

INTO THE GROOVE

A NEW WAVE OF ORIGINAL GUESTHOUSES IS GETTING UNDER THE SKIN OF CUBA'S CAPITAL

Not long ago, a stay in Havana meant a choice between a run-of-the-mill government hotel and the spare bedroom in an *abuelita's* home. But a 2014 foreign-investment law that encouraged joint ventures between native partners and outsiders paved the way for more exciting boltholes as well as big-name imports such as Kempinski. Still, these were slow to roll out, hindered by the flip-flop in USA-Cuba relations. Phil Winser and Jamie McDonald, key players in New York (Winser with The Fat Radish; McDonald with upstate's The Brampton), saw the gap in the market. 'We were blown away by the raw beauty of the city,' says McDonald, 'but few places offered a local experience without giving up modern comforts.'

After testing the waters with Twins, two whitewashed, mid-century apartments with Old Havana views, they opened mini-hotel Gardens Havana last year, taking over a crumbling townhouse near bar-packed Plaza del Cristo. They worked closely with neighbourhood artisans to craft the furniture and restore the building's colourful tilework. Now, the four bedrooms, palm-shaded courtyard, peaceful reading room and lobby with its grand piano encapsulate old-world Cuban charm. Guests also get access to a secret online guide with insider spots, including El del Frente's rooftop bar, arty café HAV Coffee and club-gallery Fábrica de Arte Cubano, to fully tap into the city's evolving scene. CHRIS SCHALKX gardenshavana.com. From about £195 per floor (two bedrooms)

Clockwise from top left: balcony and dining room, both at Gardens Havana; houmous sandwich and storefront at HAV Coffee; living room, courtyard, lobby and tiled bathroom, all at Gardens Havana

