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Two Weeks in Cuba

By Will Hobbs

“Why you from?” asked the middle-aged gentleman in broken English. “Estados Unidos. Oregon,” we replied in our best Spanish accents. “Oregon,” he repeated. “Salem is capital. I have poem about Oregon.” He quickly thumbed through a thick notebook of handwritten poems until he landed on a soiled page entitled “Oregon” and began reading. Roughly translated, his poem said “From the Columbia River to Portland to Salem, its capital, and on to Bend-- Oregon has mountains and forests and is on the Pacific Ocean.” We encountered musicians everywhere in Cuba, but this was our first poet. We fished in our pockets and gave him some change. “Para Usted.”

My wife Kathy and I have had Cuba on our bucket lists for decades, but the specter of heavy fines and possible jail time has kept us away. Until recently, only Cuban-Americans, journalists, students and those involved in certain cultural exchanges have been permitted to cross the 90 miles of Atlantic that separate us. Last year, however, the door to Cuba opened a bit wider with the introduction of the “People to People” program, aimed at promoting greater understanding between our two nations. The Treasury Department has issued licenses to several organizations that offer tours, including Marazul (www.marazul.com), under whose license we traveled. Marazul charters multiple flights a day between Miami and Havana, carrying several tour groups each. Word is getting out slowly. Of the 24 travelers in our group, all had learned of the program by word of mouth.

Ours was a first class tour. In Havana we stayed at one of Cuba’s best hotels, the historic Hotel Nacional. It was here in 1946 that the largest gathering of Mafia bosses took place, as they mapped out their Batista-endorsed plans for casinos and brothels. At least half the rooms in the hotel had placards by the door declaring who had stayed in that room, people like the Duke of Windsor, Frank Sinatra, Ava Gardner, Fred Astaire and Tyrone Powers. We traveled in a modern air-conditioned bus manufactured in China, taking in Old Town atmosphere, museums, monuments to the Cuban Revolution and José Martí, art galleries and Hemingway hangouts. Every restaurant served up fabulous cuisine, accompanied by quartets and quintets of Cuban musicians playing Son, their rhythmic version of folk music. They always finished with Guantanamera. On our second night, we were treated to an energetic performance by the Buena Vista Social Club. We spent three fascinating days in Havana before trekking further afield.

Iconic pictures of Cuba portray pristine cars from the forties and fifties cruising along the Malecón. This is not an exaggeration—vintage cars are everywhere. Automobiles are hard to come by, so they are passed from generation to generation; perhaps a third date back to pre-

revolutionary (pre-1959) times. They are maintained by ingenious mechanics who manage to keep them running despite being unable to get the right parts. On the outside, a car might look like a Buick, but under the hood it could have any kind of engine or transmission that can be made to fit.

The one freeway in Cuba, the Autopista, is eerily empty, populated only by a few tour buses, ancient Chevys, donkey carts, bicycles, people on horseback and the occasional stray goat, cow or vulture. At every intersection and major rest area people stand waving paper money at passing cars to indicate they are willing to share gas expenses for a ride. The more popular intersections feature yellow-clad men called “amarillos” whose job is to flag down cars and assign passengers on a first-come first-served basis. Except for tour buses, all government-owned vehicles are obligated to take on hitchhikers.

On day four, it was off to Cienfuego, the home of big band great Benny Moré, whose life-size bronze statue stands on the main boulevard. We ate at a restaurant in the former home of a sugar baron, a garish pink and white Moorish castle, while a tenor sang classic Cuban songs. The rest of the day was spent walking Cienfuego’s immaculate streets and sipping Mojitos until we turned in for the night.

The next morning we were off to Trinidad for a few hours of shopping at crafts stands that lined the narrow streets, then on to Sancti Spiritus for the night. On our return to Havana, we toured Hemingway’s estate, the Corona Cigar factory, the Church of the Black Madonna, and an interesting Santeria museum. Santeria merges the African Lukumi naturalist religion with Catholicism. The high priest of Santeria is called the “Babalawo,” which immediately reminded us of Desi Arnaz’ “Babalu!” (Aha!) A bit later we rode a bus-sized ferry across Havana Harbor. If the term “rickety” can be applied to a ferry, this boat was rickety, and filled with perhaps a hundred sweaty people standing shoulder to shoulder holding onto railings and leather straps. Our formal tour concluded with an elegant dinner and a jazz trio who ended their set with, yes, Guantanamera.

Each day of the tour included two of the meals, breakfast and either lunch or dinner, but rarely all three. This prompted us to explore some off-beat restaurants, notably the “paladars,” which are privately owned restaurants situated in homes. Some of these were quite posh and richly appointed with antique furniture and beautiful wallpaper and chandeliers, while others were much more homely and decorated with perhaps a string of Christmas lights and plastic flowers. The food, however, was universally good. When venturing away from tour groups and hotels, it helps to know some Spanish. In the paladars, we were able to interact with a few of the small but growing class of self-employed Cubans.

We had arranged for our flight to leave several days after the official tour ended, so that we could return to Trinidad, a city that captured our hearts. With its cobblestone streets, beautiful central squares and Spanish colonial buildings that date to the sixteenth century, Trinidad is vibrant and full of music. We stayed in a private home called a “casa particular,” a B&B. Being a musician, I eagerly interacted with other musicians there, and took a conga lesson from Guillermo Galán, an outstanding percussionist. Once we were away from our American compatriots, performers no longer ended their sets with Guantanamera.

Trinidad’s proximity to the Caribbean permitted us a couple of quick escapes to nearby beaches in La Boca and Playa Ancon, the latter featuring a white sand beach that stretches for kilometers.

When we’d first arrived in Cuba, we purchased a liter of Havana Club Ron Siete Años (rum, aged seven years), and had consumed less than half of it by the end of our trip. Since it is illegal to bring Cuban rum or cigars back to the U.S., we decided to give it to our casa particular hosts, who were genuinely thrilled. Apparently such luxuries are a rare treat.

We shared the bus trip from Trinidad back to Havana with three women from Idaho, who mentioned that this was their last day in Cuba—tomorrow they’d be flying to Cancun. We commiserated, and said we’d be leaving in the morning, too, flying back through Miami. In astonishment, they said. “Miami? You’re here legally?!?” We smiled.

Cubans are almost universally friendly and eager to talk to Americans. On our last evening in Havana we’d hoped to stay at the Hotel Colina in the Vedado District. Unfortunately it was full, but the receptionist sent us to the help desk where the 30-something assistant quickly found us lodging. While she was waiting for confirmation, she chatted with us about some of the difficulties Cubans faced. Her father lives in Naples, Florida, but because of a heart condition he cannot travel to Cuba. The Cuban government does not allow her to travel abroad, concerned that she won’t come back. “I’d come back. This is where I live!” She lamented her inability to access the Internet, which she’d only been on three times in her life. “The Cuban government says it’s full of lies. That may be, but I’d like to see that for myself.” Instead, she reads a lot. She also wished she could have a different job, but this was the job she was assigned to, and she had no choice in the matter. Beyond the necessities the State provides, she earns about \$15 a month.

Off the record, a tour guide mentioned other hardships: Getting an apartment is almost impossible; instead, newlyweds generally move in with the bride’s or the groom’s parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters. Because the state pays a fixed amount for specific jobs, working harder doesn’t earn you more money; with little incentive to excel, people often do just enough to keep their jobs. Doctors face severe restrictions on travel outside of Cuba for fear they won’t return. Many professionals wait years to become taxi drivers because then they can collect tips.

Offsetting some of the negatives, Cuba has no homelessness, the literacy rate is nearly 100%, violent crime is almost unheard of, we saw no hint of racism, and their health care is free.

Cuba is the cleanest Latin American country we've been to, almost no litter or graffiti to be seen anywhere. Sadly, though, many magnificent buildings have fallen into disrepair, victims of decades of neglect and a weak economy. Havana reminds me of Prague whose monumental buildings decayed precipitously during the Soviet era, but have undergone a dramatic renaissance since the fall of the Soviet Union. One hopes the same for Cuba.

When it was finally time to leave, we rode to the airport in a '52 Ford whose engine sounded like it came from a tractor. It probably did.

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