

LUXURY

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Your guide to good living

SHINGLE MINDED

Scotland's best seaside homes and holidays

ROUX
DINING

Plus: Fashion
Interiors
Culture
& Driving

The Herald

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The terms unique, historic, breathtaking and unspoiled may be bandied about liberally in travel brochures, but when it comes to visiting Cuba, there are good reasons for such hype.

When the Americans broke off diplomatic relations in 1959, following the removal of US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista, they imposed a punitive trade embargo on Fidel Castro's fledgling Communist country. But today, in more relaxed times, the very thing that could have crippled the Caribbean country in the 20th century, lies at the heart of its appeal to travellers in the 21st century.

Out of necessity, the country reduced, reused and recycled. While the rest of the world was producing plastic by the megaton, Cuba was preserving its buildings, maintaining its vintage cars and keeping high-rises well away from its beauty spots. And Cuban culture was safeguarded with a passion.

The result is a vigorously independent culture, beautifully preserved cityscapes filled with horse-drawn carts, bicycles and beautiful classic cars. There are no Starbucks or McDonald's and visitors to Cuba could feel transported not only in space but in time as well.

Today tourism is the country's biggest industry. President Obama shone the spotlight on Cuba when he visited the island in March and there is now a sense of urgency as travellers line up to try to go "now" before all is diluted beyond recognition.

But many argue that in fact, far from teetering on the brink of extinction, the country is embracing these new opportunities and really coming alive. And daily flights to Havana, from Edinburgh via Paris, make Cuba more accessible from Scotland than it has ever been.

Cuban culture evolved from a melding of influences from aboriginal peoples, Spanish colonialists, African slaves, American industrialists, and the Soviet Union. As a result African rhythms, drinking, dancing, salsa music and even ballet (the national school is the world's biggest) all coexist.

Among its natural assets are dramatic mountainous rainforests, remote and beautiful valleys, acres of sugar cane and tobacco and ancient cities. Coupled with this are the rich array of Caribbean plants and animals and some picture-perfect beaches. In the south of the island, about 100 miles from Havana, is Zapata Swamp, the Caribbean's largest swamp, teeming with wildlife. The unique Cuban crocodile is preserved through a breeding programme, and flocks of bright pink flamingos can be seen fanning out across the water.

There are, of course, fantastic new hotels to stay in but a good way to experience the country, and one highly recommended by travel experts, is to sample the personalised hospitality offered via the *casa particulares*, literally private houses and Cuba's answer to AirBnB. These private homes are increasingly open to guests as people embrace new freedoms to develop their own small businesses – and being a house guest gives travellers access to personal guiding, plenty of advice, and a unique insight into life in this seductive country.

It has to be remembered, however, that Cuba has a struggling economy and not everything runs smoothly. Specialist tour operators can tailor-make an itinerary to steer travellers



Pristine Caribbean beaches, plentiful wildlife and colonial townscapes are all found in Cuba



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towards the efficient, high-end private houses and dining rooms. A suggested tour from Steppes Travel, for example starts in Havana, staying at the top-rated Hotel Saratoga in the heart of the Old Town and with an unrivalled view of the Capitolio, the National Capital Building. The city's finest hotel has a rooftop terrace, a spa, fine dining and excellent service.

A walking tour of Old Havana, a UNESCO world heritage site, takes in the four plazas: Plaza de Armas, Plaza San Francisco de Asis, Plaza Vieja and Plaza de la Cathedral. This is

followed by the essential classic car tour, in a 1959 open top Buick. And along the way visitors can join the dancing or sample the magnificent rum that always flows.

As well as some key historic sites, such as Che Guevara's memorial and The Bay of Pigs, the suggested tour visits the faded colonial city of Trinidad, arguably the most beautiful town in Cuba. Said to be dozing in an 18th century time warp, the pace remains slow in this perfect relic of Spanish colonialism – with plazas, churches, palaces and cobbled streets. Guests stay at the Finca Kenia, a high-end private house. Built in the second half of the 19th century, on the edge of Santa Rosa Valley, Finca Kenia is one of the oldest houses in Trinidad. There are six rooms, each with a small terrace, a garden, swimming pool and a view of the ruins of a colonial fort. Staying in Trinidad gives access to the Escambray mountains. Guests are taken in an ex-Soviet military jeep to hike through lush forests, swim under waterfalls or spot the vociferous birdlife. The experience is both luscious and luxurious. ■

Quintessential Cuba with Steppes Travel, nine days, from £2,445 per person. For more information check www.steppestravel.co.uk



ONWARD BOUND

If you are itching to travel to Brazil this summer to catch the Olympics but don't want to hang out in the crowds in Rio ... no problem. There are some away-from-it-all options that are just close enough to get in on the action at the sports venues. But inevitably they come at a price.

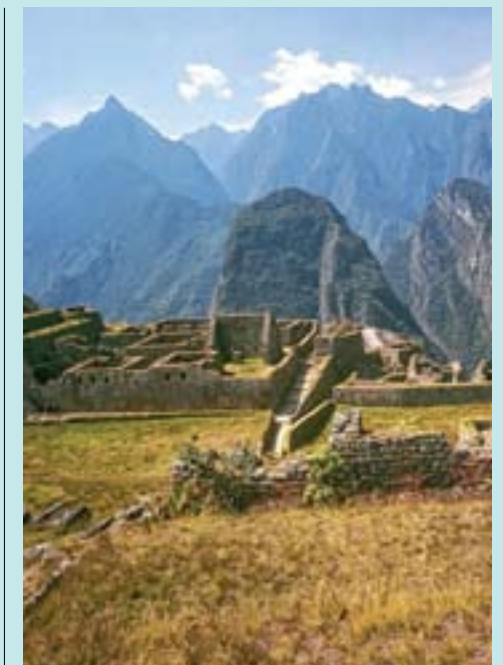
Angra dos Reis is one of the trendiest and most striking spots on the southeast coast of Brazil, 90 minutes from Rio de Janeiro airport and two hours from the Olympic Park. The Villa 10 from Matueté Villas (*pictured right*), is a luxury beachfront home with seven suites for up to 14 guests. As well as kayaking and stand up paddle boarding in the sea, guests can enjoy the swimming pool, garden, sauna, hot tub, beach volleyball court, tennis court, games room and barbecue.

An on-site bilingual host will manage two housekeepers and a cook as well as book restaurants, massages and babysitters or arrange tours, tickets and travel. Yours for £34,000 per week.

Villa 10 is available through Matueté Villas, a member of UltraVilla, www.ultravilla.com/matuetete

Bespoke Brazil offers a luxury package to the Rio Olympics including six nights in the five-star Hotel Santa Teresa plus tickets to the sold-out opening ceremony as well as four other key events. Close to Corcovado mountain in the trendy district of Santa Teresa, the hotel offers guaranteed luxury in relaxing surroundings.

It has a pool, a spa, the most romantic bar in Rio (according to Veja Rio magazine) a Franco-Brazilian restaurant and an award-winning loft suite. Also included is a guided tour of Corcovado, airport transfers and business class flights from Edinburgh or Glasgow. £20,500 per person. Check www.bespokebrazil.com



Peruse Peru with new flights

British Airways is launching the UK's first direct flights to Lima in May, which will make Peru more accessible.

For the conscientious luxury traveller, Inkaterra is an eco and sustainable tourism pioneer celebrating its 40th anniversary this year.

With a portfolio of luxury hotels in the Amazon, Cusco, Machu Picchu (*above*) and Sacred Valley it offers eco-activities and experiences such as canopy treetop trails and night time rainforest explorations, and visits its own Spectacled Bear sanctuary and a new eco-farm.

Rainbow Tours has a 12-night trip to four Inkaterra locations, from £3,980 including return flights from Scotland via Gatwick. Go online at www.rainbowtours.co.uk for more details.

