

RESORT REPORT: MELIÁ CUBA • FROM THE TOP OF MACHU PICCHU • A TASTE OF LAS VEGAS

CANADIAN *Traveller*

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CUBA

with eyes wide open

From the white sand beaches of Varadero to the culture and history of Havana, there is no shortage of things to do in Cuba. Canadian Traveller's **JOHANNA READ** shares her complementary experiences at **Paradisus Princesa del Mar** and **Meliá Habana**, where she ventured to enjoy equal parts relaxation and stimulation, though the outcome at each might not be exactly as one would expect.



I'VE BEEN DREAMING OF THE SOFT white sand of Cuba for months. It's been 20 years since my last visit, though I remember it like it was yesterday – the details of the pristine beaches still sharp in my mind. I crave stretching out in that sand with the waves tickling my feet while my face absorbs the sun's warmth.

I'm tired and very much looking forward to taking a break. But I know it isn't just a rest that will put me back on track; I need a little inspiration to go with my relaxation.

So, my Cuba trip will include both a stay on the long sandy peninsula of Varadero as well as a quick stop in the cultural capital of Havana.



L to R: Paradisus Princesa del Mar beach; Meliá Marina Varadero's scuba diving program.

By the time I board my flight from Vancouver, I'm exhausted; too exhausted to sleep for the entire six-hour flight. However, as we descend over the perfect blue of the Caribbean Sea, I begin to feel more awake.

My hotel is Paradisus Princesa del Mar, an adults-only resort almost at the tip of Varadero just past an ecological reserve. I wilt a little when the receptionist tells me I'm in the wrong place; it turns out I need to check in at a separate area of the resort. It's not too much hassle though; a golf cart whisks me to the exclusive Royal Service section. Things are starting to look up.

They really roll out the welcome mat at Royal Service check-in; one person greets me by name while another offers me a cool towel and a drink. My butler (yes, butler!), Miguel, arrives before I've finished the very brief paperwork. I can already tell that this Cuban all-inclusive experience is going to be very different.

As he escorts me to my suite, Miguel explains all the Royal Service extras that come with staying in this exclusive hotel-within-a-hotel. I catch that he's at my beck and call for the duration of my stay, but get distracted when he offers to unpack my bag for me, weighing the convenience

of it with my incessant urge to lay down. Then he shows me my patio and the decision is made; what I really need is to jump into that pool. Miguel bows slightly when I tell him I'm all set, confirms the time for my dinner reservation and leaves the room. I ransack my bag for my bathing suit.

The only thing between the glass patio doors of my suite and the water is one of those dreamy beach beds you see in movies, its slips of white curtains billowing in the breeze. The pool – a long, meandering one that stretches past other swim-up suites like mine – beckons. Overlooking the bed for now, I plunge into the water. While I'm usually a beach person, this feels just about perfect. I slowly swim from one end to the other, listening to the breeze rustle through the palm fronds around me and feel the kinks in my shoulders start to relax. I end the day with a butler-drawn soak in my giant jetted bathtub and, finally, fall asleep.

After my dream breakfast of Cuban coffee, pineapple and mango (and a little made-to-order French toast), it's onward to the beach. While I bring my snorkel, I'm told a recent storm has left the water too choppy to see much. No matter; it's the feeling of being gently rocked by the waves that I covet.

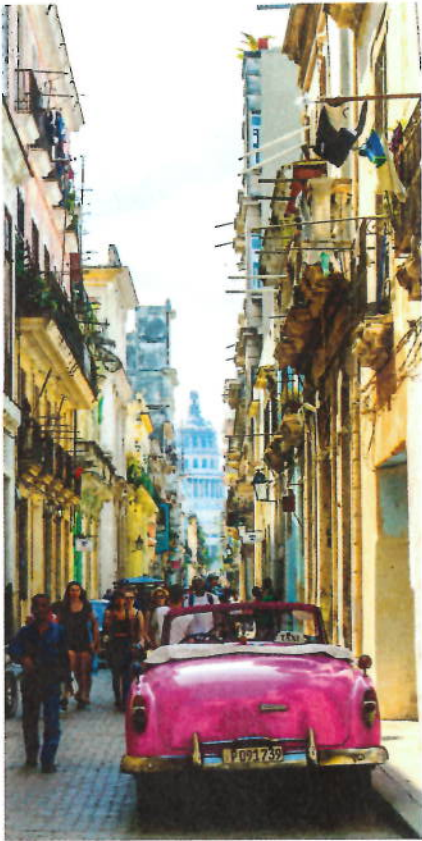
When my fingers start to prune, I return to solid ground. A waiter points to curtained Balinese beds not far from the shore and offers to unfurl towels. I accept his suggestion of a *canchánchara* (a marvelous concoction of sugar cane spirit, honey and lemon juice on ice) and opt to flop down in the sand instead. It's even softer than I remember it.

The Royal Service beach is almost empty, save for a few couples soaking up the sun and enjoying the tranquility; this peace and quiet alone is worth the upgrade. I try to copy the sunbathers around me by pulling my hat over my eyes, though sleep doesn't seem to be in the cards for me. The good news is that relaxation beckons elsewhere, thanks to a date I have booked at the spa.

Meliá's YHI Spa is an oasis of calm. I feel taller as I walk away from my treatment, and as much as I'd like to rest my eyes, I head back to the beach for another swim.

All of this relaxation is just what I've needed, but I eventually decide to shake things up a bit by taking advantage of Paradisus' scuba diving program. Every Paradisus guest can enjoy a free one-tank dive every day of their stay, and having some experience, I jump at the chance.

Because I'm not travelling with a fellow diver, I feel a bit nervous about the excursion but my anxiety is quickly relieved when I meet Bill from Calgary. He's hanging-out in the lobby as I am, and caught me gingerly assessing who else might be waiting for the bus to the marina. He tells me that he's been diving every day this week, reassures me that my camera will stay safe and dry on board, and



Havana, unplugged

For those interested in spending more time exploring Havana, here are a few popular things to do & see:

- Visit museums that specialize in the arts, sciences and history. These include: the Arms Museum, Literacy Museum, Jose Marti Birthplace, Museum of the City of Havana, Museum of Colonial Art, Museum of Decorative Arts, Museum of Natural Sciences, Museum of the People's Struggle, Museum of the Revolution, Napoleonic Museum, National Museum of Fine Arts, Numismatic Museum, Postal Museum.
- Just the same, a visit to any of Havana's churches is a must-do. A few options include: Havana Cathedral; Jesus de Miramar Church; La Merced; San Antonio de Padua; San Juan de Letran; or Santa Rita.
- Tour Lenin Park and make time to stroll through the Amphitheatre, Aquarium, Rodeo, Art Gallery and similar attractions.
- Plan a visit to the Cigar Factory, where you can gawk at the experts as they hand-roll the world-famous Havana cigars.
- About six kilometres east of Havana you'll find Cojima, the colourful fishing village where Nobel laureate Ernest Hemingway kept his boat, the *Pilar*, and found material for many of his stories.
- For nightlife lovers, there's no shortage of entertainment to enjoy. For example, the world-famous Tropicana Nightclub offers an extravagant show of colour and catchy rhythm provided by Cuban orchestras in its outdoor ballroom. Or, opt for a night of cabaret: enjoy a show and dancing at the Capri, Caribe, Copa or Parisien cabarets – all in the heart of modern Havana.



Top: Street life in the Old Havana. Bottom: Paradisus Princesa del Mar.

is excited to report that wrecks we might visit include a destroyer and a tugboat with four jeeps.

After arriving at Meliá Marina Varadero (the resort where the dive shop is located), we're soon speeding out over the waves to the dive site. I'm amazed at the abundance of life and more amazed still when Bill points to something I've never seen on a dive before: lobster. Not just any lobster – massive lobster. Surprisingly, morays are stretched out on the sand, too. There is so much unusual sea life here that I almost don't notice the corals and colourful fish.

Having enjoyed a balance of activity and relaxation in Varadero, I'm reluctant to leave, however curious I am to see Havana.

I'd read about the Necrópolis Cristóbal Colón, an open-air museum and one of the most famous cemeteries in all of Latin America. I want to see how it compares to Buenos Aires' Recoleta Cemetery, which I'd visited a few months before. I'm anxious to see the Museo de la Revolución in the former presidential palace, Old Havana's UNESCO buildings and El Morro Castle. I want to hear musicians from the Buena Vista Social Club, some of whom still play in Havana's bars. I aspire to replicate photos I've seen of wrinkled grandparents with fat cigars clenched between their teeth. I want to ask them about life in Cuba and what they think of us tourists.

Arriving at Meliá Habana, along Havana's western coast, my first priority is lunch. I'm escorted up to The Level, similar to Paradisus Royal Service, in that it's a hotel within a hotel, with exclusive and personalized services. The restaurant does not disappoint. The food is light and flavourful, and for a moment, I feel more like I'm in the Mediterranean than the Caribbean.

I head out for a walk, deciding to start with Havana's famous Malecón. This seven-kilometre roadway next to the sea is famous for its views and the classic cars cruising along it. Though the driver who brought me from Varadero to Havana complained about the traffic jams in the capital, I find none. In fact, the Malecón thoroughfare is so empty that it's effortless to photograph the candy-coloured Chevy Bel Airs and Oldsmobile coupes framed against Cuba's brilliant blue sky. They seem like models strutting their way toward me on the catwalk as my camera clicks away.

Perhaps it's the heat, the two desserts I enjoyed with lunch or maybe I used up all my energy in the water in Varadero; I drag myself back to the hotel. When relaxation was all around me, I couldn't sit still. Now that I'm surrounded by culture and history, all I want to do is lounge by the pool.

And what a pool it is; Meliá Habana has the biggest pool in the entire country. You can't even see one end from the other. Flowing around tropical gardens, it changes from a pond to a river and then into a lake with islands. There are areas of shade and areas of sun, and perfect palm trees.

Havana's sites will have to wait for my next visit. A chaise longue is calling me and I'm finally ready for that nap. **11**

Where to stay

WITH YOUR SIGNIFICANT OTHER:

VARADERO: Opt for Meliá Las Americas (with direct access to Varadero Golf Club) or the Royal Service at Paradisus Princesa del Mar. No kids allowed at these properties (both are 18-plus) so you will enjoy peace and tranquility, sans interruption.

HAVANA: Both Meliá Habana or Meliá Cohiba are perfect for romantic getaways in Cuba's capital, both well-appointed and ideally located. To take your vacation experience up a notch, invest in an upgrade to The Level for concierge service, access to a VIP bar lounge, priority in the reservations of any hotel service, exclusive facilities and specially decorated rooms.

WITH YOUR FAMILY:

VARADERO: You can't go wrong with the Paradisus Varadero, where Family Concierge service is available for extra attention and luxe. At Meliá Marina Varadero, the choice is yours: a traditional hotel room with all-inclusive amenities, or an apartment rental (also available in all-inclusive) for more space and flexibility. Another good option is Meliá Peninsula Varadero, located in an ecological reserve, which makes for a unique experience. This property also has a dedicated family section.

HAVANA: For a comfortable base to call home while experiencing Havana with your family, Meliá Habana has plenty to keep kids entertained on-site as well, including three freshwater pools opposite the sea with panoramic views, two outdoor tennis courts, and evening entertainment.

WITH YOUR FRIENDS:

VARADERO: For groups travelling on a budget, Meliá Las Antillas might be your best your best bet. For those willing to splurge a little, The Level at Meliá Varadero takes the all-inclusive experience to VIP-status. And, as another option to consider, the apartments at Meliá Marina Varadero are great for big numbers and especially suitable if you want to spend a lot of time off-resort.

HAVANA: Located opposite the city coastline in a modern district of Havana, the five-star Meliá Cohiba is only 50 metres from the famous Malecón. It is also home to Habana Café nightclub with live entertainment, and Bar and Casa del Habano, an ideal space for cigar gourmets and connoisseurs. For budget-conscious travellers, Tryp Habana Libre is situated in the heart of Vedado. Panoramic views of the city, specialty restaurants and a nightclub with retractable roof and live shows are part of its appeal.

