

## Cuba, December 2019, notes on a trip by elly



Cuba was wonderful: wandering through the sleepy streets in Remedios and the busy ones in Havana and finding new vistas and colors around each corner was breathtaking. Surprising street art and strolling dogs were a bonus. There is very little internet and there are no fast food places or chain stores! Traveling from the US, I could only visit as part of a tour in 'support of the Cuban people' and was required to do the entire program, which is vetted by the Cuban and US governments. I saw a lot because of that. In Remedios, there was a visit to a Cuban home, a church, and the various stores and, in Havana, we visited an art workplace for people with disabilities, a modern dance group, and a farm. A trip to Fusterlandia (a Cuban Gaudi) was deleted from the program as was a visit to a Jewish cemetery because we "had already done enough religion" though a later presentation on 'women in Cuba' was changed into one on religion. See a good NYT [article on women](#) in Cuba instead. But, after the official daily program ended, there were lots of hours to wander, which I loved the best.

Cuba is small so very susceptible to external change. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russian support ended and that left such a void, in the supply of food and technology and moral support. The recent crisis in Venezuela left Cuba without reliable gasoline supplies and that is a huge problem. The US is only 90 miles away and the up-and-downs in the US-Cuba relations over the last 60 years (and before) have (had) a huge impact on (i.e. determined) the lives of Cubans. For instance, if tourism from the US were opened up, there might be 10 million US visitors a year and the crumbling buildings might get restored.

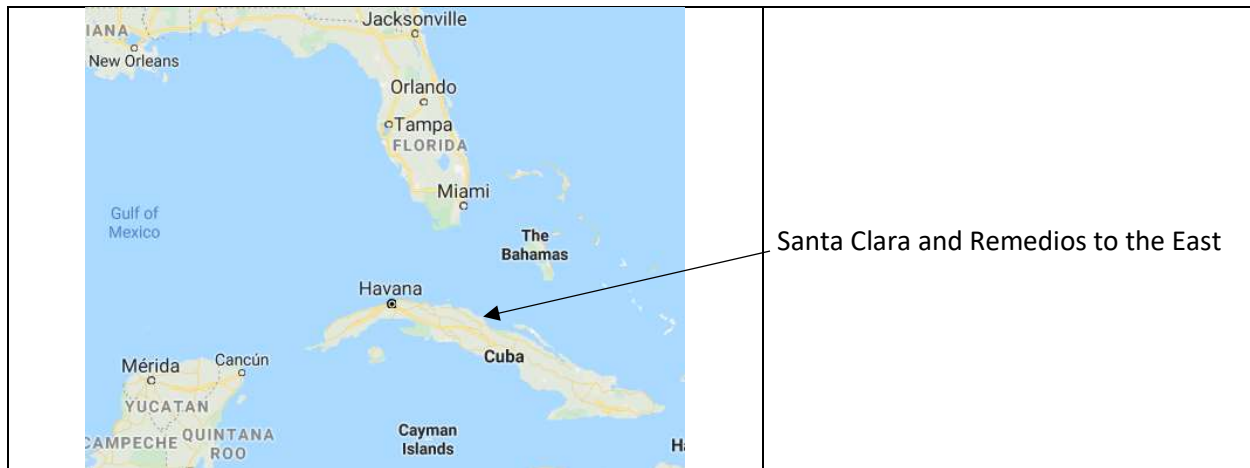


Horse drawn wagons are a regular means of transportation



Havana, Malecón

When I visited Cuba, the Trump administration had just announced another set of measures: less money could be sent by US family and friends to Cuba, only the Havana airport could be used, US cruise ships were banned, etc. I landed in Santa Clara, an airport that would no longer be serviced by US airlines after this trip. The tension in US Cuba relations exists because Cuba occupies such a strategic position; see map! It can, however, never be a threat to the US and the economic embargo therefore makes little sense. It would be great if normalized relations, as were started under Obama, could resume but, since Trump, there have been a 190 new sanctions (Carlos Alzugaray p.c.). And the (new) US Embassy on the Avenida Washington no longer offers visa services.



People say that, from one week to the next, Cuban policies can change a lot depending on what the outside world decides. Cuba needs foreign currencies to buy food and this shapes the policies of what to accept. Traditionally, there are two kinds of Cuban money, CUPs and CUCs ('kooks'). Cubans are paid in CUPs and pay with this but visitors exchange foreign currencies into CUCs that they use for paying at a different rate. Cubans are entitled to a minimum of rice, beans, sugar, etc and this is what they get in ration stores. Visitors cannot buy there, but there are also stores accepting both currencies. The CUC will be replaced by the dollar (and possibly the euro) and there are now some stores that accept only foreign currency. Some of these are in Havana and one was just opening in Santa Clara.



A multi-tiered system of income has also started: doctors and teachers are on government pay but that is so little that they are almost forced to work in the tourist and free-market economy. So, many medical students, doctors, teachers opt out and become guides, drive taxis, rent out rooms, or work in palavars

(private restaurants). People in the government sector work eight hours/day, pay minimal taxes, and retire at 60 (women) and 65 (men). Taxes are a little higher if you work in the private sector.



Cigar factory, El Vaquerito, in Remedios



Driving a taxi

The first town we visited was Remedios, founded in 1513, and that was great: a small plaza, lots of stores, and a wonderful hotel (Barcelona).



Church of San Juan Bautista, Remedios, with preparations for the Parrandas festival in front



Store that accepts CUCs in Remedios

The Church of San Juan Bautista is from the 1550s with a baroque altar piece and lots of other treasures, e.g. a statue of a pregnant Mary and evidence of the rivalry between two barrios that culminates in the Parrandas Remedianas, on December 24<sup>th</sup>. The Carmen barrio on the south of the square and that of San Salvador on the north side compete in music, dancing, and (carnival-like) floats. I got a Carmen t-shirt because that's where our hotel was (and because they seemed to be the losing side)!



Altar in San Juan Bautista



The San Salvador group at work

There is a Museo de las Parrandas Remedianas and we visited the workshop that makes the float and lights etc. There may be as many as 100 workers and volunteers working just before the festivities. When I was there, it was the 5<sup>th</sup> of December and I would be extremely nervous because I didn't see much yet (so the other side may win this year!!). There is a second Catholic Church on the square in Remedios, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Iglesia de Nuestra Señora del Buen Viaje. The sea is only 3 miles away so this was an important church for sailors. It seems to be in need of some repair.



The Church of Good Travel



Side street



Remedios at night, Plaza Martí

Nothing in Cuba was what I've seen before: it's all a surprise. Some buildings remind me of the Caribbean architecture but others of the starker concrete structures of e.g. Cambodia. Transportation is so varied: bicycle taxis, horse-drawn carts, cococabs, old American cars (many Chevys), old Eastern European cars (Ladas) and a few VWs. More on the cars below. In the countryside, there are people on horseback and lots of hitchhikers (e.g. university students).

Most of the island is green and there is a lot of groundwater. They grow sugarcane, tobacco, bananas, pineapple, coffee, moringa (medicinal tree, originally from India), and various palm trees, and get honey (from stingless bees), fish for lobster, and mine for nickel. Charcoal is also produced a lot.



Fields outside Remedios



Royal Palms

We visited a farm outside Habana and it was interesting to hear that all farms were forced to be organic after the embargo. Hence, there are rotating crops and 'smelly' flowers to chase away the insects.



Vista Hermosa



Green house with fine netting to stop heavy rain and promote condensation

Santa Clara is a good-sized town (5<sup>th</sup> largest) and the site of the last battle in the Revolution in 1958. Because of that, there is a big monument to Che Guavara and his bones were repatriated here. Che Guavara's face is everywhere and Fidel Castro didn't want that so the latter's image appears sparingly on schools and in official buildings. Santa Clara has a colonial history, like most cities, and beautiful buildings.



Che Guavara Monument, Santa Clara



Museo de artes decorativas



Santa Clara main square



Four-star hotel, former Hilton, with bullet holes left

All over Cuba, there are so many dogs around and all I have met are friendly. One person, named Lazarus, said 10 dogs come to his house to be fed. This is appropriate since the patron saint of dogs is Lazarus with a statue in the Church. In Havana, dogs that are cared for have tags. There are also dogs on leashes, e.g. huskies. I mainly saw cats in Old Havana and that seems right because Hemingway liked them and the bars of Old Havana.



Lazarus, Church of Remedios



One of Hemingway's bars, Old Havana



Remedios



Santa Clara



(Old) Havana

Change is coming fast, e.g. internet for one peso/hour. At the moment, very few people have internet at home. Some things that don't change are the cars. They are repaired and repainted and most have diesel engines. The one I went in with Beverly and Margaret was a beautiful pink Chevy. There are other colorful cars, e.g. Ladas and VWs.



A 1953 Chevy





Lada in Havana



Remedios



Havana



The buildings in Havana are in bad shape. That looks very interesting from an artistic point of view but then you realize people live there! Some buildings are great, e.g. the Cathedral and the (restored) buildings on Plaza Vieja. Most of Old and Central Havana is falling apart though. Most obvious for tourists is the seaside, the Malecón, but so much else is!



The Cathedral, Old Havana

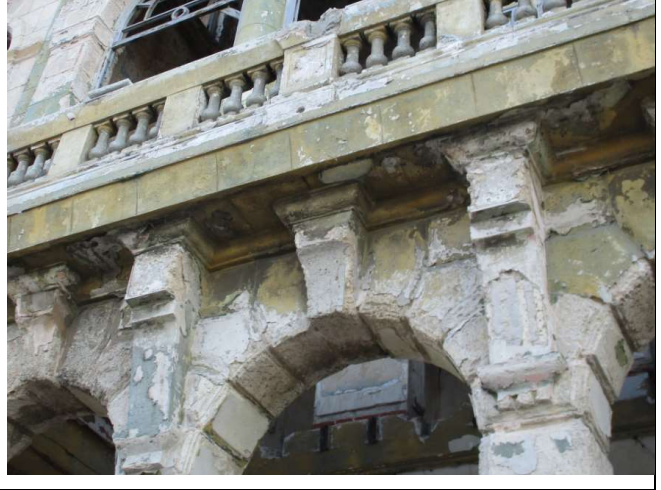


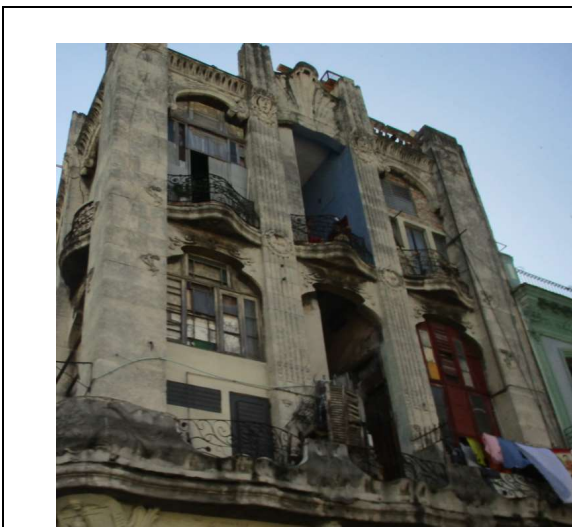
Plaza Vieja



Restored on the outside







The below building in Old Havana, off the Plaza de la Catedral, is one example of a crumbling building with electricity and cold water. If this building (ever) gets renovated, the inhabitants will move out but will be able to return once it is finished.



From one side, on the outside



The inside



Staircase



Detail on the inside

I could fill pages with street views; just a few here and then on to a few other things.



As I mentioned in the beginning, the group I was with visited an arts place for people with disabilities (Art Brut Project Cuba) and a modern dance company (Rosario Cardenas).



Rierda Studio; Art Brut Project Cuba



Rosario Cardenas

There are lots of schoolchildren but Cubans worry about the aging population; over 4000 are over 100! It is partly the brain drain but also the excellent medical care.



And there are blue skies despite lots of pollution from the diesel engines and leaded gas. The reason is because the traffic is light. Most streets are easy to cross, even on weekdays.



I can talk a lot more about politics, the medical system, religion, etc because we heard so much about these topics, so please ask if you are interested. It was a fascinating trip with really excellent guides!!

As expected, the judicial system, political prisoners, etc. didn't get much attention on our tour. This is what Amnesty International says "Arbitrary detentions, discriminatory dismissals from state jobs, and harassment in self-employment continued to be used to silence criticism. Advances in education were undermined by ongoing online and offline censorship. Cuba remained mostly closed to independent human rights monitors".

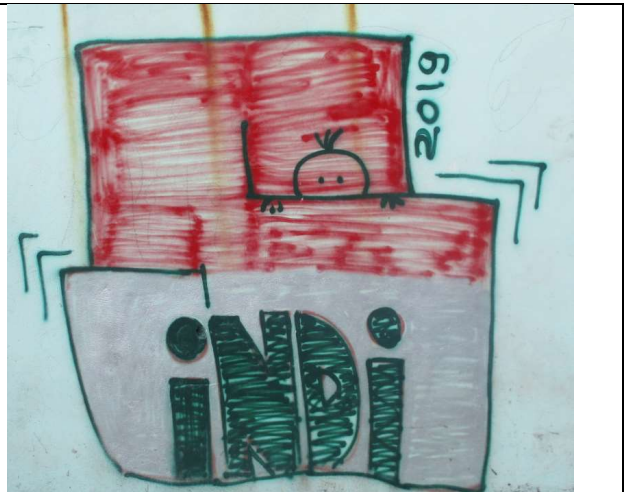
**End of travelogue;** now follow 14 pages of street art! There is a political message (Orwell and anti-consumer) in some of the work which would have been unthinkable during Fidel's years.

## And my favorite street art

The first group of pictures is from Central Havana and the last from the southern part of Old Havana. It was fun to recognize the artists because there aren't that many: the ski-masked 2+2=5? artist is Martí according to Mills 2017 and Fabian Lopez according to Marsh 2017. The 'Happy Zombie' ones are by Osmany Carratala and the helmets and other work by (Mr.) Myl is signed so recognizable.









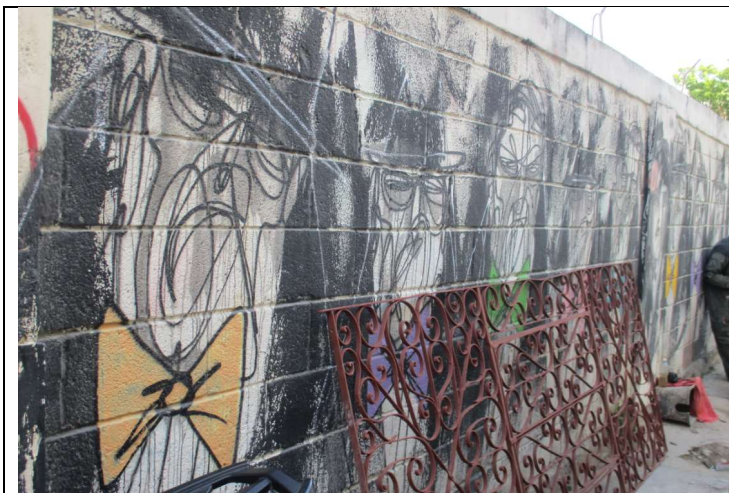
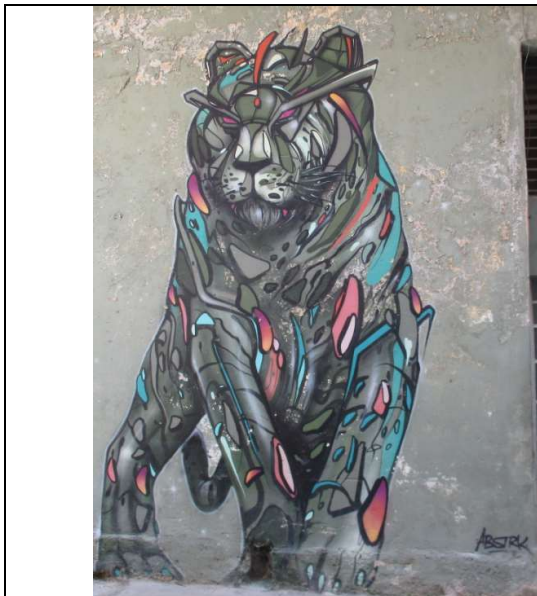




And from Old Havana come the following!



















## References

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