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Havana On the radar

Entrepreneurs bring new life to Old Havana

With more Cubans being allowed to start up restaurants, hotels and shops, the beautiful colonial quarter is getting a much-needed injection of new blood

- [Top 10 holiday apartments and villas in Havana](#)





📷 Old Havana - new buzz. Photograph: Jon Arnold/Corbis

Claire Boobbyer

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Though being immaculately restored by the government, the colonial streets and squares of Old Havana until recently lacked a certain buzz. But thanks to a recent law that allows more Cubans to run their own businesses, and hot properties in the historic quarter now available to rent from the state, a new wave of self-employed Cubans are opening cafes, shops, restaurants and stylish rental apartments. These openings have accelerated recently, and [Old Havana](#), a Unesco world heritage site, is now lively and resurgent.

“I’m very happy to see the renaissance of Old Havana,” says Lea Díaz Ramírez, whose new deluxe rental apartment, [Suite Havana](#), sits just off handsome Calle Mercaderes. “But, above all, I’m happy to see so many intelligent entrepreneurs realising their dreams. This is only the beginning.”

Among top new addresses is funky [O’Reilly 304](#), offering gin cocktails and great ceviche under the gaze of a pop-art portrait of Amy Winehouse by owner José Carlos Imperatori, and [El Chanchullero](#), a tapas bar serving skewered shrimps, overlooking the under-restoration Plaza del Cristo.





📷 Dulcería Bianchini



A light, budget lunch – something of a rarity in Cuba – can also be found at cute **Dulcería Bianchini**, close to the cathedral, which bakes bite-size quiches. Less light, but still wholesome, **Café Oasis Nelva** delivers savoury crepes on a mezzanine above a pretty flower shop.

Cubans are ever-entrepreneurial, and dual-purpose enterprises are in vogue. At **Piscolabis**, after browsing gifts in the light-filled store, visitors savour coffee by the window. And at **Jacqueline Fumero**, a cafe-cum-boutique on tiny Plazuela del Angel, Death by Chocolate ice-cream shakes give clothes shoppers a sugar fix.

Around the corner, Havana's barber-in-chief, Gilberto Valladares, runs **hair salon**

[Arte Corte](#), decorated with vintage barbers' equipment. This place has been instrumental in the rejuvenation of this northern corner of Old Havana.



📷 The view from Azucar!!! Photograph: Claire Boobyer

Another vibrant Old Havana square is the stunning Plaza Vieja. Earlier this year, [Café Bohemia](#) – a deli inside the 18th-century-frescoed Palacio del Conde Lombillo – opened, offering paninis and cocktails. Opposite (above the alfresco, state-run Café El Escorial) is a new, stylish tapas bar, [Azucar!!!](#) (yes, three exclamation marks!), serving

passion fruit daiquiris under elegant half-moon windows on its balcony; a new, 1950s-style bar is to open shortly.

On another fringe of Old [Havana](#) is the vast former shopping mall **Manzana de Gómez** (built in the early 20th century), which is due to open as a state-run hotel, under Kempinski management, in 2016.

Meanwhile, as well as [Suite Havana](#), more small deluxe accommodation can be found: [La Maison](#) is artfully decorated with Spanish colonial furniture. And last month saw the opening of **Casa Alta**, a stylish but affordable B&B with five en suite rooms (£19-25 a night, Calle San Ignacio 412 e/Sol y Muralla, +53 53 07 02 20)... that is, if you've got time to sleep now that newly revived Old Havana has so many temptations.

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