



**Hop in and ride** Vintage cars parade down the Plaza de la Revolución or Revolution Square ferrying tourists CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

# Walking down the revolutionary road

Cuba is a land of contradictions where plush hotels and gleaming vintage cars coexist with dilapidated buildings and modest bodegas

The façade is impressive, more like a palace than a museum. And the interiors even more so, with winding staircases of Carrara marble, ornate chandeliers and plush furniture and stunning works of art by major Cuban artists — all of it put together by New York’s Tiffany Studios. It is not surprising, given that the Museum of the Revolution in Havana, where I am standing and staring at some of the most significant chunks of the country’s contemporary history, was once the Presidential Palace. It is where the all-powerful and corrupt leaders of this small island would meet their important guests, and also lived and governed from.

It took seven years to build the palace that was home to several Cuban Presidents from 1920, until Fulgencio Batista was overthrown in 1959. This palace — with its grand Despacho Presidencial or President’s Office — was also where Fidel Castro took oath in 1959, and lived until it was converted into a museum in 1974. Converting the palace to the Museo de la Revolución to showcase the struggle that changed Cuba’s fortunes forever was part of the then regime’s efforts to rebuild the nation.

Call them freedom fighters or guerilla warriors, depending on which part of the world you come from, but Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and their band of merry men continue to remain Cuba’s favourite heroes. My local guide Karen Calvino takes me on a Revolution Tour of Havana, in which this museum is perhaps the most important stop. Located near the sprawling and green Parque Central, the museum welcomes visitors with the exhibit of an old military tank used by Castro during the war. In the space of an hour, I get a brief

glimpse into the changes the island has witnessed in the last few decades.

As travel writer Pico Iyer recently said in an interview for the BBC, “Cuba is without question the most complex, contradictory, confounding place I’ve ever visited, a riddle that only grows deeper the more I look at it.” These contradictions are visible everywhere on the streets — plush hotels and gleaming vintage cars right next to dilapidated buildings desperately in need of a lick of paint or fundamental repairs.

Vintage cars rumble down the streets of Havana, but at the Plaza de la Revolución or Revolution Square, there is a veritable parade of these beauties, many of them ferrying tourists around town. This central plaza is the administrative centre of Cuba, with stern-looking government buildings lining an entire side. The façades of the most important ones each have a giant image of the revolution’s three leaders — Che Guevara, Fidel Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos.

One of the most obvious signs of Cuba’s Communist leanings is the fact that there are no glitzy supermarkets or shopping malls in sight; in fact, not a single hoarding obstruct the city’s fascinating skyline. Locals shop when and where stocks are available and even today, much of these supplies are scarce — from lipsticks to antacids, everything is rare and expensive.

As part of the tour, Calvino takes me to a bodega, a government store where Cubans go for their daily supplies of eggs and bread, and the

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Fly to Havana from India via the US or a European airport such as Paris or Frankfurt

**Stay**  
Splurge on the luxurious Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski, located close to the main tourist sights

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Make your visa and travel process easy with the efficient Cuba Private Travel (<https://www.cubaprivatetravel.com/>)

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occasional rice and milk. The bodega reminds me of ration stores in Chennai, or Madras as it was called when I was growing up there in the 1980s. The long lines from those days are missing, but the vibe is similar; hopeful and vacuous at the same time. These bodegas are present in every neighbourhood, catering only to the residents registered there. As far as I can see, the women who have come to the bodega this morning, carrying their coupon books and shopping bags, are there to catch up with friends and neighbours as much as to try their luck at procuring a box of butter.

There are many things that the revolution set on the right path, including freeing Cubans from the oppression of despotic leaders and promising equality and equity for all. After relations with the country’s nearest and most influential neighbour, the US, soured with the blooming of the Castro era, much of the dream was sustained and propelled by the USSR. Things took a beating with the collapse of the USSR in the

1990s, and Cuba was left without friends or allies. With the recent thawing of relations with the western world, particularly Barack Obama’s America, things are looking up, but the state of the bodega also reminds that there is a long way to go.

Yet, in the midst of want, despair and silence, there is music and hope and joy in today’s Cuba.

**CHARUKESI RAMADURAI** is a Bengaluru-based freelance writer and photographer