

# SUN TRAVEL

## CHRISTMAS ON ITS WAY: Niagara Falls light fest

The Ontario Power Generation Winter Festival of Lights opens this weekend in Niagara Falls. The annual 8-km self drive illumination route continues through Jan. 31. This year's event also includes laser light shows, light projections and weekly fireworks. See [niagarafallstourism.com/events/winter-festival-of-lights](http://niagarafallstourism.com/events/winter-festival-of-lights) for details.



# Another side of Cuba

## Celestyal Cruises visit places many tourists never go

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**A**T SEA NEAR CUBA — In the same year that a U.S. President visited for the first time since 1959 and the Rolling Stones played for the first time ever, I also had my maiden voyage to Cuba on my first ever cruise.

Coincidence? I don't think so.

The arrival of Barack Obama and the British bad boy rockers within weeks of each other earlier this year signalled a new era for the Communist-ruled Caribbean Island.

On the tourism side, new hotels are under construction and Greece-based Celestyal Cruises announced that its seasonal cruises, which circumnavigate the island, will now operate year round.

Here's how a week aboard the *Celestyal Crystal* — a mid-size (1,200 passengers), 10 deck ship — went for yours truly as I joined a merry band of 17 Canadian and American journalists for plenty of sun, ocean and seeing the sights in four ports of call.

### DAY 1

Fly to Montego Bay, Jamaica, and shuttle to the

*Celestyal Crystal* docked about 20 minutes away. Settle into my balcony cabin (totally worth it) on deck six aft (the very back of the ship). Attend the mandatory muster drill, then meet my fellow journos for pre-dinner drinks with the Greek captain at Horizons Bar (deck nine, also the disco). Dine at the Olympus restaurant, which becomes our usual place and where I have my first Cuban beer — a Bucanero. Smooth sailing overnight.

### DAY 2

Every morning we are greeted by the dulcet tones of Danny, the delightful cruise director, making announcements over the P.A. system. His bouncy Transylvanian accent makes "snorkelling" sound like Count Chocula has taken up the underwater sport.

My daily pick for breakfast is the Leda Buffet on deck nine, where I can grab a quick coffee (Nescafe with milk on ice!), yogurt and fruit.

We arrive at our first stop — Santiago de Cuba, Cuba's second largest city. As we disembark, we are immediately greeted by musicians who play for us (the first of many).

Our day of exploring the



historical city starts with Castillo de San Pedro de la Roca — a UNESCO World Heritage Site built in the mid-1600s to protect the coast from pirates. It offers panoramic views and a seemingly impromptu a capella musical performance in the castle chapel by an all female group called Vidas.

When we leave, we have our first group Mojitos before heading downtown to Cespedes Square, where we get our first glimpse of classic American cars from the 1950s, an outdoor market,

cigar-rolling in action, and the main shopping street.

We also visit Moncada Barracks and look at bullet holes still visible from a failed rebel attack led by Fidel Castro in 1953, before the 1959 Cuban Revolution, and the Santa Ifigenia Cemetery to witness the changing of the guard and elaborate gravesites of Cuban luminaries including members of the Bacardi family.

### DAY 3

We're "at sea" en route to Havana so we book spa treat-

ments, take part in some music lessons on offer (one colleague plays the bongos so enthusiastically he suffers a minor finger injury and has to have his wedding ring removed using Vaseline and dental floss) and leisurely enjoy the ocean views.

At night, we've taken to meeting on deck five at the Thalassa Terrace bar (named for the hot tub right in the middle). It's at the back of the ship and we can drink and talk under the stars while at sea. One of my fel-

Sailing into Havana early in the morning is a highlight of a Cuba cruise aboard the *Celestyal Crystal*. One of many Mojitos enjoyed on the cruise, top. View from Castillo de San Pedro de la Roca, left. The ancient fortress once protected Santiago de Cuba from pirates.

low journos describes cruising as "your brain catching up with your body," which is an apt description.

### DAY 4

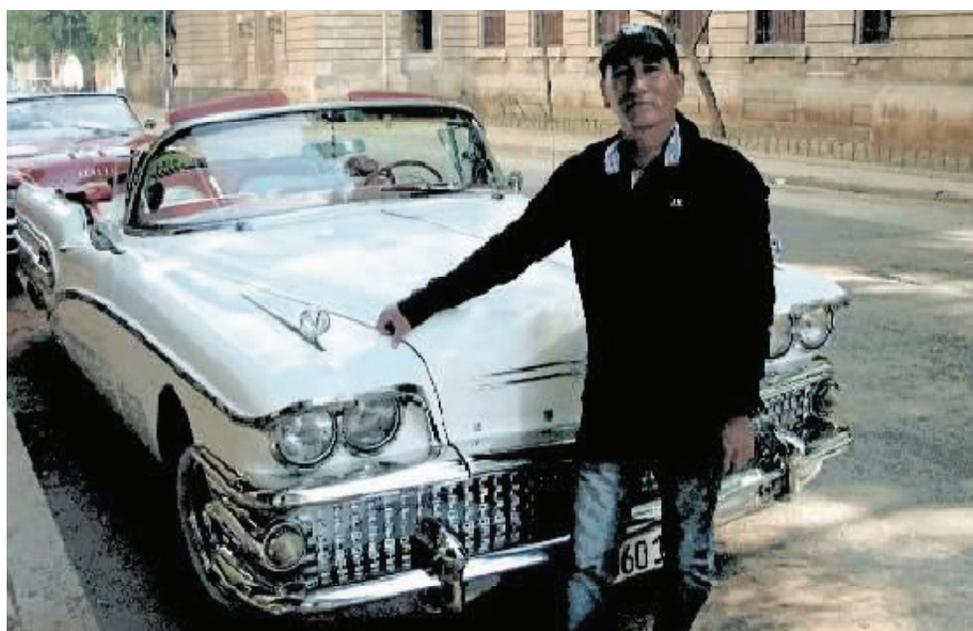
It's hard to describe the feeling of arriving in Havana by sea. It's pretty exciting, especially the first time and when a fleet of classic convertibles are waiting to take your party for a spin to discover the city and cruise along the famed Malecon (sea wall.)

I choose a white '58 Buick.

There are also stops at Central Park (great for people watching), Revolution Square, the famed Hotel Nacional, and La Floridita bar (the home of the daiquiri includes a barside statue of patron Ernest Hemingway).

On our own we venture on foot to another Hemingway haunt, the '20-era Ambos Mundos hotel, where the

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Clockwise from top left: Passengers from *Celestyal Crystal* arrive by tender boats for a beach day at Maria La Gorda, one of four ports of call on a cruise around Cuba. There is music on every corner in Old Havana. Travel writer Doug Cooke enjoys a beer at the bar in Havana's Hotel Nacional. In its heyday, the iconic hotel hosted celebrities, world leaders, royalty — and a mobster or two. The enormous statue of war hero Antonio Maceo Grajales in Santiago de Cuba's Revolution Square is the largest in the region. Your chariot awaits: A driver-guide takes guests from the *Crystal* for a spin around Havana in a classic '58 Buick convertible.

writer holed up in room 511 (now a museum). We also check out the rooftop bar.

After dinner aboard the ship, we return to Havana for a visit to the legendary Tropicana Cabaret. The city's biggest nightclub dates back to 1939 and features more than 200 crazily outfitted dancers and singers (think chandeliers as headgear).

The men of our group take it upon themselves to drink *all* of the Havana Club rum provided at our long tables and when we return to the *Crystal*, it's disco time. All I will say is there *may* have been some throwing of shoes and dancing on tables.

#### DAY 5

We check out more of Old Havana, including Plaza Vieja, followed by lunch at

the Atelier-Restaurante Paladar, a restaurant in a private mansion, before we sadly sail away from Havana. We all could have spent more time in this fascinating stuck-in-time city, where you can hear street musicians play on every corner and the architecture spans the 16th to 19th centuries.

(Dining tip: Paladares are quite common in Cuba, but wherever you dine, try the pork dish.)

#### DAY 6

After anchoring offshore, we leave the ship on tender boats to explore our third stop — gorgeous Maria La Gorda. We are given the option of diving, snorkelling or swimming in the beautiful blue water, which is teeming with fish, or just relax-

ing on the palm-tree laden beach and enjoying barbecue and cocktails. Chill time.

#### DAY 7

Our final port of call is Cienfuegos, where the majority of our group take a two-hour bus trip inland to Trinidad. Due to a sore throat, I opt for a low-key stay in Cienfuegos — often called the Pearl of the South — and after coffee in the quaint square full of galleries and restaurants, I hire a bicycle taxi to take me to the nearby beaches, where I swim with the locals.

#### DAY 8

We arrive back at Montego Bay for the flight home, our Cuban adventure sadly over.

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## NEED TO KNOW

### SHIP TO SHORE

Celestyal Cruises has just launched year-round Cuba cruises through December 2017. There are weekly departures every Friday from Montego Bay and every Monday from Havana. Prices vary depending on departure date and cabin selected. In addition to included excursions, optional excursions are offered for a fee. For in, contact 1-855-364-4999, celestyalcruises.com or yourcubacruiase.com.

### MONEY MATTERS

Tourist currency known as CUC (Cuban convertible peso, the locals call it Monopoly money) is available at exchange locations at places the ship docks. Currently \$100 will get you \$75 CUC.

### MEDS

Common medications are not always easily available in Cuba so stock up on things like Advil, Gravol, Imodium and echinacea.

### HEADS UP

Cruise lines work hard to prevent the spread of germs such as norovirus in close quarters. On the final day of our trip there was a temperature check of each passenger leaving the ship.

### POST CRUISE

For a week after the cruise, I felt like I was walking sideways. I was told this was normal after having travelled at the back of the ship for a week. Middle cabins experience less motion.