

Cuba: Bicycling in the 2nd World



So why the 2nd world? Places like the USA, Canada, England and etc. are the first world. They have all the best of everything and folks live the good life of conspicuous consumption. Places like much of Africa and other impoverished lands, where the uncertainty of next meal may be the motivating question of the day are the 3rd world. Cuba seems to fit somewhere in between. Since the Soviets pulled their economic support in the early 1990s it has been the land of shortages and ingenuity. Making their way under crippling sanctions imposed by the land of my birth, in revenge for something that happened shortly after I was born, makes life here a day to day challenge. I understand how things between the USA and Cuba went off the rails. There was that period when the first revolutionary nation in the world was a friend to the Cuban revolution. That is until the matter of Communism was injected into the mix and the cold metal of the Iron Curtain fell, with a thud, between the USA and their island neighbour. Yes, a lot of Mafia types lost their shirts and casinos as did a number of innocent investors but at some point in time we have to let bygones be bygones just as England eventually did with the upstart American colonists. Did England and those on her side lose property and wealth because of the American Revolution? Just ask Ben Franklin's son for the answer. England eventually forgave George Washington and his cohorts, maybe it is time for the USA to forgive Fidel Castro and his.

What do these aforementioned sanctions mean for Cubans? They mean that you can find a larger and cooler collection of antique cars there than you can find in Hollywood and in Cuba they are still on the road and working every day. In a single day you can expect to see the usual assortments of fifties vintage Chevys, Fords and Dodges, some with tail fins so sharp you could shave with them. Also in the mix I spotted a Rambler, a Hudson and even a Kaiser all still rolling along like they just left the factory. Cubans care for their cars better then some folks care for their kids. However, aside from extending the life of vintage automobiles, the sanctions mean that the average Cuban has to stand in line for just about everything including some life saving medicines that sometimes fail to arrive on time. Shortages of even simple things like pepper are part of everyday life. It means that the average Cuban needs to develop the ingenuity of a MacGyver and James Bond's 'Q' all rolled into one clever and crafty person. These are seriously adaptive people who can fashion transportation out of a combination of old bicycle and car parts powered by human or horsepower: Horsepower of the hay eating kind. The tourism dollars that we spend with them allow them to buy such luxuries as toilet paper and soap. Despite all of this the average Cuban is kind, generous and openly friendly, even to the selfsame Americans whose government is causing such hardship. They just wish it would stop and don't know how to stop it.





With the above in mind I travelled here with 7 friends touring in a loop around the central Cuban city of Santa Clara. We arrived with three suitcases of medical supplies for the cardiac centre in Santa Clara and another hospital, as well as a rebuilt bicycle for a family with a new child and in need of another means of transportation. Ish, our group leader, was responsible for setting up the medical supplies with the group Not Just Tourists and his wife donated the bike. I provided some bike repairs.



Six of us will pedal our way on two wheels while the remaining two are hopping our belongings ahead each day in a taxi. It is nice to pedal light and free. I have to mention that Cuba was a bit outside of my comfort zone but Ish and his wife Kathy are long time visitors and many in our group know a bit of Spanish. I was an unsuccessful Spanish student in high school preferring practice of my class clown skills to practising Spanish. Now I pay the fool's price. Luckily, others more than make up for my shortcomings. What follows are my musings from this unusual journey.



We landed in the city of Santa Clara, an interesting little city of faded buildings, narrow sidewalks. Transportation there is by everything from vintage Chevys to modern KIAs with a strong contingent of bikes, horse carts, mopeds, scooters, and pedal taxis all loaded beyond the manufacturer's intended passenger limits. It is a vibrant and busy place. Our group of eight is split between two casa particulars. These are essentially private homes licensed by the state to accommodate foreign travellers and operated to state set standards. They are clean, neat and run by people who will do all in their power to make your stay pleasant. The state requires them to see your passport and log your information into their records. Frequently they will provide your with breakfast lunch and dinner well prepared and served at a reasonable cost. It is a far more intimate experience than a resort hotel.



Upon arriving we made arrangements to get the cases of medical supplies to the two hospitals. The good people at Not Just Tourists carefully stuffed three large suitcases with a variety of medical supplies that are hard and sometimes nearly impossible to get in Cuba. Two were nondescript black cases but one, the one full of specialized cardiac supplies, was packed in a distinctive orange suitcase. We opened it in the middle of Carlos' living room just to be sure it was the correct one for the cardiac hospital. Inside were such medical necessities as a set of swim goggles, a snorkel and an assortment of children's clothing. It seems there was more than one distinctive orange suitcase aboard our flight. We called the airport and they confirmed that there was a lone orange suitcase still in Customs. They were also quite instant that if we did not bring back the case we had there would be terrible consequences. Thankfully Carlos had a friend with a car who graciously ferried Ish and Kathy back to the airport and then on to the hospitals where the suitcases were received with many thanks and a bit of cheering.



With that business out of the way it was time to relax, wash off the dust of the road and find some dinner. Despite the many shortages which include a number of foods, the government insists that restaurants and tourist facilities get priority. Frankly, it made me feel quite guilty about eating;

however, the CUCs we used to pay for our meals provide employment and money to the Cuban economy that

allows them to buy other non-embargoed items on the global market. The guilt has to be swallowed along with the good. Afterwards it was early to bed, early to rise, a large breakfast and off on our bicycles to travel the busy highway to Cienfuegos.

Cinfeuegos is a coastal town that has a mix of agriculture, industry and tourism. The agriculture surrounds the town and occasionally pops up in the backyards of its more industrious residents. However, tourism and those that are needed to support it, seem to be the largest factor in the economy. Casa particulars, resort hotels, restaurants, pedal cabs, motorcycle cabs, 1950's automobile cabs and regular modern cabs await to house, feed and move the tourist population. Residents seem to ride the omnibus, motor scooters, horse carts and bicycles. Personal cars also share the road but a car with a single passenger is as rare as a can of Coca Cola in Cuba.

Our accommodations were small establishments run by local residents who had jumped through the hoops to obtain the highly sought after government permits. The facilities were clean, well maintained and run by cheerful, friendly people who would go well out of their way to make our stay comfortable. The setting was as nice as any seaside home. This included fixing us better than restaurant quality meals at prices far less than those at home and for better quality food. Everything was fresh. Guilt was swallowed and proper thanks given.

After dinner Ish took out his mandolin and we sat by the water and listened to him pick out a number of tunes as the full moon rotated across the sky, reflecting off the water. We sat near a turn around on a dead end street that was also near the entrances to a restaurant and small resort. A number of pedal cabs were parked there awaiting guests needing transportation. As Ish played, one of the cab operators came over and made some musical suggestions. Ish tried and eventually managed to pick up the tune he was tapping out and a small jam session developed. It was great fun and the cab operator seemed quite outgoing, friendly and a bit of a musician himself. The next morning he was there when Ish and Kathy needed to get downtown to take care of some business. Employing his services seemed the reasonable and friendly thing to do and they both climbed aboard not bothering to inquire the fare. Pedal cabs are usually very competitive and reasonably priced modes of short distance transportation. Not this time. Their friendly driver, music lover and small scale con man demanded fifty CUCs (Convertible Universal Currency) for his efforts. With one CUC equal to one US dollar this was literally highway robbery. Ish balked, the cabbie demanded, Ish countered, the cabbie insulted, Ish held his ground and the cabbie gave ground, a little. Thirty CUCs were agreed upon which was about double the going rate for the service. The lesson taught to the man who had taught it to the rest of us: ALWAYS negotiate first!

While Ish and Kathy were getting taken to the cleaners, Ole and I jumped on our bikes for a twenty kilometre ride into the hills and the Botanical Gardens. Paying a ridiculously low entry fee of 2.50 CUC to get in and another 3 CUCs to have our bicycles watched we were treated to a lush landscape of tropical flora from around the world. Cocoa trees, Banyan trees, cacti of numerous and sundry types spread over a large area and well cared for. A helpful groundskeeper came



along during our walk and despite his lack of English and our lack of Spanish, was able to point out some things that we would have walked past without recognizing. One such thing were large termite nests attached well up a number of trees and connected to the ground by strings of twisting mud tunnels. Butterflies of various varieties fluttered around us teasing us by holding still just long enough for us to get in to position to take a photograph only to flutter away before we could do so. Phoebes, robins and a few other birds not unknown in Canada put in an appearance to help us feel more at home.



Sunday morning we were again fed a breakfast easily suitable to feed twice our number and we again boarded our bicycles for the relatively short ride to the home of Dr. Larabie, the cardiac physician and friend of Ish's for whom we arranged the medical supplies. Dr. Larabie, like all Cuba doctors is paid a wage set by the state and scaled to be in keeping with that paid other highly skilled trades. He is not allowed to set his own rates and needs to operate a business on the side in order to support his family and to do charitable work. His business is a beautiful casa particular at his home. This work of architectural wonder was designed by him and built back before the Soviet Union bailed out of the Cuban economy. It is furnished with classic antiques, draped with hanging gardens and staffed by his family and neighbours. It is a delight to look at and even better to stay at and relax. A short walk takes you to a public sand beach and all the surf and sun you could want. The doctor's kitchen serves up three meals of chef quality cuisine upon request and a mean Cuba Libre! We hated to leave.



The road from Rancho Luna to Villa Yaguanabo was not long or particularly difficult by what I am used to on my bicycle tours. Along the way we passed through rural farming country as we followed the coast. The route is a bit hilly but not bad by what I find on my rides around home. Along the way we stopped to find some shade under the branches of an unusual tree composed of two completely different species of tree intertwined like two eels in loving embrace. One was smooth of bark and broad of lead and the other the opposite. Their strange union did not seem to cause either of the two any particular hardship and if anything, the pair were stronger than the individuals. Maybe there is a life lesson here.

While we were enjoying the shade and pondering the strange broad leaf relationship, a slightly built Cuban carrying a large woven plastic sack wandered by and engaged us in conversation. Communication was on a fairly basic level due to our incomplete mastery of Spanish as spoken by Cubans but he seemed interested in shaking each of our hands and giving us a series of high fives. From his bag he produced a small horseshoe and presented it to Ish, apparently a gift. I sensed that a trade might be required and fished in my panniers for a small tube of Advil which he accepted with a knowing grin. Ish added a few pesos to the trade and our new friend seemed to feel an honest exchange had been made. However, he must have thought other mercantile opportunities were possible and he began fishing in his bag for other items of possible barter. Not needing any

flattened tin cans or plastic bottles we decided that it was time to bid adios and move on.



Villa Yaguanabo is a pleasant place directly on Cuba's southern coast. Warm ocean breezes greeted us as we peddled in at the height of the mid day heat. It is a government run resort and quite clean, comfortable and well arranged. The bar offers a variety of cold drinks and the cabanas are nice but not overly luxurious. I had to fix the toilet in one and only one out of the four had a small refrigerator that would have seemed tiny by any standard. Bureaucracy seems to override good customer service in this government run facility. Check in was delayed because we did not have a voucher issued by an office in the previous town. Said voucher was not obtained because said office closed at 12 noon sharp on Saturday and we did not get there in time. Reluctantly, we were able to pay in cash for the reservation that our group leader had made well ahead of our visit. Dinner had similar problems.

Our tables were set with drill team like precision and our dinner orders promptly taken. Drinks arrived in short order and we listened to waves crash upon the nearby rocks and engaged in interesting conversations as we awaited our very reasonably priced fare. Eventually the conversation turned to why it was taking so long for our food to arrive. The place was far from crowded with our group of eight being the only customers for the first half hour or longer. At the most there may have been our eight along with six other guests dining that evening. Two orders of bread and a couple of bowls of soup appeared within around fifteen minutes but the rest of the meal took well over an hour to arrive. One order was completely forgotten and it took three conversations with a waiter before someone up the food chain arrived to determine that indeed, one of our group did not get his meal. Our cheque arrived with similar speed taking a scant twenty minutes to arrive from the time we requested it. I think there was an old saying back when the Soviet Union was still in business that went, "they pretend to pay us and we pretend to work." I think that saying sums up Villa Yaguanabo. However, breakfast the next morning was better if not all that great.

The trip to Trinidad was a struggle into strong head winds. I started the ride by blowing out my front gear cable. It was not a quick roadside repair so I decided to force my chain into the middle chain ring and turning my 30 speed bike into a 10 speed, more than enough gear ratios for the relatively short ride and moderate climbs of the day. The nearly gale force headwinds prevented any overheating in the thirty degree (Celsius) sunshine.

Trinidad is an old city by North American standards with over 500 years of history in its account. Finding



our way to our accommodations was a bit of a challenge with my cell phone's navigation map asking for multiple turns in conflicting directions and causing my addled brain much confusion. It turned out that nothing was wrong with the phone only that I had missed seeing the prompt to make a turn due to the glaring mid-day sun and the phone



was re-routing us in obedience to the many one way streets. We finally made our way into the oldest, historic part of the city and found pavement giving way to ancient cobble stones. Walking our bikes seemed the safest option.



My first impression of Trinidad was that it looked run down and impoverished. The streets and building seemed unkept and in need of major repair. Upon a closer look the streets were actually fairly clean by most city standards and what sometimes appeared run down was just ancient and under renovation. Still, living conditions will likely seem strange to most First World visitors until they take the time to get a feel for what goes on behind those ancient exteriors.

As with the rest of Cuba, transportation is by a multitude of means. Old cars, antique cars and modern cars are mixed with bike cabs, motorcycle cabs, horse cabs as well as motor scooters, motorcycles, foot, horseback and donkey cart. Bread can come on the back of a bicycle and garlic walks by draped around the neck of a vendor like an pungent necklace. Vampires take note. Walking seems to be the most common way to get from A to B and given the narrow sidewalks, pedestrians share the roadways with all of the above.



We are staying in a two part, casa particular run by Oscar and Patricia. Four of us share two rooms on Oscar's side and the other four have rooms two doors down and one floor up on Patricia's side. My side has the best view overlooking much of the city towards the mountains and the ocean. A cool breeze seems ever present.



Earlier I mentioned bringing along a bicycle for one of Ish's Cuban friends. This friend also plays in an excellent band that Ish tried to bring to Canada without success. This band was playing at a nearby cafe during our first night in town and we made hearing them our primary objective that day. Ish had brought along his mandolin and hoped to be able to join them for a set or two. The newest member of the band was a trumpet player who had an old beat up trumpet held together by wire and faith. Ish had found a company in Ottawa that rented trumpets to students that was willing to donate one of those trumpets to this band member. In the new master's hands this former student's trumpet became the student as this talented musician made it perform as it never had before. The joy on this man's face as he belted out clear, crisp note after note easily spread that joy to everyone within earshot. It was a performance to behold and goes to demonstrate how one small act of kindness can have gigantic results.

The following day we set out as a group to explore, find a bank, maybe a farmer's market and a cigar factory. The farmer's market was no longer there but the cigar factory was. The aroma of cut tobacco drifted out onto the street as we approached and we could look in through the open windows to see workers inside busily rolling and bundling cigars. A few waved to us beckoning us to come in. Some called out offers to sell their products. Ish and I found the entrance and stepped through the door. Like a spring loaded toy, a uniformed guard ejected himself into our path demanding that we not set so much as a toenail inside his domain. Ish explained that we meant no offence and that we only wished to purchase some cigars for a friend. He seemed shocked by this request but after a bit of persuading he agreed to check with a higher authority. Some time passed and our majordomo eventually returned with a hand full of

generic cigars wrapped in a sheet of white paper for only double what the workers inside seemed to want to sell them for. Ish explained that we wanted cigars with some sort of label to indicate quality for that sort of price. Our guard disappeared once more only to return with what we assumed to be his boss and an offer to sell us 25 cigars in a box for only double the market price. While such bargains might be hard for some to resist, we somehow found the will power to decline and moved on as the workers inside continued to entice us with offers. It seems a strange way to conduct business.



The highlight of our last day in Trinidad was described as a ride over some rustic rail tracks to a sugar plantation. The rustic part was dead on accurate. The rail station was a small, shopworn building containing an employee who's job seemed to be to keep anyone from stealing the equally shopworn furniture. She did not sell tickets and offered only the information that it was indeed the place to catch the train. Since we already had our tickets, this information was actually useful. We had been told to arrive at 9:00 am, one half an hour before departure time. The reason for this is still unknown. No one asked to see a ticket or to count noses. At precisely 9:50, on the dot, our train, in actuality a stubby diesel yard engine, chugged into place pulling an open air passenger car that would have seemed right at home on display in a railway museum. It then backed out of the station and back into the train yard where it secured another rolling antique to transport in a seated manner all those assembled on the platform. A scant 15 minutes later we were chugging and lurching down the tracks.



The countryside was truly a beautiful collection of farm fields, banana groves and rural backyards set against Cuba's central island chain of mountains. Everything was lush and green, a real treat for us snowbound Canadians in January. A conductor of sorts began to go down the isle and made it clear that he intended a few of us in the first few seats to follow him into the cab of the engine. It seemed that we were going to be allowed to sit in the engine. Actually, we were being given an opportunity to operate it. It is fortunate that the operation of a diesel train engine already underway through a rural landscape is not rocket science. Despite there being a steering wheel, I could not do anything to nudge the train anywhere other than straight ahead down the tracks. Likewise, there was no speed control within my sphere of influence. I was urged to

sound the whistle, repeatedly. I was also urged to have Ole, my travelling companion and assistant engineer of the moment, take my picture. Having served the Cuban people and tourism industry with honour as well as brevity, I was strongly urged to contribute some small gratuity to the Cuban people, primarily the train crew, before leaving my post and hopping over the open and bouncing car coupler to return to my seat. Ole was offered similar opportunities and honours.

Our first stop was a small town by a very large concrete tower. We were given 20 minutes to get off the train and do one of three things: We could climb the tower by going up some rusted stairs while ducking under low, overhanging superstructure for a fee of just one CUC. Another option was to visit a very official looking building housing a well furnished and set restaurant complete with table cloths, silverware, cloth napkins and wine glasses. Alas, it was too early for lunch and too little time. Our final option was not really an option but a requirement for anyone wishing to



check out the other two options. This involved running a gauntlet of local entrepreneurs selling bananas, white linen squares of various sizes, white shirts, other articles of clothing, mainly white in colour and the usual assortments of Cuban souvenirs relating to classic 1950s automobiles. The ample choices of white linen items hanging on strings and fluttering in the breeze, gave this bazaar the appearance of a sunny laundry day after a week long rain.



The train took us next to what I may have misunderstood to have been a sugar plantation. It was definitely not a sugar plantation but it could have been a processing facility for sugar cane delivered there by train. It also could have been a train repair yard. It was hard to tell. What it had was a crowd of people gathered around part of flat concrete area covered by a fairly new awning and obviously an area used for entertainment. Today's entertainment was a cute and talented group of grade school children dressed as bees. There was also a mistress of ceremonies who may have been an insect of some sort given what I assumed were two silver antenna protruding from around her red conical headdress. There was also a very vocal, animated and flamboyant rooster who seemed to be engaged in a debate of sorts with this insect and occasionally interrupted by the large chorus of singing and dancing bees. A cow also appeared in this production. Different Cuban folk songs played throughout the performance and occasionally everyone broke into a dance. There was a wedding and finally a large dance number during which younger school children from the audience were encouraged to join the dancing cast. Proud parents and other friends and relatives watched all of this as well as nearly everyone from the train. No one in our group had a clue as to what the story was but that lack did nothing to limit our enjoyment of these energetic and talented children. What great fun!



The final stop for the day was also the longest at an hour and forty-five minutes. I suppose the length was to give us time to eat some lunch and explore. It was far more than we needed. To get there the train had to back up for a few kilometres, back to the place with the white linen bazaar and tower, where a switch track was engaged to allow us to go forward along a spur route to Guachinango. Guachinango is not a town, village or anything other than a place where a road meets the railroad tracks. Located there is a fairly new facility apparently run by the government for the sole purpose of promoting tourism. There were a couple of rural dwellings across the trestle bridge over the Rio Ay but that was about it for anything other than this new facility. It was

apparent that ambitious plans are or were in the works as this place offers a full service bar, restaurant, horseback riding, accommodations as well as entertainment. For now it seems to exist to serve the train and maybe guests arriving by bus. During our stop we were the only ones around. The lunch menu was nice but expensive by Cuban standards but beer was available at a reasonable price. Aside from sitting in the shade and downing a beer there was little else to do other than take a walk down the railroad tracks to have a look at the Rio Ay. We were happy to hear our diesel engine chug to life indicating that departure time was nearly here.



Our second week began with our longest bike ride so far with a seventy-four kilometre ride that was mostly uphill and into a strong wind. The scenery was beautiful but the traffic was heavy. Most Cuban drivers are used to dealing with the many bicycles, horse carts and pedestrians that travel the roads but there are still the impatient few that can give you a good scare. While riding one narrow and hilly section we watched as an oncoming bus decided to pull out into our lane to pass the slower bus it was overtaking. Even though we were riding close to the shoulder there was not enough room for the bus to safely pass and get back into its lane before making contact. We had to grab hard onto our brakes and head off into the ditch to avoid the loose nut that held the wheel of that oncoming menace.



On the road from Trinidad to Sancti Spiritus we passed through a few small rural villages where farming seemed to be the primary occupation. As you approach any of the settlements you encounter bus shelters that are usually occupied by folks waiting for the bus or other transportation. This can take the form of a scooter with passenger room, a work vehicle with space in the cab, an open bed truck with fresh air seating or basically anything on two or more wheels. As the vehicles come into view

people step out into the road and wave their arms to indicate their need. Most vehicles just pass them by but stopping to pick up riders is a fairly common occurrence for trucks and commercial haulers. Often a small amount of money is offered for encouragement or thanks.

Aside from our near miss, the trip was mostly an enjoyable ride, although we would have all enjoyed it more without the wind. Ish kept tradition alive by getting yet another flat tire and we practised our drafting skills. Traffic grew heavier as we approached Sancti Spiritus with its one way streets and ancient roadways. On approaching the centre of town we passed over a picturesque five arch bridge that legend says was built with mortar mixed with donkey milk. They must have had a lot of donkeys and a good reason for not just using the far more convenient water from the river.



One of the disadvantages of staying in small, privately owned casas is the limited number of rooms available. Most of the time our relatively small group needed to split between two different places to stay. In Sancti Spiritus part of our group stayed at the very nice and well appointed Casa Ninija. Ole, Ish, Kathy and I stayed a short distance away at a place I shall call La Casa Dumpa. Ish and Kathy had made every effort to find decent places for us to stay and had placed their confidence in the owners of Casa Ninija to find a nice place nearby for the two rooms they could not accommodate. Somehow this process went awry when the second accommodation proved impossible to contact for confirmation of our reservation. This resulted in four of us at La Casa Dumpa, where you could conveniently step out the front door directly into the path of oncoming traffic. This same traffic passed within a metre of our wooden shuttered window. However, most of the time we could hardly hear the traffic except for when the loud music, blasting tunefully from some establishment across the street, decided to shut down for the night. Our room was a lovely shade of institutional green and we could relax in the comfort of our aluminum slated metal chairs. We checked out the next morning.



During that first day Ish and Kathy generously scouted the central town area trying to find some better accommodations. What they found was a place called El Buganvill Hostel. What a delight! No street noise and no dancing with traffic upon walking out the front door. Clean, modern and wonderfully furnished rooms at a modest price. One of the nicest place we stayed. It was floor planned somewhat like an Escher drawing with stairs going every which way and multiple levels that sometimes required you to go down in order to go up. It was an attractive and ingenious way of getting the most out of a small space.

Sancti Spiritus is the home of Edris, the wonderful musician whose band we listened to in Trinidad. His family was also the recipient of the bicycle we brought with us to handle their expanded transportation needs. He has a very new daughter and a three year old son named Samuel. Ish and Kathy had brought along a number of gifts for Edris' family and they wanted to return the kindness by inviting us to dinner at their house. I felt the need to bring something and luckily, before leaving Canada, I packed a harmonica that my dad had given me years ago and which I never got around to learning to play. While harmonicas are virtually unknown in Cuba I figured that someone in this very musical nation would likely have more use for it than I ever did. Samuel was that person. After a brief demonstration by his father, the young lad jumped into the process of making music like noises with a flourish.



Dinner at Edris' home was to be more than just food. The evening began with a living room concert that migrated to the kitchen. This day was Edris' birthday and Guillermo, his friend and a local poet of some renown, stopped by to sing a special song composed for the occasion. He was joined by a talented young musician, Lazo who played a traditional Cuban guitar known as a Tres for its three groups of double strings. Traditional and new Cuban folk tunes were played and Guillermo composed some special verses for Edris. Ish and Kathy. By this time young Samuel had mastered enough harmonica technique to join in with nonsensical vigour and enthusiasm. What he lacked in skill and technique he compensated for with cute persistence and volume. Ish and our group polished off a wonderful dinner of beans, rice and pork, accented with fresh vegetables. We then vacated the table to make room for our host, and the other guests to enjoy the meal. During this time we serenaded our Cuban friends with some traditional Canadian folk tunes. Finally, it was time to go and to a person we left fulfilled in every way possible.

Our goal the next day was to deliver our final suitcase of medical supplies to the hospital in Sancti Spiritus. After a bit of negotiation throughout the hospital's corridors and bureaucracy we arrived at the door of the assistant director of the hospital where we were able to deliver the suitcase crammed with medical supplies provided by Not Just Tourists. The director and his assistant seemed quite surprised with this donation and were excited to receive some much needed supplies that Canadian hospitals take for granted. We were given a short tour that included the obligatory photo array of Fidel Castro and other Cuban heroes that were present at the hospital's dedication.





The farmer's market in Sancti Spiritus is a busy place on a Sunday morning. The streets are lined with people coming and going for quite a distance. One pesos gets you through the gate and into an area where every locally grown product can be found. Fresh pork is cut to order in front of you and piles of bananas, onions, garlic, root vegetables and fruits abound at every stall. Beans, nuts and cheeses have been brought in from the countryside and everything is priced in the far less expensive Cuban pesos. Spices, drinks and small toys can be purchased along with living room furniture.



Earlier in our trip I had asked about Cuban micro-breweries only to learn that no one had ever seen one. The farmer's market resolved this mystery. In a land of innovation where the people look for every way possible to improve their position in life there had to be someone taking advantage of the Cuban love of beer in light of a general shortage of the locally brewed product. At the market I found a large green truck with a large aluminum or steel tank shaded under a canopy in the back dispensing beer into whatever container you could provide. There was a crowd swarming this facility and hands held high with both container and the three pesos fee jostling for a filling of the amber goodness. I was curious enough to be interested in a tasting of this local brew but not patient enough to secure a vessel and fight my way to the beer. It will always remain a mystery to my dry palate.



Our afternoon entertainment involved visiting the Casa de la Torva where our friend Edris was performing with his other band. The drinks were cheap and high voltage and along with the excellent music it was easy to get into a Cuban head-space. Ish brought along his mandolin and was invited to join the band for a few numbers to the delight of the crowd. Much dancing followed as Edris, Ish and gang burned down the house. The only downside was the house running out of beer. No problema, rum and other drinks were available. Tomorrow we are off to Remedios.



After a pre-dawn breakfast at Hostel El Buganvill we slipped aboard our bikes for the ride out of Sancti Spiritus to Remedios. The morning air was still, moist and thick with smog. Back when Toronto was called The Big Smoke they used to brag about being able to see the air that they breathed. This morning in Cuba you could have chewed it. Bike riding in Cuba with all the old cars, the lack of any apparent pollution controls and the use of leaded gasoline is like smoking a pack of unfiltered Lucky Strikes a day. It will take a month for my lungs to clear when I get home.

About a dozen kilometres outside of Sancti Spiritus the smog lifted, visibility improved and as traffic lightened, our lungs were given a break while our eyes were treated to a lush rural landscape. Travel today lacks a headwind and is mostly flat with a nice downhill grade at the end. It was our most pleasant bicycling day of the trip. Remedios, like every other town we have visited is not much to look at as you approach. Like the others it is over five hundred years old and shows its age. The houses and other structures are faded and often vacant. However the town squares are usually quite nice and fairly well maintained. It is often said that looks can be deceiving and this is especially true about the Cuban hostels where we have stayed. In a block of

worn buildings, the hostels usually have a freshly painted exterior. Inside, most were an unexpected delight of old world charm or contemporary fashion. You would never expect either from viewing the exterior alone. These hostels usually have a small number of rooms and as we have had to do frequently on this trip, our group was split between multiple facilities.

After the obligatory passport check and document signing that every hotel or hostel requires, we were free to have a beer, get a shower and relax. I did a bit of this and then decided to do a quick tour to take in the sights of Remedios. Twenty minutes later and enriched with a four pesos (25 cent) ice-cream sundae I was back at my room having experienced all that Remedios had to offer. I hoped I missed something or tomorrow was going to be a more restful day than I could appreciate.

The next day it was apparent that I misjudged Remedios. After moving to new accommodations our new host, who spoke some English, gave us an outline of what to do in her town. Plans were made and after breakfast we set off to find the steam train to the sugar factory museum. Our host was bit off on then time for the train so rather than hang around the whistle stop for a an hour or so we took a short walk to visit San Juan Bautista, built in 1550 and one of the three oldest churches in the Americas. Catholic worship took place here from that above date through 1961 when religious worship was outlawed by the Cuban Revolution. It remained underground until Pope John Paul II visited Cuba in 1998. It has continued to openly serve the faithful from that date onward. The interior is one of breathtaking beauty. The alter is a stunningly carved and gilded representation of important events from the early days of Christianity. The ceiling is an intricate wood mosaic resembling the interior of a ship. Religious icons adorn the walls including a representation of the Mulatto Virgin Mary symbolizing the union of the races and one of the three pregnant Virgin Mary statues known to exist. Without the excellent knowledge and language skills of our tour guide, none of this would have been apparent. No money was requested but our donations were graciously received.

The train to the sugar factory museum turned out to be pulled by an authentic 1890's vintage steam engine manufactured in the United States. A steady rain that increased in intensity began shortly upon boarding the open sided cars. A light wind accompanied this rain causing us to all sit on one side of the car to avoid getting soaked. This manoeuvre was only partially successful. Thankfully, the ride was short and we were only treated to a dampening.

The museum houses a large collection of steam locomotives of various sizes and ages all built in the USA. Under the roof of the old sugar factory is a well maintained exhibit of the machinery used to process sugaar cane up until 1998 when the sugar market fell and Cuba began closing refineries. The exhibit traces sugar production from the days of slavery through modern times. For 9 CUCs you can get both the train ride and a guided tour of the facility complete with a somewhat dated film telling the sugar story with only a bit of anti-American propaganda.

Lunch was pizza and beer for a modest 4 or 5 CUCs depending upon if you wanted just cheese or ham and cheese. The beer was cold and the pizza was delicious. Our group attracted the attention of three of the town



curs, one who took up residence under our table and at my feet. Clearly the most experienced and well fed of the three he managed to avoid being chased off at broom point by the cafe staff through hiding behind my chair until the menace passed. His skill and patience were rewarded.



If you were to be given the choice of being a dog in Cuba I would listen carefully to the alternatives. A chosen few are family pets, well fed and cared for. A few others are farm dogs of the working variety. Again, they are fed on a regular basis and being farm employees of a sort, they are



provided with shelter of a sort. However, the overwhelming majority are street curs, hungry, hot or cold depending upon the weather, skinny, scarred, and generally in ill health. Life is short and hard. Females are bred and have pups about every time they come into heat. No one seems to care about them and they are found everywhere. If you love dogs, try not to look and don't make eye contact. They look for eye contact and recognize the soft heart behind it. Your heart will be broken so best to just try not to notice them. I failed in this endeavour.

The next day we awoke to a chilly morning, something unusual in Cuba. People on the street were wearing hoodies and toques while walking with their arms folded across their chests. Being Canadians we still found the weather warm enough for cycling shorts. Our ride today was mostly a ride from Renedios back to our starting point in Santa Clara. The first half of the ride was bit of scenic backtracking to avoid a much busier road that carried a lot of traffic from the coastal resorts to Santa Clara and other destinations. While the ride was mostly uphill there was also pleasant headwind. This being our last day in Cuba we had arranged for the good folks at Hostal Buenviaje in Santa Clara, to serve us a lobster dinner. One great thing about staying at a casa is that the owners will often cook breakfast or dinner for in exchange for a modest fee. Our lobster feast this evening included soup, salad, french fries, a root vegetable as well as superbly prepared lobster. All of this for a modest 15 CUCs (app. \$15 dollars US).

Some final thoughts:

There are two Cubas, the Cuba of the all inclusive resorts run by big corporations in partnership with the Cuban government and the real Cuba that is described above. If all you have seen of Cuba is from the resort or the tour bus you are missing most of it. Most of the money spent at an all inclusive properties goes into the pockets of the government and the big corporations who partner with it. When you stay at a casa particular you enrich Cubans directly, if you eat with them even more of the much needed money you spend goes into the pockets of Cuban people. Sure, the government will get its cut but the people get much more.

The way Cuba works their currency is something between the Twilight Zone and Stranger Things. There are two types of paper and coined currency, first is the CUC or Cuban Universal Pesos. Folks call it the “kook” and its value is in lockstep with the US dollar. The second is the CUP or Cuban Pesos which is worth far less at around 25 Pesos to one CUC. Both come in coin and paper bill form. The CUC has pictures of building or statues while the CUP has pictures of people. Here is where it gets even more strange: Most things are priced in both currencies EXCEPT at the airports where they are priced in US dollars. Cubans used to accept US Dollars anywhere but if you try to use them today you



may get turned down or at best hit with an extra 10% fee for using them. You can buy CUCs with US Dollars, Canadian Dollars, Euros, British Pounds, Swiss Francs, Japanese Yen and Mexican Pesos. You can buy CUPs with CUCs only. Outside of touristy places you may find it an advantage to have some CUPs to spend. For example, if you go to a local farmer's market most things will be priced in CUPs and very cheap by US or Canadian standards. You can buy a beer dispensed into your own can or other container for about 3 Pesos (about fifteen cents US) however, I will not vouch for the quality. A beer at a local restaurant goes for an average of 2 CUCs. At the end of your stay you should spend all of your CUCs. It is illegal to take them out of the country and they will not accept them at the airport.

Try to overlook what may look like grinding poverty. Some of it may be but most Cubans get enough to eat even if it is mostly beans, rice and plenty of fresh fruit. Also be aware that many of those properties that look run down on the outside are completely different on the inside. Even with the relative income levels being low, Cuba is a safe place to visit. Violent crime is virtually unheard of even if theft seems to be commonplace. Just use a bit of common sense and crime will never touch you.



Look for and find the music, it is everywhere. From local clubs to cultural centres the music of Cuba is the heartbeat of this nation. Even the churches sing to the Cuban beat. It is excellent.

By all means look up the group, Not Just Tourists. They can provide you with a suitcase of medical supplies very much needed by Cuban hospitals. Often the airlines will take the bags without charging a fee as Air Transat did for us. Even if you have to pay a baggage fee, take one with you. Cuban hospitals are short of just about everything we take for granted. You should also consider taking along some gifts for Cubans, especially if you stay at the casa particulares. Antacid tablets, band-aids, headache remedies and vitamins are often hard for Cubans to find and well appreciated.

