

El Cubano

A traveler dreams a lot..it's sort of how we end up with the life of "wander"; thinking of places to visit, then making a "dot" on a map. You dust off your passport and play "connect the dots" until your money runs out. Such were the circumstances that brought me to Cuba.

I had hoped to make Cuba on my previous "rounding" buy events, and friends in Colombia interceded and I ended up with a coco-loco in my hand in Providencia. But I digress.

For Americans, Cuba represents some sort of "forbidden territory". Not impossible to get to, but enough of a hassle to divert to other targets. For the "Yank" these are the "known" limits,

- 1) can't use US credit cards
- 2) you have to "declare" your intent from a list of 12 options (and no, just looking around is NOT an option)
- 3) you have to save receipts and documents for 5yrs under penalty of \$150,000 fine and an orange jump-suit "stay-cation" down the road

But guys with beards are a determined lot, and with enough internet clicks and decent reading comprehension, a path can be laid.

What follows is a more comprehensive recap of what I expected, what I found, followed by a run down of events "chaser"... it was quite a trip.

WHAT I EXPECTED

From the States, Cuba is portrayed as a "land stuck in time" where folks travel in immaculately maintained vehicles from the 1950's, living a comfortable existence in cities filled with majestic aging buildings.. the promotional videos always show Havana in the late afternoon with pastel hued buildings tempting the lens of every photographer.

When laying out my "path between the dots" back in Chicago, I knew Cuba took cash, real American green-backs, so I included a small roll of crisp US\$100 bills...let Ben Franklin show me the way...

During the last eight months of travel, I occasionally thought of my trip to Cuba. I had laid out some ideas, read reviews, but few were written by travelers, so most included hotel stays, and driving vintage cars as "things to do"...but as I neared departure, I realized I would be "winging it".

WHAT I FOUND

"It's all about the Benjamins" folks...here's why

Turns out that that roll of US\$100 bills was necessary, but comes with a 10% penalty for using them. GBP and EURO too...Essentially if you're not "from there" they hit you with a "gringo tax" to convert to the Cuban Peso; the first of many such "fees". You have been warned.

In my research in Ecuador (always plan a “dead day” at the end of every country for such research) I read about the 10% “gringo” tax, and learned that if I used Mexican pesos, I’d save the 10%...luckily my plans were to fly to Cancun, Mexico first, drop my bag, and then head over. I converted US\$1,000 (better to have too much \$\$ too) and boarded my flight. More on the money situation later.

The US State Department does a good job of laying out the requirements to travel to Cuba from the US..but coming from Mexico is another story...a simpler story...as simple as “aisle or widow seat, sir?” No forms, no questions about intent, just grab your pesos and go. This was an easier experience for sure (for an American) but I later heard even foreign travelers, going thru America were subject to a more intensive scrutiny (or not)..more on that later too.

The lack of credit card usage was fairly misinterpreted by me, frankly. Yes, using them once inside Cuba is a no-go, but my suspicious mind applied it a little too broadly. Travelers love their credit cards...a lot. They sort of become your travel-companion. I call mine “Dave”, not just because Dave (as you may recall) is my BFF, but because as fiscally obsessed as I am, Dave was even tighter, and when we were kids, our “corporation” had to be in agreement before funds were spent. Thus if “Dave” has a problem; Say mis-use gets “Dave” cancelled, that would be a VERY bad thing for me. So I thought that even buying a plane ticket to Cuba would get the charge rejected. Frankly, I was an idiot. I could have bought tickets a month ago, gotten the cheaper rate, but had this notion I had to pay cash in Mexico for a ticket. This mistake cost me about \$130...lesson learned.

Then there was housing. We the travelers, use Hostelworld.com for most of our housing needs. The reservation system is first rate and easy...your deposit is tied to your credit card. Again, I’m thinking “Dave won’t like any Cuban transactions.” And I like Dave, so I had planned to just arrive in country, and let fate determine my stay. Upon landing in Cancun, I was emboldened by the Cuban plane reservation, so I took a chance on Hostelworld in Cuba...Dave approved...I don’t know exactly how, and I’m not at all curious as to why, but I was able to book the Corazon del Mundo in Havana for \$10 a night..problem solved.

I landed, converted Mexican Pesos to Cuban CUC (pronounced Kook) and paid the rate (\$25, or 25CUC) to get to the Corazon...I was set.. oh and there’s a currency for locals called CUP (Coop) which is 24 to the US\$1, or 4cents...more on that

And so our Adventure Begins:

By the time I pulled into the Corazon, it was dark, I dropped my bags, “located” myself on Maps.me and set out to find a bite to eat. My 2yrs of DuoLingo-Spanish swirling in my head as I began to discover this ‘forbidden country’.

The day to day report is WAY less important than my general observations, so in no particular order, here’s what I found;

CUBAN REALITIES

Havana is not real big on toilet seats..its odd. The Corazon my “hive” for Havana, had them, and properly installed...a first class operation. But generally speaking, once you left the hive, a toilet seat was a novelty that seemed to indicate “you’re not from here”. My needs for such were minimal but for the chicas, this would have been an issue. Tangentially, there are almost no public toilets in Cuba...more on that later.

GROCERIES

Street food, or food in general, is hard(er) to find. You don’t miss something, until it’s gone, and applying the ‘traveler’s standard’ to Cuba is a mistake. In every other country, where there are tourists, there are shops that cater to them; but not Cuba. I would also opine that the “Cuban Situation” is a factor in this. The Corizon isn’t located in a tourist district (aka Gringo-town), it’s in an area directly west of downtown. The “local shops” servicing locals provide what’s available, and upon your first visit to a Cuban “local” you may be shocked by what’s available; beans and booze. No bread, fruit, fresh veg (can only), dairy, condiments or meat. Lots of canned and bagged beans, and walls of bottled drinks and alcohol. And what they DID have, (beans, booze and breakfast cereal) wasn’t exactly cheap by any standard (CUC or CUP). I did note that there were these tubs of pickles though, probably 1litre, but they were priced at \$17 and THAT they had plenty of...the things that were in greatest supply, were the things no one wanted. In Cuba it looked like someone (govt is king) here decided what the minimarts would carry, regardless of demand. Thus the shelves were full of unsold/seldom wanted items like beans, but had empty coolers for meat, and eventually empty shelves for soda...you don’t miss the free-market until it’s gone.

CUC or CUP

It’s impossible to discuss Cuba without a bit more on the money. Tourists are provided CUC at the currency exchanges. The on-line blogs I read, again, came from a vacationers perspective; stay at a hotel or *casas peticulares* (guest houses) for around \$40 a night and away you go. Sylvia, my “casa mama’ at Corazon, sat me down on the first morning and explained that I could convert my CUC (foreigner\$\$) for CUP (local\$\$) and I was just stunned. You head to the ‘moneda’ locations, essentially money exchanges for locals and convert away. I changed \$20 in CUC for \$480 in CUP and away I went.

Now which is which? CUC, has Cuban buildings on it, and generally has bolder colors. CUP has pictures of people on it and it generally pale in tone. OK, but what’s the REAL difference.. ah my friends, the difference is everything...and one of the “bohemian” joys I found in Cuba.

When you travel in the “gringo” areas of Cuba, everything, and I mean EVERYTHING will be priced in CUC. Ice Cream is “1”, a sandwich is “2” and a meal might be “4-8”. My first night I had this fist full of CUC and thought I was in the Dollar-store, I paid \$2 for a burger, another \$1 for a drink and thought. OK, I can live on \$3 a meal. I was seated, in a restaurant, with a waitress taking the order, I was SUCH a tourist.

The rule of thumb is that you judge the price by the customer. If there are Cubans eating, the price is in CUP; if not, it's CUC...a price of "8" for a burger would be outrageous in CUC, but in CUP, that 32cents. Bon Appetit.

As previously stated, there is no street food in Cuba. BUT, the Cuban equivalent is sold out of street-side storefronts in town, and from front-windows away from town. Once you leave Gringo-town you are oh-so local, and you need CUP to survive..

So that first day, with the camera strapped to my right hand, I began the walk of Havana. Much like the "knowledge" that UK taxi drivers used to require (now replaced by Google maps and Maps. Me) to gain the "knowledge" of Havana would require walking all streets. Thankfully, Havana has a grid system, but I digress.

Camera in my right, pocket full of CUP on my left, and I'm off. I'm shooting like crazy, the colors, the decay, the street art, the street people..everything happens in the streets in Cuba...I'm loving it. Around noon, I start noticing people walking around with small ice-cream cones....Santa wants..I track down the source and queue up...it's "3" but everyone in line is a local...the average salary in Cuba is 30CUC a month, so there's no way they're paying \$3 (CUC) for an ice cream.. they're paying 12cents. The bohemian heritage swells inside me.. I can get used to 12cent ice-cream. And as it turns out, I radically overpaid. With a little research and a fair amount of shoe leather, I discovered that the same ice cream can be had a few blocks away, and farther from Gringo-town, for 1 CUP; 4cents. When I did this dairy "haj" I just had to double down and get 2. So I would put the camera away and double-fist my treat...such are the rewards when you have CUP. Likewise, there would be an 8CUP burger (32cents) and a 10CUP pizza for those "in the know". I didn't any blogs mentioning this 'culinary trail'.

GIVE US THIS DAY, OUR DAILY BREAD

I will not claim to know all the 'rules' for locals under the current socialist system, just relate what I was told. Everyone has to work, and receives around \$30 a month as a base; \$1 a day. When you apply this knowledge to what you experience as a tourist, you realize how lucky you are not to live here. Locals will never have the \$2burger, served inside, by a waitress. Their burgers will come thru a window. The government prescribes ration books for things like bread and rice. I believe each person gets 5lbs of rice per month..bread seemed more plentiful, but I don't recall the allotment. I stood in line at a panaderia and bought 5 dinner-rolls (the normal shape of things) for 5CUP, 20cents. Only after paying did I note that bags were NOT provided by the government, so I was handed my 5 rolls to carry away. Have you ever eaten 5 dinner rolls as a snack? I have. And that's a lot of carbs.

I had heard that milk is viewed as something for children or the unwell. I can't comment, only to say I rarely saw milk, but it was available in Cienfuegos, which must be closer to the cows. In fact, each city I visited had a local 'specialty'; something that the other towns didn't have. In Havana it was cold soda; in Vinales it was cookies. In Trinidad it was potato chips. In Cienfuegos it was milk and chocolate. Again, I'm not saying I understood why, this is just what I saw.

GIVE US THIS DAY, OUR DAILY WORK

About those jobs. There are street-sweepers in Cuba..physical street-sweepers. Their job is to broom up the detritus of a walking public on a daily basis. I would love to report that there are a cadre of sweepers for every street and that the cities glistened like pearls in the Caribbean...they do not. Like essentially “forced” labor the world-over, when ‘assigned’ a job, the quality suffers, whether it’s an east-German car or a street in Havana...your results will vary. In Gringo-town the streets are really clean, and you see the sweepers keeping it that way. As you walk the barrios, the sweepers appear outmatched. You still see them, but they’re like fending off flood waters with a mop. The difference is jarring. If you are considering a trip to Cuba, be aware of this difference. The “Gringo” experience would be great, you’re taken on tours between Gringo-approved locations, resorts and restaurants; shuttled in vintage cars and that might be great. But venture just a few blocks off that gleaming “path” and the realities of Cuban life can be stark.

There is a “Gringo” effect on work as well; ie Tourism = money. This is a global reality, but again, in Cuba the effects are stark. Here’s an example.

One of the realities that struck me while walking the million paces of Cuba, is the lack of lawn-mowers. I’m sure they exist, but I never saw one. In Havana, there’s some grass around the large public institutions that looks well kept. THEY have lawnmowers. But for other grass, there are “machete men”. Cubans armed with machetes and not brooms. Incredibly, they stoop over and chop at the grass to lop it down, manually... for hours every day. During my “rounds” of the cities, I would see these guys whacking away...mindlessly, controlling the landscaping with brute force. And for this they get that all-mighty 1CUC (more likely 24CUP).

But along comes tourism. If “machete man” is lucky enough to have a house with a spare room or two (rare with families doubled/tripled up) he can put a couple of beds in there and suddenly he’s not just living in a house, he’s got a *casa peticulares*. He hangs a sign out front noting guest accommodation, the symbol for this is an upside down blue anchor and somehow, if he can get a single guest/foreigner the going rate can be as high as \$40 a night, he’s essentially increased his take forty-fold and perhaps he can drop the machete.

Now that sounds great. Tourists come, and particularly AMERICAN tourists come. When entering Cuba from America, citizens have to “tick a box” denoting why they’re coming. The popular option is “helping the Cuban People” and one of the ways to “prove” this is to show receipts from staying at such places. So those who can, started fixing up their spare rooms (possibly kicking out the kids) and everyone now has a *casa peliculare* for rent. Everyone who can.. To say there’s a glut of guest accommodation is an understatement. That could be a factor in the current housing shortage for locals. Everyone simultaneously reaching out for the brass ring of touristic-prosperity from a relatively small base of tourists.

The guide for my street tour mentioned that only 15% of the populace was NOT involved with tourism. The sweepers and the machete-men. I think that’s a low number, but what do I know from 2 weeks of walking around?

So, I mentioned having that first hostel, booked from Mexico, Corazon del Mundo. After a few days of the “Havana Stomp”, it was time to move. For those on vacation (or more flush) you can hire a vintage car/driver to take you to your next stop. The experience must be grand. Another option is the Cuban bus system which is cheaper, and offers you the experience of traveling on a bus. Before I came, my experience with the local bus is that it’s used by locals. In Cuba, with the salary of \$1 a day, taking the bus is a healthy fantasy. They hitch-hike. The last option for gringos is the collective. In Tunisia this was called the “louage”. A local car jammed full of human cargo aimed in a similar direction.

Sylvia, at Corazon, literally “makes the call” for you and at the appointed time, a vintage 1950’s car rolls up. It surely lacks the spit-polish of the private rides, but cars of this vintage are spacious on the inside, if lacking in seat comfort. Your keister bounces on springs from the 1950’s as well. The price is roughly \$10CUC per hour. Vinales, my first destination was about 2hrs away, so \$20. This is roughly equivalent to the bus, with the advantage of door-to-door service....

But more on Sylvia’s service. I had read a few posts regarding the linking of casas in Cuba. No doubt about it, Corazon is a hostel; probably 25 beds in several rooms, roof-top bar; \$10 a night. But her services also include having satellite *casa peticulares* in all the major cities. Thus you aren’t on your own when it comes to finding another place, Sylvia does this for you. So you say “Sylvia, I want to see Vinales”. She calls for a collective, and then alerts her contacts in Vinales that Santa is coming for a visit.” On your way out the door, she hands you the name of your next stay to give to the driver and away you go. This works on the surface, but though Sylvia said all places were \$10 a night, you had to actually negotiate that with each stop, which was a bit of a hassle. In retrospect, Sylvia’s operation in Havana is the model of efficiency and marketing. She rarely had less than 15 people a night and more frequently had an overflow crowd that spilled into adjoining places. She offered meals, but rarely did anyone take her up on this...she made bank just find on our \$10.

With the casas, the story is a bit different. They generally rent for \$20 on up, per room. A room might have 3 beds, so if you have two friends, it’s a great deal. For the Bon Voyager alone, this presented a problem. The first place was adamant that I pay the room rate of \$20, even though Sylvia said this was not the case. The leverage the tourist has, is in the breakfast. Prepared meals are generally great in Cuba. But “great” isn’t cheap. Breakfast, with an egg and juices and toast, is \$5CUC. Again, something a local will never enjoy; nor did I. But, as a negotiating tool, I would offer to pay \$10 a night, BUT I would also have the \$5 breakfast, raising the per-day rate for me to \$15. More than Sylvia’s but at least I would get breakfast.

So I got to see Vinales, home to a UNESCO national park to preserve manual farming of coffee and tobacco. You have daily opportunities to buy cigars and rum in Cuba, and during the drive to Vinales, the driver of the ’54 Buick actually took us to a tobacco farm where I’m sure he got a financial ‘taste’ of the money I spent on cigars. But I digress.

From Vinales, I just had to tell the casa mama that I was heading to Trinidad. She, like Sylvia called for a collective and arranged a casa in Trinidad. Then from Trinidad to Cienfuegos the same. Heading back to Havana after a week of movement, I went rogue, and just arranged for a taxi. For the same price, I sat in

a taxi, with dupa-conforming bucket seats, air conditioning, and about 15mph faster than the old colectivos... the lure of traveling in 1950's era cars fades quickly.

So remember where everyone who could, was converting their spare bedrooms into guest accommodations? Vinales, Trinidad and Cienfuegos were no different. It has become the standard...everyone has rooms. But the system employed by Sylvia and others (no doubt) means that only a select few get linked together. The odds that someone would just randomly appear in town without accommodation is small. Some Brits I travelled with, without the credit card restrictions of Yanks, booked thru AirBnB and booking and were glad to know, in advance where they would be staying. I'm sure they paid more, but were none the less satisfied with the experience.

There were probably 400 casas in Vinales and almost all were offering guest accommodations. I do wonder what is worse, fixing up your place as a guest accommodation and having no one stay, or being machete-man cutting a field of grass. I don't know how they enforce the "work" requirement, or whether the housing is viewed as additional income to locals...I just saw stuff.

So that's money, housing and transport, which is logistics. Here is what else I experienced:

INTERNET

Internet is doled out by card, 1 card, 1hour, 1CUC. To get online, you visit a park or landmark, and log in..most have the strength to connect to email, and on a rare occasion, you can open a website, but don't count on it. One way to control the people is to make information impossible to get. After a day, you just stop wanting it.. I can almost see Miami, but I had better Wi-Fi in the barren planes of Mongolia.

There are colors here among the crumbled buildings ... pastel shades of decay..like Varanasi and Kochi India, there is a grace here, visible to those who seek it out. Havana was the best, with Cienfuegos a distant second. Nothing to photograph in Trinidad, and not much in Vinales, but there are experiences in both.

My first day in Havana was the stuff cameras were invented for, a freshness of vision around every corner..but by the second day, the political realities set in. You'd find some street art and as you're lining up a shot, a local comes up and says he "owns" everything on the block and demands tribute. The art is good, but not great. There is a pressure here, tourists as ATM, street hustled for baby milk, phone cards, bicycle taxis, and even a band of elderly women, tough looking, who stand on corners smoking big cohebas and offering pictures for tribute.. there's the Havana you take, and the Havana that is sold to you...

Third day here and it rains...the drainage is poor so things flood. If it is a serious downpour, the area 300meters from the coast in Havana floods to the point of being impassable for taxis or cars. It would

be a great day for a lazy cup of coffee, if there was coffee...the abundance of sugar cane makes rum a cheap substitute for many things. A pint of orange juice is almost \$3 but a fifth of rum is \$12..

Took a food tour in Havana that began with the caveat, "hope there's food" which was different..Cuban sandwiches, made by Cubans, not from the, coffee pizza and the most amazing beef and lobster appetizers..these guys know how to cook, but only for tourists..but again, only for tourists. The Cuban was \$2.60 CUC..or 3 days wages for machete-men.

VINALES

Venturing to Vinales in a vintage '56 Olds was a hoot, but somehow I'm missing the attraction of the place. There is horseback riding, and bike tours, if they had bikes...they don't.

In Vinales the power gets cut... frequently.. my host family explains it's old wires and old story about equipment in need of repair. So be weary of dining in the 7pm hour and bring a headlamp.

Vinales is as close to a resort town as I've seen here. Lush and full of restaurants and tourist shops. There is only one food shop, and empty shelves, but they have cookies..which helps., I found the local ice cream stand, where 12cents wins the prize-and a pizza shop where 60cents delivers any of 5 pizza toppings.

I'm feeling a bit of the travelers lament here. Other tourists have been raving about this area bit from what I've seen, the reviews are mixed. Wi-Fi was fast, but again, email only.

The walking tour was well worth the \$10 fee. It was just me and Julio heading through the UNESCO protected farms that cover the low lying fields here. The UNESCO designation means nothing can change here, so there's no machinery, just the sweat of the farmer and the gristle of his animals pulling the plow. Sort of like Cuban version of the Amish.

We were done by noon and we shared a cheap lunch with the other tour guided.. the afternoon was spent out at this man-made attraction, prehistoric painting..it was a good walk..

TRINIDAD

The 7hr drive to Trinidad was slightly less than optimal. Getting to Vinales took about 2 hours thirty minutes in that '56 Olds..who could believe that driving in a vintage car would have a time limit... but it does. At 2hours 35 minutes, old cars were no longer fun...it was transport, but not style. The old seats had springs that begged to burst through their leather restraints and impale you..comfort left a long time ago. After returning near Havana we were combined, repackaged and repurposed to Trinidad in a

1950s troop transport that held 17, not so comfortably...there seemed to be about 2 inches of clear space near the roof that wasn't filled with flesh or luggage, but I'm not sure.

As with Vinales there was an attraction, that faded quickly...exit strategy employed...i spent my day at the beach and it was glorious, but almost no photos.. returning to town in hopes of catching greatness..i caught a cold drink and some cheap ice cream...

100 Fires..CIENFUEGOS

The colectivo I arranged ended up being an ordinary taxi, but better speed and bucket seats. Cienfuego was only an hour, and the place I've been looking for. A nice mixture of old and older buildings with wide lanes and no cobblestones. There is a sheltered port here which allows the cruise ships to disembark passengers for a 3hr excursion. I had the afternoon to walk around and the highlight was finding a local cafeteria that had 40cent burgers and 20 cent chorizo..i hit that a lot.

A rainy Sunday was no reason not to walk around and most of the day was rain free after a wet start. I walked for 7hrs up and down the streets, finding art, and old cars, just frequently enough to keep me going. I walked along the main road to a terminus called Pinto Gordo where there was a park. It was also a restaurant where the matre de informed me that to sit by the water required buying a drink. I agreed but them said "after" which allowed me to take a few shots and sneak out the back...the view wasn't even worth the drink.

My host mama at Casa Ana was promoting her cooking skills and tempting me with lobster...and I caved...it was wonderful...lobster with cream of shrimp soup and rice..amazing for \$12.... and now for the days excitement.

Returning to Havana by 2pm, I was excited to be back on familiar grounds, the hostel, the city, the bustle. I got a few hours in with the camera and found a few beers. The "local shop" had run out of soda; and a lot of brand, while I was away but I was home.

THOUGHTS

Cubans seemed to very comfortable living within their own system. Everyone essentially has two jobs, the one mandated by their society and the one that's done on the sly. It makes everyone an entrepreneur, essentially. I was told that when a building is renovated, the government sends in painters to give it that final finished look. The first thing the painters do is to divert half the paint into other containers and add water; essentially "white washing" the walls instead of painting. These jars and

bottles of paint are then sold by the painters for some extra cash. Perhaps this is where the weathered look of all the buildings comes from..

The Cubans I met all spoke of the day when the US Embargo would be lifted as being a great day for the Cuban people...more money coming in, more investment. But the current plan is for the government to own 51% of everything would seem to make investment difficult, as well as the two tier system of money. While Cuba is difficult to get to, it is not impossible, so I don't know where the extra tourists would come from. The beach in Trinidad was great with 50 people on it. 550? That might change things.

As for commerce, can Cuba increase production of Havana Club rum and still have it made in Cuba? Same with the cigars..how many smokes can they make? These are questions the tourists would discuss when we were noshing on 30cent hamburgers and 4cent ice cream cones..

Those American flight restrictions were another hot topic. Lots of foreigners come thru the US to get cheap direct flights into Cuba. Some reported no issues, but they all had different stories. A dutch girl reported a sort of "medical" exam with rubber gloves and squeezing of her arms . (yikes?), others had a separate line to search their carry-ons a second time. No consistency. The Americans that came thru all reported having to "tick" the "support for the Cuban people" box, but then nothing else. Like with many things in life, the rules are loosely consistent; read: Your results may vary.

Since I came thru Mexico, I have made no declarations to anyone about my intent. I do have a pair of passport stamps from Havana that may draw some suspicion, but since I came thru Mexico, there was no (hopefully) crime committed. And frankly at this point, I would be hard pressed to remember what my actual intent was...cheap food and photos?

ABOUT THOSE BATHROOMS

OK, so toilet seats were a rarity...but it was even rarer to find a public bano. I was walking for hours in Havana and when nature calls there, no one listens. I was deep in the poorer section of town and was pondering having to walk all the way back to the gringo section to find relief when I spied a cluster of dumpsters, turned upside down along a broad lane. Turns out, identified by the smell, that I had stumbled upon the "public" restroom. Several men were taking advantage of the service, so I joined in, but it really felt odd to have it so publically "sanctioned".

THE RIDE OUT

Taxi drivers are kings in Cuba. They charge CUC, seem lightly regulated and can make up prices on the fly. The one standard rate was to going to/from the airport. From 8am to 6pm it's \$25CUC, after those hours it jumps to \$30. The money made in this area is staggering since sharing a taxi is rare. There is presently no way for tourists to find each other. Sylvia called me a cab, but there could be another traveler in the next building needing the same ride, I'll never know. I hop in, and pay my \$30 upon exit at the airport.

AND IN THE END?

So as the plane left Cuban airspace, I was left feeling mixed emotions. While I enjoyed discovering the 'forbidden country' for myself, I am left remembering the struggle more than the inherent beauty of the place. The locals are always out in the street, so the interaction with them is unavoidable. My Spanish was sufficient to have a few conversations with them. I tried to steer clear of politics, but this too is unavoidable. Their love of Che Guavera and Fidel is universal, but perhaps this has to do with the media access or lack thereof. The full internet was made available to the Cuban government in early December, and eventually it is hoped this will move down to the people. They have smart-phones but right now it's for texting and calling friends and family. Once the rest of the world opens up to them, things will change...I just don't know for better or worse..

SHOULD YOU GO?

That, I'll leave up to you. I've seen a vast swath of the planet and Cuba surely had its quirks, but for a week or 10 days, it would be a unique trip. Stay on the "gringo path" and I've got a place that makes the best "Cuban" sandwiches... The Voyager knows all dances, but the Cuban Salsa is wonderful...you can take a night of lessons.

Pictures to Ponder.

Voyager Out

PS. The Cuban beer is nothing great, and there are no pretzels to be had.