

# A Funny Sort of Socialism

*Travels in Cuba*

*Mark Moxon*





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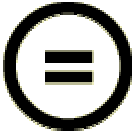
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*A Funny Sort of Socialism: Travels in Cuba*  
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Cover Photograph: The former convent of San Francisco de As , Trinidad

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# Foreword

This book is a collection of writing from the road, covering a two-week trip I made to Cuba in 2005 with my partner Peta.

The travelogue for all these countries and more can be found at my personal website at **[www.moxon.net](http://www.moxon.net)**, where you can also find travel tips, recommended journeys and further free books for you to download. If you enjoy reading this book, then I'd be delighted if you would sign my website's Guestbook.

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Finally, please be aware that this book is highly satirical, which means there's a slight chance that it might cause offence those who think my sense of humour is amusing as a puddle of mud. On top of this, some parts will be out of date – which is why each article is dated – and others will betray the naivety of a

traveller who discovered his way in the world by throwing himself into it headfirst. It is, however, an honest account of how I felt as I travelled the world for three years, and as such, I hope you enjoy it.

Mark Moxon, April 2005

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# Map



# Cuba

## Heaving on a Jet Plane

*Written: 5 March 2005*

I can only assume it was karma of some sort. Perhaps it was a payback for all those times I've sat on the sofa watching people on reality TV suffering at the hands of the airlines and thought, 'Well, what do you *expect* when you turn up ten minutes before take-off?' Despite all the travelling I've done and all the air miles I've put in, I've never been one of those unlucky people whose holidays have been derailed before they've even begun. I've never had to sleep in an airport, and I've never experienced the shambolic sight of an airline trying to deal with an angry horde of bitter holidaymakers... until now. At last, I've joined the club.

I'd planned it all so carefully, too. Ever since a balmy night in 1997 when I landed in Indonesia in the middle of the night with no local currency, no words of the local language, no accommodation booked and absolutely no idea what I was doing, I've tried to avoid landing in a brand new country without at least some kind of safety net. The Internet is a godsend; before leaving London I'd booked three nights in a hotel with a few mouse clicks and spent precious lunch hours

hunting around for a civilised flight to Havana. I carefully tiptoed around the cheaper end of the schedules, where Iberia cheerfully rules the airwaves with a whole bag of flights that guarantee the maximum amount of jet lag, and instead I went for Air France, whose main Saturday flight from Paris lands at Havana's José Martí International Airport at a convenient six thirty in the evening. 'Perfect,' I thought, and turned my attention to more important matters, such as tracking down my well-worn copy of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

### **Technical Difficulties**

I've written many a story about terrible journeys in dilapidated African trucks, belching Indian buses and Indonesian sardine cans, and how, when the pain barrier is a dim and distant memory and things take yet another turn for the worse, there's always an element of, 'Well, you get what you pay for.' When it costs threepence for the miniscule corner of a wooden bench in a beaten-up old tin can that looks like it runs on luck, homemade spare parts and prayer, it's a bit rich to complain when the wheels fall off and you don't get to your destination until halfway through the next day. Besides, there's always something interesting in transport disasters, not least the reaction of the locals, who mostly just shrug their shoulders and spark up another cigarette. Travel

disasters in the developing world are a part of travelling, and they often make for great stories.

If only it was like that when companies like Air France get hit with the stupid stick. Without wanting to dwell on the details – particularly as my brain has already started filing away the memories in the box marked ‘utterly pointless waste of time’ – Air France managed to keep me and an entire Boeing 747 of passengers profoundly irritated for a whole day, and not once did I think, ‘Well, you get what you pay for.’

It started at about 11.30am, when we arrived in Paris to catch the 1.30pm connecting flight to Havana. ‘I’m afraid the departure of flight AF474 has been delayed until 1800,’ said the robotic girl at the Air France transfer desk, ‘but here is a meal voucher for 15 euros, which you can present at any of the restaurants in the departure lounge.’

‘Fair enough,’ I thought, and Peta and I wandered up into the departure lounge, took a minute to soak up the atmosphere, and sagged into quiet desperation as we realised that Terminal 2A at Charles de Gaulle Airport is the aviation equivalent of velour. It’s tasteless, shabby, dated and the French should be thoroughly ashamed of it. I was most impressed by the dirty fabric seats littering the foyer, whose headrests were stained with the dandruff and grease of decades of unwashed heads in transit; I also marvelled at the grumpy restaurant – the

only one in the whole departure lounge, I should add – that single-handedly managed to destroy France’s claims to be the culinary kings of Europe; I amused myself by admiring the disgusting concrete grot that passes for architecture in Paris’s international airport; but most of all I was deeply proud of the way the mostly French passengers kicked off at the Air France staff, shouting at them, stomping their feet, clapping in solidarity at the incompetence of their hosts, and forcing the bewildered customer service girls at the check-in desk to bring the police in to keep the peace. The check-in time slipped from 1715 to 1745 to 1815 to 1845 amid fears that the technical difficulties might ground the plane entirely, but finally we got on board, only to sit there for another two hours while we refuelled, waited for air traffic control to grant us a slot, ran the engines for 15 minutes to de-ice them, waited half an hour for another slot, aborted one take-off halfway along the runway because of ‘technical problems’, and finally got into the air. People cheered; it was sarcasm at its finest.

Luckily there were no screaming babies in the vicinity and we managed to get a reasonable amount of sleep, and apart from one poor man a few rows back who lost his supper in a particularly noisy reaction to turbulence over the east coast of the USA, we landed in one piece at Havana just seven hours late. It was hard to keep smiling as we waited for over an hour for the

immigration authorities to stamp our passports, but after changing some cash into Cuban *pesos convertibles* and grabbing a taxi at the exit, we arrived at the Hotel Deauville at 3am, some 22 hours since the alarm clock had gone off back in London.

It's one way to get over jet lag, I suppose; we slept like babies all the way through to morning, when we were greeted by warm sunlight, the sound of the sea breaking against the city walls, and the bustling chatter of a city about to celebrate carnival. It's funny how airline incompetence doesn't seem so important after a few hours in the Cuban sunshine...

## Havana

*Written: 6 March 2005*

There's a reason why life classes at art school don't involve young female models stripping off to reveal perfectly toned bodies and porcelain skin, and it's not just because art school students don't deserve that sort of luck; it's because the drooping body of your average pensioner is far more interesting than the image of youthful perfection that fills entire shelves of the modern newsagent. Perfect bodies are everywhere, but men's glossies have more to do with titillation than beauty, because beauty isn't just about appearance, it's also about character. That's one reason why Havana is

such a beautiful city; it might be slowly crumbling into the sea, but that's one of the things that makes it so appealing.

Architecturally speaking, Havana is like a gracious old woman sitting by the sea, staring out through crinkled eyes at the deep blue waves of the Florida Straits. Look into her eyes and there's a youthful twinkle in there, almost an air of mischief, because behind the crumbling façade, Havana is sexy, hip and gorgeous. One day Havana will undoubtedly get a facelift and some of the magic will be gone; right now, though, Havana is a glorious synthesis of the very old and the very new, and it's thrilling.

### **Along the Malecón**

It's along the Malecón that Havana's architecture really shines. The Malecón is the coastal road that hugs the shoreline of northern Havana, and to say that it's an atmospheric place for a stroll is an understatement. While waves burst along the shore, sprinkling the unwary with the smell of brine and deep sea fishing, an intriguing array of buildings line the road like individual works of art. The majority of them appear to be losing their battle with the corrosive sea air, and this is what makes the Malecón so wonderful, because nature has taken these old buildings and stripped away all their pretensions, leaving the bones behind in an enticing

state of disrepair.

It's this fragility that gives each of the buildings its own, distinct character. You can see the different layers of colour used over the years as the salt air strips away the paint, leaving nothing more than a glimpse into the grandeur that was Havana in its pre-revolution decadence. Delicately carved balustrades peer out from behind patches of hastily applied concrete, giving the impression of a row of houses propped up by large, grey sticking plasters. Some buildings defy the laws of physics, leaning on their neighbours like old men after too many tots of rum, glancing with resignation at the holes of rubble further down the strip where less fortunate friends have finally collapsed.

But these buildings are a long way from being unloved, for even the most skeletal are home to families peeking out from behind row after row of colourful washing, fluttering in the sea breeze. As you stroll along the Malecón, squinting under a turquoise sky, it's possible to look right through most of the buildings to the streets behind, where streaks of yellow and blue turn out to be taxis and cars that themselves have managed to defy the corrosive effects of the last 60 years.

Havana is indeed like a step back in time, and it's a delight, though one wonders how long it can last. It's perfectly understandable that the people of Havana should want to modernise their city and rebuild for the

future, and quite right too; I just hope they manage to modernise it in a way that retains its unique character. There's a big difference between youthful beauty and the fakery of plastic surgery, and it would be a shame to see Havana go from timeless classic to architectural botox when the money finally starts to pour in. Thankfully, that time appears to be some way off, and even more thankfully, the Cubans appear to adore the architecture they have. And who can blame them?

## **The Cigar Scam**

Every city has its scam, and Havana's is – not surprisingly – centred round cigars. Within an hour of leaving our hotel on our first morning in the Havana sunlight, we had our first run-in with Cuba's *jineteros*, so-called because like jockeys, they ride on tourists' backs.

'Hello, where are you from?' is the normal introductory line, and instantly our eyebrows rose. It's the same in every culture where tourists are rich and it's more lucrative for young men to try to wangle a few dollars out of the unwary than to get a proper job. It's the same in the Gambia, Morocco, Mali, India... pretty much anywhere in the developing world, in fact, but the way the scams are played varies wildly. Happily, the *jineteros* of Cuba are cuddly teddy bears compared to the bloodsuckers of Morocco and Mali; they manage to

combine the relaxed attitude of the Gambia's bumsters with the broad grins of India's scam merchants, perhaps because their basic needs – food, shelter and clothing – are provided for by the state. Scamming tourists is not a matter of life or death here, it's all about standard of living; our *jinetero* had smart jeans, a clean black T-shirt, wrap-around mirrored shades and excellent English. He deserved a fair hearing, so we let him prattle on.

'My name is Fernando,' said Fernando, shaking our hands with a grin. 'So, are you from London?'

We nodded, and he launched into his well-rehearsed story of how his brother lives in New Cross in London, and how he applied for a visa to go to England but was refused, and how wonderful London sounds, and so on and so forth. To give Fernando his dues, he came across as charming, witty and impossible to shake off, so we resigned ourselves to having a tour guide for our stroll along the Malecón.

'Today is carnival,' he said, stating the obvious. We'd been woken up by the sounds of bands loosening up in the morning sun, the booming of loudspeakers from garish floats, and the excited chatter of swirling groups of children dressed in ridiculously colourful costumes. 'It is the day for the children,' said Fernando, and as we headed further west along the seafront in the direction of Havana's iconic Hotel Nacional, the crowds

filled out and the melee gradually morphed into a static line of dancers warming up on the tarmac. At the head stood a posse of bikers who turned out to be none other than the local police, and two minutes later they roared their engines, slammed on their horns and took off, closely followed by a couple of small floats sporting colourful characters from Cuba's past, and four horse-drawn carriages decked out with glittering decorations. And that's where the whole thing ground to a halt.

Out of politeness we waited for a good ten minutes while distorted *salsa* music pumped out of a shiny blue truck further back down the line and the crowd milled around expectantly, but with the combined effects of jet lag and a midday sun that was proving much hotter than we'd expected, we told Fernando we were going back to the hotel to get my hat and turned to say goodbye. As if; Fernando hadn't even managed to mention the true motivation behind his befriending us, and it would be rude not to give him at least a chance.

So, a little further back towards our hotel, we sighed a slightly unsurprised 'yes' to his suggestion that we pop into a bar on the Malecón to sample Cuba's most ubiquitous cocktail, the *mojito*. There's no way to fight the local tourist tout tax, especially if you don't yet know how the game is played, and how much can go wrong in a bar in the middle of a carnival? Precisely.

*Mojitos* are delicious, even at 11am on a Sunday

with the tense muscles of jet lag creaking in your neck. Take a generous sprinkling of sugar and add the juice of half a lime and some scrunched up mint leaves, mix it up, pour on a stiff measure of light dry rum and add soda water and ice... and serve with a straw. 'The secret of a good *mojito* is to stir it well,' said Fernando, whirring his straw round his drink like a man possessed, and he was right. The combination of sugary lime and teeth-tingling rum is delightful, particularly when served with the most essential ingredient of all: the sun flickering off the deep, blue sea.

'This is my friend Julio,' said Fernando, turning towards a man on the next table who smiled at us and offered us a cigarette.

'No thanks, we don't smoke,' said Peta, sucking on her *mojito*.

'Ah, but you like cigars, no?' said Fernando. 'In Cuba we have the best cigars in the world.'

'Not really,' I lied, sensing that this was the hard sell. 'Actually, it's pretty hard to smoke a cigar in England now. You try lighting up a cigar in a restaurant in London, and they'll throw you out.'

This wasn't what Fernando wanted to hear, so he engaged the selective hearing so beloved of shifty salesmen and pressed on.

'I work in a cigar factory,' he said. 'Romeo y Julieta in Pinar del Río. I am the tour guide there. Perhaps you

have heard of it?’

‘My dad used to smoke Romeo y Julieta cigars,’ said Peta.

‘Ah, then you want to buy cigars for your father!’ announced Julio, exhaling a cloud of blue cigarette smoke. ‘But you don’t want to buy cigars from a shop, shop is very expensive and no good.’

‘Actually, I don’t want to buy cigars from anywhere,’ said Peta. ‘He gave up.’

‘Yes, but I can give you great deal, said Fernando. ‘You pay fifty, eighty dollars for one cigar in shop, I can get you excellent deal. You come to my house.’

‘But we don’t want to buy any cigars, thanks,’ I said. ‘We don’t smoke. *No me gusta fumar.*’

‘I know,’ he said, ‘but I will just show you a box, and you can try a cigar and your wife can try a panatella. You can just try. I tell you they are good, better than in the shop.’

And with that Julio stood up and said, ‘I go to get you a box,’ and with a wink he shot across the bar and into an alleyway.

‘Listen Fernando,’ said Peta, touching his arm and looking him straight in the eye. ‘I know this is how you make your money, and that is fine. But we are not going to buy any cigars, today or tomorrow, and it doesn’t matter how good they are. We do not want any cigars, OK?’

Suddenly Fernando knew he'd lost the sale, and he stood up and called Julio back, his face a picture as his male bravado wrestled with his being firmly told by a woman that he wasn't going to get anywhere. 'OK,' he shrugged. 'You understand, this is how I make my money.'

'We know,' I said, 'and you have been very good company. We'll pay for your *mojito* and you can head off into the crowd to look for people who might want to buy your cigars. Without you we might never have tried a *mojito*, and they're delicious.'

And with that, we shook both their hands, smiled and left them to scout out for other potential jockey fodder. If only all the touts of the world were this pleasant, life would be a lot easier.

## **The Fag Lady**

The Malecón might be one of the most intriguing parts of Havana, but the most beautiful has to be Habana Vieja, or Old Havana. Habana Vieja takes up the eastern half of the city centre, sandwiched between Bahía de la Habana on the right and the delightfully dilapidated housing of Centro on the left. As the name suggests, Habana Vieja is where the really old buildings can be found; the whole area is crammed with old plazas and winding streets, and simply wandering around is a treat for the senses.

It isn't just because of the atmospheric squares such as Plaza de Armas, Plaza San Francisco and La Plaza Vieja, where pretty cafés spill out onto cobbled stones beneath the colonial towers of Spanish-era cathedrals; it isn't just because the streets are lined with houses whose crumbling beauty is as stately as it is sad; and it isn't just because the smell of cigar smoke hangs in the air, masking the subtle odour of drains and the acrid fumes from the buses that roar around the towering dome of the Capitolio. Habana Vieja is a delight because at every turn you can look into the buildings and get a quick glimpse of what life is like in the capital of Cuba, and every building is different. One barred window hides an ornate staircase whose paintwork is a sedimentary history of the ironwork's colours over the years; in another a family sits around their living room, hiding from the midday sun and gently rocking the afternoon away; yet another is home to a man whose face is almost entirely made up of crinkles, and who appears to be living in a skip, surrounded by looks like rubbish, but which to him is home. In cold countries, life is lived behind closed doors, because the temperature is too low to leave anything open; in Habana Vieja, the windows have no glass and the shutters are open all the way through to the shaded yards out the back. Washing flutters in a gentle breeze, dogs wander in and out of houses like trusted neighbours in times gone by, and

music pours out of windows, doors and basements with the distinctive hip-swinging beat of *música Cubana*. It's a heady mix.

One of the most enduring images of Havana, though, is the proliferation of ancient cars, and there are few better places to see the 1950s Cadillacs and Fords of Cuba than outside the Capitolio. This building, constructed between 1929 and 1932 by the dictator Machado, is a pretty convincing copy of the Capitol in Washington DC, and it's an incongruous sight in a country whose relationship with the USA is far from comfortable. It was built in an attempt to suck up to the US at a time when American money was starting to drift towards Cuba; prohibition was kicking in back in the States, and the less salubrious elements of American society – the Mafia, in particular – were looking to make money elsewhere, and Cuba was a prime target. This emblem of Cuba's past is now home to the Cuban Academy of Sciences and the National Library of Science and Technology, and it's a focal point for the wonderful cars of Havana, which sit outside in photogenic poses that it's hard not to fall in love with.

But central Havana is much more than just cars and Capitolios, and taking a breather in Parque Central is a wonderful way to soak it all up. We took a seat on the southern side of the park – our bench only had two slats missing, which made it positively luxurious compared to

its neighbours – and watched as buses zoomed past, looking like the bastard offspring of long-distance trucks and Portakabins. Old men wobbled past on bicycles with no brakes or gears, families wandered along the sidewalk, towing children in various states of tantrum, and the young women of Havana sauntered past in clothes designed with the sole purpose of celebrating the posterior.

Next to us on the bench sat an old lady holding a packet of cigarettes and a bag, and while Havana whirled around us, she sat as still as a statue, gazing into space. I didn't take a great deal of notice of her until a man came up to her and spoke some hurried Spanish, and she opened her bag, pulled out a loaf of white bread with the end nibbled off, fished around in her bag for a white plastic bag, untied the handles and pulled out an unopened packet of cigarettes. The man gave her some money, which she put into her bag, and ten seconds later the bread was back in the top and the old lady had gone back to being just another observer of the Capitolio's bustle.

Five minutes later another man came by, and this time the old lady pulled out the loaf of bread, untied the white plastic bag and fished around for a newspaper. He nodded and said a few words, and she pulled out four more copies of the same paper, checking the dates on the front. Again the man paid up, tipped his hat and left

the old woman to reassemble her bag, all the time keeping a watchful eye on surroundings.

‘Perhaps she’s peddling decadent cigarettes and capitalist propaganda,’ said Peta. ‘Who would suspect a little old lady of that?’

And with that we left her and her black market shopping bag and wandered back to our hotel for a siesta.

## **Tourist Tours**

Back at the hotel, we arranged to hire a car for ten days from the man at the Havanautos desk, and that night we treated ourselves to a very pleasant meal in an Italian restaurant just off the Plaza de Armas. As if to stock up on extravagant tourist attractions before hitting the trail, we decided to go home via El Floridita, the bar where Ernest Hemingway drank far too many cocktails in the years when he lived in Cuba. The bar is roundly lambasted by the guidebooks as a rip-off and a tourist trap, but there’s a great deal of fun to be had in tourist traps like these, and we decided to brave it.

El Floridita is amazing, mainly because it’s such a strange place. It’s a shrine to Hemingway, with a life-sized bronze statue of the great man propping up the left-hand end of the bar, and with the cocktails retailing at \$6 each – about twice the price of a normal Havana bar – and waiters wearing wide-lapelled red jackets and

the kind of haughty expressions that mean you'd rather chew gravel than give them a tip, it's designed to be an exclusive joint. But sit there for more than a few minutes, and the cracks begin to show. First up, a lady pops out of a side door every five minutes, dressed in a white skirt and jacket, and she proceeds to pester each table in turn, holding up a selection of Ernest Hemingway T-shirts and saying, 'You want T-shirt, Hemingway T-shirt?'

As if this isn't enough, every few minutes the door opens and in troops a gaggle of tourists in inappropriate multi-pocketed shorts with a whole Christmas tree of camera lenses hanging round their necks, nervously glancing round for directions from their guides. 'Over here,' grin their hosts, pointing towards the statue, and suddenly the flashbulbs go off in a cacophony of red-eye prevention, following which the whole gang turns around and heads back out of the door. For the unfortunate souls who thought it might be fun to have a *daiquiri* at the same end of the bar as the Hemingway statue, it's a blinding experience; for the rest of the tourists in the bar – and you only get tourists here, plus a handful of local guides who know how only too well how to wring the dollars from their charges – it's a strange experience, watching the tourists as they roll in and out like people on a Hemingway-themed amusement park ride. It's frankly bizarre, but then

again, so is El Floridita.

Thankfully El Floridita is far from representative of Havana, even if its cocktails really are rather good. Trust Hemingway to get that part right...

## Driving in Cuba

*Written: 8 March 2005*

Welcome to the most amazing video game release of the year! Take on the challenge of navigating without any road signs! See if you can steer round the hitchers, carts, bicycles and vultures! And don't let those pesky police get the better of you in this crazy, real-life driving drama! Welcome to *Gran Turismo*, Cuban-style – don't forget to fasten your seat belts!

Yes, driving in Cuba is like being in a particularly surreal video game, and once you get used to it, it's just as enjoyable. We started our road trip by getting hopelessly lost on our way out of Havana, which is not surprising given that we went wrong within a few hundred metres of leaving our hotel. We'd hoped to go through the tunnel under the Bahía de La Habana and onto the ring road, where we hoped to join the Autopista Nacional – the A1 – to take us all the way to the Bay of Pigs, some 200km to the southeast. Instead we enjoyed an unexpected tour of Havana's extensive docks and ended up in suburbia, where we stopped three times to

ask where we could find the *autopista*, with varying amounts of success. Eventually we happened on a junction with a major, three-lane road, and fishing out our compass (an essential tool for navigating in Cuba) we turned left, heading for the east.

The *autopista* is like a strange netherworld, populated by characters that you wouldn't believe if they weren't in front of your very eyes. There is almost no traffic on this wide, three-lane motorway, but when you do happen across an obstacle, it's either an ancient 1950s American car, full to overflowing with bouncing locals; a tractor, carrying hay in the opposite direction to the traffic; a big, black vulture picking at something unidentifiable in the middle of the road; or another rental car, which you can spot because it's the only one that looks like it's from this millennium. Adding in a little spice are the young men standing in the fast lane – yes, the *fast lane* – holding out long strings of onions and motioning for you to slow down, and large numbers of hopeful hitchhikers standing in the slow lane, optimistically thumbing each vehicle down for a lift (as the public transport system is so stretched in Cuba, hitchhiking is the mainstay for most of the population). Finally, there are the potholes, which are there to make sure you don't fall asleep in the long stretches between life forms. It's a gas.

There are also service stations along the way, if

that's what you can call the shacks dotted along the side. We stopped at a comparatively grand one that obviously catered for tourists, judging by the postcards, CDs and wooden carvings for sale in the shop. We bought a ham and cheese sandwich each – which proved to be pretty good given the fact that we were in the middle of nowhere – and washed it down with freshly squeezed orange juice, a common theme of roadside stops throughout Cuba. A lame straight-to-TV American cop film blurted out of a distorted television while the odd car shot by outside, and that, it seemed, was the sum of activity on the *autopista*.

Off the motorway things are made considerably more interesting by a continuing lack of signposts, even larger numbers of tractors, hitchhikers every few metres, and bicycle rickshaws (known as bici-taxis) absolutely everywhere. Bicycles carrying a minimum of two people weave in and out of the side of the road, and you have to give way to them, because with more than two million bicycles in Cuba, they own the road. The potholes get deeper and navigating by compass is the only way to go, and if you're lucky – like we were – you may even get flagged down by a policeman. Ironically he fined us for running a stop sign, which we found rather surprising since the last road sign we'd seen had been at Heathrow... or at least we think he fined us, as he simply took our rental agreement and scribbled on it.

We will, no doubt, end up paying a little extra when we hand our car in later, but such is life.

This did throw us a bit, though, because amongst the large population of hitchhikers in Cuba, there are quite a few police. One of the talents of driving in Cuba is deciphering their hand signals; sometimes the police might be flagging you down for a lift, and sometimes they're flagging you down to give you a ticket. We never really worked out which, so we just kept driving, hoping for the best and looking out in vain for signposts.

It gets my vote for game of the month, anyway...

## Playa Girón

*Written: 8 March 2005*

The plan had been quite simple. We'd hoped to drive to Playa Girón in the Bag of Pigs, book into a *casa particular* and chill out in this historic spot for a few days while planning the rest of our jaunt round Cuba. Of course, things didn't quite turn out like that...

*Casas particulares* are Cuba's equivalent to the British bed and breakfast; they're rooms in private homes that are rented out to tourists, but this being Cuba, there are quite a few restrictions. Only those licensed to do so can put up foreigners in their houses and there are strict penalties for those who break the rules, and each house can only rent out up to two rooms.

Playa Girón has quite a few *casas particulares* as the Bay of Pigs is a rather famous place, and we figured we'd work out how to find them when we got there.

Luckily *casas particulares* are pretty easy to spot. They all have a distinctive sign stuck on the outside that's not unlike the international sign for a Youth Hostel, and this year's sign is in green (the licence has to be renewed each year, so although there were other places with red and blue signs, it was only the green ones that still meant business). We simply screeched to a halt outside one of these signs and went inside to ask about accommodation.

'I'm afraid we're full,' said the owner of the first one, 'but let me ring around to see if anyone else has room.'

'Thanks very much,' we said as he dialled a number on his roaming telephone and started speaking super-fast Spanish down the receiver.

'I'm afraid everywhere is full,' he said after a while, and shrugged his shoulders sympathetically. 'We have many tourists at the moment. There is always the hotel.'

We thanked him and drove off to another *casa particular*, only to hear the same story there. Another *casa* owner kindly offered to take us down to a neighbour of his who might have vacancies, but we still had no luck; all the *casas* in Playa Girón were full.

'Maybe tomorrow?' said the *casa* owner, and we

wobbled our heads and said, ‘Maybe,’ thanking him for his kind help. And so it was with slightly sunken hearts that we jumped back in the car and headed towards the beach and the Hotel Playa Girón.

## **Hotel Hell**

The *casa* owners had been, to a tee, smiling, helpful and genuinely sorry that they couldn’t find us somewhere to stay. The grumpy, fat trollop behind the reception desk at the hotel couldn’t have been more of a contrast; when we asked her if she had any rooms, she looked us up and down with clear disdain, put on her most condescending voice and said, ‘I need your passports and \$70 in cash.’ Seeing no option I pulled out 70 pesos convertibles, popped them on the desk with our passports, and tried to smile as politely as I could while the old dragon huffed and puffed and grudgingly filled out the forms for our arrival.

‘It is all-inclusive,’ she spat, and indicated that we should hold out our hands.

‘I’m sorry?’ I said, and she repeated the gesture for us to hold out our hands. And that’s when I beheld the true depths of our despair, for she fished out two plastic tags, wrapped one round each of our wrists, and tagged us like chickens in a supermarket.

I swear she enjoyed doing that, the calloused old hag, and my heart slipped so far into my boots that my

breath caught in my throat. ‘What on earth have we got into here?’ I thought as she handed over the keys for hut 106a and pointed where it was on the map of the hotel complex. How little I knew...

Our apartment was right on the edge of the complex, a fair walk from the pool and bar complex at the centre of the hotel. It was OK, I guess; it had noisy air-conditioning that we avoided like the plague, a scalding shower that pumped out slightly salty water that left us feeling just as sticky as we’d been when we rolled into town, and it was home to a friendly collection of bright green lizards who looked as startled by our arrival as we were by them. We dumped our bags, jumped into our swimming gear and headed back to civilisation.

The first and only positive point of our entire stay was when we realised that ‘all-inclusive’ included the bar as well. Sure, the beer was served in tiny plastic cups with a huge head, and the cocktails – a choice of just four because there was no pineapple juice – tasted as if they’d been created with a SodaStream and a complete lack of imagination, but we’d already paid for them and we soaked up a few as fellow guests wandered around the pool, all of them looking slightly dazed. I sensed a slight air of panic and disappointment in the air, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on the reason. And then Peta pointed to the beach, and it suddenly all made

sense. This, after all, was the site of one of the most infamous cock-ups in American history, and what we saw on the beach fitted in perfectly.

## **An Historical Location**

The Bay of Pigs invasion is one of those stories that makes your heart sink at the stupidity of man. When Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba on 1 January 1959, after a long guerrilla campaign to oust the dictator Batista, the US decided it wasn't happy having a left-wing neighbour so close to the US mainland, so in 1961 Kennedy cut off diplomatic relations with Cuba, and on 14 April 1961 an invasion fleet set out from Nicaragua, consisting of 1400 Cuban émigrés, trained by the CIA in Guatemala and Miami, along with ships from the US Navy acting as escorts. On 15 April, while the invasion fleet was on its way, planes from the Nicaraguan air force bombed Cuba's airfields with the aim of disabling the Cuban air force before the fleet arrived. Seven men were killed in these raids, and at the airmen's funeral the next day Castro announced that Cuba was a socialist state, effectively putting up a solid middle finger to the incoming invasion.

The flotilla landed at Playa Girón and Playa Larga in the Bahía del Cochinos (the Bay of Pigs) on 17 April, but the Cuban air force attacked the flotilla and stranded the invading army, who were slowly picked off one by

one until they surrendered three days later, with 200 dead. 11 invading planes were shot down and 1197 men from the invasion force were taken captive, to be repatriated to the USA in exchange for \$53 million in food and medicine. It's said that President Kennedy was so horrified at this turn of events that he decided to avoid a massive political fallout by calling on the USA to land on the moon by the end of the decade; whether this is true is debatable, but there's no doubt that the whole Bay of Pigs escapade was an almighty cock-up, and ever since then the relationship between the USA and Cuba has been decidedly frosty.

Now, it's not unusual for hotel complexes in the developing world to be walled in; the idea is to keep out any unwanted elements, thus protecting the guests from touts, petty thieves and assorted conmen. Surrounding the Hotel Playa Girón in a huge arc, therefore, is a battered old concrete wall, cutting a bite-shaped semi-circle out of the coastline and preventing anyone from entering or leaving except through the guarded gate on the way into the complex. This isn't strange in itself, but the Hotel Playa Girón takes things a little further than having a simple perimeter wall. They really mean business.

For not only is there the semi-circular wall cutting the hotel off from Cuba, but there's another wall along the rocky coastline on either side of the beach. This, I

presume, is to stop the resort from eroding into the sea, because this part of the world is prone to hurricanes, and indeed, the last hurricane to hit these parts, back in 2002, did considerable damage. Judging by the desolate hotel grounds, things still aren't quite back to normal.

But the designers of the Hotel Playa Girón were obviously not content with simply closing off the perimeter and the rocky coast, because some mad fool has built a concrete wall across the mouth of the pleasant crescent-shaped beach, only 50m or so off shore. This means that when you sit there on the beach, all you can see dead ahead is a wall of mouldering concrete grot, stained with green streaks and crumbling gently into the sea. I idly wondered if the locals were worried that someone else might try to invade the beach and these were their defences. If so, they've surely succeeded in deflecting future attacks; it's hard to see why anyone would want to reclaim this small part of holiday hell.

The sense of idiotic desperation that the wall personified managed to pervade the whole complex. The all-inclusive food was at best depressing and grey, and at worst inedible; the free bar continued to serve up plastic cups of watery beer and cocktails that came in different colours but which all tasted of cheap rum and sugary soda; and the evening's entertainment consisted of a nervous cabaret band playing ill-advised rock and

roll covers, a surprisingly large number of songs that all sounded exactly like ‘La Bamba’, and a set of schmaltzy western ballads that really didn’t improve under a heavy Spanish accent. We were trapped in a holiday camp disaster zone, and I felt so depressed I couldn’t even see the humour in the groups of tourists from Basingstoke doing their own unique interpretation of *salsa* dancing. We downed as much all-inclusive alcohol as we could stomach and went to bed, wondering if this was going to be just one typical night in a very, very long holiday from hell.

The next morning we got up, pushed the free breakfast around our plates until finally giving up on it, and decided to make a break for it. Thankfully the world outside the exclusion zone would turn out to be as wonderful as the Hotel Playa Girón was awful, and we didn’t even need a wristband to get in.

## Trinidad

*Written: 12 March 2005*

Trinidad oozes charm, which made it a perfect antidote to the disaster zone of Playa Girón. This time we drove straight into the centre of town, got lost, pulled up by the side of the road to try to work out a strategy for finding accommodation, and a man came out of a nearby *casa particular*, knocked on the window and asked whether

we'd like to see his *habitaciones*. We liked what we saw, and so we ended up staying with José and Daisy on Valle Maceo for three very pleasant nights.

In retrospect, it isn't surprising that we found a *casa particular* so quickly, because Trinidad has over 300 of them. What did surprise me was that we managed to find one so easily in such a convenient spot, a stone's throw from the main centre of town; being a UNESCO World Heritage area, Trinidad is a serious tourist draw and is the most visited town in Cuba, which means there are plenty of *jineteros* only too happy to show you to their favourite *casa* (or, to be more accurate, the *casa* that pays them the highest commission). Luckily we'd been nabbed by the owner, José, and it worked out a treat.

Not only did we have a pleasantly cool room in a pretty Trinidad home, but the food that Daisy cooked for us each morning and evening was superb. The main complaint people have about holidaying Cuba is that the food is awful, and if your main source of nutrition is the kind of all-inclusive pap that we'd suffered in Playa Girón, I can see why. Instead of grey, lifeless mush, Daisy fed us with the likes of lobster tails, homemade chips, fresh salad, garlic king prawns, succulent pork, and plenty of the national dish, *congrís*, consisting of perfect rice with red beans. It's amazing what a difference a good feed makes, and Daisy's spreads

really made that difference.

## **Historic Trinidad**

Not only was our *casa particular* a vast improvement on the previous night's hovel, but so was Trinidad itself. It's easy to see why UNESCO gives it a big thumbs up, as Trinidad is a beautifully preserved example of colonial Spanish architecture, and if you can squint your eyes and mentally block out the large number of tourists milling around the old town centre, it's easy to imagine that you're back in a time when old men were old men and their donkeys were more than just photo opportunities for tourist hordes.

The old town centres on Plaza Mayor and its square of white-painted wrought ironwork, tiled walkways and cobbled courtyard. The square is dominated by a grand church, the Iglesia Parroquial de la Santísima Trinidad, which at night sports a neon cross on the top, and surrounding the square are ancient buildings with ornate balconies and shady porches. The square has been considerably cleaned up for the tourists and it feels slightly unused and clinical – not helped by the anti-tout police who guard it night and day – but take a look down the side streets leading in all directions, and it's hard not to fall for Trinidad's charms.

With its winding cobbled streets and hardly any signs of modernisation beyond the electrification of the

town's old lampposts, Trinidad is perfect for exploration by foot. Everywhere there are doorways leading to leafy courtyards, which house everything from restaurants and museums to accommodation and tacky tourist shops, and if your idea of heaven is supping a cocktail at a table overlooking a picture-perfect colonial square while a talented Cuban band plays traditional music for your personal entertainment, this is the place for you.

### **Beauty is Skin Deep**

At first we couldn't resist it; we headed straight for the Plaza Mayor and walked up the wide stone stairway to the east of the Iglesia, taking a seat at one of the white metal tables in the Casa de la Música and returning the waiter's beaming smile with the order of a Cristal beer and a *mojito*. I was a little surprised when they brought me my beer in the form of a can and a small, thin plastic cup, as this was clearly the prime tourist drinking spot in Trinidad, but this wouldn't be the last time that Cuba appeared to be missing a tourist trick. The clientele were exclusively tourists, and I get the feeling that you could charge more than \$1 for a beer if you served it in a glass, bought some parasols for the tables and improved the quality of your cocktails. Even in this bar in the centre of Cuba's most visited city, the corners feel cut.

This may have something to do with the fact that Cubans find it practically impossible to leave their

country, so their exposure to the world outside is practically non-existent. We spent our evenings talking with José and Daisy's son, Manuel, who spoke better English than we did Spanish and who was a delight to talk to. He explained how hard it was for Cubans to break out of the local scene; with an average wage of around \$13 a month and a transport system that is so overburdened that hitchhiking is an officially organised solution, Manuel said it was pretty much beyond their reach to get to Havana, let alone abroad. If you add in the fact that to get a passport your average Cuban will need an official invitation from a foreign embassy, then it's fair to say that for most Cubans, their only exposure to foreign cultures is through the tourists that turn up on their shores. When you consider that most tourists roll up on organised package tours where all-inclusive and pre-paid are the rules rather than the exception, it's little wonder that world-class spots like Trinidad serve lame *mojitos* and canned beer in plastic at knockdown prices.

Of course, this doesn't stop the tour buses rolling in and the bars filling up, but it does smear a veneer of plastic fakery over the whole Trinidad experience. Once our relief at escaping from the Bay of Pigs had washed over us and drifted into the realm of 3am nightmares and holiday horror stories, it soon became apparent that finding the real soul of Trinidad would be more difficult than it first seemed.

## Loud Cuban Bands

We tried valiantly to scratch the surface of Trinidad, but ultimately we failed (unless, of course, Trinidad is little more than a tourist shell, which I don't really believe, and don't want to). We spent the first night doing the tourist thing and hanging out in the Casa de la Música, which filled up as the evening progressed until the steps were heaving with crowds of tourists watching the traditional Cuban band halfway down the steps. Despite the perfect setting and the undeniably upbeat music, the atmosphere was a long way from the thumping party vibe portrayed so enticingly in the Bacardi adverts. The crowd clapped politely between each song and hired dancers shook their hips in front of the band, but there was little engagement between the audience and the musicians; this was all about getting that Kodak moment and saying you'd been there. People were nursing their plastic cocktails rather than throwing them back, and I could see people mentally ticking the box marked 'Evening spent watching *salsa* band in historic colonial square.' We left them to it when we couldn't handle any more drinks, which didn't take too long.

Irritatingly, the other bars in town felt distressingly similar. Some managed to serve their cocktails in glasses, though the beer always came in a can and plastic cup, and the entertainment always followed the same theme. Each bar consisted of tables facing a stage,

on which a band or a dance troupe would strut their stuff. The biggest problem was that the volume was so loud, it killed any chance of an atmosphere starting up; instead, you had a bunch of tourists sitting there, unable to communicate with each other, while entertainment of variable quality blared from the stage. The odd Cuban or South American dancer would kick off in the corner, but the truth was that the entertainment took over each bar completely, which is a bit boring when it's yet another *salsa* band playing yet another collection of songs that sound like they're being played by yet another *salsa* band. I like Cuban music and have a fair amount in my collection at home, but that doesn't mean I like it to be the only option, 24/7.

It's also a prohibitive dancing style for those of us who don't know how to *salsa* (i.e. the vast majority of tourists). If you have a band on stage and professional dancers out front pretending to be the audience, then you're never going to persuade the uncoordinated tourist hordes to jump up onto their two left feet and get into the groove. If only the bands involved themselves in the audience a little more, it might make a difference, but as it is the bar scene in Trinidad is all about loud cabaret and little ambience, with no middle ground. There's room there for a quieter, more romantic bar where drinkers can communicate, with the sweet sounds of Cuba drifting through the sultry tropical air and quality

cocktails available in genuine glasses... but perhaps it takes someone who's been outside of Cuba to think like that?

## **Burning Beach**

When we asked Manuel if there were any beaches nearby that he could recommend, he said there were two. La Boca, the nearest, was where the locals went, while the tourists went to Playa Ancón, along the end of a 4km sand spit to the south of Trinidad. 'Ancón is just too hard for us to get to,' he said, 'so instead we take the bicycle to La Boca. But not often.' Playa Ancón is 14km from Trinidad; when public transport is non-existent and only the rich have cars, it's a very small world indeed.

Besides, Playa Ancón is very much a tourist beach, with a couple of hefty tourist hotels behind the beach and plenty of pale bodies lightly toasting in the sun, their all-inclusive bracelets leaving white rings in their otherwise perfect tans. I don't do beach holidays terribly well – I blame my low boredom threshold – but even I can appreciate the appeal of tranquil, light blue waves lapping gently against white sandy beaches, and we parked the car in the Hotel Ancón, rented a couple of sun loungers under the beach umbrellas for a dollar each a day, and relaxed. Apart from half an hour's snorkelling with gear that didn't fit – during which we discovered there was absolutely nothing to see within

swimming distance (the reefs, which are apparently very good, are really only reachable via dive boat) – we stayed put, eating pizza from the men who walked up and down the beach and moving only to stop parts of our bodies from going numb.

Ever since I burned the skin behind my knees in Gran Canaria, blistering them to buggery and forcing me to spend two miserable days lying on my front in the hotel, I've been rather cautious on the beach. I hid religiously in the shade of our thatched beach umbrella while Peta basted in the sun, which made it all the more annoying that I got really quite seared. I'd clean forgotten about the power of the reflected sun, and facing south towards the sea, just a few yards away, proved to be fatal. I spent the next few days wincing and feeling decidedly hot, and it was scant comfort that Peta, too, was burned red. The Cuban sun, even in March, is no laughing matter.

Quite unlike the sight of tagged, overweight tourists taking exercise classes on the beach, which I'm sure will never cease to entertain me...

## **The Man in the Red Hat**

*Written: 13 March 2005*

'Where are you going after Trinidad?' asked Daisy.

'We're off to Camagüey,' I said.

‘I know a good *casa* in Camagüey,’ she said, and so began our hop from *casa* to *casa*, which would last for the rest of our trip. Once you’re on the *casa* treadmill, it’s easy to stay on it; the only downside of being passed from *casa* to *casa* is a subtle commission charge that the owners will add to the price, and which will be sent back to the *casa* owner who made the recommendations in the first place. In a sense this is a bit of a scam, and if I was travelling on a budget I’d politely refuse the recommendations and find my own lodgings, but when you’ve only got a couple of weeks in Cuba and you’re looking for an easy life, it’s the most relaxing way to find a place to stay.

It didn’t sound so simple when Manuel sat down with a hand-drawn map and explained where we should go. His map was little more than a straight line from left to right, with six marks denoting something we’d come across on the way into Camagüey.

‘Here is the main road into Camagüey,’ said Manuel. ‘You will come into the city here, and go past the *punto de control amarillo*. Here will be men in yellow trousers; you should take no notice of them. Then you will come to a *puente* – what is *puente* in English?’

I looked it up. ‘Bridge,’ I said, and Manuel continued.

‘OK, so you go over the bridge, and past the

Hospital Materno. Then you will come to the Hospital Aneologico and there will be a man outside with a red hat and white trousers. You should talk to him about finding your *casa*. After him is a *rotunda* and another *punte*, but you need to find the man in the red hat.’

‘Oh,’ we said, wondering how on earth this was going to work. ‘Thanks very much.’ And off we went.

As we came into Camagüey, this is what happened.

‘Look, we’re in Camagüey, there’s the sign.’

‘Right, where’s that map?’

‘In the glove compartment.’

‘OK, so what’s the first thing we’re looking for?’

‘The *punto de control*.’

‘And what did he say about that?’

‘I don’t know. Something about trousers?’

‘Oh. Did he mean those guys over there in yellow suits?’

‘No, that’s a bus stop, isn’t it?’

‘Looks like it. OK, *punto, punto...*’

‘Then there’s a bridge.’

‘Hang on, we’re still looking for the *punto*. Perhaps we have to get through the outer suburbs first?’

‘Sounds likely. Oh look, there’s a hospital! Hospital... Gynaecologico. We’re looking for the Hospital Materno, then the Hospital Aneologico. No mention of the Gynaecologico anywhere.’

‘Probably on a bit.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Hang on, the road’s forking. Did he say anything about the road forking?’

‘No.’

‘Ah shit. We’re lost already. And someone’s blaring their bloody horn at me.’

‘Can you pull over?’

‘I’ll just get through this roundabout system. Hang on.’

‘How about here, by that man in the white trousers?’

‘What the one waving the red hat?’

‘Bloody hell, it’s the man in the red hat. Slow down!’

And Peta wound down her window, waved at the man in the red hat, and that’s how we met Ricardo from our *casa*. We couldn’t quite believe it; Manuel’s directions had, against all the odds, worked.

Who would have thought it?

## **Camagüey**

*Written: 15 March 2005*

The *casa* of Ricardo and Gladys was as delightful and friendly as that of José and Daisy. The Cubans are such welcoming people, and Gladys’s evening meals of pork, chicken and lobster were simply delicious. Without a

doubt, eating in private houses is the way to go.

But Camagüey itself was slightly disappointing, probably because our hopes had been raised to fever pitch by the write-up in the *Lonely Planet*. ‘Camagüey enchants on sight,’ it said. ‘This is one of those places that hijacks your itinerary.’ If the author had gushed any more we’d have been swimming for it, but we were taken in with her stories of beautiful plazas and the town’s *tinajones*, large clay pots that used to be used for storing water in droughts, but which now pop up in courtyards throughout the town for purely aesthetic purposes. It’s easy to sympathise with this method of storing water; one group of Canadian tourists we bumped into in town said they liked Cuba, but that there simply wasn’t enough water. They’d been staying in hotels rather than *casas particulares*, and water can be a real problem; Manuel in Trinidad said it hadn’t rained for a year (though that very night the heavens opened and an almighty tropical storm dumped its load on top of us) and Ricardo confirmed the same story (though he didn’t believe us about the rainstorm in Trinidad, so perhaps there’s an element of bravado in the suffering too). Water is delivered by tractor to many houses in the cities, but luckily our *casa* had a borehole in the garden with a hand-pump, so we never ran out.

Anyway, legend has it that those who drink from *tinajones* will fall in love with Camagüey and will return

again and again, though I prefer the alternative version of the story that says that any man who is offered water by a maiden from a *tinajón* must accept the drink, but if he does he will fall in love with her and will never leave. With stories like this in the background, Camagüey sounded delightful; in the end it didn't quite live up to the hype, though it was pleasant enough.

I've often found this problem with guidebooks. To use a guidebook successfully you have to get to know how the author thinks, particularly with *Lonely Planet* guides, which tend to be more opinionated than others (incidentally, we also took the *Footprint Guide to Cuba*, which was better in almost all respects). Some *Lonely Planets* have been excellent (India and Australia spring to mind), some have been adequate (such as Malaysia and Nepal) and some totally out of kilter with my own approach to life (like West Africa and Indonesia), and it seems the *Lonely Planet Guide to Cuba* falls into the latter category. It doesn't help that it's littered with annoying American phrases and spelling – I don't 'haul ass' or 'kick it' a great deal, and all the other *Lonely Planets* I've bought in England have bothered to put the 'u' into 'colour' – but all that is window dressing compared to the facts. Camagüey might be a pleasant enough place to visit, but I really can't understand how the author of the *Lonely Planet Guide to Cuba* fell in love with it so much.

Presumably she drank from a tinajón or two during her visit...

## **Plazas and Casas**

Camagüey does have its charms, though, even if it wasn't quite enough to hijack our itinerary. Its main draw card for tourists is the proliferation of plazas dotted throughout the city, some of which are rather pleasant and some of which are completely forgettable. We spent a very hot morning and afternoon wandering round the best of them, taking a long break at lunch in a pretty little restaurant which emptied of tourists as soon as we arrived, only to be replaced by what I can only assume were local girls having photographic makeovers.

In the shaded courtyard that kept the worst of the sun from burning holes in our heads, first a pretty brunette and then a slightly less fortunate blonde spent half an hour posing by various *tinajones* and streetlights while a photographer snapped away with the girl's family looking on. If the mothers were anything to go by, it was a wise move to try to capture their daughters' beauty on film before the effects of gravity and high-fat food started to win, and we had a ringside view of proceedings. Some things are the same the world over, and given the unease with which the girls staggered around in high heels and thick make-up, adolescence is just as confusing in Cuba as it is elsewhere, though as

it's normal to get married here at around 20, perhaps some aspects of adolescence live a little shorter than they do in the West.

The plazas of Camagüey also, at times, suffer from rather too much make-up. The prettiest of the lot, Plaza Carmen, has a charming church at one end, newly painted and patched-up houses, a lovely little restaurant that charges tourist prices that are quite a shock after the rest of town, and a collection of life-size clay statues of people going about their business, from the old man pushing a cart full of water jugs and a couple canoodling on a bench, to another man reading the newspaper and three women sitting on chairs and catching up on the gossip. There are some nice touches: there's a fourth, empty chair in the middle of the old women where tourists can scarcely resist the photo opportunity, and the cuddling couple sits at one end of a bench, inviting visitors to become art imitating art, but despite this obvious attempt to create an enticing and picturesque square, I found it a little clinical. Everything was just a little too neat, and little too clean; Cuba isn't like that, and the people living in the renovated houses round the square looked a little out of place after the chaotic bustle of the nearby suburban ramshackle.

The other squares vary. Plaza de los Trabajadores is mostly a car park for tourist cars and buses, though the pink-coloured Nuestra Señora de la Merced church is an

impressively dominating structure; Plaza Maceo is a forgettable junction square; Parque Ignacio Agramonte is grand and sits picturesquely under the towering Santa Iglesia Catedral; Plaza del Cristo is hot and dry and home to lots of dust and boisterous kids playing baseball with sticks and stones, though it's worth visiting for the necropolis behind the church of Santa Cristo del Buen Viaje, where the graves and mausoleums are fascinating; and Parque Martí is livened only by the reconstruction of the modern neo-gothic church of El Sagrado Corazón de Jesus. There are many squares, but not many great ones.

## **Pros and Cons**

One of the biggest problems with Camagüey's squares is that they're empty, turning them into ovens at midday and giving you nowhere to pause. It's almost as if they have been designed to concentrate the heat; trees would transform them into oases, but trees just aren't the thing round here (though not because of a lack of water, as palms thrive happily all over Cuba). Some of the squares, such as the Plaza San Juan de Dios, have cafés with tables outside, but this is the exception, and even in San Juan it was far too hot to sit outside in the shimmering cobbles, so we ducked inside and sat out the back. Cuba excels in hidden little restaurants in pretty backyard settings, but this means the squares themselves

are rarely places to enjoy; this is not the country for sitting in squares, sipping a coffee and watching the world go by. The world is generally inside, sweltering, and I can only assume that things get worse in the summer.

Even in the evening, things don't liven up much. We'd read in both our guidebooks about the celebrated *Noche Camagüey*, in which the main road through town, the República, is cordoned off and plays host to stalls purveying food, alcohol, music and a good time; this, said the guidebooks, happened every single Saturday, so we dutifully hung around town, waiting for things to kick off. And we waited, and waited, and waited, until we finally asked our waitress whether anything was going to happen later. She looked completely blank and didn't know anything about any night market along the República; it seems that the *Noche Camagüey* is either a thing of the past, or a figment of the guidebook authors' imaginations.

There was one saving grace, though, and that was the central Plaza de la Solidaridad. If it wasn't for the ancient brickwork of the Nuestra Señora de la Soledad church peeking out from under layers of flaking plaster, this square would be little more than a traffic junction, but tucked around behind the high walls of the church is a lovely little bar restaurant where we gladly hid from the sun along with plenty of other tourists.

It wasn't just a spot for tourists, though, because it turned out to be a great place to watch Camagüey's prostitutes in action. Prostitution used to be one of the big draws of Cuba in the pre-revolution days of excess, and although it all but disappeared after 1959, when Cuba was effectively off the tourist trail, prostitution has made a bit of a comeback in recent years. If you're a single man (or, indeed a single woman) wandering round Havana at night, you'll not be short of offers, and it's the same in Camagüey. The number of distinctly mediocre westerners to be seen out with gorgeous, short-skirted Cuban girls is surprisingly large, and the dollar restaurants of Camagüey are a good place to see them sharing an awkward meal in which they discover they have nothing in common save a desire for something the other one has got. It's tinged with more than a little sadness on both sides, but that's business.

You have to know it's there to spot it, though, and I'm sure plenty of visitors float through Cuba without even noticing the pros in action. Cuban women dress to impress whatever their profession, and short skirts and tight tops are *de rigueur* for those who can (and often for those who can't, rather unfortunately). The men do the same, with tight trousers and pec-hugging tops, and the overall effect is of a country in love with wiggling hips, long legs, sexy dancing and flirting as a way of life. Waitresses in the smartest restaurants wear white shirts,

black waistcoats, neatly tied hair, tiny miniskirts and long stockings, a look that in a city like London would edge onto the tarty, but which looks nothing other than smart in Cuba.

However, the pros do go one step further and sport the shortest skirts, the tightest tops, the glossiest lipstick and the longest hair. But they're easy to spot because they're not bubbling over with the *joie de vivre* that characterises most Cuban woman when they walk down the street; it's hard to explain why, but it's not hard to spot the tarts from amongst the vicars, especially after a few afternoons spent hiding from the sun in the central plazas of Camagüey.

## ***Música de la Casa***

*Written: 15 March 2005*

Cuba is world famous for its music, and rightly so. Everywhere you walk in Cuba, music pours out of the buildings, whether it's the sound of a live band serenading tourists in the Casa de la Música, the booming bass of a hi-fi pounding out *rumba* down a back street, or the tinkling of a piano from behind shutters in the suburbs of Camagüey. Music is in the blood of the Cubans, whether it's *salsa*, *son*, *timba*, *danzón* or *cha cha cha*, and it makes travelling through the island a pleasantly aural experience.

What you don't hear so much is western music, which is a delight after travelling through other, more tourist-influenced societies. There are two universal languages on this planet, and you come across both of them in spades throughout most of the known world; they are, of course, Bob Marley and football (or, if you're a *Norteamericano* or Australian, soccer). In Cuba, though, neither of these is apparent, which is a particular surprise given that one of Cuba's closest neighbours is Jamaica. Instead of Cuban boys kicking a football round the back streets of their home town, you'll find them practising their baseball swings with sticks for bats and rocks for balls; and instead of yet another plug of 'Jamming' and 'I Shot the Sheriff', Cuba hops to the beat of its own unique music.

The exception seems to be in the *casa particular*, where western music has seeped into their CD collections in a strange and rather unpleasant form. Music from the 1980s has found its spiritual home in Cuba, and our first two *casas* entertained us with a nostalgic trawl through the depths of 1980s pap, interspersed with local music that sounded all the fresher for being sandwiched between Phil Collins's 'Another Day in Paradise' and Bryan Adams's 'Everything I Do (I Do it for You)'. Toto's 'Africa' is acceptable enough, but I will forever remember sitting in Trinidad, listening to those housewives' favourites

Chris de Burgh and George Michael; yes, I'm talking about 'Lady in Red' and 'Careless Whisper', which made my bones creak and my teeth ache. My only hope is that they played this music in a mistaken attempt to put on something they thought we would like. Following it with the Scorpions and their candles-in-the-air ballad 'Wind of Change' was, surely, a mistake even our hosts couldn't have made out of politeness.

The doorbell in our Camagüey *casa* was little better. Every time anyone came to visit – and in Cuba, that's every few minutes – the doorbell played out a plinky-plonky electronic tune, varying from 'London Bridge is Falling Down', 'Frère Jacques', 'Happy Birthday' and 'There's No Place Like Home', to 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' and 'Clementine'. At times it felt like the inside of an ice cream van rather than the suburbs of Cuba.

But the prize for the most amazing use of western music came on our penultimate morning in Camagüey, when we were sitting in the back yard of our *casa*, trying to summon up the energy to go out into the midday sun for lunch. The cleaning lady was mopping the kitchen floor, humming merrily to herself, when the opening chords from Procul Harum's 'Whiter Shade of Pale' rang out of the hi-fi in the front room. But instead of skipping the light fandango, the sound of Spanish lyrics floated out across the porch, and the cleaning lady filled

her lungs and sang her little heart out, her mop slopping on the tiles in time to the music.

It looks as if, even in the land of *salsa*, the oldies are sometimes the best.

## **Cayo Santa María**

*Written: 17 March 2005*

To the north of the Cuban mainland are some of the most idyllic spots on the entire island – the *cayos* of Cuba. *Cayos* are coral islands, which in English we call ‘cays’ or ‘keys’; hence we have the Florida Keys strung out southwest from the Florida coast, not a million miles from Cuba itself.

The *cayos* are being developed for tourism at a frantic pace, so it probably won’t be long before they’re home to the kind of sprawling hotel complexes you associate with Varadero, the package holiday peninsula to the east of Havana. At the moment development is still gathering pace, and there are still some deserted beaches to be found, but it’s obvious that the government wants to squeeze as many tourist dollars out of its northern assets as it can; I just hope that in doing so, they don’t manage to spoil what makes them so special in the first place.

## Driving on Water

Getting to the *cayos* off the northern coast is a surreal experience, not least because you can drive there. In a fairly obvious plan to make the *cayos* easy to reach for tourists and their dollars, the Cuban government has built a series of huge roads across the sea, joining the likes of Cayo Coco, Cayo Romano and Cayo Santa María to the mainland.

The road from Remedios to Cayo Santa María is a good example; known as El Pedraplén, this 48km causeway joins the mainland to three *cayos* and is a delight to drive. The road stretches out into the blue ocean, perched on top of a long wall of stone, and at times you genuinely feel you're driving on water; it takes quite a while for the first signs of land to appear on the horizon, small pockets of green mangroves that slowly turn into larger islands of trees and shallow wetland. The first *cayo* you drive through, Cayo Herradura, is uninhabited and a picturesque mishmash of tropical mangrove forest and hidden inlets, which would be a delight to canoe round. It doesn't last long, though, and soon enough there's another stretch of shiny blue ocean before the road reaches the second island, Cayo Las Brujas, and it's here that the first signs of life are apparent.

Cayo Las Brujas is easily the most beautiful *cayo* out of the three, despite being home to the resort's

airport and a large, modern petrol station. But it's the pretty beach at Villas Las Brujas that steals the show, managing to combine the best of tourism with the best of nature. Villas Las Brujas is a complex with 24 individual bungalows tucked onto a small headland at the west end of a wonderful little beach. A restaurant on the end of the headland discreetly looks over the golden sand, and apart from a handful of sun loungers and thatched beach umbrellas below the restaurant, the beach is pure, untouched and spotlessly clean.

We spent a whole day soaking up the rays at Villas Las Brujas, this time wearing sun cream. It's a place of beautiful tropical colours, best enjoyed on a beach towel under one of the palm trees along the back of the beach. The blue sky up above is peppered with small white clouds that drift eastwards, and if you sit there and look at them long enough it's possible to see them boiling away into space under the hot sun. A half moon sits lazily on its side, looking like the top of a bald man's head<sup>1</sup> peering out from behind the wispy clouds.

Gently move your eyes down to the horizon and the sky becomes turquoise, turning a hazy grey as it meets the sea from the slight humidity hanging above the

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<sup>1</sup> In the tropics – and Cuba is just in the tropics, with the Tropic of Cancer a handful of miles to the north – the moon is turned on its side, unlike in the cooler climes, where it waxes and wanes from side to side. This is exactly the sort of useless information that makes lying on the beach so relaxing...

tropical ocean. The sea itself is a deep blue on the horizon, a stark contrast to the light blue sky, but as your eyes drift down towards the shore, the peaceful waters turn greener and greener, until the shallow waters lapping the beach are a light emerald against the bright, cream-coloured sand and the olive green fringe of palm fronds at the back. It's a picture, it really is.

It's also home to some intriguing people. When we visited Villas Las Brujas there were no children, hardly any young people, some astoundingly fat sunbathers, and one token in-it-for-the-money couple, consisting of a pasty, middle-aged computer nerd and a gorgeous dark-skinned supermodel who whispered sweet nothings in his ear in a way that had more to with professionalism than passion.

There were also no Cubans, which is not surprising when you remember that there's a passport control point at the start of El Pedraplén. For reasons I can only speculate about, the Cuban government doesn't allow Cubans onto the *cayos* here; they're turned back before they even leave land, and only employees of the hotels or workmen can cross the mini-border. It feels rather unfair, but it does mean the beaches are completely free of touts, which is a relief to anyone who's suffered on a tourist beach in somewhere like Bali.

## The Dark Side of Paradise

The third *cayo* along El Pedraplén is Santa María, and this is where you get a real sense of Cuba gearing up for hardcore tourism. The guidebooks mentioned a couple of large, all-inclusive hotels, so we thought we'd take their advice and head instead for the 'utterly deserted' Playa Ensenachos, which, according to the Footprint guide, is 'deliberately being left wild and there are no hotels or facilities.' Unfortunately things are moving fast on Cayo Santa María, because Playa Ensenachos is now a mass of huge cranes, concrete shells and signs declaring that there's going to be an almighty resort opening there in the not-too-distant future. It looks as if the environmental plans of the past have already been swept away on a wave of construction.

This is probably the biggest threat to the *cayos*, and yet it's unstoppable, at least while people like you and me continue to lust after such tropical idylls. When El Pedraplén was finished in 1996 after seven years of building work, it represented a vast improvement on the earlier causeway to Cayo Coco, which was finished in 1986 with no bridges at all, thus effectively damming the sea, cutting off water flow in the bay and splitting the wildlife populations in two. It's not known how disastrous this will prove to the environment, but the nutrient levels in the water around Cayo Coco have taken a serious beating and things are unlikely to get

better. There are lots of bridges in El Pedraplén, so water and wildlife can circulate, but plans for Cayo Santa María include 10,000 hotel rooms and ever-increasing numbers of tourists, so things have got to change.

We did manage to find a deserted beach, though, at the far eastern end of the *cayo*. Playa Perla Blanca might be devoid of development, but instead it's home to a large and varied collection of jetsam, ranging from tangled fishing nets and perishing Styrofoam blocks to faded oil canisters and broken plastic crates. The sandfly population is epic and the sharp volcanic rocks on the approach to the beach are lethal, but the sea was as pure as ever and it was good to see Cayo Santa María in its natural state. Something tells me it won't be like this for very long, though...

## Remedios

*Written: 18 March 2005*

From Camagüey we had to start heading back west towards Havana, and we chose as our halfway point the colonial town of Remedios, from which we figured we could visit both the coral islands off the north coast and the revolutionary city of Santa Clara to the south. It turned out to be a good plan, but for slightly different reasons that we'd first anticipated.

It happens at some point in almost every single trip I make abroad, and this time it happened on the way to Remedios. I hung on as long as I could, but about two thirds of the way there I had to ask Peta to pull over, and I threw up copiously, noisily and with immense relief. That night I reacquainted myself with the deep green colour of stomach bile, and sank into a restless sleep with a slight temperature of 100.2°F.

This scuppered any plans we had for doing anything serious, so instead we opted for quiet evenings in Remedios and days spent lapping up the sea on the coral islands to the north. It turned out to be an excellent decision.

## **The Two Churches of Remedios**

Remedios is lovely. It's not a world-class tourist attraction and it's not particularly big, but this is one of the reasons that it's so charming. The main square is a great place to walk at night because everyone is so pleasant; there's practically no hassle, everyone seems pleased to see you, and nobody tries to sell you bici-taxi tours of the city or evening meals in the restaurant of their choice. Hell, nobody even tries to sell you cigars...

If anywhere deserves the luck that befell the town in 1944, it's Remedios. The story goes that an American millionaire called Eutimio Falla Bonet traced his family tree back to nearby Santa Clara, and found that one of

his ancestors had been a founding member of the city. The founders of Santa Clara moved there from Remedios on 15 July 1689, which meant that Bonet's ancestor must have come from Remedios, and indeed he found records in the church on the square that confirmed his ancestor had indeed been born there. He was so taken with Remedios that he spent \$1 million renovating the church containing the records, the Iglesia San Juan Bautista de Remedios, as well as the main square sitting below its tower. The results of the 1944-1953 renovation are still striking; the church is as good as new and the spacious park in the middle of the plaza is a delight, with a pretty cupola in the middle where children play and plenty of cool, stone seats for the locals to sit on and natter.

Meanwhile, on the north side of the square sits the town's other church, the less fortunate Iglesia Buen Viaje. Remedios is the only town in Cuba with two churches on its main square, but the Iglesia Buen Viaje is mouldering, leaking and closed until repairs can be made. It makes Remedios a strange reminder of the fate of Cuba; on one side is a gleaming beacon of American capitalism, while on the other side is a faded and peeling reminder that life in Cuba isn't easy.

Another reminder of past glories was our wonderful *casa particular*, an 18th century colonial house where the shutters were three inches thick, the front room

dominated by a beautiful spiral staircase, and the food presented with spectacular flair; I don't think I've ever seen so much carved fruit in my life. It was a delight.

The only fly in the ointment was the last night, when we ordered fish, a dish that the Cubans fail completely to understand. Given that it's a tropical island, it's a real surprise to find that Cubans don't eat fish; a government initiative to persuade people to eat this renewable and highly nutritious food source failed completely and Cubans simply don't eat things that come out of the sea. Instead they save things like lobster and prawns for tourists, who think they've landed in heaven when they can get a sumptuous plate of succulent lobster for under \$5. Fish, however, is a complete disaster in Cuba; whenever we braved fish on the menu, it either came overcooked, smothered in garlic, mashed up into a paste like cat food, or an unhappy combination of all three. My advice is to stick to the shellfish; it doesn't matter how many crenellated guavas and perfectly round papaya balls appear alongside it, fish in Cuba is an unmitigated disaster, even in a place as welcoming as Remedios.

## **Santa Clara**

*Written: 18 March 2005*

Most tourists visit the city of Santa Clara for one thing,

and we were no exception. Handily positioned right by the ring road is the resting place of the most famous guerrilla of them all, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, and it’s a superb place to visit.

Che Guevara is an icon, and you’ll see his picture everywhere in Cuba, alongside less famous revolutionary characters like José Martí and Carlos Manuel de Céspedes; in comparison you see almost no images of Fidel Castro, who prefers to avoid the cult of personality in favour of dead revolutionaries. The image that turned Che into the doyenne of student bedsits the world over was taken by the photographer Korda in 1960, at the funeral of the victims of an explosion on board a French freighter in Havana harbour. Widely regarded as a CIA-backed terrorist attack, the explosion infuriated and saddened Cuba, and the picture showing the emotions on Che’s face as he surveys the crowd is a study in capturing the moment.

The monument to Che is equally moving. Centre stage is a huge bronze statue of Che carrying a machine gun, and he’s flanked by rectangular plinths containing words of wisdom from the revolution, the text of the letter he sent to Castro when he left Cuba in 1965, and scenes from the fight for Santa Clara in 1959, in which Che took the town in what is regarded as the decisive victory of the revolution.

Below the monument, hidden away from the searing

sun, is an excellent museum that tells the story of Che's life, along with a surprisingly large number of personal items, from an early drawing book and school reports through to guns, asthma inhalers and revolutionary uniforms. There are loads of photos, and the most striking thing is what a stunningly handsome man Che Guevara was. His eyes smile with a passion that's infectious, and he even manages to make the straggly beard he wore in the jungle look cool. Whether he's puffing on a cigar, sipping coffee or posing with a machine gun, Che Guevara looks the part, and you come out of the museum with the same feeling you get when you play the Beatles' back catalogue; deep down, everybody wants to be John Lennon or Che Guevara, and Santa Clara is Che's Strawberry Fields<sup>2</sup>.

Next to the museum is the mausoleum where the

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the Beatles and Cuba didn't get on at first; the Fab Four's music was banned throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and a whole generation had to get their rock 'n' roll fix from listening to foreign radio (the radio that got past the jamming technology employed by the government, that is). Things are different now; a taxi driver in Havana told us that when he becomes a millionaire, he's going to visit Liverpool, because that's where the Beatles came from. An American friend had sent him the entire Beatles CD collection, which was such a joy because he'd grown up adoring the Beatles, but hadn't been able to buy their music in Cuba. As if to emphasise this change of heart, in December 2000 Castro inaugurated a new park in Havana, Parque John Lennon, which contains a bronze statue of the erstwhile Beatle and the following lyrics etched on the ground: '*Dirás que soy un soñador, pero no soy el único*' ('You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one'). It's clearly a considerable about-face, but even communist dictators can't hold back something as powerful as the Beatles.

remains of Che are buried, along with a number of the men who were with him on that fateful day in Bolivia, when the CIA finally got their man. Che had been on their hit list ever since the 1959 revolution, where the young Argentinean led the guerrilla army's second column to victory. As a politician he fared less well; he was seen as the revolution's second leader, after Fidel, but his laudable championing of the underdog in his speeches didn't translate into being a good politician, and his stints as president of the National Bank and Minister of Industry proved fairly disastrous for the economy. Disillusioned by politics and the increasing reliance of Cuba on the USSR, Che left Cuba in 1965 and went to the Congo, where he joined a failed rebellion before moving to Bolivia in 1966 to set up his own guerrilla troop in the jungle. Unfortunately the US didn't take too kindly to him calling for 'two, three, many Vietnams' in the jungles of Central America, and on 8 October 1997 the Bolivian army captured him in an operation coordinated by the CIA. After consulting with military leaders in La Paz and Washington DC, the Bolivians shot Che in front of US advisors; his last words were reportedly, 'I know you've come to kill me. Shoot, you are only going to kill a man.' 30 years later his remains were sent back to Cuba, and were reburied in Santa Clara.

The mausoleum is tastefully done, with plaques of

all those in Che's Bolivian guerrilla column (most of whom are also buried there) and an eternal flame lit by Castro in 1997. It doesn't matter what your political leanings are; this shrine is a fitting tribute to a man whose ideals were strong, and who remains an inspirational and enigmatic figure to this day. After visiting Santa Clara, it's easy to see why Cuba is crazy for Che. He's the closest thing to revolutionary royalty there is.

## **A Funny Sort of Socialism**

*Written: 19 March 2005*

Cuba has to be one of the most famous communist countries still going, not least because they're a continuing thorn in the side of the US government. But you could be forgiven for thinking that Cuba has cast off its Leninist-Marxist approach to life and gone all capitalist, because the signs of socialism are surprisingly subtle.

Certainly Cuba feels nothing like the old Eastern bloc; there are few grey, monolithic concrete structures, and although there are featureless housing estates dotted throughout the suburbs of some of the cities and towns, housing in the main seems to be in older, more stylish accommodation, which might be crumbling before your very eyes, but which is a far cry from the rabbit hutches

of the Soviet state. Sure, along the roadside you'll see plenty of communist slogans like *¡Hasta la victoria siempre!* ('Until victory always!' or 'Struggle towards victory forever!') and *Un mejor mundo es posible* ('A better world is possible'), but Fidel has clearly avoided a Stalinist cult of personality. It feels as if he's a genuinely popular guy anyway, and the feeling is more one of a commune rather than communism.

Confusing the situation further is the dual economy, which Fidel reluctantly introduced in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Eastern bloc. The considerable aid that the Soviets had been sending to Cuba dried up – money that the Russians are still trying to get back, which seems a bit churlish – and given the continuing US trade embargo, Fidel had no choice but to start propping up his slowly crumbling economic foundations by planting the seeds of capitalism... and like climbing ivy, capitalism is slowly infiltrating all the cracks in the economy, shoring it up at the expense of pure socialism.

## **Two Currencies**

The dual economy is pretty explicit, because Cuba has two very different currencies. The national currency of Cuba is the *peso Cubana*, and this is what state workers are paid in. There are around 27 Cuban pesos to the US dollar, meaning the average wage is about \$13 a month. The welfare state means that all Cubans have access to

basic food via a ration system, and they have excellent state education, one of the best health services in the world, and no illiteracy, so although it might sound like almost no money, it buys you a higher standard of living than it would in a lot of other countries. In terms of social policy, Cuba has got a large number of things very right, from a lack of crime to fair standards of living for all. It's something that the Cubans should be extremely proud of.

The socialist state might be an impressive and highly laudable achievement, but Cuban pesos won't buy you any luxuries; shops that sell in the local currency are pretty sad affairs, and while you won't starve on the ration system, you'll hardly enjoy the culinary variety of rice, sugar, oil, pasta and beans. This is where the second currency comes in, the *peso convertible*, which has a much higher value of one convertible peso to one US dollar (though, amusingly, if you try to change US dollars into convertible pesos, the Cuban government will charge you a 10% fee, which only applies to those changing US dollars; those changing pounds or euros can change at the full rate). The tourist industry runs on convertible pesos, and as a visitor you'll find it pretty difficult to spend more than a handful of Cuban pesos; it's all convertible pesos, so much so that the currency sign for pesos is the \$ sign. Indeed, until November 2004, the US dollar was legal

currency in Cuba with one US dollar being the equivalent to one convertible peso; as a result of George Bush's increased nationalism and a hardening of his stance on Cuba, however, Castro banned the dollar from Cuba, reverting instead to the convertible peso.

Cubans can own convertible pesos and can open dollar bank accounts, though the majority don't bother with the latter, apparently because they don't want the government knowing about their finances. This has the effect of creating a class system inside the socialist states, made up of those who have convertible pesos (those who are 'in the dollar market', as it's still called), and those who don't. People who work with tourists can rake in the convertible pesos, while state doctors are still paid in Cuban pesos; as a result you find doctors and lawyers quitting their jobs to work as waiters, because there's more money in it. It's a sad state of affairs, but it's hard to see how tourism can be introduced without it creating such an imbalance.

## **Money in the House**

Owners of *casas particulares* are a case in point.

Camagüey has a large dollar-based department store in the centre of town, where lockable fridge-freezers retail for about \$600, about the same price as in London. Our *casa* had a brand new fridge-freezer in the kitchen, just like the ones in the shop; they also had two TVs, a hi-fi,

air conditioning and even a regular cleaner. There's clearly money to be made in renting out your rooms.

The government isn't totally unaware of what's going on, though. In Trinidad, Manuel explained that the licence to rent out a single room in a *casa* costs \$210 a month, payable even if the room isn't let; if two rooms are let (the maximum allowed in one house), then the licence costs \$420. Given that the average night in a *casa*, including evening meal and breakfast, is around \$35-40 for two people, it means there's money to be made if you're successful, but the tourist season isn't year-round, so *casa* owners have to do their sums carefully. There are plenty of houses around with out-of-date *casa* signs stuck on the outside – the colour of the sign denoting a licensed *casa* changes every year – so it's obviously not a cash cow for everyone.

Another restriction on *casa* owners is that only those directly involved in running the *casa* can live there; people with other jobs aren't allowed to stay, which is why Manuel had just moved out of his parents' house and in with his mother-in-law<sup>3</sup> down the street. But those taking the gamble and going for the dollar market can reap the rewards; they can, effectively,

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<sup>3</sup> In a country where the plural of the word for 'wife' – *esposas* – means 'handcuffs', this was no mean sacrifice. Then again, the plant that we call 'mother-in-law's tongue' on account of its sharp leaves is called 'grandmother's tongue' in Cuba, so perhaps things are a little different under communism, after all.

become Cuban capitalists. It's a funny sort of socialism...

## Thoughts on Leaving

*Written: 19 March 2005*

Cuba took a very long time to grow on me, but by the time it was time to leave, I'd grown rather fond of the place.

Cuba's greatest asset is its people. They are simply wonderful; they're always eager to have a conversation, they're unfailingly polite and pleased to see you, and even the touts – who are few and far between compared to most countries – are a delight. If you politely tell them that no, you don't want to buy a cigar, they apologise for interrupting you and go back to hovering on the street corner; you don't find that in places like Morocco and Mali.

Cuba is also one of the safest places I've ever visited; we never feel threatened, even when wandering through the seediest parts of town, and the number of security guards and police on show in tourist spots is reassuring (and no doubt partly responsible for the small number of touts). It's also amazingly clean, even in the cities; sure, the sewers might pong a little on a hot day, but it's no worse than the fragrant waft of the Thames after a dry spell, and the streets themselves are generally

devoid of litter.

The biggest criticism you hear about holidaying in Cuba – that the food is terrible – is also unfair. Sure, if you stay in an all-inclusive hotel or eat mainly in restaurants, then you're going to have a tough time finding high quality food, but if you stay in *casas particulares* you're in for a treat (just as long as you don't order fish). It's a little harder to find shops that sell anything useful, so you can get caught short in the middle of nowhere with nothing to eat except a limp ham sandwich from a shady-looking restaurant, but with a bit of planning you'll never go hungry... and there's always fruit, which Cuba does extremely well (I couldn't tear Peta away from the guava juice, which was so creamy it was like a cross between a melted sorbet and raspberries and cream).

It's not all joy and light, though. If you eat in restaurants then you *must* check your bill before you pay it, and check your change too; in tourist hangouts it's common practice to slip an extra drink or two on the bill, or to give change for a \$10 note when you've paid with \$20. Whenever this happened – and it happened a lot – I simply looked resigned and noisily left no tip, but with the imbalance of the dollar market, it's understandable why people try it on.

You'll find the odd tout or beggar who takes the piss, too. Beggars aren't that common, but you'll come

across them every now and then. Some are, of course, genuine, but some have worked out that scamming tourists is more profitable than work. One guy in Remedios, of all places, hung round our car, and when he saw us coming he quickly ran a dirty cloth over the bonnet and asked us for money for cleaning it. I gave him some loose change one morning as I got into the car, and instead of looking pleased, he actually looked offended, holding it in his palm and making annoyed noises. He thrust a postcard in my face that read, 'I am deaf and dumb. Please give your consideration for me cleaning your car.' On the other side of the postcard was a picture of a *2 peso convertible* note, and I looked at him in astonishment. I tried a quick bit of mental arithmetic: if the average wage is \$13 a month and he was asking for \$2, then given that the average UK wage is £25,000 per annum, that means he was asking for the equivalent of £320. If someone smeared dirt on your bumper in London and then demanded £320 for their efforts, they'd end up in hospital; I simply shook my head in disbelief and wound up my window, narrowly missing the cheeky little beggar's fingers.

I found the bars a bit disappointing too, with their consistently loud music killing the atmosphere. Sure, if you're lucky enough to find a bar where things are kicking off then the music is all part of it, but we failed to find anything worth the effort outside of the capital.

Tellingly, our favourite bar of the whole trip was a quiet little affair on the square in Remedios, where they played precisely no music and you could sit outside, soaking up the sound of the locals gossiping and promenading in the town square. *Salsa* is one thing, but ambience is another.

But these are niggles, because for every touting tramp and noisy bar there's a whole bunch of smiling Cubans ready to make your day. The best thing you can do before visiting Cuba is to learn a bit of Spanish, because then you can enjoy the real thrill of Cuba: the Cubans. They're worth the journey alone.

**THE END**

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Happy travels!

Mark Moxon, April 2005

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