



CUBA

A first-person look as America begins to improve relations with its Latin neighbor to the south

By KENNETH BOONE
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Suzanne, our blond, bubbly and very able American tour guide, met us in the lobby of the NH Capri hotel and announced the “bad news.” Our tour bus had broken down and she arranged for taxis to take us to dinner.

Not really a tragic announcement anywhere in the world, but not good news either.

Except in Havana, Cuba, where it turned out to be a highlight of our visit last week.

Lined up on both sides of the street were 17 vintage 1950’s American convertibles, tops down, awaiting 41 American travelers on a 75-degree breezy evening. Buicks and Oldsmobiles and Fords and Pontiacs, all painted bright colors like lime green, sky blue, crimson and white, and the most iconic of all, Pepto Bismal pink.

Mary Lyman and I couldn’t keep the smiles off our faces as we rode in the backseat of a bronze and white 1953 Mercury Monterey along Havana’s famous seaside boulevard – the Malecón – while the sun dropped into the Gulf of Mexico. Our ‘ride’ had the original ‘53 engine and modern stereo that accepted a USB stick drive playing Frank Sinatra’s “New York, New York” – with the volume cranked way up.

That’s a memory worth crossing 90 miles of saltwater.

Cuba is still closed to American tourists, except those who travel under 12 special categories. We were part of a people-to-people exchange with the Alabama Press Association and the Southern Newspapers Publishers Association. The rules required that we have a full-time schedule of educational exchange activity.

And we had one.

During a four-day jam-packed whirlwind tour, we visited a local artisan print shop; toured a number of the squares in old Havana (the city is also spelled “Habana” and is often called La Habana); had dinner at the Hotel Nacional de Cuba where the walls of the bar were lined with photos of famous Americans who have visited; drove by national monuments like the capitol building which is called the “Cuban White House” because it is modeled after ours, except it’s 9 feet taller; walked inside the Habana Cathedral where uniformed school children were also touring; we ate wonderful seafood, crayfish and snapper, and lots of fresh organic vegetables. We asked why so many of the vegetables were organic and learned that many small Cuban farmers don’t have access to pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

Everywhere we went we had what ought to pass as the Cuban national drink, the mojito, a mixture of lime juice, sugar cane juice, sparkling water and mint. The best restaurants add a splash of Angostura bitters on top ... after pouring in a generous dollop of Cuban rum, usually Habana Club.

Most meals began with a “welcome mojito.”

Some places featured the other Cuban highball, the Cuba Libre, which is very similar to the Alabama tailgate favorite bourbon and Coke, except it’s made with Cuban Rum and Tropicola or Tukola – locally made colas. Did I mention a bottle of rum costs \$5? One of the few perks in a communist country.

By the way, don’t drink tap water in Cuba. We brushed our teeth with bottled water and kept closed-mouthed in the shower. Two non-rum hydrators are the local beers. Cristal is in a green can with a Royal Palm on the label. Bucanero is a red can with a pirate on its label.

If you order a beer, the waitress will likely say, “Strong or weak?”

If you answer, “Strong,” which I usually did, you get the red pirate beer.

The performing arts are alive and vibrant in Cuba. We saw a mid-afternoon drum and dance performance by the young men and women of the Habana Compas Dance troupe who used congas and bongos and even drumsticks on leather-covered chairs to get our pulses quickening. At dinner one night Cuban pop singer Jesse Suarez was filming a music video next door on a deck overlooking the river.

We visited the famous Tropicana cabaret and saw a spectacular burlesque show, one said to rival the Moulin Rouge in Paris and I believe it. The Tropicana is in an open-air amphitheater surrounded by palms, mangos and dense green tropical vegetation, with a wrap-around stage that would make Ricky Ricardo weak at the knees. When we arrived, each man was presented with a Cuban cigar. Then came champagne. Then a bottle of rum and cans of Cuban Tukolas were set down on each table beside a full ice bucket. An orchestra pounded out Latin salsa while very profes-

sional stage crew lit up the night for showgirls wearing huge headdresses, sequin and feather capes and not much else. One number featured girls wearing immense crystal chandeliers on their heads, walking carefully through the audience. A man balancing an aluminum octagonal frame on his forehead while a girl dressed in a few ribbons of fabric climbed inside and hung upside down by one foot – and he set the whole thing spinning, Cirque de Soleil style. It was an extraordinary show that has been in operation since 1939.

The Viñales Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is located several hours west of Havana. Its distinctive, rounded blocky hills called “mogotes” are surrounded by hundreds of small family farms, the home of Cuba’s world-famous tobacco.

A farmer named Benito took us inside a thatched barn – both the walls and roof were thatched – when it was raining. The rain dripped off the thatch overhangs and we only felt a few drops inside. Benito explained, thorough our guide-interpreter Abel, how tobacco is grown, dried for five years and rolled into cigars. He then sat down with a board on his lap and his large knife as his only tool. He rolled dried leaves into a cigar shape with his hands, then cut out a wrapper and rolled it on a bias to cover it. Two chops with his knife made a finished cigar, which was smoked on the spot by one of our travel companions. Then we went inside his house where his wife sold us bundles of 10 cubans for 10 Cuban pesos (about \$11 after the exchange fees).

In the valley, we visited a cave and a park where a girl dressed as a native Cuban Indian was holding a small furry endemic creature called a “huita.”

“Mary Lyman, would you like to hold a rat?” I asked.

“No rat, huita,” the girl said. “It no bite.”

“It looks like a rat.”

“No. huita,” she said, as she pointed to the trees and said that’s where the huita lives. Turns out, huitas are more closely related to guinea pigs and hamsters than rats. You wouldn’t know it by looking at it.

Our last full day in Cuba took us to Ernest Hemingway’s estate, Finca Vigia, located in San Francisco de Paula, which is about 10 miles east of Havana. Hemingway lived there from 1939 to 1960, and it was there he wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *A Moveable Feast* and *The Old Man and The Sea*. The home is modest, filled with African trophy heads and books. There is a three-story tower – concrete not ivory, though it might as well have been – beside Hemingway’s house. The top floor held a worn wooden desk with Papa’s old Corona typewriter.

Outside in a pole barn is Hemingway’s famous fishing boat, Pilar, which has only one chair I could see, a wooden fighting chair. Hemingway won many fishing tournaments and caught a number of record-setting bluewater fish in that chair. He even patrolled for German U-Boats in the Caribbean in Pilar. One of his captains, Gregorio Fuentes, is said to be the model for Santiago in *The Old Man in The Sea*.

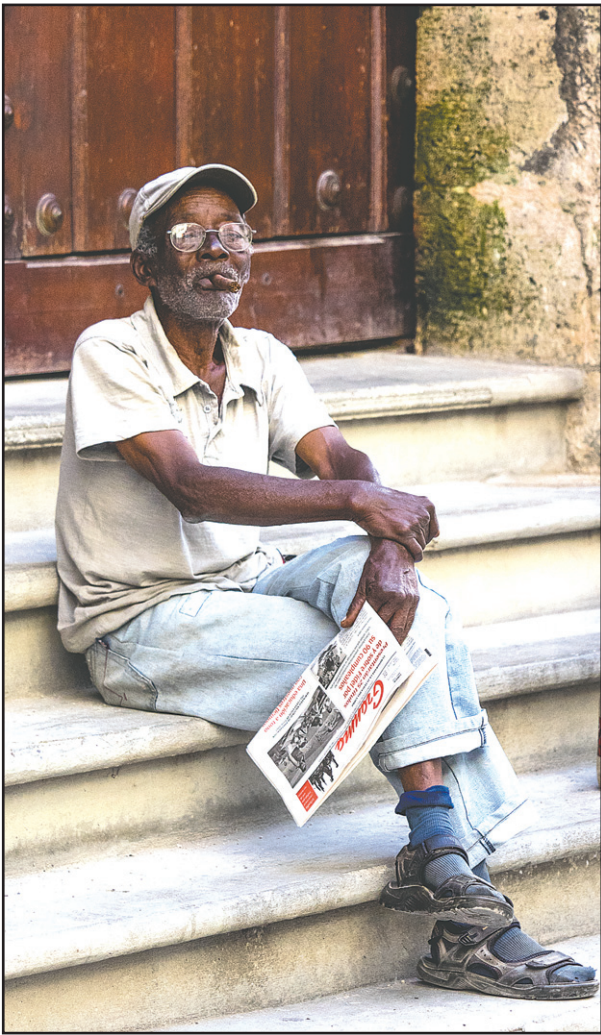
Finally, we visited the home of Jose Rodriguez Fuster, a ceramic artist and painter, who made mosaics on more than 80 houses in his neighborhood and created wild, colorful patterns and structures that look like a mash-up of two famous Spanish artists: Gaudi and Picasso. The neighborhood is known as Fusterland and it is definitely a memorable sight.

Throughout the short visit to Cuba, I found several common threads.

The people of Cuba are friendly and helpful. I wore a lapel pen of American and Cuban flags joined together. At least a dozen Cubans noticed it, grabbed their lapels, and gave me a big smile and the thumbs up sign.

The first night there, in the Capri hotel, I went to the “cigar bar” and asked if they had cigars for sale. The bartender said yes, and I said I would be back that night to have one. That night when I arrived, there were no cigars available, so I ordered a mojito and told the bartender I would go upstairs and meet some friends by the rooftop pool. Twenty minutes later, the bartender came up to me and handed me a cigar with no label on it. He said it was a “Rolo,” or at least that’s what I thought he said. I thanked him and offered to pay. He shook his hands at me and wouldn’t take any money. I don’t know where he found it, probably out of somebody else’s pocket. I left a \$5 tip.

The movie crew for Fast and Furious 8 was in Havana filming while we were there. Helicopters flew overhead. Streets were blocked. Mary Lyman walked down to the Malecon where rows of vintage American cars, all in great shape and brightly painted, were parked. I took



From the top: A Cuban smoking a cigar and reading a newspaper in the morning; A view of the beautiful Viñales Valley; A classic vintage convertible Chevy painted pink and used as a taxi; Tropicana cabaret has been thrilling visitors since 1939; A Cuban Santeras in downtown Havana; Habana Compas dancers and drummers stage a mid-afternoon show.

out my camera and started shooting. After about 20 photos, a Cuban man came up to me and said, "Sir, please take your photos and then move on." I was standing in a movie set. Nobody got angry. Don't try that in Hollywood.

A second common thread: the communist Cuban infrastructure is crumbling. There are some nice, well-kept buildings. There are many, many more that are dirty and unkept. Some are literally falling in.

Everywhere you look, Cuban people are sitting, standing, milling around. Especially in Habana, it doesn't look like most have jobs, or at least not 9-to-5 jobs. The Cuban government provides an average of \$20-30 per month to its residents.

It doesn't take but a few minutes on Cuban soil to figure out that Cuba needs the dollars American tourism and investment will bring as the frozen relationship between our countries thaws. On May 1, the first American cruise ship in four decades landed in Cuba. Before long, Cuban tourism and travel will be open

to Americans without a special license. The island's infrastructure will be a challenge, the island's warm people will not. They understand their plight all too well and seem hopeful for a better future.

As our local guide Abel said, "Cuba is not all we want it to be, but it is better than you may have heard on Fox News."

Cuba is as close to Key West as Alexander City is to Birmingham, but that short distance across the Strait of Florida and political differences between our two countries forms an immense gap that is just now, slowly, starting to close.

And that is good for both of our countries. Boone is chairman of Tallapoosa Publishers, Inc.

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