

Reconnecting in Cuba:

OUR HAVANA HERITAGE

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Nancy duBusc P '87, '00 and Elizabeth "Lisa" (duBusc) Miller '87 embracing Havana heritage at José Alonso's burial place in Cristobal Colon Cemetery.



Nancy duBusc P '87, '00, Richard B. duBusc '59, P '87, '00, and Elizabeth "Lisa" (duBusc) Miller '87 with their Cuban tour guide Ale and American tour guide Tracy Lewis at an organic co-operative farm in Havana.

It is possible to visit Cuba now—I just did it on a Friendly Planet cultural tour. Anyone who loves to travel to unusual places should definitely add Cuba to the list.

Stepping off the plane, just a 35-minute hop from Miami, I was arrested by the Cuban reality of what appeared to be a 1950s car show. The juxtaposition of these old-fashioned jalopies against the landscape of breathtaking architectural gems in Old Havana was truly captivating.

This trip was a pilgrimage for my parents and me. My great-grandfather José Alonso had left Barcelona in 1940 to open a nightclub at 1 Bernaza Street in the heart of Old Havana. According to my mom and her old letters, he was friendly with Hemingway. The highlight of our trip was hopping into a shiny yellow 1957 Pontiac Super Chief convertible to find the Cristobal Colon Cemetery. Here, we tracked down my great-grandfather's gravesite and were able to pay homage.

Our hotel, The Nacional Hotel, was an experience in and of itself—and the same hotel where my dad stayed as a 16 year old with his father. My dad has great memories of the beautiful beaches and the famous nightlife of the Tropicana. Just like the rest of Havana, for better or for worse, the hotel hasn't changed much.

Our tour took us to an elementary school where we saw tough classroom conditions and gave small gifts. The building itself was glorious, but gloomy. The senior citizen home we visited moved me to tears, as they sang and clapped for us. I couldn't get over their gratitude for our visit.

Socialism certainly had imprisoned Cubans for so long. It is clear that they just made do with what they had, which had not been much. Our one-hour briefing by a government official to "teach

us about Cuban-American economic and trade relations" felt more like a long-winded plea: "lift the U.S. embargo, please."

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

In the midst of all this government-induced austerity, it seemed that Cubans had developed a "you get what you get, and you don't get upset" mentality. For this little island nation, the lack of means and choices for so long clearly had demolished the competitive drive.

Flashbacks to Pingry, where I first learned of communistic concepts via Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, began to take hold of me. Does socialism have its benefits? Well, Cuba certainly is a perfect current day anachronism to launch that discussion.

Exposure to capitalism will undoubtedly 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 it the way it is today. Cuba is so quiet, so uncommercialized, yet so full of potential, like a sleeping baby with such a great future ahead of it—one with a Starbucks on every corner, no doubt.

I remember how I felt about Saigon when I lived there in 1994, just after Vietnam opened up. It felt like the Wild West. It was exciting and intensely dynamic. It's easy to see how Cuba will head down that same path soon. I just hope that, in the process, Havana maintains all of its charm and sense of peace that I felt so enveloped by.