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Cuba – People-to-People

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Trip Report

By Greg Smith



Greg Smith, Bolivar (Boli) Sanchez (L) and Gustavo Puig (Ctr R) Guides. Along with: Elaine, Jeff, Sharon, Dean, Lynn, Linda, Patrick, Terry, Dan, Julia, Nancy, Rich, Julie, Linda & Bill

Thursday, 12 February – Miami to Caya Coco

Our departure from Miami to Santa Clara, Cuba was going to be an early one for most of us, with our American Airlines flight scheduled for 0730. Our check in was made easy given our Miami travel concierge. We did have our bags, but certainly not the volumes of baggage being shipped back home –

tires, flat screen TVs and large numbers of plastic wrapped parcels headed for Cuban homes. It looked chaotic, but we took off without a delay and landed to applause.

As we exited the airport, there was Gustavo, our Cuban guide for the third year in a row. An incredibly knowledgeable individual, he is also a great birder and affable enough to laugh at his own syntax and join in a good joke! We couldn't have done better...

Our first stop was in downtown Santa Clara, at a municipal park. We discussed the different architectural styles around the park, which ranged from the late 1700's to the mid-1950's. Some of the structures had numerous bullet scars from the 1959 revolution. We also discussed the different school uniforms –red for grade school, yellow for middle school and blue for high school. It must've been recess as we saw all three colors in the park.

Next we visited the Che Guevara Museum and memorial. Gustavo, our Cuban guide, spoke passionately of the story of Che's transformative life, starting in Argentina where he studied medicine and ending in a mass grave in Bolivia. His socialist ideals formed during a motorcycle trip through South America where his eyes were opened to the extreme poverty of most people. He met Fidel Castro in Mexico, shipwrecked the "Granma" on the shores of Cuba and was one of only a handful of rebels that escaped capture or death at the hands of Batista's troops. He remained a leader in the Revolution and later in Fidel's government, serving as Treasury Secretary.



Santa Clara is also the site of a train derailment that started the final downfall of the Bautista's troop garrison. Twenty-two rebels stopped a train with 400 support troops using a bulldozer to cause a derailment and Molotov cocktails to defeat the troops.

The drive to Cayo Coco was quintessential Cuba as we headed north. Small cottages with metal, thatched or tiled roofs, front porches swept clean, with flat-armed chairs suitable for a cup of good Cuban coffee. Usually there were chickens meandering in the yard, tidy gardens and hanging laundry. Most homes had a palm or two and a couple of banana trees.

The long causeway to Cayo Coco (one of a chain of 65 islands on the north coast) is an impressive piece of Soviet era engineering. In the past it cut off ocean circulation to the Bay of Dogs, but this has since been mollified to some degree with culverts through the causeway. We had brief glimpses of Roseate Spoonbills and Royal Terns. Just enough bird life to let us know that we were in for some fantastic birding.

Friday, 13 February – Caya Coco



We got out and started birding at 0645 with one of our first birds being an American Bittern, common back home but rare in Cuba. We had only been out about ten minutes when our local guide Oly joined us. Then the birds started flowing: Oriente Warbler, Great Lizard Cuckoo, Cuban Vireo, Cuban Gnatcatcher with assorted neo-tropical migrants. We moved to different locations where we found Cuban Green Woodpecker, Stripe-headed Tanager and Cuban Tody. Pretty fine morning of birds...

We had a couple of hours to catch up from yesterday's travel in the early afternoon before

we headed off to Caya Guillermo to see what this cay would hold. But our primary goal were the American Flamingos that use some of the coastal lagoons for foraging. Our first and only stop was within a half mile of crossing onto Caya Guillermo. Here we found a flock of ~115 flamingos along with an assortment of other waterbird species. Northern Shovelers, Black-necked Stilts, Short-billed Dowitchers and many more species were added to our lists. We stayed until sunset, a stunning one at that, finished our day appropriately...

Saturday, 14 February - to Trinidad/Topas de Colantes

Today we left Cayo Coco, crossed back over the causeway and headed towards Trinidad. On the way, Gustavo took advantage of his captive audience to let us know about some aspects of Cuban life and history. He explained that many Cubans put into practice Santeria or Lucumi – the African roots religion that is a melding of Yoruba with Catholicism, commonly practiced here in Cuba. There is no house of



worship – the spirit is in music and dance. A priest has an altar in her or his home, where they give spiritual advice. You can observe Santerians, as they are dressed in a set of clothes that are all white. Santeria also includes a healing tradition that includes diverse herbal remedies, divination, animal sacrifice, trances, offerings and altar building.

Trinidad is a World Heritage Site at the base of the Escambray Mountains in central Cuba. We stopped for a wonderful lunch at the Trip Advisor Award of Excellence Davimart paladar. A paladar is a family home operated restaurant and Davimart lived up to its reputation.

We had a number of stops after lunch, with the first being the shop of Chi Chi Santander, a ceramicist of local fame. After sharing CUCs with the local economy, Gustavo took us on a walking visit to historic center of town made up of cobblestone streets, pastel houses and row after row of iron grillwork.



We noticed that birds, especially Cuban bullfinches, were singing from small cages. Sometimes there are gambling games around whose bird is the best singer.

We stopped into a cantina for “la Canchanchara” – a delicious drink of fire water, lime and honey, served in cups from Santander Pottery – while being entertained by Santerina drumming and dancing.

Trinidad was founded in 1514 by the Spanish and was an important sugar growing locality. The town was elaborately built up during the

Colonial era when Cuban sugar profits were massive. The Plaza Mayor (a fine example of this colonial wealth) includes a colonial cathedral, a monastery, plus historical museums housed in former well-to-do homes.

Nearby is an open-air market, where we took a little pocketbook lightening time to shop for handmade sweaters and vests that sell for \$10 or less. There were also wooden toys, carved wood, cars made from aluminum cans, and other trinkets for sale. After a few more pictures it was time for our bus to head to Topas de Colantes and the Los Helechos Resort in the mountains above Trinidad.

We did a little birding prior to dinner where we got very good looks at Limpkin and Loggerhead Kingbird. It was Valentine’s Day and there were celebrations being planned for this Saturday night, all in a very fine Cuban way.

Sunday, 15 February – Topas de Colantes

We met our guide Luis who offered us much on the local lore. He was an excellent botanist, birder, and naturalist and as we walked the “La Batata” trail (named after the lobster-sized crayfish found in these

waters) we learned about local farming and coffee growing techniques. With that, we got great views of Ruddy Quail-Dove, West Indian Woodpecker and Cuban Trogon.



We tasted the local “Crystal Mountain” coffee at a small coffee house nearby and learned that it can bring up to \$19,000 per ton and a farmer (campesino) can make \$600 - \$800 per month (which doesn’t sound like much, but in Cuban terms is a decent income).

Lunch was delicious, at the handsome home of one of Batista’s cronies. A house with a wrap-around

porch and dramatic views of the valley allowed us to dine on another tasty Cuban meal. Congris, pork, marinated potatoes, salad and a dessert of mango marmalade with a wedge of local cheese!

Then we were off to a local art museum that houses a small fraction of the 800 pieces of Cuban art that grace the old sanatorium walls (the sanatorium is located on the hill just above Los Helechos). The museum was housed in a stately building that had been a senator's house (prior to the revolution), and then the headquarters of the revolutionary forces. Then it was given to the people as temporary housing. It now hosts sixty-four works by well-known Cuban artists, including Adigio Benitez, Eduardo Roca and Raul Zerpa. That was the end to another fine day, this time in the highlands of Cuba...

Monday, 16 February – Bay of Pigs/Playa Larga

Today we left Los Helechos and headed towards the Bay of Pigs. We were leaving the Escambray Mountain Range and rolling through the grasslands of Cienfuego province. Miles of open habitat are punctuated with scrub acacia and palms, with fertile crops of potato, tomato, rice, sugar cane banana, mango, and papaya (remember, papaya is not a term to use in Cuba as it refers to specific parts of human anatomy. The term to use is fruta de bomba).



The Bay of Pigs got its name because pirates and privateers landed here to hunt for pig and restock their supplies, and it became an important meeting area. In 1961, 1500 troops – Cuban exiles supported by the CIA – landed in the bay and three Cuban airports were bombed (including one civilian airport). The plan was to start an alternative government here. The exiles expected to be supported by the locals, but in fact, were strongly resisted and were defeated within 72 hours. Playa Giron is to the east side of the Bay mouth and is one of the two landing spots of the 1961 invasion. Giant

billboards citing American imperialism mark the point of their farthest incursion. We traveled along the Bay towards Playa Largo, our evening destination and the inner most point of the Bay (and second landing spot).

While we driving along the south coast of Cuba we passed a shrimp farm, with a giant stone shrimp sculpture in front, a cement factory, an oil refinery, a brick factory, a charcoal maker. Even with these industries, it's still a relatively poor area with simple but still carefully tended homes.

As we approached the Bay of Pigs we were joined by Orlando, whom Gustavo said "is always offering much more than his best for the clients". The habitat grew more forested as we approached the Bay, and we stopped with Orlando to look for Cuban Parakeet, Bee Hummingbird and the Cuban Screech Owl – all Cuban endemics.

As soon as we stopped there was a flock of about fifteen parakeets feeding in a tree alongside of the road. The birds were only ten feet up in the tree and seemed to be not bothered in the least by our presence – great looks!

Then we went looking for Cuban Screech Owl in royal palms that had lost their tops. It took a while, but we found one poking its head out of the top of a defrocked palm. That was exceptional! We left the Refugio de Fauna Bermeja and walked across the road to Orlando's brother's place. The road leading into his place was lined with flowering trees. Cuban Green Woodpecker, Cuban Pewee and a few species of warblers were foraging. And there it was, the tiniest bird on the planet (less than 2 grams and about 2 inches in length). A female Bee Hummingbird sitting on the petiole of a leaf just big enough for her delicate feet to grasp. Her crisp, blue back gleaming in the sun, contrasting with that subtle gray breast, she was tiny, but she was hot...



En route we had lunch at Punta Perdiz, with a delicious fish or beef choice. Then we enjoyed some snorkeling and sun, as this restaurant was on the edge of the Caribbean. That ninety minutes helped us really feel the tropical nature of this part of Cuba!

Off to Playa Larga where our hotel was also on the water, complete with beachside bar, palm trees, and cabanas. A subtle sunset prepared for us for our pre-dinner lecture.

Frank Medina, the Director of the Zapata

National Park, spoke to us about the Zapata swamp, on the Zapata peninsula and to the west of the Bahia de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs), and at 5000 sq. km is the largest and best-preserved wetland in the Caribbean. It is named for an important landowner in the area, though is coincidentally also shaped like a shoe (which Gustavo said that 90% of the country believes it is named after...).

The Bay of Pigs runs along a fault line – the east side of the bay is rocky with coral reefs, the west is swampy. Both Cuban and American crocodile can be found here and it turns out they are interbreeding, which isn't good for the integrity of the endemic Cuban crocodile (a pretty yellow with black spots). Crocodiles and garfish, as well as Cuban parrots, are raised in a successful captive breeding program.

There are twelve mammals here, including manatee and hutia (tree rat). There is a lot of endemism, especially with plant life. And twenty-two of the twenty-six endemic bird species are found here (such as the Zapata sparrow, Zapata rail, and Zapata wren).



As with most places there are problems with invasive species. Catfish were introduced to the area during a hurricane and quickly became a problem – eating small crocodiles and frogs. They are being controlled through fishing and in the first year of the program 200 tons were caught, some as long as 1.5 m. After 7 years, 55 tons have been caught. Lionfish are invading bay waters (we saw several during a snorkeling outing along the beach), and a melaleuca species is a problem in the swamp flora. Climate change is manifesting itself in hot temperatures and unusually dry weather. There are challenges like anywhere else.

Dinner was at Hostal Eugene, a paladar where we were treated to a feast of seafood accompanied by a one-person music show. Dinner included black bean soup, salad, bread, plantains, rice, marlin, calamari and lobster. All of this to eat and we got to listen to a vocalist accompanied by a keyboard and a trumpet in the background. By the time dinner was finished, most of us had had one beer, but apparently that was enough to get everyone out of their seats and dancing. Wait staff, other diners and our entire tour group were having a great time on the dining room floor. I am not sure the owner expected this on the first night he provided music, but his wife was certainly enjoying being involved in the conga line...

Tuesday, 17 February – Korimacao to Sorora

Early morning birding was pretty spectacular, with a Great Lizard Cuckoo paralleling us in the underbrush for part of the walk and providing us with great looks. But the highlight of the walk had to be any one of the five endemic Cuban Pygmy Owls we got to study. All were very close to the road and most were vocalizing which seemed to indicate breeding boundaries were being set up. One would've been fine, but five were outstanding!!!

We left Playa Larga and headed to the Korimacao Project in the community of Palpite. The project



allowed us to interact with the artists, musicians, and dancers in residence and to enjoy a small set of performances. This is an interesting concept, given that it is fully funded by the government. Residents are supported so they can “do their thing” in a collaborative environment, but they have to audition to determine whether they will be accepted into the project, and most have no prior formal training. They come from all over the country, with the requirement that they bring their artist training back to different parts of the country.

There is an annual production each year to celebrate April 18th, Victory Day for Cuba during the Bay of Pigs invasion. Korimacao tours most all of the Zapata villages and visit other provinces as well. There are 120 artists in residence and most stay three to five years. We were lucky to see both a Latin and a jazz group rehearsing, each performing four different pieces. And then we got to experience the modern dance group perform for us.

Next we stopped at the Cuban crocodile breeding center to get a look at this endangered reptile. Hurricanes, hunting and interbreeding with the American crocodile are taking a toll on this species. The other reason for stopping here are the pools of water associated with the captive breeding. These wetlands and mudflats provided habitat for Purple Gallinule, Least Bittern and Western Sandpiper. Not bad for thirty minutes!

Lunch was at another Trip Advisor Excellence Award winner, Restaurante Divino, where we were treated to plantain cups filled with smoked tuna, and salad finished off with crab enchiladas. Desert was a coconut filled with coconut and cocoa ice cream! After a few short rounds of ping-pong out back, we were off to Ernest Hemingway's home.



We arrived around 4:00PM in San Francisco de Paula to visit Hemingway's house, Finca Vigia. From 1928 onward, Hemingway visited Cuba every year, finally moving in 1939. Using the money (\$150,000) he earned from the movie rights to *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, he bought this beautiful home. He lived here first with his third wife Marta, also a writer and a very independent woman who eventually divorced him, Hemingway wrote all of his remaining books at this house. He was eccentric – typed standing up and agitated if disturbed. He kept a room in the “tower” with over sixty cats, and also kept

pigeons, cows and dogs, with his favorite dog being a springer spaniel named William. Our guide (the assistant museum director) said that Hemingway was unfairly characterized in the press. His fishing boat Pilar (also the secret name of his second wife Pauline) lives here as well, under a large roof and beautifully kept.

He suffered from alcoholism, depression and health problems in the later years of his life. He left in 1960, after Castro took over the country, at the urging of the U.S. Ambassador. He took his own life in 1961, the same year CIA backed Cuban exiles invaded the Bay of Pigs.

From here we headed back into the mountains to stay at the wonderful Hotel Villa Soroa in Pinar de Rio province at the western end of Cuba. To do this we actually drove through the outskirts of Havana for the first time, and then up into the mountains. The easterly Sierra del Rosario and the westerly Sierra de los Organos mountains, include a world biosphere designation.

Our hotel was just outside the biosphere boundary. The resort has a large and fancy pool where a number of us sat pool-side and enjoyed a Havana Club. While reveling in a little relaxation, an adult male Gundlach's Hawk flew into a nearby tree with a red phase American Kestrel on its tail. Some of us got great looks at both birds and also at a very obliging White-crowned Pigeon. Nice downtime...



Wednesday, 18 April - Vinales

It was a rainy morning as we set off for Vinales with our first stop at a tobacco farm. It is very scenic drive, with the bellied palm tree, a Cuban endemic, decorating the landscape, along with Caribbean pine and gumbo-limbo trees. We headed to the Montesinos tobacco farm, which is located in San Juan y Martinez in Pinar de Rio province. We learned that there are 5 types of tobacco that make up a good Cuban cigar. Three come from different positions on the same of plant, and make up the filler (for combustion, flavor and aroma), another serves as the binder, and the last is the wrapper – the corajo – that protects the cigar from flavor loss.



Tobacco seed is tiny, and is sprouted in beds before being transplanted to the field. It is three months until the first harvest in February, when the lowest leaves are picked. Harvesting continues over 9 weeks. The leaves are cured on poles in a large barn, where a lovely sweet aroma all , while the flavor of the tobacco mellows. The Montesinos are required to sell 90% of the tobacco to the government, where it is cured further and aged up to four years before being rolled and sold as those famous Cuban cigars. The remaining 10% of the tobacco is kept by the farmer to be rolled and/or sold for

additional profit.

Vinales is the land of the mogotes. The mountains of Cuba are not volcanic, but limestone with some serpentine. And the mogotes are wonderfully shaped limestone outcrops interlaced with fertile, red-soiled valleys. Uplift has pushed these former sea-beds into contorted shapes. Vertical walls are sparsely covered with palms, vines and odd-looking trees. Definitely the prettiest place in Cuba, even with the cloud cover.

Next we stopped at Cuevas de los Indios, a limestone cave with a stream that is deep enough for small boats that would take us into the domain of stalagmites. But the other reason we visited this site is that the Cuban Solitaire is only found nesting adjacent to limestone cliffs, and there were lots of those in Vinales.

The boat in the cave gave us a glimpse into an system of limestone caverns. This might not be a world-class cave, but it definitely gave us insight into the potential of what caves can share! But no solitaire when we entered the cave.



But when we exited the cave we had a little time to scan the cliffs above us. It took a while, but first we saw a Cuban Trogon perched about thirty feet above us. And then Gustavo found the solitaire. It was perched about twenty-five feet above us and on the other side of the creek and everyone got excellent looks. Long looks, as the bird and the trogon sat almost side-by-side and only move a few feet at a time. We had our seventeenth endemic!

It started raining again as we pulled up to the organic farm that was going to be our lunch stop for the day. Folks were warned about that the food was incredibly tasty and that they would have to pace themselves. And after a bowl of soup, fourteen different dishes served family style came and went and also an as yet uncut and unabridged barbecued pig. Then we finally had some flan dessert as attested by the number of helpings. For those that followed the advice, they got to taste it all. For those that didn't, well there was still lots to taste...

We spent about twenty minutes in Vinales town checking out some of the local stores. The rain had kept the number of visitors down, but that just made this well kept town that more inviting. It was time to head back to our hotel to finish digesting our lunch...

Thursday, 18 April – Sorora to Los Terrazas to La Habana

This morning we wandered up the road to the Soroa Orchid Garden, birding the road and enjoying the morning light, before departing for La Habana. This beautiful property was built in 1943 by a wealthy Spanish lawyer to honor his daughter. There are 700 orchid species here from around the world and 150 species from Cuba, and over 6000 plants in all. There are lathe houses, beautiful stacked stone planters, and terraces all the way up the hill to the lovely old home at the top. Clouds of begonia blooms, bromeliads, giant beucarnias, dracaenas, and Brazilian rose tree add to the spectacle.



Cuban Green Woodpeckers put in another appearance as we looked out from the terrace at the beauty below, all while being serenaded by guitar, bongo, and harmonies.

The road to Las Terrazas bounds the biosphere area, and is lush with indigenous hibiscus, cedar, mahogany, royal palm, cecropia, Caribbean pines, and gumbo limbo, as well as introduced eucalyptus. Las Terrazas is essentially a planned community that was constructed to mitigate the economic impacts with the biosphere designation. It was built on old terraces that have since been reforested by the residents starting in 1968. Over 8 million trees were planted; it's hard to imagine now because the forest looks so mature. The community was an experiment in building a sustainable community – 35% of profits are reinvested in the community. Thirty tons of honey are harvested here a year, as well as coffee and citrus. It's actually inside the boundaries of the biosphere. There is senior housing, schools, day care, and hotels, definitely hotels. Tourism is certainly one component of their sustainability. We



visited the studio of a local artist, Ariel, who makes his own thickened paper by recycling used computer papers.

We had lunch at a beautiful old French coffee plantation – a stone building where coffee had been stored in the rafters. Yesterday's storm left us with some increasingly strong winds, making it almost impossible to bird. But our meal of rabbit or beef was very tasty and we were warm enough indoors. From there we made our way to La Habana, with a stop in the suburb of

We drove around La Habana for a bit, and got out of the bus to wander around Revolution Square, the Ministries of Defense, Communication, and Economy, and the monument to Jose Marti. Within ten minutes we were checked into our five star hotel Melia Cohiba. Very, very nice, with people in high style passing through the lobby, and super-sized flower arrangements in the all around.

We ate at a wonderful paladar called La California down towards the historic center of La Habana. Wonderful lobster nestled in a medley of rice and vegetables and proceeded by a bowl of simple squash soup. All of this was to get us ready for night at the Buena Vista Social Club...

The Club was made famous by a movie of the same name and by Ry Cooder, an American musician who featured a number of the club greats on his own music. And if you have ever been to the club, you know that audience participation is an integral part of the show.



One of us was very fond of instigating different actions and pointed out one of us to the two resident dancers who promptly walked down the aisle to take his hand and lead him up front. There, both he and the raven-haired lead danced a very light cha cha in front of the 200 guests.. There was more music with different leads and you could see why their voices resonated with their decades of history. Really a treat to get to hear so much talent!



Where you have one instigator, well that usually means most others pile on. And so the female lead walked down the aisle one more time looking for one more partner. All of us (with the exception of the me, the guide) were pointing at the guide. It was almost vatic as I realized I was about to be led to the stage, and then she put her hands on my shoulders. It was my turn to rumba...

We finished our night with an all-inclusive conga line. Almost everybody got up and made at least one pass around the room at the Buena Vista Social Club!

Friday, 19 February – Historic La Habana

It was our last day and we drove through older Colonial Havana in all its crumbling glory. There seems to be directed goal of restoring the historic part of La Habana and that restoration seems to be percolating out to other historic parts of the city (the colonial center is the 1600 's, while other parts date to the 1700 & 1800's. The winter storm that brought us rain for the past two days created waves that were breaking over the Malecon. We drove under and to the other side of the bay to El Morro Castle, an enormous fortress that guards the entrance of Havana Bay. Here we did a little cigar shopping given the new import rules delineated by the President.

Then it was back under the bay to the Parque Central ,an area surrounded by old hotels, the Grand Teatro, the capital building (being restored), and the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment (closed for restoration and reopening as the National Congress). Outside the pedestrian sections, pedicabs compete with old Chevys, Chryslers and Fords, Chinese buses, and obscure Russian and Italian sedans on the streets of La Habana.



We strolled the streets of Old La Habana, going from La Bodequita de Medico, Hemmingway's bohemian hangout, to the Plaza de la Catedral and then the Plaza de Armas, the oldest square in the City, dating from the 16th century. The Palace of the Captain General is here, which has a spectacular patio with a statue of Christopher Columbus! The colonial fort is the second oldest in the Americas. The

colonnaded buildings surround a lush tree-filled plaza. We walked down “Merchant’s Street”, past chocolatiers and the Café Taberna, the venue for the Buena Vista Social Club, and an 11 km aquaduct built in the 1800s to move water from the Almendares River to the City. The Church of Saint Francis of Assisi (built before 1600) served as the headquarters for troops that took over Havana in 1762. Lunch was another dose of vitamin R and some of the best food of the trip at another paladar (Paladar Los Mercaderes), this one also located on the Merchant’s Street.

Next up was the Art and Crafts Fair that had hundreds of local artists. We finished daylight with a visit to the Museum of the Revolution before heading back to the Melia Cohiba and getting ready for our farewell dinner.

The highlight of our farewell dinner was the celebration of Bill and Linda’s Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary! With a cake and flowers Linda was just a little surprised. Not by Bill’s fondness or planning (that was a given...), more just from the sharing the experience with everyone on the trip...

All photos by Greg Smith. Find more of his work at Gregory Smith: www.flickr.com/slobirdr.

