

HAVANA'S

PROMISING TRANSFORMATION

BY MONICA FRIM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN AND MONICA FRIM



President Obama's car is seen at Jose Marti International Airport on March 22, 2016 in Havana, Cuba. Mr. Obama's visit was the first in nearly 90 years for a sitting president, the last one being Calvin Coolidge.

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As one of the world's greatest yet most isolated cities, Havana is on the brink of transition, opening up guardedly to the 21st century and the outside world. As Monica Frim follows Hemingway's trail through La Habana Vieja and the surrounding suburbs, she encounters fanciful "People's Art" displays, colonial mansions in the throws of restoration, enchanting city squares and old fortifications laden with history. An atmosphere of hope pervades the city as *Habañeros* stake their expectations of a better future on the impending reconciliation between Cuba and the United States.

Cuba is in flux. Its capital, Havana, sits like a brooding dowager on the brink of a surgical make-over. One must keep up appearances, you know. Not only because the world's most powerful leader recently made history by being the first American sitting president to visit the Communist state, nor because the Rolling Stones were the first mainstream rock group to bring once prohibited western music to the island, but because there's a long waiting list of potential American visitors who want to see for themselves what they've missed out on since the Castro regime came to power in 1959.

When the United States ceased diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1961, it left the island in a time warp. While Fidel Castro turned his attention toward beefing up the poverty-stricken countryside, the colonial capital of Havana became the sacrificial lamb of the socialist state. Beautiful colonial mansions were left to crumble and collapse as Castro put an end to the polarization of wealth that existed under Batista. Universal access to free education and healthcare, and an equitable distribution of shelter and food, ensured that the *campesinos* were no longer starving, but neither was anyone sated. Perpetual shortages of even the most basic necessities resulted in unbiased deprivation that kept the entire country a backwater.

Now Cuba is on the brink of another transition, one that merges Communism with small-c capitalism, and Havana is blazing the trail. The past twenty or so years have seen hotels, shops and restaurants open under the umbrella of a state-owned tourist-

management company called Habaguanex that shrewdly funnels the profits into social initiatives and renovation projects. It's a slow process that started in Habana Vieja (old Havana) and is still radiating outwards. Inch by inch the cobblestone streets are being relaid, and the flaking facades of the dilapidated buildings that look over the historical parks and squares are being propped up, scrubbed and polished in a surge of economic optimism that coincides with the U.S.-Cuban détente and expected influx of Americans.

Most Americans know Cuba only through hearsay and their own imaginations. Stereotypical visions of classic

American cars, Cuban cigars, flashy cabarets and the raucous sounds of *Reggaeton* and *salsa cubana* tell but a limited story of a country that's flailing for change. Even the people who qualify to visit Cuba under the 12 government-approved reasons can't help but feel somewhat perplexed. Suspended between past and present, Havana baffles as much as it entertains.

Despite the derelict buildings, the city's former grandeur and elegance still shine through. Mansions boast wrought-iron details, soaring arches and painted tile floors even though, structurally, the buildings themselves may be on the verge of collapse. Leafy public squares dotted with statues of dead revolutionaries provide shady meeting

points for young and old; old forts and museums tell of bygone battles and other eventful historical moments; and artsy neighborhoods dotted with renovated cafes, restaurants and modern galleries give rise to a vibrant street life that hints of hope and transformation.

One very inspired neighborhood is the *barrio* of Lawton in the south of Havana, where dilapidated



The Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (Museum of Fine Arts).



The streets of Havana are a veritable car museum. Somehow resourceful *Habañeros* keep vintage cars running despite the difficulties of getting replacement parts. (After the US embargo of Cuba in 1960, all imports stopped.)

buildings with broken walls and peeling paint give way to a street exhibition full of fanciful art creations made of brilliantly painted garbage. Known as *Muraleando*, a four-by-two-block section of the city has been turned into a blaze of colorful murals and outdoor sculptures made of old wheel rims, broken typewriters, bulldozer tracks, sewing machine parts, metal chair legs and whatever components can be found or rescued after they've outlived their original purpose. Here nothing gets thrown away. The entire community works together to weld, paint and glue found objects into whimsical art projects that give everyone a sense of hope and purpose. Even an abandoned concrete

water tank has been revamped and repurposed as a colorful community center. Appropriately named *El Tanque*, it also functions as a gallery, workshop, theater, dance and music studio.

Artists from all over the world conduct workshops in myriad art forms, from ceramics to puppetry. Justin Thompson was first to leave an American imprint: he painted two large murals of Snoopy, one next to the bus stop, another at the entrance to El Tanque, which, in a way, makes the beloved beagle America's first unofficial ambassador to post-revolutionary Cuba.



A telephone pole, carved and painted like a totem.



The *Obelisko Amistad* (Friendship Obelisk) encourages visitors to ask for world peace as they circle the column.



El Tanque: The old water tank in Lawton repurposed as an art gallery.



Locals ham it up for the camera in front of a sculpture made of rusty old typewriters and wheel rims.



Street art serves a practical purpose as a bench.



A mural of Snoopy by Justin Thompson greets visitors to *El Tanque*.

Muraleando

Decidedly, Cuba and America have a long love-hate relationship that goes back to colonial times. Following Christopher Columbus’s discovery of the island in 1492, Cuba spent four centuries as Spain’s portal to the New World. But by the end of the 19th century, a growing nationalism set the stage for bloody battles that eventually led to the island’s independence in 1899. American troops were key players in bringing stability to the new country and in paving the way to economic prosperity. Money from the United States streamed across the Straits of Florida to bankroll hotels, restaurants, casinos and nightclubs, creating a perfect environment for opportunistic politicians and artful gangsters. Of course, the high times couldn’t last. As the corruption and social injustices reached their apex under General Fulgencio Batista’s government in the 1950’s, the gap between rich and poor escalated. It was in this atmosphere that a young Fidel Castro was able to organize the resistance that forced Batista to flee. When Castro subsequently stood fast with the Communist Soviet Union and proceeded to nationalize private property, much of it owned by Americans, the United States initiated the trade and tourist embargo that is now in the process of being dismantled.

Though the Cuban-American estrangement bred more than half a century of bitterness and grudge, Cuba never wavered in its respect for one of America’s most cherished writers. Hemingway’s haunts—the bars and restaurants he frequented and immortalized in his fiction, and the hotel where he lived and penned some of his best literary works—were among the first to be chosen for renovation by the Office of the City Historian, a state department of architects and planners, that counts prioritizing renovations among its functions. Naturally the establishments most conducive to tourism and economic development topped the list.

Fortunately for visitors, Hemingway’s favorite watering holes are all within easy walking distance of each other. On Havana’s busiest shopping street, a pedestrian mall called Calle Obispo, you can literally sidle up to Papa himself—or rather his double in bronze—leaning on the dark mahogany bar of, reputedly, his favorite bar-restaurant, El Floridita. It seems that even in death Hemingway holds court over a loyal following that’s willing to pay outrageous prices for daiquiris simply because Papa eulogized both the drink and the bar in his novel *Islands in the Stream*. It’s said that he kept an extra drinking cup in El Floridita for the drive home

to Finca Vigia, his house on a hill overlooking Havana, about 10 miles south in the town of San Francisco de Paula. Hemingway moved there after Martha Gellhorn, his lover and eventual third wife, refused to live in the room that Hemingway occupied from 1932 to 1939 in the Ambos Mundos Hotel, although the hotel was conveniently located within staggering distance of El Floridita.

There’s a sign in El Floridita with a quote attributed to Hemingway: “My mojito in the Bodeguita and my daiquiri in the Floridita.” While Hemingway’s biographer Philip Greene questions the sign’s authenticity (Hemingway may not have been a regular patron of la Bodeguita del Medio after all), it doesn’t stop fans from stopping in the bar-restaurant for a dose of authentic Cuban atmosphere, a traditional meal or the Bodeguita’s signature mojito. Visitors are in good company. Among the Bodeguita’s famous patrons are Nat King Cole, Margaux Hemingway, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Pablo Neruda and Salvador Allende.

As for the Ambos Mundos, there’s often a crowd of camera toting tourists in front of its coral-colored walls. Inside, Room 511, where Hemingway lived and wrote *The*



The 19th century lighthouse at El Morro Castle still guides ships. It is one of the oldest lighthouses in Cuba.



The Hotel Ambos Mundos was Hemingway's home for seven years.

Green Hills of Africa and *Death in the Afternoon*, has been turned into a museum, refurbished to look much as he left it but with the addition of a photo of Hemingway and Fidel Castro over the bed. Supposedly the two men met only once, in 1960, at a fishing contest held in Hemingway's honor. There is much speculation about their relationship with some saying that Hemingway sympathized with the Revolution and others saying that he couldn't care less. But with no solid evidence to support either argument, it

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seems that the greatest trait shared by the two men was the fact that they both had beards.

From Ambos Mundos it's a short walk to Sloppy Joe's, the model for Freddy's Bar in Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*. Renovated in 2013, Sloppy Joe's teems with photographs of celebrities such as Frank Sinatra, Ava Gardner and Joe Louis. It also boasts flavorful burgers and piña coladas that taste way better than the watered-down versions served at Cuba's all-inclusive resorts.

Throughout Havana the ghost of Hemingway lingers in the streets and in the sea, where one can imagine him watching over fishermen and their catches. It hovers southeast of Habana Viejo and over the diesel-fumed suburb of San Francisco de Paula where Hemingway's last home in Cuba, Finca Vigía, provides stupendous views that stretch all the way to Havana. It's here that one can truly absorb the Hemingway mystique. Nestled among mango trees, bougainvillea and jacarandas, the breezy, Spanish-colonial house is so faithfully preserved, that one can almost picture Hemingway standing among his trophies and roughly 9,000 books. One can peer into every room, at desks that Hemingway never sat at (he always stood while writing), the sofa that Clark Gable reputedly slept on, pictures of bull fights, and mounted heads of beasts from his African safaris. Reportedly the British author Graham Greene once commented, "I don't know how a writer could write surrounded by dead animals."

Outside, the memorabilia continues with Hemingway's boat, *Pilar*, the nickname of his second wife, Pauline; a small cemetery for his dogs; and the swimming pool where Ava Gardner swam naked.

Whether paying homage to dead writers or dead revolutionaries, Havana teems with museums, statues, churches and parks that glorify momentous historical events and their prime advocates. As is typical of the colonial cities of Spanish America, plazas or city squares serve as community gathering places or parade grounds. At the Plaza de la Revolución, where Fidel Castro famously pontificated for hours—his longest speech lasted almost five hours—a somber expanse of concrete culminates at the marble memorial to José Martí, the nationalist Cuban writer who founded the Cuban Revolutionary Party in 1892. The memorial, composed of a 59-foot marble statue



One of the most populous streets in Old Havana, Calle Obispo is a pedestrian walkway lined with shops and restaurants.



Stylized sculptures of Cuba's famous revolutionaries look over the Plaza de la Revolución: (L) Che Guevara on the façade of the Ministry of the Interior, (R) Camilo Cienfuegos on the Ministry of Communications.



El Floridita was favored by Hemingway as having the best daiquiris in Cuba.

of Martí and a star-shaped 358-foot tower, was begun in 1953 on the 100th anniversary of José Martí's birth. It was completed in 1958 during the final days of Batista's dictatorship. Today the ground floor serves as a museum and the top level provides visitors with unparalleled views of Havana.

The plaza is surrounded by the National Theater, National Library and two buildings with complementary stylized sculptures of Havana's most famous revolutionaries on their facades: one, Camilo Cienfuegos and an inscription of his response to Castro, *Vas bien Fidel* (You're doing well, Fidel), said during a rally in 1959 is surmounted on the Ministry of Communications; the other of Ché Guevara and his quote *Hasta la Victoria Siempre* (Toward Victory Always) adorns the Ministry of the Interior Building. Almost 50 years after Ché's death in the jungles of Bolivia, he remains a cultural hero. Visitors flock to his house-turned-museum across Havana Harbor near the cliffside Christ Statue of Casablanca. Politics aside, one can't argue with the dead man's popularity. Then again, perhaps it's just that Ché looks good on a T-shirt.

As Havana's historic district struggles to preserve its architectural history, the focus on tourism that began in



Hemingway's boat, *Pilar*.



Hemingway's dining room at Finca Vigia. The table is set as it was when Hemingway lived there—with an extra place setting in case of company.

the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse slowly gathers steam. Visitors amble in the footfalls of Havana's colonial elite, along the leafy boulevard known as the Prado where gas lamps with griffin-shaped wrought iron posts and stone benches recall a glorious past when Cuba was known as the Pearl of the Antilles. Left to tarnish, the mansions that line Havana's most distinguished thoroughfare are being brushed and buffed with diligence. Witness the district's Palacio de Matrimonio with its neo-baroque façade and ornate interior—a venue of colonial elegance where wedding ceremonies take place. Farther along the street, Havana's oldest existing hotel, the Inglaterra, will be the first hotel managed by an American company—the Luxury Collection division of Starwood after renovations later this year. It's bound to give the nearby Hotel Sevilla, run by the French chain, Accor, under their Mercure Hotels division, some competition. Known for its portrait gallery of famous guests such as Josephine Baker and Al Capone, the Moorish-styled Sevilla buzzes with stories of gangsters and Hollywood celebrities.

The Prado ends at the Parque Central, the social core of Havana. Across the street, the Gran Teatro was renovated and renamed the Gran Teatro de la Habana Alicia Alonso



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after the Cuban ballerina earlier this year. Once considered the most technologically advanced theater in the world, the theater boasted exceptional acoustics, an internal telephone system and, debateably, electrical lighting effects designed by Antonio Meucci well before Bell or Edison. International stars the likes of Sarah Bernhardt, Enrico Caruso and Anna Pavlova graced its stage. Today it is the performance venue for the National Ballet and National Opera as well as many notable international dance troupes and musicians.

Habana Vieja covers a 2-square-mile patch from Prado to the Havana Harbor and The Harbor Channel. It is the axis of Cuban culture, a melting pot of *Habañeros* and *estranjeros* (foreigners) who stroll its streets and plazas (must-sees are the Plaza de Armas, Plaza de la Catedral and Plaza Vieja); drink, dance and delight in the music of its restaurants and cafés; or soak up the historic tales evoked by the four fortresses that guard The Harbor Channel: La Punta and La Real Fuerza on the west side,

and El Morro and La Cabaña on the east. Standing at any of the harbor viewpoints, it's easy to let the mind wander to a time when ships laden with silk, silver and emeralds passed by the channel forts as they carried their treasures back to Spain.

As Raúl Castro slowly loosens his iron grip, another era is coming to an end. Obama's historic visit in April was somewhat of a clincher. As the president called on congress to lift the half-century-old embargo and urged Castro "to leave the past behind," he clearly signaled to Cuba and America that the challenges of reconciliation can only be resolved through greater engagement and cooperation.

It seems the people of Cuba agree. As the president and his family exited a restaurant in Havana, they chanted, "Viva Obama, Viva Fidel."

Five days later, another historic event took place in Cuba: the Rolling Stones landed full force. Cuba, assumedly, is getting satisfaction.

Two forts, El Morro (L) and the larger La Cabaña (R) guard the entrance to Havana Bay on the eastern side of The Harbor Channel. The complex is now part of a historical park and houses several museums.



Ché Guevara's home is now a museum.



The José Martí Memorial at Plaza de la Revolución.



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