

CUBANISM – Human Interest Observations

By Christopher Gulden, s/v Bristol Head

Having spent the winter sailing around the Caribbean, many different island cultures, languages, people, climates, topography, and cuisines have been experienced. Each has their own stamp, a unique flavor, maybe reverse traffic flow, speed bumps or pot holes to slow for safety, steep hills, beaches, arid hills, jungle, their own version of national pride that is woven into the music, dress, and socialization. The sharing of smiles, or frequency of locals smiling has been one element that has caught my attention. It's an unspoken attitude that speaks much about status quo.

You tour these places hunting that special feeling. Why is this place different and what to capture with one's time and money. The cruise ship folks are forced to process all this in a frenetic port to port week, yet on a sailboat, there is a slow motion to the passing of harbors, meals ashore, provisioning, clearing customs, among other exchanges. The boat has required repairs along the way, and those needs have added to the assimilations, and fingers crossed, a chance special encounter of meeting someone that helps make the repair a pleasant and learning experience

If sailing is a quest for wind passing perfectly across your sails with favorable seas rocking the boat in sinusoidal harmony, a third medium, radio transmissivity, can add to a static free journey. Stepping on shore of an island holds all these promises in a similar regard. A good restaurant may be our wind, the quality of selection at the grocery store and the smoothness of the taxi ride there and back - waves, and subconsciously smiles are radio comm. That is, we may get what we need but are we having fun doing it?



Alas, I feel as though I saved the best for last when arriving in Havana. Cubans are an earful and eyeful of music, dance, and appreciation - a step above and beyond my expectations. A genuine smile is gratis and expected. Havana is blessed with an urban landscape and architectural history that feeds this culture like a dovetail joint, with added unique character of late 1950's automobiles restored in various degrees of splendor, serving as a parlay between the historical streetscapes, the limited availability of modern amenities, and a means for arriving at their next gig in style. Even the dogs about town seem

to never bark, as they frolic in fearless acceptance of the surroundings.

Cruising around Havana, there is an ever-present sense of mild jubilation. The horns on all the cars toot out a unique friendly call saying 'howdy do amigo, passing by'; such a pleasant change from the norm, it begs us all to go home and install a 'make me smile' horn in our cars. The roadways are a community and language of their own as well. The paved surfaces are a shared thoroughfare of bikes, horse carriages, bike cabs, hitchers, walkers, vendors, potholes, buses, trucks, stalled cars, and kids playing

soccer. The traffic lights have timers on them, informing the number of seconds it will either remain green or red – how novel and helpful! The experience adds up to be rich, friendly, and sight-full. However, when the wind dies, it should be noted the smog from all the diesel vehicle engines poses as an irritant and health risk to all.

Collectively, all the restaurateurs in the Caribbean offers a diner a cornucopia of dining experiences that would quickly burst their YELP! account to Anthony Bourdain status, and it would be rightly deserved. From good service to bad, expensive to a good deal, maybe you don't get a napkin, never expect hot water from the restroom sink, all the while, at least for me, hoping the sound system plays more than just repeating reggae hits. Cuban cuisine was billed as bland and boring, and thank you to those friends and journalist folks for lowering my expectations, as the savory mouthfuls I found were plentiful and satiating; i.e., there is splendid and delicious food on the island, best found at 'paladars', which are privately owned restaurants. In terms of service, Cuba has achieved the perfect chromometer of 'island time' tempo. Expect some delays and don't be in a hurry, and all will usually fall together as it naturally should. You are a leg up if fluent in Spanish, and if there is a live acapella band in the corner, then well moments of idleness have no language, shaking your shoulders to a foot tapping salsa beats.

Neo-Communism, reforming socialism, whatever the 'ism', something unique is going on in Cuba. Yes the government wields a massive heavy stick, but the tide is turning and private enterprise is taking seed. Cautiously folks are dancing with cautious foreign investors, hanging a shingle, creating mainly paladars and casa de particulars (bed & breakfasts), that are in varying degrees, amazing given the very modest resources available. I toured a several story tourist rental complex in old town Havana which was a series of flats with outdoor terraces and immaculate interior décor, complete with Cuban hospitality woven in, whereas a spotless car garage served as a garage by night, but was the bar and table area by day, complete with a breakfast, lunch, or cigar and rum open air emporium.



There were a couple adventures into the countryside that fleshed out my take on Cubanism. It is a big ole island and the rural scene reflected other Caribbean outroads. The Auto Pista reminded me of a long roadtrip a few years back southbound across Mexico. Cattle on the loose, pedestrians shaded under an overpass, a horse & buggy enjoying the smooth ride half in and half out of the lane. By day the rules of the road were comically self-explanatory, by night, like on a sailboat, the darkness can lurk of perils. At one destination in Vinales, for a handful of hours in straight up daylight I rode a horse alongside a local cowboy, and learned of organic tobacco farming, their rural simplicity and its scenic beauty, spotted a Cuban national parrot, and a flock of vultures circling above the valley floor in search of dead meat.

Another outing took us to the Bay of Pigs for snorkeling in the crystal clear water, followed by a fantastic lunch in the back courtyard of a family's homestead.



Artistically, there is a sense that Cuba has been sequestered and is about to explode. Certainly Ry Cooder felt this however many years ago when he brought us the timeless Buena Vista Social Club. Yes the live music is ubiquitous and fantastic! Unlike most other Caribbean islands where a series of copycat tiki bars carries the waterfront, here a cow bell, clave & maracas, a few guitar-like string instruments, and a proud set of vocal pipes coming from a pint sized

singer, create fabulous high energy music that compels dancing. Forget cover-charges, bulky doormen, billboards, stapled up leaflets, and think New Orleans; this talent is everywhere, and what a life-lesson to hear the beautiful sounds of a society that takes street dancing for granted among the Spanish colonnades, cobble stones, government crumbs, black market shirts & shoes, and priceless romantic glances across the plaza.

So yea, if Anthony and Ry want to make passage with me to Cuba... let's make sure someone speaks Spanish... the berths, beers, amigo smiles, and 1956 Buick rides are on me. We can toot our horns in this cacophony of uniquely delightful Cubanism.