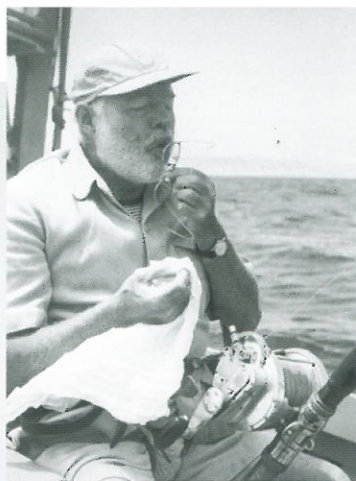


# CUBA LIBRE

*This last uncharted corner of the Caribbean is opening up and the best way to explore it is by yacht. But, as Risa Merl discovers, you need to get there quick before this country frozen in time changes forever*



US writer Ernest Hemingway, pictured in 1958, lived in Cuba for two decades



**insider tip**  
**KEEP TABS**  
**ON UTILITIES**

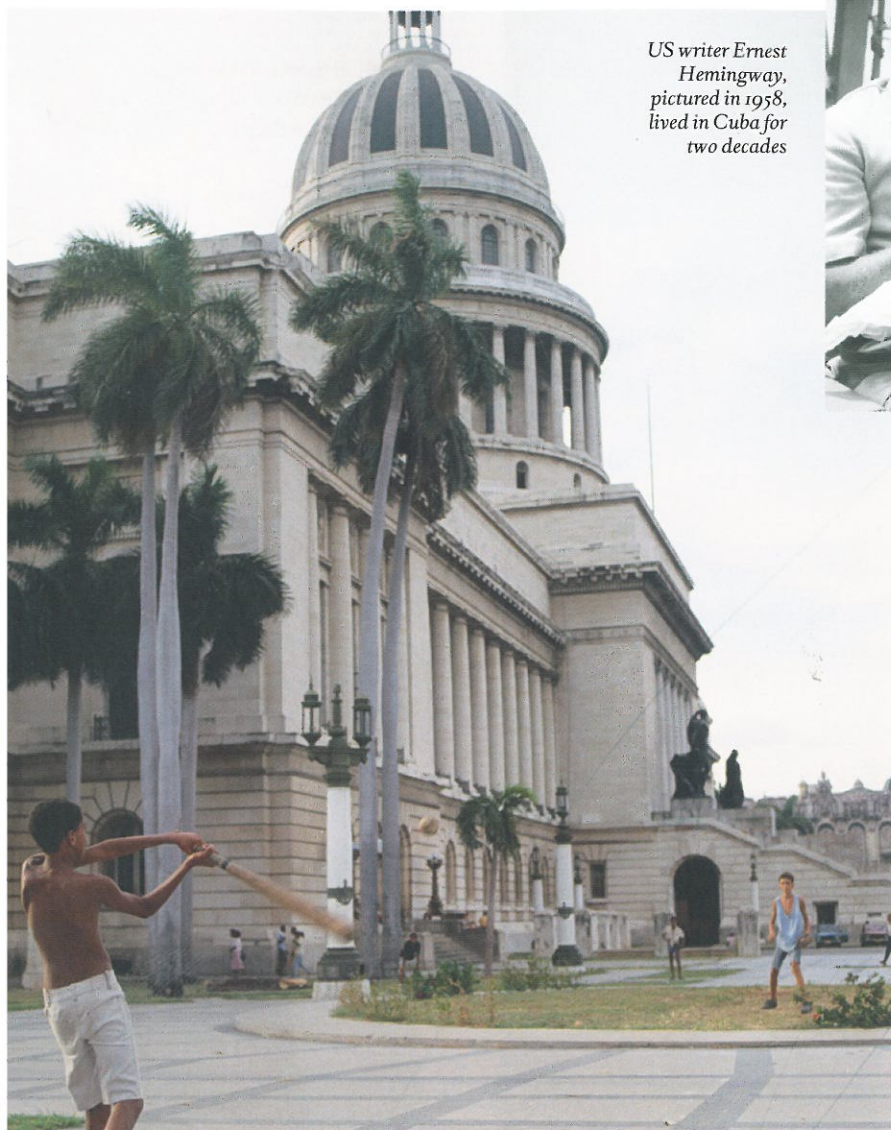
“It can be expensive to get water and electricity and you can end up with a huge bill,” warns Jerry Berton, of Cuban specialists cubaseas.com, who says one client was charged \$2,800 for three days on a 23 metre yacht. “Take a photo of your water and electric metre so there’s no discussion about it when the bill comes.”

**the knowledge**  
**RULES AND**  
**REGULATIONS**

Travel restrictions that once made it illegal for Americans to visit Cuba have been eased but not completely lifted. Americans must apply to visit under the cultural People-to-People licence. “It isn’t an open card to tourism, you have to have specific reasons to want to be in Cuba, shared with the US Government, US Coast Guard (USCG), Cuban Government and Cuban Coast Guard,” says charter yacht owner Ken Morrell. Non-American guests can simply go as tourists.

Cuba’s US restrictions apply to the boat, crew and guests. If any are American, they must comply with USCG, US Government, Cuban Coast Guard and Cuban Government rules. “If no US citizens or residents are on board, and it’s not a US-owned boat, then they just have to conform with the Cuban regulations, and we help with that,” says Paul Madden of Paul Madden Associates.

The good news is that relaxing US travel restrictions has made life easier for foreign-flagged yachts to visit Cuba.



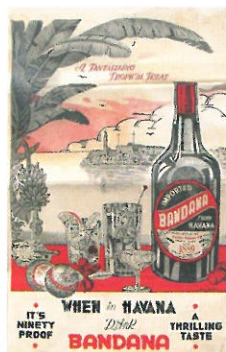
**H**igh-rolling casinos, wild cabarets and glamorous nightclubs – in its heyday between the 1920s and 1950s, Cuba was a playground of the wealthy. In 1956, *Cabaret Quarterly* called Havana, “a mistress of pleasure, the lush and opulent goddess of delights”. Socialites and celebrities, including Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner, flocked to this sinfully delicious tropical paradise. The closing-off of the country in the proceeding half-century of communist rule has, if anything, enhanced the allure of Cuba, the largest island in the Caribbean, albeit for rather different reasons. Now the draws are natural and cultural, rather than purely hedonistic (although a dose of hedonism is certainly still available in Havana) and as Cuba’s global relationships thaw, these attractions are increasingly within reach.

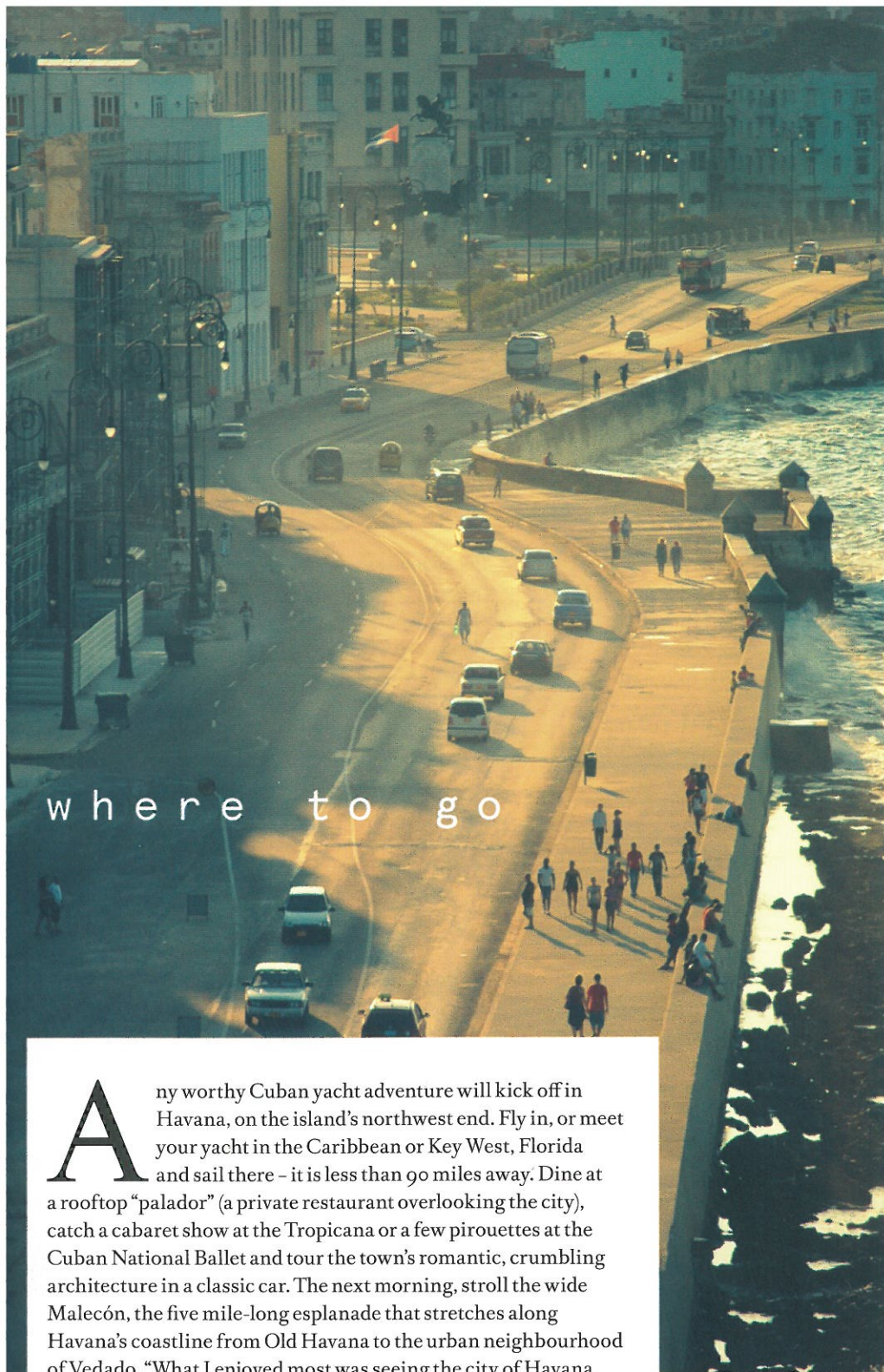
“The best way to see it is by yacht,” says Paul Madden of Paul Madden Associates, which arranges trips to Cuba for charterers and private yachts. “Cuba is more than 700 miles long and has more coastline than Florida.” Travelling to Cuba by superyacht also affords visitors luxury that cannot be found on land, as Ken Morrell, owner of Cuba 38.7 metre charter yacht *Gladius*, explains: “The advantage of a yacht charter is the ability to offer the things that [yacht clientele] are often looking for – air-conditioning, comfortable beds, excellent food. Returning to the yacht after a day out makes the whole experience very comfortable, as those types of services aren’t readily available in Cuba.”

While the door has slowly started to creak open, tourism is restricted and progressing slowly, so now is the time to visit this time-capsule paradise before the day-trippers arrive. “It’s still at the early stage, where the Cuba that everyone knows, the 1950’s cars and the untouched nature, is still there,” says Mark Duncan of YPI Group, which is offering 72m *Axioma* for charter in Cuba. “But a lot of development is happening and land has been bought up – we suspect in a year it will change dramatically. It’s good to have the chance to visit when it’s a wee bit raw, before it disappears.”

Opposite page: American and Cuban tourists gambling at the Casino Internacional at the Hotel Nacional, Havana in 1957

Above: children playing baseball in front of the neoclassical Capitol Building in Havana





where to go

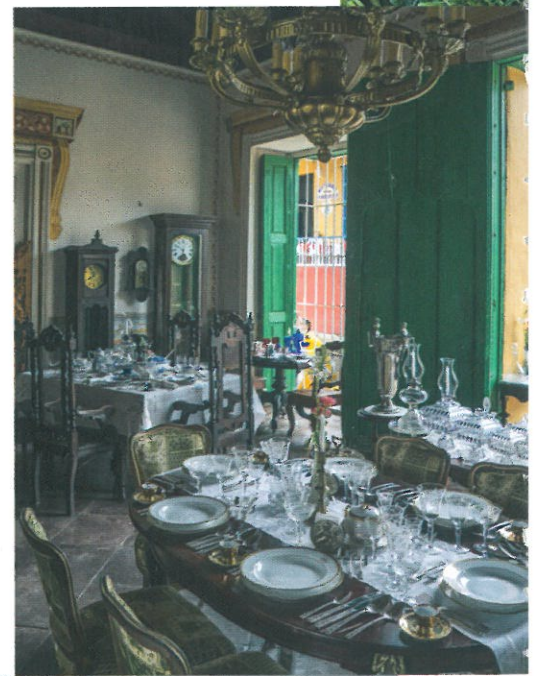
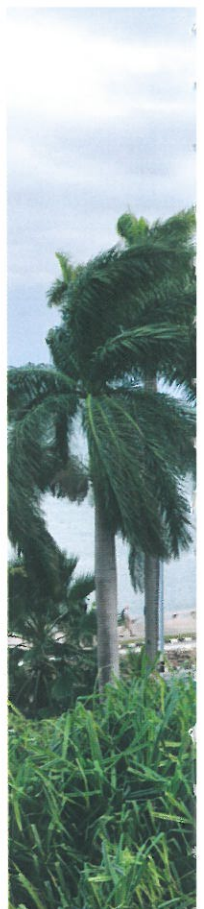
Any worthy Cuban yacht adventure will kick off in Havana, on the island's northwest end. Fly in, or meet your yacht in the Caribbean or Key West, Florida and sail there - it is less than 90 miles away. Dine at a rooftop "palador" (a private restaurant overlooking the city), catch a cabaret show at the Tropicana or a few pirouettes at the Cuban National Ballet and tour the town's romantic, crumbling architecture in a classic car. The next morning, stroll the wide Malecón, the five mile-long esplanade that stretches along Havana's coastline from Old Havana to the urban neighbourhood of Vedado. "What I enjoyed most was seeing the city of Havana and recognising that in its heyday it was probably one of the most beautiful and interesting places in the world to visit," says Morrell.

With the proper permits in place, a yacht can cruise to the Port of Havana on a 20 mile passage from Marina Hemingway to the west, passing seaside neighbourhoods and the imposing, white-walled fortress, Castillo de los Tres Reyes Magos del Morro, which guards the bay's entrance.

From Havana, a car can transport guests to the other side of the island (too far to travel by yacht in a week's charter). Here, in the picturesque town of Cienfuegos, on the southern coast, stay a few nights ashore in a private villa - overnighing with locals. "We stayed with a family that was the nicest group of people," says Morrell. "When you meet the people, without any politics or influences around of any type, it can be rewarding for both sides."

the knowledge  
PERMITS +  
PAPERWORK

Berton says his team can arrange a Cuban cruising permit in 24 hours, but it doesn't mean you are free to roam all Cuban waters. Everything is regulated, so if you're going from one marina to another or anchoring out, you'll need permission. "The Cubans just want to know about all the boats coming in, and the better you handle the paperwork, the easier it is," says Berton.





**the knowledge**  
**CASH IS KING**

Credits card facilities are limited and US plastic isn't accepted at all. "Bring cash! They like euros; dollars have a penalty," says Madden.

Most big hotels exchange currency to the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC). "Rates vary, it can often be 80-87 CUC per US dollar," says Berton. "Since the government controls everything, there is no bargaining for the exchange rate." Berton's company can facilitate money exchange ahead of time and have it waiting for you at the marina. It also has a Cuban bank account and credit card and can arrange to pay for things like berthing and guides before a trip.



**the knowledge**  
**INSURANCE**

"If anyone on board has a US visa and doesn't conform with the US visa requirements, then the boat is considered illegal and the insurance policy is voided," says Madden.

Berton says every visitor gets Cuban health insurance: "But personal carrier insurance will give you a safety blanket. If there is a health issue it's best to fly to Miami, as it's only a 40-minute flight."



While you're on land, your yacht could make its way from Havana to Varadero, on the northern coast. Varadero is a resort town on the hilly coastline that boasts gorgeous sandy shores, a newly expanded 110-slip marina and yacht services, golf courses and good hotels. Cocktail hour at the Dupont family mansion Xanadu, which overlooks a picture-perfect beach and golf course, is a must. The next day you can dive and snorkel over some of the most unspoiled reefs in the world. Fishing is illegal – unless it's for your own consumption – so if diving isn't your speed, try your hand at catching that night's dinner. Offshore, there are bays and islands to explore, and inland tobacco farms and cigar hand-rolling factories to visit.

East from Varadero, in the waters off Cayo Santa Maria, are the shallow reefs of the Buenavista Biosphere Reserve. The best dive sites include Las Brujas [Witches], Borracho [Drunkard's], Los Diablillos [Little Devils], Ensenachos and Santa Maria Cay.

For an even more relaxed itinerary, follow a path along the south coast, and visit the myriad islands that lie off Cuba's southern shores – but ensure you have the proper permits. Excellent weather is all but guaranteed, with temperatures averaging 27°C year-round.

*Opposite page, from top: the Malecón; inside a paladar; and the Havana waterfront*

*This page, top: stunning architecture in Cienfuegos on the southern coast. Below left: fun on the shore*



*Che Guevara fishing off the coast of Cojimar, east of Havana, in 1963*

**the knowledge**  
**PLAY BY THE RULES**

Paperwork might be boring, but Berton cautions against ignoring it. "Some boats are saying, 'to heck with the rules'. One superyacht went to Cuba and back to the Caribbean, and got a \$125,000 fine from the US Government. It's a stupid thing to do when you can get permission. The US could have confiscated the boat. There's no reason to run the risk."

Similarly, from the Cuban side, rules ban Cubans from going into hotel rooms, good restaurants or stepping foot on board a yacht. "Stay out of trouble and don't do anything illegal," says Berton. "You are the asset if something goes wrong, and they will hold their asset until they get paid. When you rent a house or anything important, they ask to hold your visa. They don't care about your passport, that is secondary as there is no way out of Cuba without a visa."



**insider tip**  
**BE ORGANISED**

Be organised, or have someone organise the trip for you. Working with a knowledgeable yacht agent or broker specialising in Cuba will remove the paperwork headaches – as well as help secure the best table at one of the few top restaurants, arrange a visit to a recording studio or a visit to an artist's home, which requires special handling. Madden says: "[Yacht clientele] are often expecting the same experience they'd get in the Mediterranean or Antigua, and it takes a lot more work to deliver that in Cuba."

**the knowledge**  
**BIG BROTHER**

Morrell says you should be prepared for a culture shock. "There's an absence of supermarkets because people are given a subsistence every month," he says. "If they can afford to buy a small house, that is the only privacy they have, any business is government controlled. People aren't even allowed to move from one area to another without government permission. You can always sense a military presence, because it's everywhere."

On the flip side: "Cuba is probably the safest place in the Caribbean," says Madden. "A lot of people are afraid, but it's safer than Florida, the Bahamas or Antigua. People aren't carrying guns, they just get along, and they are curious about visitors and have a thirst for knowledge because they've been out of the mainstream for so long."



Yachts for charter in Cuba



**MARCATO**

► The 43 metre expedition yacht *Marcato* is one of many yachts offered for charter in Cuba by Paul Madden of Paul Madden Associates. [private-yacht.net](http://private-yacht.net)



**USHER**

► Fleet Miami is preparing a reconnaissance trip to Cuba and plans to have some of its fleet ready for charter here in the near future. Look out for 46.94 metre Delta *Usher*. [fleetmiami.com](http://fleetmiami.com)



**GLADIUS**

► The 38.7 metre Cantieri di Pisa *Gladius* is available for charter around the island this summer with *Worth Avenue*. Fresh from a 2016 refit, she boasts a huge sundeck and accommodation for 10. [worthavenueyachts.com](http://worthavenueyachts.com)



**AXIOMA**

► Thanks to client demand, the spectacular 72 metre Dunya Yachts *Axioma* will charter in Cuba February and March 2017 through YPI Group. [ypigroup.com](http://ypigroup.com)