

# meet the Guide



**As Cuba celebrates 50 years since the Revolution, Martha Perez, one of Audley's guides in Cuba, discusses becoming a guide, Cuban life and her views on the future of her country.**



Valle de Vinales



Varadero



Trinidad

**Q Why did you decide to become a guide?**

**A** "When I was studying, I never thought I could work as anything else but a piano teacher, which I did for five years. But in the 1990s the situation in Cuba changed completely, so did our minds. By the time I became a guide I had already worked in tourism and I liked it very much. A friend of mine talked to me about a tour guide course, which one of the Cuban travel agencies was offering in order to prepare guides. So I went there and, since the first class, I just loved it. To re-study Cuban history, to learn a little bit more about architecture, culture in general, the international situation... I just found it fascinating! Soon after, being a tour guide became my full-time job and I enjoy this job everyday. I keep learning about new things, new amazing places in my country, new people and even new things about myself. So, I'm very lucky. I have now been a guide for seven years."

**Q Why should people visit Cuba? What makes it unique?**

**A** "People should visit Cuba because it is a very safe place and also because it is still different from the rest of the world. In my personal opinion, Fidel Castro's system makes it unique. You can find beautiful cities and beaches anywhere, great hotels, nature, adventures, nice people, even for less money, but there is only one Fidel Castro and his Revolution, and we have it here. There are many things to see and to learn in Cuba. I have worked with people

who at the end of their holidays in Cuba, go back to their countries having a completely different perception of what is really important in life; they feel they are spoiled and despite this they complain all the time. People's feelings change when they experience the real life in Cuba and compare it with what they have heard or seen from our government in the international media."

**Q Are there any hidden gems?**

**A** "It depends on the kind of client and their interests. For me there is a very special place in the Old Town I visit quite often, not included in the tours. It's the terrace of the San Miguel Hostel, with its gorgeous view of Havana Harbour and the Old Town, very nice restaurant and great service."

**Q What is your favourite place?**

**A** "To live, Havana. To visit, Trinidad, as it combines everything: a colonial town with beautiful architecture, wonderful history and traditions, nice beach, mountains with gorgeous nature to explore, great nightlife, very good musicians and nice people, all nearby."

**Q Where is the best place in Cuba to experience the classic Latino music, for which Cuba is so famous?**

**A** "There are many good places: Jazz Café in Vedado, Casa de la Música in Miramar, both in Havana, and the one in Trinidad, where there is

no cover fee, so many Cuban people go to dance there. In every bar in the Old Town in Havana, you find very good traditional bands. My favourite is Casa de la Musica in Trinidad, very spontaneous, great and almost unknown musicians."

**Q Are there any 'must see' festivals in Cuba?**

**A** "The International Ballet Festival, usually in October-November and Jo-Jazz, which is mainly to promote young jazz music players."

**Q How has Cuba changed since your parents' generation?**

**A** "Cuba, as a country, has not changed too much. Our leader has been the same for the last 50 years so our industries, infrastructure and organisation are basically the same. We do have more hotels; more restoration works going on, but it is something you see mainly in the most touristic towns and cities. But the situation, the problems are the same: transportation, housing and food. Religion is something that has changed a lot, for instance. Now, people can practise any religion without restrictions and everything related to religion that meant a huge problem with big consequences in the 60s, now is ok, is a right.

What has really changed is the people, especially after the 1990s. Those years of crisis were terrible for Cuban people, also for the socialist revolution ideology. Everything the revolutionary government achieved during the 60s to the late



80s collapsed with the crisis we suffered in the 90s. With the development of tourism, the private enterprises, foreign investments, double currency, shortages of all kinds of items and services, plus the contact with foreigners and Cuban people living abroad, the Cuban mind is not the same, it has changed completely. We still have the same restrictions that our parents had but we are less afraid to talk, to make jokes about the system. I mean in a discreet way of course, not openly.

My parents are adapting themselves to this but still ask me and my brother not to speak too loudly, not with everybody, especially me because of my job. It's difficult for them to accept that even the people who work for the political organisations in Cuba have become a lot more flexible now than in their times. The difference in the standard of living is now bigger than it was for my parents' generation, soon after the Revolution. We are having again a poor, middle and upper class in Cuba, whose money comes mainly from illegal businesses. Life has become much more expensive and youths are more interested in material things such as designer clothes, cell phones and computers. Those who are still interested in having a college degree go to university just to get it and save it for the future, because now they have to work where the money and possibilities are. In my parents' youth, there was no bigger pride for families than having a member of the family studying at the university. As I said before, Cuban people are changing and becoming similar to the rest of the world."

### Q How have things changed since Fidel's brother has taken over power?

A "Raúl Castro has lifted some of the new restrictions set in the 90s, but they are only affordable by Cuban people with money, like having cell phones, renting a car or staying as a guest in hotels. He has encouraged new laws regarding the agriculture and, actually, we can see more cultivated land in the countryside. But anyway, it is too soon to see the results, especially if he keeps the same restrictions on the private enterprises.

One of the most remarkable things is the freedom of our media, not to express their political position of course, but to be more critical with the problems we have, which are not new. What is new is how frequently you read an article talking clearly, openly about the food problem, for example. On TV as well; the comedian shows now, it's just amazing all the jokes they say and perform for millions of Cubans about the situation and the shows are not suspended, like they would have been before. This is really a change, but we are not sure if it will last."

### Q What do you think the next 50 years have in store for Cuba?

A "There will be a moment when our old leaders will be gone, and I don't think that the new generations will be able to keep the same system going. Cuba will become like any other Caribbean island, with McDonalds everywhere,

more big hotels and cruise ships, and I'm not saying this is wrong; change brings progress also. There is no perfect political system, everybody complains about their government, but at least you must be able to get the basics without so many efforts.

I do hope that our future leaders, no matter how big the change is, will be capable of doing it smoothly, step by step, and Cuban people don't lose their minds trying to satisfy years of abstinence, and forgetting what is really important in life. Everybody has needs and ambitions. So do we. It's just that so far, someone put a limit on them.

I hope we Cuban people still feel proud of ourselves, no matter the system running the country, and save our traditions, culture and simplicity."

## FACT file

Prices start from **£1,700 per person**. A typical 15-night tour including Havana, Trinidad and Vinales and the services of a guide, costs from **£2,650 per person**. For more information, please contact our Cuba specialists on **01993 838 685**.



[www.audleytravel.com/cuba](http://www.audleytravel.com/cuba)