

5 WAYS CUBA HAS CHANGED SINCE OBAMA – OUR RETURN TO HAVANA

BY MR ROMANCE

MR AND MRS ROMANCE, LIFESTYLE, TRAVEL MAY 16, 2018

Cuba has undergone enormous change and development over the past few years. Supercharged evolution following decades of barely any progress threatens to throw the country out of whack. The question is are these changes for the better or the worse? Our return after 4 of Cuba's most important years since the revolution shows us changes we never expected to see.

Instead of a regular IG Edition this week, we thought we'd turn our first instalment of our time in Cuba into something more. The last time we were in Cuba was just before President Obama visited in 2014, when even getting into Cuba was difficult.

These days, visiting Cuba is much easier – even from the USA – but it seems our second trip to this beautiful country has heralded another big change.

For the first time since the success of the Cuban revolution in 1959, Cuba has a president who is not a Castro. Could this spell another growth spurt for Cuba into the 21st Century, or will President Miguel Diaz-Canal simply tow the Castro line? In this special IG Edition, we look at 5 of the ways we've noticed change in Cuba in the time since our last visit and ask the question of progress in this fascinating time capsule country.

We hope you enjoy this Edition. Cheers,
Jim & Christina xx



From the moment we step through the arrivals hall at Jose Marti International Airport, we get the feeling something's different about Cuba. Gone are the massing crowds milling around the entrance. Taxi drivers tout muted offers of rides and there's advertising and screens in places there was nothing before.

But when we finally get into Havana Old Town, everything seems to be just the same. Beautiful old cars parked like it's the most normal thing in the world, people sitting out on the street and talking, the elegant sadness of the crumbling plasterwork...

At the same time, there's an itch on the back of our necks that makes us eager to explore 'our Havana' and find out what's going on.

We asked our friend John, who runs the excellent tour company [Cuban Adventures](#), whether Cuba had changed a while ago. [You can read what he thinks here](#). So we're even more interested now to see things with our own eyes.



This is an image we never thought we'd see here in Havana.

One of the things we were always so impressed with here was the lack of mobile phones. But the smart phone has come to Cuba. In spite of the hardship, the relatively diminutive internet access and an American embargo still holding strong, people here are walking nose down staring at screens and gobbling up modern tech instead of talking and being much more present.

You might also notice the 'eye in the sky' in corner of this photo. CCTV has also come to Cuba. Not that visitors are ever in much danger here. [It's still tremendously safe to visit](#) – safer than any other country we've visited I honestly believe.

But here are the 5 main differences we've spotted that I think shows bigger changes coming to Cuba.

How much has Cuba changed? 5 big differences

1. The cars



Thanks to a big influx of visitors to Cuba since 2014, the country is seeing a boom in tourism. In fact, it's the country's biggest GDP earner by a long way. Think in the 80% realm.

Because of this, people from across the country are bringing their beautiful old '50s American cars to the capital in hope of getting their hands on more tourist coin.

When we were last here, of course there were '50s cars here, but nowhere near as many. And they weren't in the best condition either. These days the vintage cars are spectacular – almost better than when they first came off the production line.

Check out some of our favourite shots of these beautiful old cars – I think you'll see what I mean.







2. The food, bars and eating options

The last time we were here, Christina and I lamented the food situation so much that it was really the one thing we felt we had to warn people about.

Things have changed for the better like you wouldn't believe.

Imagine our surprise when we sit down to dinner in a little restaurant in Havana Vieja and the waitress plonks salt, pepper, ketchup and mayonnaise in the table. These three things did not exist here in 2014. Not only that, but the food is actually delicious! We'll be writing Cuba a full apology in the next few weeks and showing you some of the honestly delicious food we've been eating here.



If there's one thing you have to try while you're here is the Cuban pizza. These were really the only things you could find easily in Havana and that you'd really want to eat. The only thing that's changed is the availability of them. They're everywhere!

And at only \$1-\$2 each, they're the perfect snack as you explore Havana. And we've got some tips to help you order too:

- Be brave and queue up. Call out 'ultimo?' and find out who's last in the melée and be ready to shout 'si' when the next person asks.
- Order the basic pizza queso – a cheese pizza – and ignore the offerings of ham or anything else. It's not worth it.
- Don't try and share these pizzas. They're made for a single owner.
- When you get your pizza, fold it in half and eat it like a sandwich. It's neater and how the locals do it.



A trip back to the rooftop of Hotel Ambos Mundos – preferred digs of famed writer Ernest Hemingway – sees us enjoying views across the city, excellent mojitos and a great spot for a cigar of course.

Go through the hotel lobby to the old elevator – it's usually working – and head to the top floor. Considering it's such a famous hotel, it's rarely over-busy and you can nearly always find a table.

There are definitely more rooftop bars around Havana now. Keep an eye out for tell-tale umbrellas on the tops of buildings. There's nothing like getting up high in this city. None of the buildings are that tall – that even from the highest vantage point – you'll have some great people-watching opportunities.



Cubans have really embraced al fresco dining since we've been gone. Thanks to the government releasing its death grip on private business licences, people have been able to open their own little restaurants or are now free to have visitors openly eat with them.

Certain areas of Havana Old Town are packed with open-air seating and menu-wielding restaurateurs doing their best to pull in the punters.

3. The street art

We're impressed to see people expressing themselves on Cuba's streets more this trip. Instead of just political tropes or communist propaganda messages, Cubans have been given more freedom to create. We even come across a street art quarter in Havana Viejo.



This quarter adds to the colour and traditional spirit of the town more than we ever thought it would. This kind of artistic freedom is a good sign that Cubans are being given more space to express themselves.





4. The cruises and shopping

Another of the most surprising differences we've noticed with Cuba now is the arrival of cruise ships to Havana's port.



Pre-2014, cruises on this scale that went around the Caribbean had at least one port of call in the USA. This meant they were not allowed to land in Cuba. For decades, Cubans would watch ships full of tourist dollars sail just out of reach but never make landfall.

Now, cruises can stop here. In peak season, around 11 ships per week moor up, which is busier than Sydney. Sadly many of the passengers don't disembark though because tours and taxes are too expensive to lure people off the cruiser.

Still, it's an interesting sign of things to come. Perhaps sight of these magnificent cars will tempt out more tourists.



The shopping in Havana has also improved since we were last here. You won't find a Target or Aldi here (yet), but there are more and more brands showing up on the streets here.

This new high-end shopping mall near the Capitol Building has created a weird oasis in the city. Its shiny floors, vaulted glass ceilings and enormous price tags seem a bit in bad taste though with so many locals struggling to make ends meet. This mall has an eerie ghost-town feel to it, with few people exploring its streets and even fewer within its shops.

Bored-looking shop employees stare out the windows or down at their smart phones. We hasten back to the living streets of Havana and away from this anachronistic oddity.

5. The casa particulares



We're big fans of staying in the *casa particulares* in Cuba. Private homes with enough space to fit a bedroom with a lockable door and its own bathroom facilities can apply for a licence to run what is essentially a B&B.

These casas are awesome because you are connected with the community much more and your money is going to the people instead of to hotels, which are run by the government military.

Since the last time we were here, there are lots more casas around, and the facilities they're offering are also more complete.

We're staying in La Gargola – more like a miniature hostel than a proper *casa particular*, but still privately owned. This place is so well located. If you want to stay in Old Havana, you should definitely check this one out.

And the good news...

In spite of all the changes that have happened in Cuba since 2014, the city still feels the same. It's absolutely awesome to be back here – it almost feels like coming home.

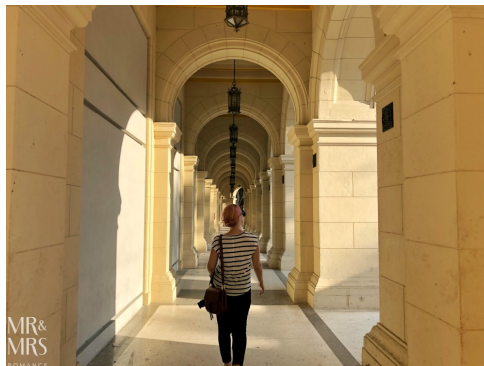
It's also still a photographer's paradise, with incredible things happening and life doing its thing before your very eyes. Here are some of our favourite shots from Havana – though I think we'll be sharing a few more with you over the next little while:



Sunrise in Havana. Early morning in this city is definitely the time to go exploring



The colour and life of Havana Viejo never gets boring



Amidst the old crumbling ruins of tenements are grand arched passageways of perfect symmetry and architecture



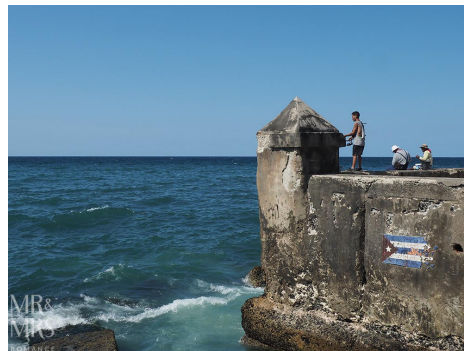
Early in the morning, these cats are all waiting by this door for their breakfast



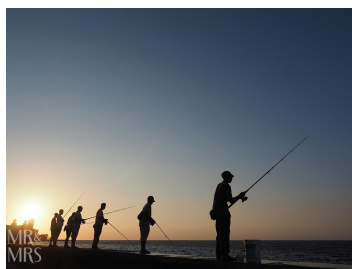
As quickly as Havana is progressing, it's still things like this that give you hope that it's a city that will never lose its sense of humour or its ingenuity



With the Grand Teatro de la Habana in the background, this old horse and carriage brings history alive



The fishermen along the Malecon – Havana's sea wall – throw a line in



The sun sets perfectly with the Cuban fishermen still casting their hopes into the Caribbean



Wedged between two taller white buildings, this old duck-egg blue perfume shop catches Christina's sharp eye