

TRAVEL CUBA

Lords of the dance

The cracked modernity and faded glory won't last but Cubans will always know how to salsa.
Jane Cornwell gets into the rhythm.



Oye! Even as you read this, Cuba is changing. The embargo might still be in place but there's a new optimism in the air, a fresh energy in the streets of the capital, Havana. Small businesses – online apps, design shops, tattoo parlours – are flourishing. Hoards of tourists are milling about the galleries, museums and churches, bent on soaking up that trademark mix of cracked modernity and old-world charm before it disappears. Film production trucks are hogging parking spots. International A-listers are descending: Madonna, Beyonce, Pope Francis.

In March this year, the same month US President Barack Obama made his historic visit, marking a new chapter in US-Cuban relations after decades of animosity, the Rolling Stones played a free open-air concert, the first on the “forbidden isle” by a non-Cuban band.

In May Karl Lagerfeld and fashion glitterati pitched up for a Chanel fashion show on a grand colonial avenue, El Prado, where thousands of ordinary Cubans watched from behind security barricades, blinking as stick-thin Western models danced an after-show conga, badly.

“Cubans are the best dancers in the world,” says Kerry Ribchester of the London-based Key2Cuba, a dance holiday company that operates in cahoots with package holiday specialists, Captivating Cuba. We're strolling down Obispo, the main pedestrian drag in Havana Vieja

(Old Havana) - founded 1514, pretty, cobbled, UNESCO world heritage-listed.

“Watch the way Cuban women walk,” she continues. “They move from their core. Everyone's knees and pelvises are wonderfully relaxed.”

Indeed, everywhere I look, all kinds of mujeres – fresh-faced teenagers, straight-backed grandmas, chicas in tight jeans and unforgiving neon Lycra – are sashaying the Cuban way, going about their business in a manner as confident as it is effortlessly, unselfconsciously sensual.

“Us Westerners need to get more in touch with our bodies and our emotions,” says the dark-haired Ribchester, 53, who after nearly 20 years of visiting this beleaguered yet compelling Caribbean island, rolls just like a Latina herself.

“We're more inhibited in the West, less used to being touched,” she adds as we pass Hotel Florida, an upmarket colonial joint with potted palms, a tiled courtyard and a club that, come weekends, teems with some of the hottest salseros in town.

“Cuban culture is far more open and tactile and this is especially evident when Cubans dance.”

Having constant access to live music helps. You can't walk – sashay – anywhere in Havana without bumping into a band. There, in an open-sided bar, is a trio on percussion, guitar and double bass, covering the rootsy “son” music popularised by the Buena Vista Social Club

as couples twirl and dip with elegant grace. There, at Casa de la Musica in Miramar, an upmarket district near the beach, is the great Los Van Van, the so-called Beatles of Cuba, peeling off hit after timba (funky salsa) hit in a room packed with sweating, moving aficionados.

At the Havana Cafe, a hard-rock-style place with an old Cubana Air light plane dangling from the ceiling, is an album

Famous salsa dancer Maykel Fonts on the Malecon. Top right: dancers go through their paces.
MAIN PHOTO: AGUIRRE ROLANDO



launch by salsa giant Isaac Delgado. Over at Cafe Cantante under the National Theatre, peroxided icon El Noro is showing off his reggaeton chops. Under the radar, at a ramshackle house in central Havana, legendary rumba group Clave Y Guaguancó are hosting a party; bare-chested men and women in swishy skirts are bending their knees and moving, elbows akimbo, along to the call-and-response singing and the beat of the bata drum.

And in front of them all, practising the steps we learnt in a room behind a dulceria (bakery) on the infamously catwalked Prado, is the current Key2Cuba group, who have flown in from Britain and elsewhere – the group includes a Greek, an Italian, two Americans and this Australian – for two weeks of dance and music. Music is just as vital; with a contacts book unlike any other tour operator, Ribchester variously ensures

You can't walk – sashay – anywhere in Havana without bumping into a band.

we're on the list, in the VIP section and even, should we want to get right up close and personal, backstage.

While I've had to unlearn some bad salsa habits (“You've been dancing on your toes, not on your heels and your toes,” cries Ribchester), others who've only done a bit of ballroom or kizomba have taken to salsa as if to the barrio born.

Much of this is to do with our good-natured, swivel-hipped Cuban dance partners, all from the respected folkloric ballet troupe Raices Profundas. It's with their help that we tear up dance floors under the nose of Ribchester. A dance teacher, body therapist, choreographer, video maker and three-time recipient of the UK Salsa Teacher of the Year award, her philosophy is simple: get the basics right and free your mind. The rest, she reckons, will follow.

Most of us are staying at the recently renovated four-star Hotel Sevilla – a haunt of Josephine Baker, Gloria Swanson and gangster Al Capone (who lived in Room 615). No need to stick to the script, however: one client has opted for the VIP package and is staying down the road at Iberostar Parque Central, a five-star digs with a traditional facade, modern interior and 360-degree view from the rooftop pool. Detox massages (what, all that Havana Club isn't good for you?) from the spa's ever-courteous Nelson are the bomb.

Plan it, then, how you like; Ribchester has bespoke itineraries for well-heeled clients who want dance lessons by the pool of their private villa before dining at La Guarida – a fine-dining establishment on the top floor of the dilapidated tenement block in which the 1993 film *Strawberry and Chocolate* was filmed. It's revered by food critics and widely considered an emblem of Havana. Or Paladar San Cristobal, where Barack and Michelle ate when they were here (so did the Kardashians). The President had the triple A steak; the First Lady, fajitas with fried plantains.

Splash out on Hotel Saratoga, a classic '30s establishment and the most luxe in town, where Jay Z and Beyonce stayed in a room with a view (probably of the majestic Capitolio, that former seat of Cuban



Kerry Ribchester & dancers. PHOTO: MAUREEN SAMUELS