



**CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM** Kate with friends at restaurant La Soupe Populaire; shopping in Berlin Mitte; Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week (MBFW) S/S '14 street style, Brandenburg Gate; Berlin street life; summer in the city; a shop window display; the bustling Potsdamer Platz.



As boisterous as its colourful history, Cuba captures the essence of the push-and-pull of a post-revolutionary

**I**'VE BEEN THINKING about becoming a communist lately, and there's no more alluring and challenging place to contemplate this than in the faded beauty of Havana. The real problem about converting to communism, for me, would be the food. Communists, you see, have tended to make distinguished architects, creative interior and product designers and revolutionary filmmakers, but when it came to cuisine, heirloom tomatoes, ideologically, must give way to rice and bread. What I crave for dinner is subordinated to everyone actually having dinner.

The remnants of the Cold War and the repercussions it had for Cuba-US relations still smoulder. While recent legislation has made US travel to Cuba possible only after tortuous administrative flick-flacks, for us fortunate South Africans, entry is easy and painless. We are simply required to buy a tourist card, which is easily arranged by a travel agent or purchased at the airport.

Already in Mexico, I took a one-hour flight from glitzy Cancún to Havana. The first thing that strikes you on the ground is the complete absence of advertising, branding, logos or aesthetic clutter. It's an almost disorientating visual silence and the first sign, apart from the buffed-up Pontiacs, Studebakers, Oldsmobiles, Chevrolets and Lada Nivas, that you are somewhere altogether different; somewhere you have never been before. You are entering a world after the revolution, an island in the sea of capitalism.

The oblique rules that govern currency and ownership were invented to protect Cuban society from outside influences. The current dispensation has created two parallel currencies: the Cuban peso (CUP), which is worth pretty much nothing and used by locals; and the

Cuban convertible peso (CUC) for foreigners (and a small group of upwardly mobile Cuban elites), which is pegged to the US dollar at US\$1 to CUC1 (there are apparently plans afoot to unify the two currencies). Sounds simple enough. Except if you actually exchange US dollars you have to remember that there is a special 10% tax and a 3% exchange fee. You can't pre-purchase Cuban currency outside the country, or take it off the island. Visa credit cards are recommended, although apparently MasterCard sometimes work too – mine did not, and I brought dollars. Contact your bank to check if your cards will work and take extra euros just in case.

The apartment I stayed in was an ancient second-floor home with dramatic high ceilings, huge windows and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves belonging to a gracious old doctor and his journalist wife. I reserved the room in their home through the casa particular system, created in 1997 by the government so that families could earn extra money by renting to foreigners. Casa particulars are the preferred alternative to tourist hotels and insulated resorts. It is, however, a terribly unwieldy booking system, akin to an internet 0.5 version of airbnb.com, with unfortunate and very unrepresentative photos. No real-time web availability means you need to request a room by email and then engage in a volley of mails with The Administrator, who ostensibly ends up deciding where you will stay. The Administrator picked the Centro neighbourhood for me, which I was very glad about. It is, I think, just as beautiful as La Habana Vieja (Old Havana), which is a short walk away, but with less of a camera-carrying tourist crowd. The facades in Centro display the scars of centuries of sun and wind and use. The city appears deeply loved.

I drank Cuba libres (rum, Coke and lime) with Dr Ernesto in his drawing room, sitting on stiff wooden chairs (the Coke is from Mexico, not the US). He has

**For Cubans, WHERE THERE IS RUM, there is music.**



Spotted in Havana: Beyoncé and Jay Z!

# HAVANA

Words JONATHAN CANE

**RHYTHMIC,**  
*exotic,*  
**HISTORIC**







percussion instruments, polyrhythmic percussion, Spanish string instruments and the traditions of European musical notation and composition all coming together to create a new sound. I don't have access to sophisticated musicological terminology, but I know it's sexy and sad and sweaty, and it makes you smile.

Cuban music has been hugely influential over the centuries and Cuba itself has managed to attain almost mythological status. A character like world-famous revolutionary Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, whose face is spray-painted across Cuba, hangs as official portraits in banks, and is emblazoned the sides of buildings, is also seen on T-shirts in the US and posters hanging in bedrooms in Johannesburg.

Imagine the street scene in Havana: a tiny chihuahua sits in a doorway watching old men playing dominoes in the street, a Chevy rounds the corner, sunset on the Malecón waterfront. The trouble with

this image is not that it isn't true – it's that when a country gets cast in a patina of sentimental yellow light, with old cars ending up as photo-ops, we miss the revolutionary challenge a society like Cuba's poses. A city full of old cars is, by necessity, a city full of stores that fix instead of selling things – and this is a profound critique of our disposable lives.

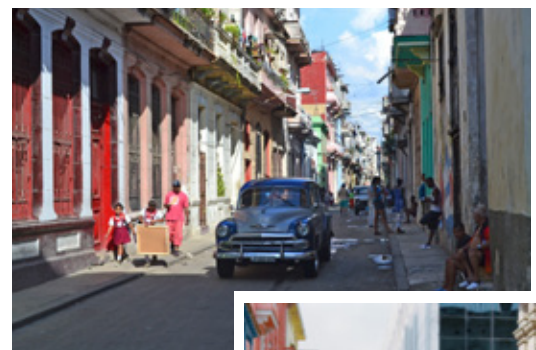
The clichés obscure another thing, too: it's tough not having new cars or access to the internet, especially for the younger generation with a 100% literacy rate, a stagnant economy and a R700 pay cheque to look forward to. Cuba is more than beautiful, but it can also be more a lesson than a vacation.

internet, though it is only a dial-up connection. Dr Ernesto was seconded to South Africa by the Cuban government in 1994 and so we had lots to talk about. I wanted to understand from him what life is like as a socialist. Dr Ernesto is a general surgeon and like the multitude of other world-class Cuban health workers, he earns about US\$60 to \$70 a month (about R700). It's enough to live on because healthcare, schooling and (most) food in Cuba are free. On the flip side, the average casa particular room rents for R350. The tension between these two systems is not easily reconciled. Not everyone is happy, he told me, but no one is unhappy.

And what about the food? Dr Ernesto suggested I check out China Town, just near Centro. Thank goodness for the Chinese, I thought. It's the best place to get pizzas, he said. A few blocks up our street is Restaurant La Guarida, maybe Havana's most famous eatery and the set of the 1994 film *Fresa y Chocolate* (Strawberry and Chocolate). It may be hard work to get a good meal in the city but it's certainly not difficult to get a drink. Ernest Hemingway was probably Cuba's most famous drinker and his favourite bars in Old Havana were La Floridita and La Bodeguita del Medio – both still serving mojitos. Hotel Ambos Mundos, where Hemingway stayed for nearly a decade in the 1930s, is still open and makes for a nostalgic alternative to the casa particular system.

For Cubans, where there is rum, there is music. Even the most uninitiated, most tone deaf (like myself) will find live Cuban music very hard to resist. Musicologists have explained that Cuban music resulted from a process called 'transculturation' – primarily the exchange between African slaves and Spaniards. It involves the traditions of African

**'IN RECENT YEARS, "FASHION BLOGGER" has become associated by some designers with the image of a FAME-SEEKING NARCISSIST IN**



Something about Che over here

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