



Travel Stories by Amaru & Suzanne



Sampling Mojitos and Cuban life...

by Amaru & Suzanne, January 8th 2009

We're finally in Cuba and Havana or La Habana as the locals call it..

Before travelling to Cuba we had read about their money system (two different currencies, one for the locals and another one for the tourists) and the fact that they don't have ATM's in the country that work with our debit cards. Sure, we could always walk into a bank and get some money out through the credit card but you always lose a lot in the conversion plus the commission fee.

So, we had to decide how much money we might need so that we could extract it while in Mexico and then change it over to Cuban Convertibles once we got there. We had also read that the worst money to bring over is the US dollar since they give you a really bad rate. Since we still had some US dollars on us we changed it in Mexico to Euros.

We were now ready for Cuba...



View over Obispo street
from our balcony

We landed in Havana at 23.00, immigration was easy, they checked our passport, took our photo, stamped our tourist cards (not our passports) and that was it. We then also managed to share a taxi (a brand new car...) with another couple into the city and could split the cost that way.

We had decided that while in Cuba, we would stay in so called "Casa Particulares". These are accommodations where you stay with a Cuban family, not only are they cheaper than hotels, but they are also generally safer and you also get a lot closer to the Cubans this way.

Our accommodation was at "Juan y Margarita", in Havana Vieja (Old Havana), and on arrival we were a bit worried that it would be too late, or that they would have rented it out to someone else instead and that we would end up searching all night for somewhere to stay.

Well, we didn't have to worry about that, Juan meet us at the door and showed us our room. We then sat in the livingroom and I was talking to him in Spanish when he said that he now wanted to practise his English.... and it was flawless!!

We had a good night's sleep and the next morning we had breakfast with Juan as well and he gave us a few tips and pointers regarding the city and its inhabitants.

Since we weren't planning to do anything in particular we just started walking and right around the corner we found the Capitolio (Washington DC and Havana have that in common) and behind it one of Havana's Cigar Factories. Since I was interested in doing a tour of the factory we walked inside but unfortunately the workers were on holiday until the 21st of Jan.... what a shame!



Parque Central
One of the main squares in the city



The local school boys
really wanted their photo taken

The only thing we could visit was its cigar shop, one funny thing about Havana is that everywhere you meet people that want to sell you cigars. When you try to walk into the "proper" cigar shop they warn you that it's too expensive and that they can do a better deal.... yeah, maybe, but I still bought mine in the shop.

We kept on walking and made it to the Revolution Museum which is located in the former presidential palace. Here you will find lots and lots of information, photos and paraphernalia from the revolution. And we didn't realize it, but they are actually celebrating 50 years since the revolution this year.

All over the city you can see written slogans on the walls for the revolution...

Our day continued with a walk down the Malecon where we were both very surprised to see how clean the water was. We made it back to Havana Vieja where we just walked down the streets, looking at all the old cars, buildings that look like they will fall down any second, and just having a great time.

Eventually lunch arrived and we could now finally sit down and try our first Mojito, and it was just as good as we had imagined it to be...

The rest of the day we just spent strolling around and watching people. One of the things that we found so odd were their stores, first of all they would only let in a certain amount of people in the store (everyone else lined up outside) and secondly, the store barely had anything to sell.



Old cars
are very common in Cuba



Capitolio
An impressive building in Central Havana

It didn't matter if it was a grocery, clothing or childrens store.... they all looked very empty and most of the groceries were behind the counter. Of all the things that we eventually saw in Havana, this was what was the most different to what we have (or what most countries have for that matter).

When it was time for dinner we were wondering what we were going to be able to find. We had read that Cuba is not known for its cuisine (basically they always lack proper ingredients). But, besides from the fact that they might not have one or two things on the menu we have to say that we still found the food to be very tasty.

The next morning we decided to see a little more of Havana so we jumped on the very touristic "Hop-on Hop-off" bus.

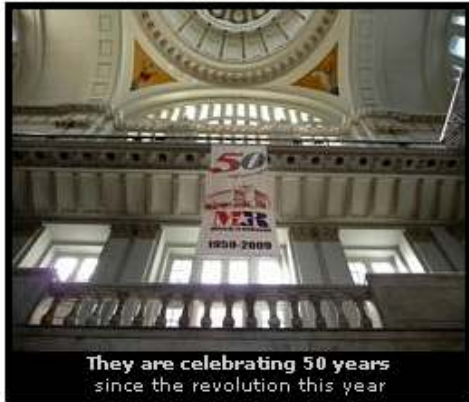
We took the bus to Revolution Square first, whenever you see big rallies on TV from Cuba, this is where they generally take place. Here we found a 134m tower and also a building with the outlines of the national hero Che Guevara and his famous quote "Hasta la Victoria Siempre", Always towards Victory!

We then tried to find the cemenetry "Necropolis Cristobal Colon" but couldn't find an entrance through the wall that surrounds it. One Cuban guy saw that we looked a bit lost and told us where the main entrance was, he then walked us all the way there as well (a good 10min walk), very kind indeed!!

A few hours later, after we'd seen the cemenetry and had gotten bored of bus rides we had to find a taxi driver for the next morning.



"Museo de la Revolucion"
The Revolution Museum



They are celebrating 50 years
since the revolution this year

Our flight was leaving at 7.20am and Juan at our Casa Particular had advised us to book one the day before since there aren't many taxis at that time in the morning. So, we talked to a taxi driver and he said that he would be there in the morning for us.

That night we managed to find the best place for dinner, it was a small place with maybe only 7 tables and a bar, the food was good but the best thing was the band that was playing there for us. We had some great entertainment with our dinner that evening...

The next morning we walked outside at 5.00am and.... no taxi. We waited for 5min but still nothing... We didn't want to miss our flight so we walked over to some big hotels and eventually managed to get hold of a taxi that could take us to the airport.

Lining up for our check-in at the airport we talked to an American lady and we could now see how tough it is for them to make it to Cuba. She told us that this was her 6th trip, she always comes with lots of luggage and leaves empty handed since she leaves everything else behind. She was telling us that she would have to bribe immigration in Mexico so that they didn't give her a second entry stamp into the country as that would look suspicious. So much trouble just to travel to Cuba...

So what did we think of Cuba, well... we actually liked it a lot! People are very friendly, the city feels very safe to walk in (day and night), the drinks and cigars are great and there is so much to see. This was just a small taste for us, we will definately come back in the future and explore it more thoroughly!



Authentic clothing
used during the revolution



Lots of information
and photos from the revolution



Revolutionary art
Showing Fidel and his men...



An impressive painting
on the ceiling



"Rincon de los Cretinos"
...funny!



The fire burns
for the heroes of the revolution



That's Fidel's old tank
... and a piece of the old city wall



"Todo por la Revolucion"
Plenty of these around the city



Suz
by the water



Local fishermen
Along the Malecon



Suz and I
with the Malecon in the background



The water looks really nice and clean
and we saw some divers in it as well





A lot of the locals
joined in and danced away



More dancing...
we saw lots of this in Havana



Walking along Obispo street
in Havana Vieja



It's "ABC" once more...
"Another Bloody Church"



The food we had in Havana
was actually quite good!



Monumento a Jose Miguel Gomez
Quite impressive!



"Plaza de la Revolucion"
Revolution Square



"Hasta la Victoria Siempre"
Always towards victory!



Memorial Jose Marti
It's 142m in height...



Necropolis Cristobal Colon
It's one massive cementary



The famous tomb of
Señora Amelia Goyri



We love these old cars!
Outside the famous hotel Inglaterra



Havana Club
...it's Mojoto o'clock



Enjoying my Mojito
while checking out the church behind us



A clothing store
Not a lot to choose from



Another store
Everything is behind the counter



And once more...
Another great old car!



We wanted a tour of a cigar factory
but they were on holidays



The cigar store at the factory
was open at least...



My afternoon snack...
Beer and a Cuban cigar



Relaxing on our balcony
watching the people below



Enjoying some local musicians
while having dinner

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