**Cuba: One of Today’s Top Travel Destinations**

With the renewal of diplomatic ties between the U.S. and Cuba, this island-country is now becoming a top travel destination, due to its offering of diverse experiences as well as its superb value.

Last March, the Rolling Stones played an historic concert for over one million people in Cuba. At the same time, Starwood Hotels & Resorts announced its efforts to renovate three aging Havana hotels while the Carnival Corporation readied the launch of its Fathom brand, making it the first cruise line to Cuba in 50 years. Now, travelers can experience this well-preserved “hidden jewel” of the Caribbean that is like no other.

Just a short flight from Florida, this tropical destination is known for its vibrant and colorful culture, spicy Latin/African beat, and sizzling hot cuisine. Whether you’re looking for a weekend getaway or a longer vacation, Cuba offers travelers a wealth of experiences for all ages and activity levels. While most people head to Havana, the island’s capital, the true “heart” of Cuba can be found in Matanzas. Once known as the “Athens of Cuba,” is was the birthplace of Cuba’s unique danzónand rumba music and home to the island’s first provincial theaters.

Bordered by the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, Cuba offers breathtaking warm-water beaches, excellent sport fishing, some of the world’s best scuba diving sites and unspoiled days of relaxation on white sand beaches, like Playa Pilar, known as the Caribbean’s “best beach.”

Historically, Cuba dates back to its founding as a Spanish colony in the 16th century battling marauding pirates for over 100 years. A tour of the island offers many well-preserved World Heritage Sites, like the 17th century Renaissance-style fortress Santiago de Cuba with its magazines, bastions and batteries. Or you can take a walking tour of Old Havana and its fortifications, dating back to the 16th century. Other notable landmarks in the city’s capital include Plaza de la Catedral, Las Mansiones de Miramar, and the Cathedral of Christopher Columbus, one of eight, sacred religious sites in this city.

Nearby, in the province of Cienfuegos, the island’s colonial period comes alive at the Urban Historic Centre of Cienfuegos, a former trading center for coffee, tobacco and sugarcane. For outdoor enthusiasts, the coastline of this province is home to over 50 remarkable dive sites with numerous underwater caves.

What attracts most visitors to Cuba, hands down, is its nightlife: there’s just no better place to dance the night away than in Havana’s salsa clubs. Another big draw is the Santiago de Cuba carnival festival in July with its colorful parades, elaborately-costumed float queens and numerous percussion and salsa bands performing throughout the city. Vibrant, electrically-charged, sensual and spicy, Cuba opens its arms to visitors with a past preserved like none other vacation destination.

**Recipe for Cuban Mojito**

*Considered Cuba’s national drink, the Mojito is a traditional Cuban highball consisting of five main ingredients: white rum, sugarcane juice, lime, sparkling water and mint. The Barcardi Company traces the origin of the Mojito to 1586 when Francis Drake and his pirates invaded Havana for its gold.*

Prep Time: 5 min/Simple Syrup Cook Time: 5 min

**For Each Serving:**

* 1 tablespoon granulated sugar or 2 tablespoons Simple Syrup (see recipe below)
* 8 to 10 fresh mint leaves, washed and dried
* 1 lime, halved crosswise or 3 tablespoons freshly-squeezed lime juice
* 2 ounces white rum
* Crushed ice
* 3 ounces mineral water or soda water, chilled
* Mint sprigs for garnish

**Preparation:**

Place the mint leaves and sugar in a tall glass. Crush sugar (or simple syrup) and mint leaves with the back of a spoon for approximately 20 to 30 seconds until you can smell the mint.

Cut the lime in half, remove seeds and discard. Squeeze out the juice into the serving glass, then in drop 1/2 of the lime.

Pour in rum and stir. Add plenty of crushed ice, top off with mineral water or club soda, and garnish with a sprig of mint.

**Simple Syrup:**

* Heat equal parts sugar and water in a saucepan.
* Boil for 5 minutes without stirring; remove from heat.
* Cool before serving or refrigerate syrup overnight in a closed jar.