



The long way 'round to Havana: Cuba by bicycle

Sue Bowness

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In a land where the package deal reigns supreme, it is entirely possible to fly in and out of sun-soaked Cuba without learning a word of Spanish or getting any sense of how the average Cuban lives.

Yet for myself and six other travellers in pursuit of a more authentic experience, a week-long cycling tour proved one of the best ways to get a real impression of a place is on the seat of a bicycle, in the heart of the countryside.

Our particular patch of countryside was centred around the community of Guanabo, the principal town of Playas del Este, about 40 kilometres from Havana. We would spend our first few days there before heading back to Havana for the last couple of nights.

On our arrival in Guanabo, we were greeted by Marcos, our host at the casa particular where we would be staying. As my roommate and I listened to our guide make arrangements with this burly ex-army general, I first grasped how different living at Marcos' house would be from staying at a resort. I should have learned more Spanish.

Despite my inability to communicate fully with Marcos, I did come to understand a bit about his business. As the owner of a casa particular, he could earn a supplemental income for his family by renting out rooms in his home to tourists — provided that he stick to strict government regulations. Before long we would learn just how strict. A mildly frustrated Marcos told us in the morning he had just learned he was not authorized to serve us breakfast. This unexpected change of plans led us to the discovery of a tasty roadside pizza stand across from our casa. I could see why Marcos had learned to take things in stride.

My room at Marcos' house made me realize that in a place where extra space could equal extra income, nothing was wasted. Total frugality was a way of life in Cuba, from the resurrected 1950s cars with their many coats of paint, to the conservation of household goods such as paper and toiletries.

While manufactured products might have been in short supply on the island, natural beauty was not. Our casa was just a few blocks from a stunning beach where we swam often.

From Guanabo, we made several day trips cycling the surrounding area, taking in not only the fragrant countryside and towering royal palm trees, but also the daily life of the villages that we passed through. Our little cavalcade of bicycles must have looked unusual, but the local people were always friendly. They were particularly intrigued by one member of our group who had brought along a digital camera. With its ability to produce images immediately, the camera impressed everyone from the little boys playing soccer to the grandmother out for a walk, and made our photographer a popular person to travel with.

There were many unexpected diversions. One afternoon we ducked under an awning for shelter from a surprise shower only to discover that through an open door we could witness a play rehearsal by some Cuban schoolchildren. The friendly teachers welcomed us in and we watched until the rain died down.

Our evenings were similarly eventful, as we would variously seek out local live music in nearby towns or eat dinner at local paladares the privately run restaurant equivalent of casa particulares.

On our fifth day in Cuba, we cycled from Guanabo to Havana, through the narrow streets of Habana Vieja, then along the famous Malecon roadway by sunset to our second casa particular in the neighbourhood of Vedado.

After living in the little town of Guanabo, Havana's tourist-savvy cabbies and waiters — who brought out a Coke when you asked for a cola — made us realize that this city was more accustomed to visitors than the countryside where we'd been.

We did all the tourist things in Havana — drank mojitos in the big hotels, visited the Plaza de la Revolucion, shopped in the outdoor markets. Staying in our second casa particular, we are once again reminded that even in the big city, life in Cuba can be unpredictable. The power frequently went out without notice and you just resign yourself to waiting for it to return.

On the first night of our stay in Havana, a few of us had a late dinner in a fancy hotel, the closest we'd come to being conventional tourists in Cuba. Our grubby cycling clothes set us apart, but looking around at the more well-dressed diners, I felt lucky that my experience in Cuba was not limited to this elegant ballroom and the tourist-friendly city of Havana.

I was glad we'd taken the long way here.

IF YOU GO:

- The cycling tour was organized by Mark Franklin of CareerCycles. His next tour runs from Feb. 29-March 7, but is sold out. Space is still available on the Mar. 9-15 tour. The price of \$1,555 includes airfare between Toronto and Havana, seven days cycling, six nights accommodations, breakfasts, lunches and two dinners. The rate doesn't include bike rental or Cuba Airport Tax. For more information visit www.careercycles.com
- We rented bicycles from Bicycles Crossing Borders, a Canada-Cuba organization which sends bicycles and parts from Canada to Cuba. Check out www.bikestocuba.org/



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