

EL CORAZÓN de Cuba

Exploring the island by bike, a writer finds a culture both exotic and familiar—with plenty of surprises left

By Boyce Upholt

Photography by Rory Doyle

A gardener at Finca Agroecologica El Paraiso, a restaurant in Viñales, waters the expansive gardens at sunset.

Pack a bottle

of hot sauce in your suitcase, people told me. That's the only way to survive the island's bland and monotonous food.

Cuba—exotic, forbidden, rum-soaked, and cured in tobacco—has long been a traveler's dream. For everything but food, that is. For years, this was an island of government-run restaurants, which meant lackadaisical service and less-than-imaginative recipes. But these days in Cuba, changes are afoot.

The morning I arrive in Viñales, a rural town one hundred miles west of Havana, is one year to the day after Fidel Castro's burial. The country's new president, Raúl Castro, is in Santiago, on the far side of the island, placing flowers on his brother's grave.

Life continues in Viñales. Clusters of locals sit on street corners, waiting for the public bus—never quite sure when (or if) it will arrive. The crowd in the village square is bent forward into their cell phones, tapped into the town's Wi-Fi.

Thanks to its dramatic landscape—the wide valley is humped by the oldest mountains in Cuba, verdant, rocky hills known as *mogotes*—Viñales has long been a tourist destination. Which means this village has a jump on Cuba's emerging food scene.

My first meal is at El Cuajani, three miles west of town. The restaurant opened a year ago, after its owner, José Luis Gomez, returned to Cuba from Miami. He'd been working in a kitchen there, but noticed that tourism at home was on the rise.

Gomez hasn't bothered to set a menu, "because in Cuba you can't find anything," he says. (Some days, he drives two hours to Havana just to buy tomatoes.) So Gomez cooks what's available. On the day I arrive, that means a white-bean hummus; fillets of bonito, a fish not so distant from tuna; battered-and-fried balls of lobster meat; and mashed malanga, or taro root, subtly seasoned.

From the restaurant's unglazed windows, I look out on the buds of a young bean garden. "You must come back in two years," Gomez says. By then, he plans to be growing much of his own food.

Privately owned restaurants, known as *paladares*, were first legalized in Cuba in 1993. For decades, the island's economy had focused on growing sugar for the Soviet Union, until it collapsed in 1991. Cuba suddenly needed new economic options. The government gave the green light to restaurants, which were often already operating illegally.

Clockwise from top left: A traditional Cuban plate of grilled fish, moros rice, salad, and sweet potato in Havana; chef José Luis Gomez in front of his Restaurante El Cuajani near Viñales; a farmer rides into Viñales; the gardens at Finca Agroecologica El Paraiso.





**Cuba's recipes
are rooted in its
colonial history.
African influences
mingle with
Spanish traditions,
producing a cuisine
that's familiar
to Southerners,
with a few
local twists.**

Restrictions were tight. A paladar had to be run out of the owner's home; it could have no more than twelve seats. But in 2011, three years after Raúl Castro came to power, a new wave of economic reforms loosened rules. Over the past six years, paladares have boomed.

Finca Agroecologica El Paraiso was one of the first privately owned restaurants in Viñales. Perched atop the hills west of town, the restaurant overlooks a thirty-two acre terraced garden, as well as paddocks for pigs and rabbits and pygmy goats—everything the restaurant needs to provision itself.

Organic gardening was another outgrowth of struggle. After the Soviet collapse, Cuba's imported food all but disappeared—as did fertilizer and pesticides and fuel. The only way to eat was to grow locally, using natural techniques. Urban gardens popped up in almost every neighborhood. At El Paraiso, the garden's harvests now yield massive meals: thin-cut fried yuca chips, a delicate vegetable soup, fried chicken, and a whole hog, marinated for twelve hours in sour orange and garlic, then

roasted over coals.

Portions in Cuba can be massive, I learn. Fortunately, I'm making my way across the island by bike. A twenty-mile loop through Viñales' mule-plowed tobacco fields that afternoon had prepared my appetite.

The rules governing travel to Cuba are complex, but for most American tourists the easiest way to visit is to participate in an approved "people-to-people" tour. Backroads, a US-based company that focuses on luxury adventure travel, conducted mine. Backroads began offering bike trips through Cuba earlier this year. (Disclosure: My trip was a preview offered to journalists, and Backroads covered food and lodging.) As required by Cuban law, we're accompanied throughout the trip by a local guide, an employee of the government-owned travel company. But Oscar turns out to be a winning addition: He's charming, and frank about his opinions of the government—opinions that can't be characterized as simply positive or negative.

As the name implies, a people-to-people tour



Classic American cars are common throughout Cuba. **Previous spread, clockwise from top left:** A roasted pig fresh from the fire pit is delivered to restaurant customers at Finca Agroecologica El Paraiso; traditional Cuban plate of grilled chicken, moros rice, salad, and sweet potato; a cowboy competing in the rodeo in Sancti Spiritus; an elder cowboy in Trinidad poses with his horse; kitchen staff at El Paraiso use only fire to prepare the massive meals; a fruit and vegetable vendor in a Havana market, also known as an agro.

TRAVEL TO CUBA

Despite restrictions rolled out by the Trump administration last fall, Americans can still legally travel to Cuba. The new rules tighten the types of individual trips that became popular after President Obama relaxed constraints on travel to the island in 2015, and prohibit Americans from spending money at hotels and other businesses associated with the Cuban military. Independent trips are currently restricted to twelve categories (find details online at [treasury.gov](https://www.treasury.gov)), including family visits and professional research. For now, it may be easiest to book travel with organizations that offer group people-to-people itineraries, such as active outfitter **Backroads** or **Cuba Cultural Travel**.

requires interaction with local Cubans, and we stop in many rural villages that would be difficult to access if we weren't traveling by bike. We refuel at homes along the potholed roads, where our hosts serve fresh-squeezed guava or mango juice or, if we need something stronger, *cafecitos*. Cuban espresso is brewed with a dash of sugar in the pot, and works well after thirty miles on a bike.

On our fourth day, we visit a bodega in a tiny rural village. Here it becomes clear that the meals we're eating are, while reflective of old Cuban traditions, not necessarily typical: Each Cuban is granted monthly rations of dried goods—beans and rice and oil—in miniscule quantities.

Many Cubans spend hours each day supplementing these rations. Supermarkets will suddenly have a glut on, say, bananas, amid otherwise barren shelves. There is no schedule, and no way to know what food might appear. *Paladares* that can't grow their own food are able to survive thanks to a thriving black market. Most employees of government-run hotels and restaurants will pocket a few ingredients to sell "*a la izquierda*"—or, to the left. (As more of these black-market goods are diverted toward the tourist market, it sometimes means less food for locals.)

We spend two nights in Las Terrazas, a town built in the late 1960s as part of a Cuban eco-park. Our hotel, La Moka, has a carob tree growing up through its lobby. On our second day in town, I skip the afternoon bike ride to explore, and find myself walking through the local pig farm. Residents pay a small fee to house their pigs here, keeping the animals' stink out of their yards. One man arrives to check on his own pig. He tells me a young animal costs as much as forty dollars—a remarkable amount, given that the official monthly salary in Cuba is twenty-five dollars on average. But pork is by far the nation's fa-

vorite food. And I'm finding, despite its reputation, this is a nation that has always known how to eat. It's just that its old foodways were not always accessible to tourists.

Cuba's recipes are rooted in its colonial history. African influences mingle with Spanish traditions, producing a cuisine that's familiar



to Southerners, with a few local twists.

Suppers almost always include big platters of meat, from fried chicken to *ropa vieja*, the famous Cuban shredded beef. Side dishes are just as massive: salads of shaved cabbage and green tomatoes, *frijoles* served with rice or as a hearty stew, and always some kind of tuber—yam or yucca or malanga—which might be mashed, baked, or thin-cut and quick-fried. After dinner comes a *cafecito* and a piece of *flan*.

From Las Terrazas, we bike through the jungle and down toward Havana. In Playa Baracoa, a tiny ocean-side village, lunch is redfish hauled that morning from the sea. In Cuba, you might not be able to predict what you'll be eating, but you know it will be fresh.

On the outskirts of Havana, we abandon our bikes for a fleet of classic Cuban taxis—mine is a baby blue 1954 Chevy convertible—and cruise into the city in high-tourist style.

After President Obama opened relations with Cuba in 2015, other nations followed suit. President Trump has since restricted US travel, but tourists are still pouring into Havana from the rest of the world. It's clear why: This is one of the world's great cities. Scattered amid crumbling colonial ruins are hipster art galleries and artisanal ice cream shops and decadent hotels. But even Old Havana, which marks its 500th anniversary this year, has not been given over to tourists completely. Down narrow, bustling alleys you'll find butchers and grocery stalls where locals cobble together supplies for meals.

You could spend days wandering these streets—though unfortunately I only have hours. My tour is reaching its end, and US travel policies require I depart the country soon after its completion.

As for hot sauce—who needs it? Cuban food deserves to be met on its own terms. Rarely spicy, I found it nonetheless precisely spiced: a dash of salt, a crack of pepper, a bit of garlic, a splash of vinegar. Sometimes the simplest ingredients can yield the most intricate of flavors.

Still, there's time enough for some famous Cuban pleasures. In the courtyard of a centuries-old castle, converted now into a series of galleries, I smoke a hand-rolled Cuban cigar. Before me is a glass of spiced Cuban rum. With every puff of tobacco, the rum mellows, revealing new complexities. Just like the country itself.



A farmer rides through the morning fog outside Viñales. **Opposite:** The bustling Paseo de Martí in Havana.