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TIME STOPS IN TRINIDAD

Live music spilling on to streets and piazzas that have seen the rush of revolution—the Cuban town is a book of many stories



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In Trinidad, music is a force of life, drawing tourists to locals who make merry with spontaneous jams; Old, peppy-hued cars (bottom) are a common sight on the streets.

TIME STOPS IN TRINIDAD

LIVE MUSIC SPILLING ON TO COBBLED STREETS AND PIAZZAS THAT HAVE SEEN THE RUSH OF REVOLUTION—THE CUBAN TOWN IS A BOOK OF MANY STORIES **BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI**

It feels a bit like Legoland, all these squat buildings on narrow lanes, with their brightly painted walls—only, these are real homes with real people in them. The rains have washed the streets of Trinidad squeaky clean, and there is still a welcome nip in the air. Once in a while, squeals of kids playing football or the tinkle of an ice cream van breaks the soothing silence. There is almost no traffic on the streets, only the occasional clip-clop of a horse led by its owner, showing curious tourists around.

In 1514, Spanish explorers founded this small town in central Cuba close to the southern coast in the Sancti Spiritus province. Over five centuries later, this part of Cuba, with its uneven cobblestoned lanes and red-tiled pop-

coloured homes, still feels like a slice of colonial Spain. Throw in magnificent churches and bustling piazzas to the mix, and it is easy to see why UNESCO ascribed the town and the surrounding valley with World Heritage status way back in 1988.

I am staying at the **Iberostar Grand**, one of Trinidad's few luxury hotels, a perfect throwback to the times of colonial splendour. The facade is a muted mint green, with the architecture perfectly blending into the environs. Inside the hotel, marble

columns and the gurgling fountain in the central courtyard are impressive without being imperious. When I step out on to the balcony, I can see the small **Plaza Carrillo**. Locals have congregated here to celebrate the cool evening, lovelier after the sudden spell of rain.

Not that they need an excuse, according to my local guide Alian Rojas, who is taking me on a walking tour. This plaza, though small, has been a hub for both administration and entertainment since the 1840s; the former is



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represented by the grand government offices around the square, and the latter by the numerous parks where mothers push prams as they engage in mild banter. One long look at it and you can tell—history is something this town has in plenty.

Trinidad's fortunes waxed and waned since the 1820s, until the end of the century, when wars and fires devastated the economy. The town's revival began only in the 1950s when then President Batista declared it of historic value, curbing any ideas for modernisation. Massive period mansions dot the Sierra de Escambray hills and the Playa Ancon coast surrounding Trinidad. Today, the city it is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Cuba, located only a four-hour highway drive away from the capital city of Havana.

As Alian and I stroll through the undulating lanes of Trinidad, slowly heading towards its historic core, I find people standing outside their homes, ever-ready to engage in warm banter. Like all Cubans, the people of Trinidad are either of African or Spanish origin, which makes for a vibrant marriage of cultures. The streets lined with humble dwellings slowly give way to the grandeur of the town centre, with its plazas and parks, grand buildings and museums. The contrast is unexpected and charming.

After a dozen halts to chat with locals excited to practise their English, we reach **Plaza Mayor**. This central piazza is the heart of this colonial town, where 18th-century buildings bearing Moorish and Andalusian influences mingle with neoclassical designs of the 19th century. Landowners' mansions are still clustered around this area, although most have been converted into a volley of museums conserving everything from Cuban architecture to the country's history of counter-revolution. Little wonder then, that Trinidad is often referred to as Cuba's museum city.

We sit down at one of the four small square gardens on the plaza, facing

Trinidadians (top) have imbibed the vibrancy of both African and Spanish heritage; Food (middle), whether the Cuban paella or global dishes, is served to channel local quirks; The city's many undulating lanes (bottom) wear a whirl of colours.



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the Church of the Holy Trinity, with the **Convento de San Francisco de Asis** standing down the road. The convent's bright yellow bell tower is a prominent landmark in Trinidad. Alian points out the various museums around the plaza, adding that I would need at least a couple of days to visit all of them. From architecture to antiques, history to natural sciences, these museums hide within them some of the most remarkable pieces of the puzzle that is contemporary Cuba.

I am certainly fascinated by the 18th-century convent, which has now been converted into the **La Lucha Contra los Bandidos National Museum**, or the Museum of the Fight Against Bandits. Except in this case, 'bandits' refer not to average highway marauders, but Cuban counter-revolutionaries, supposedly sponsored by the CIA. This museum, set up to document the "struggle of the Cuban people against the counter-revolutionaries," has a small collection of weapons and armoured vehicles, maps and notes, and even a part of a U.S. spy

Trinidad still resembles the colonial town that it started out as (top); Che Guevara collectibles such as nameplates (bottom) are popular souvenirs.



plane shot down over the area.

It is impossible to speak of Cuba without mentioning the great revolution of the 1950s, led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, which resulted in the establishment of a new Communist state. And with it, the beginning of a prolonged cold war of sorts with the country's closest and most powerful neighbour, the U.S.A. And even though in the last few years, relations between the two countries have begun to thaw, there is still a love-hate emotion that Cubans harbour for Americans.

After that intriguing peek into the days of the revolution and counter-revolution, we opt for a quick dip into the **Palacio Cantero**—former home of the influential doctor, Justo Germán Cantero. This mansion, built in the early 1800s, is now the Museo Histórico Municipal, showcasing how the sugar barons of the day lived: think floors of gleaming Italian marble, walls covered with lush frescoes, vases of Baccarat crystal, and wooden furniture that would fetch a king's ransom in any

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antique market today.

More than any exhibit, it is the museum itself that is popular among visitors for the expansive views of Trinidad and the surrounding countryside from the top of the bell tower. By the time I huff and puff my way up the winding stairs, it has begun raining, and we have to wind up the walk. Alian announces this is the perfect time to introduce me to Trinidad's very own *canchanchara*, or rum cocktail. We head to a nondescript bar where there are no other tourists. Indeed, this simple cocktail—a mix of Cuban rum (or Vitamin R, as it is known here), lime juice and a generous splash of honey, topped with ice and served in terracotta cups—is as invigorating as it is delicious.

Later in the evening, I walk to **Sol Ananda** for dinner, a tiny restaurant located in an old bungalow in a busy street around Plaza Mayor. Although food has not been a problem for me so far as a vegetarian, Sol Ananda entices with the promise of Cuban cuisine tinged with global flavours. Like any self-respecting mansion in town, this one too is a mini museum, with mismatched antique furniture and sparkling chandeliers. I am more captivated by the ambiance than the food, given that a talented trio is belting out soulful Caribbean music.

Like everywhere else in Cuba, music is in the very air that Trinidad breathes. I have been told that there is no better place to take in some of this magic than the **Casa de la Música**, where I head straight after dinner. This open-air club-



Scratch under the touristy Trinidad of cigars (top) and rum-filled evenings to find a lot of cultural treasures; Spanish colonial churches (bottom) raise heads from cobblestone alleys.

café is perched on a set of old, broad stone steps on one end of Calle Cristo, just off Plaza Mayor.

When I reach just after 10 p.m., the local band has already started performing, and the crowd is warming up to classics from the popular 1990s Cuban band, The Buena Vista Social Club. As I watch—with more Vitamin R in hand—young couples get up and begin to sashay to the lilting beats of the music. In a few minutes, the small space in front of the makeshift stage is filled with people of all ages and nationalities, salsa uniting them all on that warm night under a starry Cuban sky.

Cuba may have moved on, ready for what the future brings, but in Trinidad, time seems to have stopped. ●

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE There are no direct flights from India to Cuba. Flights from Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru and Chennai to the capital Havana usually stop at European gateway cities such as Amsterdam and Paris, or Toronto. Trinidad is 316 km/4 hr from Havana by cab.

VISA Obtaining a Cuban visa for an Indian traveller can be cumbersome; visitors are advised to go through an established travel agent. The writer travelled with the Havana-based Cuba Private Travel (www.cubaprivatetravel.com). For those who wish to apply on their own, the form is available at misiones.minrex.gob.cu/en/india/consular-services. It has to be submitted to the Cuban Embassy in New Delhi.

Indians with a U.S. visa can also fly to Havana from an American airport. If transiting through an American airport, you'll be required to fill a short form, declaring your reason for travel by selecting from one of 12 categories. Choose 'Support for the Cuban People'.

TIP It is best to keep a copy of your return ticket handy during immigration at Havana. Internet and cellular networks can be a problem, so a hard copy or screenshot are safe bets.

