

Our Visit to Cuba

Maxine Okazaki and Peter Aitken

In November 2017 we took a ten-day tour of Cuba. We traveled with Road Scholar, which has been very highly recommended by friends. In fact, a couple we know took this exact same tour last Spring and loved it. It was our first group tour (19 people total) and it worked out very well, with pleasant and interesting tour-mates and a very skilled American tour leader and Cuban guide/interpreter. We flew into Camagüey and out of Havana with many stops in between. This is our travelogue, with photos and commentary from both of us.



Our route in Cuba

Nov 7

We flew to Miami on the first flight of the day (ugh) and saw a beautiful sunrise on the flight. We stayed in a hotel with the other tour members. We met the tour leader Paula, had an orientation session, and got to know each other at the welcome dinner.



Sunrise from the plane

Nov 8

Flew to Camagüey, Cuba's 4th largest city, on American Airlines and got through Cuban immigration and customs without a hitch. They do care what you bring in and are on the lookout for items to be sold. For example, if you have a dozen paint brushes to be given to a school, that's fine, but if you have 200 brushes they figure you are going to sell them and it is not permitted. We met our Cuban guide and interpreter, Yohany, who was with us throughout the trip. Peter nicknamed her "Brahms" because her first name is pronounced the same as that of the German composer Johannes Brahms. She did not get it! She was a very lively, knowledgeable, and friendly person, but we were aware that she was a government employee and, therefore, the descriptions of certain things (the US embargo, the economy, elections, etc.) were unavoidably filtered through a government lens.

Our bus picked us up at the airport—this was a Chinese-made bus, very modern and comfortable. We were taken to the city center where our first activity was a pedicab tour. Pedicabs are ubiquitous in Cuba—it's a 3-wheeled "bicycle" with a seat for 2 passengers in the back and a hard-working peddler in front. The cabs are owned by the driver, for the most part, and many are fancifully decorated. Our caravan of 10 pedicabs visited several of the main squares in Camagüey—public squares are very important in Cuban culture, not least because most of them have wifi.



Pedicabs in Camagüey

We then went to our hotel, the E. Santa Maria (part of a Spanish chain). Our accommodations throughout the trip were fine, we never had an issue with cleanliness, lack of hot water, linens, and so on. All rooms were air conditioned. Of course as RFTs (rich foreign tourists) we stayed in high-end places. Budget travelers will find hostels and *casas particulares* (rooms in private homes). AirBnB operates in Cuba too. We had dinner at the hotel's rooftop restaurant, and unfortunately this was the worst food of the trip, which made us wonder what was in store for us during the rest of the tour. Fortunately things quickly improved! See **Food in Cuba** for more information.

It was great that the tour people took care of luggage throughout—it was taken from the bus to our rooms, and then when we left taken from the room to the bus. All we had to do is verify that our luggage made it onto the bus.



Our hotel in Camagüey, the E. Santa Maria



View from the hotel roof of the town square and the tour buses. Notice the narrow street on the left where the 2 buses are parked.

Nov 9

The next day we visited the studio of leather artist Pepe Guitierrez. He does amazing things with goat skin leather! Some of his creations look like wood, but they are flexible and can be rolled up like gloves. Faces and tobacco leaves seem to be his favorite themes. We watched him work for a while and bought a few small items—we wished we could have brought back more.



Pepe Guitierrez and some of his leather creations

We next went to the ceramic studio of the Casanova family. They, father and son, have been making ceramics for many years since they found good clay on their property. At first it was practical items such as flower pots. Now their production includes art pottery. We saw a great demonstration of preparing the clay (which they no longer mine but purchase) and then both the father and the son made pieces on the wheel while we watched. A few of the tour participants got to try their hand.



At the Casanova Pottery.

We next went to the Zaragozano Ranch, a private farm or *finca*, that raises cattle for milk and meat. It's outside the city, a lovely spot with lots of tropical plants (probably just weeds to them!). This is a private farm, owned by the family. Yes, there is indeed private property in Cuba! In addition to about 70 head of cattle they have a few goats and the property was full of birds wandering around—turkeys, geese, pheasants, peacocks, and chickens.

Our hosts first presented us with welcome drinks. This is an important custom in Cuba, to offer visitors a drink when they arrive—it might be coffee, a mojito, or lemonade, but in any case there's a sense of hospitality that we much appreciated. We saw this at many places we visited. The owners talked about the farm's history and its current operations, and answered questions.

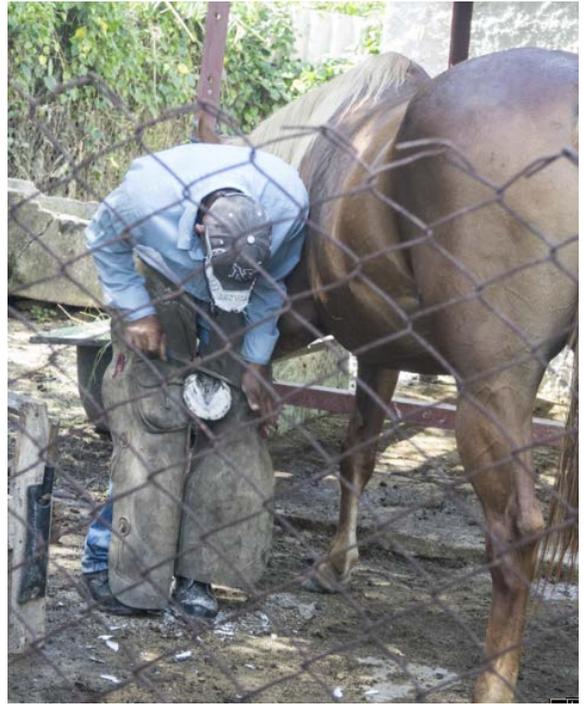


Entrance to the Finca Zaragozano



Welcome drinks at Finca Zaragozano

The finca has a few horses that are used by the workers (cowboys!) to work with the cattle. They have a blacksmith to take care of the horses' hooves. We saw the whole process—the blacksmith makes the horseshoes and nails from scratch, using iron bars, heating them in a charcoal fire, and pounding them into shape. The horse has the old shoe removed and the hoof filed into shape. Then the new shoe is attached.



Shoeing horses at Finca Zaragoza

One of the interesting lizards we saw at the finca was a male yellow-headed gecko. And there was lunch, one of the best meals of the trip. We had a small pig cooked slowly over marabou wood charcoal. Marabou is a kind of tree, originally from Africa that is now considered an invasive in Cuba, and it gives food an unusual and excellent flavor. The pork was accompanied by a huge array of side dishes, perhaps 20 in all (rice, beans, squash, salads, yucca, soup, and so on), various drinks, and a bunch of desserts. This was Cuban hospitality at its best!



One of the unusual lizards we saw—a male yellow-headed gecko.



The centerpiece of lunch at the finca.

The streets of Camagüey look quite different from the streets in America. Our large tour bus had to share the roads with people on bicycles and scooters, horse-drawn carriages, and pedicabs, as well as the usual cars and trucks.



On the streets of Camagüey

The bus took our well-fed selves back to the hotel and we had the afternoon to ourselves. We walked down the pedestrian mall next to the hotel but found it uninteresting—mostly shops for western goods, a lot of them knock-offs for sure (Adidas, Prada, etc.). We went off the beaten path and found the church Iglesia de San Francisco in the Plaza del P. Pablo Trias. We enjoyed looking at the outside of the church but did not go in. Then we walked to the central square and saw the convention center (Centro de Convenciones Santa Cecilia) and the church Iglesia de Nuestra Senora de la Merced. The convention center, 5 stories tall, is supposed to have nice views from the roof but it was closed that day—but we were able to go up later in the week. We sat at a table in the square and were soon informed that it was for customers only. So we bought some bottled water and sat for a while, watching the people walk by and some schoolkids playing around the fountain.

Dinner was at Meson del Principe, another palador (privately-owned restaurant) and we were entertained by a skilled violinist and guitarist. Stuffed plantain was very tasty, as was Maxine's lamb stew. Peter's shrimp was OK but unexceptional. Yet again, flan for dessert!



Maxine in front of Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Merced



Peter and the Santa Cecilia convention center



Views around the square.

Nov 10

After breakfast we headed to the Ballet Company of Camaguey. This is a professional group that has performed all over the world, and we were fortunate that they were in town and allowed us to see a rehearsal. We also saw their workshops where ballet shoes and costumes are hand-made. We were surprised to learn how short-lived the shoes can be, wearing out after a single performance in some cases. This visit was a real treat for us! We sat along the edges of the

rehearsal hall and had these exceptionally talented dancers practicing a few feet in front of us, and the artistry and skill of these young people were a thrill to see up close.



Making ballet shoes and costumes at the Ballet Company of Camaguey



Costume storage



Original drawing of a costume with fabric swatches pinned at the top left.



During rehearsal

When we were finished at the ballet, the bus picked us up and we were off to the studio of sculptor Marta Jimenez. She is well-known for her bronzes of the human form, many larger than life, and she also works in painting and ceramics. We were not permitted to photograph inside the studio, but we could take snaps in her garden where one of her humorous works adorned a fountain.



Humorous statue by Marta Jimenez

Many of her bronzes are displayed in public places, and one graces the very top of our hotel (below left). Another more whimsical work, of a man on a bench reading his newspaper, was in the Plaza del Carmen right outside—and by good fortune the man who was (or at least claims to have been) the model was on hand to pose for us!.



Marta Jimenez sculptures

Lunch was at the Paladar El Paso (in the same plaza) where we had a typical Cuban lunch and entertainment by a very talented singer/guitar duet (we had live music at many meals). The restaurant had a creative way of identifying the men's and women's rooms! It started pouring rain while we were eating and a we sat and chatted for a while as we waited for it to let up a bit (the bus was a block away). Then back to the hotel for some free time.



At Paladar El Paso on Camaguey

We decided, with a few of our tour members, to try again to get to the rooftop of the Convenciones building, which had been closed the other day. This time it was open and we enjoyed great views of the city, including some of their 21 churches and the Teatro Principal, which is the main performance venue of the Camaguey Ballet.



Views from the roof of the Convenciones building.

The whole group reconvened and walked to the square containing a monument to Ignacio Agramonte, remembered for his important role in the revolution of 1868 when Cuba was trying to become independent of Spain. We saw the Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria and then visited the home/gallery of the artists Ileana Sanchez and Joel Jover where we saw an astonishingly eclectic assortment of their work and the thousands of items they have collected over the years.



Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria



Home/gallery of the artists Ileana Sanchez and Joel Jover

There was no group dinner planned this evening so 8 of us made reservations at a well-regarded Italian restaurant near the hotel. It was a rather strange experience! Their beer and wine lists looked promising, but when we got there all they had was one kind of beer (European), red wine (there was white wine but not cold), and one flavor of juice—not even water! We never did get an explanation of what was going on, but it was an example of one of those “Cuban things” where events don’t unfold quite as desired. Fortunately the kitchen was functional and we had a tasty meal of pizza and pasta.

Nov 11

We left Camagüey in the morning and headed for Trinidad. Along the way we stopped in Sancti Spiritus for a quick tour and lunch. It's a picturesque town perhaps best known for the Iglesia Parroquial Mayor del Espiritu Santo, Cuba's oldest church. Originally constructed of wood in 1522 and rebuilt in stone in 1680, it is also known as the Blue Church. When we asked our guide about the spiritual significance of the color blue, she said it was probably just the cheapest color they could get!



The "Blue Church" in Sancti Spiritus, the oldest church in Cuba.

Lunch was at Restaurante 500 Años (500 Years) and it was one of our best meals. We had fish that was truly excellent, and we were told that it was *el pargo* which, we believe, translates as snapper. Some of us walked down the river to see the Punta Yayabo, a bridge built by the Spanish in 1815.



Punta Yayabo

We hopped on the bus and continued the trip to Trinidad. We saw the first sign of mountains—OK, big hills really—as the land to the east is pretty much all as flat as a board. Much of the drive was with the Caribbean Sea on the left and a lovely valley with distant hills on the right.



Seeing our first hills on the road to Trinidad (taken from the moving bus, hence the low quality)

Our first visit was the studio of local artist Lazaro Niebla, who makes gorgeous wood carvings. His specialty is portraits of real people executed in bas-relief on discarded chunks of wood, such as cabinet doors and shutters. He is very skilled and we would love to have brought a piece home with us, but they are too large for easy transport—and very expensive by Cuban standards!



Artworks by Lazaro Niebla in Trinidad

We spent a couple of hours exploring Trinidad on foot, both with the group and on our own. It's a tough city to walk because it is hilly and paved almost entirely with uneven cobblestones. Somewhat touristy, with lots of street vendors selling all the same stuff. Peter did find an attractive leather belt for \$12 and we got a couple of trinkets for the granddaughters. The Playa Major is very attractive, with much effort having been expended to restore it.



Steep cobblestone street in Trinidad



Store window



Sunset in the Playa Major



Our excellent Cuban guide and interpreter Yohanys

After we had wandered in Trinidad the bus took us to our lodging at Finca Ma Dolores outside of town. This farm has been converted into lodging while retaining the original name. The story behind the name is that many years ago on the original farm there was a woman named Dolores, probably a slave, who was skilled in traditional healing arts and folk medicine. She received the affectionate nickname Ma, and so the hotel goes by Ma Dolores. It is unusual in that each room is actually a small separate cabin, and there is a large central outdoor communal area with a bar, for dining and entertainment.

While the bartender made a lovely mojito, we must say that the dinner entertainment (3 musicians) was pitiful and the food was pretty bad, and that included breakfast. We were glad we spent only one night there.



Statue of the original Ma Dolores



The main building at Finca Ma Dolores

Nov 12

It was an early morning today to get on the road to Cienfuegos. On the way we saw large shrimp farms along the southern coast and some unusual birds. The city was settled by French people from France and Louisiana and much of the architecture is different from the Spanish Colonial you see elsewhere in Cuba. On the way into town we saw this well-known billboard about the Cuban response to the blockade (their term for the embargo). Given the total stupidity and uselessness of the embargo, and the enormous harm it caused the Cuban people, it's a wonder that the Cuban people are still welcoming to Americans. This was—and still is—one of the vilest chapters in American history.



Billboard in Cienfuegos about the embargo

Cienfuegos and Remedios

On arrival in Cienfuegos (Cienfuegos means 100 fires) we walked around the town square and then had a private concert by the Choir of Cienfuegos. This professional choir group, consisting of about a dozen women and 8 men, is marvelous! They sang a variety of popular and traditional songs with great energy and skill. When the performance was over they

had all us old folks get up and led us in a conga line! Great fun—we bought their CD and have enjoyed listening to it since getting home.

After leaving the choir we spent some time at a large and lively street market where we bought a few small souvenirs.



Around the Cienfuegos town square



The Choir of Cienfuegos



Street market in Cienfuegos

Then we were off to lunch at D’Carmelina where we had one of the best meals of the trip: breaded snapper/grouper, marinated chicken, rice, beans, soup, fried white sweet potatoes, salad (avocado, tomato, cucumber), banana ice cream, and natural lemonade. We were entertained by a terrific 3-man band and some of the group got up and danced. It poured buckets while we were at the restaurant, but fortunately stopped before we had to leave.

The bus took us along a section of the city, on the waterfront, where the rich folks used to live. There are some very impressive homes here, although they have now all been converted to more socially responsible uses. One of the fancier homes was used as a casino during the period when the US mob had a lot of influence in Cuba. Gambling is strictly illegal now, and while you will see an occasional “Casino” sign it simply means social club or something similar.



Homes of the rich folk from Cuba's past

We drove next to Remedios. Part of this drive was on Cuba's only 4-lane "highway," which should not be mistaken for the highways we have here in the US. The pavement is rough (70 km/hr speed limit), and thanks largely to the embargo road-repair materials are in short supply and expensive. On the 2-lane roads, which means almost all of the roads in Cuba, there is also the issue of horse-drawn wagons, pedicabs, slow scooters, and the like, so our modern bus could not travel as fast as it might. Well, it just added to the charm, and what was the hurry anyway?

We visited Villa Joel. Joel is a local character, who is the town historian and also runs a *casa particular* (private BnB). He gave us welcome drinks and a short history of the region and his involvement. There were some artifacts from the past, including a local gold specimen (there was a brief gold rush here). We were entertained by a local band and saw his fascinating garden. Joel was yet another example of how so many ordinary Cubans have transcended the embargo and their poverty to make an interesting and meaningful life. His *casa particolare* has an unusual feature: he used to have a modest-sized swimming pool for guests, but a while back there was a water shortage and he decided the pool must go—so he converted the pool into a guest room with a pirate theme.



At Villa Joel

We had dinner in Remedios at Casona Cueto, the home of a local doctor and his family who have converted part of their house into a paladar (private restaurant). The menu looked great, but the execution was poor. The pork ham was dry, and the fish, supposedly snapper, was tough and also dry. Ah well—the hosts were most welcoming, the side dishes were good, and the atmosphere was most convivial.

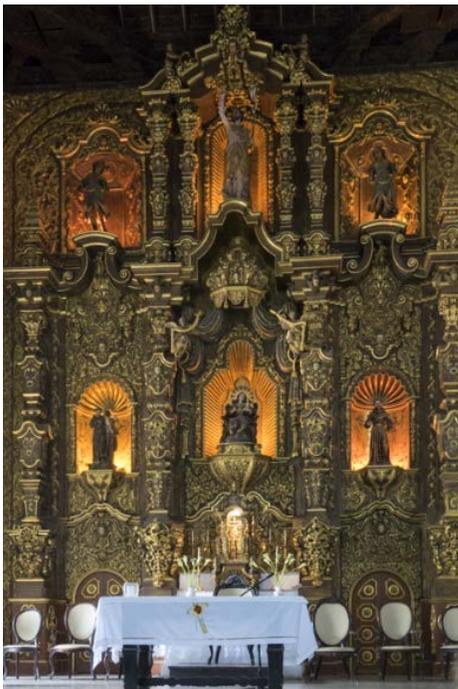
In the photo below, the dish at the lower left is *conгри*, a Cuban specialty. At its heart it is just rice and beans, and that combination is of course a staple in many Caribbean and Central American countries. But the Cubans do it differently. Rather than cooking the rice and the beans separately, then combining them at the table, the ingredients are cooked together along with aromatics, spices, and perhaps a little bit of meat. There are many variations, and it can be delicious. The dish on the right is yucca, which we had many times during our trip and was delicious.



Dinner at Casona Cueto

Nov 13

We visited a beautiful church in Remedios, Iglesia San Juan Bautista, and had a presentation by a docent. The church is known for the use of gold in its decorations, mostly because Remedios was a center of gold mining in the past. It is indeed most beautiful even if the Catholic iconography does not mean anything to you. The church is known for its original wooden roof. It was yet another brief glimpse into history.



The altar and roof of Iglesia San Juan Bautista in Remedios

We met with local artist and historian Roadis Cartaya. With his movie-star looks and mild manner he is a real charmer! He is very involved in the Parrandas, the annual neighborhood competition and celebration held every Christmas season. The city is divided into two neighborhoods, San Salvador (represented by a rooster) and El Carmen (represented by a hawk), and they compete for the award based on fireworks, a float, and a “wall of light.” Search Google for Parrandas Remedios to see more—it’s well worth it! We heard some history and then visited the El Carmen workshop where the float and wall of light are constructed. The fireworks are all handmade and the electronics—they have literally thousands of bulbs—amazingly primitive. It’s a miracle that half the town has not been blown up or

electrocuted! If you're interested, here are links to a 4-part video explaining the Parrandas celebration in Remedios with English narration. We think they're definitely worth watching!

Part 1: <https://youtu.be/UZ4NBjHj8E0>

Part 2: <https://youtu.be/O916XBcqXAI>

Part 3: https://youtu.be/i_0MLj7lei0

Part 4: <https://youtu.be/Ckz0j06jCzs>



Roadis Cartaya showing us a design for the Parrandas celebration.



El Carmen's mascot, the Cuban hawk



Homemade fireworks. They set off thousands of these during the festival, as well as much larger ones.



Remnants from past years



Part of the antiquated electrical system

Back to the hotel for lunch, but a power failure had blacked us out. Our intrepid tour leader quickly arranged a meal at the nearby Hotel E. Barcelona. The food was unexceptional but this hotel had a gorgeous courtyard. This is a common feature of Cuban hotels, a central area open to the sky and surrounded by balconies onto which rooms open.

After lunch we had some time to lounge around, and many of the group took the chance to sit on the hotel veranda or wander around the town square. I went down to the nearby street market and fell into conversation with this fellow, a Cuban who had lived in the US working as a truck driver for many years, then returned home for retirement. He had a lot of things to say about President Trump, none of them complementary.



The courtyard at the Hotel E. Barcelona.



A Cuban fellow Peter met at the market.

We then took the bus to Caibarien, about 5 miles away on the north shore. We were supposed to visit a sugar mill and museum on the way, but they were closed due to damage from Hurricane Irma. We visited the SOS project where children are taught art. It was a heart-wrenching experience, as this town was hit hard by the hurricane and we were in an old building surrounded by rubble, the roof had been blown off, yet here were half a dozen kids all busy drawing, all looking content, well-fed, and happy. Sigh.

Carlos, the teacher, is a talented artist who uses women and tobacco leaves as his main themes. His main media are, of all things, coffee grounds and dirt—hence the rich palette of browns in his work. He “paints” on lightweight cloth and uses small touches of other colors. His works are most attractive, and we bought a small painting.



Children working at art at SOS



Carlos talking about his work

The bus took us to the shore of the Atlantic Ocean to watch the sunset. Unfortunately, due to heavy overcast, we didn't see much. Our trip leader Paula produced a bottle of Havana Club rum and a bottle of Cuban cola and made us all *Cuba Libres* (free Cuba), which is their name for rum and Coke. Of course they do not use Coke, but a locally produced cola that is actually tastier than Coke. There were “virgin” versions available, too. Then we were off to dinner at Paladar En Familia in Caibarien.



At the seawall in Caibarien



Cuba libres at the seawall

Nov 14

Off to Havana! It was a long drive, and we were thankful to have a modern and comfortable bus. We stopped for lunch at Paladar Ajiaco in Cojimar, a fishing village where Hemingway lived. Here we had excellent grilled marlin and chicken. After lunch, we then drove on to Havana. In central Havana, we had drinks at Floridita, famous as Hemmingway's favorite bar for daiquiris. It was crowded and touristy, but still fun. They have a life-sized bust of Hemmingway and it is well-photographed! Their daiquiris were very skillfully made, although a drink at midday is not the best way to ensure energy for the remainder of the day! Unfortunately Finca La Vigia, where Hemmingway lived, was under repair after hurricane Irma and we could not visit.



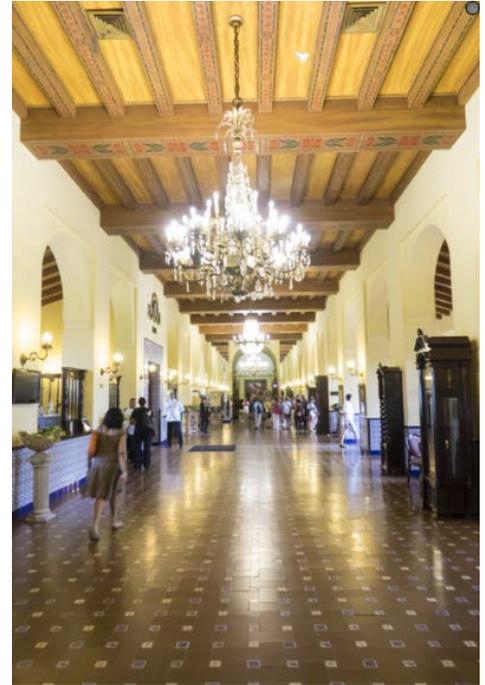
At Floridita, Hemmingway's favorite bar in Havana.

Our hotel, the Nacional, was quite astounding. Built in the 1930s, it is still one of the best hotels in Cuba. It is an imposing structure and has first-class amenities. Our room was huge with a king bed, a great view, and windows that actually opened to the lovely breeze. It's true that we had to flush the toilet 4 or 5 times to get the desired results, but still it worked! We had dinner at Restaurant Baracca, an open air place on the back patio of the hotel. We were served a family style meal—appetizer of fried pork skins (cracklins), yucca or potato balls, and thinly sliced fried plantains, and a

main course of white rice, beans, rice and beans (conгри), shredded beef, pork, and squash, followed by dessert of guava paste and cheese.



Hotel Nacional



Nov 15

The breakfast buffet was by far the best we have seen on this trip, it must have been the size of a basketball court. The offerings seemed endless, and we very much enjoyed it. Several kinds of ham, custom-made omelets, fruit, sausage, cheese, juices, bread, pastries, you name it! Service, which mostly consisted of bringing coffee, was slow and a tad surly. But hey, it's Cuba, take it easy!

We had a lecture and demonstration by musicologist/professor Alberto Falla (Faya), describing how modern Cuban music came to be as an amalgamation of the Spanish and African traditions. Then we went to the Fine Arts Museum and had a tour with guide Omar. This museum displays Cuban art and there certainly are a lot of interesting works to see! Omar was very knowledgeable and the museum was great. There is no shortage of creative Cuban artists! Unfortunately we were not allowed to take photos in the galleries but the shots below show the entrance and a mural in the lobby.



At the Fine Arts Museum

Next after the museum was a trip to "the mall." There were about a dozen small shops here for many of the things tourists are interested in. We went to the cigar shop first, and of course Cuba, and Havana in particular, is famous for cigars. I was astonished at the prices of the cigars, \$5-10 or more for individual *puros* (local term for Havana cigars). We

bought a few for gifts, neither of us has the slightest interest in smoking one! I will say that the fresh tobacco in the shop smelled good!

The shop had a rolling demonstration with Clara, who has been rolling cigars for 45 years. It's true, apparently, that young Cuban women used to roll cigars on their thighs! Only the best tobacco is used, and the leaves are carefully trimmed and the central vein removed. One thing that sets purros and other high-quality cigars apart is that the tobacco leaves inside the cigar extend the full length of the cigar. The outermost leaf of the cigar is specially selected and treated with a fermentation process to make it supple and flexible. This final leaf is most carefully applied and fastened in place with a tiny dab of a special natural glue imported from Canada. If Clara sees the slightest imperfection she unwraps the cigar and redoes it.



In the "shopping mall" in Havana



Clara demonstrating cigar rolling. Note the twisted triple-barreled cigar near the lower right!

Maxine bought a dress and Peter bought some rum to bring home and a guayabera (shirt). Havana Club is the best known rum, but there's a story behind it. The Havana Club brand was started in Cuba in 1934, owned by a Cuban family. The company was nationalized after the 1959 revolution, the "Havana Club" trademark registration owned by the family expired, and the Cuban government registered the name. Havana Club rum is now produced in Cuba through a joint venture of the Cuban government and a French company, and it is sold all around the world *except* in the U.S. But you will see "Havana Club" rum for sale in the U.S. It is made by Bacardi in Puerto Rico and, obviously it is not authentic. What would you think of a bourbon made in Montana and called "Kentucky Gold" or something like that? 'Nuff said.



Authentic Havana Club rum

We had a lovely lunch in Paladar Amos, which combines a small restaurant with a photography studio and community project run by Alex Castro and Ramsés Batistia. They are fine photographers and they devote a lot of time to working with neighborhood kids. We learned after we left that Alex is the son of Fidel Castro. He prefers to keep his identity under wraps because he wants to be accepted for his talents and who he is and not be treated differently due to his parentage. Note the creative “water closet” (bathroom) sign below!



At Alex Castro’s photo gallery. The sign outside the dual gender “water closet” and some of Alex’s photos. Note the ingenious hanging system using wire hangers and clothespins.

After lunch we had a demonstration by the Havana Queens Dance Company. There are no words to describe this troupe—they combine modern dance, break dancing, gymnastics, and who knows what else in exceptionally energetic and skillful routines. Google will get you some photos and info about them. After the performance they got all us old farts up to dance! It was great fun.

In the late afternoon, back to the Hotel Nacional and the Restaurant Baracca, located on the patio of the hotel. We were owed a couple of welcome drinks and our trip leader, Paula, made darn sure we got them! We spent a pleasant time sipping our drinks, watching some birds strut around, gazing over the ocean, and chatting with our new tour friends.



Red-legged thrush and Eurasian collared dove at the Hotel Nacional.

Peter took a walk down to the Malecón, the promenade and sea wall, across the highway in front of the hotel. It was windy and the sea was rough, with large waves breaking over the wall.



Surf at the Malecón in Havana

We were on our own for dinner. We were both a bit frazzled and did not want to go hunting for an eatery. We had heard from, our tour leader that the hotel's patio bar served a mean Cuban sandwich that was big enough for two people. It was true! The Cuban sandwich is well known, and there are many variations, but at its heart it is smoked ham, roasted pork, and cheese, all sliced thin, layered between good bread with mustard and pickle slices, then heated in a press. Our sandwich was delicious, perfectly enough for the both of us, and with a Buccanero (a Cuban beer) for Peter and a sparkling water for Maxine we had a very nice meal while listening to the band and watching the sunset.

Nov 16

Our last full day in Cuba!!

After breakfast at the exceptional buffet we heard a talk about Cuba-US relations by Professor Javier Dominguez Martinez. We understood that this was filtered through the Cuban government, but that's also true of most of the US government filtered crap we hear about Cuba here in the US. Still, another perspective worthy of consideration.

Havana has been an important port for centuries. It figured strongly as a waypoint for the Spaniards to ship gold and silver from their colonies back to Spain, and its terrific, easily defended harbor helped keep pirates and the English at bay. At the harbor's narrow entrance you can still see the stone forts that were built. The photo below was taken while standing in one old fort and looking across the harbor entrance at another.



Forts at the entrance to Havana harbor

We went to Old Havana and had a tour with Yohanys. The tour was punctuated by short periods of free time, perhaps 15 minutes at a time, where we could wander on our own, then re-convene as a group. There were some street acts and people in period costumes, one was expected to slip them a few small coins in exchange for a photo.



In Old Havana

We were on our own for lunch and teamed up with tour-mates Rodger and Helga for a light lunch at the Azucar (means *sugar*) on a balcony overlooking one of the many squares.



Lunch with Helga and Rodger and a very fancy lemonade

We had a couple of hours free so we headed back to Castillo de la Real Fuerza, an old fort that we had seen briefly earlier in the day. This was the first fort built in the harbor, specifically to defend against pirates who had their eyes set on Spanish gold. It had a bunch of huge cannon and some historical exhibits of gold, silver, coins, and gemstones that had been recovered from shipwrecks. We were not supposed to take photos but there were two young women, attendants at the museum, who helped us sneak a few shots. We gave them a nice tip!



Inside the fort





Old cannon



Gold and silver from the Spanish Main

The fort was built of limestone and the stone blocks were just full of interesting fossils, primarily of coral. We could not help but wonder what the people 450 years ago made of these obvious signs of life in the rocks.



Fossils of coral in the limestone used to build the fort

We reconvened and boarded the bus for the ride to the dominos club, located (conveniently) over a bar. Several of the members taught us how to play by Cuban rules (nine spots and not just six) and then we had (of course) welcome drinks as we played a few games. There was a door prize drawing and Maxine won the door prize of a handmade domino set! We have been playing at home since we came back. The game is not as simple as you might think, but is better with four people than with just two.



Handmade domino set won by Maxine, signed by the maker

We left the domino club and walked around the corner to meet the bus. It was not there and Paula, the trip leader, was grouching about the “undependable bus driver.” Then, with a rumble of engines and blaring of horns, a fleet of eight classic cars cruised around the corner to pick us up! What a surprise! Peter immediately zeroed in on a 1955 DeSoto because that was the car his granddad had when he was a kid. Of course, granddad’s was not red and white and not a convertible! Maxine hopped into a 1955 Chevy. Off we went for a drive through the city, with much laughing and picture taking. Seat belts? Gimme a break!



Peter in his '55 DeSoto and Maxine in her '55 Chevy. Heck, 1955 is the year she was born!



The Desoto, which was considered a luxury car back then



Cruisin'

The cars took us to a beach to see a very nice sunset, then back to the hotel. After some time to pack we were bussed to the Wao restaurant for our final dinner. It was fun reliving the trip with our tour-mates and having Paula recap all the things we did.



Setting sun over Havana.

Nov 17

Woke up at 5:15 AM, did a quick finalizing of packing, and had a sandwich for breakfast in the cafeteria. We left at 6:30 for the airport, which was thankfully not crowded so we all breezed right through. Our arrival in Miami was equally stress-free. Great trip, and we heartily recommend Cuba as a destination and Road Scholar as a tour company.

Food in Cuba

This was not a foodie tour. We had good food, with a few great meals, a couple of terrible meals, and most were OK. Road Scholar had warned us that in a poor and embargoed country we could not expect to get the variety we might like, so it was not a surprise. Breakfasts were always at the hotel buffet, and you could typically get bread, cold cuts and cheese, eggs, fruit, juices, and the like. A blessing, the Cuban coffee was always great! Most lunches and dinners were arranged by the tour agency and were fixed menu—you had 3 or 4 dishes to choose from. To be honest, they could have been more creative. Many of the dishes on offer were decidedly un-Cuban, such as plain chicken breast and spaghetti with tomato sauce. On the Cuban side, we got *ropa vieja* (shredded beef) quite a few times, and *congrí* (Cuban black

beans and rice) was a staple (and delicious). Yucca was common also. On your plate you might think it was potato, but it has a different flavor and texture and can be quite tasty. We noted the almost complete absence of corn and tortillas. Flan is a popular dessert, and one of our favorite desserts was guava paste (think applesauce made from guava) with a dollop of soft cheese on top. Meals almost always end with coffee, typically a small cup half-full of very strong, very good coffee. But Cubans have never heard of decaf!

It's important to remember that Cuba is a poor country, partly due to the vile American embargo. Expecting to have the variety and abundance of food that we are used to here in the U.S. is simply ridiculous. And, as rich foreign tourists, we surely got the best they had available. We might complain about the variety of the food we got in Cuba, but imagine what the ordinary Cuban eats.

Drinks in Cuba were fun—both alcoholic and non. Rum is of course a major product of Cuba, and many tasty drinks are rum-based (mojito, daiquiri, etc.). And with all the tropical fruit, wow! Funny thing, when you order or are offered apple juice you always seem to get pear juice!

Money in Cuba

Cubans primarily use the Cuban peso (CUP), while tourists use the convertible peso (CUC, pronounced “kook”). The CUC is fixed at parity with the US dollar, while the CUP floats in value and currently is valued at 25 CUP = 1 CUC.

Cuba is a cash economy. You bring US cash dollars and change them to CUCs, usually at your hotel. The exchange rate is 1:1 but there are taxes and fees totaling 13%, so your \$100 US gets you 87 CUC. Then when you leave you can change your unused CUCs back to US\$—with a 5% fee. So just changing your money costs you 18%.

Almost all tourists will eventually be approached by a Cuban wanting to exchange US money for CUCs. It is almost always done furtively because it is illegal (for the Cuban) to possess US dollars. They get the U.S. cash from relatives in the US, and need to change it to CUCs in order to spend it.

American credit cards are not used in Cuba (due to the US embargo, American banks do not do business with Cuba)—we did see a few Visa/Mastercard signs in Havana (we assumed for tourists from Canada, Europe, and anywhere else in the world).

Internet

Wifi is widely available in hotels and public squares. You must purchase access, typically \$2-4 CUCs for an hour.

Adios amigos!