

10 Reasons Why I Need You To Make Cuba Your Next Destination

For 2017, I made it a goal to travel more, especially out of the country. Just two days into the New Year, I was on a plane headed to Havana, Cuba.

I am a graduate student at Syracuse University studying magazine, newspaper, and online journalism. I love meeting new people and learning about their stories. How ironic was it that most of my cohort is full of students from different countries, cultures, and ethnicities.

It's great to hear about the experiences in their hometowns.

Hearing about all of their wonderful adventures inspired me to have my own. I wanted to see what else was beyond the United States, so when I was offered an opportunity to travel to Cuba, I jumped on it.

A journalism organization that I have been a part of for years, National Association of Black Journalists, partnered with Morgan State University for a trip to Havana, Cuba. I was asked to email a color copy of my passport along with a one-page bio about myself, to send over to the Cuban Embassy, in order to receive a visa. Administrators in the organization coordinated with Marazul Charters, a travel agency, to purchase tickets, insurance, and other documents.

We flew Jet Blue airlines, during a time when flights were relatively cheap (and still are).

Cuba is known for its music, culture, delicious food, and friendly residents. Southern hospitality is nothing compared to Cuba's hospitality—its genuine, kind and authentic.

Here's 10 reasons why you need to travel to Cuba right now.



1 Because it's easier.

Although Obama is leaving office, he did have success opening up relations with Cuba, which has made it much more easier to travel to and from. Americans need to review the categories of travel permitted under a "general license." (what is this)

Though I was never asked for it, it's better to have it than not and possibly be sent out of the county.

2. You can get so much, for so little.

Make sure you go to the market in Old Havana. It's an enormous warehouse full of tents where people are selling everything from jewelry, clothing and shoes, to paintings and sculptures. If you're looking to get souvenirs for your family or unique keepsakes, this is the place.

However, be careful. Sellers will try to stick you with a high price, especially

for a painting. NEGOTIATE. I can't stress that enough. It will save you money in the end. If you are buying a large painting, sculpture or anything that can't fit into your bag, get a certificate of purchase, or else you will not be able to take it back with you.

Someone on our trip didn't get a certificate of purchase, so they had to fold it up and put it in their bag. I only hope the painting didn't get ruined by folding it. Don't take the chance

3. Cuban Culture.

I loved walking down the streets of Havana seeing the people, old 1950s cars, and historical buildings. Looking up to see people sitting on the fire escape or balcony enjoying a cigar or watching their clothes drying, hanging on a string. Wide streets, narrow streets, clean streets, dirty streets. When you think of an alleyway, you think dark and scary. In Havana, the only word that came to my mind was beautiful.

Most Cubans drive cars created before 1959, Hudson Hornets, Chevrolet Bel Air. You can hear the loud engines revving up, all over the city of Havana.

Cubans are serious about sports, particularly baseball. If you see a group of men arguing, they're just talking about baseball so don't be alarmed.



4. Experience Unique Art.

Everywhere you go, you'll run into some beautifully constructed buildings, art on the walls, streets, even the ground you walk on. It is said that the revolution's stated goal was to nurture the development of each citizen's abilities, even the talents that are not economically productive. I got a chance to meet Eduardo Roco ("Choco"), one of Cuba's well-known painters.

His studio is full of beautiful paintings and artwork using audacious colors and an unique print technique, "collagraphy." It's a collage of materials glued

to a printing plate together. He has used cardboard, sand, smashed cans – creating visually appealing, texturized art.

His pieces are unique, in the sense that he makes most of them only once. He's even had to buy back pieces others bought at his exhibits because they meant so much to him. My only regret is that I did not bring enough money to purchase a piece from him.

5. A Unique Dining Experience.

Every day we ate at a different paladares, privately run restaurants inside of a residence. In the 1990s, the Cuban government allowed residents to run private businesses out of their homes.

They are amazing!

From the outside looking in, it's someone's home but once you step foot inside, it's an experience. Imagine a 5-star restaurant with dim lighting, and a three-course meal complete with appetizer, entrée, and dessert.

If you want tender lobster, visit El Loco Loco Restaurant.

VIP Havana was my absolute favorite. Great ambiance and their Caesar salad is superb. The mixed Papaya, OMG! Let's just say I finished my plate, leaving not even a drop of sauce. Their strawberry ice cream was left just the same.

6. Aged Rum.

Rum may not be everyone's go-to drink on Friday or Saturday night, but in Cuba that's the go-to drink every day at any time. The welcome drink at every paladares I went to was a mojito. I've never had so much liquor in one week in my 25 years of living.

Havana Club Anejo Tres Años, made from sugarcane, is pretty smooth. The rum brand was created in 1934 and is now one of the best-selling rums in

the world, served in white and brown.

The rich-flavored rum was so tasty, two bottles made it's way back home with me. I'm actually saving one for graduation in May. The longer you save it, the richer the flavor becomes.

7. Cuban Nightlife.

All you need to enjoy the night is a bottle of Rum, good music, and a spot on the Malecón, a seawall that stretches along the coast in Havana. During the day, you can catch people walking along the wall admiring the water, great scenery, and couples engaging in some outside cuddling.

But at night, it's a whole 'nother story! The crowd is doubled. People are listening to music, dancing, drinking Rum and just living in the moment. If you get hungry, you'll catch someone walking by selling some of the best chips you've ever tasted. Grab a bag! They're only .25 cucs. Actually, grab two. You'll thank me later.

In Cuba, you can hear everything from Reggaeton and Soca to 90's Hip Hop. I heard lots of Chris Brown and Rihanna, but of course not together.



8. Music

Cuba is well known for its booming music scene. There was not one block or strip in Havana we walked on that didn't play music or have a live performer. Cuban music includes Latin jazz, Reggaeton, Hip Hop, Pop, Rock, Electronic, Fusion, Salsa-Timba, Traditional and Jazz.

I was fortunate enough to go to The Jazz Café, one of the most common clubs in Havana and see El Chewy perform. He's amazing on the saxophone.

9. Chivalry is not dead!

In my experience it seems as though generosity and kindness are common traits in most Cuban men. Touching is a form of affection, but doesn't have a sexual connotation. The men open doors for all of the women and help them out of cars. It was amazing to hear someone say "Muy Bonita" every day.

10. Disconnect from the world.

The internet in Cuba is horrible, but it's making some progress. We stayed at the Four Points by Sheraton Hotel, where you had to pay 5 cucs/hr for Wi-Fi.

The exchange rate is approximately 1 USD = 0.87 CUC.

That might not seem like much but it adds up. I spent about 30 cucs in the 7 days I was there. I bought an hour the first day, just to let my family know I arrived safely and used the WhatsApp texting app to avoid roaming charges.

It felt great to be disconnected from the world. Not receiving countless emails from school or work. For the first time in a long time, I was able to live in the moment.

It is important, now more than ever, to take the time to unplug all the devices and simply live.

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