

# Varadero

## Cuba's Source of Foreign Currency

> By Habeeb Salloum

"Welcome to Varadero! It's a beautiful resort but it's not Cuba. More tourists are to be found here than Cubans. It's only a showplace for tourists". The young Cuban lady guide explained, as she began to give us an overview of Varadero. Her words, more than volumes of reporters' stories, sum up what the local Cubans think of Varadero - the country's top tourist attraction.

Everything in this resort of some 20,000 inhabitants is geared toward foreign visitors who are offered some of the finest tourist facilities to be found anywhere - a world that Cubans can only dream about. This crowning jewel of the 290 beaches in

Cuba is a special pampered tourist resort. Varadero is the major source of the country's foreign exchange and the government is anxious that tourists are catered for, not gouged or harmed in any way by unscrupulous individuals.

A spread-out town edged by 20 km (12.5 mi) of sugary- white sand, Varadero brings in much of the foreign currency sorely needed by the country. Some time back when the Soviet Union disappeared, Fidel Castro declared that 'Tourism and the



Arenas Blancas Hotel

فندق أريناس بلانكاس



The writer in front of Al Capone's home-now a restaurant

الكاتب أمام منزل آل غابون وقد تحول الآن إلى مطعم



Mallorca Restaurant

مطعم مايوركا

export of medicine will, in the future, satisfy Cuba's need of foreign exchange'. His words were prophetic. For three years in a row more than two million annual visitors to Cuba have brought in some 45% of the country's foreign exchange.

Canada is leading the way in the number of tourists travelling to Cuba followed by the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, Germany, France and Mexico among others. People choose Cuba as a winter destination, because of its exceptional beaches, its health facilities and the safe conditions in the country as well as for its rich history and culture and its social achievements. Crowning all these attributes are its people who are very hospitable and do their best to make visitors comfortable.

Located 144 km (90 mi) east of Havana, this resort is being developed into a first-class holiday spot by joint ventures between the Cuban government and European and Latin American companies - also partners throughout the country in agricultural, commercial, manufacturing and mining projects. Its beaches are bordered by some of the most sophisticated hotels in the Caribbean, almost all under the hospitality-minded eye of European or Canadian management.

If visitors are looking for an economical vacation, the 2 or 3 star abodes are the places to stay. A good number are all-

inclusive and priced fantastically low. They offer tourists much more for their money than any other Caribbean destination.

Yet, hotels are only the periphery to Varadero's appeal. The resort's mile after mile of talcum sand, so fine that it glides like silk across the feet, and the edging clear-blue waters are unsurpassed in the whole of the Western Hemisphere.

Once a hideaway for millionaires, like the DuPonts who banned ordinary Cubans from the beach, the resort today is almost exclusively the domain of thousands of tourists. Gone are the days when one of the top US Mafia leaders were advisers to Batista, the country's long-time dictator. With his cronies and the Mob they ran Cuba and built their luxury villas on Varadero Beach. Among others, the DuPont estate with its impressive villa has been transformed into a tourist spot with an 18-hole golf course.

The majority of the tourists who travel to Varadero are a mixture of peoples from many nations. With their Babel of tongues and cultures, they have made the resort truly cosmopolitan. It is one of the few retreats in the Western Hemisphere where tourists are not mainly Americans - the US has an embargo against the country and its citizens are banned from travelling to the island. However, between 20 to 30 thousand Americans, in defiance of US

policy, annually visit the country. Cuban officials welcome US citizens, mostly coming through Canada and Mexico, with open arms.

Tourism, which today draws some 2 million visitors to Cuba has changed the peoples' lives dramatically. Foreign visitors are largely responsible for the country's survival. After the demise of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s the country's GDP was reduced by 51 %. Tourism covered most of this loss. To make the stay of the sorely needed vacationers more pleasant in the last few years, the black market and prostitution have been drastically reduced due to a government crackdown.

All of Varadero is a tourist playground. The heart of town is crowded with restaurants, and shops. In their midst stands Retiro Josone Park consisting of a large artificial lake with row boats for rent, three restaurants and handicraft stalls.

Rounding off Varadero's many attributes are the safety of tourists, the cleanliness of the resort, and the educated, warm-hearted and friendly inhabitants who love to enjoy themselves. These qualities have made the resort the fourth largest tourist market in Latin America. A Canadian visitor summed all this up saying, "For me Varadero offers, in a gratifying fashion, all I'm looking for in a vacation." ▶

## IF YOU GO

1) Even though still reasonably priced, Cuba has become more expensive for tourists. It is best to take an all-inclusive package deal offered by travel agencies.

2) For transport in Varadero, take taxis. Metered, they cost about CUC15.00 from one end of the resort to the other. They are the best way to get around. Also, there is a sightseeing tour bus that runs the whole length of Varadero - cost CUC5.00 - passengers can get on and off all day with the same ticket. Autos are expensive to rent - starting at CUC85.00 per day and gas is around CUC .90 per litre.

3) In spite of all types of shortages, Cuba is still safe, thefts are rare and tap water is drinkable, even in the villages.

4) The best buys in Cuba are cigars. Beware of black market cigars - they are often not authentic.

5) Cubans are appreciative of gifts, especially soap, English-Spanish dictionaries and all types of clothing - new and used.

6) For Americans wishing to travel to Cuba through Canada, only a passport is needed. USA citizens should not use their credit cards in Cuba.

7) Food in most ordinary Cuban restaurants is quite dull. The meals in peoples' eating-places run from CUC4 to 10.00; good



Drums in the market

طبول في السوق

restaurants charge from CUC10.00 to 30.00 for a meal.

8) Take bug repellent with you to protect against 'no see-ums' insects - their bites are very itchy.

9) The best time to travel to Cuba is from December to the end of April during the dry cool season.

10) Be sure to save CUC25.00 in cash for your departure tax at the airport.

Excursions:

The best way to see the country is to take the offered excursions. My favourites is: Guamá Sugar and history - see the sugarcane fields and a re-created Indian village - cost CUC59.00.



Market along the main street

سوق في الشارع الرئيسي