

On visiting Cuba in 2018 by Brenda Smith

Towering before me was a 30 metre high bronze statue looking over the valley towards the sea; unmistakably Che Guevara. We had arrived at the inland city of Santa Clara, built in 1689 as Cubans fled to escape the pirates of the Caribbean. More recently, the town had become the site of the most important battle, when the Communists had successfully driven out the dictator Batista to ensure the triumph of the revolution. It was Che who led the revolutionists to this decisive victory and established an independent communist regime. How the local people must have revered their guerrilla soldier who stood by Fidel Castro later when the USA tried to end the independent communist rule of this small island. In 1961, during the Cold War, Cuba stood firm against the CIA and the Government of the USA. We visited The Bay of Pigs, where the final stand-off took place. A moment in history which I remembered, coming up to its 60 year anniversary.

A group of 30 Eltham High School teachers arrived in January 2018 on their Central American trip. All were looking forward to visiting Cuba before the restrictions on residents of the USA were slackened. There would be no MacDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken or other fast food chains. Hopefully there would be no posters or hoardings. Hotels would be modest and the neglect of Havana, Trinidad and other major towns, would ensure that they were preserved with their original architecture.



What joy when we landed in Cuba and we found all this was as we hoped plus much more. The first impression was one of live music, dance and colour. Every restaurant and cafe, no matter how small had their own band with singers and dancers. The salsa is the dance of Havana and the men relish in it. We were often invited up to dance with them, which several of us enjoyed. I noticed that even two or three reluctant Australian men were enticed by the rhythms and were willing to 'give it a go'. The other immediate source of vivid colours was the 1950s cars. Sun yellow, lollipop pink and emerald green Cadillacs, Plymouths, Chevrolets and Buicks filled the roads. The USA trade embargo since the 1940s has resulted in few cars arriving after this date. How magic, every road is filled with stretched, gleaming limousines. The owners are justly proud of them and keep them together with tape, smuggled parts and paint. Over the 8 days, most of our party had at least 2-3 rides in a classic car.



The whole of Havana is World Heritage. The beautiful laurel shaded Spanish squares are just as the conquistadors and, later, wealthy Spaniards had built them. Cobbled laneways link the cathedral to all the marble Spanish palaces and villas. The original Spanish Opera House is now the Ballet Theatre dedicated to Alicia Alonso, who is still alive at 97 years old. Bronze statues of flamenco dancers, poets and musicians (such as Chopin and Tchaikovsky) grace the squares of La Revolution or Les Armaments. The port has a Spanish castle at the river entrance, where goods from everywhere except the USA is landed. UNESCO is, along with China and Venezuela, pouring in money to restore the city to its former glory. Batista's former palace is now a museum. Below the original chandeliers are original posters claiming victory over the Yanqui Imperialists. Photos of both President Bush's have words such as 'thank you cretins for letting us win against your massive armies'.



The following week saw us visit the countryside of Cuba. Small, self-sufficient villages and towns lie in the fertile valleys. People are on foot or riding small horses. The houses are neat, small and colourful. Everywhere we see tobacco, coffee and bananas being grown. The finest Cuban cigars are hand-made and smoked everywhere. Each town has its own school and medical centre. Education is free, as is health care from cradle to grave. In a couple of valleys, we stayed in family home stays. The Cubans are friendly and I suspect that they realise that tourism will be their financial saving grace. With this in mind I bought a couple of Cuban T shirts and hummingbird salad servers at the local street market. Again there is music and dancing even in the middle of the day.





After 8 days travelling the length and breadth of the island of Cuba, I was glad that I had visited before the American dollar made its influence felt - a phenomenon that we were to see in Panama and Costa Rica. Here was a charm and a pride in the continuing success of their islands' revolution. The USA is still hated and mistrusted, although Cuba concedes, with the passing of Fidel Castro last year, that a lessening of the restrictions on travel for their own people will be necessary.

The island is unique.