



destination UPDATE CUBA



FIRST IMPRESSION: Cuba is quite simply one of the best and most underestimated long haul destinations I have visited for a very long time. A sweeping statement, yes, but few Caribbean destinations can equal the quality of the new state-of-the-art coastal properties that Cuba has to offer and none offer an exciting and fascinating city like Havana. Add to this prices between 20%-30% lower than other Caribbean destinations, in my opinion this makes Cuba a very safe and exciting choice for even the most demanding client.

The current schedules of Virgin, with 2 flights a week (Wednesday & Sunday) makes for either a single destination city or resort programme, but also a 2-night Havana, 2-night beach programme. Cubana, Cuba's national airline is not really suitable for our market, even allowing for its significantly lower fares, offering a service more akin to that offered by low cost carriers. There is a CUC25 departure tax.

With such a new destination I will keep this 'First Impressions' fairly simple, basing it on Havana and the coastal resort of Varadero, which offers the properties for our industry. With the imminent opening up of Cuba to the American market, now is an excellent time to visit the island, the largest in the Caribbean, before hoards of cruise ships change the face of this fascinating country forever.

DMC: HAVANATUR



We are fortunate to have one of Cuba's leading DMCs, Havanatur as our Partner in Cuba. Their in-depth local knowledge and attention to detail of the needs of the incentive & conference market is second to none with every activity checked in advance of the arrival of your guests to ensure quality throughout the programme.

Further to this you have UK contacts in Gemma Richardson and Matthew O'Sullivan, whose knowledge of the island, gained over many years, is second to none. They can be contacted on 01707 871905 and 01707 871901 respectively.

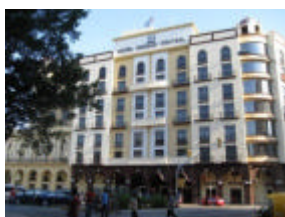
HAVANA: What an exciting, vibrant and historic city; a city that no other Caribbean Island can offer.



The city reflects the rich past of colonial rule and influences from both Europe and North America. The nightlife is rich and varied with music wherever you go and the ubiquitous Mojito (white Rum, crushed mint, sugar syrup and soda water over ice) and Daiquiri cocktails (white rum, slushed ice, lime juice and preferred fruit) ever present in every bar. If you want to try either cocktail go to where they were invented; for the Mojito, the La Bodeguita del Medio and for a Daiquiri, Hemingway's favourite haunt; La Floridita.

HOTELS: I have chosen a small selection of what I consider to be the best hotels in the city for incentive and conference groups, as Cuba is an emerging market it should, under normal circumstances, be more than possible to get rooms at any of these properties for your group. As a guideline, hotels in Havana are approximately 1* below their official rating and in the coastal areas, the new properties, in my opinion, don't just meet their star rating criteria, they often exceed them against similar properties in the Caribbean.

The Hotel Parque Central 5*: Ideally situated in the centre of the historic part of the city. It is within easy



walking distance of the major sights of interest in the old part of the city, along with its many bars and restaurants.

The hotel overlooks the Parque Central and the Prado. The hotel rooms all have the facilities you would expect in a hotel of this type, along with internet access. It has 2 restaurants, a lobby bar and rooftop pool bar.

Room numbers: 287, including 8 suites and 18 junior suites

Wi-Fi: Yes

Number of meeting rooms: 5

Conference capacity maximum: 200

Banquet capacity maximum: 160

Reception capacity maximum: 260

Swimming pool: yes

The Saratoga Hotel: This delightful 5* property is situated just down the road from the Parque Central and almost opposite the Capitolio Building. It has recently been completely rebuilt behind the historic original façade and it found universal favour from all of us who visited it. The Saratoga offers 2 restaurant/bars and an all-day bar on the Mezzanine floor.

Room numbers: 96, including 7 suites

Wi-Fi: Yes

Number of meeting rooms: 2

Conference capacity maximum: 20

Banquet & Reception capacity maximum: n/a

Swimming pool: yes



Meliá Cohiba: This modern 5* property is situated on the waterfront, some 6 kms from the Old City. The property has a pool, Gym and squash courts. It also offers numerous restaurants and bars and one of the city's leading entertainment venues - the Habana Café.



One of the strengths has to be the hotels meeting potential. I personally feel that the superb meeting facilities would be

the major reason for choosing this property. Being so far from the old town and the coastal area and not being up to other major resorts elsewhere, it falls between two stools for use for incentive groups.

Room numbers: 342 doubles, 60 Suites, 39 Junior Suites, and 21 Senior Suites with whirlpool

Wi-Fi: Yes

Number of meeting rooms: 8

Conference capacity maximum: 600

Banquet capacity maximum: 500

Reception capacity maximum: 1000

Swimming pool: yes

The Nacional Hotel: A 5* property and one of Cuba's most historic buildings, but unfortunately the old lady



is really starting to show her age. The lobby is very dark and more reminiscent of an old railway booking hall and the rest of the property is generally run down and a little shabby. I am sure that in the years to come major investment will restore



this fine old building to its former glory; until then I would visit it out of curiosity just to enjoy its history.

Room numbers: 457, 15 suites, and Presidential Suite

Wi-Fi: No

Number of meeting rooms: 4

Conference capacity maximum: 250

Banquet capacity maximum: 180

Reception capacity maximum: 200

Plus La Pérgola terrace admits up to 500 persons for a reception and 300 persons for dinner

Swimming pool: yes

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

THE OLD CITY

Havana is the largest city in the Caribbean and the historic centre is a Unesco World Heritage Site. It has been run by numerous Colonial Powers in the past including the UK, but Spain and more latterly the US have had the most influence on how the city is today. The city is a mixture of many architectural styles ranging from Colonial and Baroque through to Art Nouveau and Modernism. The historic centre is a charming mix of small lanes, crumbling buildings and great characters. Much is being done to restore many of these fine buildings, my only hope is that they don't over restore this area and change its character too much.

Among the must see sights in the city are:



El Capitolio Nacional, built in 1929 as the Senate and House of Representatives it is almost an exact copy of the Capitol Building in Washington. This colossal building is recognizable by its dome, which dominates the city's skyline. Inside stands the Statue of the Republic, the third largest indoor statue in the world.



The Great Theatre of Havana, famous particularly for the acclaimed National Ballet of Cuba, it also occasionally hosts performances by the National Opera.



Plaza de la Revolucion, the venue for the first mass rallies and parades after the revolution in 1959. The square is surrounded by Government buildings including the Ministry of the Interior, with its iconic portrait of Che Guevara and other cultural institutions such as the National library and Theatre. The square is dominated by the Memorial Jose Marti set in



the middle of it, which offers panoramic views of the city and sea beyond.

Museo de la Revolución, located bit dusty and heavy on the printed the improvised hardware and air with the yacht Granma which comrades from Mexico to start the Batista.

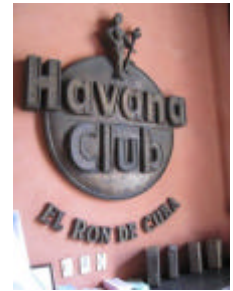


in the former Presidential Palace, it's a word. Outside is a display of some of power used in the revolution along brought Fidel Castro and some of his revolution against the then President,

OTHER THINGS TO DO

Cigar Factory, many factories offer tours of one of Cuba's most famous exports, showing the complete process of cigar making from leaf selection to making the boxes. An interesting visit only spoilt a little because, due to a few unruly tourists, photography is now banned.

Rum Distillery Tour, a short tour of the Havana Club museum showing the history and the making of one of the Caribbean's most famous products followed by a tasting makes this a pleasant little visit to add to any city sightseeing.



City Tour or transfer by Old American Cars, One of the most famous sights in Cuba is a hangover from the days of trade with the USA, big old American cars. Due to the lack of parts many now have very different engines, some are even rumoured to have Lada engines in place of the big V8s. I would suggest that they are best used for evening transfers, as even the convertibles get very hot and it is easier to load them when there is less traffic around.



NIGHTLIFE AND BARS

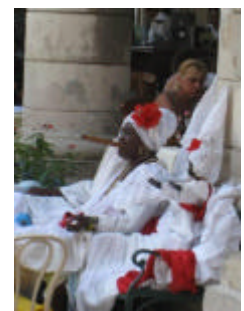


El Floridita, the home of the Daiquiri. Both a restaurant and bar, this is where the daiquiri was invented and enjoyed by Ernest Hemingway, whose life size statue props up the bar.

Bodeguita del Medio, another haunt of the author and adventurer Hemingway which is probably not surprising as this is the spiritual home of Cuba's National drink, the Mojita. It is now very touristy but has, in the past, been the haunt of many celebrities who have left their autographs around the building.



El Patio Restaurant, situated on Cathedral Square in the old city, this restaurant is located in an 18th century mansion. El Patio offers both local and International cuisine. The courtyard fountain makes a relaxing spot to eat after a tour of the old city and the square is a Mecca for every eccentric character in the neighbourhood.



Tropicana Founded in 1939 it is nightspot in Cuba. In all honesty it a 2-hour show that is somewhat would be to eat elsewhere and as the Casa de la Musica or the



probably the most well known cabaret is stuck in a time warp offering a dinner and repetitive and fairly expensive. My suggestion find one of the excellent music venues, such Habana Café.

Restaurant Cafe del Oriente, an International restaurant that has the reputation for some of the finest dining in Cuba. Situated on the Plaza San Francisco in the old part of the city, this elegant silver service restaurant also provides live music during your meal.

Casa de la Musica, an amazing live music venue interspersed with a DJ. Agreed by all that it was one of the best live music evenings we had ever experienced, which, when you consider the combined experience of those that visited, it is remarkable. It must also be noted that after the 10CUC entrance fee, drink prices were very reasonable. A definite must during any visit to Havana.



Club Habana, for a private function, more formal in the evening is a perfect Havana Yacht and Country Club and now courts, sailing, jet skiing and team beach. In the evening the beach can be



either informal during the day or a little venue. The club-house was originally the offers ideal facilities for sport, with tennis building events or just relaxing on their own used as a dinner venue.

OUTSIDE HAVANA

Sierra del Rosario Nature Reserve - Las Terrazas Community, just under an hour west of Havana is the community of Las Terrazas, nestling within the boundaries of the Sierra del Rosario - a part of unspoilt Cuba given Biosphere Reserve Status by UNESCO. Las Terrazas offers a great escape from the hustle and bustle of the city. Apart from the more obvious pastimes of viewing the native flora & fauna that the area is famed for, there are also more active pursuits such as swimming in the San Juan River and a canopy tour



where you are strapped into a harness and launched across forests and lakes attached to steel cables for an exhilarating view of Las Terrazas and the surrounding area.

Lunch can be taken in a Farmhouse restaurant featuring some of the best local cuisine we experienced during our visit. The rustic atmosphere was further enhanced by two old musicians who appeared to be in their late eighties and still capable of getting up to a great deal of mischief between them. All round a great experience of real rural Cuban life.



VARADERO

Varadero is a purpose built resort, approximately a 2 hour transfer from Havana. The route takes you along the northern coastal highway offering an insight into life outside Havana. Surprisingly there is even an oil exploration with drilling rig and nodding donkeys abutting the shoreline.



A recommended stop, either on the outward or return transfer, is the Bacunayagua Bridge - the highest bridge in Cuba spanning the Yumuri River. Not only are there superb views over the countryside there is also a small kiosk that serves what must be the best Pina Colodas you can get anywhere, a bold claim, but fresh blended coconut and pineapple to which you add your own measure of rum was simply superb.

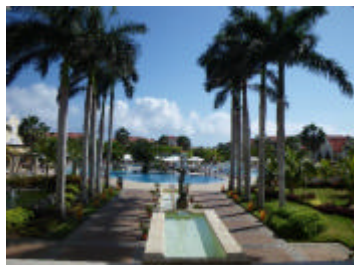


Varadero is Cuba's top purpose built deal of history what it does have is offering a superior all-inclusive service groups as Iberostar, Melia and Tryp.



resort. While not having a great state-of-the-art hotels, many operated by such leading hotel

The Paradisus Princesa del Mar, this superior adults only 5* all-inclusive property offers everything you could want for a group; superb all-suite rooms, a wide choice of restaurants including Italian and Japanese and superior brands of alcohol in all the bars. If your budget allows, the Royal Service accommodation is situated in an exclusive area, with butler service, exclusive pool and beach plus private a la carte dining in the Hilltop Hideaway Restaurant. There is also a wide choice of sports and beach activities. Royal Service guests also have unlimited free use of the nearby golf course.



Room numbers: 360 junior suites, 24 Imperial Romance suites, 48 Royal Service suites, 2 Presidential suites
Wi-Fi: Yes

Number of meeting rooms: 4

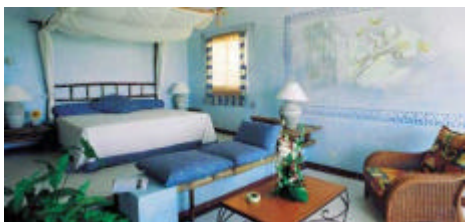
Conference capacity maximum: 400

Banquet capacity maximum: 360

Reception capacity maximum: 475

Swimming pool: yes

The Paradisus Varadero is one of the sister properties of the Princesa del Mar offering similar standards



throughout except for the Royal Service, which will be available shortly. This is a property that should be viewed during the inspection process. A wide range of bars and restaurants are available and like the Princesa del Mar it is a superior all-inclusive property.

Room numbers: 409 junior suites, 12 suites, 1 Garden Villa

Wi-Fi: Yes

Number of meeting rooms: 3

Conference capacity maximum: 225

Banquet capacity maximum: 175

Reception capacity maximum: 125

Swimming pool: yes

Iberostar Varadero, for those on a tighter budget this all-inclusive 4* property is well worth considering. Of course when compared directly to the other Ultra 5* mentioned above it would appear to lack those finer finishing touches, but it is a good honest property with all the facilities one would want for the right type of group.



Room numbers: 324 double rooms, 60 junior suites, 2 Presidential suites

Wi-Fi: no

Number of meeting rooms: 4

Conference capacity maximum: 442

Banquet capacity maximum: 216

Reception capacity maximum: 442

Swimming pool: yes

WHAT TO DO

On the Sea, one thing everyone wants to do around warm tropical waters is to enjoy a day onboard a boat



and Cuba is no exception, offering boats for most size groups, from Catamarans for larger groups or a sports cruiser for smaller groups of around a dozen. The day at sea



includes exploring the coral Dolphins and lunch on an lunch includes lobster that is you onboard.



reefs, snorkelling, a visit to meet the island. Aboard the smaller vessels caught during the trip and cooked for

Golf - Varadero has an excellent golf club built around the former Du Pont mansion 'Xanadu' built in the 1930's. The Varadero is an 18 hole, par 72 course. The Xanadu mansion is the clubhouse and is a delightful venue for private receptions and dinner, especially from the terrace overlooking the beach and sea beyond.



SUMMARY: Well, is Cuba a future contender for the incentive and conference market? In my opinion it is not just a future contender; it is more than ready now to provide a first class infrastructure and service. Yes, there are still a few rough edges, but this just makes the destination even more fascinating. Cuba is due for rapid change, it has just been welcomed back and recognised by the Organization of American States after some 47 years, recognition from the US must surely not be that far behind. My advice is to go sooner rather than later and enjoy the country, enjoy the music and most of all enjoy the people and the exceptional value for money that this amazing country has to offer.

WHAT OTHERS SAY:

'**Cuba es fantástica**' Breathtaking sights to the friendliest people, Cuba as a destination accommodates all and leaves you wanting more. *Best Caribbean destination* **Yasin Demir - Account Executive, UK Group Sales - Virgin Atlantic**

It's best not to compare with other Caribbean destinations - quite aside from its unique recent history, it is essentially Hispanic in character as best portrayed by Havana which has the feel of a large Latin-American city dropped onto a Caribbean shore. Wonderful! **Roger Parker Director, Event Operations AddingValue**

Cuba offers fantastic culture, colonial history, classic cars, great salsa music, beautiful white beaches, crystal clear waters, wonderful people, rum and fabulous Mojito cocktails and there are some ideal properties on the coast to suit incentive groups, offering interesting activities, experiences and value for money! What more can you ask for when you are looking for a different incentive destination. **Hayley Trussell - Senior Account Manager, dbmt Limited**