Before CASTRO

When Cuba was a Tropical Playground

PETER MORUZZI

Through vintage and contemporary photographs, brochures, and artifacts evocative of time and place, Havana Before Castro tells the story of the city that was the most exotic destination for Americans during the forty years between World War I and Castro's revolution.

See how Havana evolved from Prohibition haven and rich man’s playground to a heady blend of glittering nightclubs, outrageous cabarets, all-night bars, and backstreet brothels.

Visit Havana’s seamy Shanghai Theatre as well as its glamorous Tropicana, roam the stately Hotel Sevilla-Biltmore and ultramodern Habana Hilton.

Savor a daiquiri at La Floridita (one of Hemingway’s favorite watering holes), rub elbows with movie stars at Sloppy Joe’s bar, and learn why Cuban cigars remain the world’s most highly prized.

Celebrate the influence of Cuban music on American popular culture—the rumba, mambo, cha-cha-cha, and salsa—from its earliest stars such as Xavier Cugat and Desi Arnaz to modern acts like the Buena Vista Social Club.

Celebrate the city’s architectural heritage, a Havana Modernism unique to Cuba’s topography and climate.

Follow the parade of corrupt presidents who, along with American mobsters such as Meyer Lansky, welcomed the mass tourism that led to Havana becoming a tropical Vegas swirling in a haze of rum and cigars, backed by a conga beat.

www.HavanaBeforeCastro.com

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“Havana at night is a glittering jewel set in the black velvet of the Caribbean. She is a seductive sorceress exuding an essence of warmth and indulgence and delicious lethargy. Her streets throb with a dark and pulsating beat. The air is a heavy, aphrodisiacal wine that dissolves the inhibitions and dissipates restraint. The tourist is caught in a heady torrent of rich laughter and swept along in swirling freshetts of gaiety. The music is everywhere. Time is an endless round of dark rum and rhumba, light rum and marimbas, for Havana is the mistress of pleasure, the lush and opulent goddess of delights.”

—Ja y Mallin, Cabaret Quarterly, 1956

“Everything’s legal in Havana”

—Jim Wormold, protagonist of Graham Greene’s Our Man in Havana, 1959
Tropicana

A Sunset with the Stars

Tropicana and its unique blend of entertainment and atmosphere has become synonymous with Havana's nightlife. The venue is known for its lavish performances and luxurious setting, offering a mix of dance, music, and acrobatics that attract both locals and tourists. The Tropicana's show is a spectacle of lights and colors, combining traditional Cuban music with international influences. The venue has been a symbol of Havana's cultural and social life, hosting various important events and performances.

New Year's 1958 and Beyond

On December 31, 1958, the revolutionary victory in Cuba was celebrated across the island with joy and enthusiasm. The new year brought with it hope and change, as the country began to transition from a dictatorship to a socialist state. Fidel Castro, seen in the image, was a key figure in this transformation, leading the revolution and becoming the country's领袖. The celebration of New Year's in Cuba was marked by music, dance, and festivity, reflecting the spirit of resistance and the desire for a better future.

In 1958, the Tropicana was still a place of entertainment and glamour, hosting dances and performances. The venue played a role in the cultural life of Havana, offering a space for social gatherings and celebrations. The Tropicana was a symbol of the city's vibrant nightlife and a beacon of excitement for visitors and locals alike.