

January 2017

A TASTE OF TASTY CUBA

Dear Friends and Family,

A good friend decided to celebrate her 80th birthday in Cuba, so I broke up my Agadir winter for a ten day visit to approximately the same weather and latitude.

We spent six nights in Havana in the Vedado neighborhood at the edge of Centrum and an easy 20 minute walk to Old Havana. We were in an air bnb with a wonderful host family and it was great to be in a local neighborhood without a lot of tourists.



Cuba's tourism numbers have been growing rapidly from ~ 1.6 million in 1999 to 3 million in 2012 and 3.5 million last year. This has put a strain on the food supplies for an economy of 11 million people who have to import $\frac{3}{4}$ of their food. Having said that, comparing notes with visitors from prior years there appear to be more small neighborhood bar/restaurants opening catering to the local population (who can pay in \$ prices) as well as visitors. And, indeed, since 2008 the number of "professions" open to self employment has grown exponentially, although still strictly government regulated.

Food was relatively inexpensive to us as foreigners and cocktails, especially the national rum-based drinks, were inexpensive even in higher end hotels. Many tourists opt to eat at the paladors which are high end family owned and operated (but government-licensed)

restaurants. We had one such meal and chose San Cristobal in Havana where President Obama dined when he visited Cuba last year. The interior (including the ladies' room!) was filled with



clocks, artwork and memorabilia.

Transport in Havana was widely available from pedi-cabs to vintage 1950's US cars to modern taxis, but not cheap. There is also a public bus system. Deliveries are often made by human



power, including flower sellers.



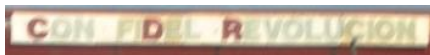
Outside Havana vintage cars and horse drawn transport (for both people and goods) were the norm.



The first thing I noticed was bright colors everywhere, beginning with the buildings visible after leaving the airport.



There are frequent inspirational message billboards throughout the countryside and at the entrances to each province and town.



The national hero Jose Marti, primarily a poet and writer on the subjects of freedom, liberty and democracy, but who died in 1895 at age 42 as a soldier in the Cuban war of independence from Spain, is remembered everywhere with sculptures, posters and quotations. The obelisk on Place de la Revolucion, the highest point in Havana, is in his memory.



Surrounding the plaza are the major government buildings dating from the 1950's with homage on their facades to Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos Gorriaran, a close confidant of Fidel Castro and chief of staff of the Cuban army after the revolution before his early death in 1959 in a light plane crash. Those buildings are today also the center of government and it was never clear to me whether the "Capitol" building dating from the 1920's, currently under renovation (and resembling the Capitol in Washington, DC), ever housed government activity!



Families are now permitted to own their own homes, one in the city and a second for vacation, either at the beach or in the countryside. Recently there is permission to actually sell their homes which is subject to a transfer tax. Even before the arrival of air bnb the government encouraged families to rent out rooms both long term and short term and in local pesos (red signs for Cubans only) or tourist currency (blue signs) to supplement the available hotels and housing supply. The government of course heavily taxes this income. Our hosts maintain a water tank on the roof which they pay to have filled since the city water supply can be unreliable – electricity also, but we didn't experience any outages.



Because apartments are owned individually floor by floor in a building you often see buildings with some floors renovated and others not. And when a building in the old town is too dilapidated to be rebuilt it can be torn down to create a pocket park, which often had very nice art work. There was also frequent street art around town which I love. And garbage receptacles on every corner which kept the city quite clean.



Our hostess warned me to wear my backpack on the front and to attach my camera to it, especially as I would be walking alone. No problem. I saw quite a few beggars, especially women with children, on the pedestrian part of San Rafael as you approach the Park Centrale.

Shopping is an interesting challenge. There are ration cards for free food for Cubans who work only on the local economy (typical monthly wage ~ \$20) for basics such as eggs (5 per person per month, pppm), rice (2 kg pppm), oil, bread and beans. These items sell out quickly when they become available at the mercados (we often saw long lines of impatient people).



When available, additional quantities can be purchased, but at U.S. prices! Inside the Mercado many shelves would be empty while others fully stocked, apparently of what shipment had recently arrived, such as oil or canned sardines (reminds me of life in Micronesia!). Neighborhood markets, like souks or French street markets, had local vegetables and meats. And street vendors had fruit and vegetables, and flowers plus itinerant sellers such as for brooms. In Havana there are some “malls” with international brand shops and prices. Fast food is available at frequent tiny window outlets in most neighborhoods.



Rum (made in Cuba) is available in virtually every type of store and inexpensive. We were told that during the “Special Period” 1989 – 1993 after the collapse of the USSR (and its subsidies), the

collapse of world sugar prices, and the U.S. embargo, people lived on bread and sugar water and danced and drank rum to forget their hunger.

High priority is given to education (100% literacy) and is compulsory up to age 16. According to a 2014 World Bank study Cuba has the best educational system in Latin America and the Caribbean. The main campus of University of Havana (founded in 1728, current site 1902) was just up the street from us with its classical buildings and seated sculpture of its Alma Mater, meaning nourishing mother in Latin.



Universal health care is also a high priority, and Cuba actually exports its well-trained doctors and nurses, (especially to Venezuela to offset the oil import deficit costs with that country) as well as to developing countries in Africa. Among current industries is a growing pharmaceutical and biotech sector. Infant mortality rate is comparable to Canada and lower than the U.S., although

some claim that medical statistics are falsified.

Sports (baseball is a national passion) and culture are also high priorities. We attended the National Ballet of Cuba (ranked among the top companies in the world) performing the Nutcracker. Alicia Alonso, founder of the company in 1948 and still its director at age 96 and almost blind was in the audience that evening and received a standing ovation! Even here color



reigned with the waltz of the flowers ballerinas vibrantly garbed. The theater, dating from 1835, newly renovated and reopened in January, 2015 is named for Alicia Alonso. It is very elegant, not flashy, and beautifully lighted at night.





From Havana we hired a taxi for a day trip west to Vinales. En route we visited Las Terrazas, a planned community developed by the workers sent there in 1968 to begin reforestation of 5000 acres of former forest obliterated due to charcoal production and former coffee plantations. Today the town of 1200 population is self supporting from forestry, vegetable growing, charcoal production, eco-tourism and an artist colony within a 60,000 acre biosphere.



Here are photos of art of Lester Campos and of the terraces before and after reforestation.



The highways are in pretty good repair with efforts made at landscaping.



Vinales is in the beautiful tobacco growing region of Pinar del Rio Province – the plants were robust and we were there before the harvest when the leaves would be hung to dry in barns of the same design as those in the tobacco growing regions of the U.S.A. Individual land ownership of up to 15 acres is permitted but 90% of the tobacco crop must be sold to the government tobacco monopoly. Other regions in Cuba grow tobacco for cigarettes, but this is the prime fertile land for production of the leaves that become the famous

Cuban cigars.





En route we of course passed sugar cane fields and orchards, but I couldn't tell of what fruit. Vinales itself was full of mango trees and we were sorry it wasn't mango season!



The small town has multicolored single story buildings with front porches. Each one was either a restaurant or a guest house – and full! One thing I noticed throughout our visit was the prevalence of rocking chairs.



Bicycling, horseback riding and rock climbing are popular in this region along with other destinations such as caves and a huge rock face mural created in 1961, recently partially restored, denoting evolution from pre-history to man. The hillocks called morgots form an interesting scenery along with the limestone cliffs.



As expected, Cuban music, formal and informal, was prevalent giving an upbeat feeling to the



visit.

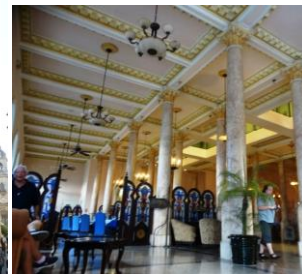
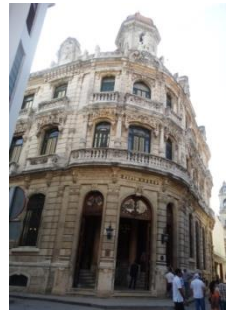
Only a couple of blocks from our apartment was an interesting alley of art and music (especially Rhumba music on





Sunday afternoons) that is a fund raiser for a children's charity.

Old Havana in its heyday had magnificent architecture, very little of which (primarily government and bank buildings and government-owned hotels) has been restored. Notable

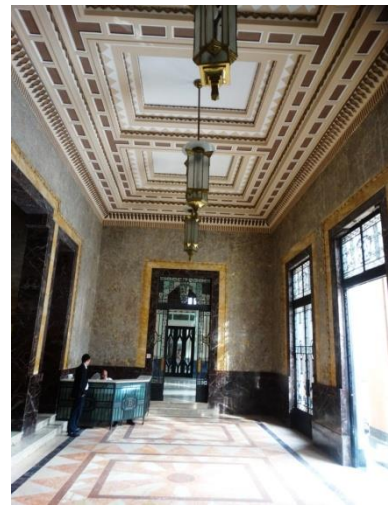
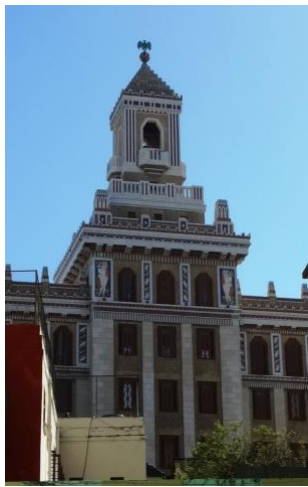


hotel interiors included Europa, and the bar at Telegrafo.

I would judge that much of the housing in Old Havana would be considered uninhabitable but is lived in.



The city historian has undertaken some of the renovations including the magnificent Bacardi building dating from 1930, the same year as the Hotel Nacional.



There are strict preservation codes for facades, so even our apartment building retains its historic colors and façade, despite not being particularly remarkable.



Another interesting historic building is Sloppy Joe's bar where the sandwich of that name was invented and is still served.





Cuba's history as a haven for transatlantic commerce in the 16th C resulted in an extensive system of fortifications which remain today, although only a small archeological site remains of the city wall. At the site of the original founding of Havana were pineapples on top of columns.

As I have seen this symbol in many parts of the world (Philippines, Italy, now Cuba) I finally decided to look up its significance, which is welcome and hospitality.



I was fascinated that the warehouses along the wharves of the port reminded me of those in San Francisco and one even had the same



name!

I also did a double take to see the cruise ship Adonia there as when I left Agadir a few days earlier the P&O cruise ship Adonia was in our port. Turns out this one belongs to Carnival cruise lines. The trains in front are a reminder that the railroad came to Cuba in 1837, before it

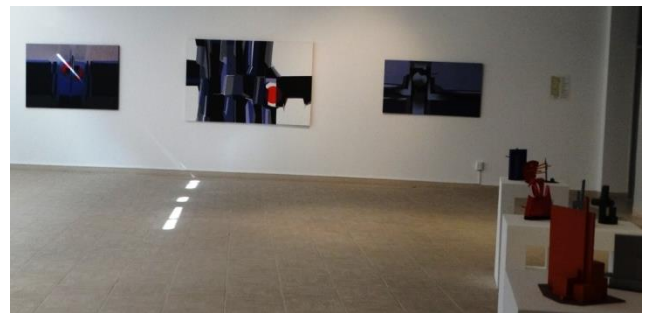


came to Spain!



I enjoyed the museum of modern Cuban art and was able to sneak a few photos, but ran out of time to visit any other museums.

Communication and money are a challenge. Cell phones only became legal in 2008 (along with microwaves, dvd players, and computers). Only in mid-2016 did public wi fi become available. You buy cards for an hour of connectivity and then go to public hot spots, so in every park and plaza you see the whole area filled with people on their phones and laptops. Connectivity can be spotty at peak times.



Changing money is also a challenge with not a lot of outlets and long lines. US dollars are penalized with a 10% tax so \$1.00 usually yields about \$0.86. Other currencies trade at close to international rates with the Canadian dollar being the most favored. And it can happen that your outlet will run out of cash after you have waited a long time in line!

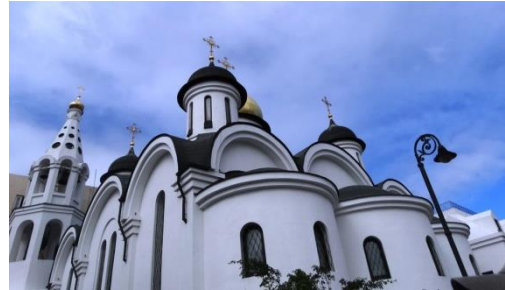


Cuba is largely a Roman Catholic country, but remnants of the African religions brought by the original slave population are still apparent.



We saw many Santeria's, (Way of the Saints of Yoruba origin) dressed in white, including what we assumed were recent initiates following a parade.

Interestingly in Trinidad an Afro/Cuban chapel is in the building adjacent to the square where the first Roman Catholic mass took place in Trinidad in 1514. And there is a Russian



Orthodox Church in Havana that was completed and dedicated in 2008.

We transitioned to Trinidad for our final three nights. This is about a 5 hour bus ride south east from Havana. The scenery along the way varied including rivers, orchards, occasional towns.



School children's uniforms were the same as in Havana.

The Caribbean coast is about 4 km from the center of Trinidad in the province of Sancti Spiritus in approximately the center of Cuba.

Trinidad has beautifully preserved/restored architecture because it was effectively cut off for a hundred years from the mid 1800's when the sugar barons (and slave traders) whose wealth built the town sold off the sugar processing to Americans, and the town survived on handicrafts and cigar making until a road finally arrived connecting them to the rest of the island in 1950!



During the bus ride we made a lunch stop at an excellent rest stop with a full buffet plus Cuban sandwich line, bar, bathrooms, souvenirs, etc. The standard Cuban sandwich is pork sliced right off a hunk of the roasted pig served on a bun sometimes with a choice of condiments.



Street carts often serve the sandwiches and small window take-out food was common as in Havana.



Street art and messaging were also on view.



Trinidad is an easy town for architecture junkies to wander, has many good restaurants, four artisan street markets selling beautiful embroidered table linens plus crocheted clothing among



other crafts. Each street also has two names, pre- and post-revolution.

There is music on the staircase adjacent to the cathedral from mid day through the evening.



The town primarily lives off tourism these days, so there is more pressure from the local population than there was in Havana.

But daily life goes on, kids are in school and pre-school! People are lined up at the Mercado for



food, and to get their ration books updated.

One evening I did the Lonely Planet walking tour which takes you out of the center and into barrio Tres Cruces, another view of Trinidad, a quartier populaire. There was lots of music, everyone out on their steps socializing and horsemen returning from work in the hills behind the town.





It was terrible, however, to see horse drawn carts negotiating the cobblestone streets.



Because Trinidad is comprised predominantly of single-family houses, the overcrowding common to other historic centers has been avoided, thereby contributing greatly to the retention of the original interiors. The use of centuries-old techniques and building materials has persisted, including traditional lime mortar, wood, terracotta clay roofing tiles and cobbled streets. I did a second walking tour with a staff member of the architecture museum who focused on a lot of the architectural details as well as interior decors.

The typical Trinidad house opens directly into the large front room, behind which was the dining room (now often converted to tv room), then the kitchen and an open courtyard around which were arranged the bedrooms. Air flow was very important in the design so there are fan



shaped louvers between rooms, front door and window grills so that the shutters can remain open to permit air flow and even smaller doors set into the larger front doors.

Early 18th century buildings strongly marked by Andalusian and Moorish influences blend



harmoniously with 19th C classical styles superimposed on the traditional layouts. The interior of Palador Ananda, owned by an architect, was especially rich with its collection of furnishings



and art, particularly of the art deco period. Wall painting both interior and exterior was also featured in many buildings.

Typically a building located on an intersection was devoted to commerce.



The main church, Santisima Trinidad Cathedral, replaced an earlier one destroyed by a 19th C cyclone and is famous for a Christ figure that was intended for a church in Vera Cruz Mexico but the boat carrying it was repeatedly blown off course landing in Trinidad three times and so it is especially sacred. The Christmas crèche was still in place.



The Playa Major has a beautiful garden and a view down the one road that goes all the way to



the Caribbean 4 kms away. I took the bus the 11 kms out to the beach, passing varied terrain including vegetable farming and a lovely view to the hills behind Trinidad. The beach was white sand and of course the Caribbean water was – well, the Caribbean!



The Bar Floridita was on the corner of the street where we stayed. This supposedly was one of



Hemingway's favorite hangouts with his daiquiri drink. So I had to try it. It was only when I was reviewing my photos in preparing this write up that I realized there is also a Bar Floridita in Havana that was actually his favorite hangout and I was in a copy!

However both the drink and the music were a nice way to spend my final evening in Cuba.

