

PUBLIC SAFETY STANDARDS Or Lack Thereof

By Seale George, SV Flash

Our senses were on overload as we rode in taxis and walked the streets to explore Havana. It was all so vibrant, so exciting. But, it was impossible not to notice however the lack of public health and safety standards, especially in heavily-traveled tourist areas. It was also impossible to ignore poor air quality.



As Americans we are accustomed to having safe streets, sidewalks, steps, park areas, and work sites. Our local, state and federal, governments establish and enforce safety standards for just about everything. In contrast, the Cuban government, seemingly in control of everything, appears to have or enforce no such standards.

We observed crumbling sidewalks, large holes in walkways, utility covers missing, non-existent curbs, and re-bar and fencing (including barbed wire) extending into public areas. Grassy spaces are often uneven and riddled with ankle-turning holes. Staircases in homes and in public places have narrow steps that often vary in height and width; handrails may or may not be present. In addition, many steps are tiled and become slippery and treacherous in wet conditions. In fairness, such conditions are not unique to Cuba and can be found throughout the Caribbean.

Small renovation projects are surrounded with homemade scaffolding supporting narrow, unattached boards running the length of the scaffolding. Little care is taken to prevent dust, debris, tools, and bodies from falling on passersby.



Buildings used for public performances did not appear to have typical fire safety standards, including signs stating a maximum number of allowed occupants, fire exits, and strategically placed fire extinguishers, etc. This came to light as we attended a musical performance in the upstairs room of a building where all of the furniture was wood and tables and chairs were arranged in a way that made quick egress impossible. Adding to public risk was the fact smoking is still allowed in the buildings and almost encouraged by after-dinner table-to-table sale of cigars. A kitchen was also located near the seating area, separated only by glass partitions. In the event of fire, there was little evidence of fire hydrants, fire trucks, or firehouses nearby. One positive is that most of the buildings are of masonry construction. Other materials for roofing and flooring could possibly have asbestos, and paint may be old enough to be lead-based.

The air quality in Havana can only be described as poor by any standard. Vintage cars, while nice to look at, are retrofitted with low-quality diesel engines. The cars spew and belch black smoke produced by the low quality high sulfur fuel they consume. Trucks are even worse polluters. Riding in an un-airconditioned car with all windows down only heightens the effect and one's sense of exposure.

Air quality also takes a hit from trash burning on the island. We were treated to the smell of smoke and a burning sensation in our eyes and lungs 15 miles off the eastern shores of Cuba. An offshore breeze ensured we experienced acrid air through most of the night. As we approached Marina Hemingway on the north shore and waited outside the marina entrance in the morning, we were welcomed with the same acrid air and trash burning experience. Our boats became covered with a dusting of the light black emissions.

What does all this mean for cruisers?

We take air quality and safety standards for granted in the U.S., but experiencing and observing these issues over our two week stay in Cuba made evident their low priority here. It will be a very long time before meaningful improvement is made. Cruisers sensitive to poor air quality will suffer to some degree unless they remain on an air-conditioned boat their entire visit, which defeats the purpose of visiting the island.

Walking is a must for visitors to Cuba, but sidewalks, grassy areas, and streets are minefields. Pedestrians should carefully watch where they walk and wear good shoes. The use of canes, crutches, and wheelchairs can be challenging, but several of our cruisers using such aids did so successfully. Caution should be exercised when passing fenced areas or construction/renovation sites. Clothing or skin can get snagged or debris could fall on you. Navigating the streets of Havana on foot is best done without the added distractions of texting, emailing, or talking on the phone.

Deficiencies in air quality and public safety standards are quickly overlooked while fully enjoying all of the positive attributes offered by Cuba and its friendly and colorful people. Visit Cuba with an open mind and a sense of adventure. You will not be disappointed.

