

Groovy cars, funky music, friendly people, sunshine, rum and cigars...

# The kindred spirit of Cuba

by Kate Chambré

**Three weeks spent backpacking around Cuba with a friend recently, gave me an interesting insight into this communist country on the fringe of capitalist America.**

No glimpses of Fidel Castro unfortunately but what we did gather from chatting to Cuban people, is that they have a deep rooted respect for their leader. After Fidel? Who knows.

Natives say that they are certain things will change and are dreading the day when he dies.

So why go to Cuba? Groovy cars, funky Afro-Cuban music and dancing, friendly people, a unique culture, a warm climate, beautiful landscape, alluring beaches, rum and cigars were but a few things that drew us to this Caribbean island.

Cuba is the Caribbean's largest and least commercialised island. With a population of approximately 11 million the country is considered one of the world's last strongholds of communism. Its tourism industry is the fastest growing in the world making it the country's largest single source of foreign exchange. A mere 1.5 million tourists holiday in Cuba each year. Untainted by commercialism Cubans have a friendly attitude and are eager to accommodate visitors in whatever way they can. Particularly the men! The continual suggestive kissing noises and other such sounds echoing through the streets as women pass them by is an everyday occurrence. Although very flattering (until you realise that everyone gets the same treatment) it can make you feel a little uncomfortable at times.

We didn't really have a travel itinerary mapped out upon arrival in Havana, our idea was to play things by ear and to spend the first week exploring the south of the country.

We wanted to steer clear of resorts and places that catered for the package holiday maker. To cut costs but more importantly to gain a realistic impression into Cuban culture we stayed predominantly in private homes ('casa particulares'). The price of staying in a casa is half the price of a hotel.

**Risk of imprisonment**

As well as all private houses, the government own virtually all of Cuba's hotels, resorts and holiday camps. This means that they are not too keen on the 'casa particular' set up (which was established through a decree in 1997). Subsequently the government have imposed stiff licensing fees on this 'casa culture', which means many families operate on the sly, facing a significant risk of imprisonment.

Families would usually give you a decent breakfast (for around \$3) and an evening meal (for around \$7). Although perfectly edible, Cuban cuisine didn't exactly leave us craving

for more. The staple Cuban diets consists of pork, chicken, rice, beans, banana fritters, tomatoes and lettuce.

We were careful to drink bottled water. However, it didn't prevent us from getting ill at different stages of the trip. This may have been from brushing our teeth with tap water, drinking cocktails or eating something dodgy, who knows!

Having caught a train south to Santiago de Cuba which was supposed to take 14 hours, 21 hours later we arrived at our destination.

The first week spent cruising around the south of the Island gave us an initial flavour for the country. I was struck by the friendly and laid back attitude of its people, the strict and suspicious regime of the police (they are continually watching people - especially when natives are interacting with tourists), the picturesque scenery, the scarcity of traffic on the roads (in rural areas) not to forget the widespread poverty of the place.

On numerous occasions, we would stop; be it in the countryside, a village, town or city and ask a native if we could use their loo. This request was never refused - in fact such was the home owner's hospitality that a shot of coffee or a glass of sugar cane cordial was often offered.

I think I must of been into at least 50 peoples homes, in different areas of the country (I was drinking a lot of water, just in case you were wondering.) Through use of their loos, we gained a unique insight into family life and everyday existence in Cuba. Like the Irish of old they were extremely welcoming.

## Guantánamo US Naval Base

We passed through the city of Guantánamo but didn't see the renowned US Naval Base (located 27 km southeast from the city) where numerous prisoners of war are held by the Americans. We needed permits, to get a glimpse of the orange suited prisoners through a telescope, from a viewpoint located nearby.

Using different modes of transport (trains, buses, taxis, bicycles, a rented car (for 3 days)) our travelling exploits took us to places all over the Island. The picturesque and laid back town of Baracoa (on the southern tip.) to Guardalavaca and Holguin on the east coast, Trinidad (on the west coast), the beautiful location of Vinales in northern Cuba - noted for its spectacular cliffs and caves, were some of the places we visited.

Our experience in Guardalavaca confirmed why we were happier staying away from Cuban



Some elderly men make music during "The Semana de la Cultura Trinitaria."



The beautiful landscape of Vinales.

resorts. After a train journey, a long wait in a small village called Caccum and two bus journeys, we eventually arrived at our destination at 3 a.m. There was no room in any of the many hotels there because we arrived too late. It also transpired that you are supposed to pre-book, so we took ourselves off to the beach where we came upon 20 deck chairs stacked up in rows by the sea shore. That was to be where we would lay our heads until dawn. We were lucky that there was no rain and thankful that we'd brought our sleeping bags with us because there was quite a strong breeze.

At around 8 a.m. we were usurped from our resting place when a beach attendant came along to disperse a deck chair to a holiday maker. Bleary eyed and exhausted, we got down from the chairs, feeling mildly

embarrassed (we received quite a few strange looks from holiday makers.) A couple of hours later we were on a bus to a city called Holguin deciding that Guardalavaca wasn't for us. Later that evening we caught a night bus to the beautiful city of Trinidad.

It just so happened that we arrived in Trinidad during "The Semana de la Cultura Trinitaria" - an annual festival, which is great fun. A week when music fills the city, people dance in the streets and the place generally bursts with life. The night life was excellent and one thing I will say is that plenty of cocktails were consumed.

Cubans are born with music in their blood. Music is a way of life for them and this is evident from the way in which they embrace it. From as young as two years old children learn how to dance. At a doctor's 30th birthday party



A Cuban family photographed at a beach not far from the city of Santiago de Cuba.



A groovy Cuban car.

making three times (if not more) the amount through tourism. He said although the communist regime in Cuba dictates that all people and professions should be treated equally, it is clearly not the case. His plan is to head to Jamaica once he has raised the necessary funds to pay his way out of the country.

## Tourist prices

Staying in 'casa particulares', eating in restaurants and travelling around the country by public transport is much cheaper in comparison to prices here in Ireland. We found that by using Cuban pesos, the cost of living (food, drink, local transport) could be reduced considerably. However we soon realised that because we were non Spanish speakers it was very difficult to use the local currency. This meant that backpacking in Cuba was far more expensive in comparison to places like India or Africa. With the exchange rate at around 20 pesos to 1 dollar some tourists do get annoyed when they're asked to pay in dollars for something, while Cubans pay in pesos. However most Cubans only earn around \$10 dollars per month. Because of this the Cuban government provide them with services and facilities at equivalent prices. One Cuban told me that where tourists are only contributing their money to society the majority of Cubans are contributing their labour as well, by holding peso-paying jobs.

For me, Cuba was a fascinating place to visit. Full of discovery and beauty, the island is an inexpensive and easy country to travel in, unspoil by commercialism as of yet. It's definitely a good time to visit the country because once Fidel Castro dies, it's apparent that things are going to change.