

CAPTIVATING CUBA – Part One

By Sherry Sayers

Going to Cuba has always been on my bucket list, so when I discovered that Walking Adventures International (WAI) was offering their virgin trip, I did not procrastinate (like I usually do!) and promptly signed up. I am so glad I did, because it was totally awesome. The very first event was a walk along the Malecón, eight kilometers along the seawall between a busy street and the Atlantic Ocean. Walking along the street was awesome because there were so many old cars going by and walking along the ocean was awesome, as well! We ended the walk at the Museum of the Revolution, a very beautiful building that tells the story of the events that took place in 1959.



The next day, we all climbed into one of those old cars (I picked a red and white 1959 Chevrolet Impala convertible), and took a tour of the city, ending up at the San Carlos de la Cabaña Fortress, which is a volksmarch in and of itself because it is so huge. We then took the ferry across the bay and explored on foot four plazas, which were all different, passing through Old Havana into new Havana.

The next day, we left Havana to head to Viñales, a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site, famous for the mogotes, which are limestone covered hills that are only found in a few places around the world (Cuba, China, Mexico and Colombia), as well as one of the finest places in the country to grow tobacco. Along the way, we stopped at Fusterlandia, a small neighborhood with tons of tiled walls and sculptures, and then stopped at an orchid farm, with over 700 species of orchids. After arriving in Viñales in the rain, our walk through the tobacco farm scheduled for the next day turned out to be perfect. We tromped through the fields, seeing many interesting things, including a Cuban hutia (a large species of rodent endemic to Cuba), oxen pulling the plow, as well as many goats, chickens, turkeys, horses, dogs and pigs. We learned about the unique aspects of the state-controlled agricultural tobacco farming and watched as the local farmer hand-rolled the tobacco leaves into authentic Cuban cigars. We stayed in Casa Particulares for two nights, which are private homes owned by Cubans, much like our Bed & Breakfasts.



After Viñales, we headed to Playa Larga, which is near the Bay of Pigs, and we visited the Girón Museum, which tells the story of the invasion from the Cubans' perspective. We stayed in another Casa Particulares here and the beach was only one street over. I elected to get a massage from a VERY good-looking Cuban gentleman on the beach, which again, was totally awesome! We did a short walk to the cenotes, which are water-filled sinkholes, then walked across the road to put our feet into the Caribbean Sea. The next day, we were up with the birds to see flamingoes in Zapata National Park. Unfortunately, they were too far away to get good pictures, but other birdwatchers in our group throughout this trip were able to spot at least 22 different species of birds, as well as the tiny bee hummingbird. Stay tuned for part two of Captivating Cuba next month with a real funny story about a cow!



CAPTIVATING CUBA – Part Two

By Sherry Sayers

After leaving Playa Larga, we traveled to Cienfuegos, another UNESCO World Heritage Site. This was a large, noisy, and dirty town that reminded me a bit of New York City. The walk here was very nice along another Malecón where we ended the walk at Palacio de Valle, a mansion that a rich Spaniard built in 1917 for his future wife. This structure resembled an ornate Moroccan casbah, with a mix of Gothic, Byzantine, and



baroque influences. We had drinks here and there was a very good band playing. That night, we stayed in beautiful Hotel la Union, a 4-star hotel dating from 1869. This is where I noticed that Cubans really like their night life, as there was a bar across the street from our room, and they hung out on the sidewalk until late at night dancing and drinking.



The next day, we traveled to Topes de Collantes National Park, a beautiful nature reserve in the Escambray Mountains 2,600 feet above sea level. This walk was my very favorite and it came as a complete surprise to me that we had to get to the hiking trails by riding in the back of a Russian ZIL 6x6 truck. We hiked through the tropical rainforest with breathtaking waterfalls, some as high as 200 feet. The walk itself was quite strenuous, with many high rock steps, and crossing streams on planks of wood. Thankfully

they all had handrails, or I would have taken a bath for sure because I've never been able to walk on narrow boards across water!



We then headed to Trinidad, another UNESCO World Heritage Site, famous for its cobblestoned streets and old architectural buildings. Trinidad was founded in 1514. The highlight here was meeting on a street corner (we were all in different Casa Particulares) to go to dinner and hearing the lowest bellowing you can imagine, and lo and behold, a cow comes walking down the street towards us. All the Cubans in the street were chattering like crazy, and our local guide, Will, said he had never seen this happen before, so this was truly a sacred event for us! Oh, wait that's India! For a 2-minute video of the cow, go to woodlandwanderers.org/Cuba2. While in Trinidad, we went to the Colonial Architectural Museum and saw a 19th century hot and cold shower with a very complicated network of pipes.

The next day, we returned to Havana, stopping along the way in Santa Clara to see Che Guevara's mausoleum. Che was Argentinian, not Cuban, but he played a huge role in the 1959 revolution, and his iconic image is everywhere in Cuba, on murals, walls, buildings, t-shirts, mugs, etc. He was executed in Bolivia in 1967. No one is allowed to speak or to touch anything while in the mausoleum. We also stopped at an old sugar plantation where we learned that Cuba also had slaves to work in the sugar fields, a history that has not been well-known. The local guide, Ray, was very informative and passionate about wanting to preserve this history, as well as the plantation house that was ravaged during a hurricane – in my opinion, a huge project that will take many years and dollars to accomplish.



My third and final article next month will be my perceptions and observations of Cuba.

CAPTIVATING CUBA – Part 3

By Sherry Sayers

My final article on Cuba is about my perceptions of the trip and some of my observations. Getting to go to Cuba was something I never dreamed I would be able to do, and it surpassed all my expectations. I found the Cuban people to be very accommodating, very friendly, and ready for tourists, even out in the country. Almost every restaurant where we ate, the staff and the food were exceptional, although there was one exception in Cienfuegos on the plaza where we were the first to order and the last to get our food, and it was painfully slow. In Trinidad, we had pizza and a milkshake, which were a little different than ours (the chocolate in the milkshake tasted strange), but still quite good. The breakfast bar at the National de Cuba Hotel in Havana was truly phenomenal – everything to eat you can imagine, even a cappuccino machine, which I utilized quite a bit, and it was the only cappuccino I found (no Starbucks here!).



One thing that was upsetting to me was how the Cuban people treat their animals, specifically their horses. Many times (especially in the country), we encountered horses tethered in the middle of nowhere, standing by the side of the road, with no water or shade in sight. We also saw horses pulling every kind of cart you can imagine, and many times the horses were just standing out in the heat waiting for their masters. Then, there were the proverbial starving and sick dogs everywhere, thankfully none of them menacing. There were signs of abject poverty, but the people weather the things they have been through and are very charming and resilient.

Bathroom-wise, the funniest thing I saw was at the coffee farm, which was very primitive. We had a great lunch down by the stream, and there was one outhouse with a toilet bowl, just the bowl sitting on the planks. Someone asked after they came out, if they flushed it. I thought – flush it how? Then I realized why the big bucket of water was sitting in there. There were many places we stopped that had toilets, however, no running water. At Fusterlandia, I watched as the girl working there took a bucket, scooped up water from the fountain, then took it into the bathrooms to flush the toilets!

Another thing that took getting used to was the pollution. I learned that Cuba gets their gasoline from Venezuela and I assume it is not processed like our gas is, as it has a foul smell to it. Then of course, there are all the old cars, which don't have the emission converters that our cars here have. It was truly amazing to me that they all still run. Where in the world do they find parts?

As I mentioned, the food for the most part was excellent, although I did get a little tired of pork and black beans and rice. The way they process hamburger was a little strange, and that was not my favorite meal, but everything was so cheap. You can get a meal in Cuba for under five dollars and the drinks at our catered dinners were usually free. The drink of choice for Cubans is “Vitamin R” – rum (ron in Spanish). Some of us on the trip got a stomach virus, and I believe it was from the mint (weeds as I called them) that they put in the Mojitos.

As we are all weathering this pandemic, I am oftentimes reminded of our local Cuban guide, Will, who liked to joke about Cubans' motto – wait and see what you find to buy because you never know what the stores are going to have on hand. Wow! This is what America, the richest country in the world, is now experiencing! I traveled to the grocery store three times before I found toilet paper and eggs, and now they are predicting we will have a meat shortage.

So, in concluding, I would like to ruminate a little on the present state of things and let you know I am never taking anything for granted again. I was hoping to write another article this summer about another WAI trip to Canada and Alaska I was going on, but it has since been cancelled. There were several Falcon Wanderer members who also were planning to go on this trip. I don't know if things will ever get back to normal, so as you can see, Cuba was a very special trip for me. I hope everyone is doing okay in these crazy times and I hope to see you on the trail real soon!