



PHOTO ADVENTURES
By Lee Frost

CUBA

EVEN AFTER HALF A DOZEN VISITS, LEE FROST NEVER FAILS TO FIND INSPIRATION ON THE TIMELESS AND SULTRY STREETS OF CUBA

WORDS & PICTURES: LEE FROST

IF EVER THERE WAS an official list compiled of places every photographer must visit before they die, Cuba would definitely be on it – and close to the top if I had my way. Thanks to a combination of its Caribbean climate, chequered political history, sour relationship with the USA and a fierce pride and loyalty among its people, there really is nowhere like it. And of all the places I've travelled to over the last couple of decades, it remains a firm favourite.

Cuba was once a very wealthy island through the growing of sugar, coffee and tobacco, a fact that becomes very apparent the minute you stop and look around at the wonderful ornate architecture in every town and city. But everything changed in the late '50s when Fidel Castro and a small band of followers, including the legendary Che Guevara, established an armed resistance movement against the Batista government. By 1959 they had taken over the country in one of the most famous revolutions of modern times.

In the intervening 50 years, Cuba has been in a steady state of graceful decline. The once-grand architecture is tired and crumbling simply because there has been no money to maintain it. Many large buildings in Havana have simply collapsed, big old pre-revolution American cars still rumble along the pot-holed streets in various states of decay and if you try to travel outside the major towns and cities, getting lost is par for the course due to a distinct lack of road signs. Some conspiracy theorists reckon this was a ploy to make invasion difficult, but I doubt any modern military force would rely on local road signs to find their way around!

Despite five decades of struggle, continuing poverty and a lack of basic necessities that we take for granted, the people of Cuba are among the proudest and friendliest you're likely to encounter anywhere. It's quite common for a local in Havana to ask 'how are you enjoying my beautiful city?' Can you imagine a Londoner asking a tourist the same question? Walking the streets late at night poses no threat whatsoever, despite the fact



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that you'll be carrying camera gear with a value far in excess of the average annual salary. I wouldn't consider doing that for a second in my own capital city, but in Havana I feel totally safe.

I've visited Cuba six times over the last few years, mainly to lead group photo tours, but the last two trips I have made I've been shooting digitally and have been by far the most exciting and productive. There's simply so much to photograph, with visual treats hiding around every corner. The people are very laid-back about being photographed as well. I've visited Morocco many times and always shoot portraits of the locals, but they expect to be paid and the whole process can be rather tiring. In Cuba, money is very rarely asked for. Soap or cream are more likely requests as both are rationed – so if you're planning a trip to Cuba, buy some small bars of soap or raid your hotel bathroom on a daily basis!

Havana is a great place to start any Cuba trip. It's a big, bustling city where all the clichés come to life. Live music echoes from every bar, old men (and a few old women too) wander around with big cigars clenched between their teeth and ancient American cars cough out clouds of black smoke as they rumble along once-elegant boulevards. Life is lived in the streets. ➤

PREVIOUS PAGE: "Early morning in Havana Centro – old car, grand architecture, lovely light. What more can you ask for!"

TOP: "Havana Centro at twilight, shot from my room in the Hotel Seville. For ten minutes the natural and man-made light was perfectly balanced."

ABOVE: "Many of the old American cars are still in great condition considering their age and make ideal subjects for close-ups."

LEFT: "You see the funniest things in Cuba just by wandering around. This local I met had his pet cockerel on a lead!"

RIGHT: "A typical street scene near Havana Viejo, emphasised by using a telezoom."



Cuba



LEFT: "The interior is falling apart but there's no mistaking its grandeur or former glory."
ABOVE: "A blue car parked outside a blue building. Cuba's a great place for colour."
RIGHT: "As sunset falls on The Malecon, a wave meets the shore."
FAR RIGHT: "They take dominoes seriously in Cuba!"

"I head out an hour before sunrise and start by shooting street scenes and old cars in the half-light. The first hour of sunlight is by far the best"

Lee's kit
One Canon EOS 1Ds MkIII body with 17-40mm f/4, 24-70mm f/2.8 and 70-200mm f/4 zooms; infrared-modified Canon EOS 20D body with Sigma 10-20mm zoom, Lee Filters ND grads and Big Stopper ND filter, Heliopan slim polariser, Gitzo GT3540LS carbon-fibre tripod with Manfrotto 410 Junior Geared Head, Lowpro Vertex 200 bag.



Kids play baseball using mineral bottle tops instead of a ball – no wonder Cubans are so good at the sport – while men enjoy excited games of dominoes and an occasional tot of rum. Young couples stroll along the Malecon, Havana's romantic waterfront, where waves crash against the sea wall and locals fish for their supper as the sun sets over the Caribbean Sea.
Havana Viejo is the main tourist area and though nice in places, it gets busy with tour buses coming in from the coastal resorts, making photography tricky. I prefer Havana Centro, a residential area close to the main hotels in the 'old' part of the city. Wander over to Prado, the main boulevard, walk a few blocks and you're in what I consider the beating heart of Havana. I head out an hour before sunrise and start by shooting street scenes and old cars in the half-light. The first hour of daylight is by far the best for shooting street scenes as raking light

from the low sun picks out colour and texture while long shadows rake across the tarmac. Contrast can be a problem, but I usually overcome it by shooting bracketed sequences of images then merging them using Photomatrix software – choosing the Exposure Blend option rather than HDR for a more realistic effect.
Once the sun's high and the light's too harsh I tend to look for indoor subjects. There's a wonderful old building on Concordia that used to house a famous private restaurant called La Guarida. That has been closed down by the government now, but the ground floor and first floor of the building offer fantastic photo opportunities – ornate staircases, painted murals, laundry drying in the sun pouring through open windows and so on. Come early evening, The Malecon is the place to be. It's a popular gathering place for young people who sit on the sea wall, enjoying the sunshine and sea ➤



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breeze. Cuba isn't great on the landscape front, but the Pinar Del Rio tobacco growing region west of Havana does boast the spectacular Vinales Valley where limestone rock formations known as Mogotes rise majestically from the valley floor.

Conveniently, the best views of the valley are from Hotel Los Jamines – just step out onto your balcony at dawn and you can't fail to get great shots! Down in the valley, peasant farmers tend their tobacco fields to produce leaves that end up in the world's finest cigars. Oxen plough the fields and coffee beans are roasted over open fires. I've visited one farm in the region for years and never fail to come away with great images.

From Vinales, it's a long drive to Cienfuegos. Fondly referred to as 'The Pearl of the South' by Cubans, Cienfuegos at first appears like any industrial city. However, its colonial heart is home to pretty streets and beautiful architecture. It also enjoys a coastal location and a wander down to Punta Gorda, a slender strip of land stretching into the sea, is always rewarding. The Palacio de Valle, a palatial home now operating as a restaurant, is a great source of interior images and there's usually an old double bass propped in the corner of a side room that makes an iconic Cuban image.

Cienfuegos is a great place to just wander around, shooting whatever catches your eye. Faded glory is evident everywhere, in the bleached and peeling paint, the cracked plasterwork, the rusting metal. Photography rarely ends until darkness forces it to.

Perhaps the most photogenic town in Cuba is Trinidad, an hour or so east of Cienfuegos. Made wealthy



by sugar, it's a perfectly-preserved 16th Century town complete with cobbled streets, colourful houses and attractive churches. Despite being popular with tourists – Trinidad's only 15km from the Caribbean coast – it's still easy to avoid the crowds and capture the character of the place if you start early and finish late.

The most interesting part of town doesn't cover a very big area, so on a typical day you can cover it all and retrace your steps if you find a view that will be better later in the day. Trinidad's a particularly good place for sunsets as the old town centre is set slightly higher than the outskirts so you can shoot down west-facing streets and capture the afterglow in the sky – plus a conveniently parked old car if you're lucky.

Downpours are quite common in and around Trinidad – it's more tropical and noticeably more humid than Havana – but that needn't be a problem as you can take photographs inside the town's museums providing you handhold your camera. On my most recent trip I also ventured inside the main church – Inglesia de la Santisima Trinidad in Plaza Mayor – and spent an enjoyable couple of hours shooting details of the interior until the rain stopped.

As I spend most of my time shooting landscapes in a very slow and considered way, usually with a preconceived idea of how I want the end result to look, visiting a place like Cuba is a real breath of fresh air. Each day becomes a visual voyage of discovery that's full of surprises – I wander around, soaking up the character and soul of the place and capturing anything that catches my eye. Given that I returned home with over 70GB of raw files, that was clearly quite a lot!

TOP LEFT: “It's the sleeping dog that makes this shot.”

TOP: “I loved the quality of light in this tobacco hut so I asked the farmer to pose for me.”

ABOVE: “Old men and donkeys are a common sight in Trinidad and the colourful walls make great backdrops.”

RIGHT: “Down near the railway station in Havana, old American cars operate as shared taxis for locals. It's a great location at first light.”

Courses

Lee is leading his second photography tour of Cuba this year from 14th–25th November. If you're interested in a Cuban adventure, email him at info@photoadventures.co.uk

