



Wonderful view of Cuba's capital — Havana — which tempts tourists all year round

Following salsa beat and rhythm

Arturo, a clothing vendor at a shop inside Cuba's Melia Varadero five-star hotel, learning that I am from Belarus, asks me, in excellent Russian, to convey greetings to Ambassador Alfredo Nieves Portuondo

Seeing my confusion, he laughs, telling me, "We studied together at Lvov Political College; a significant portion of our older generation studied in the USSR." One can't argue with historical realities. For a long time, the Island of Liberty was a child nurtured by the Soviet Union. Now, the child has grown and become independent, inviting us to visit.

Popular flights

The Moscow-Havana Aeroflot flight lasts nearly 13 hours, so it's rather pleasant when the plane isn't full. You can lay down in the emptier central rows, allowing you to hit the Cuban beaches revived and ready for action. Early May tends to be busier of course, because of the holidays. Russian-speaking tourists love Cuba, despite the great distance. My eight day business trip flew by and I wondered why that should be so.

There's no doubt that Varadero resort is stunningly beautiful: like a postcard or Bounty chocolate advertisement. The sea is deepest azure. Besides Russian, you hear English and French and don't be surprised to meet Canadians; Cuba is as close for them as the Crimea is for post-Soviet citizens.

Cubans are known for their friendly and relaxed nature, which dances to the beat of salsa; their favourite word is 'mañana' (tomorrow) and we can't help but associate them with a rocking chair on the porch, a glass of rum, a cigar and endless chatter in the hot sun. Accordingly, life has its own pace. It can take time to be served in restaurants and buses rarely leave on time.



Some shops open only for an hour and a half, after the end of the siesta. It's best to ride those same waves; look at life through their eyes and relax. You're on holiday after all! There's no hurry.

Stereotypes

I spot two glamorous Moscow girls taking pictures and imagine them uploading them on Facebook: bronzed bodies and mojitos. Like most visitors, they'll go dancing all night — to Latin rhythms, and buy a selection of 'Che Guevara' souvenirs for friends.

Our Cuban guide, from the *Useless Notes* programme, Raisa Kamenker, tells us, "As a rule, tourists tend to rush to the beaches, not only in Varadero, but those on other popular is-

In 2012, a grand total of 2,838,607 travellers visited Cuba, bringing income of over \$2.6 billion. Over 1,000 Belarusians have made the trip since the beginning of this year.

lands. However, more people are starting to seek tours, being fed up with Turkey and Egypt. Some of the older generation see Cuba as a dream from childhood, remembering their pioneer days of singing *Cuba is My Love*. There are plenty of people who can speak Russian, as we feel nostalgia for our Soviet past. Russian tourists see local children wearing red



Blue Caribbean Sea. What could be better?

ties and cry. Many chose Cuba above Mexico or the Dominican Republic as a result." Few would battle jet lag for the stereotypes I've detailed so far. Of course, there's far more to Cuba than white sands and hot sun, alcohol and tobacco, salsa and rumba. Its classic, retro cars, and unique history of revolution and socialism, are matched by exotic landscapes and elegant

architecture. Nowhere on Earth is quite the same.

Know how to present oneself

"Cuba has 14 monuments and 257 national sites," notes Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero. "We're developing 'event' tourism, having already hosted the 14th World Championship in Underwater Photography

and a range of golf tournaments. We're organising a tournament on catching marlin next. It all helps our tourism."

Perhaps few potential holidaymakers realise what Cuba truly has to offer. Accordingly, the *Authentic Cuba* programme intends to enlighten us. Its 500 year-old Spanish colonial town of Havana is one of ten local UNESCO World Heritage Sites; the well-preserved pavements, narrow streets, enticing open doors and unglazed windows give it a feeling of cosy safety. The most noise I've heard is from the arrival of a group of journalists, who drove in single file blaring their horns like Spanish conquistadors!

An old signora with a cigar in her mouth tells my Spanish-speaking colleagues a story, with passionate gesticulation, while a group of students ask me to take their photo; then, I get a local barman to mix me his specialty — a Pina Colada.

Tourism should bring Cuba a considerable share of income, after its traditional nickel mining and export of medical services. However, most ordinary people live very modestly, on low incomes. Cuba inspires emotions not easily explained. Perhaps looking at photographs is the best way to understand: admire the beaches of Varadero, the architecture of Havana and Trinidad, the natural beauty of Pinar del Río and the Ciénaga de Zapata and the revolutionary zeal of Santa Clara. Cuba's flavour is that of paradise: unique.

By Dmitry Umpirovich
Minsk — Havana — Varadero — Minsk.

MT tips

* Change Cuban Peso into Euros rather than US Dollars, to avoid an additional exchange fee.

* For Belarusian citizens, no visa is required to enter Cuba but 25 Cuban Pesos (about 20 Euros) is payable in airport tax on departure.

* You may bring back up to 50 ci-

gars and 3 litres of rum per person (into the territory of the Customs Union) but will need a certificate for the export of alligator leather souvenirs.

* If you spot a wonderful souvenir, buy it straight away, since you may not find the same elsewhere. Prices

tend not to vary between hotels and duty-free or souvenir shops.

* Cuba is safe, so you're unlikely to be attacked or robbed, but still keep an eye on your possessions.

* Shops tend to be American in style but many hotels in popular tourist places offer European outlets.