
The Vigía estate, now the Hemingway Museum

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Ancient trees guard the entrance to the Vigía, Hemingway's splendid home in Havana for two decades. Photo: Mireya Castañeda

Summer means vacations, relaxation, learning... and adventure. All of this is to be found at the Vigía estate, the Havana residence of U.S. novelist Ernest Hemingway, 1954 Nobel Prize for Literature winner.

The estate, today the Hemingway Museum, has that mysterious attraction of places where great artists have been able to create, that I discovered in Klin, where Tchaikovsky composed; in Yasnaya Polyana, Tolstoy's home; and more recently in Granada, at San Vicente farm, so special to García Lorca.

I have returned many times to the home of the author who penned works of universal appeal – *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) – located in San Francisco de Paula, 15 kilometers from the center of Havana, not only because of its beauty, but for the fascination that emanates from a place that still seems to be waiting for the writer to reappear.

THE HILL

In a 1952 letter to his friend Karl Wilson, Hemingway wrote, "I've always had good luck writing in Cuba. I moved here from Key West in 1938 and rented this estate. I bought it when I sold *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). It's a good place to work because it's outside the city and sitting on a hill."

The home has become a museum devoted to a key figure in modern literature, with a personal style of brief, clear dialogue: Ernest Hemingway (Oak Park, Illinois; July 21, 1899 - Ketchum, Idaho; July 2, 1961). Photo: Mireya Castañeda

The Vigía is in fact located on a rise that was once the site of a Spanish colonial army observation station. Thus its name, which means sentry. In 1887, it became the property of Miguel Pascual Baguer, a Catalan architect, who

built the spacious, breezy house, in which he lived until 1903. Among the subsequent owners was the Frenchman Joseph D'Orn Duchamp, who rented it as a vacation home.

In 1939, Martha Gellhorn, Hemingway's third spouse, discovered the Vigía in a Havana newspaper's classified ads and convinced Hemingway to leave the Ambos Mundos Hotel, and move to the city's outskirts. In 1940, they bought it for \$12,500, but it would be Mary Welsh, who married the author in 1946 to become his fourth and last wife, who made the Vigía the splendid place we know today.

THE MUSEUM-HOME

Visitors are not permitted to enter the house, but it is surrounded by a veranda, allowing a full view into Hemingway's personal, private world through the many windows and doors. You can see the different rooms, first the main living room where the bull-fight paintings by Spanish artist Roberto Domingo hang; Hemingway's favorite chair beside a small bar; his collection of more than 900 records; and the dining room in the style of a Spanish tavern, with rustic furniture designed by Mary Welsh and constructed by carpenters in San Francisco de Paula.

On the library's shelves are more than 9,000 books, magazines, and other publications – 2,000 of which are underlined, with notes in the margins – placed according to Hemingway's taste, regardless of author, subject, or genre.

Taking center stage in the author's office is his Royal Arrow typewriter. This is where, standing up as he liked, he wrote *Islands in the Stream*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *The Old man and the Sea*, which won him the Nobel Prize in 1954 and was dedicated to the Cuban people. He left the medal in the Santiago Sanctuary of Cuba's patron saint, the Virgen de la Caridad de El Cobre.

The indiscreet can peek into the bathroom and see a bookshelf, a magazine rack, and the scale on which he weighed himself every day.

The observation tower, on the left side of the back of the house, was added in 1947. It has three floors, and on the third is a typewriter, a chaise lounge, a rug, and a telescope, to enjoy the panoramic view of the city.

On the estate's four hectares of grounds is a pool, where Hemingway would swim at the end of his workday –and where Hollywood star Ava Gardner once took a dip –a cock-fighting ring, a tennis court, and even a baseball field.

A must-see is the replica of his yacht, the *Pilar*, which he took deep-sea fishing into the Gulf Stream, and into legend, since they say he pursued a German submarine aboard this boat during WWII. (Hemingway now has an international fishing tournament to his name.)

THE END

Hemingway left the house in 1960, with the clear intention of returning. He put his desk in order, placing the typewriter on a copy of *Who's Who in America*; and left a couple of sharpened pencils at the ready, plus a dozen sheets of "superior quality" carbon paper, still in the box.

He traveled to Spain to see the running of the bulls, but feeling sick, went to the United States where he was hospitalized. He killed himself with a gunshot in Ketchum, Idaho, in 1961.

A few weeks after the author's death, his widow Mary Welsh came to Havana to collect a few items of value and donate the house to the Cuban people with the majority of its contents, in accordance with Hemingway's final wishes. Since 1962, it has functioned as the Museo Finca Vigía.

Ernest Hemingway made his first trip to Cuba in 1932, and left his mark at the Ambos Mundo Hotel, where his room remains intact, and at the Floridita and Bodeguita del Medio bars. He is always quoted as saying, "My daiquiri at the Floridita, and my mojito at the Bodeguita."

Clearly the most important stop for those following the footsteps of the great novelist in Havana is the Vigía estate, where he lived from 1939 until 1960, to feel the mystery of creation that emanates from his home. A special adventure that brings us a little closer to the life of Ernest Hemingway and sends us back to read his work again.

