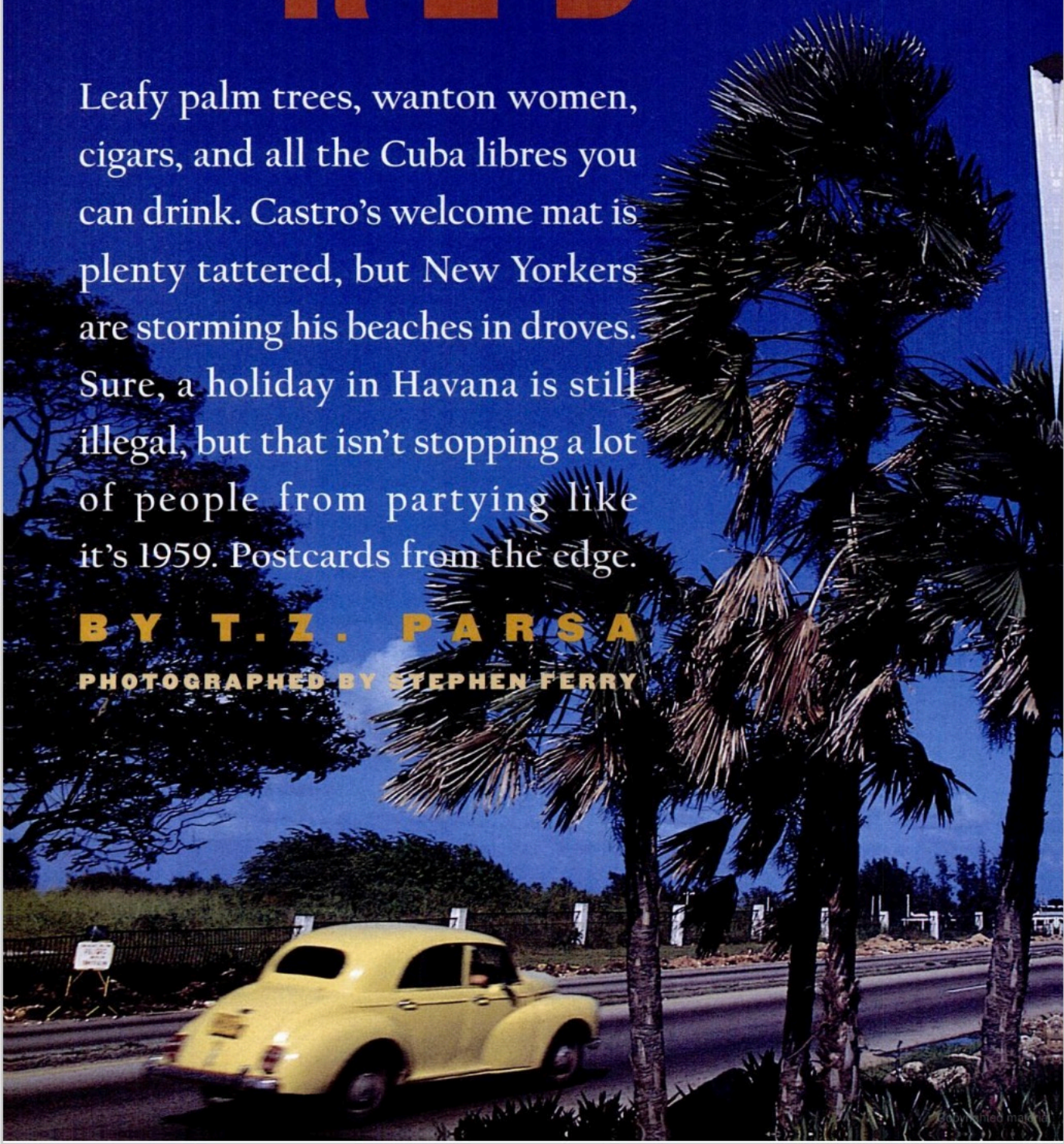


CLUB RED

Leafy palm trees, wanton women, cigars, and all the Cuba libres you can drink. Castro's welcome mat is plenty tattered, but New Yorkers are storming his beaches in droves. Sure, a holiday in Havana is still illegal, but that isn't stopping a lot of people from partying like it's 1959. Postcards from the edge.

BY T.Z. PARSA

PHOTOGRAPHED BY STEPHEN FERRY





TOBACCO ROAD:
Che Guevara surrenders
Havana's beachfront to
tourists in rented
vintage cars flashing
hard currency.

A FEW MORE BOMBS AND A YUPPIE'S BOUND TO GET KILLED. THERE HAVE been eleven blasts in Havana since April, four in September alone, all targeting bars, restaurants, and hotels frequented by tourists. George, a Bear, Stearns investment banker who has come to Cuba on the sly with a friend, is worried. "No one told me about the bombs. With my luck, I'll get a piece of shrapnel in my ass and have to explain myself to some embassy attaché. 'Why are you in Cuba?' he'll ask me. 'Why?' I'll tell him, 'Because I'm an idiot and listened to my drunk friend Gene, that's why. Because it was closer than Beirut.'" ■ The taxi drivers in Havana say Fidel is behind the bombings—an excuse to crack down on troublemakers before the pope pays a visit in January. But Cuba experts can't fathom why Castro would risk scaring away

tourists whose hard currency has brought the island's economy back from the brink. Fidel blames exiles in Miami. The exiles say the bombs are the first signs of a popular uprising against the 71-year-old general.

Gene is in fine spirits—mashed mint stuck in his teeth, breath stinking of rum and pigskin. *Chicharrones* is Spanish for pork rinds, he informs the room, building a vocabulary where, before, all he knew of the island was Castro, *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ricky Ricardo, and *tu puta madre* from his doorman at 30th and Park.

He waves for another mojito—the drink for which La Bodeguita del Medio is famous, thanks to Hemingway. Gene points to where he has signed his name on the wall, just like Hemingway once did, just like everyone who comes to La B del M does, so that now most of the surrounding walls are covered in a roiling sea of scrawl. Americans are ingenious show-offs, however, and an indication of their growing presence in Cuba can be found in their freshly inked salutations on hard-to-reach wall space that 30 years' worth of postrevolution vacationing Canadians, Italians, and Spaniards could not be bothered to fill in. Gene is tall and lanky and has managed, by dangling off a stair railing, to leave his mark.

La B del M was bombed on September 4—a small blast that splintered tables and erased a couple of thousand autographs from the walls. "The only reason I let Gene drag me here is that it's already been bombed," says George. "I figured they wouldn't bomb the same place twice."

"Just admit that it's a beautiful city," Gene protests. "Just admit it."

George concedes the point: "It's like the skeleton of the most beautiful woman you could imagine. In five years, Havana could be the most gorgeous place in the world. But right now it's all bone, no flesh."

THE ONLY U.S. CITIZENS WHO ARE SUPPOSED to be buying drinks in Cuba these days are journalists, people visiting their mor-

tally sick relatives, and those on missions of sufficient cultural, religious, or professional gravitas to merit a travel license from the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC).

Not many fast-laners can resist a furrough in Havana; whether they get there under such earnest pretexts is another matter. Cuba is a kick for trend-trafficking journalists like *Today* show executive producer Jeffrey Zucker, who went down five years ago and found "a beautiful city in need of a paint job," and John F. Kennedy Jr., *George*'s editor-in-chief, who swung through two weeks ago—ostensibly to conduct one of his gonzo interviews with Dad's arch-nemesis, Fidel Castro. Kennedy bunked at the Hotel Nacional.

Hollywoodites are also increasingly leav-

ing their footprints on Havana's sidewalks. For years, director Sydney Pollack has partied in Cuba with a lively left-leaning crowd including Castro, Gabriel García Márquez, Harry Belafonte, and Sidney Poitier. Tom Fontana, producer of the NBC show *Homicide* and HBO's *Oz* spent four days in Havana last month with *Oz* stars Lee Tergesen and Dean Cain. Fontana and Co. admitted to U.S. Customs that they'd been in Cuba, but merely producing a backpack with an NBC logo got them waved through. Fisher Stevens, who flew down last year with Matt Dillon, says his cigar-obsessed-matinee-idol pal is in Havana all the time. "I went to Berlin before the wall fell. I was in Russia right before glasnost," says Stevens. "And I wanted to see Cuba before it collapsed." At his elegantly frayed Havana hotel, he "half-expected Sydney Greenstreet to come walking through the door." How long before Johnny Depp trashes a room at the Habana Libre after fueling all night on high-octane mojitos? Cuba's sex appeal is even being felt in New York—hotelier Ian Schrager, whose wife Rita Norona is Cuban, has just opened the restaurant Asia de Cuba in the Morgans Hotel.

Vacationing in Cuba is against the law for *Americanos*, but the bookstores know us better than the Treasury Department—Barnes & Noble stocks four different Cuba guides. "Anyone can trav-

"This has always been a very New York
"Meyer Lansky, the mob. Good-bye, Atlantic



HEARTBREAK HOTEL: Sinatra and Churchill romped at the now-faded Nacional.



**BEACH-BLANKET
GRINGOS:**
Chatting up the locals
on the Playas del Este.

own," says Alex, in his Havana hotel room. City, once a casino goes in down here."

el to Cuba," a senior OFAC official explains. "It's an economic embargo—we regulate financial transactions, not travel. Only licensed individuals can spend money there." That's the law, but OFAC's travel restrictions are becoming something of a dead letter.

Meet Ed, a 26-year-old New Yorker strolling peaceably through crumbling but picturesque Old Havana, speaking of arbitrage and sketching the rough outlines of his future business empire in Cuba. Ed admits he has come to the island illegally by way of Cancún, Mexico.

"Listen, it's a stupid law, and like most stupid laws, it's both unenforceable and destined to go away. I'm buying in cheap while most people are too scared to come."

Ed is unfazed by the bombings and the prospect of getting caught. "Risk, reward," he says. "How is Customs ever going to know I came to Cuba? And why should they care? I could understand if they were preventing me from going for my own safety or because Cuba was a terrorist state. But Havana is the safest city I've ever been to in Latin America. There are

police everywhere, and the people are incredibly friendly. In Mexico City or Rio on business, I never leave my hotel room."

Ed is one of an estimated 84,000 U.S. citizens who will visit Cuba in 1997, according to John Kavulich, president of the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, Inc., a private not-for-profit organization that provides information about Cuba. Approximately one fifth of those visitors are sneaking in. "You get a lot of lawyers traveling to Cuba illegally these days," Kavulich says. "They go to talk to Cuban lawyers, to get a feel for the place. My impression is that they're feeling things out, positioning themselves, getting ready."

A DOZEN CARIBBEAN DESTINATIONS offer the same sun, the same sea, the same sand, but Cuba's allure derives from the fact that it has yet to be leveled by the great tourist steamroller. No tour buses navigate Havana's narrow streets; few jet skis curdle the tide. No newlyweds bicker over steam-tray breakfasts in the rumba

lounge of a tacky Radisson. Not yet.

In the Plaza Vieja, there is a lone Benetton store—the only first-world retailer on the island. But only Fidel, his cronies, and the tourists can afford to shop there. Most of the nicest cars on the island were the nicest cars 40 years ago—wide-finned Chevys and Oldsmobiles with all the bells and whistles—left behind by the fleeing aristocracy. Farmers and neurosurgeons alike ride bikes, hitch rides, and get pulled around in converted tractor-trailers that serve as Havana's people-movers; there are no "bad" parts of town, and the average mansion is home to two dozen lords and ladies living in equitably distributed dilapidation.

On the highways, army trucks rumble past billboards with Che Guevara's Christ-like visage radiating a martyred benediction upon Cuba's rundown infrastructure; *guajiros* (farmers) wave away leaded-gas fumes as they bicycle down back roads to cut sugar cane, machetes in their belts. On the road to Santiago: old women smoking cigars. On the white-sand beaches: Frenchmen in thongs.

The Old Havana hotels have been renovated, but the island remains relatively uncommercialized (with the exception of Havana's Varadero, which looks more and more like Miami Beach each year—

cheap new hotels cheek by jowl, all-you-can-eat buffets, white heads bobbing down cruise-ship gangplanks). The service in Cuba is bad—not rude but slow; be sure to order your second round before you are half done with your first. Castro went to great pains to jettison bourgeois institutions such as waiters and maids; it will take more than a generation for Cubans to acquire the solicitude that makes for top-notch service.

Talk to a Cuban for five minutes and you are struck by his or her cultural and political awareness. The children of the revolution are poor but educated. They have all their teeth. They quote poetry and beam a soldierly pride in having adhered to principle.

Cuba's isolation—its otherness—is today its biggest selling point to Americans weary of leis and drinks with long straws in coconuts and college kids belly-flopping into



PULP FRICTION: Vertical lap-dancing near the Hotel Nacional. Girls park themselves outside discos, hoping a foreigner will foot their cover charges.

table. In the past five years, Vedado has been resurrected—many fancy hotels and ooh-la-la cabarets, though no sex shows or gambling.

"It's not the sex or the girls so much as the atmosphere," Alex says. "That's why I love Cuba. It's like nowhere else, not even Brazil. It's louche yet clean."

herself. Niurdes says she's a philosophy student at the University of Havana. "He is a pig," she says in Spanish, sitting on the edge of the bed beside Alex and picking a thread from his shoulder. "But he is very cute. Are you in Havana for tonight? I have a friend that would love to meet you." Niurdes smiles widely as she leaves,

"It's fun to dance and drink and have sex," says Catea, a college student. "Maybe it's with a foreigner—so what?"

the hotel pool. For now, at least, Cuba lacks the homogenizing whitewash of free-market capitalism that gives you everything you want—but nothing you'll remember.

ALEX, AN ADVERTISING EXECUTIVE FROM Manhattan, is too cheap to take a sex tour in Thailand. He comes to Cuba instead. Alex has rented a suite in the Hotel Nacional. He is lounging in his air-conditioned room at noon, lobster-red from the beach, wearing linen pants and a pink oxford unbuttoned to his belly, hair brilliantined into a reflective helmet, puffing on a Cohiba Double Corona (Castro's favorite before he kicked the habit).

There is someone taking a shower in the bathroom. "Wait until you see her," Alex cackles. "Prime, prime, prime."

The Hotel Nacional is an architectural cousin of the Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach, and it rises with salmon-pink majesty above Vedado, the old hotel-and-casino district of Havana. Winston Churchill used to stay here, as did Frank Sinatra and all the gringo grandees who came in the fifties to wallow in sun-drenched vice. Vedado is where the gangsters played before Castro; where your granddad came to catch a live sex show before losing a paycheck at the craps

The incidence of AIDS in Cuba is very low, thanks to regular, mandatory health inspections, including blood tests, as well as the government's practice of isolating HIV-positive Cubans in sanatoriums. Cuban law requires any visitor staying in the country for more than three months to take an HIV test.

The Nacional is a five-star hotel by Cuban standards, which turns out to be an important qualification. The winding rear patio overlooking the hotel's lush, green park is a first-rate place to relax with a drink (bombs notwithstanding); the rooms are large and well lit. Still, the luxe touch is missing. The elevator is a creaky box that stops operating at ten at night. The hallways smell of mildew and harsh disinfectant. Beds are lumpy. Water stains spot the ceilings. A midsize cockroach has thrown up its legs in despair behind Alex's bathroom door.

Hotels in Old Havana such as the Inglaterra, Ambos Mundos, and Santa Isabel are cheaper and just as comfortable—three-star hotels at a three-star price. Even so, the old, fancy hotels in Vedado (the Nacional, Capri, and Victoria, for example) are a good place to lay your bones your first night in Havana. A room costs twice as much as in Old Havana, but it will give you

showing perfect white teeth. "You'll call me at seven, then, for dinner?" she says in Spanish.

Alex nods enthusiastically. "Not a chance in hell," he says in English and gives her a peck on the cheek.

"A very nice girl," he says after she leaves. "But, to paraphrase Churchill, going around with a girlfriend in Cuba is like bringing a sausage roll to a banquet."

IT'S NOT HARD TO SPOT THE PROSPECTORS in Havana. You see them taking meetings on the patio of the Hotel Nacional, dirty-dancing with 16-year-olds in the discos, reading the *Wall Street Journal* at José Martí International Airport. They don't carry cameras and guide books. They're not here to follow the Hemingway trail. They're in Havana to take advantage of Cuba's proximity to the United States, its immense natural resources, and the inevitable normalization of relations between the two countries that they are betting will occur sooner rather than later. There are indications that they are right.

Since 1963, U.S. law has prohibited almost all commercial relationships between Cuba and the United States. However, recent legislation introduced in the House of

Representatives promises to punch a large hole in the embargo by allowing U.S. companies to sell food and medicine to Cuba.

"The Europeans and Canadians have been doing business in Cuba for years, but they are really just waiting to be bought out by Americans when the embargo is lifted," says Pamela Falk, a Cuba expert and professor of international and commercial transactions at CUNY's School of Law. "Two years ago, José Martí was full of U.S. corporate jets. Many thought that Clinton would change policy toward Cuba in his second term. They were signing nonbinding letters of intent, scouting locations. Then the Brothers to the Rescue planes got shot down. Clinton signed the punitive Helms-Burton bill, and everything froze in place."

The pope may prove to be the ice-breaker—His Holiness is scheduled to visit Castro's decaying Xanadu in January. It will be the first papal visit since the 1959 revolution, and Fidel's hosting of the pope is widely seen as part of a broader strategy to pressure the United States to lift the embargo. The pope's opposition to the embargo for humanitarian reasons is widely known, and Castro is hoping for a public denunciation.

Dan Snow, a Bible-quoting Kentucky-based fishing-tour operator who has been organizing illegal fishing trips to Cuba for

the past twenty years, is counting on the pope to change things. "The pope is going to lay it all out for the world about this shameful embargo," says Snow. "That should do it. Only a fool would try to rough-dance with the pope."

DAN SNOW IS THE ONLY U.S. CITIZEN in the history of the embargo to serve jail time for traveling illegally to Cuba (45 weekends in 1990 and 1991), after being found guilty of five felony violations under the Trading With the Enemy Act. Undaunted, he continues to bring fishing parties to the island and is expanding his tour business to include trips for scuba divers, hunters, bird-watchers, and cigar fans. He's even offering charters of Castro's private yacht.

Not every American doing business in Cuba is breaking the law. OFAC permits businesses to operate in Cuba in certain sectors, such as humanitarian enterprises, publishing, and news gathering. Since 1994, U.S. citizens have also been allowed to own a noncontrolling minority interest in a foreign company doing business in Cuba as long as revenue from those operations is not the foreign company's major source of revenue. Days Inn and Choice Hotels International have invested in foreign companies with hotels in Cuba.

As far as Castro is concerned, the more Americans spending dollars on the island, the better. For most of the Cold War, Cuba was buttressed by Russian subsidies—its sugar purchased at above-market prices, its oil Russian and sold on the cheap. But since roughly 1991, Castro has been desperate to attract foreign currency to replace the vanished subsidies.

A new foreign-investment law was enacted by Castro's government in 1995, allowing 100 percent foreign ownership of businesses in Cuba, the right to repatriate hard-currency profits, and indemnity against expropriation of assets. This last is an important consideration, given the expropriation of more than \$2 billion worth of assets in 1959 and 1960 never returned to foreign owners.

The most remarkable result of Castro's embrace of foreign investment has been the explosion of the tourist industry. In 1996, tourism surpassed sugar production as Cuba's largest source of hard currency for the first time since the revolution; Cuba now has more than 27,000 hotel rooms, more than Puerto Rico and the Bahamas combined. The pope's visit promises to pump the industry further.

"My friends and I are starting a business here, and if it's illegal by U.S. standards, so what?" Ed says defiantly before disappearing into the lobby of the newly reno-

FANTASY ISLAND

THE ROUTES AND THE RISKS

THOUGH CUBA IS ONLY 90 MILES AWAY from the tip of Florida, there are no scheduled flights from the U.S. The quickest way to get there is to hop a flight to Nassau in the Bahamas and then a connection to Havana. American Airlines offers flights from New York to Nassau that are as low as \$290; the connection to Havana can cost as little as \$160, but everyone has to fly Cubana airlines, aboard one of the government's ancient Yakovlev YAK-42's.

An alternative route is through Mexico City or Cancun with a connection to Havana on either Cubana or Mexicana airlines. (Reserve ahead, and the whole trip costs around \$800 coach.) People must book the Cuba leg of the trip through an airline office or travel agent outside the United States. Call Mexicana de Aviación (52-5-325-0990) or Cubana de Aviación (52-5-255-3776) if leaving from Mexico, or Havanatur (242-394-7194) if leaving from Nassau.

The likelihood of getting in trouble for touring Cuba illegally is low. "Let's face

it," says John Kavulich of the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, Inc. "U.S. Customs officers have a lot more to worry about—drugs, firearms, illegal aliens." Even so, most Cuba experts recommend that travelers procure a license before traveling to Cuba; apply to OFAC, the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (202-622-2480). The Center for Cuban Studies in Manhattan (242-0559) will assist in processing license applications for \$50 or will do it free of charge for travelers participating in one of the center's cultural trips.

On paper, defying the embargo or travel restrictions means big trouble: criminal penalties of up to ten years in prison and \$1 million in corporate or \$250,000 in individual fines. Beginning in 1992, civil penalties of up to \$55,000 per violation were also instituted. However, OFAC statistics indicate that relatively few tourists find themselves in any serious hot water. "No one gets thrown in jail," says Sandra Levinson, executive director of the Center for Cuban Studies. "But with civil penal-

ties, there's now some risk. I've been hearing about people getting fined, sometimes thousands of dollars. They might not get you the first time you go, but the second time—suddenly they pull you out of line [at Immigration], and later you get a letter from the Treasury Department asking you to detail all your expenditures in Cuba, where you stayed, how you got there. Who knows how they know you went, but they do." Since 1992, OFAC has collected approximately \$1.5 million in civil penalties for embargo violations found in 257 separate cases (most were assessed to banks that failed to file the correct paperwork).

Cuban Immigration does not pound U.S. passports with an official entry stamp (though they've begun to stamp them with a cryptic mark resembling a round-roofed house). Levinson hypothesizes that OFAC must now have spotters in Mexican and Bahamian airports who alert U.S. Customs to citizens returning from Cuba, or that perhaps OFAC is being supplied information by foreign airlines that fly to Cuba. Michael Sheehan, a spokesperson for the Customs management center in South Florida, confirms Levinson's suspicion: "We have agents in Nassau and other jumping-off points to Cuba."

vated Hotel Ambos Mundos. "Its only illegal until you get really rich; then it becomes unorthodox and farseeing. Wasn't the original Kennedy a rumrunner? You got to have balls to get a jump on everyone else. You've got to be a pirate."

IT IS A SCOTCH-AND-CIGAR EVENING IN June at the private Anglers' Club on Broad Street. George Plimpton, in his role as hired chit-chattist for Macallan Scotch, is passing around a pile of oral snapshots that have become worn from frequent handling—the time he hung out with Hemingway at El Floridita (a tacky bar in Havana that ties with the Tropicana as Cuba's biggest tourist trap) and Faulkner showed up in an admiral's cap; something about Tennessee Williams's dog.

An older gentleman—a partner in a Manhattan law firm of the Republican persuasion and a guest of the club for the evening—leans over, Hoya de Monterrey jutting from his pucker, and drowns out Plimpton with a gruff anecdote of his own: "Cuba. Ever been there? Wonderful fishing. First-rate. There last month. Forget that deep-sea Hemingway crap. I'm talking fly rod and reel. Bonefish. More bonefish than you can imagine. Two thousand dollars for a week of fishing. Best money I ever spent."

The inner reach of the long Bay of Havana is a putrid stew of sewage and gasoline whose wafting odor can jolt you from a sound sleep in your Old Havana hotel room three blocks inland. But it's only a two-hour drive from Old Havana to the gigantic Ciénaga de Zapata national park on Cuba's south coast, which offers pristine wetlands, isolated beaches, crystal-clear water, and some of the best fly-fishing in the world.

I am driving along rutted and near-desolate Cuban roads in a rented Hyundai with my friend Withers. Our destination is Playa Girón on the coast of the Bay of Pigs. For \$100, a guide at the ranger station named Guillermo promises to show Withers more bonefish than he's ever seen.

We tool along the coast, the three of us crowded into Guillermo's small boat. Clear blue water laps up against mangrove forests and small rocky beaches. Flocks of pink flamingos rise into the air as Guillermo poles us into his secret cove. He points out what looks like a portly man in a wet-suit snorkeling nearby but is, in fact, a manatee grazing among the sea grass. The water is teeming with squadrons of bonefish. The air is full of birds. Withers can barely speak. Guillermo just looks at us with a big, proud smile.

Don Causey, who edits *The Angling Report*, a fishing newsletter published out of Miami, confirms that Cuba has become a destination for U.S. anglers. "I was just

down in Cuba—in a journalistic capacity, you understand—fishing the Bay of Pigs, and on my way back I saw Dan Snow helping ten bass fishermen through Customs on their way back to New York. They were all going off about how great the fishing was; I don't think any of them really understood that they were breaking the law."

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, SMUGGLING cigars out of Cuba has, to a certain type of Waspy young professional male in Manhattan, become the adult equivalent of sneaking butts behind chapel after study hall. A long weekend in Havana—catch the show at the Tropicana, do the foreign-disco thing, burn your nose at the beach, then hit the cigar factories and just see who stokes the big boss man with a couple of Cohibas at the firm Christmas party. It is what running with the bulls in Pamplona was in the eighties, only you come back with a tan and some stogies instead of bruises and a wineskin that hangs off the corner of your bed.

Americans traveling to Cuba with OFAC permission are allowed to bring up to \$100 worth of Cuban goods into the U.S., which may include cigars. The Cuban government allows the export of up to 200 cigars but requires proof (should they search your bags) that the cigars were purchased from a state-owned factory or shop rather than from one of the hustlers who proposition tourists on the streets of Havana with the promise of cheap cigars. Odds are that a traveler's bags will not be searched in Cuba or in the U.S.; however, the Cuban authorities have been increasingly suspicious since the bombings began.

Black-market cigars will be confiscated by Cuban Customs, and U.S. Customs will destroy all cigars carried by unlicensed travelers. A Manhattan corporate

loud, tortured conversations about where he can get Cuban cigars at the lowest prices. Not the tourist prices, he's insisting, but the real, low-down, insider prices, as if a socialist country marketing perishable luxury goods to status-conscious tourists would have extensive reduced-price bins. His Spanish is not great, however, and he's saying *cigarro* (cigarette) when what he really means is *puro* (cigar). Even he knows something is wrong when the old guy next to him explains in slow, broken English that he can find what he wants in any Havana bar, 25 for a buck.

The amateur is maybe 19 and makes no secret that he's planning to smuggle cigars back to New York to hawk in the cigar bars around town. He says he's taken a \$5,000 cash advance out on his credit card to finance the venture.

"You've got to be careful," a Manhattan corporate lawyer says. "There's a lot of crap out there passing for Cubans. People steal the boxes and the rings from the factories and then get their uncle Juan to roll up a bunch using whatever is lying around the bodega. You get referred to a reliable dealer and you always go back to him. Remember, these are delicate, handcrafted objects—like sushi. It's not just fish and rice."

ALEX IS PARTYING LIKE A ROCK STAR AT THE high-tech disco in the El Comodoro hotel, sandwiched between two gorgeous mulatto women, doing the Cuban porno-boogie, one hand on the breast of the woman in front of him and the other on the buttocks of the one behind him—a three-person conga line. Coolio is booming and Alex's cigar has smoldered down to a fetid, soggy nub. Everyone is grinning like a maniac.

There are few Cuban men at the Comodoro; the entrance fee is \$10, and girls wait outside to be invited in by generous male tourists. In the nineties, a significant

A weekend in Havana is what running with only you come back with a tan and some

lawyer who has traveled to Cuba on several cigar-buying jaunts offers the following advice: "Never buy black-market. Save your receipts until you get through Cuban Customs. Throw them away before you get back in the States. I had a friend—a real genius—who kept the receipts stuck in his passport. You can imagine what happened when he went through Passport Control in New York."

Industry sources claim that the U.S. luxury-cigar market has grown 300 percent in the past four years, which pretty much assures the existence of individuals like the kid sitting in front of me on the Cubana airlines flight into Havana.

He's engaging everyone around him in

number of Cuban women decided to adopt Lycra as their national fabric and male tourists as their national pastime.

In Spanish, *puta* is slang for prostitute and *jinetero* means jockey. In Cuba, *jinetero* is a pejorative term that broadly describes anybody who disports with foreigners outside the tourist conduits approved by Fidel. The male grifters in Old Havana who offer bogus cigars for half the showroom prices are *jineteros*, as are the young dudes who speak fluent English and offer to guide pale, blinking Canadian couples around the old town. The girls outside the tourist discos looking to have someone pay their cover charge are *jineteras*, as are the ones who stroll the Malecón (Havana's beautiful four-

mile-long seaside boulevard) in micro-skirts at night waving at the rental cars, as is the disturbingly young girl who asks me for a cigarette, a light, a drink, and a hundred bucks to have sex with her, all within a minute's conversation.

Not all *jineteras* are putas, though, and not every girl who dances with a foreigner is a *jinetera*. This is all explained to me by Catea, a microbiology student at the University of Havana who wears a skin-tight baby T with the words SUPER, ROCKER, SEX, CLUB, and PARTY stacked top to bottom on the front.

"We are sexually liberal in Cuba," she says. "We are educated about sex very early, and maybe also it's because the church is not so influential here." She is 22; quotes Benedetti, Neruda, and Carpentier; dreams of engineering DNA in Switzerland; and has a body that would cause a Hard-hat Harry to collapse into his lunch box. She has had 30 lovers, some of them foreign tourists, but categorically denies being promiscuous.

"Maybe 40 percent of the girls here are *jineteras*," she says, looking around the club. "The rest are just having fun—it's fun to dance and have a drink and have sex. Maybe it's with a foreigner—so what? Maybe the foreigner buys you something—why not? The girls that take money—they do it because they want to; no one dies of hunger in Havana. They do it to buy luxuries. Ten years ago, everyone was equal; now people want to have



MAKING A BUNDLE: A cigar roller at the Partagas factory, where black marketeers stockpile stogies to sell back home in Manhattan for \$25 apiece.

house for his Cuban girlfriend two years ago. Her name is Regina, and she is a tiny thing in the huge kitchen.

"Sure, it's a risk investing in property in a socialist system, but we're not talking about Vietnam or Romania," Doc says, laughing. "We're 90 miles from Key West here; it's like buying prime real estate in South Beach at 10 cents on the dollar. There is a tremendous upside."

Ownership of Cuban property by foreigners is a violation of Cuban law. Cuba's new foreign-investment law hints at the possibility of foreigners' being allowed to negotiate leases with the government. "What you hear about is long-term leases of land—up to 99 years in some cases—by joint ventures," says CUNY's Professor Falk. The embargo would prohibit Americans from assuming leases, but that's not to say a lot of U.S. citizens aren't having a friend in Spain buy a beach house for them.

Regina is a cooking-school graduate

fessor Falk, however, some residences in Cuba were not nationalized and are passed by inheritance. It is a violation of Cuban law for Cubans to buy and sell private property; however, the trading of inherited residences is permitted.

Doc explains that he and his girlfriend secured the house—a fifteen-room mansion surrounded by embassies and diplomatic residences—for little more than \$45,000. "I had a suitcase full of money, just like in a movie. Of course, I was scared—I don't want to go to jail. I

sailed in a friend's boat from Key West. It would have cost me three times as much if they had known an American was buying," Doc says. "Regina did all the negotiating—she's quite a little haggler. There was some little old lady living here before—all the kids had gotten out to Miami in the eighties."

Doc uses empty beer bottles to describe the complicated barter transaction. "You can't buy—you have to trade. So we swapped a house that Regina's parents owned out in the countryside—a worthless shack, just a token, but with proper title papers—for this house and the suitcase of money. Then the old lady who was living here swapped the shack and some of the money from the suitcase for a little apartment in Old Havana. Then the owners of the apartment swapped the shack and some of the money they got from the old lady for a different apartment, which they got from a family who had two apartments in Old Havana. The shack was just the chit that made it legal under Cuban law—just a formality. It was really all about money. The lawyers handle everything once the price is set—they even arrange it so that everyone 'moves' on the exact same day."

When asked how he felt about the house being in his girlfriend's name, Doc just smiles. "Love's all about faith, isn't it? Sometimes you got to have that faith."

As for the future of Cuba, Doc is also sanguine. "Things are changing fast these days—you can see it all around. There are more Americans around town, more investment both legal and illegal. The Cubans are an incredibly well-educated people—they're learning very quickly how to live with a free market. The transition won't be as hard as it was in Eastern Europe. You won't be able to get houses like mine for long. I mean, when the blockade is lifted, *all this* is going to be a three-hour flight from New York."

The bulls in Pamplona was in the eighties, stogies instead of bruises and a wineskin.

things that only dollars can buy. They want to live like Americans."

CAN YOU IMAGINE WHAT IS going to happen to the property market in Cuba once the blockade is lifted? Doc, a U.S. citizen originally from California, asks. It's five in the morning after a night of heavy disco and boozing, all of us sitting around a table eating moros y cristianos (black beans and white rice) in the high-walled kitchen of a crumbling mansion in the Miramar district of Havana, west up the coast from Vedado. Doc purchased the spooky

whom Doc met at a disco a few years ago while on an OFAC-licensed medical exchange program with a Havana hospital. Doc is lean and tanned, a widower from California who speaks a lovely slow and fluent Spanish.

"I came down here legally at first," Doc says. "Special license, the whole thing. But this," he waves around at the spacious but grubby kitchen, "this is very illegal, and so is every time I come down here these days. I could apply for a special license, but I don't bother."

Soon after the revolution, the majority of private property in Cuba was nationalized, making the government the biggest landlord in the country. According to Pro-