

Cuba, June 17 – 25, 2014

June 17 We flew to Miami with some of the group that would be on the tour...our neighbor, Scott Schwar, who led the group, Lisa Greyhill, Scott's business partner, and one of the couples on the trip, Frank and Susan Fedele, who live in the Chicago area. Lisa, Frank, Susan and we took a shuttle bus to the hotel and checked in while Scott waited for two people who were coming in on other flights, Bill Crozier and Clem Shemanski. The other couple, Mark Faber and Elaine Neverauskas, had gone to Miami a couple of days earlier. At the hotel, we met up and went to dinner at a nearby diner that had been recommended by the hotel. Because of the early flight the next day, no one wanted to make a late night of it.

June 18. Up at 3:45 am. Groan. Or is it "gasp"? We didn't think much of the hotel (a Courtyard by Marriott), but that might have been because there was a construction site next door and they kept the jackhammers going until we had to get up (then they stopped). We had brought some breakfast bars along, since we knew there wouldn't be time for breakfast, but we didn't eat any until we had been waiting at the airport for a while. We had to check out of the hotel at 4:30 am to get to the airport with plenty of time, because the officials had to check all of our paperwork. The flight was supposed to leave at 8:00am (I even have a photo of the scheduled time at the airport) but because of a pin that had to be replaced on the airplane, we finally left around 11 am for the very short flight. One surprise was that they would not let us carry on our usual roll-boards, so we had to check them and pay \$60 for the privilege. Clearly a ploy to make money. One amusing thing was that we instantly recognized the charter company's plane as being an old American Airlines plane. Going through immigration in Havana was pretty easy, and the local guide, Abel Contreras, and our driver, Lazaro, were waiting for us with the bus.

We were taken to the hotel, the Nacional (very historic and interesting) and had lunch at the outdoor restaurant, then checked into our rooms. Back on the bus, we drove along the Malecon (a five mile sea wall) and then to Revolution Square where we tried to go to the Jose Marti Memorial Museum. It was closed because of a reception for the President of Nigeria. The tower at the museum is really great...shaped like a star if you looked at the shape of an individual floor. Revolution Square is where demonstrations are held in Havana. On one side of the square is the Teatro Nacional de Cuba and on another is the Ministry of the Interior which has a huge image of Che Guevara on the front. We were driven around parts of the city, and different important buildings, cultural and historic, were pointed out. It was a good way to start the trip, because it gave us a chance to get an overview of Havana, but it wasn't too tiring, since most of the time was on the bus. We stopped at the Almendares River park so we could see what the forest must have been like around the city walls.

We went to dinner at a restaurant on the Havana Bay shoreline, La Divina Pastora. They served us a squash soup with a daub of chopped tomato in the middle. The main course, which was fish (pretty dry, so not very exciting), came with a sauté of green

beans, kale, celery, eggplant and some unidentifiable vegetable. It was lightly seasoned and had some kind of seeds in it. The dessert was a really good chocolate ice cream. Two scoops. Many of our meals were outside on covered terraces, and the best desserts were ice cream.

After dinner we were driven to the adjacent Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabana, which was built between 1763 and 1774. It is really impressive. We had a little time to walk around before the soldiers started the Canonazo Ceremony. They marched around and played drums and then fired the cannon at exactly 9pm. (In the "old days," people set their watches by the cannon, and one of the disruptions during the revolution was that the revolutionaries set off small bombs around the city before and after 9pm, so no one knew when it was really 9pm.) After that we came back to the hotel discovered that the business center was closed, so we couldn't buy an internet card. We got a really good night's sleep.

June 19. We got to sleep in until 8am!! It was so good to get to finally get some sleep, after two days without! The breakfast buffet in the hotel was great. Lots of eggs, cheese, fruit. The mango juice was not as good as I expected, but still a lot better than what's available in non-tropical locations. Oddly, no yoghurt...we never saw yoghurt offered in Cuba. And the bread was never very good. We were told that Cubans eat a lot of tortillas, but we were never offered them.

The bus picked up the group and dropped us for a walking tour of Old Havana, with stops at the Capitolio Nacional, the Escuela Gaspar Melchor e Jovellanos and Escuela Carlos Mariategui Vocational Restoration Schools, and the El Taller Experimental de Grafica printmaking artist studio. We visited 4 different squares, Plaza de San Francisco, Plaza Vieja, the Plaza de Armas, and the Plaza de Catedral. Each had its own personality with different art and types of buildings on the sides of the squares.

At the Vocational Restoration School we met with a representative of the City Historian's Office, who took us around and explained what the students were learning in each area. The first group was making plaster decorative pieces for buildings (they had silicon molds that they were pouring the plaster into...though of course I have no idea if it was really plaster! They then smoothed out the plaster and let it set for half an hour until it was hard, then removed it from the mold and let it rest for a few days (I think)). Another group was working on repairing stained glass, and another group was restoring old furniture. The students are in the school for two years. The first semester they are mostly learning the basics, then they start working on pieces, then they go out to job sites. There is so much restoration to do in Havana that they pretty much have guaranteed jobs.

We stopped at two hotels that had been completely renovated, Hotel Rachel (which was really gorgeous) and the Ambos Mundos Hotel. What they are trying to do is renovate buildings that can be restored back to their original condition, but with modern materials. For example, they have termites, so they are trying to replace most wood with more durable materials. Our lunch was at El Temple, that overlooked the harbor inlet. The

art group was working on graphic art. One student was making the "molds" for woodblock prints, for example.

We walked through Old Havana up to Centro Havana, and stopped at the El Floridita Bar and Restaurant. (We kept stopping in places that Hemingway had visited, so we looked at 3 bars he frequented, saw the hotel he had stayed at, etc. He seems to have done a lot of drinking.)

Since Cuba is very poor (partly because the old governments siphoned off all the money and partly because the Russians pulled out and the United States established the embargo, so there was no outside support), it is hard for them to set up a complete restoration program, so lots of buildings that were very beautiful are now on the brink of falling down.

After all the walking in the ferocious heat all day, I was ready to drop, so fortunately we came back to the hotel and had the evening on our own. We bought our internet card, exchanged more money (we could only use cash...because of the US embargo, no US company can do business in Cuba, including credit card companies), bought water and had dinner in the buffet restaurant at the hotel. It had some interesting things. We had looked at the menu of the high-end restaurant at the hotel, but decided it was dramatically overpriced. Three people in our group did have dinner there (we never did) and told us that even though they were the only people in the restaurant, it took them almost 2 hours to get their food. We were happy that we had avoided it.

June 20. We thought we were so bad at breakfast. We each had a fried egg, black beans that had been cooked in vegetables, a very dry chocolate croissant, and cheese. And very good fresh pineapple juice. It turned out that the "fried" egg was actually baked, so not so unhealthy after all.

Steve and I started out at the university while the rest of the group went off to a cigar factory (from their descriptions, it sounded pretty awful). We were really pleased that the group dropped us off and picked us up again. We had planned to take taxis. Steve had made contact with the head of the math department, José Fidel Hernández Advíncula (who publishes in one of Steve's areas, representation theory) and we met with him. He was very nice, and seemed to enjoy meeting with us. We talked for a while about the conditions here for faculty and students in math. It was pretty much what we expected...pretty bleak. He needed to help his students who had a final that week, so we walked around the campus on our own, and it turned out to be much smaller than we expected. One of their problems of course is no funds for renovations, so the old buildings are in disrepair. And they have trouble getting things like office furniture and computers and so forth.

From there, the group supposed to go to a ballet school but that turned out not to be arranged by the tour company, so that didn't work. Instead, we went to a rum museum, which we were supposed to have done the day before. While we were waiting for the English tour, we went into the bar, where Steve and I had the Cuban version of Coca

Cola...it actually tasted a little more like Pepsi. There was a music group performing, who were pretty bad. (Not the worst of the trip.)

We had lunch at El Aljibe, a roast chicken specialty restaurant, which is in the suburb of Miramar, a very ritzy area. Lots of foreigners live there. We drove past Castro's house (Fidel, that is...later in the trip we drove past Raul's compound which is huge).

The rest of the day was really astonishing. We went to an artist's studio, The FUSTER Studio and Community Art project. What I expected was a "regular" art studio. They have 12 workers who take tiles and break them (and also make their own) and create fantastic mosaics and shapes--covered in tile. It is huge and amazing. They have done something like 30 or 40 houses in the area with at least fences covered in the tile bits. I've never seen anything like it.

We then went to the Centro Pro Danza, directed by Laura Alonso who is the daughter of a famous ballerina. They performed two original works for us, one choreographed to Edith Piaf, and the other a more classical work. The students and professionals were really great. The next school that we had been scheduled to see was closed so we went back to the hotel and had much-needed free time until dinner.

During the free time we walked on the hotel grounds. There were two brides doing their photo shoots. There are two cannons in that part of the hotel grounds, and they had one of the couples (at least) drape themselves over one of the canons. There is a museum for the Cuban Missile Crisis, with tunnels and bunkers, on the hotel grounds, but unfortunately it was closed. As we walked around the grounds, we discovered that some of the historical photos from the area that is being restored are in a bar close by, so I was able to get some photos of that.

After taking baths, we went to the lobby to meet the group, and took taxis to the oldest private restaurant in Havana, Paladar La Guarida, famous as a movie setting. There's a sort of cute youtube video of the restaurant at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlbavC2W9ZA&list=FLftMLXTWx8wVm4g0cpD0buA&feature=mh_lolz

You climb several flights of stairs in what seems to be an abandoned building (only it isn't) and in the film there is laundry on one level which was not there anymore. At the top is a really good restaurant. We didn't have dessert, but one person ordered what turned out to be a quarter of a pineapple with the core taken out but the green part still on, and one scoop of ice cream in the cored part. The room that we were seated in had been used in the filming of the movie, *Strawberry and Chocolate*, which had a profound impact for gay rights in Cuba. The waitress spent half an hour explaining the metaphors in the film and in the room. (After we returned to Chicago, we watched the movie, but the main thing we found interesting was the room.) The Cubans that we met were very interested in the film.

Another movie that came up a lot was *Godfather II*, of course. The mob meeting represented in the film took place in our hotel, and some of the mobsters that are

featured in the film, though under different names, built and ran a lot of the casinos. The casinos were all closed after the revolution.

June 21 After breakfast, the bus took us to Egido, a Community Farmers Market where you can only buy using the local currency, CUP. They have 3 currencies, the local currency, a ration system, and a dollar based currency, the CUC. We spent CUC's, but people get paid in CUPs. The CUPs can only be spent for certain things (non-luxuries like electricity, rent, food etc.). I still haven't figured out how regular people get money for luxuries...by that I mean both the amount needed and access to the CUCs. I think our guide said that one CUC is 24 CUPs, even though they are paid as if the two systems were equal. The ration system was introduced with the revolution, and at the time, each person was given each month an amount of heavily subsidized rations that would feed them for a month. Nothing fancy...rice, beans, sugar, flour, and so forth, but enough. Now the rations only feed each person for a week or two, so they have to find money to pay full price for food for the rest of the month. All farming in Cuba is organic since they have no commercial pesticides or fertilizer in the country.

After the market, we drove to San Francisco de Paula to go to Hemingway's house, Finca Vigía, which is a museum. When we arrived at the grounds, a group of children were playing baseball. Two "coaches" came over to talk with us and have us take pictures of the children. There was a great view back to Havana's downtown from a couple of places on the grounds. Hemingway's boat is there, and two typewriters that he used.

We then went to Cojimar, the fishing village that Hemingway used, where we climbed Torreon de Cojimara, and old Spanish fort (1649) and then had a lunch of rice, rice, and rice at La Terraza de Cojimar. I'm not making this up. The first course was a rather bland tomato rice soup (I think it would have been ok with some lime juice in it, for example, or some seasoning). The main course was a paella, flavored rice that was actually good, and there was a lot of it, but that was it...no good bits of things in it. No other veg...actually there were some little rolls. And then dessert was a very bland rice pudding with a little cinnamon sprinkled on top...no raisins or nuts or anything like that. Oh, well, we didn't come to Cuba for the food (though last night's dinner was good.)

We then drove to the Guanabacoa Museum, which has displays that explain the religious practices of the African religions that were brought to Cuba with the slave trade. Santeria is the most well-known. A dance and singing troupe gave us a performance of a Santeria Dance, in costume.

Then we went to the craft market in Havana, which is huge. A lot of the stalls have the same things, by that I mean a stall of carvings is repeated many times in the market, so the actual variety of crafts was limited. There were a lot of paintings, which actually were unusual.

That night was an "on your own" night, so we had arranged with some of the group to go to Café Laurent, a restaurant about 2 1/2 blocks from the hotel. It was pretty good. There was a puree of something that we thought was sweet potato but milder (so maybe their own version of sweet potato?) And again, the interesting vegetable medley. None of us wanted dessert, so nothing to report there. And NO RICE!! We were all very careful to avoid rice!! It may be a while before we can face rice again.

June 22 We met at 9 and sat out in the patio area of the hotel. Four teachers came, but no students (not surprising, since they just had their final exams). The 4 teachers are faculty at a university for special education, and all teach undergraduates and masters students (I wasn't sure how many PhD students they have) who are going to teach students with disabilities. We learned more about the education system (all free, but the students have to pass exams at different levels...to get into university, for example, and graduate students get a very small stipend.) They have 6 years of elementary school, 3 of middle school, 3 of high school, and 5 of undergraduate (except med school which is 6 years as an undergraduate.) The teachers are evaluated every year on their performance, which is based on teaching, compassion, and contributions to the field. I gathered that the latter didn't have to be research in their fields. The teachers were very nice.

Then we went to the Cuban section of the National Museum of Fine Arts, and our museum guide was an art historian. We saw art from the 50s through the 70s, and most of it was quite interesting. There was a certain amount of anti-American sentiment...not surprising given the history during that time! It was incredibly hot in the museum, which can't be good for the art. It turned out that the air conditioning had broken and the escalator wasn't working, so they are going to close the museum later in the summer while they do the repairs. The museum building itself is a good building for art, and they have space on the first floor where children were performing. They also have an area for children to create art, and workshops for them. I forgot to ask about adult workshops.

From there we went to another community art center, the Callejon de Hamel, that was just a block of a street where the walls had been painted and there are studios along the block. In one, a son with perfect English very sweetly told us about his father's work and his, and how they differed. It was really nice. Another was a little more pushy, but didn't push us to try to get us to buy anything.

At this point Steve and I had intended to go to the other building of the National Museum of Fine Arts that has the international collection, but it was so hot that we couldn't quite bring ourselves to go back. We would have had only 40 minutes or so in the museum before it closed, so decided it wasn't the best way to spend our time. Too bad, because I really would have liked to see their collection.

Most of the group then went back to the old town, including us, and walked around and had lunch. More rice. I'm not kidding. I have photos. But this time other things as well. Green beans, rice and beans (as opposed to plain white rice), a little lettuce. Most of the remaining group stayed in the old town after lunch, but Steve and I walked to an area

where we could get a taxi and went back to the hotel to pack up and get ready for the next morning's checkout of the hotel. For dinner, we went back to Café Laurent and the dinner was nice (NO RICE!!!). We had a really good garlic sauce with nice slices of garlic in it, mixed vegetables (that seems to be the thing here, with varying success) and nice warm bread that was the best we had in Cuba. The star was potatoes that were really fresh and had been cooked to perfection with the skins on, I think they must have just boiled them, and then tossed them in a sauce that was light and tangy. When we walked into the restaurant, one of the people on the tour, Clem, was already there, just having appetizers, so didn't join us. By the time we had our appetizer, Scott and Lisa, our tour guides came in, so all three joined us. Clem left with us, and Scott and Lisa came back through the hotel while we were settling up. At the hotel, we bought our daily internet card (we were surprised that there was a line but then realized that the business center was about to close!), and paid up our room charges so we could check out faster the next morning. Our toilet broke during the night. By that I mean the flush mechanism. It didn't have a tank, so we couldn't just lift the lid. It is Cuba, after all. (The restaurant we went to yesterday had no running water in the bathroom. The attendant poured water over our hands at the sink. (Good thing I had hand sanitizer along!!) And we had the same experience at the Hemingway museum. "It's Cuba, after all." has become our little phrase.)

June 23 After breakfast, we checked out of the hotel and drove west to the Sierra del Rosario Biosphere Reserve in the Pinar del Rio province. This was my favorite part of the trip. The drive was first back through the Miramar area, then out into the country. We first drove through fields and rolling hills, passing cows and bicyclists on the road, then into a more hilly, forested area. We stopped at the headquarters of the park and met our guide for that area. There was a small, open-air building, and we were taken to an area with a view over a small lake that had tables and chairs and maps, but open so we could see and hear the birds in the trees. There were lots of lush flowering plants in the area. After an introduction to the area, we were taken to the local school (primary through secondary and technical school levels, founded by Uruguay) and met the principal and had a tour of the school.

Next we toured the ruins of the Buena Vista, a 19th century French coffee plantation. Our local guide was very knowledgeable and would hear a bird and tell us what to watch for. A Cuban Trogon, the national bird, gave us a very beautiful display and sang for us for several minutes. We then had lunch at the Casa del Campesino, a rustic, open-air restaurant. Our singers here were more unusual. When we came in to the area, we were taken through the kitchen to get to our table. The room was full, except for our table, and it turned out to be a church choir from North Carolina. A few of our group had met them earlier in the trip at a bar somewhere, and the choir had sung in the bar. So now, we first heard some really awful singers who had been singing for many years and were very famous. And then the choir sang a song and left, and then a younger Cuban group did a good job of singing. Steve and I did a Salsa along to their music, turning the restaurant into a dance floor. Not so easy in sneakers, but it was fun! From here, we went to Las Terrazas where we visited the local physician's office to talk

about the health care in Cuba, and then to an art studio that had some really nice hand-made paper.

Our next stop was the Cave of the Indians, which had some actors out in front dressed as Indians. We walked through the well-lit area of the cave. Then we came to an underground river and boarded a boat that took us a little further into the cave, then out to a little pond where we disembarked. It was really fun. From here, we briefly visited Viñales to look at the church and art studio, but we were all pretty tired and wanted to get to the hotel, so our last stop was at the Hotel Los Jazmines, where we had dinner and spent the night. The Viñales Valley that we were in is really beautiful, with Mogotes, gigantic sugar loaf structures of ancient limestone, palm trees, small rice paddies and some cultivation. Our hotel balcony had a view down the valley that was really beautiful. I told Scott jokingly that he should have just put us there for the whole time and lectured on what we were missing in Havana. As we gathered for dinner in the dining room, there was a beautiful rainbow over the hills. Instead of fading, it lasted for a long time, then disappeared.

June 24. After breakfast (really good fresh guava, mango and pineapple, the usual not-so-good bread, fresh pineapple juice, and a fried egg.) we set out for the trip back to Havana. We stopped at the Montesino tobacco farm, which is currently growing corn, (not that interesting, none-the-less), drove for a while and then had lunch at an informal restaurant just off the highway, which was surprisingly good. Our next stop, back in Havana, was the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) which is the national arts university. Professor Mario MasVidal met us and led us through the campus. We later found out that he has a radio show, with his wife, and appears on television frequently. It was extremely hot, so we were relieved to get back to the Nacional and check in.

Steve bought our internet card while I wasn't feeling well and took two baths, but in the end, I couldn't make it to the meeting with the lawyers (I had thought it was judges, for some reason), so I took a nap while Steve went with the group.

Our last official event was a farewell dinner at the Café del Oriente, with many of the Cubans that we had met during the week. We were happy that Fidel the mathematician joined us, and we were seated with him and Mario and his wife. One surprise was that the rest of the restaurant was filled with the choir from North Carolina! The director wanted to perform again, but some of their group had left, so we just waved goodbye to them.

After dinner we packed and got to sleep.

June 25 Up at 6am to leave the hotel at 7:10 for the airport. There were no surprises or delays, and we got to Miami pretty quickly and through immigration and customs in Miami in record speed. The rest of the group had flights later in the day, but we spent the night in Miami and rested up for our flight home the 26th, which was also uneventful.



Jose Marti Museum



Almendares River Park



Fortaleza



Plaza de San Francisco



Vocational Restoration School



Plaza Vieja



Hotel Rachel



Plaza de Armas



Plaza de Catedral



Hotel Sevilla



University of Havana



FUSTER



Finca Vigia



Cojimar



Callejon de Hamel



Rice, rice and beans, rice



UNESCO biosphere headquarters



school



Coffee plantation ruins



Cuban Trogon



Hotel Los Jazmines



Viñales Valley



Instituto Superior de Arte



Nacional Hotel