

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

Chip off the Old Eastern Bloc

For travelers hooked on Cold War intrigue, the Cuban capital of Havana delivers the goods, from moody museums to a Soviet-themed boîte

By TONY PERROTTET

NOT A BAD VIEW for a bunker," said a young American traveler named Andria as we peered through a grim, concrete gun-slot at the blue waters of the Straits of Florida. The underground chamber, Fidel Castro's headquarters during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, was dug beneath the gardens of the Hotel Nacional. The grande dame of Havana hotels, the property occupies the most commanding headland in the city. To either side of our million-dollar view stretched the arc of the Malecón, Havana's waterfront boulevard, poetically crumbling beneath a wash of sea spray.

The hotel was a seductive spot to start exploring the residue of the Cold War, memories of which are fresher in Havana than in the rest of the world. I had just finished researching a book about the guerrilla uprising of the late 1950s, when Fidel, Che and their *barbudos*, "bearded ones," forced the dictator Fulgencio Batista to flee on New Year's Day in 1959, nearly 60 years ago. Now I wanted to understand the aftermath, when the idealism of the revolution descended into near-Armageddon with the Soviets and decades of U.S.-Cuban enmity.

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The bunker and its unlikely setting were my first indication that it was going to be bizarrely pleasant to follow the Cold War trail in Havana. The Hotel Nacional's elegant outdoor bar, patrolled by emerald peacocks, evoked the romantic 1950s. It's easy to imagine Ava Gardner and Errol Flynn just finishing their frozen daiquiris while American mob boss Meyer Lansky huddled over a card game by the potted palms. And yet, at the end of the manicured lawn, steps lead abruptly down into the austere post-revolutionary world, with reinforced trenches and gun emplacements. The hotel seems in no hurry to pave over the relics of the Cold War heyday. As he led us through Fidel's subterranean command post, the bunker's elderly attendant, Eduardo, a retired hotel bellboy who works for tips, pointed out the olive-drab military binoculars on a

tripod pointing due north. "That way, Miami Beach!" he rejoiced.

To most of us, the Missile Crisis—which pushed the world the closest it has ever come to nuclear war—is ancient history. Not in Havana. The clammy gray walls of the bunker are still hung with military maps and aerial photos of Soviet missile silos faded from decades of salt air. Tickled to meet two *Yanqui* travelers, Eduardo opened a rusty grille and led us into a maze of dark tunnels, where flickering lightbulbs revealed old Cuban uniforms and a shards of the American U-2 spy plane shot down during the standoff. The tunnels extend for 800 yards under the strategic hotel, Eduardo said proudly, to shelter the Cuban volunteers who intended to fight to the death against a U.S. Marine assault.

To get a broader view of the Cold War saga, I headed for the Museum of the Revolution on the edge of the colonial Old Town. It's hard to miss, now occupying the dictator Batista's old Presidential Palace, a fairy-tale Neo-Classical confection with stained glass by Tiffany and a reception room based on the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles. Outdoors, the most renowned display is the Granma, the yacht Fidel and his 81 followers used to crash-land on the Cuban coast in 1956 and start their shoestring rebellion. Their against-all-odds success in 1959 bathed the guerrillas in a romantic aura—U.S. newsmen compared Fidel to Robin Hood and Simon Bolívar—but the artifacts scattered around the Granma show the violent fallout. Among them: the surface-to-air missiles from the CIA-backed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961, and at the museum's entrance, the tank Fidel commanded to repel the landing.

After the Bay of Pigs, Cuba's course was set as an outpost of the Eastern Bloc in the Caribbean. Vestiges of the Communist influence, when Moscow subsidized Cuba's sugar industry and propped up the economy, remain on Havana's horizons, including monolithic Bucharest-style apartment blocks, entirely unsuited for the tropical climate, and the brutalist former U.S.S.R. Embassy, designed to look like the hilt of a sword plunged into the earth. Wandering the alleys of Old Havana, I could still find faded graffiti with Bolshevik stars, hammers and sickles that nobody has bothered to erase. The good times, of course, did not last. The Soviet collapse in 1989 soon turned off aid like a tap, but official hostility with the U.S. did not ease, trapping Cuba

in growing isolation.

To witness the freshest example of anti-Americanism, I hopped a taxi to another government-run museum called the Memorial de la Denuncia, the Denunciation Memorial. Even that made an oddly charming excursion: It was housed in a finely restored mansion in the leafy, upscale neighborhood of Miramar. The museum opened last year on Aug. 13, which would have been Fidel's 91st birthday (he died in late 2016, age 90). Perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, U.S.-Cuban relations were then sliding into a 21st century low after mysterious accusations of "sonic attacks" on U.S. diplomats in Havana; soon after, President Trump slowed the Obama-era thaw of 2015-16.

Inside the museum's "CIA Room," interactive computers recount decades worth of covert U.S. operations alongside panels filled with dense historical documents. Inscribed on one wall was "637"—the number of attempts on Fidel's life according to the Cuban government. Elsewhere, a projector showed gory silent footage of the 1960 La Coubre disaster, when two explosions destroyed a French freighter in Havana Harbor, killing some 100 dock workers and rescuers. (Fidel charged that the U.S. was behind the disaster, although its cause remains a mystery.) One glass case held rusty ammunition, another displayed bloodstained shirts like conceptual art objects. Two walls were covered with sculpted faces of ghostly, anonymous men—spies and counterintelligence agents, the attendant explained. (Nobody at the museum seemingly took any of the CIA plots personally: As everywhere in Havana, the staff were delighted to meet a New Yorker.)

In the Memorial's boxy library, containing its "Marxist-Leninist Collection," I encountered a librar-



ROSE MARIE GROMWELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



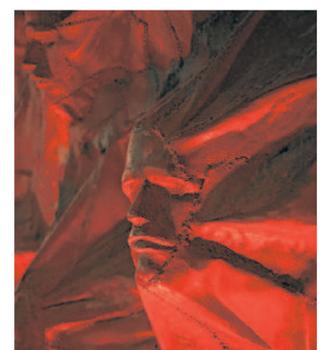
SEEING RED Clockwise from top: The former U.S.S.R. embassy in Havana, which was nicknamed the 'Control Tower'; the office of former Cuban president Fulgencio Batista at the Presidential Palace, now the Museum of Revolution; a trench on the grounds of the Hotel Nacional, the grande dame of Havana's hotels, dug during the Cold War.



ian in her 20s with nose piercings, dyed pink hair and a jumpsuit with a guerrilla motif. When I asked her how many visitors she'd had that day, she looked at me as if it were an absurd question: "None!" She, like other young Cubans, seemed to have forgotten old scores and was trying to move on. After all, the revolutionary dream has long faded. In 2011, the first halting steps to dismantling the Socialist system began, though the U.S. trade embargo imposed in the early 1960s remains largely in place.

On my last night I went to Nazdarovie, a Russian restaurant whose name means "To Your Health!" Located up a narrow staircase off the Malecón, its walls were covered with ironic Soviet posters, and the menu offered borscht, dumplings and blinis. The restaurant's outdoor balcony is one of the best sunset vistas in the city, so I ordered a vodka shot with caviar and took a table. As

Above: Outside the Museum of Revolution. Below: A sculpture at the Denunciation Memorial.



the sun bathed the Gulf of Florida in golden light, I raised a glass to Cuba's future, hoping that the island nation would maybe—one day—untangle from its past. The view, I thought, was even better than from Fidel's bunker.



BLINI SPOT The interior at Havana's Russian Nazdarovie restaurant.

THE LOWDOWN / ON HAVANA'S COLD WAR TRAIL

Touring There Exhibits at the Memorial of Denunciation, in the upscale Miramar neighborhood, are in Spanish-only, but many (such as silent films) are fairly self-explanatory and the staff are very helpful (312 Calle 14; cubadenuncia.cu). Almost all visitors to Havana take in the Museum of the Revolution, housed in the former Presidential Palace. It's fun to see dolls used by Cuban women to smuggle weapons and Che's leather jacket, but the museum offers almost no explana-

tion, and visitors can leave none the wiser. *Refugio No 1*. The bunker and trenches at the Hotel Nacional are open daily roughly 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; ask the staff to show you around. Former hotel employees, they have basic English and work for tips (hotelnacionaldecuba.com)

Eating There Nazdarovie restaurant is a must-see for sunset vodka cocktails and fine, if rather heavy, Russian dishes (*Malecón 25*, nazdarovie-havana.com).