

Travel

Edited by Jane Memmler

CRUISE SPECIAL

ANNA SELBY checks out Hemingway's old haunts as Cuba finally welcomes cruise ships

I'M SITTING cradling a mojito cocktail in Plaza Vieja. There's a three-man band playing salsa, a street vendor selling roasted peanuts in paper cones and a man smoking what appears to be – but isn't – a giant joke cigar. It's hot and it's humid. This could only be Cuba.

The Caribbean island has long been off the beaten track for cruise ships (although that's changing now that restrictions have eased). Yet it is still a star attraction and was the only port on my voyage deemed worthy of a two-day stay.

And what a stay. The minute I step off the ship I find myself right in the middle of Cuba's lively capital, Havana.

As I sip that mojito, I gaze at other tables in the old town, Havana Vieja. It is all narrow streets and crumbling Spanish colonial buildings gradually reclaiming their former glory, where people sit around huge glass beer urns with four taps and fill their own glasses.

There are hair-braiders breaking into salsa steps, people selling street food, including coconut ice (half a frozen coconut) and women dressed in neon-coloured Creole dress.

I could people-watch forever but in the end I drag myself away to the book market, which is selling communist tracts and old copies of Ernest Hemingway's *El Viejo Y El Mar* (The Old Man And The Sea), his novel about an ageing Cuban fisherman. It made Hemingway Cuba's favourite American

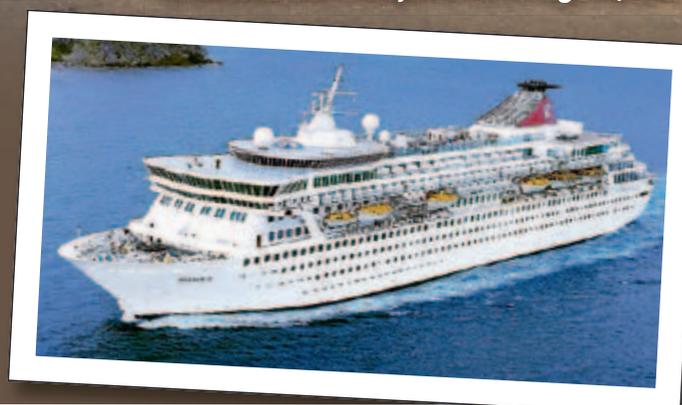
so it seems churlish not to take a tour of his favourite bars. La Bodeguita del Medio is something of a shrine to him, as well as patrons such as Nat King Cole and Marlene Dietrich.

It was where the mojito was invented. On the wall I can see Hemingway's scrawled approval: "My mojito in La Bodeguita, my daiquiri in El Floridita" (another favourite bar). He lived for a while in the Hotel Ambos Mundos, (room 511) and Finca La Vigía (the Lookout) was his sprawling colonial house where the books he was reading are still at his bedside and the liquor bottles stand



LIVELY: The Balmoral, below, gives passengers two days in Cuba to enjoy the bustling streets of Havana and a mojito in La Bodeguita, inset

Joining the mainstream



that Hemingway would have approved of the Art Deco touches were he to have sat on a stool at the Lido Bar, looking over the rear pool.

I'm doing cruising as it used to be done, all the way from Europe to the Caribbean and back again. And that means plenty of days at sea. There is a daily programme of events to keep us amused – everything from yoga and shuffleboard to thrice-daily quizzes. Fred.Olsen always likes to throw in something unusual, too, and on this cruise there are two new ones on me.

The first is a ukulele orchestra – there's a class on board each sea day and by the end (so the teacher optimistically promises), I will be good enough to perform in a concert for my fellow passengers. I gave it a try and, for a moment, I thought I might be able to play the uke version of Beethoven's Ode

To Joy as my new party piece. However, I don't think I'm a natural George Formby, although it may have been because there is no lamppost to lean against, and I didn't have the courage to try it on a street corner in Havana.

I fare much better with England's earliest form of social dancing. It dates from the start of the 1800s and is the kind Jane Austen would have enjoyed in the assembly rooms at Bath. Probably, although it is not quite the same as there are – aren't there always – more women who want to dance than men.

Balmoral is the perfect way to do this trip; its Britishness adds a truly colonial element to the destinations. The grand Ballindalloch and the intimate Spey restaurants have Scottish names and much of the ship has a cosy, Highland feel. It is a wild contrast to

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half-empty on the table. He might just have stepped outside for a moment; in reality it was 60 years ago. In fact, my cruise has the air of something from long ago, albeit with all mod cons. I'm on Balmoral, a small ship of the very traditional Fred.Olsen fleet. Definitely no water parks or rows of restaurants at an extra charge, just timeless style for 1,300 guests. I like to think

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