

FOOD & TRAVEL

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Havana nights

Cuba's capital now has a thriving – and luxury – private rental market offering travellers a unique insight into a city and its people previously shrouded in mystery.

LYDIA BELL chooses some of the best

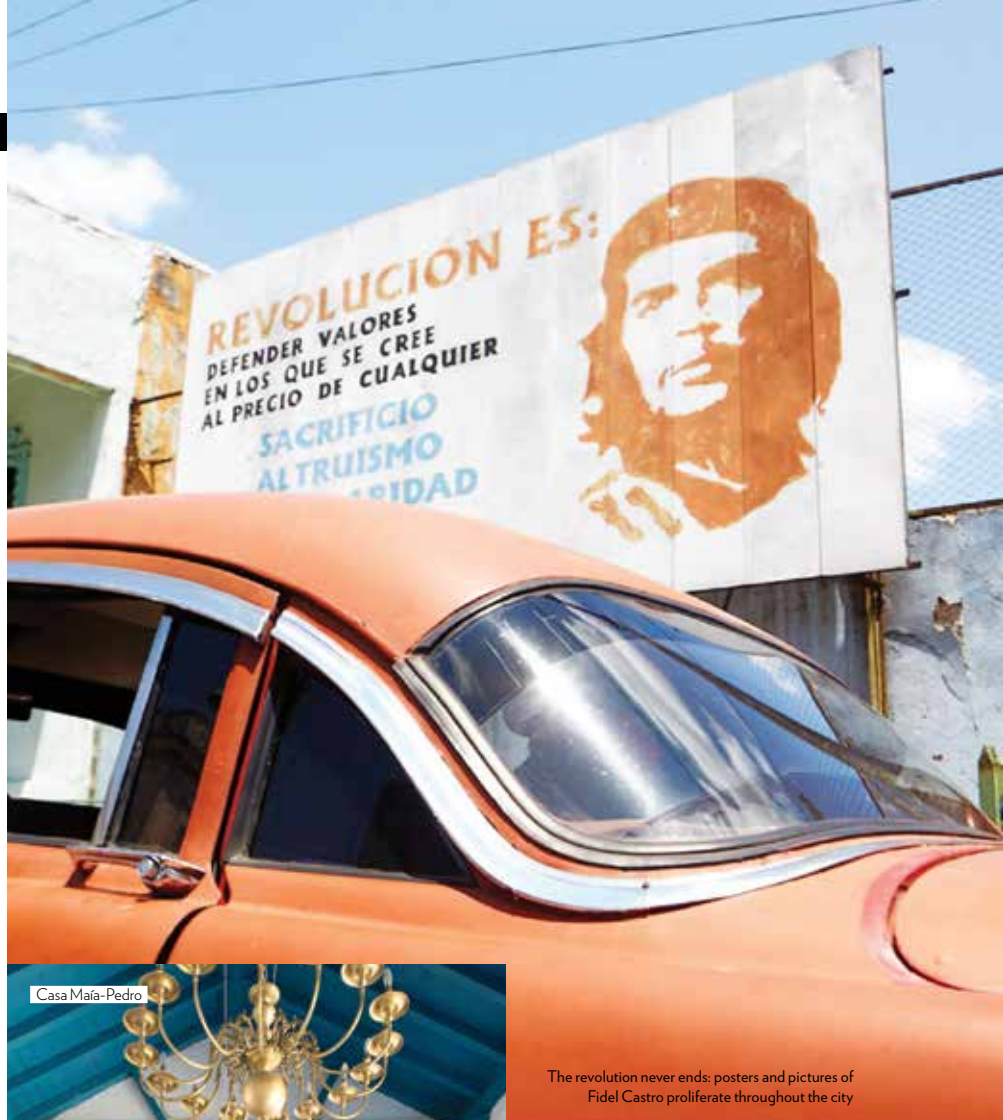


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Havana's streetscape is a winsome tableau of desolated beauty swallowed up by the past, its façades painted and repainted every washed-out shade under the Caribbean sun, almost every building a memento of a lost era. Original banana-yellow renders on Modernist mansions gently peel; colonial-era tenements, divided and re-divided, sag stoically in the summer rain. And yet, as Havana declines, it is conspicuously, winningly, alive. From the shocking pink bougainvillea that pours from its colonial balconies to the high-jinks showmanship that rules its street life, this is a city in Technicolor. Since the island threw open its doors to tourism in the 1990s, the caveat emptor has been the lack of inspiring accommodation. Despite Cuba's eclectic architectural wealth, the uninspired cheapness of the hotel renovations compromised everything. Casa particulares (private bed and breakfasts) offered a priceless chance to glimpse the lives of real Cubans, but even the 'upmarket' ones were spartan. But since Raul Castro assumed power in 2008, a blossoming of the private sector has been allowed – and things have fast changed on this front. Now you can rent out complete houses and apartments and Cubans have returned from all over the world to pour blood, sweat and tears into new projects. This game changer has unveiled some unique houses for rent for the first time since 1959, from mid-century gems with original bars to scores of penthouse beauties in this city of dreaming views. Don't expect world-class luxury, state-of-the-art technologies, or connectivity – but do expect to fall in love.

1. TROPICANA PENTHOUSE

This second project from Kendra and Jonathon, the Cuban-British architects behind Casa Concordia, caused them untold hassle but the results are enchanting. On acquiring this apartment just six months ago, it was a cluttered, dingy space hiding from the Caribbean sunshine. Their dream was to reveal through glass a huge terrace with panoramic views of ocean and city, and virtually every major landmark including a postcard view of El Morro, the Spanish colonial fortress. As there is no glass being manufactured in Cuba presently, this meant a quick trip off-island to buy necessary doors and windows, as well as other essential construction items that either do not exist or are scarce in the ground. The doors and windows had to be flown in on a 737 jet. Most of the finishes were purchased in Havana though, as they wanted to prove that one could achieve beautiful interiors with the products available locally. The result is a wining mid-century penthouse with its own entrance, a large roof terrace, at the top of a 10-storey modernist apartment block, one block back from the oceanfront. *Sleeps two*



The revolution never ends: posters and pictures of Fidel Castro proliferate throughout the city



Casa María-Pedro



Tropicana Penthouse

2. CASA CARNAVARAL

This the second and latest offering from Ydalgo Martinez of Artedel Penthouse (see no 6); this time he has acquired a classic 1940s home in the once-swanky suburb of Miramar. It's not smack-bang in the middle of the action, but that's what your chauffeur with vintage car are for – everything is a 15-minute zip away. What you get in return is a lush garden, a free-flowing layout, comfort, attention, and copious, contemporary Cuban

art. Ydalgo is multi-lingual, ever available but unobtrusive. He's also a secret party animal so if you want to hover on the edges of Havana's wild social scene, try and sneak along with him on a night out. *Sleeps six*

3. CASA MARÍA-PEDRO

This spacious colonial one-storey house with soaring, original handcrafted ceilings, doors and rough stone walls, has been extensively renovated from a pile of rubble by an expatriate Cuban with a great desire to invest in and support

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his home country. Across the way from the Museo de la Revolucion, it is perfectly placed for Habana Vieja but in a calmer, up-and-coming section close to tiny, but enchanting, Plazuela Angel. Three standard rooms and one large suite have their own bathrooms, which form part of the rooms. There's an internal courtyard for breakfasts, cocktails and lounging; you climb a spindly spiral staircase for sunbaking on the terrace. One of the cosiest restaurants in Havana, Chef Ivan Justo, is on your doorstep on next-door Calle Aguacate. *Sleeps eight*

4. LA MAISON

This is a pocket-sized two-bed, 19th century-built apartment in the heart of characterful Habana Vieja. The little townhouse refurbishment is a joint project between Jesus, a Cuban, and his French partner Baptiste from the Pyrenees; hence the European sensibility infusing the Cuban context. Original colonial architecture is enlivened by curated pieces that are quirkily pretty, including a statue of the Virgin from a local church, and a collection of straw hats. The kitchen opens onto a small eating terrace wreathed with foliage and edged with a wrought iron balcony, where you can listen to the thrum of the street and see over the roofs of Old Havana. The Baroque-inspired bathroom is frescoed and decorated with a chandelier. *Sleeps four*

5. CASA CONCORDIA

This breezy apartment is for those who want to escape the ultra-touristy confines of Old Havana and check into the gritty edginess of the centre. There's been no gentrification in this working-class neighbourhood but it's abundantly full of life, and at the weekend it's bursting at the seams with Cubans shopping in its stripped-down department stores, and clubbing at the Casa de la Musica. This 1926 fifth-floor, three-bed flat doesn't look much from the outside and you ascend in a creaky, pull-across lift that wobbles and shakes (it's all part of the fun). However its pedigree is exciting, if not impeccable. The owner of the iconic mobsters' Hotel Nacional built it as a more private, luxury outpost (they say Al Capone slept here). It has views of the ocean, art nouveau tiles, high ceilings and abundant light. Moreover, a Cuban-British pair of architects refurbished it exhaustively. Happily they understand the relevance of attractive, en-suite bathrooms, flat screen TVs and handsome Murano chandeliers. *Sleeps six*



La Maison



Casa Concordia



Artedel Penthouse

6. ARTEDEL PENTHOUSE

This mid-century art-filled pad was the original project of Ydalgo Martinez, who returned from Switzerland to pursue his dream of operating a Havana guesthouse. He was the first Habanero to bring his guests Nespresso machines, airport transfers, optional massages, laundry, salsa lessons and concierge-level organising as a matter of course (as a matter of fact, it is essential to have someone like Ydalgo on your side in this WiFi-less city). Artedel occupies the top floor in bohemian Vedado, very near the Hotel Nacional. It has many balconies and many views, and the blue Caribbean is always on the horizon. *Sleeps six*

The view from Artedel Penthouse



7. SUITE HAVANA

Around the corner from one of Old Havana's most bewitching little mansion hotels Conde de Villaneuva is the better-appointed Suite Havana. This is a sleek two-bedroom apartment renovated by Cuban Lea and her French husband François. Chuffed to find an available apartment in Old Havana's Unesco Golden Mile they poured their heart and soul into it and injected a much-needed slug of 21st-century modernity. The new is in the polished concrete monochrome kitchen and modern bathroom with its bubbling Jacuzzi. The old is in the floor-to-ceiling multiple colonial shutters that open onto the raucous street and the roomy terrace you access via a precipitous stairwell.

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