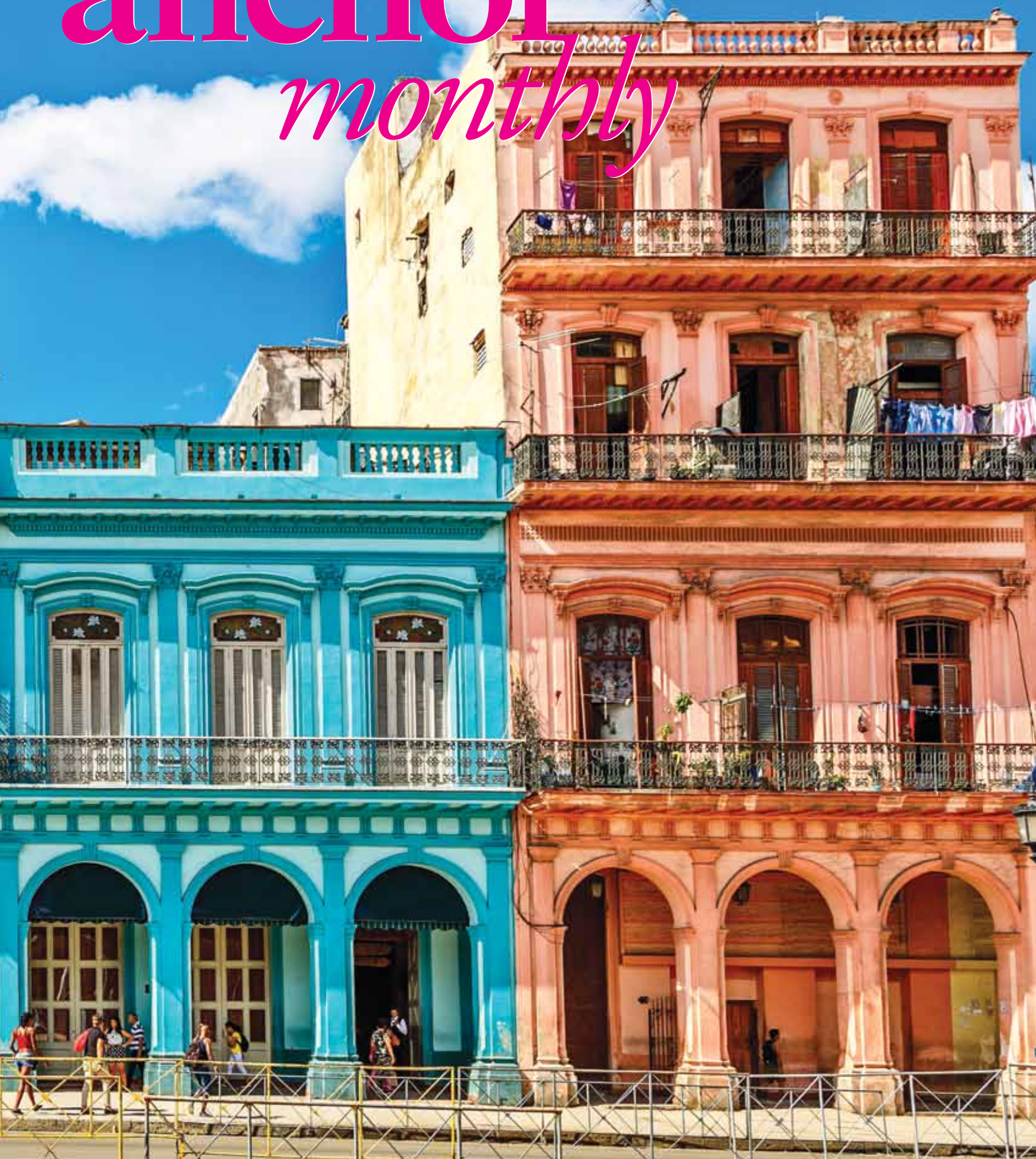


# *The* anchor *monthly*



WHEEL & ANCHOR

*We bring travellers together*







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VOLUME FOUR | OCTOBER 2019  
*The Weekends edition*



Graphic design: anythink.ca

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*On the Cover: Living colour. Old houses in the center of Havana.*

Questions or comments? We'd love to hear from you! Call us at  
**1-(888) 531-5101**  
or email us at  
**info@wheelandanchor.ca**

*The anchor* monthly



# from gordon's perspective

As you have probably figured out by now, at Wheel & Anchor we think a little bit differently and it's that different thinking that defines our Weekends. First of all, we say that weekends have 5 days, because who wouldn't want a 5-day weekend?

Many of our members and prospective members asked us about whether we could do shorter trips - getaways that you don't have to put a lot of long term planning into, but that will still carry the hallmarks of all our programs: the fun of travelling with like-minded people, engaging in local experiences and enough time to stop, savour and explore on one's own.

Hence the birth of our Weekends program, culminating with our first trip to Havana, Cuba - an incredible city celebrating 500 years of history next month. Although our itinerary in each destination will be different, the premise behind each one is that it will be semi-curated; in other words we have selected some of the most interesting and unique things to do and see, while leaving room for you to check out those places and things that are of particular interest to you. Each Weekend will have at least 2 social evenings where the group will enjoy some aspect of local food, drink and culture in the company of fellow members.

We have received a number of ideas of destinations for our Weekends and generally-speaking we are looking at places that are within about a 5 hour or so flight. It is our desire to not be entirely Toronto-centric in the places we select but of course there are many more direct flights from there than any other place in Canada and so I ask for your indulgence as we develop more Weekends that are easily accessible from other Canadian cities.

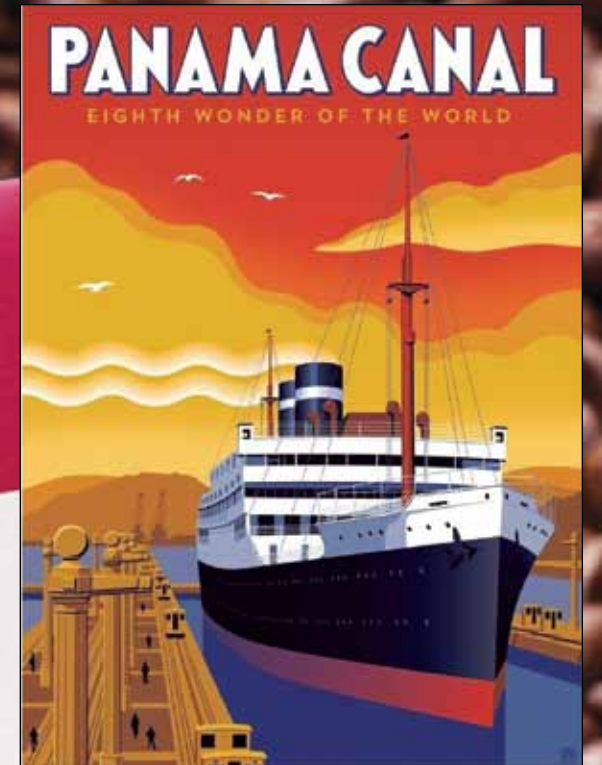
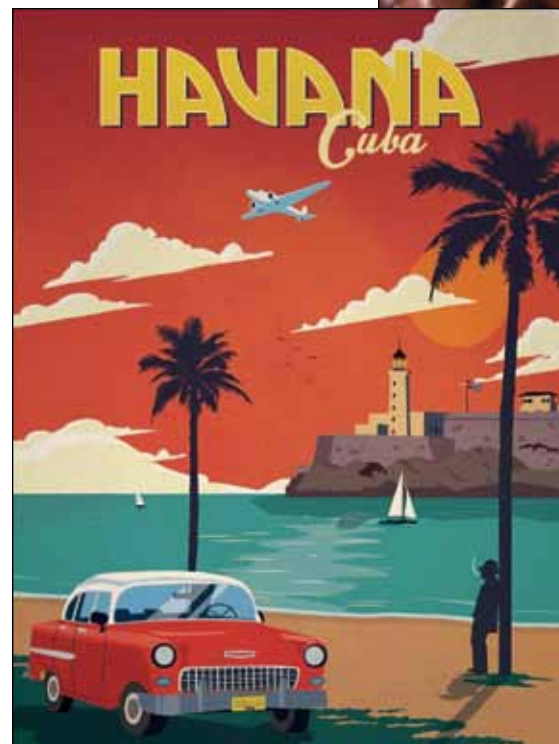
You will have heard of all the places we have selected for this first Wheel & Anchor Weekend newsletter edition, even if you never thought about travelling there for just the weekend. How far would you travel for a weekend? I think most of our members have travelled across Canada or across the U.S. for a weekend and so our current list of planned trips fall roughly within those kinds of flight times. So why wouldn't you want to come along?

Looking forward we are planning to put out more Weekends within Canada and the U.S. and we welcome your input on where you would like to go.

Please take your time to enjoy this newsletter talking about our first 4 Weekend destinations and give it some serious thought. My guess is that there is something about each of these places that has intrigued you, so why wait. I look forward to having you join us. ☻



Gordon Dreger, Founder





# future tour ideas

Feedback from members via the questionnaire, our events, calls with Gordon or even just in an email is what spawns the ideas for our future tours. While not all of these programs will necessarily be offered, we appreciate your opinion on these places and the more positive response, the more likely we will expedite development of these programs.



## IRELAND

We have had many requests for a trip to the Emerald Isle in our member questionnaire and with so many Irish folk here at home, we can't resist the urge. Dublin, Belfast, and the coastlines to the north and west will be on the agenda.

Tentative trip date: June 2020

## PORTUGAL

Another much-requested destination from our community, Portugal has developed into a tourist mecca over the past decade. We can't miss the iconic cities of Lisbon and Porto as well as the Douro Valley but we're planning to go deeper into the countryside beyond where the average visitor goes.

Tentative trip date: September 2020

## ASIAN SOJOURN: VIETNAM, CAMBODIA, LAOS, THAILAND

*Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand*

A backpacker-like itinerary without the backpacking... we'll explore some of the most picturesque and important parts of Southeast Asia, enjoying all of the flavours of the region. Likely we will plan longer stays at each stop so that there is ample time to discover the local culture... and to do what backpackers often like to do. Just chill!

Tentative trip date: January 2021

These and other truly unique programs are all on the drawing board and due for release over the coming weeks and months. Follow our weekly e-newsletter for the latest updates and to be among the first to secure your spots as group sizes will be limited.

*Stay tuned to our newsletter for updates on these and more great programs!*

## Un pequeño diccionario de español

### You think you're the last coke in the desert

Translation: Creerse la última coca-cola en el desierto

Meaning: To believe that you are better than everyone else

English Equivalent: The bee's knees, to think that you're the bomb, the best thing since sliced bread

### To be like a goat

Translation: Estar como una cabra

Meaning: To be crazy

English Equivalent: Be off your rocker, be a fruitcake, be off your head

### To be made a chili

Translation: Estar hecho un ají

Meaning: To be very angry

English Equivalent: To be hopping mad

### Good wave!

Translation: Buena onda!

Meaning: Very good

English Equivalent: Good vibes! Cool!

### Throw the house through the window

Translation: Tirar la casa por la ventana

Meaning: Pay any amount of money to achieve something

English Equivalent: Spare no expense, pull out all the stops

### El amor es como el Wi-Fi, a medida que te alejas, pierde intensidad.

Love is just like Wi-Fi, as you go further away, it loses its intensity.

### El cambio es inevitable, excepto cuando se trata de de una máquina expendedora.

Change is inevitable, except from a vending machine.

### Con el dinero, baila el perro.

With money, the dog will dance; meaning: With money, anything is possible.

## NEED A TRAVEL PARTNER? CHECK OUT OUR "COMPANIONS FOR THE ROAD" PROGRAM.

Are you looking for someone to travel with? We've launched a program to connect solo travellers looking for a companion to share a room with while travelling and avoid those evil single supplements!

To participate, simply send an email to [companions@wheelandanchor.ca](mailto:companions@wheelandanchor.ca), and you'll be sent a copy of the application form that asks a number of questions about your habits and preferences while travelling, as well as destinations you'd like to find visit with a travel partner. From this we'll create a profile that we'll use to match you with other travellers. If there's a match, our team will reach out to you and any potential matches, confirm that you're both interested in having a phone call, and facilitate the conversation from there.

It's all part of our mission to bring travellers together around a shared passion for travel and making new friends along the way. So if you're looking for a companion or know someone who is, let them know about the program and we'll do our best to connect you with others looking for the same!

*If you're interested in helping out, please send me an email personally: [gordon@wheelandanchor.ca](mailto:gordon@wheelandanchor.ca)*



# *Havana*



American golden vintage car drives under palms in Varadero Cuba.



# Weekend 1: Havana

13th November - 18th November 2019 and end of February 2020

We found ourselves with a unique opportunity to make this our first Wheel & Anchor Weekend, as November 2019 represents the 500th birthday celebration of Havana, an auspicious occasion that only a handful of cities in North America will be able to share.

Cuba has for decades attracted Canadians to its tropical shores, stunning beaches and all-inclusive resorts, but it seems to me that Havana has really only come into the limelight relatively recently, and for good reason.

One of my very good friends is an exceptional photographer who has been to Havana at least a half dozen times. The colours, the lively people, the architecture and of course the thousands of vintage cars are a photographer's dream. You don't have to be a photographer though to appreciate the beauty of the city's sites and to be embraced by its unique form of Latin culture and warm hospitality.

Our local host Enrique is a delightful character, one of those people who seems to know everyone and he is the perfect person to take us beyond the usual touristic highlights to see the real Cuba, his Cuba. Together with Gordon he has designed a program that combines visits to the must-see spots within UNESCO designated Old Havana but also just beyond the city limits to catch a glimpse of rural life.

On our inaugural trip, the 500th anniversary celebrations will no doubt be a highlight but on our subsequent trips there will be no shortage of fun, camaraderie and enjoyment of local culture. Whether it be Cuban jazz, cocktails or cannon fire over the harbour, there will be memories made in Havana that will last a lifetime.



Itinerary, November 2019:
Nov 13 - Arrive Havana, Cuba
Nov 14 - Fusterlandia
Nov 15 - Finca Vigía
Nov 16 - Finca Vista Hermosa
Nov 17 - Old Havana
Nov 18 - Depart Havana



A beautiful sunset in Havana.



A cafe in Plaza Viejo.



A view of the cathedral in Old Havana.



Free yourself with a couple Cuba Libres!



# *The Azores*



A school of Atlantic Dolphins swims off the coast of the Azores.



# Weekend 2: The Azores

Tentative Dates March 22 - 28, 2020

The Azores...what? Those little tiny specks that you can't even see when you zoom out on Google maps? If you haven't heard of the Azores, or if you don't know where they are, you're not alone. A little more than halfway across the Atlantic from the east coast of Canada on the way toward the Iberian peninsula, these remote volcanic islands are the westernmost bastion of Portugal in Europe.

But what you might not know is that you can fly there non-stop from Toronto in a little more time than it takes to fly to Vancouver. Hence the reason for including the Azores in our initial list of Weekend destinations.

What could I possibly do once I get there? It would be a logical question from all but the most intrepid of travellers. The islands, in particular São Miguel which is the largest of the Azores and the administrative capital, have a bounty of sites and experiences that would actually justify a much longer stay and yet, 5 days is just enough time to get to know it.

The mountains that form the backbone of the island hide massive craters with scenic lakes and striking vistas of the deep blue waters of the Atlantic. For those that so desire, we'll be walking on some of these mountains to get a feel for what it's like to be one of those little specks in the ocean. Of course volcanos leave behind more than craters

and in this case it is the thermal waters we are after.

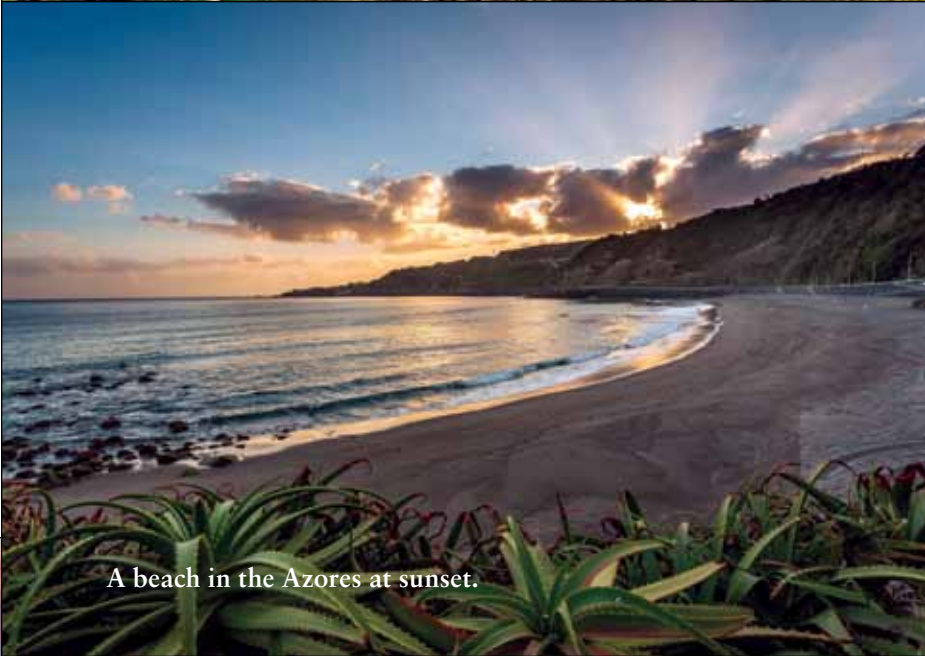
One of the many caldeiras on the island, the hot springs in the village of Furnas, just an hour's drive from the airport in Ponta Delgada, provide the perfect setting for a stay amongst the lush laurel forests of São Miguel. From here you will embark on a number of short trips taking in the tremendous vistas of the island and then returning to bask in the springs or enjoying one of the many other spa treatments that are available.

On the last day we'll tour around the whole island ending up with a final night in the main town of Ponta Delgada where you'll have a memorable farewell dinner and take in the sights before returning to Canada the following afternoon.

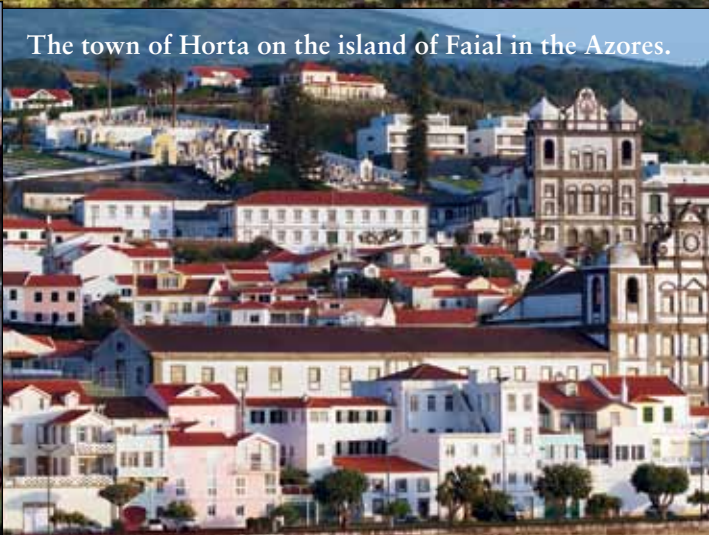
Tentative Dates March 22 - 28, 2020	
March 22	Depart Canada
March 23-27	Furnas
March 27-28	Ponta Delgada   Depart



Volcano crater with a lake on the island of Corvo in the Azores.



A beach in the Azores at sunset.



The town of Horta on the island of Faial in the Azores.



Wide angle view of volcano craters in the Azores.



# FULL LIST *of* TOURS

*Here's the current list of all Wheel & Anchor tours in 2019 and 2020.  
We're adding new tours all the time!*

Italy: North to South.  
14th October 2019 - 29th October 2019

Wheel & Anchor Weekends: Havana.  
13th November - 18th November 2019

Egypt, Israel & Jordan:  
Four Variations.  
14th January 2020 - 26th January 2020  
[sold out]

Wheel & Anchor Weekends: Havana #2  
23rd February 2020 - 28th February 2020

Wheel & Anchor Weekends: Panama  
1st March - 6th March 2020

Wheel & Anchor Weekends: The Azores  
22nd March - 28th March 2020

Austria - The Heart of Hospitality  
4th April 2020 - 17th April 2020

Austrian Spa & Wellness  
16th April 2020 - 27th April 2020

The Majestic Fjords of Norway  
30th April 2020 - 18th May 2020

Japan: Land of The Rising Sun  
(+South Korea)  
10th May 2020 - 31st May 2020

Scotland by Sea - 19th May 2020  
30th May 2020

Baltic Seafarer  
29th June to 17th July 2020

The Elbe River: Berlin to Prague  
7th - 21st September 2020

The Trans-Siberian Railway  
10th September 2020 -  
28th September 2020

Croatia & The Adriatic Coast  
September 21, 2020 - October 6, 2020

Tastes of Eastern France 30th September  
2020 - 19th October 2020

Boating the Canal du Midi  
20th October 2020 - 1st November 2020

Kangaroos & Kiwis:  
Australia & New Zealand  
October 27th - Nov 25th, 2020

South African Secrets  
18th November - 3rd December, 2020

## COMING IN 2021

Antarctica (January 2021)

Argentina & Chile (February 2021)

Southeast Asian Sojourn (March 2021)

Canal du Midi (April 2021)

Explore Caucasus: Georgia & Armenia  
(May 2021)

Bali & Indonesian Islands (May 2021)

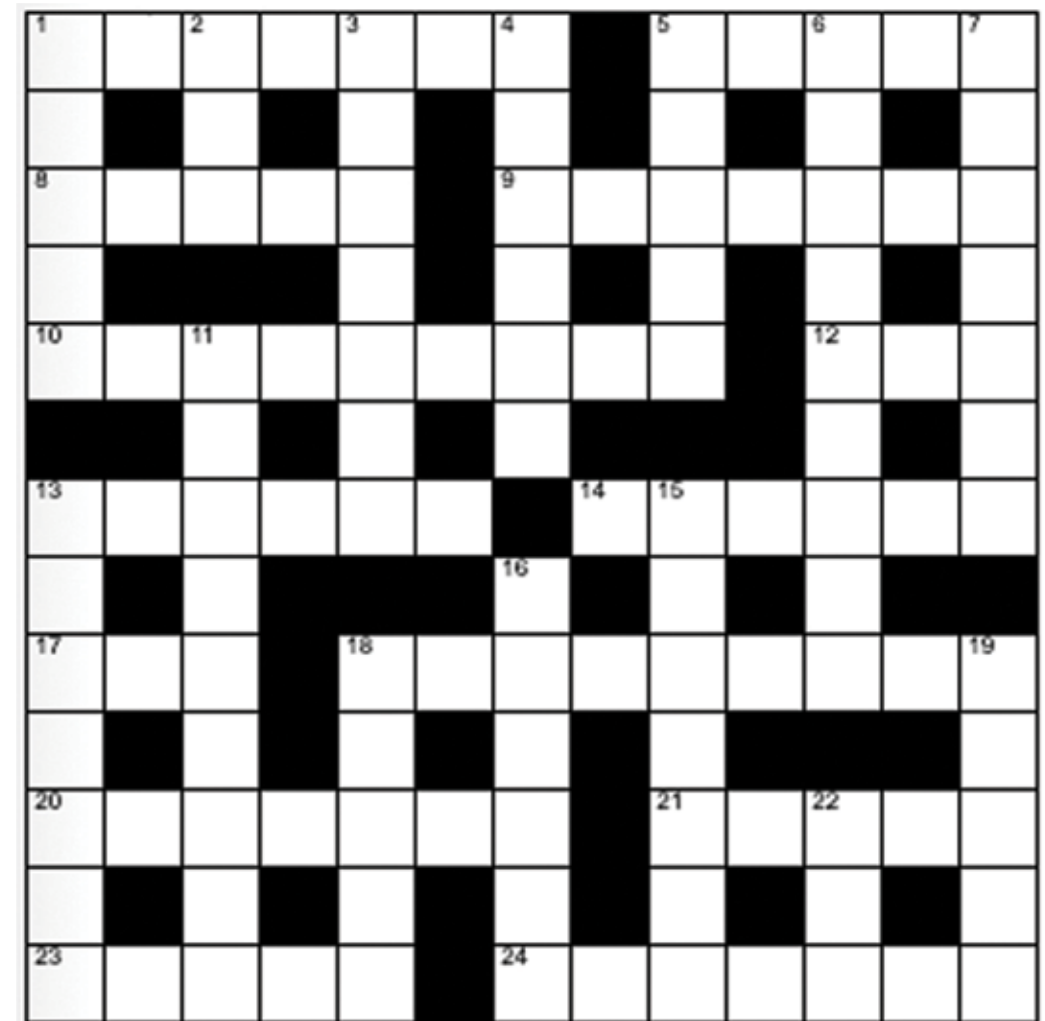
Follow the Incas: Peru (October 2021)

Stay tuned...more to come!

To get a printed version of any of these itineraries, call us at

**1-(888) 531-5101**

or visit [wheelandanchor.ca/all-tours](http://wheelandanchor.ca/all-tours)



*crossword*

### Across

1. A short novel or long short story (7)
5. Famous feat of engineering in Panama (5)
8. Adjective to describe the weather in Panama (5)
9. North African country with a Mediterranean coastline and a Saharan desert interior (7)
10. The way in which one acts or conducts oneself, especially toward others (9)
12. A major division of geological time, subdivided into eras (3)
13. Polaroid or DSLR (6)
14. The pickled roe of sturgeon or other large fish, eaten as a delicacy (6)
17. Have possession of (3)
18. One who has the title deed to a piece of land (9)
20. Nonetheless (7)
21. Home of Venice, Pisa, and Rome (5)
23. A low-growing aromatic plant of the mint family (5)
24. A thin, flat cake of batter, usually fried and turned in a pan (7)

### Down

1. Coffee company that originated in Vancouver, British Columbia (5)
2. Abbrev. found in science journals (3)
3. A period of rest or waiting before a further stage in a journey (7)
4. The longest river in South America (6)
5. A popular handmade souvenir of sorts from Cuba (5)
6. Belonging to Oslo or Bergen (9)
7. Student or trainee (7)
11. Famous author who had a home in Havana (9)
13. A handicraft in which yarn is made up into a patterned fabric by looping yarn with a hooked needle (7)
15. An inhabitant of the islands off the coast of Portugal featured in this newsletter (7)
16. Open, as a Christmas present (6)
18. An embankment built to prevent the overflow of a river (5)
19. Luxury car brand Rolls \_\_\_\_\_ (5)
22. 'I've got it!' (3)

*Find the solution on page 27.*



*Panama City*



Caribbean Paradise in Panama



# Weekend 3: Panama City

Early March 2020

Odds are if you’ve been to Panama, it’s either been on a short stopover or quick transfer on your way to South America, or perhaps you’ve cruised through its legendary canal. Always a layover or a transit point, never a destination - does Panama really deserve such a cruel fate? When winter still rages here, March seems to me the perfect time to go and find out.

Today’s interlinked global economy owes a great deal to the historically significant ‘wonder of the modern world’ that is the Panama Canal, and indeed it remains one of the most important trade routes on the planet. Now over 100 years old, it remains one of the most difficult and impressive feats of human engineering ever attempted.

Over the past 20 years, since Panama gained control over the canal and its significant revenues, the country turned its focus to attracting tourists and expats seeking to enjoy life in warmer climes. High rises sprang up along the coast in the capital and all of a sudden it became a place to go. Between the modern city, the alluring coastline and the lush countryside, Panama is a country that is ideal for sunseekers and eco-tourists alike.

With a flight time not much longer than what it takes to get between Toronto and Vancouver (let alone flying across the country), Panama is the

perfect place for a long weekend getaway (of the Wheel & Anchor variety). Undoubtedly the place to be is among the quaint streets of Casco Viejo (the old town) and if there weren’t so many things to do, you could probably spend the whole time here.

Probably the best thing about a trip to Panama are all the things that one can do that appeal to travellers of all sorts. You can satisfy your tropical ocean desire on one of the islands off the Pacific Coast - like nearby Taboga Island or the Pearl Islands. Of course transiting the Panama Canal itself is an experience not to be missed, particularly when you are on a smaller vessel surrounded by the giant container ships that pass through 24/7.

If you haven’t taken the time to discover Panama before, it’s high time to consider it.

Itinerary (Dates Tentative) March 2 - 7, 2020	
March 2	Arrive Panama
March 3	Casco Viejo & Panama City
March 4	Isla Taboga
March 5	Panama Canal
March 6	Jungle Adventure
March 7	Leisure day & depart

To get a printed version of any of these itineraries, just call us at

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[wheelandanchor.ca/all-tours](http://wheelandanchor.ca/all-tours)



Container ship in the Panama Canal



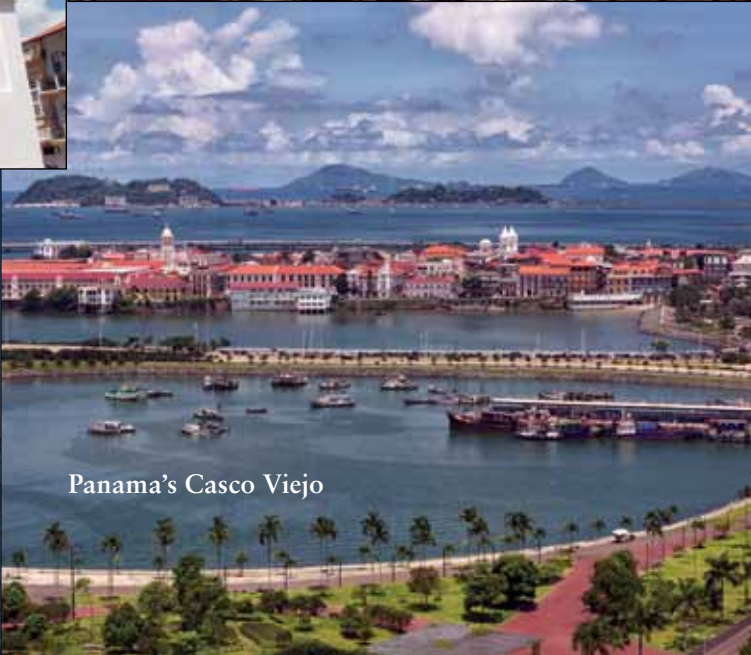
Panama City Central America Cathedral



Panama Viejo Ruins, Panama City-



Panama City



Panama’s Casco Viejo



# *Mexico City*



A Mexican altar for Day of the Dead (Día de los muertos).



# Weekend 4: Mexico City

Mid April 2020.

Most travel bringing Canadians to Mexico focuses on the beach and resort destinations of Cancun, the Greater Riviera Maya region, and Puerto Vallarta. The road less travelled but perhaps more interesting runs through Mexico City, the cultural and economic hub founded on a sign from the Gods.

I went down to check out Mexico City in the summer of 2018, when we first began to envision how these ‘Weekends’ programs might work, to see if it did indeed check all the boxes for a unique and interesting place to explore with some other travellers.

We spent our time in the trendy ‘hoods of La Roma, La Condesa, and Coyoacán, all of which were teeming with interesting architecture, hip cafes, and the energy of a young and vibrant city. Art seemed always around us, whether in the museums or reflected in the hip and swanky boutique hotels and cafes. It was cool and dry and green - much more so than I expected.

Young and vibrant was not the only energy about, as we discovered on a short trip to the holy city of Teotihuacan, or ‘The Place Where The Gods Were Created’. Here the energy was ancient and embedded in the stones of huge pyramids, built far before the Spanish and before even the Aztecs founded their empire. It was awe-inspiring in scale and a reminder how deep the nation’s spiritual and cultural roots run.

Five days in Mexico City is but a glimpse into life in the second-largest city in all of the Americas, and well worth a trip for the curious among us. History and culture, food and fun - consider the boxes all checked.

Itinerary: April 15 - 20, 2020 (Tentative dates)
April 15 - Arrive in Mexico
April 16 - La Condesa / Roma
April 17 - Teotihuacan
April 18 - Day trip to Taxco
April 19 - Xochimilco
April 20 - Relax then head home

To get a printed version of any of these itineraries, just call us at

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Palacio de Bellas Artes, a famous theatre,museum and music venue.



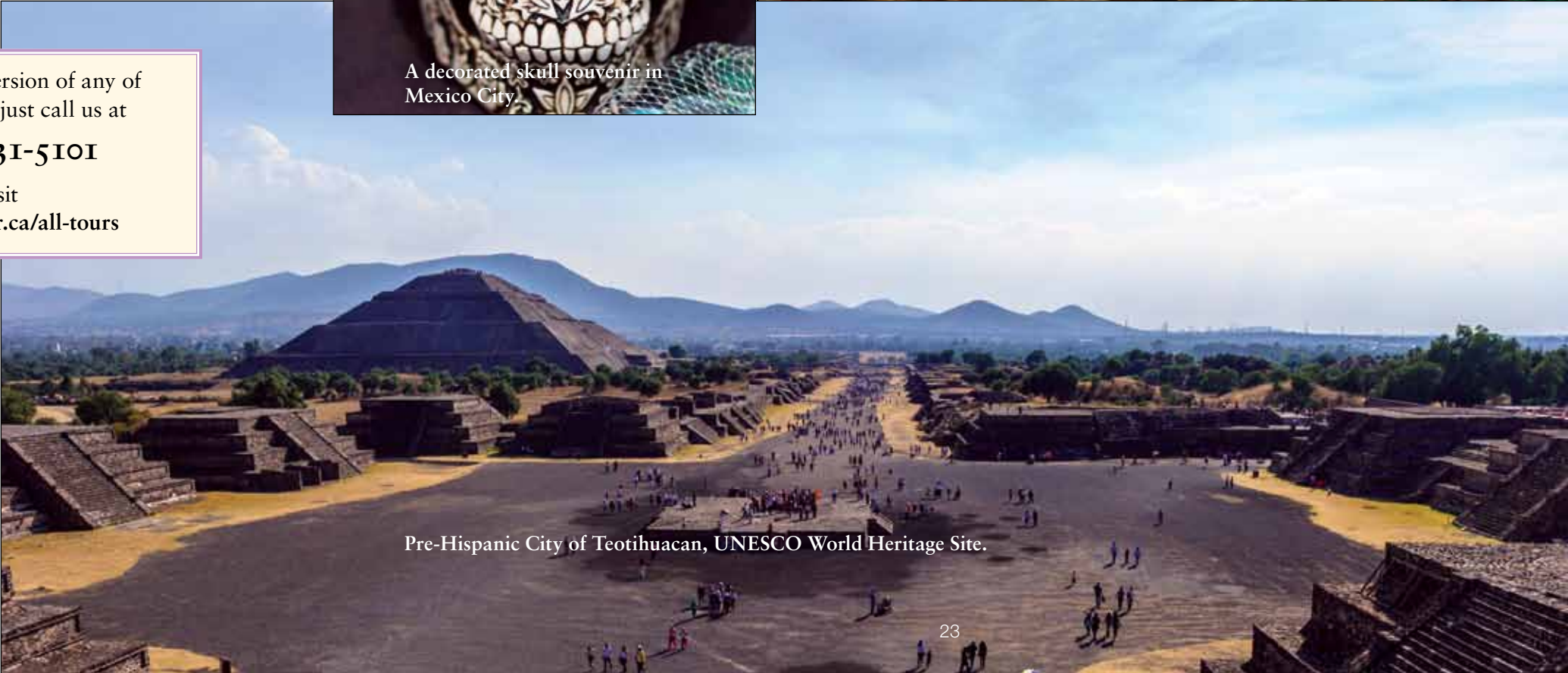
Juanita's Fajitas!



A decorated skull souvenir in Mexico City.



Fresh tacos...mmm!



Pre-Hispanic City of Teotihuacan, UNESCO World Heritage Site.



# Letters to the Editor

Dear Gordon,

I like the look of your company but I wonder about how your selection of destinations works? I really wanted to do a river cruise on the Danube because so many of our friends have done it before and raved about it. Will you be offering it sometime? I have to admit that we are relatively new travellers and so while I like the idea of all the exotic places you have, we are looking mostly at the basics.

Don and Shirley K, Nepean

\* \* \*

Dear Gordon,

I'm really excited to be a part of your community.

I have mostly travelled with bigger tour groups and, quite frankly I've generally had a good time. At the same time, I'm ready to slow down a bit as I find the pace too hectic. I do like your idea of spending more time in

each place because there never seems to be enough.

I'm a little afraid though of venturing out on my own. Will you be running a trip to Peru? I've always wanted to see Machu Picchu. Is there a place where travellers can request trip destinations?

Thanks & looking forward to meeting you,

Susan H., Brandon

\* \* \*

Dear Gordon,

I wanted to drop a short note to say I very much enjoyed the September edition of The Anchor Monthly - the photography for your cruise programs is really impressive.

I also have a question - I am an avid golfer and am wondering if there will be any golf trips at Wheel & Anchor? If there are others who golf as well of course. I winter in Florida and enjoy golfing there, but it would be fun to do something different and go with some other golfers / travellers.

Thanks & looking forward to the next edition,

David G., NS

\* \* \*

Dear Gordon,

I have just returned from a week in Tuscany with friends and had a marvelous time. As usual a week is not nearly enough - I'd like to spend a month there at the very least. This was my first time to Italy and I am already keen to go back. Will you be running the same Italy trip again next year? I'm particularly interested in spending some time in the lakes as I have not been there yet.

Many thanks,

Tim H., Ottawa



A pile of authentic Cuban cigars.

Our events are exclusive to our Wheel and Anchor members and their guests. Have the opportunity to mix and mingle with new friends and members. Each event offers something special, including a feature presentation of future Wheel and Anchor tours. Come get the latest, share your tales, and learn something new!

## Events

Please visit the events page of our website for all upcoming events, and if you don't see one in your area, reach out and we'll get one set up!

## Webinars

- October 3 - Baltic Seafarer
- October 10 - Wheel & Anchor Weekends: The Azores
- October 17: The Mekong River
- October 24: Antarctica

Please visit [wheelandanchor.ca/webinars/](http://wheelandanchor.ca/webinars/) for all upcoming webinars! New ones added regularly.

Don't see an event in your area? Let's set one up! Call us at  
**1-(888) 531-5101**  
or email  
[events@wheelandanchor.ca](mailto:events@wheelandanchor.ca)



upcoming events and webinars



# Rebuilding The Fifties:

## HOW HAVANA'S CLASSIC CARS BECAME UNIQUELY CUBAN

Mike Sowdon

AFTER THE TENTH CLASSIC AMERICAN CAR IN A ROW CRUISES PAST, YOU KNOW SOMETHING'S GOING ON.

This is part of Havana's otherwordly vibe. Yes, you know about Cuba's turbulent history in relation to its superpower neighbour to the west - and its Communist links to another superpower on the other side of the world. You know it has a reputation for being "old-school cool"...but you didn't know it would feel like a scene from *Back To The Future*.

The whole of Cuba can feel like visiting another world - somehow avoiding to feel touristy nor backwaterny at the same time, with a coastline ranging from classic Caribbean beaches (bordering on one of the deepest sea trenches on the planet) to rocky cliffs, and an interior featuring colossal savannas and plains, and a long ridge of mountains to the southeast of the island. "Diverse" doesn't get close.

And then there's Havana, the capital, made of 2.1 million people living in the same place where Spanish explorers first came ashore and conquered (read: terrorised and largely exterminated) the Taíno natives, turning Cuba into a waypoint on a Spanish invasion of Central America.



(Happily many Taino fled to the interior and survived - and now Taíno culture is making a quiet comeback, thanks to the post-Soviet-supported Cuban government turning to indigenous knowledge of traditional farming and natural medicines after the USSR collapsed in 1991.)

Havana feels frozen in time - and it's largely down to the cars.

There's an unforgivably lazy way to understand Havana's classic car obsession. You simply give in to some of the stereotypes that plague Cuban tourism. "Oh, it's because they're poor. Oh, this is what happens when the United States embargoes your entire country. Oh, life here must be hard."

The reality is nowhere near that simple. Havana, like Cuba in general, is slowly on the up. The country's GDP has been increasing every single year since 1970. Cuba has high standards of human development, one of the highest

literacy rates in the world, and a healthcare system that is underfunded but available to all citizens.

At the same time, wages remain comparatively low (the average salary in a state-run company is \$20 a month) and shortages of goods are commonplace - but the country is certainly not stuck in the 1950s.

Those cars, on the other hand...

There are Chevrolets, Pontiacs, Buicks, Plymouths, Fords and Dodges, all with that "Greased Lightning" feel: lots of polished chrome, bright colours, analogue dashboards with big dials, oversized padded-leather steering wheels, and enormous tail-fins at the back.

With around 60,000 classic American models driving around Cuba right now (around half of which date from the 50s, the rest from earlier), it lives up to its nickname as "one great big car show".

You'll also see a lot of non-American models, particularly sturdy-looking Ladas, Geelys from China, French Citroens and Japanese Nissans - usually decades-old models.

The other thing that's weird is that if you really know your cars, these will look...a little strange.

## Crossword answers. (No peeking!)



Cuba libre with lime

N	O	V	E	L	L	A		C	A	N	A	L
A		O		A		M		I		O		E
B	A	L	M	Y				A	L	G	E	R
O						O		Z		A		W
B	E	H	A	V	I	O	U	R		E	O	N
		E		E			N			G		E
C	A	M	E	R	A			C	A	V	I	A
R		I					U	Z		A		
O	W	N			L	A	N	D	O	W	N	E
C		G		E		W		R				O
H	O	W	E	V	E	R			I	T	A	L
E		A		E				A		A	H	C
T	H	Y	M	E				P	A	N	C	A

You'll look round the back of a Chevy and see an exhaust that belongs somewhere entirely different. Open up a 1956 Ford Fairlane and you might find a Toyota engine. Car parts may appear with strange dimensions, welded together seamlessly into something you'd never see on a factory floor.

Where modern cars are too expensive to buy and older models are far too precious to ditch, Cuba's mechanics have become experts in patching up cars until they're in working order again. A mechanic can charge \$400-500 to repair a car into good working order - which presents a good income for those with the skills and access to parts, and is helping to fuel entrepreneurship in Cuba's homegrown auto service industry.

Most times, it's junked Russian cars (usually Ladas and Volgas) that provide the major body parts that can be Frankensteined into new life elsewhere, and the join is frequently seamless. Under the hood, a Soviet-era engine may be running on diesel and attached to a Japanese transmission system - but from the

outside, that car may look like an all-American swankmobile straight out of the Grease era.

Classic cars may be big business for mechanics, but their popularity isn't just down to availability. If you're looking for a tour of the streets of Havana, you'll have your pick from rows of gorgeous cars lined up anywhere that tourists disembark, their drivers offering to take you exploring for an hourly fee of around \$30-\$50 in local money.

(A quick word about that money: Cuba is a dual-currency country, with convertible pesos (CUC) and Cuban pesos (CUP) available. The CUC is tied to the US Dollar (1:1), while the CUP is currently around 25 to one dollar - and in practice, they're both called "the Cuban peso". Learn the difference if you don't want to get severely short-changed!)

The taxis, too, are mostly converted classic cars. If you want a good story, ask your driver about the history of his car - it's bound to be absolutely fascinating, and something of a labour of love. It'll also be a story about Cuba: once a

car arrives in Cuba, it stays there. A law from 2010 forbids foreigners from exporting Cuban cars, including the classics so lovingly restored to serve tourism.

It's not clear how long things will be like this. Every year, it's getting a little harder to patch up Cuba's fleet of classic rides, using parts that remain difficult (or impossible) to import - and in 2016, after four months of negotiations with the government, a US-market car was imported into Cuba for the first time in 58 years (an Infiniti Q60, owned by the company's Cuban-American global director of design). Factor in the changing face of the US's diplomatic relations with Cuba (thawing under Obama, frostier again under the Trump administration) and it's hard to know what's next for Cuba's fleet of classic cars.

But for now, if you find yourself in Havana, head to the cruise terminal or capitol building to grab some wheels, and see the streets from the back seat of a bubblegum-coloured convertible from another era.

It's quite the ride. ☸



*In advance of our trip to Havana for the city's 500th birthday celebration, I called up Entrevista Sr. Abel Exposito to ask about the history of cigars in Cuba and how they became synonymous with the island nation. Mr. Abel Exposito worked for 19 years in the house of Partagas in Havana from 1993 to 2012, after having studied in the*

*agricultural field where he became interested in tobacco production. From there his career in the Cuban culture transcended borders as he participated in international events attracting new customers, to the point of receiving recognition for being the first Cuban to be a tobacco ambassador for the country.*

# Entrevista Sr. Abel Exposito & Cuban Cigars

**GD: Tell us about the history of cigars and Cuba.**

AE: Tobacco has been around for years, since Aboriginal times. The plant as such is an agricultural product that was already cultivated on the side by the peasantry. The peasants worked the land to grow tobacco.

Tobacco is produced in several countries of the world. In the case of the Central and South America, tobacco is grown in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Honduras, Mexico and a few other countries.

The Cuban cigar is considered the best in the world, which is not only said by the Cubans but by the competition, primarily due to two reasons. The first is the wisdom of the farmers, who understand Cuba's soil, and the second is the excellent climate that makes conditions for good tobacco.

The cigars in Cuba were produced manually in small factories by peasants until in 1860. The first factory to have a renowned brand was Partagas. Partagas is the oldest tobacco factory and is still maintained today in Havana.

**GD: What kind of cigars did Castro and Guevara like? Did they influence the culture / production of cigars in Cuba? Who has had the greatest influence on cigar culture in Cuba?**

AE: Che Guevara smoked any tobacco in the Sierra Maestra. Then, he smoked either a Partagás or an H. Upmann several times a day.

Before, there were no representative brands of Cuban tobacco, and so in the 60's Fidel Castro made a personal effort to dedicate an area of El Laguito to begin allocating cigars as gifts, due to the US commercial blockade at that time. Since we were unable to commercially export, he dedicated himself to giving tobacco gifts to national and foreign politicians and diplomats.

Fidel Castro himself smoked Laguito 1 at night, Laguito 2 at lunch and a Laguito 3 during breakfast. Once the

Cohiba tobacco brand factory was inaugurated, he made them his private label.

**GD: How has the American embargo affected the cigar industry?**

AE: The first country to which Cuban cigars were exported was the USA, but after the embargo was imposed in 1960, European markets that were ex-socialist and communist countries were sought. In those days there was not so much demand from these countries, because tobacco culture was not very well established. As it happens, Canada would actually be the first capitalist country to be interested in importing Cuban cigars.

**GD: Do Cuban people smoke cigars or is it mostly just an export?**

AE: Cubans like to smoke, but the majority of tobacco production is for export. The Cubans smoke cheaper, lower quality cigars, while the best cigars are destined for export and for Cubans of greater purchasing power, such as entrepreneurs and business owners.

**GD: What's the difference between hand-rolled and machine rolled cigars?**

AE: Handmade cigars are the best, because the machine made ones are made with the leftovers from the handmade production. The machine made ones are still good, but the quality of the tobacco and production is much better in handmade ones.

**GD: Do you have any tips for people buying cigars in Cuba to take home?**

AE: Do not buy in the streets, as there are many fake cigars.



Go to commercial establishments in the city center such as La Casa del Habano or Melia Habana.

It is also recommended to start with small and thin cigars, and after a couple of months increase to medium to large size if you're enjoying them. Ultimately, it depends on the taste of the smoker.

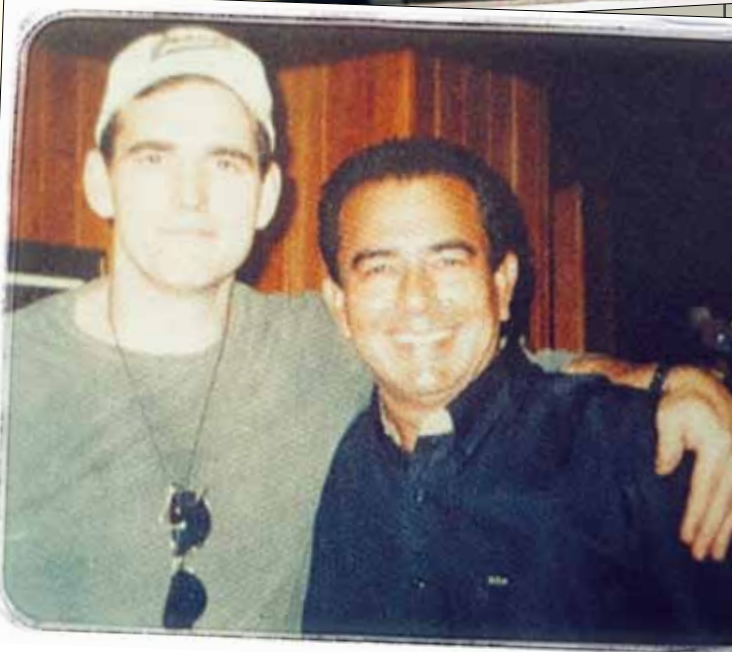
**GD: What's the most interesting story you have about cigars?**

AE: We have had a great many Hollywood actors visit the Partagás factory and the House of Habana. The film director Steven Spielberg accompanied Fidel Castro Ruz in November 2002 in the welcome of one of the inaugural events of the house. On that occasion both signed three boxes with special cigars that were auctioned to raise funds for the public health of Cuba.

In 1995, I attended a gala that Habana house did in the Four Seasons of Toronto and actress Whoopi Goldberg bought a box of 50 Trinidad Founders for \$9,000. I had the honor of being in a suite next to her. Also present were Cristy Alley, Joe Pantoliano, among other figures too.

Other celebrities who have come for cigars include: Matt Dillon, Jack Nicholson, Gerard Depardieu, Joe Pantoliano, Michael Keaton, Benicio Del Toro, Jeremy Irons, Michael Douglas, and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

*If you'd like to meet Mr. Abel and visit his restaurant, it is the Cigar Bar Casa Abel Restaurant in San Lázaro 319 corner San Nicolás in Havana. It serves both Cuban and international food, and has a terrace overlooking the city and the sea. He also recommends another bar where you can eat tapas or light things and smoke cigars. It has both a smokers lounge and a wine cellar, and tobacco and Cuban rum pairings are made there, and there conferences are given on the agricultural and industrial tobacco process.* ☼







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