

Cuba Classic Car Rally

So Cuba! You know about it, it's on your list of things to do before you die and yes it's a mysterious place borne out of a revolution that has locked it in a time capsule. You know about Fidel Castro and the Cuban Missile Crisis which makes it sound a dangerous place. You know about the cars - old American 50's icons that have been 'preserved' and are in use every day. Other than it being a large Caribbean island that's about the extent of most people's knowledge of this unusual place.

The Rallye de Cuba is a chance to see and experience the real Cuba of Fidel Castro and for the very first time we have permission from the highest authority to bring in your own classic and share the roads with the Cuban classics before this island in the sun changes forever.

Although there are more visitors than ever there are still less than you would see at a popular seaside resort on a bank holiday weekend. With only one direct flight from the UK, by Virgin, and precious few others, other than the odd charter flight, the tourist industry has little chance of growing significantly. So to go to Cuba now and see it in the Fidel era, although he hasn't been seen for some time, is a great privilege.

However, you shouldn't forget that this is very much a controlled state. They x-ray your luggage on the way into the country to ensure you aren't bringing in anything they don't like. On exiting the airport it was raining on the recce, but Rolly, who picked us up, assured us that the airport had a micro climate and normal service would be resumed before we hit Havana – and he was right.

Through the rain you will also see your first Cuban classic, a Ford, a Dodge, a Chrysler or whatever – apart from looking a little tatty round the edges it is also probably running on diesel as most of the original engines have been replaced with smoky Russian diesels.

In Havana we will be staying at the Nacional Hotel, built in the pre-revolution era and still a monument to hotel architecture. Located near the Malacon seafront it is adjacent to the car park where the local classic car enthusiasts meet twice a month.

Day 1 – Havana to Vinales - 185km

The recce started from the Nacional, following the coastal road out of Havana towards Vinales which is the first night's stop. Once out of the main Havana conurbation traffic quickly dropped away with the road surface changing as well. The roads are not bad but need watching once past the Go-Kart Circuit which is intended to be the site of a bit of fun on our first day. Following the coast road you begin to get a feel for Cuba island and its size. Towns are small and so is the activity. Here you get your first taste of how people get around in the absence in any decent public transport. Standing by the side of the road, they try and wave you down - it can sometimes take them a day to travel from one town to the adjacent one. Cars with blue number plates are obliged to stop if they have room, but they fill up quickly and have to disappoint many hitchhikers.

On this drive you go through Bahia Honda and then La Palma before heading to Vinales. The scenery quickly changes from seaside to strange mountain shapes called Mogotes which characterise this region. On this section of road you pass the Cueva del Indio, a large cave with lake, and Palenque de los Cimarrones, a huge cave that was a refuge for runaway slaves. Also, worth going to see, just beyond Vinales, is the Mural de la Prehistoria painted by the Mexican artist Diego Rivera.

We tried the Los Jazmines hotel but also visited La Ermita which looks like a better bet for the rally with rooms that have adjacent parking for the cars. The food in Los Jazmines was immediately forgettable so we will put on a special roast at La Ermita as we have heard its not a great deal better there.

Day 2 – Vinales to Varadero - 360km

Vinales stands some 220 metres above sea level so the only way is down towards Pinar del Rio. We turn off after some 14kms and head into the country where there are a number of tobacco plantations. Some of them welcome visitors and these have a little diagram or drawing of a leaf at the entrance. A stop is a must to see the process and even buy a few cigars at knockdown prices – a little private enterprise which helps subsidise their meagre wages. As a foreigner you will probably end up paying 5 CUCs (Cuban convertible currency used by tourists) for the Cohiba cigars, although this is probably expensive compared to the price for a Cuban. However it will be a substantial reduction on the price you pay in the cigar shop in Havana or indeed at the airport.

Our route joins the so-called Autopista which is an empty motorway style of Russian funded road – but do watch out for the occasional pot hole as there are just enough to keep you on your toes. For lunch we turn off the Autopista and head for the hills and La Terazas. Dropping back down onto the main road we head towards Havana, taking the coastal route again towards Varadero. It's a fascinating drive along the coast as you pass Cuba's oil fields with their nodding donkeys and refineries. The smell of oil is unmistakable as it's a very viscous heavy type – probably good for diesel luckily.

Going through Matanzas we headed up the coast road to the finger peninsular of Varadero and the night stop at the Melia Varadero. A peculiarity of many resort hotels in Cuba is that you have to book one of the a la carte restaurants at least 24 hours ahead so in Varadero we had to use the 'Buffet' restaurant. Fearing the worst we approached with some trepidation but our fears were totally unfounded as there was a range of food griddles where you could choose your fish or meat dishes which were then freshly cooked. Excellent result!

The area is referred to as the Cancun of Cuba but actually while there are a number of hotels along this isthmus they are well spread out so they are not one on top of the other in the same way as their Mexican counterparts. After the food in Vinales it's a welcome change for the better.

The hotel also has a good pool and beach which are very attractive after a long day's drive.

Day 3 - Varadero to Trinidad – 342km

Leaving Varadero we head down through the middle of Cuba, passing through Cardenas and Jovellanos, The Bay of Pigs and Cienfuegos before arriving in Trinidad. This is a really good day's drive combining, hills, central plains with intensive fruit growing and then the historic Bay of Pigs. Generally the roads are good although in places as we head inland from the Bay of Pigs there are some broken sections. But before that we suggest you stop for lunch at Playa Largo or indeed halfway round the Bay near the diving centre.

It was on the coast road into Trinidad that we had our first puncture. Picking up a hitchhiker, Eduardo at Cienfuegos, turned out to be our lucky good turn of the day as he was the most efficient tyre changer I have ever seen outside of an F1 race. As we stopped another tourist vehicle, a blue Peugeot 206 zipped past us waving. We were soon back on the road and as we breasted the next hill

we saw the 206 parked by the side of the road also with a puncture so clearly there are unseen hazards on this stretch.

Eduardo knew Trinidad well and took us straight to a tyre man who handsomely overcharged us – but we know better now. The price should be no more than 5 CUC's for a puncture repair!

Then there's Trinidad, one of the real jewels of Cuba. Much of the old town is still intact and the Iberostar hotel we have chosen is right in the middle. The hotel is in a traditional building which really complements the classic cars. The town was founded in 1514 by Spaniard Diego Velasquez – one of a number he founded – and was declared a World Heritage site in 1988. There is a certain amount of restoration in progress but the difficulty of getting materials is ensuring a snail's pace.

This is our first rest day and gives everyone the opportunity to eat out at a Paladares – a small private restaurant with a few tables and generally a fixed menu. Although subject to numerous government restrictions, in most towns these places are where you get the best and most authentic food. In Trinidad we tried Sol Y Son which was good but as its in the Lonely Planet it has probably sacrificed a little quality for quantity. There are other options which will be worth checking out on the event. The food in the hotel is average and expensive so go for at least one meal in a Paladares.

Day 5 – Trinidad to Camaguey - 256km

A good drive to Sancti Spiritus through foothills and towards the centre of the island. This is roughly where the money ran out for the Autopista once the Soviet Union collapsed, so we now travel down the old main road through Ciego de Avila and onto Camaguey. On this road there was a noticeable increase in police check points and secret speed traps, although the locals very kindly warn you by flashing their headlights at you. There is no doubt that there are too many police for the quantity of traffic on the roads. I would also like to know, on an island with such tight borders and low incomes, what they are looking for. Drugs are not an issue here, so I presume it's a case of checking on movements.

Camaguey is a veritable warren and was deliberately created this way to disorientate any would be attackers. It is also an industrial centre in Cuban terms and an important crossroads due to its geographical position. Our hotel is the Gran which is about as good as it gets here. Its wonderfully eccentric lift will take you to the rooftop bar where you can watch the stars while listening to the city below – probably with a Cuban cigar in hand. We will arrange a special meal here as the cooking skills are meagre.

Day 6 - Camaguey to Santiago de Cuba – 333km

Fiddling our way out of the city we have a really interesting drive to the region where Fidel launched his revolution. Santiago de Cuba is at one end of the Sierra Maes mountains where he hid out with Che Guevara prior to launching his campaign. In fact it's noticeable that Che is held in great affection by the people of Cuba who have images of him everywhere.

While it's a longish day the best part is definitely the last 80 to 100kms into Santiago. The last 50km, in particular, are extremely pretty. Santiago is the second largest town with a population of some 445,000, and regards itself as a cultural centre with most genres of Cuban music originating from the area. After a few days of gentle driving, Santiago is much more frenetic. There is plenty to look at here, so we will have a rest day here. One of the must do's is to have a Daiquiri at the Hotel Casa Granda which is the hotel described in Graham Green's 'Our Man in Havana' – even if it was transported to Havana in the story.

We stay in the Melia Santaigo, a bit of a monster in the Russian style, but it is the best in town. Fortunately it has a couple of a la carte restaurants that make up for its buffet offering.

Day 8 – Santiago de Cuba to Baracoa – 238kms

This is a truly fantastic day's driving. To start with you have to head north to pick up the road to Guantanamo. This is a good drive in its own right, until you hit a small stretch of the Autopista. Dodging through the back streets of Guantanamo you head towards San Antonio, cutting through a small range of hill. There is a road that leads down to the American base, but its guarded so don't attempt it! The road, then snakes along the coast to Cajobabo which at one time was only accessible by sea. The creation of this road and its route over the mountain has changed all that. Called La Faroloa (the Beacon) it is the finest road in all Cuba and they are rightly proud of it. Even with its view points it is barely used so is a delight to drive. It could be regarded as the Stelvio of Cuba making it ideal as one of our tests.

Baracoa is unique in Cuba as its the real deal. Cut off for hundreds of years because of its location it is also one of its most interesting. Founded in 1511 by Diego Velasquez (he of Trinidad and a number of other cities) it is also the first landing point of Columbus some 20 years earlier. Originally it was the capital of Cuba before Velasquez moved to Santiago, leading to its years of isolation. Here also are the few original inhabitants of the island who survived the colonisation.

However, the accommodation is basic and we will stay at El Castillo which is the best of the bunch. The cockroaches in the bathroom put us off the alternative Hotel Porto Santa. Once again eating in a Paladares is the best bet here.

Day 9 – Baracoa to Guardalavaca – 302kms

This is without doubt the hardest day of the rally as in stark contrast to La Farola, the road north is in desperate need of some attention. It is important to just take the first 58km section to Moa, a strange mining town, slowly as it is mostly unmade. The scenery is great but it will take nearly two hours. After that, there are some roadworks in progress but it's anybody's guess at how far they will get by the time the rally arrives.

The reward is reaching the Rio de Oro hotel on the Playa Esmerelda. Here, we will take a rest day to regroup after the drive from Baracoa. It's a good hotel on a beach with good food – great Carpaccio – and friendly staff. It is an all-inclusive type so does suffer some of the drawbacks but we will book into the Royal Suites which are a well kept secret with their own exclusive pool and dining facilities.

Day 11 – Guardalavaca to Cayo Guillermo – 499kms

On paper this looks a long day but in fact it is a relatively straightforward drive with good roads and a glorious finish over the 27km causeway linking the islands with the mainland. However, first we head for Holguin, then we join the main road to travel north towards the fabulous Cayo Coco, one of the islands connected to the mainland by a causeway. We actually drive past Cayo Coco and head for Cayo Guillermo which is less touristic and therefore more enjoyable. The hotel we have selected, the Melia Cayo Guillermo is one of best in the whole area so make a good stopping point. After the long drive we think you will deserve another day's rest, so make the most of the great beach.

Day 13 –Cayo Guillermo to Santa Maria – 210kms

A much shorter run today but through great countryside so no need to rush it. Once again there is a great causeway to drive, only this time it's even longer at 48kms and it took over ten years to build including interruptions from hurricanes which generally happen from August. We have chosen the Royal Hideaway Ensenachos which is probably the best hotel in Cuba – it certainly has one of the best stretches of sandy beach and three pools!

The Ensenachos will mark the end of the rally, although not the journey as we will take a rest day here before returning to Havana for a couple of nights, giving everyone the chance to take in some of the superb entertainment available from the Opera or Ballet to the (touristic) Tropicana Club (great show, shame about the food) or some of the other nightspots such as the Gato Tuerto near the Nacional hotel.

Day 15 – Santa Maria to Havana – 400kms

A long day indeed but most of it is on the main Autopista which was funded by the Russians and is incomplete and deteriorating due to lack of funds. The Chinese are sniffing round so I am sure some work will be happening soon to rectify the pot holes which are few and far between but deadly if you miss them. You will have to keep your eyes peeled. Halfway to Havana is a great fuel and watering stop where you can buy your T-shirts and tourist knick knacks. It's the only place we found on the recce that had such a good range.

Day 17 – Fly out