

Cuba: People-to-People Trip Report

January 19 – 28, 2017

With Liudmys Ramirez (Cuban tour guide), Dodie Logue (NJ) and Odey Martinez (Cayo Coco) with 14 participants: Sally and Pam, Billie and Collin, Barbara, Peggy and Bob, Byron and Joann, Vickie, Marty and Rhoda, Jeremiah and Emily

Trip Report compiled by Dodie Logue



Thurs., Jan. 19

Miami / Santa Clara / La Granjas for lunch / Lagos de Mayajigua / Cayo Coco

After a buffet breakfast at Cambria Inn in Miami we took a bus to the Miami Airport where we had glacial check-ins and a bit of a wait. Our 11:50 AM departure was on time and got us into Santa Clara just after 1:00 PM. Customs were slow, but we finally met our Cuban guide Liudmys and driver Alexis, got packed in our comfy bus, and had a short ride to our lunch spot in Santa Clara — we were all hungry as it had been a long travel morning.

Here at La Granjas we had our first taste of the plentiful Cuban food and good service we would have for the whole of our trip. A huge buffet with many types of salads and vegetables, different meats and fish, cheeses and fruits, and a large dessert display. We also had some of our first birds in the parking lot: migrating warblers and regional endemic Antillean Palm Swift.



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We had a long drive ahead, and we departed Santa Clara after 3:00 PM, making one birding/bathroom stop en route at Mayajigua, where we had our first Cuban Blackbird and Greater Antillean Grackle, as well as a bunch of roosting Cattle Egret and a few Little Blue Heron. Before heading north to get on the causeway to Cayo Coco, we stopped in Morón to pick up Odey Martinez, who would be our local guide for the next day. It was dark as we crossed the long, man-made causeway and we got to our hotel, Memories Flamenco, after 7:30 PM. Our rooms were at the far end of the resort, and after getting our luggage and selves to our lodging, we had a late buffet dinner and were off to bed. A long day!

Fri., Jan. 20 Cayo Coco / Cayo Guillermo / Cayo Paredon Grande

Hotel Memories Flamenco was an all-inclusive resort, which means all drinks, food, bar service, etc., is included. A good thing as most of us were up for early pre-breakfast birding; we hit the bar for a cup of the wonderfully strong Cuban coffee. We loaded up the bus and headed out with Odey in charge of the schedule. First stop was along a road in coastal scrub habitat where we got looks at the endemic Zapata Sparrow and Oriente Warbler — our only sightings of these rare birds the whole trip.



Next we went to La Cueva del Jabali; there are feeding stations here and we hoped for sightings of the regional endemic Key West Quail Dove. We were in luck — there were a few at the feeders, along with Zenaida Dove and Yellow-faced Grassquit. Also in the area, we saw our first lovely Western Spindalis (formerly Striped-headed Tanager), Cuban Bullfinch, and some migrating warblers. We were having such good luck that we decided to go try to find West Indian Whistling Duck at a nearby lake; we didn't see any of these uncommon birds, but we did see our first West Indian Woodpecker, a Roseate Spoonbill, and some Black-necked Stilt.

We were much later to breakfast than planned, but morning birding was so good it was hard to pull ourselves away! After a plentiful buffet breakfast, we headed out to a few spots on Cayo Coco again, looking for the West Indian Whistling Duck, among

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other birds. We never did have luck with the Whistling Duck, but we did have nice looks at a Great Lizard Cuckoo and more migrating warblers.

After a large buffet lunch we headed out to Cayo Guillermo. Here we looked and looked for Bahama Mockingbird, with no luck. This bird became somewhat of a trip “legend,” and Alexis would bring up Bahama Mockingbird any time we were out looking for an elusive bird — what a wonderful sense of humor our careful driver had! We saw our first Cuban Black Hawk here, and did get great looks at Mangrove Cuckoo, spotted along a dirt road. Here we also spotted a skulky vireo that was later confirmed as a Thick-billed Vireo, thanks to a wonderful photo that Vickie took. We had sightings of water birds along the road in mangrove ponds, including a flock of Flamingo, a white-morph Reddish Egret, Tri-colored Heron, Snowy Egret, and a large flock of early returning Cave Swallow. A quick stop by a water treatment facility gave us sightings of some ducks and a few shorebirds, as well as Smooth-billed Ani, Northern Waterthrush, and good side-by-side comparisons of Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs.

This was the one day of the tour that was completely focused on birding, and after a short break, late afternoon had us back on the bus and heading east to the lighthouse, which was built in the 1800s by Chinese slaves on Cayo Paredon Grande. It was a bit hot and somewhat quiet, but we did finally see the endemic Cuban Gnatcatcher, as well as our first Cuban Green Woodpecker. The light was waning and lovely as we headed back to our hotel, while occasional flocks of ibis graced the sky.

Back at our hotel we all went our separate ways to wash up and have dinner at our choice of buffet or Asian restaurant. We had seen a handful of Cuban endemics on this full and rewarding day!

Sat., Jan. 21 Causeway / Trinidad / Topes de Collante

This morning we checked out of our hotel, so after our usual buffet breakfast we finished packing and loaded up the bus. Our wonderful bird guide Odey had stayed over last night, so we had him for a few hours before dropping him back off in his home town of Morón on our way to Trinidad this morning. We decided to make a stop along the causeway at a small cafe/pullover to see what was in the area. Here we saw our one and only Yellow Warbler, as well as our first La Sagra’s Flycatcher and an elusive Clapper Rail. We also picked up Red-breasted Merganser and Double-crested Cormorant. We made another brief stop to look for Eastern Meadowlark (to no avail), then stopped in Morón, where Vickie was able to give Odey some of the *Sharing the Discover Birds* activity book that she had done the art and writing for. The English books we shared were funded by the Tennessee Ornithological Society and the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. The Spanish



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books were funded by Naturalist Journeys. Odey seemed very pleased! We hoped some curious kids get interested in nature and birds.



Our birding was done for the day, and now we had a bit of a ride southwest across the island to the historic town of Trinidad. En-route we did our checklist and made a pit-stop at a small cafe and shop, where some of us got maps, t-shirts, and hats, and most of us got a freshly produced cold virgin piña-colada. Back on the bus, our guide Liudmys gave us some historical and cultural information about Cuba and the areas we passed through, showing our route on a map.

We made it to Trinidad early afternoon just in time for our lunch reservations at a palador, or a privately owned restaurant. The government is getting a bit more allowing of private enterprise, and Trinidad, with its beautiful old Spanish Colonial architecture and quite a bit of tourism, is ripe for this. Our palador was called *La Nueva Era*, and was tall ceiled and elegant, with lovely dinnerware and tall open doors with beautiful woodwork. After lunch, Liudmys gave us a briefing on the city and we all had an hour to enjoy on our own. Some of us went to the Chanchanchara, a bar where locals go for music and a drink made of honey, rum, and lime juice, served in small pod-like ceramic cups. Others went to a street market, just walked along the ancient cobbled streets, or visited the local museums. Pam and Sally even got a “tour” in a horse buggy! It was late afternoon as we all gathered in Cathedral Square again and found our way back to the bus.

We wanted to get on the road while our driver Alexis would still be able to see, as the road now went up the mountain and was windy and narrow, entering the Topes de Collantes nature reserve. We stopped at the headquarters to do some paperwork, with a view of a huge Art Deco tuberculosis sanatorium built by Batista. Dusk was falling as we checked in and made our way to our simple rooms in the forest; the architecture here was a bit stark and unadorned. We had dinner in the dining room here, which again was buffet-style, and then went to bed.



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Sun., Jan. 22 Topes de Collante / Trail of the Giants / Coffee Farm

Some of us were out early this morning; as the dark lifted we could see the large forms of Scaly-naped Pigeon in a dead tree looming over our rooms. Also, some of us hadn't slept too well because of the



batch of puppies and their mom which had made a home right next to Vickie's doorway! Cute! But the mother was understandably protective at night.

After breakfast, we met our local guide for the day, Yaimáris. She was extremely knowledgeable and personable, and spoke English well. We hiked down the road right from our hotel, birding and discussing plants and habitat. We hiked along a trail called Jardin de los Gigantes, which went by a dam and along a dirt road in the woods, crossing a small stream and ending at a Coffee Museum. It was misty and damp, but we had a fantastic time and saw our first Cuban Trogon and Cuban Tody. We also saw Cuban Oriole, many Red-legged

Thrush, and had Cuban Parrot overhead. It was nice to be out all morning walking after yesterday's drive.

We stopped at the coffee museum for a wonderful cup of coffee while Yaimáris showed us how coffee was historically grown and processed. Our bus pulled in to take us the short distance to our lunch spot overlooking the valley where we had a family-style lunch of pork with lemons, along with plentiful vegetables and rice and beans.



After lunch we stopped at a local art museum. This was housed in a wonderful historic Art Deco home, and the collection was amazing. Mostly large paintings by Cuban artists done in the first half of the 20th Century; the influence of Picasso, Braque, and European Impressionism was apparent. They did not allow any photography, which was a shame.

Our next stop turned out to be the favorite of many — visiting the family farm of "Los Colorados," so called for their red hair. This was an organic coffee farm, with a few other things in the mix. Omar and Marta were wonderful hosts, answering our questions and serving us peanut

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candy. Omar seemed particularly interested in asking us about our recent Presidential Inauguration and about politics back home. Most of us bought coffee or some peanut candy, and we were reluctant to leave this friendly and welcoming place. We finally made our way back to our hotel Los Helechos, (the ferns). We experienced a cold front with some wind and rain today. Back in our rooms some of us had fantastical animal forms made out of towels created by our maids to show their appreciation for our tips. We had dinner in the hotel dining room and made our way back to our rooms.

Mon., Jan. 23 Topes de Collante / Bermejas / Cuevo de los Peces / Playa Larga

Today we were up and out early, heading to the Bay of Pigs, with some stops along the way. We drove through the town of Cienfuegos, and once again our Cuban guide was full of historic and local information as we travelled. In Bermejas, over a two-hour drive from our hotel, we met our local guide Orlando. Here we walked through a forest reserve where we saw Bare-legged Owl. Orlando had to knock on a hollowed-out palm stump that she was roosting in to get her to pop out. She flew out and landed in a nearby tree long enough for some photos, then went right back to her bed. We also had a nice mixed flock of warblers, including Yellow-headed. Along the pathway we came upon some Ground Crabs or Congrejo, which were a bright orange. Next we crossed the road to some blooms where we had wonderful looks at both male and female Bee Hummingbird, the smallest bird in the whole world! This spot also hosted more Cuban Oriole, including a bright male.



We reluctantly left Orlando and our next stop was at Cuevo de los Peces. We were here for one particular bird, the lovely Blue-headed Quail Dove. We lucked out as we saw some people looking at something off trail and tucked under the brush: a single Quail Dove! The lighting was a bit murky, but we all had decent looks at it. Some of us also saw a Cuban Racer snake and a Curly-tailed Lizard just off the boardwalk. It was after noon as we finally made it to Playa Larga and lunched at Enrique's Palador, where we were fed a sumptuous family-style meal. After lunch, Amando, a local naturalist who works in the

Zapata Swamp, gave us a brief lecture on the swamp's ecology and its importance to the area. We were tired after a huge lunch and a long day as we checked into our cottages right on the Bay of Pigs. We now had some free time to rest and enjoy the water (though the cold-front had roiled up the surf and it was a bit windy).

Dinner this night was at Milly's Palador, where the owners were a friendly and welcoming couple. There was live music with friends, wonderful food, and atmosphere. It was fun to see our Cuban guide Liudmys and driver Alexis enjoy the music and relax. We were able to walk back to our rooms that were just a few streets away.

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Tues., Jan. 24 Playa Larga / Crocodile Farm / Havana (Il Divino Restaurant) / Hemingway's House / Soroa

This morning we awoke to the goofy sound of Cuban Crow; there were a few on the grounds of our hotel, in the tall palm trees. Some of us grabbed coffee and went for an early bird walk with Amando. We headed out along the road, checking the grasses and trees for birds. The morning started out a bit quiet, but we were eventually rewarded with very good looks at Yellow-headed Warbler, Cuban Pygmy Owl, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and La Sagra's Flycatcher.



After birding we had breakfast at our hotel dining room, then grabbed our bags and checked out of Playa Larga. Our next stop was Korimakao, a community arts organization. Here we met with the director who spoke to us about the place, and we were able to see some music and dance performances, as well as an art display in the gallery. We were all impressed by the talent and feeling that these young artists poured into their work! After saying our goodbyes, we headed to the Crocodile Farm. This is a captive breeding facility where they are working to save the endemic Cuban Crocodile, which is in danger of being out-competed with and diluted by the American Crocodile. We didn't go into the facility, but we searched the small ponds outside the entrance; we discovered a Purple Gallinule across the road and Pied-billed Grebe right by the entrance. There was also a small enclosure where we were able to see captive Hutia.

Back on the road, we had a few hours' drive to the outskirts of Havana, where we had lunch reservations at Il Divino restaurant. Before lunch we had a tour of the gardens with a gardener and naturalist. We had a wonderful meal here and we all especially enjoyed the ice cream served in half coconut shells.

After lunch we made our way to Hemingway's house. This is a lovely estate with a beautiful home and gardens on a hill overlooking Havana. His beloved boat, Pilar (Virgin), is housed on the grounds as well. The well-informed Tatiana was our guide; she knew an incredible amount about Hemingway's life, and the visit made me want to re-visit his books! After this very full day, we finally headed to Soroa, our lodgings in the mountains.

Dinner this night was at the hotel restaurant. We all went off to our rooms, but the night guard told some of us he had seen an owl fly in; we looked and looked, and a few of us got up and out real early in the morning as well, but to no avail. We did hear a Stygian Owl, and Hutias as well; we only knew the sound because the guard told us what it was.

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Wed., Jan. 25

**Soroa / Montecino Tobacco Farm /
Cuevo de los Indios / Finca Paraiso /
Viñales**

Most of us were up and out of our rooms for a bit of early birding around the pool. Breakfast was at our hotel, then we loaded up the bus and headed to our first stop, the Montecino tobacco farm. Here we got a tour of the fields and drying barns, had a cigar-rolling demonstration while sipping coffee, and were able to buy some unlabeled cigars — all the tobacco they sell goes to make Cohibas.



From here we made our way to an area called Cuevo de los Indios. We had one goal here: the endemic Cuban Solitaire! We were incredibly lucky — we heard it singing as we approached the steep limestone mountainside, and we spotted it right away, sitting out on a branch. We spent a bit more time here birding, then headed to our lunch spot in Viñales at Finca Paraiso Organic Farm. This farm has an absolutely stunning view of the valley, with the mogote formations for which it is famous. Lunch was overly abundant and delicious, especially the health drink made with pineapple juice and five herbs — two mints, basil, lemongrass, and fennel, and optional vitamin R (rum).



After lunch we had a tour of the farm, learning organic methods of bug/pest control, including soaking the stems and veins of the tobacco leaves in water and spraying the nicotine-laden liquid on the plants. Next we looked for and found Olive-capped Warbler in the tall pines along the road. This bird is in the same family as our Grace's Warbler, found in the Southwest, which also likes tall pines. From here we went into the town of Viñales, where Alexis dropped us off for an hour on our own to visit the craft market and explore.



After another full day we made our way back to our lodgings for dinner, and then to our rooms. We had some packing to do as we were moving on the next morning.

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Thurs., Jan. 26 Soroa / Orchid Garden / Las Terrazas / Pig Farm / Havana



This morning we checked out and walked down to the orchid garden. Aliet was our knowledgeable guide. Cuba has many native orchids, and there are also lots of non-native plants; this is the perfect climate for orchids! We enjoyed a lovely walk, looking at the blooms and plants and birds. We spotted a Cuban Green Woodpecker in hole, and had good looks at White-crowned Pigeon. Our first Red-legged Honeycreeper was on the Bottlebrush as we came down the hill by the entrance/exit.

Next we headed to Las Terrazas, a planned community with its own school, cafe, library, and artist studios. Our guide was Otis Campa, an energetic and knowledgeable member of the community who is teaching young kids about birds and the environment. As we were having introductions in the parking lot, a Snail Kite flew in and perched right by the pond! We stopped at the cafe where we all enjoyed one of the “specialty” coffee drinks. We also visited the studio of Lester Campa (Otis’ brother), where some of us bought cards and prints. Next, we headed to a pig farm where we had hopes of seeing the endemic Cuban Grassquit. When we arrived, they put out some bird seed, which attracted many Yellow-faced Grassquit, along with a few stunning Cuban Grassquit! We also walked back by some fields where we saw an Eastern Meadowlark and Northern Flicker. We had no luck with Fernandina’s Flicker, though.

Lunch was at a renovated and beautiful old French Coffee plantation; the grounds were in ruins, some of which were partially excavated. After eating, we birded the grounds and saw a Black-throated Green Warbler and a Yellow-throated Vireo.

Next we visited a school, where we went into some classrooms and gave the headmistress a few of Vickie’s books. Saying our goodbyes to Otis, we presented him with the bulk of the books for him to use to teach the children more about birds.

After departing Las Terrazas we headed to Havana. Our first stop upon arriving was Revolution Square, where we saw many vintage American cars, and a couple of Peregrine Falcon on the monument. It was now late in the day, and we made our way to our hotel near



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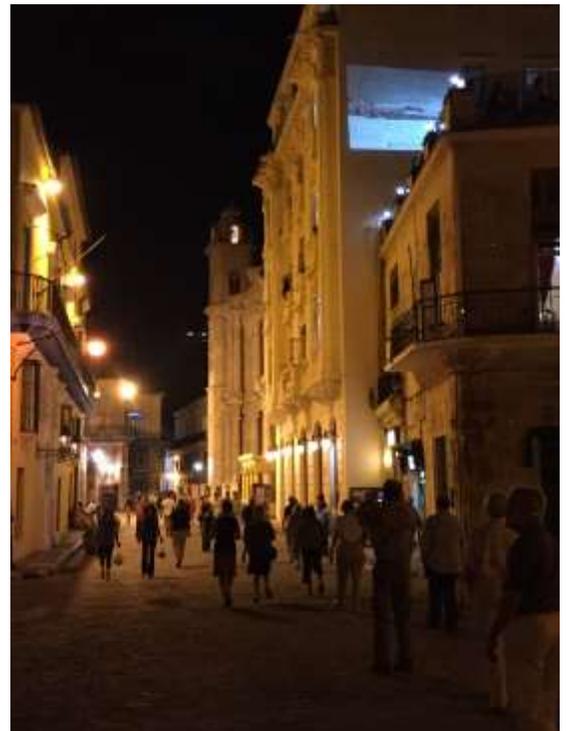
the Malecón, Melia Cohiba. After some time to relax a bit, we went to dinner at Rum Rum, a wonderful restaurant in the heart of Havana. It was a beautiful night, and it almost felt like we were on a movie set as we walked through the town — lots of people out and about, music, incredible lighting, and fabulous architecture. After staying in hotels that were somewhat “rustic,” we all appreciated a nice hot shower and cushy beds!



Fri., Jan. 27 Havana

After breakfast on our own at the overly abundant buffet at the hotel, we all piled on the bus to head to the Partagas Cigar Factory. Here in a tall old building, hundreds of people work in factory conditions making various styles of cigars by hand. We saw cigars in various stages, from dried leaves, to being pressed in molds, to being finished and inspected.

Next, Liudmys took us on a walking tour of her beloved home town. She really came to life and it was clear how much she loved her city. We walked to four main plazas: Plaza Vieja, Plaza de la Catedral, Plaza de San Francisco, and Plaza de Armas. (We were all intrigued by the large outdoor sculpture of a rooster with a woman on its back in Plaza Vieja, by artist Roberto Fabelo!) We got to know a little bit of the history of this lovely city. Tired and hungry, we had lunch at La California restaurant right in Havana near the Cathedral.



After lunch we briefly visited Arte Corte, a local community arts organization, and then the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, which was wonderful! We visited early and mid-century galleries, seeing more work by Roberto Fabelo, and works by Wifredo Lam, an important Cuban artist, as well as works by many other wonderful Cuban artists.

The huge craft market was our next stop. We had a half hour here to walk through the stalls and make local purchases. The market is so large it can be a bit overwhelming!

By this time we were all exhausted and we made our way back to our hotel for some R & R. This night we had a late dinner at Buena Vista Social Club next door — some stayed for music and the show.

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Sat., Jan. 28 Havana / Miami

Our last morning in Cuba started out with a visit to the amazing Colón Cemetery, (Cementerio de Cristóbal Colón), which was founded in 1876 in the Vedado neighborhood of Havana. Named for Christopher Columbus, the 140-acre cemetery is noted for its many elaborately sculpted memorials. We had a guide who showed us some of the more elaborate and famous grave monuments, including those of families who no longer live in Cuba, but who still own a plot. Beautiful sculpture, ironwork, and architecture all at once.

After this visit, we had some time to do our final packing and organizing before checking out of our Havana hotel and heading to a local paladar for our last meal in Cuba. We dined in the top floor of a private home that had wonderful views of Havana. The traffic and the long lines at the airport made for a bit of a hectic check-in, but we were all in our seats and heading back to Miami by 3:45 PM. Thank you to all for joining us and for making this a memorable trip, and a special thanks to the honeymooners — what a treat to have you celebrating with us!



Photo credits:

Bee Hummingbird, Vickie Henderson (VH); Cuban Bullfinch, Dodie Logue (DL); Thick-billed Vireo, (VH); Mangrove Cuckoo (VH); local guide Odey, Peg Abbott (PA); Trinidad (DL); Cuban Trogon (VH); Cuban Tody (VH); Farm (DL); Curley-tailed Lizard (PA); Cuban Pygmy Owl (DL); Vinales Scenics (DL); Soroa Garden (DL); Colorful door (DL); Pink Door Havana (DL); Havana Night (DL), West Indian Woodpecker, Lynn Feryus (LF); Havana Scene (LF).