

Colorful Cuba

Smoker

Cuba, an intriguing time-warp of a country with massive changes coming in the near future, is a photographer's delight. Semi-tropical light softens the vibrant colors splashed about Cuba's flashy cars, clothing, lush vegetation, and fascinating street life, where you see no fast food restaurants, store chains or neon lights. Photographers can capture all the classic Cuban images such as pre-1959 American cars, cigar smokers, dilapidated buildings with colorful graphics, and more; basically every type of shot except wildlife.

It is not often that a photographer can capture her favorite photo from a trip by eight a.m. the first morning. On our initial outing, as my daughter and I walked toward a prominent cathedral in Old Havana, I spotted an elderly woman wearing flamboyant red flowers over her hair. Just setting up for business, she stopped, grinned at us, and waved both hands, a cigar in one and a CUC in the other. (CUCs are the currency currently used by foreigners. Cuba will soon transition to a single currency, the Cuban peso.) With rouge caked over her wrinkles and a sparkle in her eyes, this playful Cuban grandma made our "modeling for money" transaction a pleasure, which is not always the case. My Cuban adventure was off to a great start.

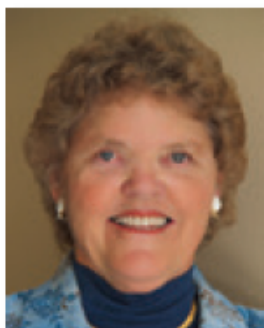
I had been interested in Cuba for years, wanting to visit before the US Trade Embargo was lifted

and Havana, if not the entire island, morphed into another Miami. Fortunately, legal visits became possible after President Obama's 2011 executive order that allowed U.S. government-approved, people-to-people cultural and educational visits. Our tour leader, PSA member **Ralph Velasco**, was leading his eleventh fully-licensed program!

In December, 2014, President Obama announced sweeping changes in the US policy toward Cuba. This included establishing full diplomatic relations, raising fourfold the limit on the amount of money Cuban-Americans can send to Cuba annually, and facilitating greater communication with the outside world. He also promised to work toward removing Cuba from the official list of State Sponsors of Terrorism, and to try convincing Congress to end the half-century-old trade embargo.

Reading about crowds cheering and hugging as they heard the news over TV in an upscale Havana supermarket reminded me of my visit to that market, located near the foreign embassies. In my case, we were cheering a World Cup match; it was fun watching how excited the Cubans were, even though their team had not qualified.

Since Obama's announcement, Americans are clamoring to visit Cuba. As of January 15, 2015, Americans can do so without being part of a preapproved program, so long as the visit is for one



By Donna Judd
California

of 12 approved reasons, such as “cultural,” broad enough to cover basically any trip. U.S. airlines and travel agents can now sell and book travel directly to Cuba. Credit cards and ATM’s are coming next. The rush is on!

My July, 2014, trip’s itinerary had to be approved by the US government, which required cultural and educational activities, not something like relaxing on the beach. Every official group wandered through Old Havana, a UNESCO World Heritage site, drove along Havana’s famous Malecón, visited a rum or tobacco production site, a farmer’s market, and the El Morro Fortress for panoramic views of the city. They also saw Ernest Hemingway-related sites including his former home, the little fishing village that inspired *The Old Man and the Sea*, and several spots claiming to be his favorite bar.

Other activities were tailored to your group’s interest. My photography-oriented group of ten had daily photo walks, plus visits with a prominent sculptor, a mosaic artist, and a photographer who was Fidel Castro’s personal choice to photograph the Revolution. All groups have late afternoons and evenings free to visit museums, be driven along the Malecón in a vintage convertible, explore privately-owned restaurants called *paladares*, or enjoy live music in bars, restaurants, and street corners.

Day or night, we felt completely comfortable in Cuba. Our group was allowed to wander at will, encouraged by our guide to ask any questions, chat with the locals, and photograph what and where we wished. Cubans are an attractive, photogenic mix, with approximately sixty-five percent white, ten percent black, and the remainder mixed race. The people were warm and friendly, and, despite financial pressures, seemed quite happy.

During our nine days, I took hundreds of people shots, and paid only twice, the second time to a man posing a pet rat on his dog’s back. My daughter and I sometimes gave little gifts such as beaded necklaces, candy, cheap sunglasses, or hotel soap bars. Mostly, though, we smiled and “*gracias-ed*” our thanks.

I loved Old Havana, but am glad I was able to



Betting on Marbles



Street Photo

balance it with insights from four days outside the capital. It is often easier to find the essence of a country away from its big cities. My trip highlight was Trinidad, a 500-year-old colonial city, and UNESCO World Heritage site.

Evening walks in Trinidad were my favorite activity of the entire trip. As the temperature receded and the evening breeze blew life into the dusty cobble-stoned streets, locals wandered out to their steps, porches and street. We photographed barefoot kids playing marbles and soccer, and adults playing dominoes, refinishing furniture, feeding horses on their doorstep, repairing cars, selling fresh-baked goodies from a bag, drinking beer on the corner, and playing with their dogs. I even photographed one grandfather as he shaved, then brushed his teeth.

We also took morning walks. I watched an older couple walk down the hilly, rough road toward town, holding hands, each carrying a sack lunch. They reach my corner, kissed without breaking stride and split down two different streets toward their work places. Over how many years had that routine been perfected?

Our Havana hotel had been built in 1875, was

Bictaxi Driver—Father
and Daughter



in Old Havana facing the central park, and had air conditioning. But our stay in Trinidad was even better, in the Cuban version of a B&B, a *casa particular*, or private home licensed by the government to rent out rooms. Another liberalizing improvement by Fidel Castro's younger brother, Raul, this allowed our hostess, Lucy, to have hosted numerous guests from Canada and nearly every western European country in the two years she has been running Casa Lucy. Lucy was thrilled with the opportunity, understandably. The \$30 per night she charged, which included a huge, delicious breakfast for two, was the equal to the state's monthly salary of a doctor.

Approximately eighty percent of Cuba's workers work for the state. It's practically impossible to survive on state wages, even with the help of subsidized housing, food rations, free education and free medical care, so Cubans rely on the black market, second jobs in the tourist industry, or remittances from family members living abroad.

Cuba gets a large share of its revenue from tourism; in fact in 2014, tourism ranked third as a revenue source, behind overseas remittances. Neither of these facts surprised me, but number 1 did: excess medical staff and services exported to countries like Venezuela. (Half thinking our guide might be mistaken, I researched and found that Cuba, "had achieved a health picture on par with the world's most developed nations.") Even more startling, this small nation of 11.2 million has a larger medical team fighting Ebola in West Africa than any other country.

More *casa particulares* and more private restaurants opening are among the many benefits for tourists coming with the end of a half-century of cold war. It will be possible to use U.S. dollars, to have access to ATM machines, to have better

internet service, plus enjoy more hotels and the infrastructure that supports them. In 2014, a record-setting three million tourists visited Cuba. Expect that number to skyrocket.

Photographers joining the crowd should adhere to the "if you need it, bring it" rule. You won't find quality photography equipment in Cuba. (The rare good camera you see will have been brought in by a relative from outside the country.) At the same time, don't overload. Air Cuba weighed all luggage going onto our ancient Soviet carrier. Checked luggage over forty-four pounds was charged \$2 per excess pound. More importantly, carryon/camera equipment had to weigh under twenty pounds, or it could be checked, something you want to avoid. I used a light, mirror-less Olympus OM-D E-m1 with a 28-300mm equivalent lens. My backup Olympus m5 had a wide-angle lens, great for landscapes.

You can get by without a tripod, saving a little weight. A few people used them for sunsets and in the two caves we visited in the Vinales Valley area, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where eroded limestone created photogenic mountains and caves. Most, however, shot handheld throughout the trip.

Although our guide always used the term "socialist," Cuba is one of only five remaining Communist nations worldwide. It remains to be seen if Cuba will follow China's path, moving toward capitalism economically, while remaining Communist politically. Other issues, such as when or if Congress will end the trade embargo and who will come to power after the Castro brothers, will also affect Cuba's future. Whatever happens during the upcoming turbulent period, I'm betting the long-suffering, resilient Cuban people will survive with spirit and heart intact—and hopefully, big smiles on their faces.

Today's Cuba is fascinating, and so is its future.



Compressed Street