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Paying Homage to Those Havana Nights — and Days

Written by Super User Category: [Archived Articles \(/index.php/old-articles\)](/index.php/old-articles) Published: 02 May 2013
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By Lisa Miller

In case you were wondering, U.S. citizens can visit Cuba legally now — I just did, on a Friendly Planet cultural tour, with my parents. Yes, there is a lot of paperwork and planning involved, but it is definitely a trip worth taking, especially before the island becomes a commercial destination, which it is sure to happen after the Castro brothers, both in their 80s, are no longer in power.

Stepping off the plane, I was riveted by what appeared to be a 1950s car show going on at the arrivals/departure area. (I was so entranced that I didn't even notice Beyoncé and Jay Z, who were heading to the departure gate.)



This “car show” is just the reality of Cuba, where they fix the old because there is no new. The juxtaposition of old-fashioned jalopies against the landscape of architectural gems in Old Havana kept me transfixed, and my camera busy. I found myself standing in the middle of busy intersections time and again awed by the colorful traffic.

There I was in my favorite era — the Fifties. As a girl growing up in the 70s, I experienced the 1950s via “Grease,” “Happy Days,” “Laverne and Shirley,” and “I Love Lucy.” Here I was, waking up in a dream come true — in a time warp, expecting Fonzie or Danny Zuko to appear. Instead, I got Ricky Ricardo — in the form of Cuban men whistling and calling out “pretty lady” as they leaned (leered) out of their cruising 1953 Chevys and Buicks. If only they knew that all I was interested in were their cool cars.



For me it was not just a vacation, but also an opportunity to retrace family steps.

In 1940, my great-grandfather left Barcelona for Havana, where he opened a nightclub at 1 Bernaza Street, in the heart of Old Havana. The club is adjacent to La Floridita, the bar Hemingway frequented and made famous by his frequent attendance. According to my mom and through old letters, my great-grandfather, Chose Alonso, was friendly with Hemingway way back then. Well, how about our five minutes of fame.

So there we were, standing in what was once grandfather's Old Havana nightclub, and it's pretty cool. My mom was right to go to such lengths to track this place down. The building seems virtually unchanged, and I could easily picture how lively it must have been in the heyday of Chose's Pan American Nightclub, with Hemingway holding court at the bar. I felt like ordering a drink, but the current tenant is an Adidas store.

The highlight of the trip was when we ditched our tour and hopped into a rented shiny yellow 1957 Pontiac Super Chief convertible. We raced off with the wind in our hair, leaving the Capitol behind us, to find our way to the 19th-century Cristobol Colon Cemetery. Here, we met up with Octavio, a cemetery official, who presented us with his diligent research (scribbled on a piece of paper the size of my thumb) on the history and current location of my great-grandfather's gravesite. Apparently, all the bodies were exhumed when the church's lease was up, and moved to another part of the cemetery. I won't go into the details about the boxes and boxes of bones we saw, but in the end, we found his transplanted grave and we were able to pay homage.



Watching my mother scatter my grandmother's ashes was a beautiful thing to behold. We felt a sense of peace in coming full circle. All the old letters and pictures from the 1940s that my mom had lugged with her started to make a lot more sense to me, and I loved her even more for encouraging me to have such a strong sense of heritage.

During our four-day stay, we were overwhelmed by the beautiful and the unexpected in Havana. First was the Hotel Nacional, an experience in and of itself, and the same one my dad stayed in as a 16-year-old with his father. My dad has great memories of the beautiful beaches and the famous nightlife of the Tropicana (which we trekked out to see, and then Babaloo'ed all the way home).

Like the rest of Havana, the Nacional hasn't changed much, for better or for worse. It has an ethereal air about it — perhaps it was the unbelievable opera being sung on the back porch mixing with wafting cigar smoke, the mojito in my hand, and the balmy breezes off the Melacon that were rustling the palm tree behind me. Peeling paint and crumbling stucco just started to seem so unimportant.



Our two tour guides were magnificent, one a Georgian gem who won us all over with her smile and good cheer, the other, a 29-year-old Cuban gent who was clearly a product of his socialistic environment, knew all his stats and facts, and was fluent in German and English.

Our group was a hardy, curious, and adventurous bunch of mostly retirees. Recuperating from knee surgery, I fit right in, pace-wise. Together, we pondered over the affects of socialism and what appeared to be its Pompeii-esque effect on the country back in 1959.

Old Havana had so much to offer that my head was spinning from the beauty of the 16th-century plazas and squares, the cathedrals, castles, and forts. Everything I laid eyes on was picturesque, but in need of a major facelift. It is a restoration expert's dream project.

Admittedly, my head was also spinning from the cigar smoke, Havana club rum, and café con leches that we seemed to be enjoying on the hour. It's what is referred to as a Cuban marriage. Let's just say, our whole tour group got married!

We had countless opportunities to savor the music of Cuba. It was ubiquitous and natural and it lulled us all into submission. We learned to salsa (bum knee and all). We also met artists and could buy their work, as long as we paid in Cuban Convertibles. No U.S. credit cards were accepted anywhere. The good news is that visitors are allowed to bring artwork home, as opposed to all those cigars, coffee, and rum that needed to sadly stay behind because of the embargo.

Our guides brought us to a variety of places — an organic co-operative farm, coffee plantation ruins in Las Terrazas (a Biosphere Reserve), Hemingway's house, and the fishing village that inspired him to write "Old Man and the Sea."

At an elementary school, we saw rough classroom conditions and gave small gifts. Then we noticed the students line up outside a bathroom, which they flushed with a bucket. As always, the building itself was glorious but gloomy.

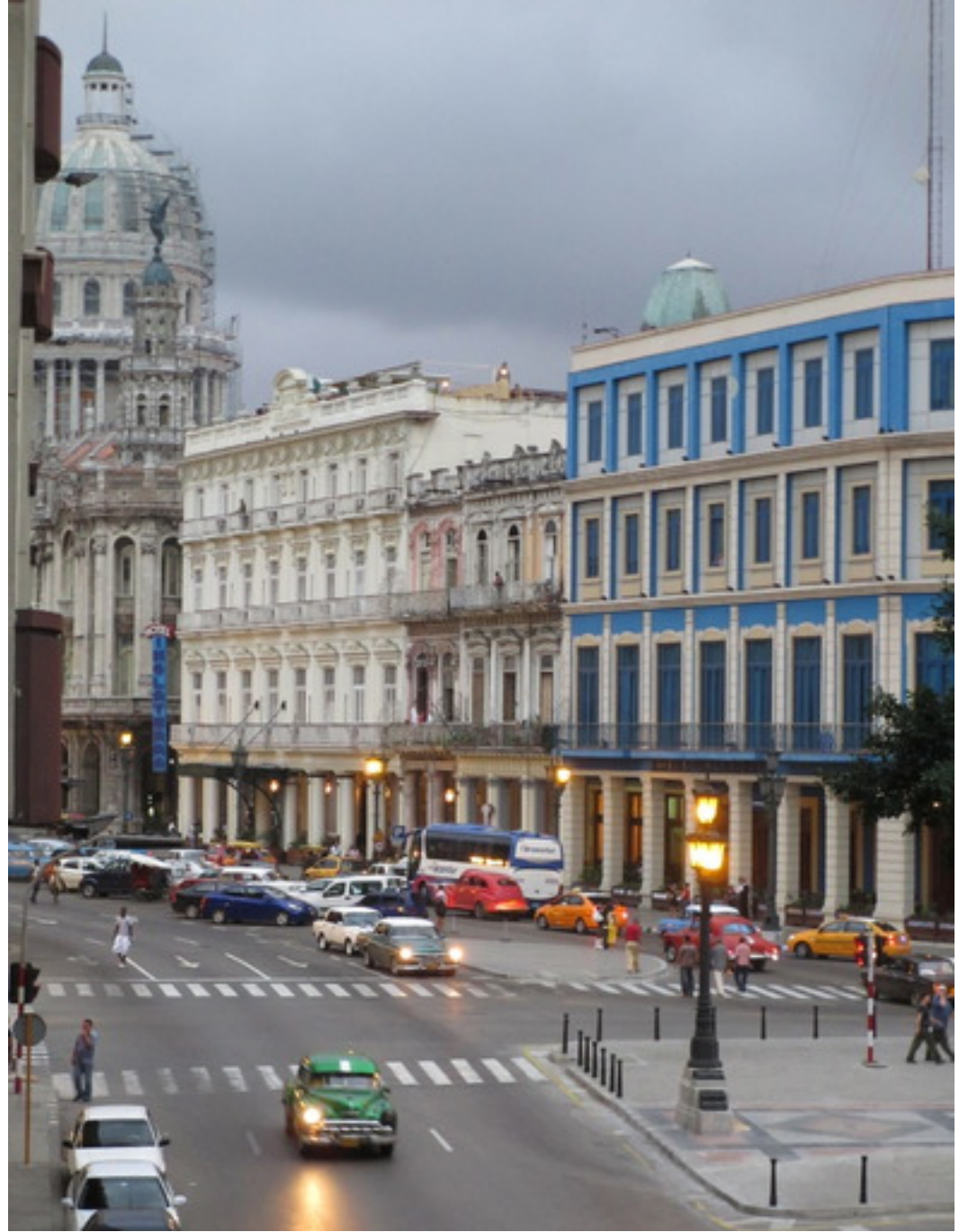
The senior citizen home we then visited moved me to tears, as they put us up onto a stage, sang to us, and clapped for us. I couldn't get over their gratitude for our visit and the meager gifts we had brought them.

Somehow, against the lush and balmy backdrop of avocado trees and royal palms, the people I saw seemed a strange mix of acceptance, peacefulness, and even pride as they sat amid both grandeur and squalor. Spanish-style mansions, exquisite in style and grace, looked as if they would crumble to the touch.

For more than half a century, Cuban citizens have been kept under lock and key. It is clear they made do with what they had, which had not been much. Every bathroom encounter we had was a clear reminder of how tough the living conditions have been and remain. Plumbing and electricity are not to be taken for granted. Clearly, things are getting better and the Communist reins are loosening. After all, there we were, 21 Americans, to witness it (albeit under strict government control on both sides).

There is still such a long way to go.

Exposure to capitalism will continue to increase and will gain a foothold (it already has a big underground presence we discovered), but I am so glad that I was able to see the country the way it is today. Cuba is so quiet and non-commercialized, yet so full of potential — like a sleeping baby with a great future ahead of it.



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