



# Finding Cuba

Memories

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Cuba, does the name denote Fidel Castro, communism, sugar barons, Guantanamo and the Mafia or does it evoke images of a Caribbean island, exotic music, American cars from the 50's, the literature of Hemingway, and palm fringed beaches? Cuba is all of these and more.

It was the best time of year November into December with temperatures in the lower seventies, to spend two weeks and visit four very different areas. Travel was pleasant in a small hired bus, which although old proved to be reliable. Roads were good and quite empty passing through acres of tobacco, sugar cane and waving palm trees, under a ceiling of blue skies decorated with massive white cumulus clouds. The light was very clear and quite harsh by mid morning. Due to airport weight restrictions a monopod was packed, but a Vibration Reduction (VR) 28 to 200mm lens on a Nikon D70s proved the most useful and reliable.

The capital of the island is Havana, a city that dates back almost 500 years. The name evokes the whiff of cigars, the tang of rum, the sounds of the tango and salsa and images of classic American cars. Old Havana has an air of faded elegance. It is a mix of beautiful but shabby old colonial buildings, neo-classical monuments, skyscraper blocks, opulent but dilapidated villas and town houses. Spanish influence is strong. Streets open

into elegant squares and small shady parks lush with vegetation. The Paseo, a kilometre long walk built in 1772, is modelled on the Prado in Madrid. Balconies on every building are a necessity of the climate and come in all shapes and sizes. The city has a sedate air about it lacking the buzz of heavy traffic due to a shortage of oil; so much transport is horse drawn, pedal powered *or* battery operated. The carriage drivers are a wonderful asset to the photographer. Find the driver with the best English tell him you want to photograph Cuban life and you will be taken to places you would never have found, such as an interesting church, an artist colony or a school.

Photography was unrestricted except of course in military areas. The Cubans were photography friendly and would happily pose for you without any notion of asking for money. However there are cigar-smoking posers in some parts of Havana who should be avoided. The especially attractive children loved having their photographs taken and were surprised and delighted with a few coins. In the countryside farmers stopped work to be photographed, amazed and often amused at our interest.

West of Havana is the very striking and fertile valleys around the small town of Vinales. This is Karst country. Sixty million years ago in the Jurassic Age this area of limestone mountains was



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*Friends*

so eroded by underground rivers that it became a series of vast caves. The roofs collapsed leaving only the columns of harder more resistant rock giving the region its distinctive flat-topped hills or Mogotes. Many millions of years of erosion have produced a rich red soil, which grows some of the best tobacco in the world. Agricultural equipment is very limited and often home produced. Animals are important for farm work and transport.

Trinidad de Cuba is a perfectly preserved colonial town, which was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1988. The opportunities here for the photographer are many and varied: cobbled streets, dilapidated old buildings, colour washed houses and friendly inhabitants who welcomed you into their homes. Once the center of the slave trade, in the country side around Trinidad there are still acres of sugar cane and one

can take a train ride on the old sugar cane railway to a sugar baron's mansion and visit museums that record the history of sugar and slavery.

Cuba is enigmatic and extraordinarily beautiful, a true island in the sun. Over the centuries Colonial oppressors, dictators, martyrs and revolutionaries have passed this way. Thus the Cubans have become a rich mix of European and African cultures and despite political and economic restrictions have retained a natural exuberance and artistic talent. Due to a very high standard of free health care and education the Cubans are some of the healthiest and most literate people in the world. To the visitor they are warm and friendly and eager to please. A delightful people living on their lovely island in the sun. ■

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*Heavy load*



*Taxis*

