

# IMPRESSIONS OF CUBA

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Our plane is on its final approach to the Nassau airport. The sea below. Large areas of translucent green shallows roll next to clear deep blue waters. Separated here, blended there. A bright, narrow reef, a long white brush stroke underneath the surface of these colorful waters. A remarkable sight. Welcome to the Bahamas.

Sunday morning in Old Havana. Six young boys are playing a game of ball. A small, hard rubber ball. Each takes his turn and throws the ball hard and high at a cracked concrete wall on the side of a house. It bounces off the wall high and far. The others run after it as it ricochets unpredictably off of pieces of broken concrete in the vacant lot or down the road. The lad who throws the ball runs the cardboard bases. The boys, their game, their fun. Their shouts and laughter echo from the walls as we walk past.

Old Havana streets are long and narrow. Many make a graceful curve and, far away around the bend, disappear. You can see the cobblestones and this gentle curve on Sunday. Then, only a handful of people are walking. On Monday, with all the people, it was impossible to see the curve.

Look up. From the third and fourth stories of apartment buildings hang recently washed garments. Like colorful flags, out to dry. They are draped over clotheslines. One end of the line tied to an exterior door. The other end to an iron railing that defined the perimeter of the small, exterior balconies characteristic of these buildings. It seems like every street in Old Havana is decorated with these banners against the aged-dulled orange, green or azure facades of the building. The many differences between this Sunday and the Sundays of yesteryears.

It is about noon on Sunday. We three musketeers are tired from two and a half hours of walking in Old Havana. And we are hungry. We chance upon an attractive café and go in. After we are seated, the café musicians, who had just stopped playing when we entered, approach us. Three men and a boy. A guitarist and his son, a violinist, and a portly man who begins to sing beautifully while playing the maracas. The musicians stand next to our table and serenade us while we eat.

The food is very good. But the music of this trio is compelling. Expressive and rhythmic. Beautifully played and sung. The warm tone and technique of the violinist reminiscent of Kreisler. This Sunday in Old Havana is truly special. One of the highlights of the trip for each of us.

The military is always on patrol. Each man alone. Walking the streets of Havana. Walking in a similar, slow, steady manner. Methodically observing. Each in his gray uniform. Each with watchful eyes and a gray face. Observing.

A cigar factory. Women, mostly, work sitting across from each other. They sort and trim the tobacco leaves that are in a bin between them. One gets up and approaches me discreetly to

reveal three cigars partially hidden under her apron. “One dollar,” she whispers to me.

I return a second day to be with a man in a school in Old Havana where he teaches. On the previous visit, he had been receptive, warm, with a sense of humor. We had made a connection. Quietly he says to me, “See the woman seated at the desk? You can’t come into the school while she is here. Come tomorrow morning at nine and I’ll let you in the classrooms to watch the teaching.” He reaches out a sweaty hand and shakes mine. A friendly smile. Then a hug. “Here is my address,” he says as he puts a pencil to a small scrap of paper. “Please write to me.” His eyes are friendly. His manner is spontaneous, real. A last handshake, an engagement of glances. I depart. Too early the next morning we left Havana for Cienfuegos.

Formal presentations by Cuban educators and psychologists. They sit and talk from a stage. Truth sometimes can be divined or slips out from behind heavy curtains. Our questions. Their answers. The transfer of meaning often seems incomplete. Too little dialogue. Presentations of words, words, long rivers of words.

Our bus passes field after field of sugar cane. Growing tall and densely planted, the long straight stalks, each topped with beautiful rich, green leaves.

I met a Cuban lad, about twenty years old, in the lobby of the Cienfuegos hotel. “I’m waiting for my friend. He bought me these new shoes and this new shirt.” A man in his late forties approached with a beautiful, young Cuban woman by his side. He shook my hand. “I live and work in Toronto, Canada for a firm based in New Jersey. This is my twenty-third trip to Cuba.” I reached to shake hands with the young woman. Her hand was limp, and her eyes were empty of everything but resignation. She said nothing.

The choir, Cantores de Cienfuegos. Hearing this choir was awe inspiring, moving, transcendent. Subtle blends of harmonies and rhythms. Riveting attention.

Our bus travels down narrow rural roads. Such beautiful, steep mountains in the distance. There is a foggy haze around the cliffs and ridges that is a reminder of twelfth century Northern Sung hand scrolls.

The bus continues on. We pass trees, like palms, with tight clusters of bright yellow, basketball sized fruit underneath the top canopy of leaves. Coconuts.

The bus passes similar trees. At the top of them, three or four feet of this years new trunk growth – a light, bright, fresh green that looks tender in contrast to the old, darker trunk-bark below.

Doric, Ionic and Corinthian capitals top columns on beautiful old buildings in the countryside and in the cities. It is often hard to decide, although built generations ago and left without care, whether these structures are not more beautiful now than then. Age and neglect have imparted an unusual appeal to these well-built and finely designed buildings.

Two buses. Two moving islands of people. Our individual differences and similarities,

in time, blend into homogeneity. Distinct and different from the people we pass in the city and countryside. I dare not believe that I fully understand what I hear and see.

In a classroom, a choral instructor is playing the piano. His students, in their early adolescence, stand close around the instrument. Their eyes on the teacher. We watch from the doorway. Although his back is to us, his warm regard and partnership with his pupils is evident. The tune is familiar and beautifully sung. Something about it is different. Oh! It's Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" sung very slowly.

The music stops. The class is over. A group of seven or eight students remain to talk with the teacher. Finally their conversation ends. The teacher turns around, starts to leave the room and sees us. As he walks through the classroom door, several of us approach him. It is clear that he was not aware of our presence. We compliment him on his class. Though the translation takes time, he shows understanding of our appreciation. He smiles. A tear comes to his eye. And he walks away looking tired.

Many of us met each other for the first time on this trip to Cuba. Before, most of us were strangers to each other. During our trip, the melting of personal and interpersonal boundaries. The discovery of commonalities and interests. The falling off of fears and formalities. The feeling of warmth. The start of some friendships.

The children. We watch the children. We listen to the children. They show some of what life is expected to be and what life is. Uniformed, marching in formation, seated in rows. One youth leads the march of his peers, all proud and stalwart. The teacher leads the class. Most children are attentive in class. A few sit, lost in their thoughts. A framed picture of Elian Gonzalez hangs above the blackboard.

A dance class is over. The teacher puts on the music once again. Pre-adolescent children come up and, with a smile and gesture, beckon us to dance with them. Couples pair off, dance and have fun. The children lead. From pair to group dance, the experience evolves. When we were that age, could we have approached a strange adult and lead them to dance?

We are at the top of a tall, freestanding, exterior metal staircase. Its base rests on top of one of Cienfuegos's tallest buildings. From high up we can look down on this attractive town. Many orange roofs atop the white walls of homes and buildings. Spread out to the edge of town. A delegation member draws my attention and points to what must be a large dome many miles away. "It's a nuclear reactor," he says.

Walking with other members of our delegation through a field, we arrive at a copse and small stream. The site of a small, rural community theater being built out in the Cuban countryside. The earth on an adjacent knoll looks like a ziggurat with narrow terraces made into seats for the audience. There are plans for other similar theaters to be built in the rural countryside. Theaters of the people, by the people, and for the people.

I am aware of breathing the cleanest air since leaving the United States.

Our countries are only ninety miles apart. Yet far apart. Each has so much to give, receive and share with the other, people to people.