

# ESCAPE

FIVE PAGES OF THE BEST TRAVEL IN THE WORLD



A TRIP TO ARNHEM AND ITS FAMOUS WORLD WAR II BATTLE



GAS GUZZLER: Eugene sees the sights in a vintage Ford Fairlane

# Viva Cuba

**Eugene Costello** takes in the colours, colonial architecture and culture of this amazing country

**I** AM in Sagua La Grande in Villa Clara province, Cuba – the area most closely identified with revolutionary Che Guevara.

It was in the regional capital, Santa Clara, that Che and his troops, acting on orders from Fidel Castro, intercepted a train carrying soldiers and armaments for the Batista regime and overcame them by derailing the train and smoking them out with a fire. The demoralised troops quickly surrendered; it was December 30, 1958 and on New Year's Day the

dictator Batista fled Havana for exile in the Dominican Republic. The revolution was complete.

Sagua La Grande is a decent-sized town some 40 miles north of Che's victory. It is a very colonial place, with a Spanish-style layout, including a tiled square and church. It's a public holiday and it seems the whole town has come out to party in the plaza. A new hotel is opening – underscoring the value that the country places on tourism for future economic prosperity. The holiday has been declared for

the townsfolk, who see tourism as delivering a new era of prosperity.

There are salsa bands blaring out music through loudspeakers; I am offered a concoction in a terracotta bowl that comprises honey and rum – but mainly just rum. People in Cuba have little, but what they do have, they share. In the crowd are a few women with young children dressed up as bumblebees (no, I have no idea either). I give the mothers a few pesos and tell them to buy something for the kids. Suddenly, I am surrounded by happy

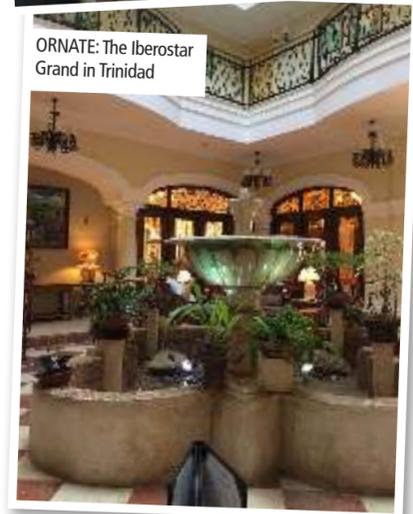
children, beaming at my small act of kindness. They want their picture taken with me. As I walk off, I am pulled back. One little girl is upset that she wasn't in the picture, so I crouch down next to her. She puts her arm around my neck and plants a kiss on my cheek.

The Hotel Sagua is a restored colonial triumph that is evocative of Havana's famous Hotel Nacional de Cuba. And Hotel Palacio Arenas is an 11-bedroom boutique gem, perfect for those who wish to see something of the real Cuba. And back along the





**MEET AND GREET:** Eugene gets snapped with young locals



**ORNATE:** The Iberostar Grand in Trinidad



**MULTICOLOURED MAGIC:** The colonial wonder of Trinidad

coast, near the bridge to the “Cayos” (of which, more later), is an even prettier colonial showcase: Remedios. It’s like the set of an old Mexican town in technicolor Westerns, with a church, numerous Hispanic buildings painted in pastel colours and all arranged around a town square. There are a few architecturally authentic boutique hotels here as well, plus a smattering of bars and restaurants since this enclave is a few years further down the tourism trail than Sagua La Grande.

Do speak to Cuba Direct about arranging a tour that takes in some of these spots after a break in the Villa Clara region (and, if you have time, add in Trinidad and Havana to make the trip wholly memorable).

You should definitely find time in the itinerary for a trip to Santa Clara, the provincial capital. The Tren Blindado – the “Armed Train” – has been restored and mounted and turned into an attraction for tourists and history buffs on the revolution trail. On the edge of town, you’ll find Che’s mausoleum, a huge stone edifice with an enormous statue of the great man carrying a rifle, standing atop an inscribed plinth the size of Nelson’s Column, or near enough. At the back is a museum devoted to artefacts from Che’s life and any number of old sepia photos. Next door is a slightly strange room that is designed to evoke the Bolivian jungle where he was killed and, for a country that eschews organised religion, this

place religiously venerates the avowed atheist. Stern uniformed guards, mainly women, stand to attention, frowning and forbidding photos and one can only ponder what the revolutionary hero himself would have made of it all.

All that culture can be tiring work, so it was with a little relief that we headed back to our hotel. We were staying at the Dhawa Hotel on Cayo Santa Maria, one of a group of keys known as the Jardines del Rey off the north coast of Cuba (there are apparently 500 keys in the archipelago) and connected to the mainland by a 48km road bridge. It’s a four-star all-inclusive resort with a huge swimming pool and there were plenty of groups here (many from Canada, for whom no embargo exists, unlike the Americans, who do not get to visit Cuba in any real numbers), who seemed never to leave the resort.

And sure, why would they? Unless, like me, you are keen to see glimpses of the real Cuba, this place has it all. Marble-effect atrium, several bars, three restaurants – one an enormous buffet-style offering with sushi bars, pasta stations, carveries, fruit and dessert oases and a couple of smaller à la carte bistros – and a couple of swimming pools, one with a swim-up cocktail bar, means if you’re only here



**CULTURE:** Fascinating architecture is everywhere



**PARADISE:** It’s easy to escape the heat

for the sun and sangria, you’re in the right place. Not to mention white, crystalline beaches and water the colour of some exotic engagement ring, plus a smorgasbord of water-based activities on offer.

The price you book is the price you pay and that’s the big appeal, certainly for the Canadian groups escaping the tail-end of winter for some Caribbean sunshine. The same would apply for those heading out from Ireland. Do keep a few pesos (technically CUCs, the “convertible peso”, worth about a US dollar) to dish out as tips – the monthly wage here can be as little as 25 CUCs,

so they rely on tips to make up their money, so don’t be mean.

But it would be rude to travel all the way to Cuba and not explore further. We put together an itinerary with Cuba Direct that saw us spend a few days in the Unesco World Heritage-listed Trinidad on the south of the island after our stay on Cayo Santa Maria. In truth, it meant a scary drive by private transfer across the interior of the island – about three hours that reminded me that I would cling to life by my fingernails, but it was worth it.

Travel editor JP Thompson did great justice to this colonial pearl in these pages a little while back – all low buildings painted in pastel colours and a fleet of old almedrones, the pre-revolution gas-guzzlers of the Fifties, so I won’t go over the same ground.

He’ll surely turn a blind eye to me saying that a highlight of the trip was when guide Ramon took us out in his

’57 Ford Fairlane to the national park at the foot of the Escambray Mountains, where we stripped down to our pants for a swim in the leaf-shaded coolness of the Rio Guarabo. We watched as a gaúcho led a pack of horses down to gulp thirstily from the river’s edge; such ineffable chance encounters provide the enduring stuff of memories.

Should you choose to follow the same path as us, we stayed in the fabulous Iberostar Grand on Plaza Carillo, all fancy stonework and an atrium with verdant plants and the soothing murmuring of a fountain. We tacked on a couple of days to imbibe – literally and figuratively – the buzz of Havana before all things came to their inevitable end. Here, we stayed in the opulent Iberostar Parque Central, from where we had the Old Town about a hurling pitch away.

If you fancy a European-style meal out, head for the Nao Bar Paladar (a privately owned enterprise) down toward the creek, on Obispo. Upstairs is all dark wood furniture, a wide-ranging menu and the wine list isn’t bad, either. And don’t be afraid to try one of the places up narrow stairs above the shops of the Old Town, as JP and I did. There are plenty of Cubans eating here and you can sample Cuban specials such as ropa vieja (shredded beef), moros y cristianos (white rice with meat and

● Eugene visited Cuba as part of the FITCUBA 2018 fair and was invited by the Cuba Tourist Board. Visit [www.travel2cuba.co.uk](http://www.travel2cuba.co.uk) for more information. ABTA and ATOL-protected Cuban holiday specialist, Cuba Direct, has a world-class team of Cuban travel experts who are dedicated to creating bespoke holiday packages that match each client’s individual requirements.

● The Gran Manzana Kempinski and Royalton Cayo Santa Maria package from Cuba Direct includes three nights at the elegant Gran Manzana Kempinski in the heart of Cuba’s capital Havana, followed by four nights of luxury and relaxation at the Royalton in Cayo Santa Maria, a paradisiacal island off the coast of Cuba. Based on two people sharing over seven nights and including transfers and representation services, the package costs €1,389/£1,239 per person. Contact [www.cubadirect.co.uk](http://www.cubadirect.co.uk) and quote MAGAZINE+ for a discounted rate.

## Maria’s milestone membership

MARIA Healy, from Co.Dublin, hit the jackpot recently, when she became the one millionth person to sign up to the Aer Lingus loyalty programme, AerClub. And to celebrate, the Balbriggan-based DJ received a Platinum AerClub membership, a €500 shopping trip and personal styling session from Kildare Village, along with a personal chauffeur to help carry the bags!

On top of that, Maria will enjoy dinner at the five-star Merrion Hotel and was also awarded 240,000 AerClub loyalty points, enabling her to book business-class return flights to the US, or up to 30 flights from Ireland to Europe. The AerClub programme allows Aer Lingus passengers reap rewards, not only when travelling with the airline, but with simple everyday purchases with partners such as SuperValu and Kildare Village.

Speaking on her milestone membership, a delighted Ms Healy said: “As a DJ, I travel to the UK, Europe and further afield regularly, so joining AerClub made total sense for me. Never did I expect that I would be the millionth member and am delighted to receive Platinum membership and a VIP day out. I can’t wait to use my points to book another getaway!”



## Go into the wild with G Adventures

ADVENTURE holiday group G Adventures has launched a bunch of new off-the-beaten track destinations. The list includes Patagonia in Argentina, Ethiopia, northern Sri Lanka, Senegal, Taiwan and Uzbekistan. G Adventures has launched two new trips for 2019, including Best of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, with Turkmenistan a new country addition for next year. A 13-day trip is priced from €1,899pp, travelling from Tashkent to Ashgabat.

Senegal in West Africa is slowly recovering from a lapse in tourism following the Ebola breakout of 2014. A 10-day tour of Senegal and The Gambia is priced from €1,649pp, travelling from Dakar return, with Dublin flights extra. Trips to Sri Lanka shows no sign of slowing down. G Adventures launched sailing trips last year in the south and sold out within weeks. It has now introduced a programme taking travellers to sail the far-north. This lesser-travelled region was cut off from tourism for decades due to civil war, but it’s now open for business. A seven-day trip from Jaffna return is priced from €1,299pp with flights from Dublin not included. For more, visit [www.gadventures.com](http://www.gadventures.com)



**LUXURY:** Sri Lanka



**HOT:** Abu Dhabi

## Lure of the Middle East

CHRISTMAS in the sun and in the lap of luxury on the high seas is a great festive combo. There’s a seven-night cruise of the Middle East this Christmas from €1,819pp, aboard the aptly named MSC Splendida. Guests sail from Dubai for Bani Yas Island, Muscat, Khasab and on to Abu Dhabi. The package includes a balcony cabin, free drinks and an overnight in Dubai. Flight departs Dublin on 23rd December 23. Call Cassidy Travel on 01 291 0000 or [cassidytravel.ie](http://cassidytravel.ie)

## Try St Paddy’s in the US

THERE are few places more Irish to celebrate Paddy’s Day than New York, where as well as catching a parade, you can shop, sightsee and catch a show. You can get there for three days from €699pp, including flights and hotel, four sharing, with Tour America on March 15. They’re also doing Chicago where the river is dyed green from €629pp on March 16, as well as Boston from €669pp. For more, see [touramerica.ie](http://touramerica.ie) or call 01 817 3500.

