

CUBA – November 2010



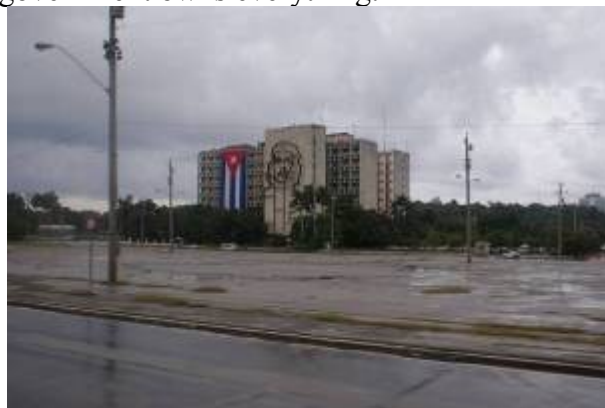
Rick's 60, I can't believe it as it only seems a few years ago that we were in our 20's dancing to "Only Women Bleed" at a nightclub in Selsey. We had to do something to mark this momentous occasion and a few days after a Ten Pin Bowling party we set off for Havana. As we left Havana airport it was absolutely tipping down, there weren't any gutters on buildings and we had to pass through the torrential rain to get into the taxi. Only the tourists were gob-smacked about the rain, the locals seemed oblivious to it. It was dark by now, our taxi had no seat belts and there were very few street lamps, not much traffic but plenty of pot holes. We drove round and round Havana as the taxi driver couldn't find our hotel. Fortunately by the time he eventually dropped us off at San Francisco Square and pointed us in the right direction the rain had stopped.

Our hotel "Conde De Villanneva" was in the historic part of the city and is a converted old colonial home set around a courtyard with only 9 rooms each named after famous Cuban tobacco-growing regions. It's a hotel especially for cigar lovers as they have a special cigar room where you can buy special cigars and watch cigar rolling demonstrations. Our room was huge with ceilings as high as a house, at least 20 ft. There was a set of very high double doors but no windows. During the night I had to use my mobile phone light to find my way to the bathroom as they also only had very weak low energy bulbs. The most exciting thing for Rick was that there were caged cockatiels and lovebirds and a resident peacock and a bolshie bantam cockerel strutting about. It was a good job that we decided not to eat at the restaurant adjacent to the hotel as it started to tip down with rain again. We made a good choice to eat at the hotel restaurant as it was only 8 pesos for a drink, bread and butter, starter, main course and sweet. It was quite basic food, salad, fruit, pork and rice but plenty of it. We were entertained by a live band but there was music all around the hotel.



The next morning we made our way to another hotel for a meeting with the "Captivating Cub" rep where we got carried away and booked loads of trips starting with a city tour that afternoon. Two currencies run side by side, the local pesos are worth 24 times more than the convertibles. We were very lucky with our hotel as it was in one of the prettiest parts of the historical sector which appeared to be a lot cheaper than the other part of the city where most of the big tourist hotels were. We sat in a garden opposite our hotel for lunch

which cost 10 pesos (£7) that included a drink, bread, a huge lobster and sweet. The city tour was great value and we managed to dodge the showers. Most of the large buildings have been converted into art galleries, museums or official buildings. Revolution Square was disappointing and a bit bleak being surrounded by government buildings. It looks better at night when the portraits of Castro and Che are illuminated. The city has been frozen in time, the many beautiful buildings with their crumbling facades, balustrades and columns have been left to decay. When the rich Americans and landowners fled Cuba during the Revolution the buildings were offered to the Cubans. After the Revolution there was another mass exodus to the US in 1980 following an incident at the Peruvian Embassy when Castro said anyone who wanted to leave the country could during a set period of time. Our rep said that for each person that left Castro also let the prisoners who had served the most time leave, it was a sort of ethnic cleansing. Our guide also said that in 1980 her parents had been waiting for maintenance materials for their wooden house but were then offered a 2 bathroom, 5 bedroom house instead that they could buy. It was brilliant at the time when there were only 5 of them but now there are 15 of them, 3 generations living in the same house. Housing in Cuba is a huge problem, the buildings are beautiful but there are not the resources to maintain them. Also, they can pay off their mortgage but they can't transfer the property to their family without starting a new loan. It's similar with the old American cars, they belong to the family and can't be sold, just passed on. In effect nobody owns anything, the government owns everything.



We were taken to a rum factory but it was really a tourist shop selling cigars and rum. The chap in charge was hilarious, he spoke extremely fast but still got us to buy his wares. It was touch and go because of the rain whether we could take the catamaran trip around the harbour. They made a big thing about having to take your passport because of people entering and leaving Cuba illegally. It was a bit of a farce, we all sat on the catamaran and had weak rum and got to get a coastal view of the city.



As a result of the historical part of the city being declared a UNESCO site the government has started to renovate some of the buildings. They are making a good job of it and have "before photographs" displayed on some of the more prominent ones. Once again, our hotel is in such a great position, everywhere around us is the sound of the live bands. Ernest Hemingway's hotel room is just up the road, it's really buzzy, wish we could stay awake to take advantage of it all.



Oh my god, we have a mouse or even a rat in our room. I went to get my sandals out of the case and the Tesco carrier bag that Rick's shoes were in was completely shredded.

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Big, big tour. There wasn't much traffic and our first stop was a cigar factory. It's equal pay, then it's equal pay in Cuba anyway, a doctor gets the same as a waitress, they are more keen to get a job in the tourist industry as they get tips. The cigar factory was very interesting; the employees get 3 free cigars a day. Almost everything is done manually although they have recently invested in a machine for testing the density of the cigars. We bought some more cigars. Onto the Valle de Vinales another Unesco site. It took 15 people 5 years to complete a painting on the limestone rock on the side of the cliff Mogote Dos Hermanas. The painting is of a huge snail, dinosaurs, sea monsters and humans which are meant to symbolize the theory of evolution. It looks quite good from a distance and although it was a main tourist stop is seemed quite peaceful with animals roaming about. The next stop was a little way north of the village of Vinales and that was the caves Cueva del Indio. There were lovely gardens around the cave that smelt strongly of orchids. Generally the countryside is just left to nature and there weren't that many flowers about. Our lunch was typically Cuban, fruit, pork with rice and puy lentils. We sat opposite a couple from Haiti who manufacture oils from a certain type of wood that is plentiful there, I think it was something like cedar. They want their son to study business at Plymouth University and perfumery in France at the same time. We thought that may be a bit much for him, it's a bit like the Americans doing all of Europe in 2 weeks. We were being taken to a farm next and the most noticeable thing about the day was that farming is not mechanised, they still use the horse and plough ! I can't remember how much land the farmers are allowed to own but it's not much and they have to give most of the profits to the government. In the valley coffee, tobacco, sugarcane, avocados, oranges and bananas are the main crops. The farmer, who was a Rock Hudson lookalike, and very handsome took us into his barn where there were drying racks for the tobacco leaves. He then proceeded to show us how to roll a cigar after which we were all given one to smoke. It's funny being in a place where smoking is actively encouraged. His wife then made us all a cup of organic coffee in their spartan house/hut. It was all quite quaint with turkeys, pigs, chickens and other livestock running around. His fields were mainly planted with tobacco and he had some coffee beans drying out on a rack along with the chicken poo. It was getting quite late by now and we were seriously concerned

that we wouldn't be back in time to pick up the coach to take us to the famous Havana Tropicana Club. The rep managed to change the pick up time and we had all of about 10 minutes to run back to our hotel to change. A nice couple joined us at the Tropicana and we had a table right next to the stage, it was a bit too close really. The ladies were given a rose and the men a cigar. The food was average but the show was entertaining. There was a single chap on the other end of our table who initially was looking a little bored until they put a couple of girls opposite him. He was like the cat that got the cream and we left him dancing alternating between the two.



Saturday onwards

We had to walk with our cases to Hotel Isabela to wait for the coach to take us to Varadero. One of the hotel porters took Rick into a cupboard under the stairs and sold him some cigars. He wouldn't let him out until the coast was clear. I wondered why he was so long going to the loo. Anyway, after three and a half hours we had been forgotten and were eventually picked up by a taxi driver for the 2 hour journey to the resort. That was a really depressing journey, we heard how in the ten years of austerity they put condoms in the oven to melt and serve as cheese on their pizzas. We stopped at a house to have the tyres pumped up as the government garage equipment was kaput. The journey seemed to go on for ever and I have never been so pleased to get out of a taxi. He was a pleasant chap but depressing and I felt very guilty going to a 5 star all inclusive while the locals still have food rationing and earn very little. First impression of the hotel Varadero Iberostar were good. The gardens were immaculate and our room was large with a fantastic bathroom. The main buffet restaurant was better than we were expecting, there was quite a lot of choice.



The next morning we weren't quite so sure about it. As we laid on the sunbeds around the enormous pool we were continuously asked to play ping, pong, water polo, rifle shooting, archery, water aerobics and so on. I enjoyed the aerobics and Rick usually came about third in the archery and shooting competitions. He was always beaten by the Russians, there were plenty of them, some with big scars up their stomachs. There were lots of big Canadians too. We sort of settled into a routine. I'd wake up about 5.30am and watch the HBO channel, one morning I managed to watch 2 films before breakfast. They were pretty crappy movies. After breakfast we would lie around pool until lunchtime and maybe join in the aerobics or shooting. After lunch we would go to the beach which was just fabulous, golden sand and turquoise water. For the first few days it was quite showery but pleasantly warm, it averaged about 28 degrees. About 5pm we would leave the beach and have a drink by the pool, one afternoon Rick won a bottle of rum on the bingo. Sometimes we

would have a couple of games of table tennis before going to our room. Rick would sit on the balcony with his book and cigar while got fixated once again on the HBO channel. I can't ever remember watching some much television. Then about 8.30 pm we would go down to dinner. We much preferred the lunches as the service in the restaurants wasn't so good in the evenings and the other restaurants were disappointing. Evenings finished fairly early as the entertainment was all in-house and very average. The drinks were good but there is only so much you can put back. Funny thing was that we mentioned that it was strange that however much we drank throughout the day it didn't seem to affect us. Foolish last words, it suddenly hit me and after an after beach drinks session with the Essex couple I completely zonked out. It only happened once though.



We got friendly with the lunchtime waitresses, Rick would leave them a peso and they would keep refilling our wine glasses. They fell in love with my Monsoon sandals as even if they had the money they wouldn't be able to buy anything like that in Cuba. On the last day I left them all my sandals and came home in just Tesco flip flops, it was lovely to see their faces. After Havana we were a bit excused out and didn't want to do any more trips but we did take the tourist bus into town a couple of times. We bought some paintings for Tenerife that cost about £35 for the three. It was a bit unfortunate but I had a bad stomach for most of our time at Varadero but it didn't stop me eating and drinking. Rick also got it a couple of days before we left. We were at the resort for 11 nights and it seemed like ages. Each time we contacted home we were told that it was "bloody freezing" and had got down to minus 21 in Scotland



We were incredulous when told that Gatwick had closed because of the snow, it was only November/December for goodness sake. Anyway, on the Thursday 1 December we returned home on one of the only 2 Virgin Gatwick flights that day. We were redirected to Heathrow and then coached to Gatwick. Cuba was one of our best holidays and our lasting memory of Varadero Oberostar is "Hey, Hey Baby, Oooh, Ahhhh, I wanna know ohhhh if you'll be my girl". They even got Rick singing along to it !!!!!