

Visiting Cuba by Barb Frobish

I love to travel, and a few months ago I had the opportunity to take a unique trip. I went to Cuba with Dan Rutherford and his Global Relations Travel Club. Yes there are still restrictions on Americans traveling to Cuba, but this was a legal people to people trip.

Many think of evil Communists when they think of Cuba. However Communism defines the government, not the people. The people were friendly and welcoming.

The architecture in Old Havana is beautiful and the country is making efforts to restore many of the old buildings rather than tearing them down and building new non-descript buildings. Another unique use of a building are the paladars, private restaurants. Some are in peoples' homes and they have wonderful food.

During our week there, we had 2 cooking lessons. One at the restaurant El Ajiaco and the other at a cooking school. Both were a lot of fun and very interesting. After our lesson at El Ajiaco, we went to visit the organic garden that produces much of what is used at the restaurant.

I have to admit that I don't know much about organic gardening, so I was fascinated. Julio and Jesus do the gardening, in their yard, in addition to their regular jobs. It was incredible. They fill used plastic bottles with soil, turn the bottles upside down and bury the top of the bottles in a ring around the plants. Heat and reflection are generated by the sun (lots of sun in Cuba) hitting the bottles. Heat is absorbed by the soil and then given off into the ground, which keeps the grubs and other pests at bay. In addition to herbs, they grow bananas, plantains, avocados, guava, coffee beans and grapes. I had never seen coffee beans before and later got to help crush some. Did you know that Cuban mint is different than what we have in the United States? A proper mojito has crushed Cuban mint. Yes, we had a lesson on that as well.

We visited several things associated with Ernest Hemingway. He used to hang out at Floridita and have daiquiris. Before he bought a farm, he stayed at the Ambos Mundos Hotel, which we visited, and even had the opportunity to see Hemingway's room. We also toured Finca La Vigia, Hemingway's home and farm. It was incredible. We saw his boat Pilar that was made famous by his book *Old Man and the Sea*.

Not only did we see a tobacco farm, but we also got to watch a lady roll a cigar. The tobacco farmers are required to sell 90 percent of their tobacco to the government. They keep the other 10 percent for their own use or to make into cigars to sell. They make more on the 10 percent than they do on what they get from the government for the 90 percent.

One night we road in "vintage" cars along the Malecon, through an ancient forest and to dinner. By vintage, they mean cars from my childhood. We were in a beautifully reconditioned 1958 Chevy Bel Air. You see a lot of the vintage cars in Havana and old Havana.

If you are a history nut like I am, you would also enjoy the Hotel Nacional. That was the hotel where the mobsters stayed back in the day when they controlled a lot of the nightclubs and gambling in Cuba. Several movie stars have stayed there in addition to the mob. The hotel does tours so you can see the highlights.

There is so much more to tell about this beautiful island but these are some of the highlights. I only got to see the western part of the island and already plan to return to see the east. Yes, you should be prepared for glitches, like the power going out for a few hours in the valley and your hotel's back up generator being nonfunctioning. Seriously though, this just adds to the adventure and makes for great stories when you get home.