

# Cuba: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Jean Steiger's Blog: [stayingyounginflorida.com](http://stayingyounginflorida.com) June 10, 2016

"Es complicado," our Cuban guide, Lázaro, said in response to a question from one of our group

I was in a bus on a busy street in Havana with fourteen travel companions (thirteen women and two men) who were touring Cuba with *Sisters Across the Straits*, a group organized and sponsored by the Florida state chapter of League of Women Voters. Our purpose was not only to visit regular tourist stops but to become more knowledgeable about Cuba, the Cuban people and the country's history.

Besides Lázaro, we were fortunate to be accompanied by Miami resident Annie Betancourt, founder of *Sisters Across the Straits*, a Board Director of the League and a member for more than three decades. We were the twenty-sixth group Annie has taken to Cuba. She later explained that 'it's complicated' is the standard response Cubans use to describe any difficult situation. It's a diplomatic way of saying there is no answer to your question or perhaps there is no solution. 'It's complicated' became the password for our six day adventure in Cuba.

Annie was born in Cuba and lived there with her parents until she was thirteen years old. That was



when the revolution occurred and Fidel Castro came into power. Her father, an engineer, understood the changes that were coming and, like hundreds of other Cubans, moved his family to Miami, hoping that their time in that city would be short. But Fidel remained in power and the family soon realized that Miami was their new home.

Annie's hope is that these visits will improve mutual understanding after decades of isolation and distrust between the US and Cuba. The itineraries, as you will see, are designed to provide League members with opportunities to learn about Cuba's history, culture and society and to meet both academic experts and ordinary Cuban citizen

## Day 1.

Our flight from Miami to the Jose Marti International Airport in Havana was just 45 minutes long, a



reminder that Cuba is only 90 miles from the United States. As soon as our group passed through customs, we boarded the bus and started our tour with a ride through central Havana and the Plaza de la Revolucion. Annie had warned us that we were going to a third world country but it was still a shock to see so many buildings that looked as if they had been bombed. Other buildings appeared very fragile, as if they might collapse at any moment. However, they were obviously inhabited, with people going in and out of the entrances and others hanging wash from balconies ten or fifteen stories high. The American embargo and a failing economy had obviously had a huge impact.

After a lunch stop at an outdoor restaurant in a garden setting, we stopped at the Jose Fuster Studio, the home of a ceramist who has changed the area where he lives. The entire street looked like an



immense modern painting with bright colors imbedded in every yard. But as I got closer, I could see the designs created with vibrant ceramics, each one different from the one before. The artist had begun this project by transforming his own gate into an elaborate scene created with ceramics. When neighbors saw the effect, they asked him to do the same to their homes. He never asked for money, always raising funds through donations and by selling his own work. Finally, he transformed his entire courtyard into a ceramic masterpiece. Because the American embargo had made ceramics and just about everything else difficult to obtain, he has been forced to travel great distances to find the tiles he needs.

After we checked in to our temporary home, the Hotel Sevilla, and had a short rest, we joined Annie and most of our fellow travelers for a walk through the Plaza and Calle Obispo – a pedestrian street in Haban Vieja (Old City). Our walk ended at a hotel where Annie had planned to have us eat dinner at its roof-top restaurant. However, like much of Cuba, the elevator was not working. A hotel employee invited us to use the service elevator which was located around the corner. It turned out to be a small, dark box that held five people including the elevator operator. Our group went up in shifts; I went up with my eyes closed and my fingers crossed, convinced that each bump meant we were about to plunge to the ground. However, the view of the city from the top made it all worthwhile. The food was another story.



After dinner, four of us walked down six flights (thank goodness there was a bannister) and made our way through the plaza, looking for a taxi. Finally, we found six of them, all 1950's automobiles, patched up and roaring to take us back to the hotel. We were herded into the backseat of one and enjoyed a bumpy, breezy and gasoline infused trip back to the hotel. As we were getting out, I noticed that much of the ancient upholstery was held together by tape.

## Day 2.

At breakfast, I heard about a lot of problems with the rooms. One of our group had hit the jackpot: her window wouldn't close, the air conditioning didn't work, and the door wouldn't lock. My traveling companion, Pat, and I had been lucky. Although the room was basic (we weren't expecting anything else), everything worked. In fact, the air conditioning was too cold and we couldn't seem to turn it down but we weren't going to complain. The hotel had a lovely swimming pool which we enjoyed almost every afternoon; except for the last day when it was closed down at 5:00 pm for mosquito spraying!

Our first stop was the Cuban Embassy to meet women who were members of the Cuban chapter of the United Nations. The Embassy building had been the home of one of the wealthy Cuban families who had left during the Revolution and it was still in good shape. Soaya E. Alvarez, Director of ACNU Asociacion Cubana de las Naciones Unidas, spoke to us about Cuba and the United Nations and the importance of lifting the embargo. The Cuban people are suffering; salaries are \$15 to \$20 a month;

Lázaro (who has a master's degree) left a government job to become a guide because he could earn more money. Although health care is free, gas and some food is rationed and there is not much left over for luxuries. The Cuban dream is to come to the US; in 2015/16, 153,000 Cubans arrived in the US. People are leaving now because they are afraid the Cuban Adjustment Act, which allows a path to citizenship, will be repealed. Thus, the Cuban workforce has been diminished and the population is aging.

Our next stop was a visit to El Quitrin, a women's clothing shop sponsored by the Federation of Cuban Women. Annie had suggested we bring thread and needles as gifts for the women working here as these items, like everything else, are in short supply. At the time of our visit, most of the finished dresses and shirts in the shop were white cotton. The work on the clothes was amazing but I didn't find anything to buy (for a change).



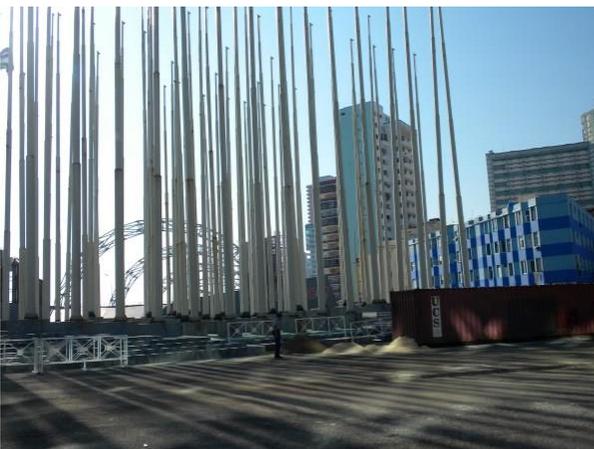
Later in the afternoon, we visited a conservative synagogue and heard about the Jewish population in Cuba from a young woman. There are 1200 Jews in Cuba and three synagogues; a typical situation for Jewish people in any location. But in Cuba, they are either conservative or orthodox; the modern reform movement has not reached Cuba. However, I was glad to hear that girls are having Bat Mitzvahs.

That evening, three of us took a taxi to a restaurant for dinner and made the acquaintance of a young driver who spoke excellent English. The taxi was brand new, had leather seats and purred as it made its way through town. Our driver told us it was made in China and purchased by the Cuban government.

He was leasing it from the government and sharing it with another driver; each had three days on and three days off. He was married and had a toddler. When we asked him about President Obama's visit, he said, with emotion, "Obama is our hero."

### Day 3.

Annie had arranged a visit to the newly opened U.S. Embassy. I was surprised at the amount of security – our passports were carefully examined and our bags were checked. We entered through a turnstile and were seated in a room right off the entrance. An embassy director who had been sent to Cuba to prepare for Obama's visit gave us an overview of our country's situation and answered all our questions. It was thorough and interesting. She encouraged us to interact with Cubans to dispel any negative impressions they might have about Americans.



At the end of the sidewalk in front of the entrance to the American Embassy, there is a football field of very tall black poles that look like they had been planted. Annie told us that, right after the Revolution, the American Embassy began running a ticker tape with a message about freedom along the top of the building. To retaliate, the Cuban government put up the poles and topped them with the Cuban flag to block out the tape.

Our next stop was Finca Vigia, the home of Nobel Prize laureate Ernest Hemingway who lived in Cuba from 1930 to 1960. Pat and I had seen the movie "Papa Hemingway in Cuba" just a few days before our

trip so it was exciting to look in the windows and doors and see where the movie had been filmed. His fishing boat Pilar has been restored and is on display at the property.

We had lunch in Cojimar, a fishing village that was the backdrop of Hemingway's novel, "The Old Man and the Sea." I looked out at the water and could almost see the old man rowing the boat. Lunch was at a privately owned restaurant run by young local entrepreneurs and it was delicious. Many restaurants in Cuba are owned and operated by the government but more and more people are getting permission to open their own restaurants, a very good sign.

#### Day 4.

Breakfasts at the hotel were enormous; five large tables filled with everything from fruit to meats to pancakes or eggs and sweet breads. By now I knew our lunches would be huge – at least four courses – so I stuck to cereal, fruit and yogurt (at least I think it was yogurt) for breakfasts. I also decided I would not weigh myself for a week after I got home.

We walked through Old Havana and visited the plazas. There were dozens of stands selling books and street artists were everywhere, displaying their work on boards and boxes. One young man followed our group, drawing quick profiles of a few women and then trying to sell the sketch to the owner. He was remarkably good and we later found out he was an art student. One woman bought her sketch; then discovered that it looked more like another member of our group. Then we visited an artisans' cooperative and I bought a small painting to take home (my first purchase).

In the afternoon we visited the Museum of Fine Arts- Cuban Collection and I was so awed by the art that I kept moving even when my body was telling me to go back to the hotel and take a nap. Of course the elevator was out here also so we did a lot of walking.

#### Day 5.



A day in the country! The bus took us through the countryside for over an hour and Lázaro kept us awake with a lesson on Cuba's history. Now and then, Annie took over the microphone, giving Lázaro a rest and us some background from the American point of view. We arrived at lookout point in Valle Vinales in Pinar del Rio Province which is west of Havana. The unique hill formations (known as mogotes) are gorgeous; unlike anything I've seen before.

Then we moved on to a rum distillery (not sure that's what it's called) and then a tobacco farm. We watched a man actually roll cigars which almost made me want to smoke one. Of course I bought some for my husband; he smokes one occasionally but only when I'm not home.

Lunch was on the porch of a charming country restaurant. Annie warned us there would be a lot of courses and there were; one after another, each one better than the last. Dessert was the best flan I have ever eaten.



I thought I'd never eat again but by 7:30, I was at yet another restaurant eating the best eggplant lasagna I'd ever had.

## **Day 6.**

Time to pack our suitcases for our trip back to Miami that evening. But in the meantime, we were still moving. We visited a local arts and craft market where I searched for (and found) a humidor in which to put my five precious cigars. I also bought a beautiful, hand-made white cotton dress for my granddaughter which will probably not fit but I couldn't resist it. Next, our group visited an art community project in inner city Centro Habana. An artist named Salvador Gonzales Escolono first started developing art from graffiti until galleries opened and it became a street of art celebrating the African/Cuban experience. Salvador, who was leaving for Washington and New York the next day, was at his gallery and he told us to "enjoy my country but don't try to understand it."

Lunch was at an organic farm that also provides meals for people in need, painting and environmental classes plus classes for single mothers and seniors. When the government gave the land to the family that has produced all this, it was a swamp area. Now they grow 150 different varieties of fruits and vegetables (plus a little dog that kept getting underfoot). The lunches help pay for the free food and classes.

Next stop: The airport and the end of our adventure in Cuba. But first, I and several other travelers checked out all the duty free shops, trying to spend what was left of our Cuban money. I settled on two bottles of vintage rum which my husband tells me tastes like smooth bourbon.

## **Last thoughts:**

A fellow traveler who has been to Cuba before was overwhelmed with the number of yellow cabs and even open-air double decker buses – all made in China. The Chinese have also built an automobile factory in Cuba. She noticed lots of tourists from Spain, France, and even a few from Switzerland. I spoke to two young men from Germany and a couple of English women who rode the hotel elevator with me. Also, there are a lot of new restaurants. Cuba, she commented, is catering to tourists.

The internet is still very difficult for Cubans to access; it's expensive and slow. The government has begun to open up WiFi hotspots outside of some buildings where you will see lines of young people sitting, standing, leaning – all with computers in their hands.

Change is happening but it's slow. Although the country is still under the Castro's, I continually heard Cubans describe Raul as "pragmatic" compared to his brother. I'm assuming this means he is more open to change and to private ownership which we experienced during our visit. Personally, I believe that if the embargo was lifted and the Cuban Adjustment Act repealed, Cubans would be able to visit America, learn from all of us and then go home instead of seeking citizenship in this country. And the distribution of American products in Cuba would stop the rationing and improve every Cuban's life immensely. The ferry will travel across those 90 miles once more and the Cuban people will be lifted out of poverty and into the twenty-first century. I know 'es complicado' but it's way past time:

## **Lift the Embargo!**