

# *slow-walking* HAVANA



*Visit Cuba – while it's still living life in the moment*

“AS I MAKE  
MY SLOW  
PILGRIMAGE  
THROUGH  
THE WORLD,  
A CERTAIN  
SENSE OF  
BEAUTIFUL  
MYSTERY  
SEEMS TO  
GATHER  
AND GROW”

— AC Benson



Cuba is finally having its moment. For over 60 years the Caribbean island has been blunted from the world; now the American embargo, locally called “el bloqueo”, is steadily lifting, and with that comes new blood, direct flights and a glimpse of what some might hail as “the good life”.

This dolce vita is most evident in the country’s walkers – parading on the esplanades, taking to the streets among the 1950s classic cars, meandering the coastal shores, caressing slowly all over the gravel roads and shrubby paths of the countryside.

Cuba today, still a country of forever-stretching pale beaches and fat cigars, paired with rum on every street corner, has evolved without hurry. The locals, albeit partially enforced by socialism and impaled by severe poverty, collectively celebrate the art of living, in every moment of every day. As the sun comes across the ocean, Cubao (or “where fertile land is abundant”) wakes with a rhythm unfettered by giant polluting mass industry, recognisable commercial brands or Internet-doused technology. The morning coffee is roasted and ground at home from beans

found at a nearby plantation; the added sweet milk is fresh from a neighbour’s cow. iPhones are unavailable, social media unchecked, and a meditation is instituted from the sensual circadian heat and lazy trees overhead. Of course, the city’s tempo is more vivace, but there is something about the Cuban essence that keeps mindfulness extant.

The country’s harlequin capital, Havana, has long hosted some of the world’s most beautiful colonial Spanish architecture, and members of Buena Vista Social Club roam the streets just to tinker some jazz. Named after the 1940s members club of the same name, Cuban musicians joined to play into the early hours of the morning. The club, or cabildo, was run like a community guild that dated back to Spanish colonialism and attracted musicians such as Rubén González and Omara Portuondo. Here, in the right now, music was the only time. Nobody wore watches; not a single person ran outside to take some frantic phone calls, and seemingly everyone lived in the moment, with the jazz as their muse.

Jazz is to Cuba as blues is to New Orleans – they can’t be separated, even if they had to break up. Jazz, by its very nature, appeals to an improved mental and physical state. The natural improvisation and swooning syncopation is what meditation teaches – let go, feel free and just be in the moment. In fact, Keelan Dimick, a jazz performer, uses a transcendental

meditation technique during his jazz practice. Dimick told the Transcendental Meditation Blog: “When I transcend, I experience deep quietness and silence and bliss. It’s the only time and the only thing you can do in life that allows you to kind of take a step out of what we see as reality, and therefore it allows you to see more holistically.”

The dusty, rumpled streets hold all of the city’s magic, and around any corner could be a guitar and a troubadour saluting the day – taking you along for the ride as you walk on by. Although the remnants of its 1930s and 1940s heyday prevail, Havana’s decay has covered up all of the American glamour and returned this vivacious city to a uniquely Cuban elegance. Days here last forever as the city gives off that “time stood still” fable, and, as you enter the party, you cross a threshold of a world almost forgotten, slightly underestimated.

Over the last decade, “slow living” has found its way into our vernacular; in fact, it has spurred a billion-dollar industry internationally (complete with products and magazines), and captured a whimsical part of who we are that has long wanted to slow the roll and enjoy the very moment we’re in. All of this is so strongly opposing the too-fast, overly productive, stress-inducing lifestyle that scientists say is contributing to disease and depression. But what did we think? We could kill ourselves in the big, bad world and there would be no consequences?







Perhaps Mother Nature knew better and gave Cuba a sneaky insight that the rest of the world missed out on.

Last year National Public Radio (NPR) and the Mayo Clinic revealed studies that point to “stressing about stress” becoming the next frontier we will have to tackle. The Smithsonian magazine alarmed: “Stress is becoming the national psyche.” But stress, even the awareness of what it means exactly, is what Cuba manages to avoid in its day-to-day living – there seems to be just enough food, a good rum to sip at sunset and plenty of fresh air to enjoy during walks. Cuba, without consciously doing anything really, is the epitome of holistically going at it slowly.

But wellness in Cuba is not restricted to slow, meditative walks – just a hop and a skip outside Havana lie adventures and even cures. Cuba, known for its first-grade doctors, also has wellness clinics and sanctuaries dotted around the country. In fact, it was football legend Diego Maradona who blazed the path for Cuba as a destination for medical tourism when he travelled to the island for drug addiction therapy in 2000.

The authors of *Slow Living – Learning to Savor and Fully Engage with Life*, Beth Meredith and Eric Storm, call “slow living” a life structured around meaning and fulfilment – emphasising a “less is more” approach. This seems to be in direct contradiction with what the world’s marketers and brands are advocating – the ubiquitous mantras “you can have it all” and “fast and furious”.

But Cuba, for now at least, has resisted the temptations of becoming just another westernised, commercialised playground. Of course, this could all change as the borders go up and the world’s money pours in. But gazing out at the laughing locals strolling around the promenade, with crumbling, beautiful Havana as the backdrop, it seems life cannot evolve too fast here, even if it tries.

Now is the time for Cuba – before the country opens, before some of the locals forget the simplicity, and definitely before the chain hotels open up and another Miami is created. Cuba has lessons for everyone; they are subtle and gentle and blatant all at the same time – sort of like jazz. ■

### HOW TO GET THERE

Copa Airlines, a member of Star Alliance, flies directly from New York to Panama City (the hub of the Americas) twice daily; from there a quick low-flying hop to Havana takes an hour – book one of the new business class seats at [copair.com](http://copair.com).

### WHERE TO STAY

Havana, in particular, is best done in a homestay. Delia’s bright-blue pre-1920s casa is central, informal and costs about \$30 per night. Visit her website [casaparticulardelia.yolasite.com](http://casaparticulardelia.yolasite.com), or connect on Facebook. Airbnb has just entered the market and offers various perfect homes to rent. Visit [Airbnb.com](http://Airbnb.com).

### WHAT IS REALLY SPECIAL HERE?

Medical tourism with highly skilled medical professionals specialises in a full wellness routine (from a few days to a life-changing month). For more information, contact Latour via its website [latour.com](http://latour.com).