

CUBA OR COLOMBIA?

Whether you want to go ultra-luxury in Colombia or slip behind the wheel of a classic car in Cuba, our travel experts reveal just what you need to know



CLASSIC CUBA

The first thing to note about Cuba is that it's not luxurious in the traditional sense, advises Olie Lever, Head of Americas and Antarctica for Lightfoot Travel. "It's not about the hotels or the food, which are generally average, with some good ones at best. It's about the experience of the country."

"Cuba remains a complex country, but it has so much to offer thanks to - and despite - its communist history."

So what should you do? First, get behind the wheel, but be prepared for a bit of an old-school adventure. "Lacking in infrastructure, Cuba doesn't offer the usual luxury means of getting around," he adds. "The best bet is to cruise along Havana's malecon (a broad roadway along the coast) in a brightly coloured classic 50's Cadillac."

Then visit some of Cuba's colourful sites. "Don't miss Havana's music clubs. Some were once home to the Buena Vista Social Club. Check out Hemingway's old haunts: La Bodeguita del Medio and La Floridita, then head off the beaten track to see colonial Trinidad and Che Guevara's mausoleum in Santa Clara."

As for food, flick over to our special section to see why international journalist Joseph Reaney believes Havana's experiencing a fine-dining revolution.

LUXURIOUS COLOMBIA

“If you’re looking for somewhere equally interesting, different, and off the beaten track with fun cities, Colombia is a great option. Cartagena is similar to Havana, and there are good options around the rest of the country too,” adds Lever.

“Colombia comes with a somewhat chequered reputation and history. However, the country has moved on markedly. The people are some of the friendliest you’ll ever meet in South America. The food is tasty, and the sheer diversity on offer in Colombia is incredible: Amazon jungle, colonial cities, culture, archaeology, and beach.”

Start your journey by embracing every form of luxury travel. Explore the Caribbean coast and islands on a private yacht. Move between the country’s highlights by private jet, or book a helicopter to see beautiful national parks.

Be sure to see the Caribbean coast and islands with their hideaway stops and private villas. “Go on private coffee hacienda visits. Visit Cali, known as the capital of salsa. Then enjoy a private dinner cooked by a celebrity chef in Cartagena.” The architecture, including cathedrals, old fortresses, and ancient amphitheatres, is not to be missed.

As for food? “Colombian coffee is some of the best in the world. Try fresh lobster in Cartagena or on San Andres Island. Colombian chocolate is also very good quality.”

lightfoottravel.com



FEASTING IN HAVANA

Cuba once had a glowing culinary reputation in the world of food. Throughout the last few years – since Raúl Castro relaxed the laws on private enterprise in 2010 – a new generation of paladares (small privately owned restaurants) have been winning back the hearts, minds and stomachs of international visitors. Slowly but surely, fine dining is being revived in Cuba's capital. Our man on the ground, **Joseph Reaney**, argues the Cuban capital is in the midst of a fine-dining restaurant revolution. From homely paladares to palatial dining rooms, here are five Havana restaurants he cites as leading the way.

NAO BAR-PALADAR

This intimate restaurant overlooking the port offers a taste of 'old Havana'. Not only does its interior décor of wooden beams, dramatic arches and maritime memorabilia bring to mind an 18th century galleon, but its menu has the feel of old conquistador cuisine with a heady mix of Spain, Africa and the Caribbean. Culinary hits include ropa vieja (shredded flank steak in tomato sauce) and pargo entero frito (whole fried red snapper), each accompanied with white rice, black beans and fried plantain. It also serves a fine selection of desserts (choose the sickly-sweet torta tres leches, a milk and cream cake), as well as the most refined piña colada on the waterfront. naobarpaladar.com

LE CHANSONNIER

Although set within a 19th century property, Le Chansonnier is the image of contemporary chic. Understated décor, lively music, friendly staff and, crucially, fine nouveau cuisine make Héctor Higuera's establishment popular for those with money and style. He reveals that "due to private enterprise reforms, owners have more facilities to buy fresh fruits, vegetables and meat from different suppliers," and chef Enrique certainly makes the most of this. Our favourite dishes are the pulpo en tinta de calamar (octopus in squid ink), the sopa de cangrejo (crab soup) and the tête de veau gribiche (head of veal in cold egg sauce). lechansonnier.com

DOÑA EUTIMIA

A hidden high-end delight among Havana's back streets, Doña Eutimia brings old Cuban cuisine to modern palates. Owner Leticia is committed to reintroducing traditional

Cuban cooking through her homely paladar. She offers a wide range of forgotten delicacies, from tasty meat-filled tamales (steamed corn dough) to melt-in-the-mouth filet mignon. But the real highlight is the octopus cooked in garlic. Once the seafood has been devoured, diners can take freshly-baked bread to mop up the final drops of the garlic-infused olive oil. facebook.com/DonaEutimia

ATELIER

Housed in a former senator's mansion, Atelier provides a decadent mix of the old (antique hobs, sewing tools and adding machines fill the interior) and the new (contemporary Cuban art lines the walls, while balconies are drowned in cushions). The clientele is a mix of affluent locals and in-the-know foreigners, while the dishes also have an eclectic feel. Try the lomito de res con camarones y espuma de apio al olivo (sirloin steak with shrimp celery mousse) or – for less of a mouthful, in more ways than one – the pato confitado (duck confit). **+5378362025**

MAMA INÉS

Chef Erasmo has cooked for a number of celebrity diners, from Jack Nicholson to Arnold Schwarzenegger to Hugo Chávez. Needless to say, there was a great deal of excitement when he decided to open Mama Inés in a colonial property in the heart of Havana. Two years on and the business is thriving, attracting a who's who of wealthy diners from around the world. The philosophy is simple: take the best of Cuban food – ropa vieja (shredded steak), lechón asado (roasted piglet) and breaded prawns – and do it better than everybody else. Alamesacuba.com