

A Week in Cuba

Why would you want to go to Cuba? On more than one occasion, when I shared my plans to travel to Cuba, the response was one that surprised me. My friends and family had comments about my safety, the overall poverty and mostly dubious thoughts. Cuba will soon be a changed land, once the Americans start coming there regularly, and I wanted to see it before that happens. So I traveled to a country known for its old cars and its socialist government, but I discovered a place full of beautiful scenery, gracious people and a rich history.

Our group of 17, plus two guides, traveled out of Tampa FL on a charter plane and arrived in Havana on a Saturday. We were met by our Cuban guide, Claudia, who spoke meticulous English, and our bus driver, Eddie. They stayed with us the entire week.

Sunday

Our first couple nights were spent in Old Havana, in a beautiful religious themed hotel (think old monastery) where staff dress as monks yet it is comfortable, even with its historic setting. On Sunday we walked the cobblestoned streets viewing the many historic buildings on each of the plazas or squares. The Cathedral de San Cristobal, built in the 18th century by the Jesuit order, was a sight to behold with its baroque architecture. Each square held unique elements and buildings, with most having been built in the 1700's. There is evidence everywhere that Cuba is working hard to preserve this history. Many of the hotels and restaurants tucked in between the old buildings give a share of their profits in order to assist in the restoration. In the afternoon, we visited the rum museum which is actually the history of one of Cuba's most popular products..

Cuba has a history filled with multiple countries vying for control and the mixture of customs, language and religions which creates a unique and interesting opportunity to experience unusual art, different foods and a nontraditional approach to life. There is a great deal of poverty, as is the case in many Caribbean islands, yet the Cuban people are some of the most resourceful and ingenious people I have seen.

Monday

We journeyed to the home of a man whose entire backyard is a giant organic garden and the only tool I saw in the entire place was a machete made with a piece of pipe that he had flattened. He used plastic water bottles buried in a row turned upside down to form a barrier against slugs and snails. He said the hot sun warms the bottles and repels the slugs. He had a "rabbit poop" compost pile filled with hundreds of worms that help to aerate his soil and fertilize it as well. He grows several medicinal herbs as well as many other fruits and vegetables such as avocado, mango, and peppers. After our visit there we proceeded to a wonderful restaurant called El Ajaico, which is also the name of an excellent Cuban vegetable soup. After lunch we visited Hemingway's home that has been maintained as it was when he died with his animal trophies still on the walls and his treasured boat, Pilar, there to be viewed.

That evening, after dinner, some of us traveled to the Tropicana Club to watch the marvelous dancers and enjoy the atmosphere while sipping some of the local rum.

Tuesday

After breakfast, we boarded our coach and headed out of Havana to Vinales, which is in the valley. This area is known for its mogotes which are irregularly shaped steep sided hills and were formed by eons of erosion. The beauty of this section of Cuba is breathtaking with its lush greens and exotic flowers. This is also where much of the farming takes place and we were privileged to visit a tobacco farm run by a woman and her father and daughter. The majority (90%) of their crop each year is sold to the government for a small sum but the remainder is kept and used to make handmade cigars which the owner sells to tourists. This is just one example of how our visits to their country will help the locals economically.

Wednesday

We traveled to a local organic farm-to-table restaurant that grew all of their own food at the site. We ate outdoors, as we did at many of the restaurants, and so while enjoying delicious and nutritious cuisine we also enjoyed stunning scenic views.

All of the restaurants we visited in Cuba are privately owned which creates an opportunity to get to know the proprietors firsthand, and this was by design in the tour. On Wednesday evening, the restaurant we visited in the town was run by a mother and daughter and the father (grandfather) farmed, providing the food for the menu. The majority of our meals were served family style, as is the tradition in many Cuban restaurants, which offers a chance to try a multitude of foods. Black beans and rice were part of most meals but the meats varied from red snapper to pork, chicken or lamb and at least a half dozen meals offered lobster in some way. No beef is served and it is actually illegal to kill a cow in Cuba without a permit as they are used primarily for milk. When you live on an island, there is limited space so if you are going to graze an animal, you need to maximize the benefits received from it.

Thursday

We traveled back into Havana, only this time to another section of the city. On our way to our Havana, we stopped in Pinar del Rio at a cigar factory to watch the cigars being hand rolled and tested for good air flow. The workers are trained for 6-8 months and once they are in production make only 100-150 cigars each day. We also visited the Museum of the Revolution which told Castro's story of how he saved the people from certain catastrophe. We then checked into Hotel Nacional, which has some history associated with the Mafia as well as having hosted many famous celebrities. That evening we rode in some of the old cars that were hired as taxis to take us to dinner. I chose a 1956 baby blue Chevy for my ride.

Friday

Our last day in Cuba began with a tour of an interesting and unique school for barbers and beauticians. It was started by a man named Pepito to provide an opportunity for young people to gain a profession who weren't able to attend the university. As time went on, he expanded the school to include an art school for younger children and a

day care facility for senior citizens. He also added a restaurant nearby whose profits help to support the school. He was able to get other neighbors in the community to assist in local improvements and they also added businesses in this same area, including an art gallery. His most recent addition was to set aside 10 of the slots in the barber/beauty school for deaf students to learn a trade. The rum factory, Havana Club, is now working with him to train bartenders. He plans to add a cooking school next. It was a fascinating endeavor and again showed the resourcefulness of the Cuban people.

That evening we were free to do as we wished, so, on the recommendation of our guide, a friend and I visited a Russian restaurant that was on the bay. The Communist Russian flag still flew at the entrance, but the view was beautiful and the food divine, including borscht, pork stroganoff and dumplings stuffed with lamb. It was the perfect ending to an amazing week.

The next day we headed back to the U.S. It is evident that Cuba is planning for more tourists as they move their cargo port in Havana to make room for a place where cruise ships will dock. Their young people are learning English in high school and repeatedly we were asked to tell our friends to please come visit their country. As a retiree who loves to travel, I would encourage anyone who has the least interest in seeing Cuba to do it soon while it is still the Cuba most of us remember from our younger days.

The tour was organized by Global Relations Travel Club

www.GlobalRelations.US

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For information about their tours visit:

www.GlobalRelations.OurCuba.com