

HAVANA HEIGHTS

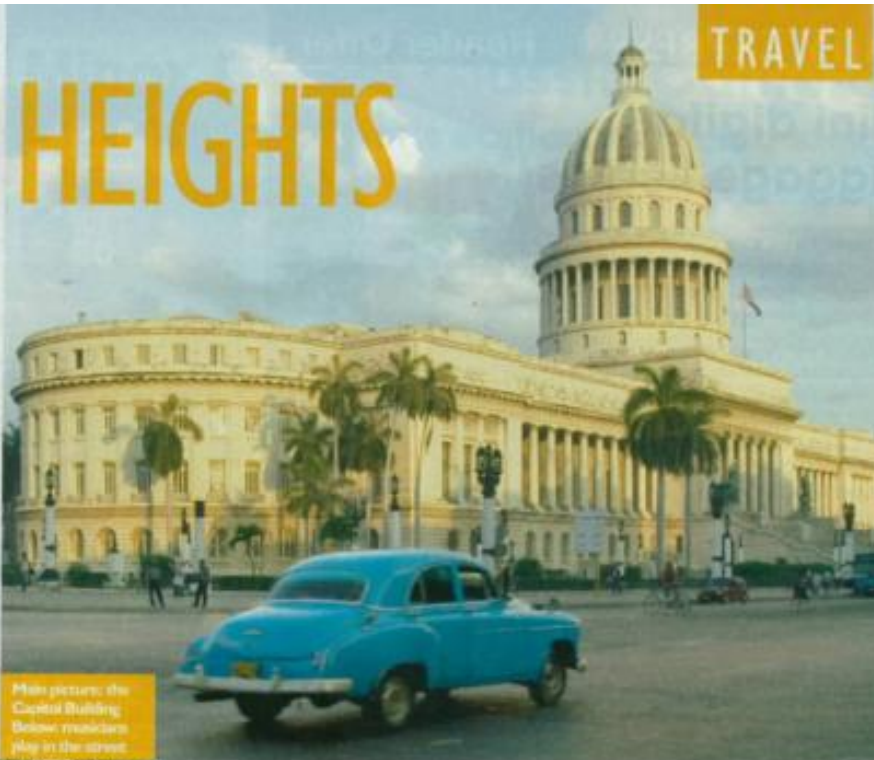
Nick Boulos enjoys a Caribbean break with a difference in Cuba's vivacious capital city...

Glancing at my watch, I decided that I am not too early for the first drink of the day. After all, this wasn't just any old drink in any old bar in any old city.

I was at the rooftop bar of the Hotel Ambos Mundos in the heart of Havana's Old Town – formerly Ernest Hemingway's residence. It was here that the literary giant wrote *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. And like him, I was clutching a sweet, cloudy glass of the country's trademark tippie – a mojito.

Now enjoyed all over the world, this rum cocktail served with fresh mint was invented in Cuba's capital and soon won a legion of fans.

Main picture: the Capitol Building
Below musicians play in the street



But Hemingway wasn't the only big shot to be left spellbound by Cuba's infectious atmosphere. Christopher Columbus famously described the Caribbean's largest island as 'the loveliest land ever beheld by human eyes', and he had a point.

Despite the early hour, the bar was buzzing. My feet tapped to the live salsa quartet playing. A stiff breeze rustled my hair as I sipped my drink and gazed down at the buildings, the La Cabana fort and the sea beyond.

Havana, or La Habana as it's known locally, is one of the world's greatest and most intoxicating cities. Almost untouched by the modern world, largely due to the long-standing trade embargos imposed on

Cuba by the United States, the city is lifted straight from the 1950s.

Battered and rusty Chevrolet cars rumble down wide avenues lined with the most beautiful colonial buildings that are crumbling from decades of decay and neglect. Despite all the wear and tear, Havana oozes an understated glamour other cities can only dream of.

The most arresting part of the city is Havana Vieja, the old town of grand squares and narrow alleys; it was founded by the Spanish in 1519 and later named a Unesco World Heritage Site. Around 900 buildings here have significant historical importance.

Later I reached Plaza de Armas. Surrounding the small park of royal palms and book stalls are museums, castles, palaces and a unique cobbled, wooden street. It's thought the blocks replaced the conventional stone ones to stop residents being woken by the noisy sounds of horses trotting by.

Havana Vieja's piece de resistance is, arguably, Plaza de la Cathedral, one of five main squares across the city. Dominated by the 18th-century Cathedral de San Cristobel de la Habana, regarded by many as the finest example of Cuban Baroque architecture, the square is simply charming. Tables from cafés spill out onto the cobbled courtyard. It's the perfect place from which

to soak up the grand surroundings and lively street music.

The next day, I was on a mission to educate myself on Cuba's eventful, fascinating and bloody history. And there's only one place to do that – the Museum of the Revolution. Housed in the former presidential palace, the extensive exhibits reveal all about the revolution led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Determined to oust dictator Batista in the 1950s, the band of men famously changed Cuba's history forever and paved the way for radical social change.

If there's one thing more recognisable about Cuba than Castro, it's cigars. The Real Fabrica de Tabacos Partagas factory in Havana, a tall red building behind the great domed Capitol Building, is the country's oldest and produces a staggering 20,000 a day.

Our guide, his index finger draped around a thick cigar, showed us around. Thousands of brown, withered but surprisingly elasticated tobacco leaves sat in large piles waiting to be de-stemmed and arranged in terms of colour, size, texture and strength.

Upstairs we saw clusters of leaves expertly rolled into cigars by hundreds of workers wearing red polo shirts. A voice boomed from a speaker in the corner, its source sat at a podium at one end of the large hall. Every afternoon a novel is read and played ▶

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A Cuban dancer and musician perform throughout the factory to entertain the staff.

All too soon it was time to leave Havana for the colonial towns, pristine beaches and dramatic countryside beyond. But not before one last cocktail...

And when it came to choosing a venue there was no contest. The sound of maracas and accordions and a eye-stinging whiff of cigar smoke welcomed us at El Floridita. Having first opened its doors on November 16, 1519, this was another of Hemingway's favoured haunts – a bronze statue of him stands by the bar beside black-and-white prints of old Havana.

When it came to ordering, the barman was keen to help. "You must have a daiquiri – it was invented here by bartender Constante Ribalaigua," he said. Who was I to argue?

WAY TO GO

Nick travelled to Havana with Imaginative Traveller (0845 508 5893, www.imaginative-traveller.co.uk) on the 12-day Viva Cuba itinerary. Prices start from £860pp (based on two sharing). Flights from London cost from £625 return with Air Europa (0871 423 0717, www.aireuropa.com).

Ten things you must do in Havana

1 Discover more about Cuba's turbulent history at the Museum of the Revolutionary, housed in the former Cuban Presidential Palace.

2 Take a tour of a working cigar factory, such as the world-famous Real Fabrica de Tabacos Partagás factory.



3 Wander through Havana Vieja, the city's most fascinating neighbourhood that is lined with amazing architecture.

4 Stroll along the Malecón, the 8km seawall and esplanade that stretches along the coast in Havana.

5 People watch at Plaza de la Cathedral. Inside the cathedral, you'll also find copies of paintings by Rubens and Murillo.

6 Learn the secrets of salsa with a dance class while staying in the city. They are the experts after all!

7 Watch the spectacle that is La Tropicana, Havana's famous cabaret show.



8 Sip cocktails at El Floridita bar, which has been open since 1519 and is the birthplace of the daiquiri.

9 Relax on the white-sand beaches of Playas del Este, only a short distance from the city.

10 Visit the old military forts across the bay for grand city views.