

500 Years of Discovery Cuba Continues to Overwhelm the Senses

On October 29, 1492, Christopher Columbus sailed into Gibara Bay in present day Holguin Province, one day after arriving in Cuba. Columbus spent 12 days in the area, during which, legend has him saying: "This is the most beautiful land that human eyes have ever seen".

And a short 524 years later, we too found ourselves in Gibara and felt a similar sentiment mixed with the knowledge that this was a place we would have never discovered had it not been for our guides from the Cuba Tourist Board, and that on a trip full of surprises, the concept of discovering Cuba is an ongoing serendipitous, pleasurable and even musical treat.

On a journey that took us from the city of Santa Clara to Cienfuegos, Trinidad, Camaguey, Bayamo, Santiago, Biran, Holguin and Gibara, we were entranced by the friendliness of Eastern Cuban hospitality, enriched by cultural experiences ranging from Camaguey's Street of Cinemas, the alluring art galleries and the enchanting contemporary ballet, to Santiago's Afro-Cuban rhythms and the traditional Buena-Vista Social Club music at the Casa de la Trova.

Along the way, we feasted not only on fresh, well-prepared, delicious dishes (which puts the lie to the accusation that all Cuban food is bland) but also feasted on the colourful colonial architecture, the celebration of historical personalities, and the enthusiasm with which the locals greeted us, engaged us in conversation and provided customer service in a way that would make many North American tourism suppliers pale in comparison.

Plus we saw things that many all-inclusive-bound tourists simply miss out on when they visit the country. For travellers looking to 'connect' with a destination, this is the place to be.

In Trinidad the Manaca Iznaga estate in the Valley of the Sugar Mills features a 45 meter-high tower, originally used by Pedro Iznaga to watch over his slaves. Today a breathtaking 184 steps to the top afford a great view of the area including the market selling white shirts, white dresses, white table cloths and souvenirs; the two huge pots used to boil the sugar cane, and the nearby bodega where you can escape from the standard factory Cristal and Bucanero beers and for only 1 C.U.C (about \$1.35 Canadian) you can sample a bottle of the local beer.

The Cemetery of Santa Ifigenia in Santiago de Cuba is an educational wonder where Cubans and visitors alike pay homage to José Martí where the mausoleum honours the hero of the War of Independence from Spain, as well as the man who was a poet, journalist, and philosopher. In fact any person who has heard the iconic Cuban song "Guantanamera" already knows something about Martí.

In 1963 when Pete Seeger, the American folk singer appeared with the group, the Weavers at Carnegie Hall, he introduced the song Guantanamera to a North American audience, but included a poem by José Martí in the opening lyrics.

Guantanamera, guahira Guantanamera...
Yo soy un hombre sincero, De donde crecen las palmas
Y antes de morir yo quiero, Canta mis versos del alma

The original song was about a woman from the province of Guantanamo for whom the author had romantic feelings. But in the true tradition of folk songs, different lyrics were added to

reflect different singers' stories. Pete Seeger's protest song included the words of a poem by José Martí:

I am a truthful man; I come from where the palm tree grows,
I am a truehearted man, who comes from where the palm trees grow,
Before I lay down my life, I long to coin the verses of my soul

And at the Martí Mausoleum the short but impressive changing of the guard ceremony takes place every 30 minutes with a high stepping honour guard and silence.

But not far away, amidst the tombs of revolutionary heroes dating from the 19th and 20th centuries, in contrast to the solemnity of the Mausoleum, lies the grave of Compay Segundo, generally acknowledged as the spirit behind the Buena Vista Social Club recordings, especially with his song "Chan Chan", which every musical trio throughout the country includes in their repertoire of 'must plays'. The tombstone includes the inscription "Las Flores de la Vida"—along with representation of the 'Flowers of Life' that refer to the songs he left to the world.

About 90 minutes outside of Santiago, in the town of Biran, lies the homestead of Angel Castro who with his 2nd wife Lina Ruz Gonzalez, raised seven children including Fidel and Raul Castro. A tour of the farm reveals the school that Fidel attended and the thatched homes of the workers who toiled in the sugarcane fields and the family's lucrative timber business, as well as the cattle that were raised on the farm. (Today you can wander by the field where horses, oxen and goats spend their time munching on grass and checking out the visitors). There is also a reconstruction of the home in which the Castro family lived (the original burned down after Angel allegedly left a cigar burning), the reconstructed cock-fighting ring that Angel loved but Fidel hated and had dismantled after Angel's death, and the house where Lina lived after Angel's death in 1956. The homestead is off the radar of tour operators so far, and provides insight into Fidel Castro's life.

A photographic retrospective of Fidel Castro's life (he celebrated his 90th Birthday in August, 2016) can be seen in Holguin city, about an hour away from the popular beach resorts, at Museo Provincial La Periquera. This former residence is an architectural showpiece but it's also revered as an important symbol of the War of Independence from Spain where the Spanish, in red uniforms and therefore resembling parakeets, were challenged by the Cubans to flee their parakeet cage (which is the translation for 'La Peiquera').

And a short walk away is Loma de la Cruz where anywhere from 445 to 465 steep steps (depending on the source) lead you to the top for spectacular vistas of the city and the Sierra Maestra Mountains in the distance. And true to form, when we huffed and puffed our way to the top (15 minutes for the younger ones in the group, 25 minutes for the others), there was a guitarist singing "Chan Chan".

Finally on the way to Gibara on October 29th, we stopped at one of the highway fruit and vegetable stands to buy the freshest, tastiest produce you can imagine. Avocados, succulent and juicy, and sweet bananas were the top purchases that day. And then in the small town of Gibara we toured the Hotel Ordoño, the former residence of Filipe Ordoño and the love of his life, Isabel Cano. The 3rd floor terrace was added after Isabel's death in 1959 so Filipe could watch over her grave at the nearby cemetery. Today it offers wonderful views of the town and the Bay.

In the town centre, near the "Statue of Liberty" there is a cigar factory where you can take photos (unlike many of the Havana factories) and then, on the Catamaran ride on the Bay, you can see beautiful vistas as well as fishermen in makeshift boats or scuba gear.

Eastern Cuba offers very special insights to visitors who are looking for something different: cuisine, cultural, nature, a one-on-one experience with history and photographs and video opportunities galore. The lesson is to step outside of the all-inclusive routine and spend a day or more in exploration and discovery mode. Give your sense of travel a wake-up call!