

Making a last visit to Cuba

By **Richard Parker** Narragansett

Being involved in historic preservation, I get the magazine *Preservation*, and saw in there an ad for a trip to Cuba. It was not just a visit to the forbidden, former island paradise, but "The last trip to Cuba." It was an offer I could not resist, as Cuba, with the exception of humanitarian visits like this one, had been off limits to U.S. citizens for more than 40 years, and even humanitarian visits would, after this, no longer be allowed.

Because of its nature, ours was a program licensed to visit Cuba from the United States. It was also "a journey to examine Cuba's culture, people and history for a week in the centers of Cuba's colonial past." To fulfill the humanitarian qualification, all of us on this trip brought medicine to distribute there. The week would include "expert seminars on Cuba's colonial history, Cuba's people & society, Cuban music and Cuba's fine arts."

While the fine arts are in excellent museums, the wonderful Cuban music is in the streets. Just about everywhere you turn people are playing music, good music, usually different, but all very good. Every restaurant has a group who are not paid by the restaurant, but the musicians do OK on tips and, surprisingly, most have CDs to sell.

In addition to Havana we would visit Cienfuegos, a French city in Cuba founded by some French from New Orleans, who did not wish to stay there after Louisiana was purchased by the United States, and by refugees from the slave rebellion in Haiti. The visit included a trip to Trinidad de Cuba, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. All in all, it was a visit to a virtual time warp of a long-gone era - and to a not-so-long-gone era, as the American cars there are all about 50 years old.

As late as the 1950s, Havana had surpassed Miami as the international city of the Caribbean. After the revolution it became a city of ghosts. While the government buildings are in good repair, much of the city is crumbling. Buildings that hosted business were no longer needed and stores, even small neighborhood ones, are no longer allowed. There is not much for the people to do except to wait in line at the Spanish Embassy for a visa to Spain or, in the evening, converge in groups along the sea walls that stretch for miles. Because of limited gasoline availability there is practically no transportation, so even the aged American cars are mostly idle. In good part, the people just wait. In fact, you get the feeling that the whole country is just waiting.

Castro did much good. He introduced cradle-to-grave health care and literacy programs. Cuba went from one of the most illiterate countries to one of the most literate anywhere, with education free for all citizens through college. He introduced rural electrification and promoted integration of the sizable black population. In fact, he said, Cuba is not a Latin American country, but a Latin African country. As part of this, he raised La Santeria, the underground religion of the blacks, to an equal

status to Catholicism. Health care for all is excellent and, although food is scarce and rationed, Cubans seem to be in excellent health. With good health care, restricted food allowance and no transportation, Cubans stay fit.

Castro's problem is that if the government owns everything, whom do you tax to pay for all of the government services? When the Russians were supporting Castro, Cuba could get by, but after that it has been difficult for everyone. Castro blames the United States for Cuba's problem, Out our boycott is not a blockade and he can get anything he needs from any other country in the world. Unfortunately, he has no way to pay for anything from the outside and so no one wants to deal with him. Except for his pal Hidalgo Chavez of Venezuela, who sells him petroleum products at Third World prices, which Castro in turn resells at first world prices, leaving very little for Cuban transportation.

It is rather spooky to be in a place that is run by a military dictatorship, but there were few visible signs of oppression, no Army people sporting AK47s and no propaganda about Castro is seen. Only Che Guevara is featured, and then not very much. But, if you dare to criticize the government, you go directly to jail. Trials are deemed as not necessary in the case of crimes against the state. Cuban jails are grim and the sentences long.

Things are relaxing somewhat; people are now allowed to grow produce to sell and some are allowed to open restaurants in their homes, but that is about all. The many shops and stores of the small businesses remain closed, and many streets are deserted. Spain has become a major destination for many Cubans, but America is still the main goal. Getting to the United States is difficult as most attempts by water don't make it. If they get by the Cuban patrols, there is always the U.S. Coast Guard. A Cuban curse on his worst enemy is "May the Coast Guard intercept your boat!"

Cienfuegos, the former French city, is laid out like a French Second Empire city, with large parks and many mansions. Beautiful surroundings, but not many people are in evidence. On our trip was a group of French-descended people from New Orleans, the Favrot family, who had discovered that ancestors of theirs had been part of the group that founded Cienfuegos, and so we met with the town historian there and they exchanged historical documents.

The RISD Museum had been showing Latin American art from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Cuba. The curatorial assistant for the show is Rene Morales, who was from Cienfuegos and still has relatives living there. I met his cousin in Cienfuegos, Rene's immediate family having left during the Mariel exodus by chartering a plane to Jamaica.

Trinidad de Cuba, our other stop, was unchanged since the 18th century when the sugar mills moved to Cienfuegos. There we traveled by an ancient wood-burning steam train to visit a restored sugar plantation complete with a pagoda-like tower, from which in the old days, plantation activities could be viewed a escaping slaves shot.

Castro fell and hurt himself quite badly while we were in Cuba. When that happened, I sort of

expected some kind of trouble, but news of the fall was not reported in the Cuban media and so nothing happened. The people are still waiting.

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