

CUBA

2008



Un mundo mejor es posible.
(A better world is possible.)

We all believe in this.
The question is:
How do we get from here
to there?

Bruce Grant, December 2008

This will be a brief account of an action-packed week in Cuba. Partly it's for the interest of my Canadian friends Yanis and Valery who are also involved in the story. For more background on the Cuba story, go back to my 2004 book.

I have landed at Varadero's Juan Gualberto Gomez Airport, The other passengers have turned right at the exit, off to the beach resorts. Who could blame them for seeking some sun and sand, away from the Canadian winter?

With my cheapo air-only ticket, I have no use for Varadero; I turn left toward Matanzas and the home of my friend Luis Alberto Valdés. Luis is an industrial engineer, educated at the nearby university. In a country with free education but very little industry the engineer and his wife Anita make a better living by operating a tourist home called a "casa particular" in their apartment. Casa particular means private home, but in this context it is a home licensed to receive foreign guests.



Luis's new love is a classic if rather arthritic British motorcycle, a 1950 Matchless 500cc. Our motorcycle mission today is to deliver a bag of medical supplies to a nearby hospital. You can see the bag behind me on the bike. Information about this program can be accessed at www.notjusttourists.org

As we dismount, Luis proudly shows me a long scar on his left arm, from a childhood injury that was treated in this place. It gives him some ownership of the hospital and satisfaction in our mission.

We are invited into the director's office. He's a big black man, looks like a stevedore; his big hand reaches out and swallows mine. The handshake is gentle, the smile warm. We have a few minutes of chat, he thanks us and signs our papers and we're off.



Just up the street from my Matanzas home is Parque Libertad, pleasantly shaded, green and well equipped with benches where you can hang out and meet the people. The central feature is the statue of Jose Martí the poet, writer and intellectual who died fighting the Spanish in 1895. Both sides in the Cuba controversy claim Martí as their hero. His statue is everywhere in Cuba, and the Americans broadcast their counter-revolutionary messages to Cuba on a transmitter in Florida that they call "Radio Martí".

Below Martí on the monument is a figure representing "liberty" with her broken chains. There are always children too, who like to climb on the monument and swing from the chains and, always, they like to be photographed.



I'm sitting in Café Atenas having a lunch and fiddling with my camera. The little chiquita at the next table is fascinated by this and wants to be part of the event, to take a photograph and to be in a photograph. She takes a picture of her papa. Papa takes a picture of us.





This evening I'll be off by bus to Santa Clara. Luis takes me to the station on his motorcycle. A bus from Havana will pick me up "de paso" and take me to Varadero, and then lay over for an hour before leaving for Santa Clara. They sell me a ticket only as far as Varadero. I'm OK with this, but my readings of Marx haven't helped me to understand the socialist principle behind this odd bus ticket procedure.

At Varadero, all the passengers from Havana disembark, heading for the resort hotels, but the driver waves me back to my seat. Then, in the empty bus, he collects my onward fare without issuing me a ticket. I'll be his "guest" for the ride. The \$14 fare that he has diverted is equal to a month's pay. Now I understand the odd bus ticket procedure. I'm OK with this too, but Marx would not be pleased. There is a huge discrepancy between the stagnating socialist economy and the growing (mostly underground) free enterprise economy.

Arriving at Santa Clara at one in the morning, I'm met at the station by the whole Rodriguez family, Orlando, Carmen, Patricia and Luis. We step into a 1953 Buick, an "informal" taxi driven by a friend of Orlando. The old car is totally clapped out, interior finishes all gone and all metalwork inside and out has been painted with a brush. But it's a big car and we are six people. The limo drops me at the home of Luis Ramos and Doris Rodriguez, a casa particular where I also stayed a few years ago.

The main reason for this trip to Santa Clara is to have a meeting with Orlando and Carmen and their two children who have been working for seven years on their plan to move to Canada



In the morning we go around the corner to the home of Samuel Urquía, big guy with the voice from the radio and Maria, who is Carmen's sister. Here we pass some hours in discussion about life in Canada, and I'm hearing more about life in Cuba too.

The people in this picture are Dr. Vivian and Dr. Rafael, Orlando, Carmen and Patricia.

Orlando is eloquent about the difficulties of his life in Cuba. He and Carmen have no access to the dollar economy; they are both engineers, well educated people working in the peso economy and barely able to get by. Orlando has two jobs trouble-shooting computer systems and he has a mantra that he repeats in an angry voice:

working working working
nothing nothing nothing



Carmen is angry too, her words tumble out in a rapid stream in Spanish; I can't keep up with it. Her face flushes, tears rise in her eyes, her body is tense and agitated.

OK, I can understand this; I don't need to get all the words.
This is a mother fighting for the future of her children.

Orlando and Carmen have already moved on, to a “mundo mejor” in a new country of which they know very little. With their heads in Canada and their bodies stuck in Cuba they can find no peace.

The gap between the socialist rhetoric and the day-to-day reality is too big. In other poor countries where the official line is less idealistic, I find the people are more passively accepting of the reality that poverty is their lot in life.



Carmen Elisa Roche Sanchez, Chemical Engineer.

Rafael and his wife Vivian are both doctors, and they have a big house that they own because it was in the family before the revolution. Today is Sunday. Rafael has finished a regular forty hour week of work at the hospital and a twenty-four hour shift on Saturday of unpaid "socialist labour". Cuba has a lot of doctors, but so many are working abroad in Venezuela, Bolivia and various other countries that there is now a doctor shortage in Cuba.

Dr. Rafael and Dr. Vivian are looking after his elderly father, they have grown-up children nearby, and they would not be allowed to leave Cuba because they are needed here. Given all this, they have come to terms with their situation. They sympathize and support, but they don't share their friends' anger and frustration. It's really not so bad.



We still have another bag of medical supplies; Rafael walks with me on his only day off to the hospital where he works, and we deliver the goods.

This hospital was a military establishment before the revolution. It was built as these things often are, in a gradual process of additions and alterations with no thought of an overall design. The result is a maze of odd buildings in a compound walled off from the street, in various stages of decrepitude. Some of this decrepitude is rather alarming to my engineer's eyes. It is not reassuring to walk under roof beams with the concrete cover spalled off and the reinforcing swollen with rust. I suppose you can get used to it.



Orlando and Rafael have been best buddies since childhood.
There is going to be a much regretted separation.

Orlando and Carmen have been working for seven years on their project, which is to move their family to Canada. They have overcome many obstacles, the most difficult one for them being an absolute requirement to have a written and officially approved offer of employment in Canada. Without this letter they would need to show a bank account with \$18600 in it, an impossible sum to accumulate in Cuba.

This is where my old friends and colleagues Yanis and Valery enter the story. They have a drafting and engineering business near Toronto. They and all of their employees are Russian; they know well the dysfunction of a life under communism. They have reached out to help, and the big move now appears to be on, about March or April.



We walk to the home of Orlando and Carmen. It's small for a family of four. At the edge of this small city, it's just a twenty minute walk to the centre. At the end of a small lane, the sounds that intrude are natural or agricultural, not mechanical. The neighbour next door has a lot of goats and a very big pig that is being fattened up for Christmas.





On our walk around town, we come to the stadium, Estadio Sandino. A baseball game has just started and so we go in. The home team, representing Villa Clara province is leading two to one against the team from Pinar del Rio. Baseball is very big in Cuba.

The game halts and we wait for an explanation while players stand around and argue on the field. After nothing has happened for some time, we decide to resume our walk around Santa Clara. When we get home we will hear the whole story from Samuel who works for the radio station and gets all the news reports first.

It seems the visiting team all came down with diarrhea during the game and they wished to hold the home team responsible for this. A stalemate developed because the home team rejected the charge. Eventually the game resumed and Villa Clara won, nine to one. I suppose it must be hard to run the bases with a load in your pants.

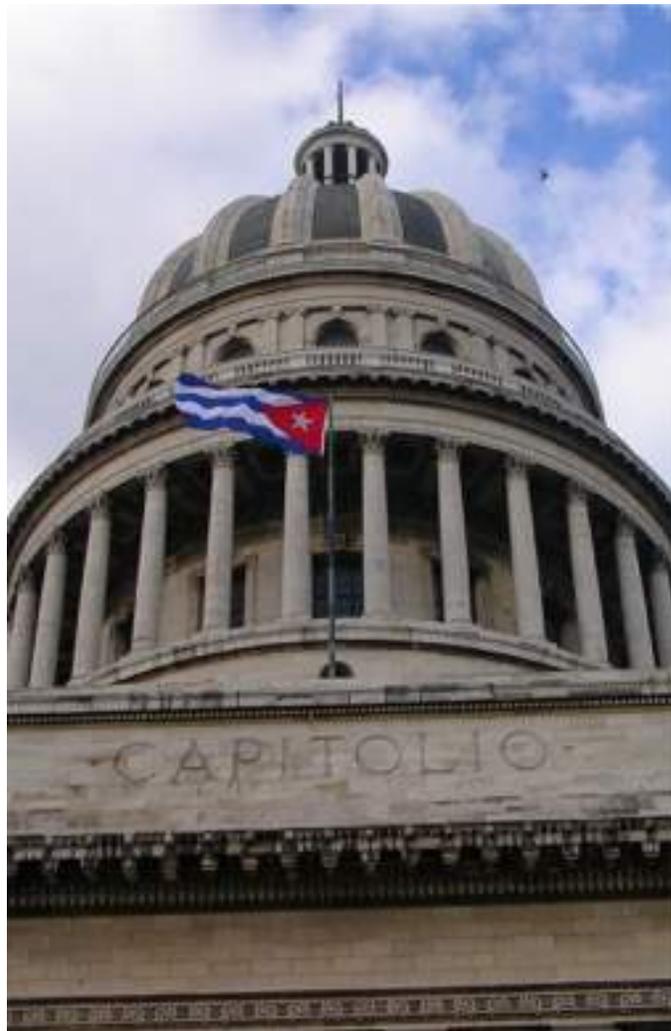
We all had a good laugh.





Monday morning, I'm off to Havana and all my Santa Clara friends are going to work. Luis Ramos, my host, calls his friend Roberto who has an informal taxi to take me to the bus station. Roberto stops across the street from the station and presents me to his friend who is going to Havana and will take me there for the same as bus fare. His Peugeot diesel car is around the corner, out of sight of the bus station. He has on board two other passengers. Off we go and he drops me in Havana right where I want to go near the capitol building. A good ride.

This grand pile of marble is a copy of the one in Washington, begun in 1929 by the dictator Gerardo "The Butcher" Machado. He was supported by Washington and by the Chicago mobsters until overthrown in a spontaneous general strike in 1933.



It's a short walk to my Havana home, a casa particular in the old city just around the corner from Plaza Vieja, with a great rooftop terrace that you reach by a spiral stair.



Havana is a great place for walking, there is much to see and the streets are full of music. It's one of my favourite cities. A lot of restoration work is going on, but so much more is needed. The picture below is Plaza Vieja, about half derelict when I first saw it, the place is now almost all restored.









A friend in Canada has urged upon me the notion of contacting his old friend Adrienne Hunter, a Canadian who lives in Havana. I have contacted her by email and I've been rewarded with an invitation. Now that I'm back in Havana, I'll call and set up a meeting.

Adrienne helps me with detailed directions to her place in Miramar, a far west suburb of Havana. "Take a taxi" she advises, "but not a Coco-taxi. They're dangerous. They tip over. And they fly into little pieces in a crash."

Hours later, I'm buzzing along the malecon in a coco-taxi and really enjoying the ride. On my left is the dilapidated and weather-beaten façade of Havana's seafront, on the right the strait of Florida, and unseen across the water is the white bear in the room, the one we're not supposed to think about - The United States of America. The little two-stroke engine is dragging me in my plastic coconut along the edge of Cuba's world.

Adrienne and her husband Lionel Martin have an apartment in a large suburban house, surrounded by tropical gardens. The street is tree-lined and quiet, the cars are newish, the lawns and hedges are neatly trimmed. How can it be that the coco-taxi has carried me across the strait to Florida?

We settle inside with coffee and cookies. Lionel, I should explain, was an American journalist who came to cover the Bay of Pigs fiasco and just never went home. He is recognized as the dean of foreign journalists here and he has written a biography of Fidel, still available from on-line sources. I have made a point of purchasing and reading it.

Adrienne has also made her mark here as a well-known writer and teacher. Lionel can't sit with us today to my regret, but Adrienne fills the space very well. She has not moved on from her enthusiasm and idealism for the revolution, though she understands very well the millions of little illegal schemes that people devise to mitigate their poverty. An afternoon of interesting discussion on the Cuban condition.

For me, I confess to Adrienne that I understand very well how the pre-revolutionary condition called out for a revolution. I find much to admire in the courage and resourcefulness of the revolutionaries. But Fidel became a follower of Karl Marx, and I have some big problems with Marx. Adrienne's support of Fidel is undiminished and goes beyond the principled support of a true believer. – "When I looked into his eyes . . ."

It's said there are only six degrees of separation between any two people in the world. I have now only one degree of separation from Fidel. But, what's it worth? Fidel has survived long enough to become a caricature of himself. His revolution, locked into its Marxist dogmas has become old and worn out and corrupted.

From La Habana Vieja you can catch a bus to the eastern beaches, the places where Habaneros and Habaneras go to enjoy the seashore in summertime. The bus can be paid in pesos, so the fare is only two cents in our money.

In winter the beach is almost deserted and the whole town of Playa Guanabo has an air of decadence and decay. No tourist resort this, you could lose your baby and stroller in some of the holes in the sidewalks. The place has a very laid back “what, me worry?” attitude, miles of undeveloped beaches, no traffic, a couple of decent restaurants. I like it.

I always feel I have to make a token effort to catch up with all those sun seekers who turned right at the airport where I turned left. So I have a brief swim, a lunch and a beer under the palm trees, and now my winter vacation is complete.

I have a very fine room in the home of Luisa (la gorda) Diaz, with a breezy terrace overlooking the sea. Under her plastic Christmas tree there’s a nativity scene in a field of cotton snow. Next door, my neighbour is reinstalling all the trims on his 1949 Plymouth following a paint job. The colour is a bright blue that you would never see on a car, but it’s very common on the government’s trucks. Everyone will know, of course, that the paint was stolen from a government workshop, but, apparently no one much cares. It’s common also to see gas tanks filled from jerry cans. The source of this gas? Don’t ask.

In the morning I have to return to Havana and catch a bus to Matanzas. My week is over.





A Cuban gas station in Playa Guanabo. Fuel is normally purchased from “un-official” sources. Fidel has been heard to complain that the Government’s vehicles get very poor fuel mileage.



Back in Matanzas, Luis's grandmother is visiting today. At 87 years old, she comes and goes on Luis's motorcycle. The helmet is now obligatory in Cuba but she doesn't like it on her hair. Anyway, who's going to bust a granny for not wearing a helmet?



Parque le la Libertad, Matanzas