

# Cuba in 2007

## Introduction:

Cuba had been in my mind for three or four years before I got the chance to visit it with four friends last summer. My Aunt and Uncle had lived there for a couple of years in the early nineties, and my grandparents had visited her there; they had all told stories about what it was like, and how it was marked out from other countries as being somehow different.

When I studied history at secondary school we spent a couple of weeks on the Cuban Missile Crisis, and we discussed Castro and Kennedy, and their background counterparts, with a strong romantic idealism; they seemed to us, or to me at least, real adults, real people who could discuss and deal with problems without the unwanted intrusion of international institutions and bureaucracy.

Later on I became more interested in politics, particularly left-wing politics, and Cuba distinguished itself from almost all of the strongly socialist countries of the world by making it from the twentieth century to the twenty first retaining its ideology and its grip on life. I was interested in what made it different from China and Russia, the Eastern Bloc countries, Albania, Vietnam and all of the other attempts at creating a working communist country that it could sustain itself for so long.

When I started to study Anthropology I learned more about the West-African diaspora in the Caribbean, and how they had transported their culture across the Atlantic. I also learned how the Spanish had done the same thing, but under slightly different pressures, and I learned about syncretism, particularly within religion. I was really interested in syncretism, as it seemed to reflect so much of what religion, and almost all other anthropological institutions were about: the combination of different people's ideas of the world to create a medium through which they can interact with it together. I learned particularly about Afro-Cuban religion with fervour; I found the circumstances in which it grew up interesting because of the novel way in which syncretism was formed, through private yet public worship of unacceptable Gods.

I started to learn Spanish in my first year of A Levels; I had been thoroughly disenchanted with languages after five torturous years of German at Secondary School, but when a friend and I attended lessons at an FE college on a Wednesday afternoon (one of the friends that accompanied me to Cuba, in fact) Spanish seemed to fit; there was a logic to it, and an artful poetry in the sound and the form. I was enchanted by the echo of the Latin roots in high register English, but used in an everyday, banal context, and I continued to learn. After a year or two conversation became easier, and I visited Spain alone and used it to limited effect. I kept going, and my Spanish improved, but I wanted to try it out outside of Iberia, in Latin America. Cuba, whose Spanish is amongst the purer forms in the New World, seemed like an appropriate destination.

The crystallisation of these motivations gave me the drive to get moving on Cuba. That three of my friends from the Halls I lived in in my first year also wanted to go helped. We

decided to spend six weeks at the end of the summer of 2007 in Cuba, finding out what made it so unique.

## Weeks 1 & 2: El Oriente and Trinidad

I first flew in to Cuba from London Gatwick to Holguin, a small city on the North East of the island, with Helen, Adam and Ricardo, friends from my halls of residence in my first year, and Rebekah, a friend from my home town. Straight away we realised there was a different way of doing things and behaving in Cuba, as we struggled to get all five of us through customs. We got in the first taxi that came along, and stayed the night at a national hotel, which was basically a holiday camp; lots of chalets set in nice grounds centred around a pool and a bar. We went out for dinner, thinking we could get cheaper food outside the hotel were perhaps we wouldn't have to pay in CUCs, Cuban Convertible Pesos, the currency tourists are supposed to use, and that Cubans use to pay for imported goods. We found a nice stall and had sausage and chips, and a bottle of what we thought was incredibly cheap rum. We were, however, mistaken. There is a lot more, a lot cheaper rum in Cuba.

The next day we went for a swim in the pool, got our stuff together and caught the bus out of Holguin, on our way to Bayamo, hopefully the gateway to the Sierra Maestra, the largest and tallest mountain range in Cuba. Catching the bus was, as we had expected, a challenge. The bus system is a lot more informal in Cuba; due to a previous lack of petrol and a current lack of automobiles and parts, buses get full very quickly. Because we had managed to obtain some *Moneda Nacional*, the currency used by Cubans everyday, we could get a cheap local bus. But the bus took a little while to arrive, and when it did it was completely rammed full. We eventually worked out when to get off after chatting to some other bus passengers, and made our way to the bus station.

Most of the long distance travel that we made in Cuba was by *Viazul*, the Cuban national bus system used almost entirely by tourists. Because you have to pay in CUCs, as opposed to *moneda nacional*, it is quick and reliable, as well as quite comfortable. The buses that could be payed for in national currency almost all had waiting lists of over 50 people.

We stayed in Bayamo for a couple of days, exploring the city and surrounding area. It was interesting working out what was appropriate and what wasn't in different situations. A lot of the time there would be queues for shops formed by a group of people sitting 20 yards away. It was apparently implicit to the Cubans that they were queuing, but for us they just seemed to be sunbathing.

It was in Bayamo also that we first learned of the difference between the two currencies; there were several shops that we tried to go into, to spend National Currency, but there were some implicit and explicit attitudes of the people that we were not supposed to. Everyone that we had asked about it, however, had said that we were perfectly within our rights to spend this money, and we exchanged quite a lot of dollars, or CUCs, with locals who could not be bothered to go to the *cadeca*, or exchange shop. At one point when we entered a National Currency market I was told in Spanish that there were not supposed to be any 'whites' here.

We all found racial perceptions strange and occasionally hard to deal with in Cuba. Helen and I were the only two who could not pass for Cuban, even if we were lucky. Because I am a little fair haired and skinned, in fact, some Cubans that I met saw this as a

significant feature. I was called *rubio*, or blondie, more than a couple of times on the Solidarity camp that we subsequently attended. Ricardo has Latino heritage, and Adam has Caribbean heritage, so they both passed around Cuba pretty much unnoticed. Rebekah, however, is mixed race, her father is from Jamaica, and so many Cubans found it difficult to believe that she wasn't Cuban herself. At first this was funny, but pretty quickly it became a nuisance to us all.

From Bayamo we arranged a two day hike up the tallest mountain in Cuba, the Pico Turquino. It was challenging, as we were carrying enough fizzy drinks cans to live off for a week, and lunch, though promised, never materialised, but it was beautiful, and the sleep that we got at the end of it was reparative indeed.



Myself and Ricardo ascending Pico Turquino, with a nice view

After

Bayamo we travelled by bus to Santiago de Cuba, the second city of Cuba, and stayed in a *casa particular*, a private residence with a room set aside for paying guests. This was the type of lodging that we looked for and stayed in for the rest of our trip; it was cheap, and we got to spend a significant amount of time with Cubans in their everyday environment. The only down side was that only two people could stay in one *casa* at a time, so as there were five of us we had to rent three separate rooms.

While in Santiago we spent a lot of time walking around and appreciating the atmosphere of the city; because of the lack of private internal facilities a lot of the business of the city was conducted outside. We watched dance shows by young men, arguments and fights, as well as the police and musicians. We heard *Guantanamera* an interminable amount, and spent a long time looking for spicy sauce, or a sauce of any kind. We visited the rum museum, which was interesting, mainly because of the knowledgeable guide, and

the Bacardi Museum, a general purpose museum built by the Bacardi lineage, which was instantly forgettable.

The main reason, we had been told, to visit Santiago was the nightlife. We tried several times to find this nightlife, and I think we succeeded once or twice, but much more often we failed. Due to the informal, and very intimate nature of social and all kinds of relations in Cuba, a lot of the things that we might have wanted to go to were off-limits to us. We found this frustrating, not just regarding the nightlife but a lot of things; because of its informal, local and unpredictable nature we were excluded from a lot of important institutions.



Adam, Ricardo and Rebekah, in the back of an infamous Cuban “Old Time” taxi, in the main square of Santiago, *Parque Cespedes*

## Cobre: National Shrine of Cuba

While we were in Santiago we took a day trip to Cobre, a couple of miles outside the city. I had wanted to visit Cobre for a long time, as I had read a lot about its significance for Cuba, and particularly for Afro-Cuban culture, and the mestizo, syncretic nature of Cuba’s mix of ideas, cultures and people. In Cobre stands the Church of Our Lady of Charity of Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba and also the Catholic saint that stands for the Lukumi, or Santeria, Orisha, or Goddess, Oshun.

The church is built around a central shrine to a small doll, a model of Nuestra Senora de Caridad, who wears a golden dress. The legend says that sailors pulled her out of the sea completely dry, and the town of Cobre (which means copper, due to the huge but out-of-

use open face copper mine viewable from all over the town) built a church to her renown. Because of her yellow dress, and the presence of copper in her circumstances, she has become the opposite partner to Oshun, the Lukumi Goddess brought over by slaves from West Africa. The reason that a Catholic counterpart often developed between a member of the Orisha pantheon and an important saint in the Catholic pantheon is supposedly so that the Afro-Cubans could worship them openly, without fear of punishment, while appearing pious to the Catholic Spaniards.

An important ritual when a pilgrimage to Cobre is attempted is to take a votive offering, and to ask Oshun/Mary for help in ones life. There is a huge collection of offerings at the church, including famously Ernest Hemingway's Nobel Prize and a small golden guerrilla fighter, offered by Lina Ruiz, Fidel and Raul Castro's mother, for the safe return of her son from the fighting in the Sierra Maestra.



The rear of the church in Cobre, with a car park where many taxis plied their trade

## Weeks 3 & 4: Trinidad, Havana, and the Beginning of the Brigade

From Santiago we travelled to Trinidad, in the centre of the island. Leaving the Oriente, the east, was a subtle transition. It is known for music and rum, dancing and the majority of the Afro-Cubans on the island. For this reason it is often seen also as the most criminal

area, and the centre for *Jineterismo*, the Cuban word for hassle that tourists receive, but also for prostitution and general bad deeds. When we got to Trinidad we did not feel much difference in these areas, but it was clear that Trinidad was much more geared up for Western European visitors.

Things were a lot easier in Trinidad; nice food was more obtainable, we could get around quicker, and the things that there were to do were obvious and clearly signposted. We went to a local beach resort and for Helen's birthday we went diving. I tried to get hold of a



Ricardo, Adam, Helen and I making a traditional Cuban beach retreat. It later fell down

birthday cake, something that was not possible in Cuba unless you're a Cuban Citizen and it was YOUR ACTUAL BIRTHDAY, but in the end prevailed. They are all very similar, incredibly pretty and colourful, but completely tasteless. We also went to a nightclub for tourists set in a small cave, *Las Cuevas*, which was possibly the best nightclub I've ever been to. They played Rihanna, Umbrella.

After Trinidad Rebekah, Adam and I made our way to Havana, while Helen and Ricardo went to Santa Clara, with plans to meet us later in Havana. Havana was completely different to anything we had experienced in Cuba; it would not have been out of place in a Mediterranean country, there were high-rise buildings, busy streets, and loads of shops selling all kinds of things.

It was in Havana that we got a taste for Peso food, bought in the local currency that was incredibly cheap, very informal, but filling and occasionally delicious. Mango smoothies and Bistec with bread were two of the highlights. We also made a trip to Coppelia in Vedado, the flagship branch of the national ice cream chain. We paid five pesos each (we managed to get into the non-tourist part as I spoke passable Spanish, and Rebekah and

Adam could pass for Cubans) for a huge, dirty bowl of ice cream and a bent spoon, as well as a glass of water. If there were less than three of you then you were obliged to share a table. Coppelia exemplified a lot of what I think is right about the Cuban Government; although trite I think it's true: it has taken an experience that enriches peoples lives, however banal we saw people's birthdays and dates, trips out for kids and friends eating in the evening, and makes it easy and accessible for everyone. The idea of an immediate glass of water struck me, because it is a courtesy that rarely if ever exists in Britain. But why not? Of course you would want a glass of water with your ice cream; this consideration, without taking advantage of an opportunity to 'up sell' something that most people don't want, seemed so much more civilized and humane than a similar experience in London would have been.

## The Political and Economic Interests of Cuba

While in Cuba I learned a lot about the political and economic system, but most of all I learned of the huge gaps and vague areas in my knowledge. Despite attending the brigade, and many of the trips and conferences organised I found it very difficult to find out concrete facts, or even opinions that I could evaluate satisfactorily. This, I think, is due to the fact of the lack of openness regarding the mechanics of government of Cuba, not blatant secrecy or lies, but obstructions to understanding, as well as the obfuscating attitudes of many of the other attendees of the solidarity camp, who appeared to be there to reaffirm their faith in Cuba, rather than to find things out and understand it better. There were several people who helped me immensely, some at the camp (Zetta Karamperi, who supplied me with a lot of information after the camp particularly) and others that we met around Cuba.

The American Blockade came up in pretty much every conversation I had in Cuba; the longer the conversation, the higher the probability of its appearance. It seems to be the single most important factor in the Cuban economy, as it means that investment and trade are almost entirely neutered. The reason that a lot of people appeared poor is that they simply cannot buy the goods that they need, even if they have enough money. The blockade is mentioned a lot in propaganda around the country, but I think to the US it means very little; using their hegemonic influence they have persuaded almost all other countries to turn their backs on Cuba economically.

The other issue that seemed endemic to every conversation held in Cuba was the Miami 5. They are a group of Cuban intelligence agents who were working in Miami against terrorist ex-pats. They were imprisoned for various crimes, after having been tried in the very contentious location of Miami, and the Cuban government is currently mobilising its population into action to free them. After several conversations with Cubans and Europeans, I think that for the Cuban government the worst thing to happen would be for them to be freed. They have a unifying presence on the island, which many people are passionately involved in. The propaganda using them is especially regular as you travel round, and as an exercise the opposite of 'divide and conquer' it is in my experience unparalleled.

## Weeks 5 & 6: The Brigade Proper

The three weeks that we spent in the camp near Havana were almost the opposite of the three weeks prior. After having to anxiously sort everything out ourselves, in sometimes broken Spanish we arrived in a womb-like environment, where all our needs were met and we merely had to do what we were told. There were many other Europeans at the camp, but it seemed like the non-English ones were a lot more set in their views; many of the solidarity organisations were parts of communist or even anarchist parties and had decided much of what they talked about years before, whereas the majority of the British brigade were looking to learn and understand as much as possible.

The trips that we took around, to farms and hospitals, schools and to Pinar del Rio in the west of the island, were very informative and gave us the chance to talk more in-depth and in a formal environment to Cubans whom otherwise we would not have met. There was some problem, however, with the one-sided nature of the camp, in which debate was not encouraged and it was difficult even to evaluate what we were hearing due to the lack of any dissenting voice.

## Cuban: The Spanish Language in Cuba

I tried very hard throughout the trip to practice and improve my Spanish, and I think I succeeded to a certain point. The language that they spoke was at first difficult to understand; they tend to speak a lot faster than Spaniards, and enunciate less. They also have an accent akin to that of Andalucia, with the loss of terminal Ss constant. The grammar and vocabulary, however, were much more similar to Iberian Spanish than I thought they would be, so I did not have as much difficulty in that area.

## Conclusion

In conclusion my trip around Cuba was, I think, a success. I learned a lot about Cuban language and culture, but also a lot about myself. It gave me a lot to think about and possibly include in my third year dissertation for anthropology, so I would like to thank the UCL Expeditions and Travel Grant Board for giving me this opportunity.