

CUBANISM – Human Interest Observations

by Christopher Gulden, s/v Bristol Head (May 2017)

I experienced the richness of people, beaches, culture, music, and cuisine of islands throughout the Caribbean this past winter. I can say unequivocally Cubans are an earful and eye-ful of music, dance, and appreciation - a step above and beyond other islands I visited. Havana is blessed with an urban landscape and architectural history highlighted with iconic 1950's automobiles restored in varying degrees of splendor carrying passengers in unique style around town. Even the dogs seem to never bark, as they frolic fearlessly in the frenetic and friendly surroundings.



I observed a ubiquitous sense of mild jubilation while cruising around Havana. The horns on all the cars toot out a friendly call saying 'howdy do amigo' – a pleasant change from the norm. Roadways are a community and language of their own shared by bikes, horse carriages, jitneys, hitchhikers, walkers, vendors, potholes, buses, trucks, stalled cars, and kids playing soccer.

Traffic lights have timers showing the number of seconds left before lights turn green or red – novel and helpful! The pace may differ from American standards, yet the experience is rich, friendly, and visually stimulating. A noted distraction is smog emanating from all the engines burning sulfur rich Venezuelan diesel that poses an irritant and health risk to all.

Although there are some exceptions, most Caribbean dining does not stand up well to critical review – certainly not to the standards of a quality chef like Anthony Bourdain. So visiting another Caribbean island like Cuba did not instill an expectation that I would be passing on high *YELP!* ratings. Add to that some friends and journalists had billed Cuban cuisine as bland and boring, all of this lowering my expectations. But, I was pleasantly surprised - I found food plentiful, satiating, splendid, and delicious.



In terms of service, Cuba has perfected its own version of island time. Expect occasional delays. Don't be in a hurry, and things will fall together as it should. If you are fluent in Spanish, you will not miss a beat, and if there is a live acapella band in the corner, you will find yourself idling away moments while shaking your shoulders to foot tapping salsa beats.

Something unique is going on in Cuba where a communist/socialist government still wields massive influence. The tide appears to be turning albeit slowly, and private enterprise is taking root. Folks are dancing cautiously with intrepid foreign investors, hanging a shingle, creating

mainly paladars and casa de particulars that are amazing. I toured a multi-story tourist venue in old town Havana that was a series of flats with outdoor terraces and immaculate interior décor. Cuban hospitality was woven in where a spotless garage served cars by night, but was a bar and table area by day where visitors enjoy breakfast, lunch, or a cigar and rum in an open-air emporium.

Cuba is a big island, and the rural scene reflects other Caribbean islands I have visited. The Auto Pista reminded me of a road trip a few years back across Mexico where I observed cattle on the loose, pedestrians shaded under an overpass, a horse and buggy enjoying the smooth ride half in and half out of the lane. By day the rules of the road were comically self-explanatory. By night, as on a sailboat, perils lurk in the darkness.



At one destination in Vinales I rode a horse alongside a cowboy of sorts, and learned about organic tobacco farming, Cuba's rural simplicity, and its scenic beauty. I observed a Cuban national parrot while vultures circled silently above the valley floor looking for dead meat. Another outing took us to the Bay of Pigs for snorkeling in crystal clear water, followed by a fantastic lunch in the back courtyard of a family's homestead.



Artistically, there is a sense Cuba has been isolated but is about to explode. Certainly Ry Cooder felt this however many years ago when he opened the timeless Buena Vista Social Club. Unlike most other Caribbean islands where copycat tiki bars dominate the waterfront, here a cow bell, clave, and maracas, a few guitar-like string instruments, and a proud voice from a pint-sized singer do circles around Bob Marley with pure music that serves no deeper purpose than to have a good time, generate smiles, and impress. Talent is everywhere, and what a life

lesson to hear the beautiful sounds of a society that takes the simple joys of street dancing for granted.

If Anthony and Ry want to make passage with me to Cuba, I'll go again in a heart beat. Let's make sure someone speaks Spanish. The berths, beer, bromigo smiles, and 1956 Buick rides are on me.