

Cuba: People-to-People Trip Report

February 16 – 25, 2017 with Greg Smith



Gustavo Puig & Greg Smith, guides, with Audrey, Mike, Ron, Lilli, Gustavo, Janet, Steve, Mike, Eleanor, Bobbie, Malcolm, Mary, Peggy, Obie, Callie, and Joyce

Thurs., Feb. 16 Santa Clara / Cayo Coco

We had lunch at that famous Presidential dining room in Little Havana called Versailles. We were going to have a taste of Cuba before we took off for Santa Clara later in the afternoon. We arrived to find Gustavo and Eddie our bus driver waiting, so after most exchanged dollars for CUCs, we were on the road.

The drive before sunset gave us looks at the surrounding countryside of central Cuba. Different lifestyles for most, and we were only one hundred miles from one of the most populous cities in the United States. One thing about Cuba that always seems to stand out is the vibrant colors of homes and businesses as you drive through rural communities and small cities.

And then we crossed the causeway out to Cayo Coco, our rooms and our Cuban dinner.

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Fri., Feb. 17

Cayo Coco / Cayo Ramon / Cayo Paredon Grande / Cayo Guillermo

A good day to be out and about before breakfast as we headed to a local night club, Cueva del Jabali, a dance club built in underground caverns of fossilized coral. We had our local Cuban guide Oday with us, who was determined that we get to see all that the islands had to offer. There are two endemics to the



cayos and two other birds that are easier to find here than in other parts of Cuba: Cuban Gnatcatcher and Oriente Warbler. We did get to see the warbler, along with Cuban Vireo, Western Spindalis, and Key West Quail-Dove. Certainly a nice breakfast appetizer.

After a breakfast that only each individual could put limits on, we were back on the bus and heading out to Cayo Ramon. A Cuban Black Hawk was another endemic for our list. Crested Caracara stood out on the top of trees, while

Cuban Bullfinch were busy constructing nests. And then, in what looked like a solitary shrub next to the road and surrounded by wetlands, out pops a Cuban Gnatcatcher. Trying to please us all, it foraged about twenty feet from where we stood. Sweet...

So we had one more cayo to try before heading back to graze just a little more at the local buffet, and as we drove onto Cayo Paredon Grande we started seeing more waders, herons, and egrets were in the shade digesting their morning feasts. We stopped just short of the lighthouse and here we found one of Cuba's more challenging species, the Thick-billed Vireo. We saw five different birds, so this was certainly a favored habitat.



After lunch and a short siesta we headed out to Cayo Guillermo where we were able to add different shorebirds to our list and then we drove a little further west to an area across the road from the last of the western resorts. Oday played a tape and out popped two Bahama Mockingbirds! One of the more challenging species to see in Cuba, primarily because of limited distribution and habitat disturbance. But these two weren't the least bit shy.

We backtracked towards Cayo Coco, but first we had to stop at this series of shallow-water

lagoons and feast our eyes on about seventy-five stunningly pink and orange croquet gleaners. In the late afternoon light, these American Flamingos just glowed! Really a treat to see so many and so close.

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But how can you go birding and not stop at everyone's (maybe every bird's) favorite spot: the wastewater treatment plant. Here were lots of herons and egrets, shorebirds, and waterfowl. Definitely a list-padding location with the highlight being the Giant Lizard Cuckoo perched in a tree trying to look invisible to all of us.

Sat., Feb. 18

Trinidad / Topes de Collantes

We started early, as we had some kilometers to cover on our way to Trinidad, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. As we crossed the causeway we could see a huge flock of hundreds of American Flamingos in the distance. Red-breasted Merganser and American White Pelican were riding the waves as we crossed to the mainland. And then it was farm fields, towns, and sugar cane factories that shaded the horizon.



We were in Trinidad for a late lunch and explored the 500-year old sugar baron tribute. Lunch with music and lots of shopping opportunities provided a different glimpse into the lives of Cubans who call a historic setting home.

It was warm in Trinidad, very warm. But Topes de Collantes is high up in the mountains and had that wonderful feel of cool when we arrived. After a welcome drink, a number of us birded our way down to the organic farm. We saw our first Cuban Trogon, small groups of Eastern Warbler, and a Limpkin that jumped out in front of us. We made arrangements for some of us to be up early birding the hills before settling down to our Los Helechos dinner.

Sun., Feb., 19 Topes de Collantes

The few that rose early for a little birding found more in the way of warblers, along with Cuban Oriole and Cuban Crow. All this before breakfast and our departure to the park.

We started off with our local guide and walked through a coffee demonstration garden. Although we learned a number of things about coffee, it was the birds in this area that kept us looking up.



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Yellow-throated Vireo, more trogons, Cuban Pewee, Loggerhead Kingbird, Red-legged Honeycreeper, more warblers, and Baltimore Oriole. We finished off the hike with coffee at the plantation house and then headed to our hilltop restaurant where we enjoyed the view, the American Kestrel, and the food.

We had two more stops before our day was complete and the first was at an art museum dedicated to Cuban artists. Mixed media and oil painting lined the walls of this former home and it seemed everyone had their favorite piece. One small room had a local's photography exhibit and seemed to be an area with rotating shows. But most of the pieces were there on permanent display, and it was a treat that we got to experience them.



Our final stop was with the Colorado family, local farmers with warm hearts, great peanut butter fudge, and home grown/roasted coffee. They shared insight into their lifestyle, how and when they harvested coffee, how much and what quality went to the government, how they hired the harvesters, and most interestingly, the story

of how some of the revolution was fought on and around their property. This was probably one of the highlights of the tour, especially given the genuine feeling of comfortableness of being with our group. Certainly a perfect finish to our bird and coffee-laden day.

Mon., Feb. 20 Back Roads / Playa Larga

Our bus driver Eddie was a local, so taking back roads out of Topas was easy for him. This was the first time we had found a road that was far less traveled than the major highways. The early morning light was just stunning on the tree-laden hillsides, with parrots and vultures masquerading as swarms of insects.

We stopped at Las Brejemes and met up with our local guide Orlando. After about twenty paces from the road he showed us a flock of another endemic, the Cuban Parakeet. This was followed by a roost site for the Cuban Bare-legged Owl.



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We made it down towards the south coast and after a few hours found ourselves at Cueva de la Peces, a restaurant across the highway from a popular snorkeling area on the Bay of Pigs. But we didn't stop for the food or the water here, it was for birds! So after long looks at Blue-headed Quail-Dove and Cuban Green Woodpecker, we headed to Playa Larga for lunch at Enrique's Paladar. Enrique's is a regular on our tour. If it is for lunch, there is always loads of fish, lobster, and veggies. Add some pork, beef, and dessert and you are pretty much set for the afternoon.

And so the five-minute drive to this evening's lodging gave us time to snorkel, swim, or just lay in the sun for a couple of hours. Oh, and there were those fresh coconut drinks.

Before dinner we had a visit from Frank Medina who sits on the Board of Directors for Cuba's National Park System, representing Zapata National Park. A biologist by training, he shared some of the challenges facing Cuba's parks, a number of which were similar in nature to what our own National Park system faces. We would see Frank again in the morning, as he would lead us on an early morning bird walk.

Tues., Feb. 21 **Korimakao / Finca** **Vigia**

We had an early morning bird walk with Frank; unfortunately, most of the birds were being less than vocal and not in the mood to bounce around the trees too much. But we did hear a number of Cuban Pygmy Owl, and then one decided to land in a tree right next to the road for us. Great endemic to start the day.



The Korimakao Project is just ten minutes up the highway from Playa Larga and was our first stop of the day. The Project Director met us and gave us a short introduction to what and why the project was created. Any artist (musician, dancer, painter, writer, etc.) between the ages of 17 and 82 are welcome

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to join the project. The caveat is that you practice with other artists and perform in rural towns and villages so that folks that haven't necessarily had the opportunity to experience some of the different forms of artistic expression get to experience it. The project is funded by the government, and for the people, of course



There is a woman down the street from the Project who has turned her yard into a Bee Hummingbird viewing area. And as we gathered in her backyard, we could see just how successful she was — there were at least three of the tiniest birds in the world zooming around with a group of Cuban Emerald.

After a very tasty lunch at Il Divino, we headed to Hemingway's casa, Finca Vigia. It was on the outskirts of Havana with acreage and grounds dotted with large trees and views. He and his

family's tortured history were lived in the spacious house where rooms had limited visitation rights for anyone other than Hemingway himself. The assistant museum director was our guide and shared with us some of his intimate life-style choices, where a particular frame on a painting came from, and other esoteric bits of information.

Then we headed up to our lodging at Soroa, the bungalows on the hill under the huge carob trees.

Cooler temperatures and very nice views of the forested hillsides.



Wed., Feb. 22 Monteciño's Tobacco Farm / Cueva de las Indios / Organic Farm

Today our afternoon destination was Viñales, home of Cuba's mogotes. The mogotes are remnant hills that were once part of a large, elevated plateau of limestone in this part of Cuba. One of limestone's characteristics is that there are numerous subterranean caverns that periodically fill with water. And sometimes those caverns close, which is what created the mogotes.

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But first we stopped at Montesiño's tobacco farm. When we arrived, he was out gathering royal palm fronds so that they could use the base of the leaves to cover curing tobacco during rains. We also learned how the lower leaves, middle leaves, and upper leaves all have different qualities that make up a good Cuban cigar. We watched as Montesiño rolled a fresh cigar and put it into the press. Then a family member lit up a few for us, and just about everyone took a puff. That, along with an espresso, pretty much got us rolling to Cueva de los Indios to look for the Cuban Solitaire.



Our first goal was to try and locate the endemic Cuban Solitaire, a bird that frequents the steep-sided mogotes. We searched long and hard for this bird, and could hear it calling numerous times somewhere in the vegetated hillsides above us. Then we spotted the bird out on a branch playing call and response with Gustavo's tape. That was pretty quick and easy compared to other years, and gave us enough time to ride the motorized boats through one of the underground caverns that was home to a free-flowing river. There were lots of bats and cave features, especially for those who had never had the opportunity to be in a cave.

Next up was lunch at an organic farm where there were prodigious amounts of food. We made it inside the paladar just before it started a good, heavy downpour. First, we had the customary organic daiquiri with special herbs.

The customary bottle of rum was placed on the table for those to "sweeten" their drink. From a whole barbecued pig, to loads of vegetables, more meats, yaro chips, and some very tasty flan, nobody left hungry.

Two more stops before we headed back to Soroa. First, just up the hill from the farm were some higher elevation pines. And here we looked for and found Olive-capped Warbler and another Yellow-headed Warbler. The Olive-capped is another near-endemic in Cuba and was very cooperative so that all of us could get great looks!

Our second stop was on the National Highway heading back to our lodge. We pulled over to the side of the road near a fish farm where we got to see four Snail Kite, eleven Swallow-tailed Kite,



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and four Limpkin. What a great little stop, with the Swallow-tailed Kite flock being totally unexpected.



Thurs., Feb. 23

Orchid House / Las Terrazas / Havana

A few of us got up before dawn to look for the Stygian Owl, as the morning before we had been rained out. Although it was still damp from the rains, there were stars overhead. Unfortunately none of us had any luck with the owl, although we did hear Black-crowned Night-Heron croaking down by the creek. After breakfast we loaded our bags and then walked over to the adjacent orchid house, a private estate built prior to the revolution and designed to house one man's

passion for orchids. It was a wonderful use of the extant limestone to display orchids, begonias, and many other plant species.

We spent about ninety minutes touring the grounds, getting good looks at Summer Tanager, Red-legged Honeycreeper, and male Cape May Warbler. After a group photo, we headed to our next stop, all the while driving through a UNESCO World Heritage site.



Las Terrazas is a "gated" community, certainly dis-similar to what we might find back home. Only residents are allowed in, and visitors with the proper identification. It is also a planned community with less than 2000 residents, and with the lake surrounded by homes, businesses, and lush vegetation, it is a pretty idyllic setting. And yes, others are vying for the opportunity to live here and enjoy the surroundings.



We were welcomed by the Assistant Principal of the local school and she shared with us how students are motivated through education. After presenting her with school supplies that a number of people brought from home, we toured the school and then made our way over to the community proper.

At the local coffee shop we each had choices of different cold and hot beverages with the instant

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hit being the Las Terrazas. This cold drink had dark chocolate and coffee as the base with a little shaved cardamom as a topping. This was the perfect setup for folks to open their wallets at the home of a family, who as a unit, were painters, wood carvers, and a seamstress. There were very few who didn't buy anything.

Lunch was on the front porch of an older simulated French farmhouse that was once headquarters to a



coffee plantation. A wonderful view of the Caribbean was another plus, as we ate our meal to the music provided by a family that played and sang together. Really a very nice setting!

We finished out hilltop visit with some birding where we got just stunning looks at Black-throated Green Warbler and a pair of Stripe-headed Tanager. Further up the hill we got more looks at Yellow-headed Warbler, Red-legged Honeycreeper, and the ubiquitous, but very good looking, Red-legged Thrush.

After a short drive down the hill we picked up our last endemic of the trip, Cuban Grassquit. A local farm had been putting out cracked corn, and there was a flock of about forty birds that also included the more common Yellow-faced Grassquit along with the endemic.

The drive into Havana took a while as we drove from the west into and along the Malecón. We arrived at the Melia Cohiba and melted into our updated hotel, very much enjoying some of the creature comforts we hadn't experienced over the last eight days.

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Fri., Feb. 24 Cigar Factory / Bella Arts Museum / Historic Center / San José Artist Colony / Colon Cemetery / Revolution Square / Buena Vista Social Club

Today was our busiest day, so after an extraordinary breakfast buffet we headed off to a down cigar factory. There was row after row of tables, each with an individual person, different piles of tobacco, and cigar trays. Each person had a different order for quantity, quality, and sizes. Their day was spent filling the world's order of Cuban cigars. So to coincide with the law of supply and demand, we next made our way to a government cigar store.

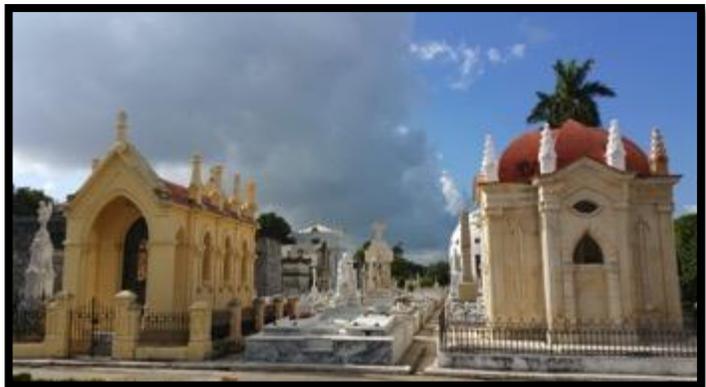
Next stop was the Bella Arts Museum where we were given a tour by one of the staff. A tour that most of us felt was one of the best we had ever experienced, given the exploration of Cuban art and specific artists that she led us down. You could walk the periods of Cuban artistic expression, while at the same time feel the changing of the individual artist's mood, all through the art placed on the walls and our guide's understanding and sense of interpretation.

We finished the morning with Gustavo's classic interpretive walk of the historic center of Havana. Through different periods of colonialism and architectural design trends, he walked us through what seemed like a myriad of alleys and roads constructed of cobblestone, wood, and pavement. We ended up at one of the best restaurants for the trip, the La Modeña Cubana.

Next up was the artist colony at one of the old tobacco warehouses. There are lots of tourist t-shirts, etc., here, but there is also lots of original art and crafts. So depending on your need for gifts or wall adornment, some were able to finish their shopping lists down here on the waterfront.

Our brief walking tour of the cemetery with our guide gave us insight into cultural norms based on religion, century, and wealth. Individuals from the past had different interpretations of how they wanted to be memorialized, with probably the most remembered being the memorial to a catastrophic number of firemen's deaths.

Our final stop before heading back to the Melia Cohiba was Revolution Square, lined on three sides by government buildings and on the fourth by the Monument to the Revolution. Pictures of the monument and the classic Yankee cars (that looked as if



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they had been driven off of a car sales lot) finished our day. But we still had the evening.

Dinner tonight was at the Buena Vista Social Club, now known as Café Tabernera; lots of food, plenty of opportunities to taste rum in different mixes, and dancing in the back to live salsa music. It was a long day, and we covered lots of ground; it was time to head back to get some sleep.

Sat., Feb. 25 Miami Flight / Fairchild Tropical Botanical Gardens

Airline schedule challenges had us flying out in the morning, so that gave us an afternoon in Miami. We headed over to these world-class botanical gardens and just let ourselves fall back into a state where smelling the roses was all we had to assess. This was a great way to finish our tour before heading off to an Italian dinner where we said our goodbyes. Flights out for some started at six in the morning.

