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Havana highlights

Sam Ballard travels with Azamara Club Cruises
and discovers the city behind the colourful facades

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AMBASSADOR
AND WIN...
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Havana highlights

Sam Ballard sails from Miami to Havana on Azamara Club Cruises – with a detour via Cozumel – and gets to know the city behind the colourful facades

Walking around the crumbling ruins of Havana's Old Town – seeing 1950s Buicks and old men smoking cigars – it's hard not to get caught up writing clichés about Cuba's faded glory. Here, the grand old boulevards have a distinctly European feel to them – thanks to the country's former life as an important outpost of the Spanish empire – from the glorious art deco Bacardi building to El Capitolio, which is based on the US Capitol building (although, as our tour guide delights in telling us, theirs is taller).

This is how you experience Cuba, Azamara Club Cruises style – and that means an overnight stay in Havana (the undisputed highlight of our six-night cruise) and a programme packed with options to get the most out of your stay, whether it's day or night-time tours.

Our cruise started four days earlier out of Miami, where US citizens have been allowed to board Cuba-bound cruises for the past three years – meaning that the number of operators offering Cuban cruises has grown exponentially. Azamara started calling at Cuba back in 2017 and now offers both 'country intensive' cruises, which call at Havana, Santiago de Cuba and Cienfuegos, as well as shorter sailings like ours, which calls at Cozumel, Mexico and Havana.

This is the first time I have ever cruised on one of the much-feted R-class ships (previously owned by the now defunct Renaissance Cruises) and you can see the appeal. With space for almost 700 guests, *Azamara Journey* hits the right balance of intimacy and facilities. There are numerous places to eat, from the buffet, which has its own outdoor seating area towards the aft of the ship, to the main Discoveries restaurant or the Patio grill, where you can get burgers during the day. For those wanting something more special there is Aqualina (where I managed two main courses) or Prime C, the speciality restaurants that are both priced at \$30 per person. All restaurants have plenty of tables for two and it's open-seating dining, making it a more relaxed affair.



Clockwise from top: the streets of Havana; Mexico's mesmerising Chichén Itzá; and the pool on board *Azamara Journey*



When it comes to drinks, Azamara includes a decent array as standard throughout the day, which along with the included gratuities makes it virtually all-inclusive. There are always a couple of wines on rotation, as well as a sparkling wine for those wanting some bubbles. Beers and spirits are listed, too. Because of this you could easily get away with staying on the included package, although if your client wants to be more selective then they could punt for the Premium Package (\$15.95 per person per day) or the Ultimate Package (\$21.95 per person per day).

Our first call of the cruise is on the island of Cozumel, off the coast of Mexico, where we visit the ancient site of Chichén Itzá, which is one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. To get there we must first embark on a 45-minute ferry followed by a two-hour coach ride, but the long journey is worth it.

Chichén Itzá comprises a number of ancient sites dating back around 1,500 years, although by far the most famous is the El Castillo pyramid, which towers 30 metres above the ground. It is a mathematical marvel, with every part of the structure meaning something. There are 365 steps to the top (taking in all four sides), 18 terraces (one for each Mayan month) and, during the spring and autumn equinoxes, the sun somehow casts a shadow of a serpent on the pyramid.

There is also the Great Ball Court – which measures a massive 168 metres by 70 metres – where Ancient Mayans watched two teams slug it out during matches that could last for days at a time. The winning captain was sacrificed to the gods. It appears that sport has always been more than a game for some people.

However, as incredible as Chichén Itzá is, it was always going to play second fiddle on this trip. After a blissed out day at sea, we awake to the ship slowly drawing into Havana. As we get closer, a pod of dolphins swims right up to the side of us, to the delight of everyone on board.

Havana, or at least the part that we saw, is like an open-air

museum, from the vintage cars to the revolutionary monuments. It's an incredibly striking place – one where you can just take a seat and watch as people hustle and bustle, trying to get by. We opt to take Azamara's Best of Havana tour, during which we see the city's famous cemetery; visit the home of José Fuster, an artist who has decorated his entire neighbourhood with vibrant mosaic tiles; and tour Ernest Hemingway's beautiful villa. You can peer into his untouched rooms through open windows and doors – seeing everything from the books on his shelves to his weight and blood pressure measurements, which were scrawled all over a bathroom wall during health issues in his later years.

As our itinerary includes an overnight stay in Havana guests get the opportunity to either join one of the night tours available (such as going to the famous Tropicana club) or go off on their own steam. We opt for the latter and, after doing some research, eat at La Guarida, which sits on the second floor of an old mansion. To get there you have to climb the grand marble staircase, past a mural dedicated to Fidel Castro and up past a floor of the restaurant's drying linen. La Guarida shares the building with families going about their daily business. It adds to the atmosphere of the restaurant, which serves up some of the best gourmet cuisine in Havana.

Cuba is clearly a country that is in transition (locals only got data roaming four months ago) but there is an argument that it isn't changing fast enough for Cubans, who live on salaries that put most essentials out of their reach and who seem to spend most of their days queuing up or trying to find shops that stock everyday items. Our tour guide tells us that getting a job in tourism is like winning a multi-million-dollar recording contract because the tips supplement wages that can be as little as \$30 a month.

It's a shocking amount of money to live on and does raise the question of whether we're engaging in poverty porn for wanting to visit a country where you will 'step back in time'.

Its striking aesthetic, history and culture will ensure the enduring popularity of Havana as a tourist destination



Cuba isn't stuck in a bubble and the history and culture are so strong that there will always be a tourism offering here – something that will not change if its population becomes more wealthy.

We arrive back in Miami on Thursday and use the opportunity to have a post-cruise stay in South Beach. We stay at The Betsy, a beautiful art deco hotel that sits on the beachfront, allowing the perfect opportunity for a bit of people watching. The hotel has its own dogs (Canine Executive Officers) and you can watch live jazz every night in the historical lobby.

From that base we can see some of what Miami has to offer – from Wynwood (where every surface has been spray painted by graffiti artists) to South Beach's famous art deco district. It's the perfect way to extend what has been a relatively short cruise. One thing is for sure: we'll definitely be back. 🇨🇺



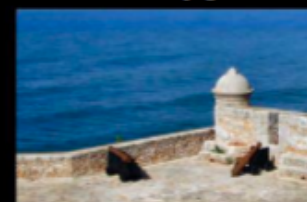
CIRCUMVENT CASH CHARGES

When travelling to Cuba take British pounds and not US dollars, like we did. Changing money isn't an issue (you can do it at a number of kiosks at the cruise terminal) but there is a hefty commission on dollars that the Cubans don't levy on other currencies.



THREE CUBA CRUISES

Cuba Intensive Voyage



Azamara Club Cruises
Azamara Journey
Miami (round trip)
November 25, 2019
From £2,760pp

This 11-night itinerary allows for much more exploration of Cuba, with stops in Santiago de Cuba and Cienfuegos, as well as Cozumel in Mexico.

Havana overnight



Norwegian Cruise Line
Norwegian Sun
Port Canaveral (Orlando) (round trip)
June 10, 2019
From £624pp

This four-day jaunt from Florida includes a full day and night in the Cuban capital, plus it's an all-inclusive experience including unlimited drinks.

Timeless Cuba



Oceania Cruises
Insignia
Miami (round trip)
October 5, 2019
From £2,069pp

This seven-day itinerary takes in Havana and also the southern side of the island. Optional excursions include a tour in a vintage car.

The Betsy – South Beach

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