



Seven go painting in Havana

Peter Brown shares his experiences of leading a reader painting holiday to Havana, and reveals the content of his travelling painting kit

In February 2018 year I took my fourth painting trip to Havana. The group consisted of six students, a courier (Jac) and me. I always say I am not a teacher and the trip is billed as 'paint alongside' rather than instructional. I am happy for people to watch me paint as much as they like and, of course, I am more than willing to share any tips. I am keen that people

get something out of their trip and am always happy to help to offer ideas on how to progress if they get stuck. Unfortunately, as many of the participants will tell you, this advice is usually just 'paint what you see, not what you think you see'. Some students stick to me like a limpet, others come and go and some may work entirely on their own.

▲ *School Run, Consulado, Havana, oil on board, 12×16in (30.5×40.5cm). I returned to finish this one on the last morning. If you don't finish them while you're there it's unlikely you ever will*



'Sunrises are all about anticipation and keying down tone, ready for when it appears – ping!'

that I was impacting on his trade. It's always good to ask first, but most street corners are fine.

As usual the trip began with a tour. The local guides we use for these first day recces rarely understand that we want to get painting as we follow, palms itching, listening to local history. There always seems to be a misunderstanding of what they think we should paint and what we actually want to paint: the old fort wall and canons versus a crumbling dusty door way.

The painting was intense, particularly the first one, and I found myself getting involved in high detail. I would say it's my comfort zone but it is really hard work and not really comfortable at all. The detail is a confidence thing: 'That view looks good. Put it all in and the painting will look good.' When people strike poses, like the guy with the bike (far right), it's great to try to catch them. It makes it so much more real than figures walking towards you or away.

Under the radar

You meet so many people, particularly artists, who want to show you their work and studios. We were low on

turpentine, which is banned in Havana. The medium can often be a problem when travelling – in India you end up with what is basically petrol; Jac managed to source some here that was similar and horrible to have around, particularly in your room. After a scary motorcycle ride across the city, she found herself in a dark alley, filling a small bottle of 'turps' as the vendors checked anxiously for anyone watching.

I, however, was invited to Lionel's studio (right), which was spacious with high ceilings. Lionel showed me his super real landscapes in various states of glazing as his girlfriend chatted, bursting with pride. They told me of their plans to convert the studio into a gallery café and I promised to revisit next trip. They gave me over two litres of turpentine, for which they refused to accept any money. That lunchtime, our medium worries over, everyone relaxed a little.

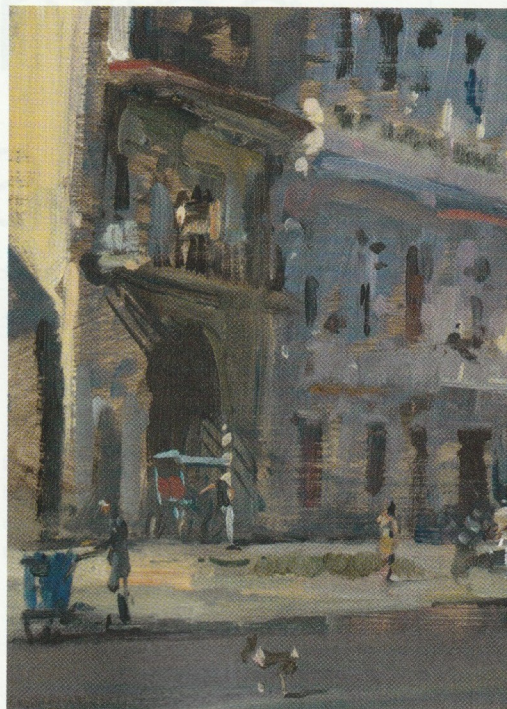
After a day's painting – two or three long sessions – you are exhausted. But in Havana the light does not give up and it's hard to ignore. I was walking back when I saw a street (not shown) that I painted over the course of an

▲ *Sunrise, Havana*, oil on board 8×12in (20.5×30.5cm).

One of the group suggested we paint a sunrise – hence this rapid impression

▼ *Morning, Cuba Tacón*, oil on board 8×24in (20.5×61cm).

A wide vista; the large arched entrance on the left of the painting is the entrance to Lionel's studio



► *O'Reilly, Havana, oil on board, 16×12in (40.5×30.5cm).*

This was the first scene I painted after our tour. It was great to capture the cyclist who stopped to pose

hour with a little bit of anticipation (where the sun would be) and, as the shadows lengthened, a little memory (where the sun had been).

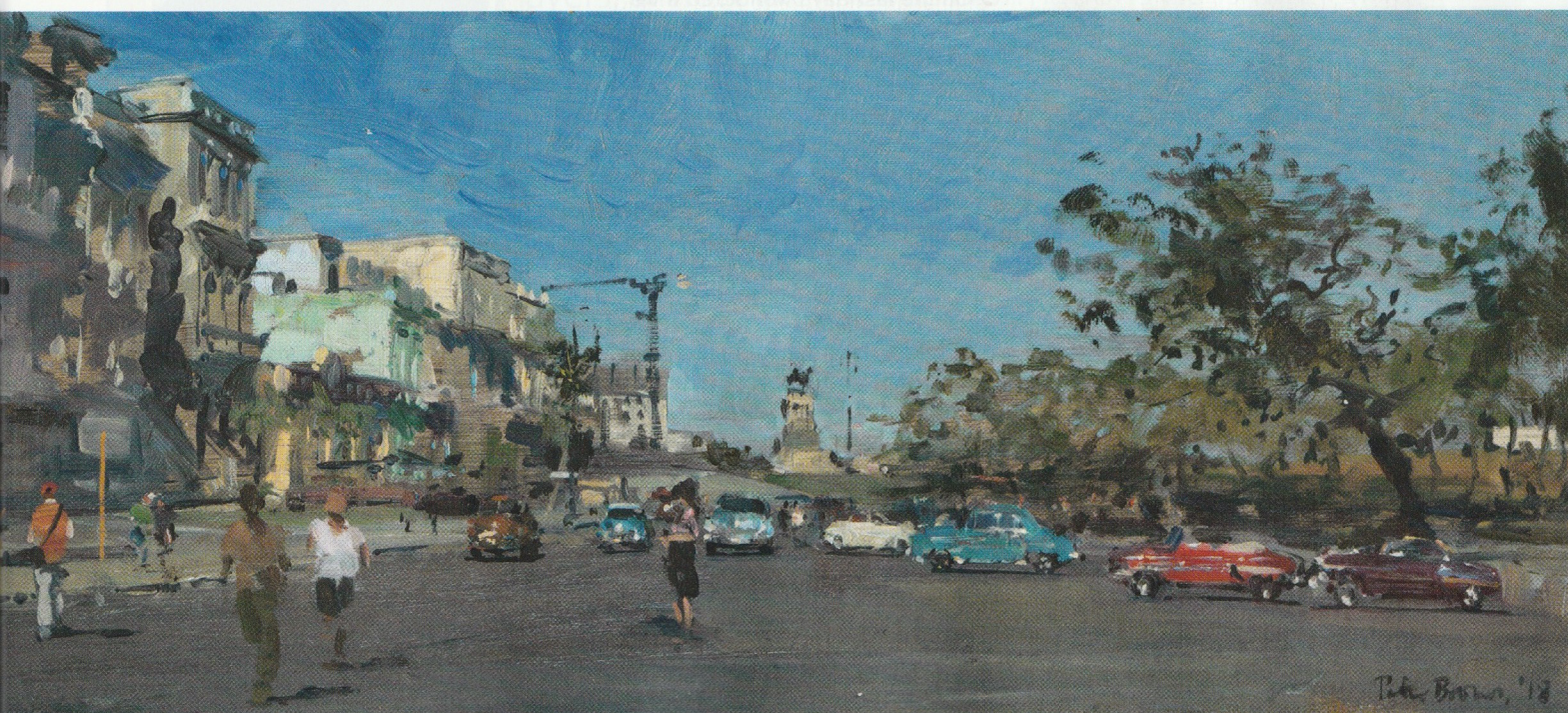
No shortage of subjects

Although obsessed with painting streets I can be open to suggestion. Three students persuaded me to do a sunrise (left). Sunrises are all about anticipation and keying down tone, ready for when it appears – ping! I just want a bit more in a painting, I guess. But we did it! In India, Patrick Cullen and I used to meet to paint sunrises over the Ganges at 5.30am (see *The Artist* May 2016 issue).

The next suggestion from the group came towards the end of the holiday. It was to paint the amazing cars, and I was a bit more into this than the sunrise. I had a few street scenes under my belt so I thought fine, let's do it.

We painted the rank where the cars line up and tout for tourists. It was incredible fun! You had to stand in the burning sun and paint the light glinting off the chrome, working on a car at a time, willing it not to be taken by a tourist (page 16). We spent two days doing that and I wished I had been persuaded earlier.

The school kids were really inquisitive



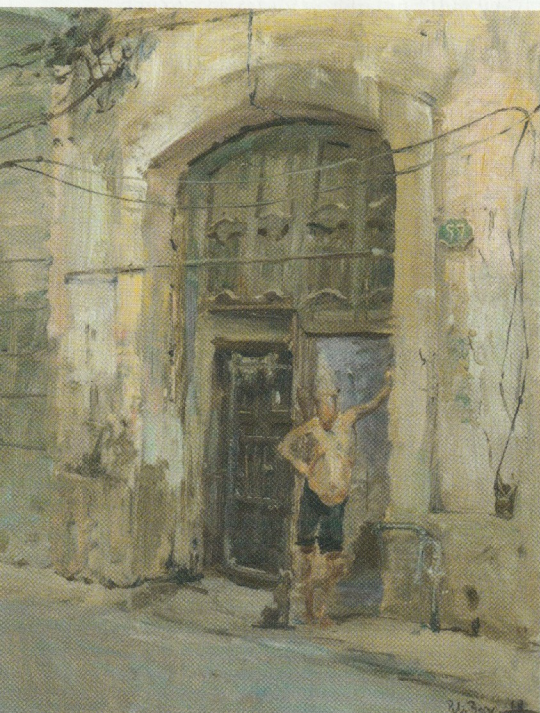


▲ *Red, White and Blue, Havana*, oil on board, 12×16in (30.5×40.5cm).

Another suggestion from the group was to paint the cars

▼ *Talking to the Cat, 57 Cuarteles, Havana*, oil on board, 16×12in (40.5×30.5cm).

On the last day we painted in Calle Cuarteles, one of our favourite streets. This local did not seem to mind



and at one point my friend Steve and I made the mistake of giving them some paint and a brush or two, which they then proceeded to use to paint a nearby garage door (page 13). The trouble is, they also managed to get oil paint all over their immaculate shirts. When we realised this, and before their mothers found out, we packed up and left.

On the last day I wondered if we should look at more intimate subjects and we spent the day on one of our favourite roads, which luckily was where our favourite bar was located. The front doors were fantastic – they had real character and we set up close to one another. It felt a little intrusive to be painting the entrance to someone's home but the man who stopped in the doorway, leaning against the frame (left) did not mind, although he laughed when he saw the picture, pointing to his belly. At one point I was amazed to see two American tourists, cameras around their necks, simply walk in. They appeared two minutes later, seemingly oblivious to the fact they had just photographed the interior of someone's home. Clearly I worry too much.

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For details of Pete's next reader painting holiday to Istanbul in April/May 2019, see page 2



Peter Brown

is president of the New English Art Club, an honorary member of the Royal Society of British Artists, a member of the Royal Institute of Oil Painters, the Pastel Society and Bath Society of Artists. His many awards include The Prince of Wales Award for Portrait Drawing, 2008. He is represented by Messums, London, www.messums.com. Peter is showing his *Havana, Vietnam and New York Paintings* at the Brian Sinfield Gallery, from September 16 to 30; for more information, and for details of Pete's many books and DVDs, see www.petethestreet.com

Learn more about Peter's painting processes and painting en plein air in this video clip: <https://painte.rs/2MyINM8>

PETE'S EQUIPMENT

- **Easel/paint box:** I use a Mabef full-size or half box easel with a strap. I carry paints and medium in a tool box, although you should be able to fit it all in the box easel.
- **Artists' oil colours** in yellow ochre; raw umber; madder brown; transparent oxide (or burnt sienna); ultramarine blue (maybe a Prussian blue); Payne's grey or blue black; sap green (naughty); viridian; terre verte; umber green (I call this invisible green – it practically disappears); alizarin; cadmiums red, orange and yellow; lemon yellow; titanium white. I also have brilliant pink (Old Holland).
- **Range of filbert-type hog-hair brushes** – maybe a small long flat or two, and a nylon soft round for detail on board.
- **Roberson's glaze** medium (not matt).
- **Turpentine** – I now use Zest it. I take 2×500cl, carefully packed in my main luggage. I usually have to find more during the trip.
- Good supply of rags.
- Palette knife and dipper.
- Jam jar for turps.
- **Boards:** MDF 2mm, primed with three coats of acrylic gesso and a dirty mid-tone oil wash for a ground. Sizes I use are 6×12in, 8×10in, 10×12in, 12×16in, 8×24in. I pack five for each day – this is way too much but I am a bit mad! I also may take a 20×25in canvas or two.
- Spare wing nuts for the easels – these always go missing.
- **Sketchbooks:** an A4 'Cachet' by Daler-Rowney and an A3 size. These are buff and have a smooth surface to draw on.
- **2H, HB and 2B pencils;** putty rubber and sharpener, for diary notes and the odd sketch.



▲ *After School, Obrapia, Havana, oil on board, 16×12in (40.5×30.5cm).*
We lent our paints and brushes to some school children

'In Havana the days are nicely punctuated with rum cocktails – daiquiris, piña coladas and Cuba libres – punchy, sweet and ice cold'

First-day enthusiasm

We ate breakfast in the hotel and dinner at a different restaurant each night and, if we found ourselves together at midday, perhaps a bit of lunch as well. In Havana the days are nicely punctuated with rum cocktails – daiquiris, piña coladas and Cuba libres – punchy, sweet and ice cold.

I tried to relax and go with the flow

but along with some of the students, I couldn't wait to get painting. The saying that to paint you step out of your front door turn left and start painting is so true – four of us snuck out pre-breakfast on day one to 'get one under our belts'. We caught the school run (above left). School children in Havana are dressed immaculately, all the same: crisp white shirts with neckerchiefs (blue or red),

and shorts or skirts, the colour denoting their level – burgundy (elementary) or ochre (junior).

It's good to get out there. You stir quite an interest and realise quickly that the people are very nice and pleased to see you. Only once did I annoy a shopkeeper, when I planted myself in front of his hardware shop in Udaipur. It was such a cramped space