MORE ABOUT PALADARES – And Other Dining Options

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Cuban food at its best emphasizes freshness and at its worst imitates American food of the 1950’s. As most restaurants are near the coast, seafood ranging from lobster to tuna sashimi was plentiful and for the most part outstanding.

The most inexpensive places to dine in Cuba cater to locals, with menu prices listed in pesos cubanos or CUP$. The exchange rate during our visit was 1 CUP$ = 0.0377358 US$ or less than 4 cents. In Havana’s Jaimanitas district, a short walk from Marina Hemingway, we stopped at a takeout window which offered hamburguesas and small pizzas for a mere 20 CUP$, or about 75 cents US). Lunch in a paladar will cost 5 to 10 CUC$, occasionally more for a dish such as lobster. For truly cheap food, patronize a walk-up window where you can get sandwiches, rice and beans, or stew.

Unlike the U.S., tablecloths are not unique to pricier restaurants. In Cuba it is not uncommon to see tablecloths in the most common of paladares. Trenchers and cloth napkins are also common table settings, although in at least one paladar, both were removed when we were seated. Napkins are not always provided. They are often offered at the end of a meal, but you may have to request one.

Water also is not always offered or available. Two restaurants we visited did not offer water. When available, it is typically sold as bottled water. Not all paladares can or will provide glasses with a beer. Cuban beer comes in three flavors: Cristal, a very light beer; Buccaneer, a very strong beer by Cuban standards, but at 5.4% a middle-of-the-road beer in the U.S.; and one with a bear on the label. The last was oddly sweet and more or less undrinkable.

Many establishments offer Heineken and El Presidente for .50 CUC$ or so. Occasionally, the unavailability of items appears to be an effort to sell higher priced goods, or perhaps a simple misunderstanding. At one paladar we were told at 2 p.m. they had no more sandwiches, but they would be happy to sell us platters. Another had no water, even bottled, but were happy to sell us beer. At dinner one night we were told, after selling us two small bottles, the restaurant was out of wine. A while later large bottles of red wine turned up. Note: red wine is tinta, not roja.

We did find some notable pizza at La Cova, located at the head of Canal 4 right in Marina Hemingway. Its pizza is outstanding, particularly at lunch time, when they offer a medium lobster and shrimp pizza for 9.20 CUC$. For some reason, lobster pizza is not available in the
evening, though many other varieties are. We tried dinner at La Cova and regretted it. The pizza was still good. The pasta was mediocre at best. The grilled fish was bland but acceptable, and the fish baked with cheese was a mistake. The mixed grilled vegetables were a satisfying compliment. Also in the Marina, at the west end of Canal 1, is a tiki hut that serves draft beer and wonderful rotisserie chicken with vegetable sauce and cucumbers. By 3 p.m. however, they run out of chicken.

RECOMMENDED PALADARES

La Fortunata, known more for its decor than its comestibles, features tables and seats fashioned from beds, a carriage, bathroom fixtures, and more.

Genesis, on San Ignacio Street near Plaza de la Catedral, was one of our favorites. We were entreated to enter by a young man waving a menu featuring grilled lobster with garlic or Cuban sauce, paella, and other entrees. This paladar had only six tables inside and a table or two in the alley. Respectably-sized lobster tails were served with the ubiquitous side dishes of rice and beans and a platter of shredded cabbage with thinly sliced, pale tomatoes and cucumber. On Saturday, a trio of musicians played and sang for our entertainment, passing around a hollowed gourd, used as a musical instrument and for collecting tips. Most entrees were in the 12 to 15 CUC$ range.

The paladar Santy's, specializing in right-off-the-boat seafood, is located on a slough a short walk east from Marina Hemingway. The second floor and its palm-thatched roof are visible from the bridge crossing the slough. There is no written menu. The server, who spoke some English, listed the appetizers—sushi, sashimi, ceviche, and a lightly cooked sashimi. The fish varies day to day, but on our visit was a luscious tuna. The generous platter of thinly-sliced, bright red tuna was ample for two. A plate of seafood served over pasta was another favorite.

A short walk west of Marina Hemingway, we dined under a thatched roof pavilion extending out from a dock at La Giraldilla, an attractive restaurant with no customers for most of the meal other than our foursome. The varied menu included enchiladas, but we were all surprised when the platters arrived sans tortillas. For example, the enchiladas camarones featured shrimp in a roux served with yucca and the usual rice and beans. We snacked on tasty fried plantain tostones while we waited for our meal. The staff seemed generally thrilled to have us.

Just down the street from La Giraldilla is El Laurel, worth visiting for its herb gardens and children’s play area and for its food served dockside.
Swordfish was the fish of the day when we were there. It remained moist and was available either as a thin steak or in a creole sauce. Cost was 8.50 CUC$.

One of the highlights of our gastronomic tour of Havana was a visit to the Coppelia, an elaborate outdoor ice cream parlor located in a park visited primarily by Cubans. Flavors and prices ranging from 1 to 5 CUP$ were listed on a board. We waited in line until directed to a table on the second floor. Almond and caramel flavored ice cream were two of our favorites. The ice cream was served in plastic bowls with a few small cookies and with brown sugar sprinkled on top – an unnecessary addition.

Who knew Havana had its own Chinatown? Unfortunately, our schedule prevented us from dining there, but we saw many restaurants that looked interesting.

El Palenque is a large restaurant frequented by tourists and Cubans. Tables under a thatched roof surround an outdoor central grill. The cuisine includes seafood, Cuban food, and pastas and pizzas at modest prices. An appetizer of ceviche, served with cucumber slices, was ample for an entree. Live music induced one of our members to ask a server to dance. Casa del Escabeche, or House of the Pickle, on Calle Obispo, is a paladar with four tables. One of their dishes, for 3.25 CUC$, is a chicken salad, consisting of chicken in a light rice wine vinegar mixed with shredded cabbage. A chicken platter was less than 7 CUC$.

OUTSIDE HAVANA

Hotel Horizonte Los Jasmires is situated high on a mountain, overlooking the Valle de Viñales. The location and stunning view attract tour buses that pull in regularly. We stopped for a moment to admire the valley and mogotes (limestone monoliths) below. We had time to visit only one of the small bars overlooking the valley.

For lunch in Viñales we visited the restaurant Balcon del Valle, also situated high on a mountain overlooking the Valle de Viñales. We sat in a row of tables directly on the overlook, protected by a wooden railing that prevented our plummeting over the edge. Lunches were dinner-sized, and no menus were available. The server, who spoke limited English, described the primary offerings—tuna filet (although it didn’t seem like tuna), whole red snapper, and roast pork. Before the entree, we each were served a bowl of thin vegetable soup with a tasty broth, baskets of bread, fried plantains, and the usual bowl of rice and beans.

SUPERMARKETS AND LOCAL MARKETS

On Saturday mornings, next door to the Cadeca (Casa de Cambion, or money exchange booth) in Jaimanitas, a vegetable market opens up. Braids of onions and garlic, small limes, various squashes, and string beans were just some of the fruits and vegetables available. No lettuce or leafy greens were visible in April. The small limes, the size of key limes, the most sweetly scented limes I have ever tasted, added a nice
floral note to cocktails on the boat. At 4 CUP$ each, they were a bargain. At a Dulceria, a sweet shop also in Jaimanitas, we sampled a pastry layered with custard for a modest price in CUP$.

Consider taking advantage of street vendors. In a park in Mirador, we purchased for 80 CUP$ a plastic sleeve of obviously homemade baking soda crackers that lasted a couple of days. Near El Floridita, a bar known for its daiquiris and a statue of Ernest Hemingway occupying a seat at the bar, we purchased churros from another street vendor - a decadent, sweet dough fried in hot fat and served in a paper cone.: 

BARS

We found these worth visiting, and recommend you give them a try:

- **La Floridita**, a favorite haunt of Ernest Hemingway in Havana Viejo, is known as the creator of the daiquiri.

- The waterside bar at the National Hotel, overlooking the Straits of Florida, is an excellent stop for a leisurely cup of coffee or an afternoon drink. One side of the terrace outside the Hotel is designated for smokers, and several people lounged and puffed away at cigarettes or cigars as a trio of strolling musicians entertained the crowd.

- **La Terraza**, in Cojimar – the town where Hemingway kept his boat Pilar – is another fun stop with four musicians, a table set for Hemingway and his Captain Gregorio Fuentes, many Hemingway photos, and their signature drink, a blue daiquiri.