

Trinidad has been the highlight of my trip to Cuba and it is one of the best experiences I have had during my travels. In this old city, I learnt and fell in love with the essence of Cuba. Through the years, I only learned about an exoticised version of Cuba—one that was studded with images of pseudo-dictatorship, lax human rights, cigars, salsa dancing and rum. When I got to Havana, some of these images did come to life in the form of dirty alleyways and poverty-stricken street corners in Centro Habana. But Trinidad managed to quash all of these images and repaint a portrait of Cuba in vivid colours.

If you too want to reinterpret Cuba in your own way, I suggest you spend at least four days in Trinidad.

Below is my humble attempt as your virtual tour guide, taking you through the streets of Trinidad in the hopes that you too fall in love with it as hopelessly as I did.



PHOTO COURTESY: MALIHA FAIROOZ

UNDER THE TRINIDAD SKY

A guide to solo travelling in the old city of Cuba

MALIHA FAIROOZ

Transport

For transport, if you are planning to go to Trinidad from Havana, I suggest you look into Viazul buses. They are much cheaper than colectivos (shared taxis). The bus ride takes six hours (longer than a colectivo but is certainly much more comfortable and cheaper). You can book the buses online and you should try and book them preferably before you go to Cuba. They cost USD 25 each way and the online payment is easy. Compared to a colectivo, you will end up saving an average of USD 15.

Accommodation

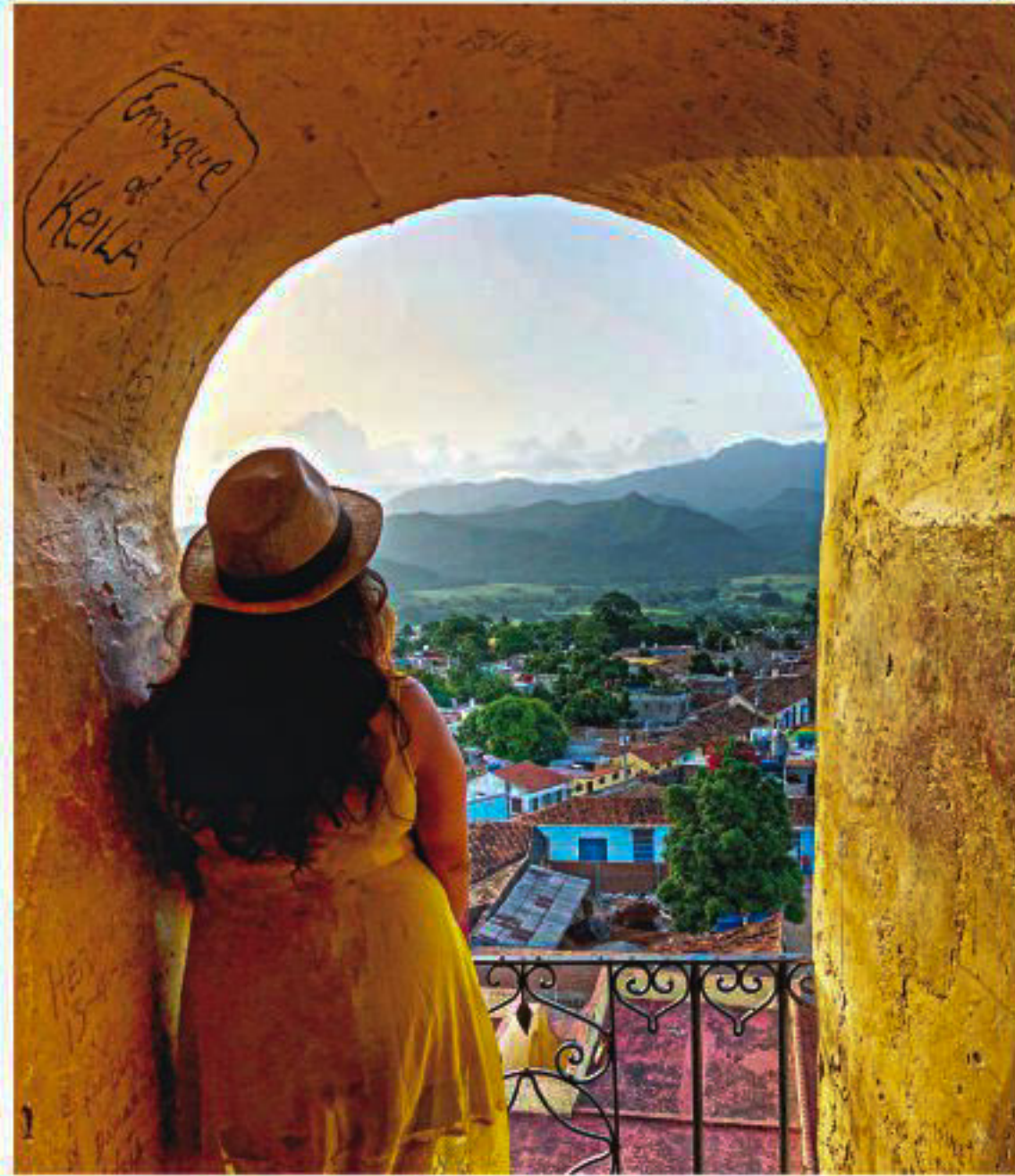
Now that you are there, it is time to find a place to stay. Look for a Casa Particular (homestay) near or at walking distance from Plaza Mayor, which is at the centre of the city. I stayed with a lovely couple, Cira and Felix, and they actually have a Wi-Fi hotspot which is quite a luxury in Cuba, notorious for their poor internet services. Their place is a nine minute walk from both the bus station and the city centre. I paid USD 14 per night for

my private room which can easily house three. The stay is complete with a large breakfast for an additional USD 4.

Navigation

As a solo traveler, I think the most important thing to focus on is navigation. There are many things I love doing alone but getting lost in the middle of the night in a new city where you do not speak the language is definitely not one of them. My saviour in these situations, especially in Cuba where you cannot buy a sim card, has been maps.me. Download the app on your smartphone, get the map of Cuba and voila, you are set! Trinidad is not a place where you can get lost easily. It is

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tiny and easy to navigate but maps.me has saved me more than once, especially in Havana, where taxis are very expensive.

Internet

Like everywhere in Cuba, you can buy cards that allow you to access the internet. The steps at the centre of town in Plaza Mayor have access to internet as do other parks. The price of the card is more expensive here—CUC 2 for one hour—but I suggest buying five-hour

cards for CUC 5 from Hotel Plaza in the city centre of Havana.

Free walking tour

On your first day, try and attend the free walking tour of the city. It is available in Spanish, English and Portuguese and starts at 5:30 pm every day at the park opposite to the Museum of the Bandits (the yellow bell tower which is the first thing you see when you google Trinidad). This walking tour is not only

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comprehensive in its historical overview of Trinidad, it is also a great way to know where to go for the best drinks, food, dancing etc. Although this is a free walking tour, I suggest you tip the guides.

Food

Trinidad is studded with plenty of restaurants and bars, but I honestly have to admit I really did not like the food in Cuba. I found it to be plain and lacking in flavour. You can find something for every price range—from super cheap street side burgers and pizzas to fancy meals. Many restaurants in the city centre offer a big meal of bread, salad, a main dish of meat/fish and a side for CUC 5. You have to make sure you look at the menu before you go into the place. There are of course many restaurants that charge more but you are guaranteed at least bread and butter/sauce for free with every meal.

Drinks

I don't really drink alcohol but if you do, Cuba has the world's best rum and of course mojitos and daiquiris. Trinidad is no exception to this, you can find bars serving mojitos for as little as CUC 1.50 and they are always fresh and delicious.

Music

There are plenty of places that have amazing music in Trinidad. One of the best spots in my opinion is, The Casa de La musica, right at Plaza Mayor. This amazing spot used to be the house of the priest from the church next door but was later converted into a house of music by the government. You will find amazing salsa music every night for a nominal fee of CUC 1 per person. Now sit on the amphitheatre style stairs under the starry sky with a mojito in your hand and let the music take over you. Another option

LITERATURE

WOMEN WRITING THE WAR

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My introduction to war literature was an intimate one, from any political agenda—they were stories of fear, simplicity, and sheer resilience in the face of ultimate crisis. They were also tales that involved mostly women, of my then middle-aged grandmother, her young daughters, and nieces fleeing from one village to another. She told me of their escape from the Punjab forces during Bangladesh's War of Liberation in 1971, crossing rivers and creeks and walking miles in search of refuge.

In later years, I came across many a literature on war, though I noticed that most of them were written by men on 'war waged by other men'.

War literature—at least those considered to be the greatest—is almost exclusively penned by men. In a list of 'The greatest war novels ever written' put together by Pan Macmillan, an international publishing company, out of 10 featured novels, only two were written by women: *Goodbye to All That* by Margaret Mitchell and *Tomb Raider* by Vera Brittain. A quick skim through other lists of top war novels feature the usuals: Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* or war photographer Robert Capa's autobiographical *Slightly Out of Focus*. Both fiction and non-fiction are littered with familiar male names—Tim O'Brien, Sebastian Faulks, or Kurt Vonnegut. While their literature is in no way to be discounted, I feel, the narratives are often limited to the rhetoric of heroic masculinity in describing war and do not take into account the 'emotional casualty' of war. Women writers have often been judged for narratives that are considered 'too narrow' or which are deemed 'sentimental' as they tend to focus more on domestic topics.

That war literature is dominated by male and masculine voices is something war veteran and novelist Cara Hoffman seems to agree on as well. In an op-ed published in *The New York Times* in 2014, she argued that "war narratives—in prose, poetry, and film—have always been, and continue to be, dominated by male voices. From the Greek classics to modern story collections, these tales focus exclusively on the male experience of battle, and of return; the stories of women at war, on the other hand, are nearly absent from our culture."

Hoffman's argument also made me think back on the few war novels I have read and it reaffirmed my desire to read more



PHOTO COURTESY: MALIHA FAIROOZ



is Palenque de Los Congos Reales. The entrance to this place is also CUC 1.

Dance

Cuba is famous for many things, but salsa has to be one of its most melodious exports. The music, the sway and the beats, all ooze art! The most amazing place to go dancing in Trinidad is Latin America's second cave club, Disco Ayala. It is set on top of a hill overlooking Cuba. The walk is relatively easy in slippers but don't wear your heels though. You won't be able to walk in them! The entrance is CUC 5 which includes a free drink. The music is an incredible mix of salsa, Latin, Afro Cuban genres.

Beach and nature

If you are keen on going to the beach, there are buses that take tourists from the city at 9am, 11am and 1pm from the Cubatur (look for it in maps.me) to Playa Ancon. The ride is about half an hour and costs CUC 5. This is ideal for a solo traveler but if you are in a group, taxis cost CUC 16 for a round trip and timings are flexible. The last bus back from the beach is at 6 pm so make sure you do not miss it. There are also incredible waterfalls around Trinidad!

Note: There are two currencies in Cuba, the Cuban Peso which is for the locals, 1 USD = 20 Cuban Peso (CUP) and the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC) for the tourists, 1 CUC = 1 USD. But due to the current state of politics between the US and Cuba, the Cuban exchange offices charge an extra 14 percent when you exchange USD. I would suggest you bring Euro instead of USD as the exchange rates are better. Plus, if you have an American bank account like I do, make sure you bring only cash because you cannot use your card here.

Maliha Fairouz is a 27-year-old Bangladeshi solo traveller, who has travelled to 79 countries, on a Bangladeshi passport. Through her blog www.wherereyoufrom.com, she shares her experience of travelling as a brown, Muslim, Bangladeshi woman while simultaneously encouraging a culture of travel amongst Bangladeshi youth.

about women stuck in warzones, of my longing for everyday stories of people stuck in war rather than ones of combat and yet connected.

And finally, right at home in Bangladesh, how can anyone forget the impact of writer and political activist Jahanara Imam's *Eklavya Diggali* (Days of 71)? The book that was an immediate bestseller in Bangladesh can bring to life the passion ignited by events that happened long before we were born. The genocide inflicted by Pakistan on what was then East Pakistan between March and December 1971 was one of the worst of the century. Imam's diary of 1971 seamlessly dances between topics of great political importance to domestic concerns. It is the story of how she watches her teenage Kumi go off to the war, return battered and dishevelled only to be taken away by the oppressor to never return again. It is of violence happening right outside the home and life going on within it.

The Liberation War of Bangladesh has produced other great books as well. In *Anu Bivrogensh Bolechi*, Bangladeshi educationist and social worker Nilima Ibrahim highlighted the courage and perseverance of war heroines of the Liberation War. While Nilima Ibrahim worked in Bangladesh in 1972 following the war with various national and international organisations to rehabilitate the raped and tortured women of the Liberation War, she interviewed some of these heroic women and kept a detailed journal of her experience, which she later published in book form in 1994.

Almost all the above novels are narratives dealing with consequences of battle or set on the periphery of a warzone. Traditionally, it was men who had gone out to battle and then returned to write of their experiences. But women too have been at war; however, their stories often reflect the trauma dealt by the conflict rather than the conflict itself. That too is changing slowly, because women writing on warfare are growing as well. As more and more female reporters, photographers, war correspondents and defense personnel go out to the field, they are writing of stories of combat and their experiences on the battlefield, such as Lindsey Hilsum writing on Libya in the *Sixth Sense* or *Time of Revolution* or Janina di Giovanni writing of her experience in *The Morning They Came for Us: Dispatches from Syria*.

The time has come for the definition of 'war writing' to be extended. It is necessary to use a wider definition because war isn't only about combat. Civilians directly experience war through bombing, displacement and loss of family members. When we extend how we define writing about war, the field does become larger and with time, we might find more narratives of war by women on women.

