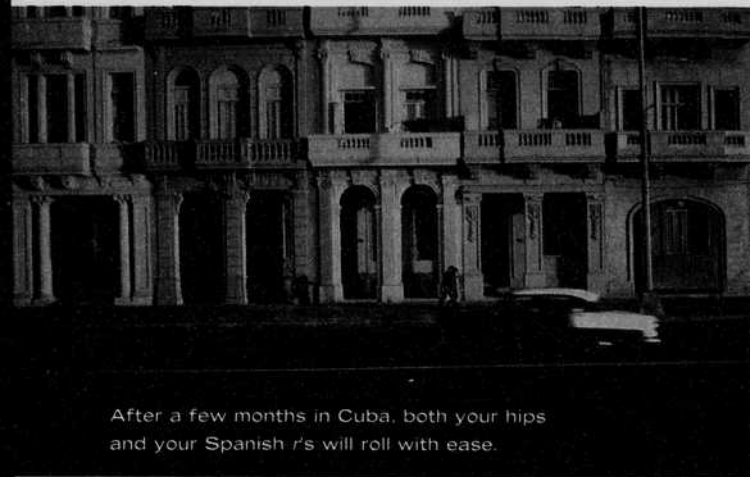


LONDON TRAVEL AGENTS are now marketing "Latin Dance holidays" to Cuba. Large tour groups fly to Havana or Santiago de Chile, live with Cuban families for two weeks, and high-speed it through salsa and Spanish courses. (Dancing is a great way to meet an islander and feel just a little bit Cuban.)

Stay a few months, and not only will both your hips



ROBERT VAN DER HILST/STONE

After a few months in Cuba, both your hips and your Spanish *r*'s will roll with ease.

and your Spanish *r*'s roll more sensuously, you'll see how Fidel Castro ("El Commandante") has transformed the mambo capital of the 1950s into the only enduring communist state. See, for example, that the 1940s-vintage American cars are running on Russian-made engines; that the people celebrating wildly in clubs are sometimes there to forget electricity rations; that the amazing concentration of top-flight bands is due in part to the government National Arts Schools, which begin testing and tracking musicians at age six.

Your quest for the source of salsa music and dancing, the secrets of communism, and perfect Spanish put you at some risk: 10 years in prison and a \$60,000 fine for violating the United States' Trading with the Enemy Act. Of course, that just adds to the excitement of dancing with the enemy. And in fact, of the 65,000 Americans who visited Cuba last year, only about one-fifth did so legally, and no one has ever faced charges.

Budapest, Hungary

WHY NOW: More bohemian than Prague.

HOW TO SPIN IT: "I'm working on the great American novel."

INTERNET STARTUPS, flashy coffeehouses, the lowest rate of unemployment in decades—sounds like Seattle, Boston, or San Francisco. Add blocks of fanciful art

nouveau architecture, public spas, world-class universities, and you're in Budapest. Often called "the Paris of the East," Budapest is arguably the most affordable and inspiring place in Europe to write your magnum opus, compose your sonata, or paint your masterpiece.

You can find an affordable apartment in the city simply by stepping off the train when you arrive. Driving through town, you'll see the buildings, fountains, and spas decorated with the whimsical animals, curlicues, and organic shapes characteristic of the free-spirited art nouveau movement.

If you write, enroll at the esteemed Central European University or simply work in your neighborhood coffeehouse. Budapest's cafés—those meeting places at the core of life for bohemian travelers—recall Hemingway's favorite haunts. Artists, businesspeople, and students linger for hours amid restored fin de siècle decor at places like Central or Gerbeaud. Espresso is served on a silver tray with a glass of carbonated water, a saucer of foamed milk, a monogrammed dark chocolate, and a biscuit on the side.

Not to say that three months in Budapest is all sugar and cream. The Hungarian language is said to be as difficult to learn as Japanese, older Hungarians can seem rude, and the weather can be gray. All the more reason to get to work on that great American novel. ◀

Eric Hansen is an assistant editor at Outside magazine.

HOT FACTS

BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

Cost for three months (camping): ~\$1,200

When to go: Summer

Guidebook: *British Columbia Handbook*, 5th ed. (Moon Travel Handbooks, 2000)

For more info: <http://travel.bc.ca/camping.html>

HAVANA, CUBA

Cost for three months: ~\$1,500

When to go: Anytime

Guidebook: *Cuba Handbook*, 1st ed. (Moon Travel Handbooks, 1997)

For more info: <http://travel.state.gov/cuba.html>

BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

Cost for three months: ~\$1,800

When to go: Spring or fall

Guidebook: *Budapest: A Critical Guide* (available at <http://internetto.hu/light> or in Budapest bookstores)

For more info: www.budapestinfo.hu/en