

Cuban Episodes

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Havana: I've always liked the sound of the name. To me, it conjures a dance hall after the crowd has left and the once-enthusiastic band members are beginning to pack up their instruments. Maybe there's still a pair of lovers draped over each other in the middle of the dance floor, a few men smoking in the corner tables refusing to believe it's over. Havana. Whenever I heard that tourists were now going to Cuba in droves, I thought about Havana. It was on television a few days before I left: gangsters, old cars and an offer you can't refuse in *The Godfather II*. Havana. Sunny and 77 degrees. Seems that was the forecast for the entire two weeks I was in Cuba. As the plane descended into Havana, the temperature rose and I shed layers of clothing. On the ground, the air was thick and enveloping. That warm tropical air that tells you right away you're somewhere different, somewhere exotic.

WELCOME TO HAVANA

After dumping my bag in my room in the *casa*, I opened the window to find out where the salsa music was coming from. Below me, in the compound next door, two dozen sexy young women were rehearsing a salsa dance routine, presumably for New Year's Eve. With one line weaving into another, rhythmic hip sashays and hair flicks, it was a visual treat.

CASA PARTICULAR

My private accommodations were adequate, though my room was in the apartment adjacent to the one I had booked (so, probably an illegal arrangement); I found out I had to knock on the door of the apartment in order to use the terrace—one of the reasons I'd taken the place. I noticed there was an elevator to the third floor, but no stairs. And, my room had two bedside lamps, one white and one red, possibly indicating that the owners, a friendly, middle-aged, middle-class couple, turned a





blind eye to the rampant and illegal prostitution.

A license to run a *casa particular* costs the owners \$150 per month (a surefire way to limit profits), so if they are only charging \$30 per night, they are always looking for additional ways to make ends meet. Hence, they serve meals: dinner for \$8 and breakfast for \$3-\$5. The rumors about bland Cuban food are unfortunately true. Though I had heaping portions of pork, salad and rice and beans, no spices were to be found in the food or out (only salt appeared on the table, no pepper). The owner, Ramon, popped in and out while I ate and asked in Spanish if everything was fine. Yes, fine, I said, and thought, fine and plain.

THE HAPPY DRUNKS

After dinner at my *casa*, I walked several blocks to the Casa Del Coctel

Habana Club, a local bar far enough from the posh Hotel Nacional to not be touristy. Luxurious, high-backed wicker chairs on the wide terrace were full of couples and groups so I pulled up a stool at the makeshift kitchen-counter style bar. The bartender patiently ground up some limes and mixed me the best *cuba libre* I was to have over the entire trip. Next to me were a pair of slurring, happy drunks who soon turned their attention to me. Roberto was grizzled, white and in his fifties, and Antonio ("Tony") was scrawny, 30-ish, clean-cut, black and always smiling. Tony could air play an entire band—he played a series of guitar chords on my forearm. They knew only the odd English words, so I had to summon all my Spanish—and patience—to talk to them.

We had a wide-ranging, rambling,

amusing conversation. Roberto said that the tourist resort city of Veradero wasn't the true Cuba, that it had no heart. He didn't say where the heart of Cuba was, but Cienfuegos and Trinidad, my next destinations, both seemed to be in the running as they were each mentioned several times. He said there were many Cubas, that Cuba is black (like Tony), white (like him), that it's the whole island, not just Veradero.

They loved Canada, and they especially loved Celine Dion. According to them, she was much better than any American singer, and Roberto even sang a few bars of her song from Titanic. They were surprised I wasn't as impressed.

Talking more about music, Roberto voted the Beatles as the number one band ("grupo") in the world and wasn't pleased that I nominated, for argument's sake, the Stones as number two. He came back with Blood, Sweat and Tears for number three, a mostly forgotten 70's band whose songs I was soon to hear in Cienfuegos. Tony didn't agree with any of this and thought the best bands were Queen, Kiss and Led Zepplin!

Roberto said he didn't want to talk politics, but considering the year end, he said, "Next year, we hope things are a little bit better than this year. Just a little

bit. And we've been saying that each year for 45 years." Ouch. It was the most telling comment I was to hear about life in Cuba.

CASTRO AND CHE AND JOSE

Apparently, Fidel Castro doesn't like images of himself so there's no personality cult like there is in other communist countries. However, Che Guevara is still revered as a hero.

A five-story outline of his face, with the trademark beret, overlooks the Plaza de la Revolucion, and postcard racks around the city feature dozens of candid black and white Che photos.



More common than images of Che are statues and memorials of Jose Marti, who opposed colonial rule at the turn of the 20th century and is the spiritual leader of the country.

A BIRTHMARK SHAPED LIKE CUBA

In the morning, on my way to the Biblioteca Nacional Jose Marti to meet

Katie, the cousin of an Australian friend, I stopped in a park. Soon a teenaged girl came up to talk to me. I feared she was an underaged prostitute, but it turned out she just wanted to talk to a foreigner. She gave me recommendations on where to go in Cuba by pointing to the birthmark shaped like Cuba on her stomach. She also recommended that I visit Havana's Chinatown—she couldn't believe there were old Chinese people, middle-aged Chinese people and young Chinese people in Chinatown, along with Chinese food. Every few minutes she would ask me if I understood her and I would laugh, hold up my thumb and forefinger and say, "Un poco." She would laugh too and then launch into another patient explanation. When we parted I thanked her for the conversation and she said it was "*Muy divertido*" (Very fun).

OLD CARS

It's true. They are *everywhere*, often in top condition. How they get the parts

I have no idea, but I now have a new respect for the '57 Chevy. Amusingly, several times I heard horns with the theme from *The Godfather*.

HAPPY NEW YEAR

On the Malecon, the oceanside walkway that runs the length of Havana, girls wished all passersby "Feliz Nueva Ano." They loved it when I shouted back, "Y tu tambien (And to you too)!"

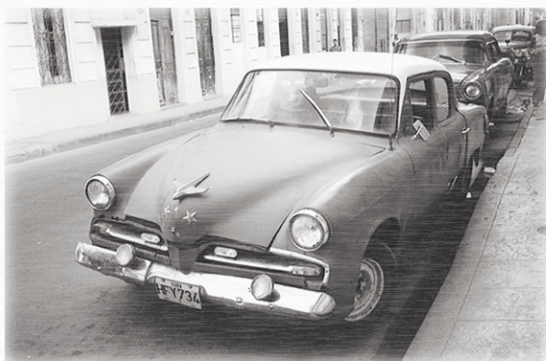
NEW YEAR'S EVE

I met Katie again in the evening and we went to meet some of the Australian friends, Madeline and David, she'd met on the airplane. We all jumped in a taxi, zipped down to Old Havana, and wound up in Café Paris, where the band was hopping and the drinks went down quickly. Katie really wanted to dance. "Go dancing in Havana" was on her life to-do list, so I was happy to oblige. We were right up in front of the band doing our best. She's a pretty woman: always smiling and dressed to the nines, so I was the envy of the band

and many of the men in the audience.

NOT SO HAPPY NEW YEAR

Another Australian guy was supposed to join us that night but he was suffering from food poisoning. Madeline went back to collect



him around 10:30 pm, but he was still unable to come out. Around 1:00 am he felt a bit better and thought he'd try to find us. But a few blocks from his *casa*, he was jumped by five guys and robbed of everything he had, including his ring and shoes. Ouch.

WELCOME TO CIENFUEGOS

I was already convinced that Cienfuegos was a special place when a tout from the bus station led me to ten different private houses to help find accommodation in the booked-up town and didn't ask anything in return. I wound up staying at a place run by an exceptionally welcoming and genuinely friendly brother and sister, Victor and Celia. They always addressed me by name.

Later, with my hat and sunglasses on, I walked down the boulevard. A black man approached from the other direction. When he was right next to me, without looking at me, he raised his hand. I slapped it in a "high five" and both of us continued our respective ways. Neither of us looked back. I felt like I'd just been admitted to the brotherhood of Cienfuegos.

SITTING ON THE TIP OF THE BAY

Cienfuegos tapers down to Punta Gorda, a sliver of land that juts into a bay and is capped by a picturesque open air bar. Naturally, the bartenders there promise to make the best *mojitos* (rum, lemon juice, soda, sugar, a mint leaf and ice) in town. Naturally, I had to try one. It was definitely potent. On my way back to town, I passed a group of people, including two women. I looked at

them but didn't say anything. As I passed, I smiled. A moment later, they were laughing loudly. I turned to look. The two women were pointing to each other and saying, "He smiled at you! No, he smiled at YOU!"

DINNER AT THE CASA

Dinner was served in a pleasant back terrace. Victor was pleased I'd chosen the fish, which was his favourite. He brought out a little boombox for Cuban music and made a point of seating me himself. I felt guilty I hadn't dressed up a bit to be more worthy of his efforts.

TRANQUILO

At night, Cienfuegos becomes a ghost town; the streets are completely empty, devoid even of parked cars. Lying in bed, you hear only the occasional sound of a horse and carriage clopping down the road.

TRINIDADIAN TROUBADOUR

I met Katie again in Trinidad, a well-preserved colonial town with cobblestone streets and an abundance both of live music and tourists. We met some Americans (who over the week became very nervous about the fines they faced if they got caught traveling in Cuba) and went to a small hotel bar where a troubadour was trying to sing over some loud, proud Hungarians who were in the process of getting loudly, proudly drunk. The troubadour's name was Israel, and over my week in Trinidad I went to hear him several times. One night, on my way back from a disco around 1:00 am, I found that he'd assembled a crowd on the steps of the church after his bar had closed.



Someone produced a bottle of rum, and he played his quiet, passionate songs for another hour under the stars.

MUSIC

On the whole, Cuban people do seem rather hard done by. But despite the air of malaise, there's also music everywhere—in the bars, blasting out of apartment windows, blaring from the radios of bicycle taxis—so they've got some kick in them yet.

And a thousand thanks to Ry Cooder and the Buena Vista Social Club for ensuring that we tourists hear more than just endless renditions of "Guantanamera".

Next to the church in the plaza in Trinidad a grand series of steps led up to a restaurant and midway up, each night, a different band performed at nine o'clock. With perhaps a couple hundred people sitting at tables and on the steps, it was a great place to have an evening drink.

MABEL'S CASA

I was envious that Katie had a roof terrace at her *casa*. When I arrived, the town was completely booked up so I had to settle for Mabel's place, a colonial home with a courtyard that was perpetually filled with drying laundry. Alas. However, a bonus feature was the grandmother who often cranked the music and danced, in order to encourage her 3-year-old granddaughter, Fatima. Eventually, Fatima obliged and both Mabel and grandmother soon joined her, treating it as a milestone event.

Mabel was a large Caribbean

woman and believed that whatever needed to be talked about, needed to be talked about LOUDLY. She was always hollering over the back wall to a neighbour, or for her husband, or at Fatima. Electricity and hot water were also both unpredictable so I believe I had an authentic Cuban home experience. (Maybe at times *too* authentic.)

MAKING ENDS MEETING

An oldtimer who lived right next to the main plaza in Trinidad invited me into his place to show off his old 1940's console radio. It worked like a damn. He then offered me hats, jewelry and coffee. I turned down all but the coffee. He showed me his wedding photos and I showed him my photo album. It was difficult to make a graceful exit as he put a hat on my head and kept telling me how good it looked on me.

BICYCLES

The trick is getting a good one. Twice I rented bicycles with ultra-hard too-low seats that couldn't be raised any further. Still, it was a pleasant way to get to the beach, 16 km away. You head down the hill to La Boca, a quiet fishing village, and then along a deserted coastal road to Playa Ancon. It's the way back, uphill, that's the killer. However, each of the two days I came back at sunset, so the empty road, with the pounding surf beside it, was especially evocative.

ILLEGAL LUNCH

The beach is just what you want. A vast expanse of sand, some trees for shade and water that's a refreshing temperature. Then, as a bonus, fishermen come around and offer you a lobster

lunch for seven dollars. It's illegal, because the lobster, I believe, is supposed to be for the state-run restaurants. But as with many things in Cuba, where there's a will there's a way. It was missing the melted butter, but it was still a good-sized tail, and hey, fresh lobster on the beach, what more could you want?

SWEDISH INTERLUDE

I met not one, not two, but three beautiful Swedish women: Angelika, Elinor, and Jenny. They all spoke excellent English and were staying at a hotel on the beach. We wound up spending much of the weekend together. Friday, we went horseback riding to a waterfall nested deep in a gorge, where we went for a swim. I'd been talking about the numerous and beautiful waterfalls in Thailand, and they were sure I'd be disappointed when I saw our destination. Not true. It was definitely worth swimming in. We went mid-day and lucked out because it was mostly cloudy—otherwise, we would have surely baked. The main site along the way in was a teak forest. The way back was easy-going and it was pleasant to clop along quiet farm roads surrounded by mountains. We hummed old Western tunes.

Saturday, we hung out at their beach. Angelika was training to be a



masseuse, so I sacrificed myself to be practiced upon. It was pretty tough having a massage at the beach, but hey, you gotta do what you gotta do.

Sunday, they were all excited about road-tripping an hour and a half back to Cienfuegos to go swimming with the dolphins. I thought it was a little expensive—50 bucks!—but couldn't say no. Upon arrival, I was disappointed to find out that you don't get to actually swim freely with the dolphins. Instead, it's all orchestrated: the trainer has you do different things, like slap the water, so that the dolphins come up to you for a kiss or to have their bellies stroked. Occasionally you get to look in their eyes and see them as magnanimous, docile creatures. The best was saved for last and I was the lucky one who got to go first. No one knew what to expect. The trainer told me to float on my stomach and keep my legs straight. He added that I should raise my arms when I began to move. I was still thinking about the instructions when, suddenly,

on the soles of my feet, I felt two dolphin noses propelling me rapidly forward. I raised my arms and rose out of the water, balanced expertly on the dolphin noses, like a seasoned aquatic circus performer. After swimming about 30 feet, the dolphins stopped abruptly and, launched from their noses, I plunged back into the pool. What a hoot! They repeated the trick with everyone else, and each time the dolphins pulled it off perfectly. Impressive!

In the evenings we went to the discos. One disco was open air, at the Casa de la Musica, so we danced under the stars. The other was deep in a cave, complete with flashing lights, disco ball and fog. That, too, was a hoot! Both

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

Crowds of people lined the highways trying to hitch rides. I have no idea how long they had to wait. Maybe days.

SARA'S TERRACE

I changed to a different *casa* in Centro Havana when I returned (instead of my first place in Vedado), to try a different area of town. Really, I just wanted a terrace or balcony with a view, and at Sara's I wasn't disappointed. It was among rows of two- and three-story apartment buildings, with a view up and down the street. Not much of a view, but at least it was a pleasant place to sit and enjoy a novel in the late afternoon light. And there was much more pulse in Centro than there was in Vedado.

When I left, I gave Sara the extra bottles of aspirin that I'd brought. Her excited reaction made me think I was giving her something very rare.

HEMINGWAY'S BAR

I gave a pass on Hemingway's touristy "Floridita Bar" and went next door where an entire table of eight was drumming along with the band.

Great atmosphere. There and at one other place, however, I tried unsuccessfully to order a daiquiri, Hemingway's famed drink. Maybe I should have gone to the Floridita after all.

WHISPERING

Every day all day people come up to you and whispered, "Cigar?" "Cigar, sir?" "You want to buy cigar?"



nights I felt pretty lucky to be showing up with my lovely entourage.

TAXI DRIVERS

They were generally very chatty and I had some good conversations with them. In Trinidad, Nelson, who clarified that he was "not Nelson Mandela," preferred the quieter life there to the bustle and noise of Havana.

Mercifully, they do take no for an answer. I finally gave in on my last day and bought some for cigar aficionados among Core faculty. (Because they're considered contraband, you can forget I just told you that.)

In Trinidad, touts whisper to you to come for a private (illegal) dinner. Presumably, eight bucks for dinner goes a long way if monthly salaries are only ten to twenty bucks.

MISSED PHOTOS

I usually keep a mental tally of photos that I miss for one reason or another. On this trip, virtually all of the missed photos were of old men sitting on their stoops puffing on their cigars.

MOTORCYCLE DIARY

On my second last day, I wanted to hang out in Old Havana, and have an easy day of moseying from cafés to plazas to the Malecon. But in the morning I phoned Roberto, the contact of a friend from Toronto. He invited me to come over and see his work. It was way over in Miramar, the absolute other side of town. So, instead of soaking up the life of old town Havana (and my balcony), I was using up my last *pesos* zip-ping across town. However, Roberto was an energetic guy who gave me a tour of the Foundation of Antonio Nunez Jimenez, a local writer, explorer and associate of Castro. The Foundation had an enormous library, plus two large rooms of artifacts that Jimenez had collected on his travels, from fossils to pottery and statuettes; it was a fascinating collection. We motor-cycled back along the Malecon and then

met again in the evening, along with another Canadian, Ismal. Ismal was doing development work in trying to promote roof gardens for restaurants. We went for a nightcap at the Café Paris and he bought me a drink "courtesy of the Government of Canada." That was a bonus because I was almost out of pesos.

"THIS IS THE LAST DAY OF OUR ACQUAINTANCE"

The refrain from this song, by Sinead O'Connor, is my "thanks, I'm leaving" song, and on my travels I start singing it when I get up on the day of my departure, sometimes the day before. My flight wasn't until 4:00 pm so I had the whole morning to do last minute things. But nothing worked out! I couldn't find the cute little handmade journals I'd wanted to buy the day before; the friendly, funny waiter at the café I liked wasn't there; I got ripped off on exchanging my last twenty bucks; and Sara was mopping and laundering on the balcony of the *casa* so I couldn't spend my final hour relaxing out there. Ah, Cuba!

ADIOS

My final taxi driver spoke a lot of English so we had an animated conversation on the way to the airport. Seems he'd been a slacker and now resolved to devote more time to his wife and two young sons. He wanted to know if my heart was clear, if I was happy. I said it was and I was. ☸

