

Havana's infamous Hotel Nacional de Cuba has seen it all. Countless international celebrities, the rise of the American Mafia in Havana, Castro's revolution and the Cold War. This year the Havana landmark turns 80

Havana's *Grand Dame*

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New Year's Eve, 1958, Havana. The days of the Batista regime are counted, Fidel Castro's revolutionary forces literally at the doorsteps of the Cuban capital. An elegant silver-grey 1957 Chevrolet Impala convertible comes to a screeching halt at the main entrance gate of the Hotel Nacional de Cuba. In the back seat of the car sits a nervous man – Meyer Lansky, kingpin of the American Mafia in Cuba. Lansky's concern: get as much of the Mafia money as possible out of Cuba before the communist mob storms the casinos. Millions are at stake. Lansky's brand-new casino, The Habana Riviera, made US\$3-million in its first season, and the three-year-old casino of the Nacional is doing equally well: the money is burning in the pockets of the mob financier. He tells his Cuban driver, Armando Jaime Casielles, on that evening: 'We've got to make the rounds to all the casinos. We've got to make sure the counting rooms are secure, that the money is secure. You know, the island is going to fall. It could get violent. It could get heated, and we have to protect our assets.'

Flash-forward 52 years and an air-conditioned tour bus with the bright omnipresent logo of Cuba's tourism agency Havanatur stops at the same spot at the roundabout in front of the Nacional as Lansky's car did so many years earlier. On board, guide Ricardo explains the significance of the building: 'This is where the American Mafia met and made their decisions on how to operate in Cuba.' He has his information from a first-hand source. After the victory of the revolution, Lansky's driver Casielles wrote *The Secret Life of Meyer Lansky in Havana*, relaying his experience as a chauffeur of the Mafia: 'The gigantic projects of gaming, drugs and sex; channels of heroin to the United States, and cocaine powder for the consumption of thousands of American tourists who visited the wildest spots in Havana... were condemned to disappear as soon as Batista's tyranny fell apart.'

Gone are Lansky and the American suits and costumes of the decadent '50s; instead, sandal-clad British and Canadian tourists, coming from the all-inclusive resorts of Varadero or Holguin, leave the

tourbuses, being received by the stone-faced underpaid porters of communist Cuba, who deeply depend on the convertible pesos spent by these Western tourists.

Even the famous 426-bed Nacional is not spared by this hunger for tourism money. Making our way to the reception, it takes a while to take in the stark contrast between the Bermuda shorts of the visitors and the old grandeur that this building still breathes. The hotel looks like a palace in the way it majestically perches on a rock, overlooking the skyline of Havana. Designed by the American architect bureau McKim, Mead & White in the 1920s, it displays neo-Moorish styles, dashes of art deco and neoclassical



The Hotel Nacional has not only played host to visiting dignitaries, statesmen and celebrities, it also witnessed a clandestine chauffeur-driven getaway by a Mafia kingpin desperate to keep casino millions away from Castro's revolutionary forces.

elements like its prominent twin towers. The reception hall and its surroundings resemble the cloisters of a cathedral, and, thanks to an expensive US\$64-million restoration in 1992, every building material is the finest: Carrara marble, Seville tiles and tropical cedar wood. The grand dame of hotels still has her style and is ready for her 80th birthday on 30 December 2010. On that occasion, Cubans and international celebrities will once again look back fondly at the hotel's intriguing

history. They will marvel at the portrait pictures of the galleria, the Nacional's own hall of fame, where, sorted by decade, its most prominent guests smile from the marbled walls – Buster Keaton, Winston Churchill, Ava Gardner, Kevin Costner, Diego Maradona, Naomi Campbell and Errol Flynn are just a few of these faces.

Famous stories will be told, like how Johnny Weissmuller (famed as an Olympic swimming gold medalist and Tarzan actor) inaugurated the garden pool



during the hotel opening at the peak of the global depression in 1930 with a jump straight out of his room window. Or how a group of aristocratic Cuban army officers barricaded themselves in the hotel during their uprising against dictator Batista in 1933.

'When the Nacional opened in 1930, the society reporters of the local tabloids had to work for days,' Cuban historian Estela Rivas Vazquez likes to say when she gives tourists a tour of the hotel several times a week. It feels like the ghosts of these glorious days still roam the halls of the Nacional – and,

if you believe British actor Jude Law, quite literally. Law visited the Nacional during Christmas 2007 with his ex-wife, Sadie Frost, and their children. According to Law's own account of events, he surprised Frank Sinatra's ghost while raiding the room's mini-bar. Even though believers said that the actor didn't know that he stayed in the singer's former suite, sceptics point towards the extensive sampling of vintage Cuban rum and Cohiba cigars that Law engaged in before the 'encounter'.

TRAVEL

Ghosts or no ghosts, it requires neither the vivid imagination of an intoxicated Hollywood actor nor a paranormal event to picture Frank Sinatra relaxing with his wife Ava Gardner on the lounge chairs of the hotel garden during their honeymoon in 1951. A glass of Mojito from the outdoor bar in hand, we find the part of the hotel park that Sinatra and Gardner particularly cherished, a spot on the hill which overlooks the Malecon, Havana's oceanfront promenade. And while an electrical storm blows over the city's skyline, all that is missing is Franky Blue Eyes singing 'In the wee small hours of the morning'.

But the Nacional is not only the right place to reminisce about the romantic Frank Sinatra, it's also an important road marker when it comes to the singer's Mafia connections. Sinatra started visiting Cuba in 1946 on the invitation of prominent mobsters living in exile there, including Charlie 'Lucky' Luciano, the Fischetti brothers and, of course, Meyer Lansky himself. On 20 December 1946, a Sinatra concert at the Nacional served as cover for one of the most important events in the history of the American Mafia – a meeting so important that it even got immortalised in a scene of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather II*. Jewish mobster Hyman Roth, a character based on the real-life Meyer Lansky, is having a birthday party in his hotel suite in Havana. 'These are wonderful things that we've achieved in Havana, and there's no limit to where we can go from here. This kind of government knows how to help business, to encourage it. The hotels here are bigger and swankier than any of the rub joints we've put in Vegas, and we can thank our friends in the Cuban government, which has put up half of the cash, with the Teamsters, on a dollar-for-dollar basis; has relaxed restrictions on imports,' Roth boasts.

These lines may be from the *Godfather* script, but every word in it is true and could have been spoken by Lansky at the famous Mafia conference of '46 at the Nacional. Not less than 500 mob leaders took hold of the suites of the hotel, which was closed to ordinary guests during that week. It was the biggest and most important conference of these underworld leaders since the notorious Chicago meeting in 1932. Alibi provider Frank Sinatra arrived with two cousins of Al Capone and two golden cigarette boxes for the guest of honour, Lucky Luciano, who was about to be crowned the king of the Mafia's international operations with his headquarters in Havana. At this conference at the Nacional, mobster banker Meyer Lansky shared with his partners a dark vision for Havana. The city was about to become a

Latin Vegas, a place ruled by drug trade, gambling, prostitution, labour racketeering and extortion.

Lansky's vision quickly became a reality. Casinos, hotels and nightclubs sprouted like mushrooms in Havana after the '46 conference with the Nacional itself getting its own casino in 1955, inaugurated with a grand gala featuring Eartha Kitt. Around 20 percent of the profits were used to finance the Batista dictatorship. By the '50s Havana was teeming with American tourists staying in the mob hotels like the Nacional, gambling, dancing the mambo, watching sex shows and visiting brothels. Some 80 flights from the United States landed

like the Hilton Group or Pan Am and split up the spoils of Cuba. To communist propaganda, it was the perfect proof of how evil capitalism really is. According to English, this era defines the American-Cuban relationship to this day: the deep resentment and hatred. 'This has been used over the many decades, by Castro and others within the revolution, as a kind of a call to arms, a reason why we could never trust the United States government because of its criminal connections and criminal roots,' explains English.

So when the revolutionaries stormed the Nacional and the other mob hotels in 1959 and closed the



casinos not much later, they removed the symbols of the hated lifestyle that brought their movement into being. The mob realised that they would never be able to buy Castro – so the Mafiosi put their profits into big suitcases and fled the country. It was the end of an era. Only once after that did the Nacional make international headlines when, during the missile crisis of 1962, the Cuban army moved its head command into a cave underneath the hotel.

The Nacional fell into a deep slumber from which it only awoke with the restoration in 1992. The communist government had lost its financier, the Soviet Union, and was in desperate need of tourism money. Good news for the hotel, which experienced a resurrection. And even though the glorious days for the grand old dame of Havana's skyline may be over, there is hope for better times, at least from an economic perspective. US president Barack Obama has said that he wants a 'new beginning' with Cuba and, already, tour operators prepare for the return of millions of Americans to the island.

Will there be a new craze of sex, crime and indulgence? At least some travel experts believe so, and say that now is the best time to visit Havana... 'before the Yankees return'. And why not stay in the place that has become a symbol of Havana's history like no other? The Hotel Nacional de Cuba. ^{1B} hotelnacionaldecuba.com

at Havana airport every day. Pan American Airlines, which had a controlling interest in the Nacional, offered round-trip tickets from Miami to Havana for US\$39, promising 'an international swirl of race, language and social class'.

'A flood of tourists, mostly from North America and from Europe, came to Havana, seeing it as one of the great entertainment scenes throughout history in a way because it really was a confluence of a kind of entertainment and a sort of slightly dangerous feel to it, particularly as the revolution began to unfold,' said TJ English, author of the book *Havana Nocturne: How the Mob Owned Cuba, Then Lost it to the Revolution* in a radio interview.

It is this decadence and exploitation of Cuba that fuelled the Castro revolution. They watched how the American Mafia teamed up with legit corporations

Toronto-based Roman Goergen, 39, has worked as a journalist in Europe, South Africa and North America. He recently visited Havana and south-eastern Cuba.