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## THE BEAT GOES ON

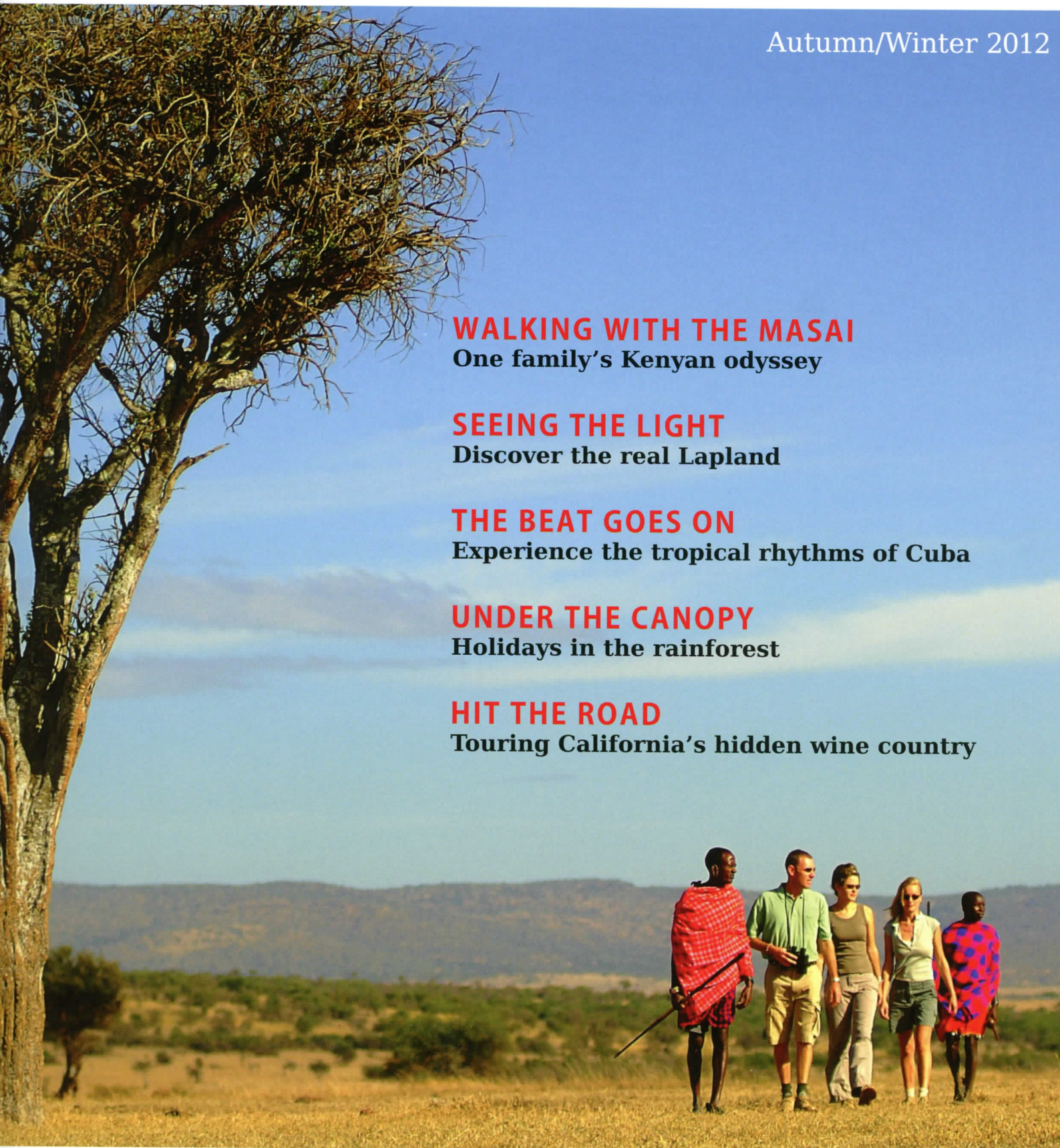
Experience the tropical rhythms of Cuba

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# the beat goes on

Music and dance have been Cuba's strongest links to the outside world during 50 years of isolation. Aided by a mojito or two, **Donna Dailey** succumbs to the rhythm



“

WOULD YOU LIKE TO DRINK SOME RUM?”

Turning away from the boisterous Cuban waving a bottle and calling to us from a shop doorway, I scurry faster across the cobbles of Havana’s rain-drenched Cathedral Square. But he follows, even as we duck down a side street and into Bodeguita del Medio. The place is barely bigger than my kitchen. Our arrival packs it to the gills. There’s a band in one corner belting out traditional Cuban *son*, and our newfound friend, who calls himself Gitano (Gypsy), grabs a pair of maracas and joins in.

This tiny bar is one of the most famous in Cuba. It’s where Ernest Hemingway drank his mojitos, and while the bartender lines up mint-filled glasses along the aged wooden bar and pours us generous measures of the celebrated cocktail, I take in the graffiti-covered walls, the tower of rum bottles, the array of cigars. It’s the perfect spot for my first night in Havana.

The lead singer’s gold chain and earrings flash against his dark skin. His voice climbs higher, the guitars strum louder, the bongos beat faster as the rhythms turn more African. The bartender clinks his wooden muddler (pestle) against a rum bottle in syncopation. Everyone is entranced by the music.

One by one, Gitano grabs the ladies and leads us - pale, jetlagged, full of British inhibitions - in our first salsa steps. I feel awkward, but the music is infectious, the mojitos are kicking in, and the desire to dance - here - quickly overcomes self-consciousness.



**ABOVE** Graffiti and vintage cars  
**RIGHT** Colonial architecture; tobacco plantation

### MUSIC IN THE STREETS

For the past 50 years, music has been Cuba’s strongest link to the outside world. As the heady days of the 1959 Revolution spiralled into increasing isolation from the West, Cuban music seeped out in a joyous stream, transcending politics, morphing into salsa in the streets of New York, and making the Buena Vista Social Club famous. Now tourists are streaming back to the island to find musicians strumming and drumming in every restaurant, bar and square.

By day, Havana’s rhythms are equally multi-layered. On a slow stroll through Habana Vieja, the old town, hot sunlight penetrates the narrow, cobbled streets linking its four main squares. The colonial buildings around them shimmer in a pastel-hued symphony of rounded arches, shaded portals, art nouveau balconies, stone churches, marble fountains and baroque mansions, housing atmospheric cafes, restaurants, museums and boutique hotels. A thrill ride in a Coco Taxi picks up the tempo. I climb into the three-



wheeled yellow pod – essentially a moped mounted with a two-seater shell – and off we roar, careening down the busy streets into Centro Habana. I'm laughing all the way as we swerve past pedal-powered bici-taxis and a host of Chevys, Dodges, Buicks and Fords from the 1950s.

These classic American cars have become a Cuban icon, something of an irony given the US trade embargo. Painted, polished, held together by Soviet parts and sheer ingenuity, they're a symbol of the time warp that engulfs the island. Many operate as taxis, and it's only fitting to board one of these 'Yank tanks' for a visit to the Hotel Nacional, a swanky mafia hang-out in the years before the Revolution.

Refuelled by a mojito in its seaside gardens, I'm soon barrelling along the Malecón in a '54 Plymouth Belvedere convertible, my hair flying in the breeze. Waves crash high over this six-kilometre sea wall as sunset bathes the crumbling harbour facades in a romantic glow, ending my whirlwind tour of Havana on a high note.

I spend the next few days touring the island with our guide, Maikel Moya, and Manolo Castro (no relation to the ruling brothers) of Cuba Real Tours. They are eager to show us everyday Cuban life, and travelling with them opens the shutters on this inscrutable society. As we travel from the idyllic beach at Playa Guardalavaca to the spectacular coral reef at Cayo Santa María via lovely historic towns, snapshots of rural Cuba flash by.

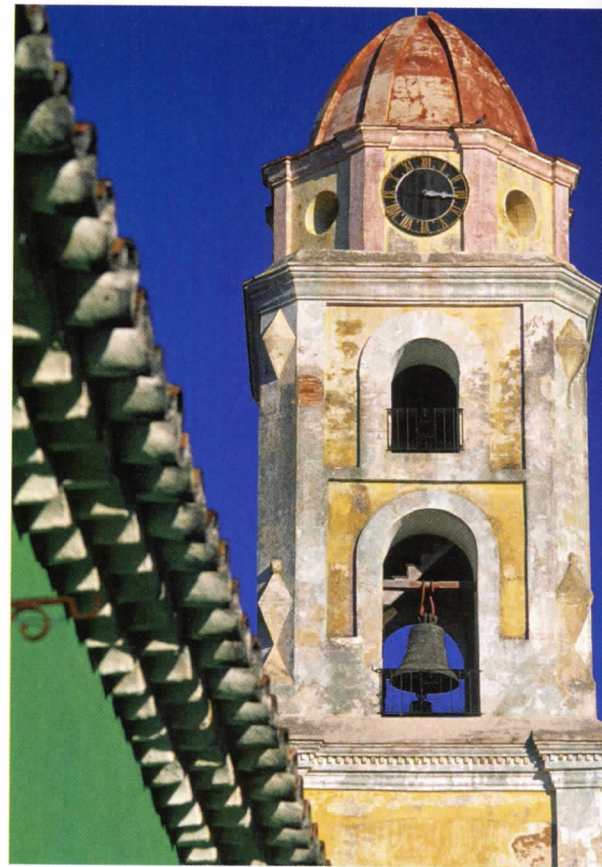
The neat, modest houses have decorative window grilles, big rocking chairs on the front porch and banana plants in the garden. We often slow down to overtake bicycles or horses pulling wooden carts, galloping alongside. At bus stops, locals crowd onto flatbed trucks that transport people, and sometimes pigs and chickens, between districts.

Beneath all this is the rumbling baseline of the socialist system, which orchestrates every aspect of Cuban life. In one town, Manolo shows us a corner shop and the ration books every Cuban receives to buy subsidised staples.

With tourism now its economic mainstay, the government has allowed some fledgling private enterprise, but it has also made life in Cuba a duet. It's not just the dual currency, with the convertible pesos (CUCs) used by foreigners operating alongside the Cuban

*These classic 1950s American cars, 'Yank tanks', have become a Cuban icon, something of an irony given the long-standing US trade embargo*





LEFT Even the police enjoy a cigar while on the job

## WAY TO GO

The author travelled with Cuban specialist **Cuba Real Tours** ([www.cubarealtours.com](http://www.cubarealtours.com)) and Royal Service Cuba ([www.royalservicecuba.com](http://www.royalservicecuba.com)), the luxury division of Meliá Cuba hotels. Cuba Real Tours specialises in custom-designed experiences, from music and dance to the Che Guevara Trail.

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peso. Cars, buses, hotels, guesthouses all have strict rules – some for tourists, some for Cubans. For example, when we dine at paladars, private family-run restaurants which offer excellent food and special ambience, Maikel can't join us. As a state-employed guide, he could lose his licence just for being seen there.

The image of Che Guevara is everywhere. Through the open window of a primary school, I see children wearing red-starred Che berets, a reward for making top marks.

"We all love him," Maikel says. "He is a very important person in Cuba, even today."

Propaganda billboards loom over city buildings and roadside verges. Even the graffiti is organised by the state. Walls and buildings bear neatly lettered socialist slogans or poetic quotes from national heroes. I can't help but compare them to the brash consumerist advertising of the West, nor wonder about their relevance today in a country where basic necessities come so hard.

## DANCING ON THE BRINK OF CHANGE

Cuba is an enigma. You can come here and thoroughly enjoy the beaches and reefs, the cigars, the rum and the music, and never ponder these things. Despite economic hardships, Cubans are friendly, open and genuinely warm. For me, this glimpse of a social system that defied all odds and dances on the brink of change is deeply fascinating. In the colonial gem of Trinidad, we head past the vivid facades to the local Casa de la Trova, house of traditional music. Manolo offers us *canchanchara*, a local drink with rum and honey, and a surprise: salsa lessons.

The women stand in a separate line while a young instructor drills us in the basic step: right foot back, left foot back, right foot in place; then reverse. It's a simple three-step move, repeated in increasingly deft variations.

"Be sure and step the right way," he warns, "or you can kick the boy!"

Then we pair off with the teachers, the band strikes up, and the rhythm takes over. It's much easier, and much more fun, with live music. My Cuban partner doesn't speak much, but whenever I falter he murmurs softly in time, "ba-sic step, ba-sic step" and I'm back on track. Soon, my confidence soars.

On my last day in Cuba, we take the rustic Hershey train to the sugar cane fields outside Havana. On board there's a band, a bar and our old friend Gitano. This time, as we rock and rumble our way down the track, I'm the one playing the maracas. And when Gitano dances me down the aisle, I find I'm right in step. ❶