



From Cuba, with love

BY AVA ROOSEVELT

I often wonder how much has changed in Cuba since 2002 when my late husband, William D. Roosevelt, and I traveled to Havana under the auspices of a Washington, D.C. think-tank to seek an alternative treatment for Bill's recurring prostate cancer. We were told Fidel Castro was afflicted with the same disease, but even to this day in this secretive nation, it is still not clear what ails the Communist dictator.

To get to Cuba, we flew our plane to Nassau, Bahamas, and boarded a government-operated Cubana de Aviacion flight to

Jose' Marti Airport in Havana. Neither the bumpy flight nor a sip of the strongest coffee compared to the jolt of adrenaline I felt stepping on the ground in this forbidden land.

Cuba has been caught in a time warp dating back to the 1950s. The cars, the buildings and people all suggest a simpler, less sophisticated time. I was strongly advised to travel light, carry lots of dollar bills, bring a first aid kit, and be careful what we say.



Our transportation was provided by a government driver named Raul who pretended not to speak English. My heart skipped when I discovered a shoebox-size recording device on the car seat. On the way to the Parque Central Hotel, scenes of deprivation and poverty shook my soul, filling me with profound sadness. Yet, in spite of their circumstances, people seemed to be happy. These impoverished scenes altered my perception of life.

While Bill busied himself with meetings, I decided to see as much of this curious country as I could. I was fascinated by this tiny speck of human existence closed to the world for nearly half a century. Frustrated with my poor Spanish, Raul finally turned off the recorder and opened up. It turned out he was an American-educated engineer who spoke English well. He told me he was in pain. His face was swollen and he ingested tablets that weren't helping. I offered him a \$10 antibiotic pill from my portable pharmacy.

"I can't step inside your hotel, Señora. It's against the law."

"I'll give it to you later. Meanwhile, let's go to the Havana Yacht Club."

"I am a member there," Raul volunteered.

I used my best acting abilities to hide my utter astonishment.

"Can you join us for lunch?"

"Si, Señora, with pleasure. I am allowed to bring guests."

When we stepped inside the yacht club, I heard the echoes of grand soirées held there during the reign of Fulgencio Batista. My Cuban-American friends had told me stories of better days on the island, but their tales didn't do justice to the utter beauty of the club and beach. The 20-inch grilled lobster tail was the best I ever had, but watching Raul's eyes fill with joy while ordering topped the visit. I suspected he had not eaten much for days.

QUEST FOR A CANCER CURE FOR BILL

The Medical and Surgical Research Center (CIMEQ) was next on our list to visit in Havana. Bill and I were eager to learn if the center's cancer research could provide an effective treatment for him. Alas, CIMEQ's program was in its infancy. The doctors and staff, nearly all educated in the U.S., were fluent in English and shared insights into Cuba's sophisticated hepatitis vaccination program. These and other vaccinations are available to all Cubans. As part of a program sharing Fidel Castro's communist political doctrine, 15 million individuals worldwide have been given access to lifesaving research and medications.



Each day, Bill reminded me to bring an ample amount of \$1 bills with us. Toilet paper and other necessities were not available in public restrooms in 2002. While visiting Palacio Municipal, I was handed a sheet of paper in exchange for what I thought was a dollar. The attendant burst into tears and dropped on her knees begging me not to take back what turned out to be \$20. I will never forget her eyes turning from desperation to gratitude when I handed her another \$20.

"Stop it, Señora. It's dangerous to show wealth in Havana," Raul whisked me to our car as children followed us begging.

HEMINGWAY'S HIDEAWAY

Cuba is known as a place of respite for Ernest Hemingway whose presence there dates back to spring 1939. Hemingway crossed to Cuba in his boat to live in the Hotel Ambos Mundos in Havana. Soon after "Finca Vigia," a 15 acres "Lookout Farm," became his winter residence until 1940. Hemingway's two favorite watering holes in Havana, La Florida



Local woman works at her cigar making craft

and La Bodeguita del Medio, are visited by thousands of tourists each year. In La Floridita, on a small plaque next to his photograph with Fidel Castro, hangs Hemingway's signed quote: "My mojito in the Bodeguita del Medio and my daiquiri in the Floridita."

Yet Hemingway's lasting footprint and his love of the sea might be most discernible at Puerto Marina Hemingway. Run by the governmental Cubanacán, it is Cuba's largest marina with an official capacity of up to 400 vessels. In reality, there are closer to 100 usable slips, but the proximity to Florida, inexpensive dockage rates and great seafood prove sufficient to entice a steady stream of visitors.

Cuba and its people gave birth to the Tropicana Club, a world renowned cabaret in Havana. It was launched in 1939 at Villa Mina, a suburban estate with plush tropical gardens in Havana's Marianao neighborhood. Tropicana's magnificent barefooted young dancers and singers sporting whimsical costumes of unimaginable splendor, stole my heart. I went twice to see the same show.

The Latin sounds of the Buena Vista Social Club, a members club in Havana, reverberate throughout the city. In the stark contrast to the scarcity surrounding most neighborhoods, it brings immeasurable joy to all gathered on the streets, day and night. The club closed in the 1940s. It was revived in the 1990s by a Cuban musician Juan de Marcos González and American guitarist Ry Cooder with traditional Cuban musicians, some of whom were veterans who had performed at the club during the height of its popularity.

CIGAR COUNTRY

I refused to leave Cuba without visiting a lush country site, a beautiful fertile valley, Pinar der Rio, known to produce the best cigars in the world: Winston Churchill's favorite Cohiba and

Montecristo. The smell of unlit cigar tobacco hanging on the walls pulled me closer inside a small hut, one of many along the road. In the main rolling room of the fabrica, there were mixed-age workers, each making cigars by hand. It's an unrushed, antique method, one that has not changed for hundreds of years. A box of 12 cigars was mine for \$12.

Next day, on the way to the airport, I placed the cigars in the pocket of Bill's raincoat hoping to smuggle the forbidden fruit of my excursion and prayed for the best. Minutes before boarding our flight, Raul, accompanied by his wife and three children, stepped closer to me and extended his hand.

"We came to say goodbye, Señora Roosevelt. Thank you for the antibiotics. I am pain free for the first time in months."

My acting skills failed me this time. I burst into tears.

"I thank you Raul, for reminding me to be grateful. I'll never forget Cuba and your people." ●

