

Notes from Undergr

by Anthony Head / photo by Kirk Weddle

THE BAR AT HOTEL
HAVANA IS SAN
ANTONIO'S BEST-
KEPT SECRET



After many years away, I stumbled into the basement lounge of San Antonio's historic Hotel Havana. Although this subterranean watering hole had been an off-the-radar jewel for years, the boutique hotel above was recently redesigned to feel a bit more upscale. So what happened to the bar? Check out my notes below. And if all the other places I visit in the next 12 months can even come close to matching this bar's character, then 2011 is going to be a wonderful year.

- The Bar at Hotel Havana is a downer—and it's always a good sign when you have to walk downstairs to get to a bar. That means it's either a secret or trying to remain a secret. The Bar can be accessed from its low-key River Walk entrance, or even better, grab the elevator from the hotel lobby. Inside, the elevator car is darker than Castro's views on capitalism because the black upholstered walls absorb much of the small light from above. When the door slides open, you step out and into mid-century Cuba.
- The basement is nearly as dark and captivating as the elevator. Strewn candles and warm ambient lighting lend a certain sexiness to the space, even in the afternoon. There are leather club chairs and velvet couches; the cement walls feature splashes of Caribbean color and décor. It's a relaxing atmosphere, almost like a Cuban speakeasy (except, of course, Cuba had the good sense to not sign on to Prohibition).
- There are no televisions, no arcade games and no bar-top gambling machines. Such devices have their places, but not here. Instead, classic and contemporary Latin-tinged tunes are played at an appropriate level. It's amazing how effortlessly a good conversation can flow without electronic distractions.
- When I ask for a Daiquiri, bartender Paula McConnell replies, "We don't have a blender?" I am about to channel my inner Hemingway for an appropriate rage-filled response, but then I noticed she has already begun making what turns out to be a spectacular authentic Daiquiri. (Head's up: She'll respond the same way if you ask for a Margarita.)
- There's no need to stock a thousand different bottles. A small, well-managed cache of spirits means the bartender can become very familiar with most (if not all) of the selections. In addition to a few carefully chosen mezcals, wines and scotches, there are some great rums—including Treaty Oak Platinum from Texas, 10 Cane from Trinidad and Pyrat from Anguilla.
- This place used to be called Club Cohiba, and it was a popular cigar bar for years. Even though you can't smoke inside anymore, Bar Havana is still classy enough to have the humidor easily accessible near the patio. ■■

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BAR

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