

2011 December

Varadero and Viñales

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December, it's getting cold. Following our Guardalavaca experience last March, it's been indicated to me that I should dig up another all-inclusive bargain. In March, Diane stayed in the resort and I went to Cuba, (Holguin and Santiago).

OK, here's a ticket from Ottawa to Varadero on December 8th, flight, transfers, hotel, food and drinks all in for a week at \$238 each plus taxes. We arrive late night at Hotel Palma Real, Calle 64, Varadero.

On day 1, we take the open-top Turibus around town. We find there actually is a town of Varadero and our hotel is in it, or at least inside the edge of it. The Turibus is a good deal; for \$5 you can go anywhere in Varadero, all day.



Beyond the town limit there is long peninsula with very posh, isolated hotels that you can't get into or out of without arranging some transport, - taxi or rental car. Not all of them are reasonably close to the Turibus. It reinforces my traveler's rule that the more money you spend for travel, the more you will be isolated from the people and places you came to see.



Varadero's splendid beach is a five minute walk from our hotel. On the beach, our hotel keeps an old house which serves as a bar and a convenience for all inmates who proudly wear the pink wrist-band.



Inmates of Palma Real are a varied lot;
some are more attractive than others.



Some look like dead things washed up from the sea

Dinner is a buffet as is usual in these places. The food, piled onto steam tables for hundreds of people, never rises above banal but it's adequate for the purpose. There's a wide variety of choices, so you don't have to eat anything that you don't like. The staff are attentive and friendly. Musicians are wandering about, playing Cuban music for tips. Most are quite good.

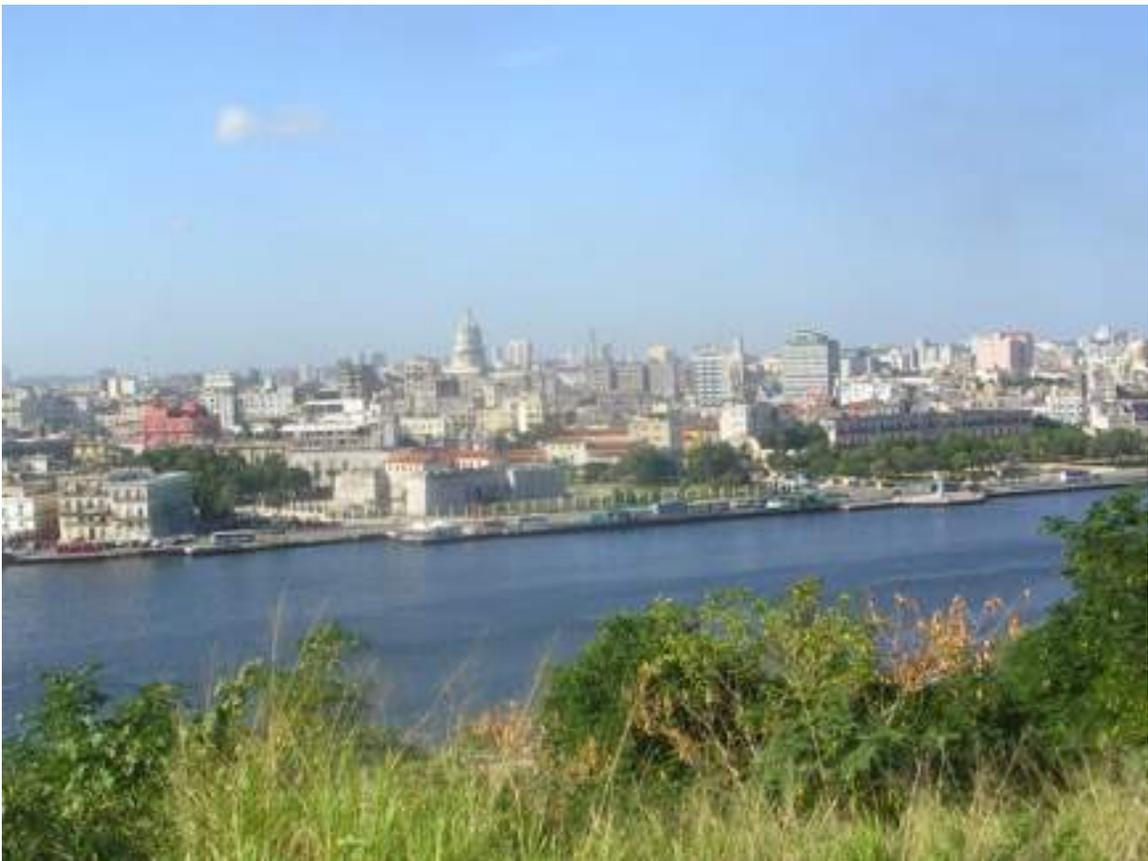
A very energetic dance show is offered in the entertainment tent this evening, a lot of young ladies are being hoisted and spun around, tossed in the air like rag dolls. It's exhausting for an old guy to watch.

At the end, the Maestra introduces every dancer and requires "aplausa!" for each one individually, "aplausa!" for this muscular young man, "aplausa!" for the lithe little chica over there, and on and on. Then the dancers jump into the audience and start pulling the people onto the stage. We bolt. A quiet piña colada by the pool. OK, why not two piñas.



We have attended to-day at the Varadero Bus Terminal to check out my transport toward Viñales. Buddy with an old car approached me outside and wanted to take me to Havana for \$15, door-to-door. The bus fare would be \$10, station to station. OK, deal! He'll pick me up at 8 o'clock in the morning. He will need 3 or 4 others to make up a quorum; that's how it works. The car has to be filled.

In the morning, Buddy has traded me to another guy (yes, they'll do that) who drives a new Hyundai taxi, a government taxi with real government plates on it. The car is waiting outside the hotel and a young Russian who speaks no Spanish or English is in the front seat; he's clearly being delivered like a parcel to some fancy place in Havana. The fare would be about \$100, of which the government-salaried driver would get virtually nothing. My \$15 will be a bonus, about a month's pay. This is how things work in Cuba.



La Habana

In Havana, we drop the Russky at the fancy old Hotel Telégrafo on Paséo Martí, corner of Parque Centrale; I'm going on to the Astro Bus Terminal. I want to get to Viñales.

Same kind of deal here, the hustler at the Astro Station door proposes a \$30 fare to Viñales. This is more than I would expect to pay for this ride, but I tend not to haggle too much with these people; my need is for a seamless service, not the very lowest price. Some of these other passengers with their handfuls of tattered Cuban pesos will do the hard bargaining. The car is a 1955 Pontiac with the usual clattering 4 cylinder Isuzu Diesel engine.



The interior of our green rocket is a Cuban cultural symbol for our times. A seven inch tablet screen is mounted on the dash for our entertainment. A memory stick pushed into the side is filled with noisy videos of jumping and gyrating young Cuban performers. There are two cell phone holders, one of them holding a phone. Another phone is on the cloth ahead of the tiny laced leather steering wheel. Two flags, two fuzzy bunnies, a beaded necklace, and a bulky hand-carved wood necklace.

Nothing works on the instrument panel, no speedo, no fuel gauge, nothing. When we enter a downpour of rain, it becomes clear the wipers don't work either; everything ahead becomes a white blur. The grinding, growling diesel pushes us along at a good speed. A truly proletarian vehicle!



My ride is taking me to Pinar del Río, a bigger place than Viñales, and not far away. He drops me at a corner where the road goes out toward Viñales, and I'm presented to Emilio who will finish my ride; it's prepaid of course. Emilio's red 1953 Cadillac shows a restrained elegance, no gee-gaws inside, no TV, just a plain brush-painted interior. It's too bad about the grille, a work of angle irons hand-welded together and finished with aluminium paint. It wouldn't look too bad from a distance if the half of it hadn't fallen off. The axles have clearly come off some kind of old truck and the engine is the usual clanky Isuzu Diesel.



My red '53 Cadillac ride

Part of the seamless service is the introduction to your next ride or to a good “Casa Particular” guest house. Emilio presents me to “Villa la Cubana”, a two-storey house owned by Maria Carrasco and Mario. My room is bright and clean and it owns a large upstairs verandah where I overlook the street and the other verandahs, \$20.

Mind you don't touch the wires!



Across the street, our neighbour has a business building wooden pallets.

A walk around this little town of 15000 people doesn't take long, and it gets me well oriented. Then, feeling more confident, I head out toward the valley.

The pavement quickly turns to broken pavement and then no pavement. The good footing deteriorates to muck and occasional piles of rubble beside the path that provide a precarious footing over the muck. The rubble has clearly been placed here with the intention to build up the road above the water level. But, good intentions having been demonstrated by placing the rubble, the actual road work can now be put off for some long time. I am overtaken by a young woman who wants to tell me about the tobacco factory just ahead which is a very interesting site to visit.

When we reach it, she draws me into a small collection of shacks. In one of them, her mother is ready to whip out a bundle of tobacco leaves and show me how to build a cigar on her kitchen table. She straightens out a leaf, brown and limp like old rotten lettuce. She rips out the central vein and spreads the leaf flat. She fills it with scraps from lesser leaves, - "la tripa". Then she deftly rolls the thing up and presses it together and presents for my inspection a fine-looking cigar. I'm quite prepared to rebuff her proposal that I really need ten of these cigars in a package of fine hand-rolled plastic, because I don't smoke and I don't intend to start now. But I do remember there is someone near to me who I think would enjoy them, so I buy.

We have a discussion about the need for horses and a guide to visit the "Valle de Viñales", and I'm inclined to agree with this notion, having seen the kind of trails we have. So, I'll come see them in the morning.



I am introduced to the little dog who is expecting her first litter of pups.



The blue building is the “cigar factory” and residence. Five people and two horses live here. From inside you can see right out through the gaps in the walls and roof. The people appear to be intelligent and purposeful and happily going about their work. I felt no difficulty in talking and dealing with them straight across. So, the big difference here may be in their beautiful valley and the low expectations and low requirements for material things. In the cities, I find it easy to hear about dissatisfaction with the stagnation of the revolution.



The big barn is a tobacco dryer, apparently made entirely of found materials. There are many of these in the Valle de Viñales.

Back home, Maria is proposing options for dinner and I go for her suggestion of lobster tail with salad, rice and beans and vegetables, \$10.

A gentle evening on the verandah with the sounds of a village going to sleep, dogs barking, children being called in, roosters crowing, the clop of horses' hooves and the growl of Isuzu motors.

There's a guitar and a singer playing at the plaza just a short block away.





From my perch above the street I can look over to the hills

Sunday 11 December starts out well with a brekky and a pot of good Cuban coffee all set up by Maria. I walk out to the casa campesina where I made a deal yesterday for a horse and guide.

Five minutes out, I feel a dull pain in my back and the nausea comes on gradually. I know what this is; I've been there before. I'm being mugged by a kidney stone.

I've seen this stone in X-ray pictures; an attempt has been made without success to break it up. The Doctor shrugged, nothing more to do. "Well, some day it may pass; it's not too big to pass without surgical intervention. It will hurt a lot."

An hour out now, there's no doubt about this. The pain is getting harder and I'm retching. We turn back. An hour's ride, a fifteen minute walk, the rest of the day hanging out at home, mostly in bed.





My horse has a home-made rope harness that matches beautifully with his strawberry blonde hair. I'm holding the reins here, but I'm not really sure who's in charge.

I shoot a few pictures from my watching place, that's about all. Sitting on my terrace and watching the action in the street is as much as I can do. In the evening I go out to the bus station to research a ride for the morning.



A vulture is sitting on the nearest pole, looking at me.

“No me mires, buitre, ya vivo!”

(Don't look at me, buzzard, I'm still alive)





My host, Mario, has a 1959 Mercedes diesel that he keeps tucked away in a garage beside the house.



In the back yard there's a kitchen garden a small chicken coop and an iron barred prison where Mario is fattening two pigs. When he opens the door to feed them, there's an aggressive confrontation. Mario barely keeps the upper hand by ramming their snouts with a rake.

Morning, I'm up early and attempt a small breakfast of sliced fruit. Maria has been hovering over me and worrying for me, but there is really nothing to be done unless the situation suddenly gets much worse. The prognosis is still for the stone to pass by itself.

I've been monitoring my urine for nearly twenty-four hours now, and at last the stone appears in the glass. Now I can start getting better. There's a Viazul bus going to Havana at eight, a comfortable air con bus with a toilet on board. I'm going to be on it. Everything is now looking up.

We arrive in Havana just before noon, and a bus to Varadero will leave within the hour. This is all good. I'm in line for a ticket when the inevitable taxista appears at the door silently mouthing the word Varadero, Varadero. I read his lips. For \$15 door-to-door I have a ride, with a Mexican couple in the back seat.

I wander around the grounds until I see Diane heading my way from across the pool, though she hasn't spotted me yet.

Today is Monday; I'm just going to hang out here and take it easy. Our first scheduled event is a concert by the Buena Vista Social Club on Wednesday evening, our last night in Cuba.



Our ride to the concert is a 1930-'31 Ford Model A cabriolet, powered by a VW beetle engine, for we have bought the package which includes the ride, a drink and a brief meeting with the musicians.

Twelve musicians, all with amps and a very energetic performance, and we have front row seats; it almost makes me feel that I'm having too much fun. A fast ride home through the cool evening air in our open Ford; we land at home exhausted, ears ringing and totally buzzed. This will have to be another two-piña-coladas-night.





the end