



Typical street scene in Havana

Impressions of Cuba

by

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July, 2016.

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IN MARCH this year Bob and I visited Cuba for four fascinating days, enabling us to experience Havana and include a day trip to the Vinales Valley, a two-hour drive north. This is obviously not enough time to explore the island but enough to gain a little insight into the life and history of the Cuban people.



A crowded alleyway in Old Havana

Habana (Havana) is a grand old dame, with magnificent, decaying buildings way past their prime. At the height of the fifties, prior to the revolution, it must have been amazing. Many of the buildings are modelled on American and European architecture including the Capitolio Nacional – Capitol; the Plaza Hotel; Central Park and the gorgeous Paseo del Prado, a promenade leading to the harbour where citizens strolled, displaying their latest fashions and greeting friends.

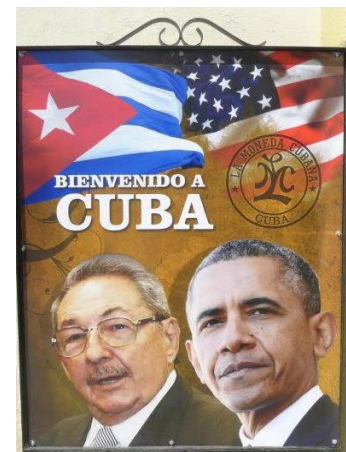
Havana has been isolated since the fifties revolution and the USA embargo, but all that is beginning to change, with more and more tourists arriving every year. Chanel recently launched their season with a fashion parade on the Prado, the Pope, Barack Obama and the Rolling Stones have all been recent visitors and the Cubans are delighted to welcome people from all over the world.



Band set up on street in Havana

Habana Vieja, the old town, was a fascinating area with a maze of cobbled alleyways, musicians on every corner and bars everywhere. We found Hemmingway's hotel and two of his favourite bars. We explored the home of Victor Hugo (a frequent visitor) and many museums, all free.

Our guide and ex-teacher, Vladimir (child of the revolution) was a wealth of information and very open regarding the history of Cuba, the slave trade, the revolution, life-style and religion. He organised a driver who was the third generation owner of a Buick convertible with its original V8 engine. That was a fun morning being driven around historic sites in this fabulous car. Cuba has been unable to import cars since 1950's so many of the cars function on a wing and a prayer. Mechanics are definitely kept busy. Small private enterprises are now permitted by the government but most establishments, hotels and museums are run by the government. Education is free and everyone is guaranteed a job.



Barack Obama was a recently welcomed visitor to Cuba

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Wealthy Cubans fled from the Revolution abandoning their mansions now lying neglected in once affluent suburbs.

There are two forms of money, tourist pesos and Cuban pesos. One tourist peso is worth twenty-five Cuban pesos.

Each citizen is given a daily voucher for bread, which is collected at a counter in the bakery. Should you wish to purchase extra bread, you go to a different counter in the same shop.

Vladimir took us on a long day journey to give us a taste of country life. We visited a cigar factory to watch the cigars being rolled, then on to the quaint town of Vinales with its beautiful pastel buildings and open markets.



Vinales, a country town where farmers use oxen to pull carts of produce to market.

We drove down the valley, with spectacular scenery to visit an attraction instigated by Castro, to encourage tourism - it was a gigantic painting, called Mural de la Prehistoria, covering an entire cliff face.

We also visited a tobacco farm and were offered white coffee (coffee with rum) for refreshment.

For those thinking about a holiday in Cuba, go now before it is spoilt by the rapidly developing tourist industry. Expect friendly, happy people, fantastic night-life (Tropicana is a must), great music, wonderful art, intriguing history and wonderful scenery. However, also be aware that service can be very slow, infrastructure can be poor and five-star accommodation is yet to arrive. Despite that, we loved it and would highly recommend a visit.

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