

## Travel

# Captivating Cuba

### Cruising into history one port city at a time

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Posted: 01/16/2016 2:05 AM | [Comments: 0](#)

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As our ship sails southwest from Havana harbour into the setting sun, I'm captivated by the panoramic view of the Cuban capital unfolding in our wake.

The blue, green, orange and white of centuries-old buildings begin to fade with distance and diminishing light, while fishers along the iconic Malecón morph into silhouettes in a scene reminiscent of a Monet painting.



That postcard-like image would be the first of many to enjoy over the next five days as I circumnavigated Cuba aboard the Greek cruise ship Celestyal Crystal.

To cruise around Cuba is to sail into history -- one port city at a time. Its metropolises are open-air museums of architecture; buildings and monuments suspended in another time.

Cuba has long been one of my favourite vacation spots and I jumped at Celestyal's invitation to see more of the island from sea and on land. On this one-of-a-kind cruise, passengers visit not only Havana, but also the country's south-coast jewels of Cienfuegos and Santiago de Cuba, cities not easy to access from resorts on the island's north side. A side-trip to Jamaica is a bonus.

#### Boutique-size ship

My adventure this past December began with a flight from Winnipeg to Varadero and a scenic 90 minute shuttle-van ride to Havana's Sierra Maestra port terminal. To me, it mattered not that the 1,200-passenger Crystal -- less than a third the size of most ocean-going cruise ships -- is without the extravagant amenities commonly found on larger vessels. After all, this cruise isn't about a tricked-out, mega ship, it's about Cuba.

Still, there's lots to like about the Crystal with her white-linen, a la carte restaurants, well-stocked duty-free shop, salt-water pool and diverse, nightly entertainment in the theatre and lounges. There is a lovely spa and well-equipped gym.

I was also delighted to discover that my Deck 7 cabin opened onto a private balcony. It would prove to be a good vantage point not only for sightseeing, but also for monitoring the conditions when atypical gale force winds and churning Caribbean Sea buffeted the ship as we plied the usually mild-mannered waters.

As a virgin cruiser, I found the ship's rock 'n' roll a little disconcerting and admit Gilligan's Island theme song did play in my head one night. Happily, I did not get seasick and despite Mother Nature's crankiness, never missed my happy-hour mojito or four-course dinner. The sheltered, aft-deck lounge proved to be the perfect place to sip my mint-infused cocktail under a glorious full moon, and chat with shipmates from around the world.

#### Back in time

My first full day in Cuba began with a guided walking tour of La Habana Vieja (Old Havana),

designated a UNESCO world heritage site. The sights and sounds transported me back in time as we navigated the narrow, brick and cobblestone streets, marvelling at the ornate Baroque and Spanish colonial architecture that defines the historic quarter. Every few blocks we emerged into expansive plazas bordered by splendid yet weathered buildings -- among them the former governor's palace, churches, museums, universities and hotels.

Our tour bus took us to the massive Revolution Square where Fidel Castro would speak for hours to loyal followers. There, Castro's fellow revolutionary, Che Guevara, is immortalized in an iconic, storeys-high caricature which towers over the space.

An armada of classic American cars -- Fords, Chevrolets, Pontiacs, Studebakers, Dodges, Buicks and Cadillacs -- lined the square, drivers at the ready to taxi tourists about. The 1950s vehicles are a photographer's dream with their kaleidoscope of paint colours -- lime green, yellow, fuchsia, turquoise and teal. In other ports-of-call, drab Russian imports such as the Lada prevail.

Such was the case in Cienfuegos, another UNESCO world heritage site. The charming city offered more architectural marvels awash in a rainbow of colour. A highlight in Cienfuegos was the Palacio de Valle, originally a private residence built in 1913. With its improbable mix of Romanesque, Gothic, Mudejar and Baroque styles of architecture and intricate stone carving, tiling and metalwork, the mansion was awe-inspiring.

As we headed into our last port at sunrise, a pilot boat appeared to guide the ship through the narrow channels leading to Santiago de Cuba harbour. The panorama was truly dramatic with the hazy Sierra Maestra mountains providing the backdrop.

Again, I could sense the hands of time spinning backward as we cruised past the hilltop Castillo el Morro fortress, a grand 16th-century relic that is a UNESCO world heritage site. Later on foot, we crossed its moat, peeked into its grim jail cells and climbed its stone stairs for the million-dollar view of the seascape.

The shore excursions included in the cruise package seemed the best way to see many sights and learn from the knowledgeable guides, but other sightseeing options are available in each port at additional cost. You can also do your own thing, as my travel companion Linda did.

In Santiago, Linda hired a taxi to take her out of the city to the Botanical Gardens and then into the mountains where she and her driver climbed 450 taxing steps to the top of La Gran Piedra, a towering volcanic rock. The views were impressive as Linda's photos attest.

#### A word about the food

A common complaint among travellers to Cuba is that the food, even at the island's best resorts, is bland and limited in variety. That weakness does not apply to Cuba Cruise. Provisions are loaded in Montego Bay, allowing shipboard chefs to produce meals on par with high-end Jamaican and Mexican resorts. Service at every level was refined, yet friendly and accommodating. The 400-plus crew -- a veritable United Nations representing 25 nationalities - exceeded expectations.

Republished from the Winnipeg Free Press print edition January 16, 2016 F1

#### IF YOU GO

Cuba Cruise offers all-inclusive pricing in Canadian funds.

Package includes airfare (Air Transat), all meals, beverages and tips on board and a shore excursion in all five ports, including Jamaica.

You can begin your cruise in Havana or MoBay. If boarding in Jamaica, you forgo that shore excursion, but get two full days to explore Havana.

Check out [yourcubacruise.com](#).

