

Cuba – An Exploration of its People and Culture

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The past is the past and what is now will change.

By

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Cuba is just 90 miles off the coast of the United States yet it seems a world away. In 2004/05 I scheduled a trip to Cuba with the Costume Society of America, but the relations between Cuba and the United States deteriorated and all people to people exchanges were canceled. Ten years later I seized this chance to travel to Cuba “a country caught in the past” and experience the country for myself.

Recent reforms in Cuba and in our own government have made limited travel within Cuba a possibility. Under a special license by the U. S. Dept. of Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, travel companies e.g. Collette Vacations, Road Scholar, or professionals in combination with travel companies, can offer this travel opportunity to visit our neighbors to the south. Through Collette Vacations, I participated in an educational excursion designed to build a bridge between our peoples with a group of 12 adults from Burlington County, NJ. Through daily encounters with Cubans from all walks of life and visits to their most important social, religious, and cultural institutions, a picture of Cuba emerged. We appreciated the heritage and history of the 3 UNESCO World Heritage sites (Cienfuegos, Trinidad, Havana’s Landmark Hotel, Nacional de Cuba) visited and pondered various issues which affect Cuba’s future.

There were panoramic views of the mountains and beautiful beaches, but contrasted by the decaying buildings in the cities and villages. Beyond the tourist areas, there was evidence of a lack of funds for infrastructure: dirt side streets, roads with potholes, and broken sidewalks in the city.

The government appears to control everything. Road-side bulletin boards were covered in political messages. Yet, there was not a heavy military or police presence. There were no arm guards at the airport as in many countries

Highlights of my experiences

Havana

At the National Museum of Fine Arts–Mused Nacional De Bellas Artes enjoyed a presentation by art historian. This museum contains the largest collection of Cuban art spanning the colonial, modern, and contemporary periods. The guide focused the walking gallery tour on artwork created in the 50’s and 60’s by the gay artisans.

At Casa Fuster, a showplace of outdoor art, we had a look at the work and life of Cuban artist Jose Fuster a well-known painter and ceramist. The son of Jose Fuster welcomed us to the colorful mosaic village of 80 houses and Fuster’s studio home in the barrio of Jaimanitas on the outskirts of Havana.

The little village of Cojimar on the coast to Finca La Vigia was where Ernest Hemingway, created his final masterpiece, *The Old Man and the Sea* and his “yacht” (broken old boat), *Pilar*, which was featured in his novel, *Islands in the Stream*.

At the Literacy Museum the director spoke about the mass literacy campaign in 1961, (barely two years after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution) that has few parallels in the twentieth century history. The national Literacy Campaign effort was to reach the most rural communities. The glass display cases showcased the letters to Fidel Castro and the final testaments to learning letters to Fidel Castro. The museum had a mannequin dressed in a youth participant’s uniform. Their model program has since been influential in national literacy campaigns in Chile, Nicaragua, Colombia and El Salvador, and most recently in East Timor and Venezuela. As I listened to the director expound on the campaign (which lasted one year) and today’s world wide program, *YES, I CAN* I sensed her profound pride as well as telling us “see how great we are in Cuba”.

We had a pleasant exchange with the men and women at the Santovenia Elderly Center residence. The men were smoking their Cuban cigars, and others were in the Catholic chapel saying the rosary before Mass. Our guide was an elderly man who

showed us around the facility including the library to the dormitory bedrooms. Before we left we gave Catholic nun dressed in a white habit, a gift of shampoos, soaps, pens and Cuba Convertible Pesos.

Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes "San Alejandro" is the oldest and most prestigious fine arts school in Cuba. It is located in Marianao a suburb of Havana. It was founded in 1818 by the French painter, Jean Baptiste Vermay. It is located in a monumental building built in the early 1940s thus showing not only its age but the lack of maintenance and care. San Alejandro is a post-secondary school for aspiring artists. The talented students were friendly and joked among their fellow students. As we toured the facility one could not help notice the limited supply of materials. The supply table had about 20 tubes of paints. The students recycle frames and canvas. In one studio they were making jewelry and the other graphic art posters using old equipment with a traditional method.

We made an unofficial stop at an elementary school (had to stay outside the building and one of the few places where we were not allow to take photographs of the children nor teachers). This short visit with about 8 students and 7 teachers and the principal (all on the porch with our group) was pleasant. The purpose for the stop was to deliver various school supplies (pens, note paper, crayons, etc.) which one of the travelers presented to the principal. There were thoughts of what is the future for these bright English speaking students?

To my disappointment many of the souvenirs in the market place were made outside of Cuba. At many of sites locals were selling their handiworks from embroidered handchief to a soda can recycled into a play camera, jewelry and hats. There were many paintings for sale of daily life of Cubans created by local artists. One favorite souvenir was a 3 inch artistic metal coffee pot made by Yami Martinez.

No matter where musicians played during lunch and dinner, in the streets, and in the concert hall. Cantar De Cantores, a choral group, sang for us in concert in the City Hall of Cienfuegos. They entertained the Americans by singing some of our favorite songs.

Hotel Nacional de Cuba was the venue for the Buena Vista Social Club's show of the revival of traditional Cuban music. The "Buena Vista Social Club" name is an umbrella term to describe the performances of traditional sounds of Cuba's "musical golden age" between the 1930s and 1950s. Having a front seat was perfect to view the couple's several outstanding "salsa" dance performances, and to be part of the lively and certainly entertaining show. This evening was highlight of what it would have been like in the glamor days of the past.

A driving around Havana in the Chinese made motor coach was like driving around a major city – the beautiful houses in the Miramar section and the crumpling and rundown buildings in other sections of the city. One can see for themselves the extensive wealth of the pre-revolutionary Cuba. Restoration of the buildings is taking place but is a slow progress due to economic factors on the country. There are close to 150 buildings dating from the 16th and 17th centuries that have been handsomely preserved while many others have been left to crumble.

Cuban car owners take great pride in carefully tending their classic American vehicles of the late 1950's, called "yank tanks". The cars from the 40's, but mostly from the 50's on the streets of Havana range from the old beat up cars to the shining classic car at any USA car show and every variation in-between. There are many newer vehicles on the road especially in Havana. I did see a policeman stop a "yank tank" taxi and give him a ticket. Reason- don't know and was not about to go over and ask why. The best and most fun experience which brought back lots of memories was riding in the "yank tanks".

Some of the members of the group purchased "made up souvenir license plates"- meaning not the real license plates issued by the government. Most of the cars are owned by the government and the license plates are coded by color and letters to let the inspectors know "who you are". Caramel, black and white, maroon, red,(government, journalists, rental, etc.,) and yellow(plates on a car owned by ordinary Cubans). The numbers tell what province the car is registered, and if it is state or private owned.

How can one leave Cuba without dancing the salas? A fun activity and important to the culture was learning the national dance, Casino Salsa, from two very enthusiastic young teachers.

Optional event was a night at the world famous cabaret Tropicana having no roof so every performance is under the stars. It was a pleasant surprise to look up and see stars after having entered into a building under flashing lights marking the entry. This show is a holdover from the pre Castro days with its nightly extravagance of Afro-Cuban music and dance featuring young beautiful showgirls and handsome muscular men with staging directly out of the 1940s. Having a seat at the stage it was a close up view of the performers as well as seeing how their fancy handmade costumes were constructed. This was the perfect place to enjoy a drink of the famous Havana Club rum.

I saw posters, "Obama free the five". I am not a student of political sciences so I began to think about whom the five were and why are they in prison. While in Havana one prisoner was released. The "Missile crisis" of October 1962 has faded and trying to understand the very complex history of Cuba with the US as well as the relationships with Russia is complicated and there are two versions to the events between the Cuban and US governments theirs and ours.

Cienfuegos

Cienfuegos is known as The Pearl of the South. The original nucleus of the city was declared to be a part of the world heritage by UNESCO in 2006. Jagua Bay is one of the most beautiful bays in Cuba.

The Cienfuegos Province, Botanical Gardens, the oldest of its kind on the island, has ties to Harvard University. It was founded in 1902 where once stood a sugar mill as a research center for sugar production a major crop in the Cuba economy. During the informative walking tour, the botanist/ tour guide explained each and every major tree and flower on the walk.

The typical Cuban cigar factory and life of a cigar worker is from 7:30 am to 4:00 pm. The women who are making hand roll cigars are working in a beautiful colonial building that has been used for many other purposes before becoming a cigar factory. All the work in making these famous cigars is done by hand – first the stripping of the major vein of the tobacco leaf, second, the separation of the leaves by color and size, third the rolling of the each cigar using fillers or large leaves, and finally, checking the quality of each cigar produced. At the end of our visit, the women workers asked for candy.

A walk on The Prado Promenade, the longest avenue of its kind in Cuba, stopping at various stores and talking with the sales people was a way of offering our hand in friendship. A young woman asked for a pen. Asking her permission to take her photo, she gathered another sales girl and an elderly woman to join in the photo.

Trinidad

Trinidad is famous for its cobblestone streets and pastel colored houses with wooden balustrades, large windows, and unbroken balconies. The original nucleus of the city and Sugar Mill Valley were declared to be part of world heritage by UNESCO. This important seacoast town was founded in 1514. In front of the Public Square, the Old Cathedral was opened for a visit which retained the original splendor if you looked beyond the years. A walk in the park found young children with their parents sitting on dog statues. Along the way, we listened to first of many Cuban bands playing traditional music.

At the Palacio Cantero, the city's history museum, housed in a restored former Neoclassical home, the docent guided us through the history of area including the African slaves who worked on the sugar plantation. Manaca Iznaga is a former sugar plantation's estate, located in the beautiful "Valle de los Ingenios" or the "Valley of the Sugar Mills". From the steps of the Manacaizanga Tower, a well preserved building, the overseers kept an eye on the slaves working in the cane fields and would ring the bell for the start and end of the work day. A large bell manufactured in New York, USA and displayed in the main hall was one of the bells used on the sugar plantation.

El Alfarero Casa Chichi is a family owned pottery shop and ceramic studio. We not only enjoyed the pottery demonstration but many had a refreshing drink (rum based of course) in the pottery cups made in the studio.

In the town of Playa Giron, stands the Bay of Pigs Museum. The exhibits are telling about major events of the Cold War and the "Victory of Giron" as it is locally known, impacted Cuba. The military weapons, strategic plans for invasion and much more

tells about the 1961 historic clash between CIA trained Cuban exiles and rebel forces, an event that defines US-Cuba relations until today.

At the last hour on the last day in Cuba, we had a lecture about the policies between the U. S. and Cuba led by a former Cuban diplomat Camilo Garcia Lopez-Trigo. As I read other reports from travelers to Cuba, this lecturer is the chosen NGO representative to speak to groups from the USA. His power point presentation began with US Secretary of State in 1823, John Quincy Adams and the involvement of the United States up to the time of Fidel Castro.

One of nature's interesting spots was La Cueva de los Peces, which is named for the "cenote" or sinkhole filled with multicolored sea life, "Cave of the Fish".

It was fascinating to view a country trapped in time. It was heart wrenching to see such poverty, where soap and pens are welcomed gifts; yet, I was also moved when I experienced the warmth of Cuban citizens. Both young and old wanted to connect with us as if we were family reuniting with each other after a long separation. How pleased we were to meet the Australia Steam Train operator who just loved "Americans". He was so happy to share his life story with the group showing off his "real estate" sale license and telling us all about the family living in the USA. His co-worker friend was wearing a New York Yankees baseball hat. What a "Kodak moment"! Is this still a correct statement or should I have said a "digital moment"?

Seven days in Cuba hardly makes me an authority on the Cuba, but gave me a better appreciation of the blessings and abundance of everything we have in our country. Cuba lacks so many essentials: shampoo, toothpaste, toilet paper! Many adults asked for soap whereas the children asked for gum and candy.

It has aroused my interest in understanding the complex US – Cuba relations for the last 100 years and especially since the "Missile Crises of 1962" and the US embargo for more than 50 years. The trip reinforced my appreciation for the rights and freedoms we have in the USA.

June 2, 2014.

Hotels:

Hotel Las Brisas, Peninsula Ancon, Trinidad

The Hotel Nacional de Cuba, Havana

Restaurants: Food and drinks:

Mojito, originally a farmers' drink, was on the table as the welcomed drink; (light rum)

Brisas Trinidad del mar, Hotel, Trinidad, Breakfasts, Dinner

Trinidad Colonial, Trinidad, Dinner

Isbersol Hotel, Trinidad, Dinner

Sugar Planation Estate, Lunch

La Cueva de Los Peces "Cave of the Fish", on the way to Havana, Lunch

Café del oriente, Havana, Lunch

La Dominica Restaurant - Havana, Lunch

Divino Restaurante, Ciudad de La Havana, Dinner, Small organic farm restaurant (paladars – a small family run specialty restarurant)

Le Template, Havana, Dinner

Hotel Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Breakfasts, Lunch, Dinner

Interesting Facts about Cuba

- Cuba is the most populated country in the whole of the Caribbean and the 17th largest island in the world. Cuba has over 200 bays and 250 beaches to explore, making it a haven for tourists from many countries especially Canada and Europe.
- Cuba has a mixed population of 1% Chinese, 11 % black, 37 % whites, and major 51% of being black and white mulatto.
- Cuba's favorite sport is baseball as many know making their teams among the best in the world. Two members of our group took an afternoon to attend the baseball game.
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