



Grandpa's Photo-Journal Series

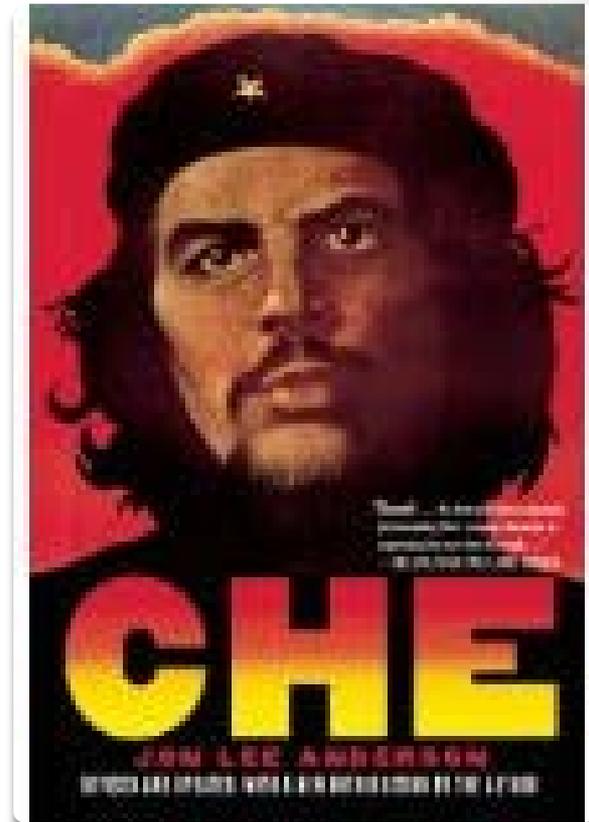
Cuba, Window on the World

- Ideas about political, economic and religious systems
- Questions about social justice and human rights, freedom and equality

January 3-10, 2015

Introduction

Last year I read a biography (life story) of Che Guevara – famous (loved), and infamous (hated) revolutionary leader in the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Curiosity got the better of me. How could anyone be so committed to a particular political, economic or social system (in this case, Communist ideals) that he would give his own life, and take the lives of so many others to achieve his ends? 56 years later, what is the outcome of Che’s adventures, and what are our expectations for the people of Cuba?



Geography

Before we begin our story, let's look briefly at the geography and history of Cuba. The map on the right shows the island of Cuba, one of many islands we call the "West Indies". Cuba itself is more than 750 miles in length but is just 90 miles from the southern tip of Florida in the United States. On this map you can also see Mexico to the west, the Bahamas to the north, Haiti and the Dominican Republic to the East and Jamaica to the south of Cuba.



Provincia del Rio	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	100
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The map on the left shows Cuba in more detail with its provinces, major cities and towns identified. There are about 11 million people in Cuba. On our one-week trip we travelled from Varadero to Matanzas, to Havana, back to Matanzas and Los Arabos and finally back to Varadero. See if you can find these places on the map. (Hint: Los Arabos is a small town between Matanzas and Santa Clara).

History

1492 - The navigator Christopher Columbus claims Cuba for Spain.

1511 - Spanish conquest begins under the leadership of Diego de Velazquez. The native people that Columbus found in Cuba have long died off since the Spanish settled the island in 1511.

1526 - Importing of slaves from Africa begins. By the Nineteenth century, imported African slaves made up a growing segment of the Cuban population.

1762 - Havana captured by a British force led by Admiral George Pocock and Lord Albemarle. During the year-long occupation of Cuba, the British colonists expanded the plantation system on the island and imported 4000 African slaves as laborers, nearly 10% of all the slaves imported to the island during the previous 250 years. Slavery in Cuba was associated with the sugar cane plantations and existed on the island of Cuba from the 16th century until it was abolished by royal decree on October 7, 1886. As the slaves outnumbered the European Cubans, a large proportion of Cubans are descended from these African slaves, perhaps as many as 60% of the population.

1763 - Havana returned to Spain by the Treaty of Paris and exchange of Florida with the British.



Columbus claims Cuba

History

The Fight for Independence

As with other New World countries, the people of Cuba desired to rid themselves of Spanish colonial rule. Spain's once vast colonial empire and mighty strength shriveled under the sunrise of independence in the early Nineteenth century. Several simultaneous revolts broke out, sparked by the American and French Revolutions, across Latin America.

New nations, freed by their own wars and revolutions, were protected by the [United States implementing the] Monroe Doctrine against further overseas encroachments. The United States feared that if Cuba fell into European hands, it would threaten America. This stemmed from the British using the Caribbean as a staging area during the American Revolution and the War of 1812.

1868-78 - Ten Years War of independence ends in a truce with Spain promising reforms and greater autonomy - promises that were mostly never met.

1895-98 - Jose Marti leads a second war of independence; US declares war on Spain.

1898 - US defeats Spain, which gives up all claims to Cuba. With the Cubans on the brink of triumph, the United States snatched victory.



Statue of Jose Marti in Havana across the street from our hotel

History

1902 - Cuba becomes independent; however, the Platt Amendment keeps the island under US protection which began a half century of direct American influence over Cuba. After the long, bitter fighting in the Nineteenth century, Cubans secured a moderately better life, but lost their dream of freedom.

1933 - Fulgencio Batista leads military coup, known as "sergeant's revolt" to overthrow the brutal dictatorship of Gerardo Machado.

1934 - The US abandons its right to intervene in Cuba's internal affairs.

1944 - Batista retires but seizes power again in 1952 and presides over an oppressive and corrupt regime.

1956 - Fidel Castro lands in eastern Cuba from Mexico and takes to the Sierra Maestra mountains where, aided by Ernesto "Che" Guevara, he wages a guerrilla war.

1959 - Castro leads a 9,000-strong guerrilla army into Havana, forcing Batista to flee. Castro becomes prime minister, his brother, Raul, becomes his deputy and Guevara becomes third in command.

1960 - All US businesses in Cuba are nationalised without compensation.



History

1961 - Washington breaks off all diplomatic relations with Havana. The US sponsors an abortive invasion by Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs; Castro proclaims Cuba a communist state and begins to ally it with the USSR.

1962 - Cuban missile crisis ignites when, fearing a US invasion, Castro agrees to allow the USSR to deploy nuclear missiles on the island. The crisis was subsequently resolved when the USSR agreed to remove the missiles in return for the withdrawal of US nuclear missiles from Turkey.

1989-2000 Cuba's "Special Period" was an extended period of economic crisis that began primarily due to the collapse (and consequential withdrawal of military and economic support) of the Soviet Union and the Comecon.

2008 February - Raul Castro takes over as president, days after Fidel announces his retirement.

2008 November - Russian President Dmitry Medvedev visits. The two countries conclude new trade and economic accords. Chinese President Hu Jintao visits to sign trade and investment accords.

2014 December - President Barack Obama announced the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba. Hope returns.



From Fear to Hope

Saturday - Our Story Begins

Our story begins on Saturday, January 3, 2015 when I joined 6 members and friends of the Montreal School of Theology on a one-week study trip to Cuba. Here are Anthony Doiron, Paul Durber, Josée Lemoine and Paul Wu at Pierre Elliot Trudeau International Airport in Montreal, checking 16 boxes of medical supplies that we purchased for Cuban hospitals and churches that suffer shortages of essential supplies stemming from a lack of financial resources and from the United States blockade of trade to Cuba since the Revolution of 1959. Helen Hliaras and our fearless leader, Alyson Huntly are pictured further on in this journal.



Anthony Doiron, Paul Durber, Josée Lemoine, Paul Wu and 16 boxes of medical supplies

Varadero to Matanzas



Arrived at Varadero with our 16 boxes of medical supplies



Arteros, our bus driver and our cool Hippie bus



Hilda, our Tour Guide with Arteros, ("Mother and Father")

At midnight we arrived safely, (Paul and Helen pictured at left with our medical kits), at Varadero Airport in Cuba and we boarded this cool Hippie Bus that was ours for the week. Arteros, our bus driver is pictured, middle above. He drove us and Hilda, our tour guide, (pictured at right with Arteros) to the Seminario Evangélico de Teología (SET) in Matanzas. SET is a college that teaches theology (the study of God) to students who want to become ministers of the Christian church.

Varadero to Matanzas

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Dinner at 2 a.m.



Our dormitory



My bedroom

At SET we were greeted with big hugs and smiles by our SET host, Moraima (third from left in the picture) and we were fed at 2 am before hitting the sack at 3. Our dormitory and my room is pictured here - sparse quarters as you can see. Paul Wu, Anthony and I shared a toilet - used toilet paper to be tossed in the trash bin, not in the toilet since the plumbing cannot handle toilet paper. Dogs barking and roosters crowing all night didn't allow for much sleep. At this point my expectations of Cuba as a poor country were being confirmed.

Question

- ▶ Immediately, our departure from Montreal with 16 medical kits raises interesting questions regarding Cuba's "managed economy", i.e. the economic implications of the country's Communist system of government. Cuba has an excellent, and completely free, medical system, even exporting many well-trained doctors to countries around the world whose medical systems are less well developed. This is certainly due in part to government policies and priorities and to the fact that Cubans have taken advantage of a free education system at all levels in their country. Cuba's medical supply shortages may arise indirectly from Cuba's Communist government policies, but they arise directly from the country's impoverished economic state and in good measure from trade embargoes imposed by a world super-power (the U.S.) that opposes Cuba's Communist government and has the ability to influence other nations to comply with its own policies toward Cuba.
- ▶ Communism has its costs . . . what, do you think, are its benefits?

Sunday - Images of Matanzas

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Sunday morning, driving through Matanzas we immediately get a glimpse of Cuba today – grand Spanish architecture speaking to a time in history when Matanzas (“the City of Bridges” and “the City of Poets”) thrived – and crumbling residential streets speaking to the widespread poverty endured by the people of Cuba today.

More Images of Matanzas

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Cubans are a happy people. These pictures confirm what we were told by many leaders and officials that we met with, while in Cuba.

The Road to Havana

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From our bus I grabbed a few shots of the countryside on the road from Matanzas to Havana. Black and white Cows in the fields (1) are descendants of the Holstein breed imported from Canada as part of Canadian efforts to ease the burden of the U.S. embargo. Poor countryside housing (2), rolling mountains (3), ocean views (4) and a Sherritt International mining plant (5) and oil rig (6). Sherritt is a Canadian company, a world leader in the mining and refining of nickel and the largest independent energy producer in Cuba. Sherritt's Cuban operations run afoul of the U.S embargo which prevents Sherritt from having any business dealings with companies and banks inside the U.S. and prevents some of Sherritt's directors and officers from entering the U.S.

La Habana!

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On arrival in Havana I was pleasantly surprised by the city's infrastructure – clean, orderly and, on the surface, well enough maintained for an older city.

First Stop – Ebenezer Church



We visited Ebenezer Church (Baptist origins - Rev. Raquel Suárez), situated in an area that was primarily of the Santeria faith, a system of beliefs that merges the Yoruba mythology brought to the New World by Yoruba African slaves, with Christianity and Indigenous American traditions. Ebenezer church, founded by Rev. Raul Suarez, Raquel's father, attracted people of the Santeria faith through community outreach, by creating activities for the children and attracting them to the church; parents followed their children. The highlight of the service was the children's choir that sang beautifully, lively for 40 minutes.

At Ebenezer, 3 ministers share in preaching, leading and training lay people. Lay groups are assigned responsibility for liturgy on Sunday, under the supervision of a pastor. There are 5 groups of people: children, teens, young adults, adults, old-age adults, and 4 areas of teaching: liturgy, outreach, accompaniment and education in the church. The church promotes inclusiveness, interfaith, education, strengthening of leadership, contextualization of the Bible, and work in solidarity towards peace in the world. **An operating and worship model worthy of consideration by our Canadian churches?**

Conversation at Lunch: Socialist Enterprise

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We lunched at the beautiful Bar/Restaurant QY16, government run; great food, good but very slow service as is typical of Cuban restaurants, especially those managed by government employees.

According to Hilda, Cuba has no mafia, no serious drug or alcohol problems but widespread poverty, the worst effects of which are contained by food ration vouchers; free education and medical care is accessible to all. Revolutionary change sought to eliminate the entrepreneurial middle class ("Bourgeois") and achieve equality across all classes.

When Raul Castro succeeded his brother Fidel in 2008, opportunities were created for private enterprise in the form of cooperatives and public private partnerships ("PPP") like the Iberostar Hotel where we stayed while in Havana. People can now open privately owned restaurants, with up to 50 seats. Since 1994 Cuba has had two currencies, one pegged to the US dollar and the other worth only a fraction of that. The more valuable convertible peso (CUC) was reserved for use in the tourism sector and foreign trade which created two classes of people - those working with tourists and those who have relatives abroad receive money and therefore have more purchasing power. Now its value will be gradually unified with the lower-value CUP, ending a system resented by ordinary Cubans.

The Ballet

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In Cuba the art of ballet carries more weight than one might expect. Cuban ballet dancers are arguably the country's most esteemed export, they often earn more money than doctors, and they perform locally to the type of cheering crowd that in the United States would be reserved for pop stars.

Credit for ballet's prominence in Cuban culture rests squarely on Alicia Alonso, now in her 90's, who trained with the American Ballet Company and returned to Cuba after the Revolution to found the Ballet Nacional de Cuba with her husband, Fernando. Cuban ballet has been at the pinnacle of international dance for decades, and Cuba continues to produce some of ballet's best dancers.

An excellent performance in an unspectacular theatre. The Teatro Nacional de Cuba was created for propaganda and arts purposes in the early years of the Revolution, 1953, six years before the overthrow of the Battista regime in 1959. Prior to the new building the old Gran Teatro de La Habana, renamed the Teatro García Lorca after the completion of the Cuban revolution, 1959, was regarded as the National Theatre of Cuba.

This was our initial introduction to a very well-developed Arts community in Cuba. Alicia Alonso made an appearance to huge applause at the close of the show.



**Alicia Alonso and the
Teatro Nacional de Cuba**

Question

- ▶ The Sherritt story suggests that dialogue and cooperation may trump boycott and confrontation as a means of enabling Communist and Capitalist countries to advance their respective interests peacefully. But not all companies have fared so well as Sherritt. In October, 2014 Cy Tokmakjian, 74-year-old owner of an Ontario-based automotive company was sentenced in Cuba to 15 years in prison on corruption-related charges. Other companies like Tokmakjian's were raided in 2011 and shut down, and their owners were arrested as part of the initiative of Raul Castro to fight corruption in high levels of the government. Tokmakjian was held for more than two years before his June 2014 trial.
- ▶ Tokmakjian's family said he was a victim of "internal power struggles within the changing Cuban political regime." Conservative MP Peter Kent visited Tokmakjian in prison last year. "He disproved every specific allegation. They simply couldn't find any hard evidence against him". Tokmakjian was given the 15 years without the benefit of a sentencing hearing, Kent said, "which is, I suppose, the ultimate chapter in this gross miscarriage of justice".
- ▶ Whether Tokmakjian is innocent or guilty of the charges against him, there remains the question of justice within undemocratic systems and whether it is advisable, or even feasible for democratic countries to work cooperatively with communist nations that act without regard for individual human rights.
- ▶ What do you think?

Monday: Plaza de la Catedral

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Our hotel (Hotel Iberostar in Havana, pictured at right) was comparable to any reasonably high end North American or European tourist hotel – notably different than accommodations available to Cuban citizens.



Monday morning we did a quick runabout Plaza de la Catedral. There are several of these Plazas or Squares around Havana. They are social gathering places with cafés and restaurants around the perimeter, all with beautiful architecture and some with beautiful tree-lined parks in the vicinity.

Centro Cultural Padre Felix Varela

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The name of the centre is from the Ven. Félix Varela y Morales (1788-1853). In the 18th century it was the St-Ignatius school. It eventually became the seminary of Havana. In the 1940's-1950's it was the Cardinal's house. Now it is a centre for the arts, culture and education.

Presentation by Gustavo Andújar (President of SIGNIS – the World Catholic Association for Communication) - passionate on Cuba, his ideas are summarized on the following slide.

The Centre opens its doors to the community for all kinds of Arts and Culture exhibits and presentations. Two years ago the Centre initiated courses in humanities and philosophy and have 50 students registered already. Courses are free and are offered in the evening so that working people can participate.

The Centre has also begun courses in business entrepreneurship so that young people will be effective as entrepreneurs, as freedoms gradually increase in Cuba.

The Andújar Perspective

- ▶ Gustavo Andújar said he is the liaison between the diocese and culture. Culture is beauty; God is beauty. The school and Mr. Andújar do not like to dictate; prefer to educate.

Mr. Andújar considers the open relation between Cuba and USA a good thing. He wants freedom and peace. Right now, freedom is only simulated because of the hypocrisy of the government in power. Mr. Andújar however, does not believe that a multi-party system is the only answer. He feels that Cuba is part of Western civilisation. In Cuba people are well educated but they are constrained as to what they can do with this education. 2 million of Cuba's 11 million people are university educated.

- ▶ Also, according to Mr. Andújar, Protestants have been working harder in politics. Government has always looked at church as ally or enemy, but the church need not be involved in politics.
- ▶ Christianity is very much alive in Cuba. Under Soviet influence in the early years of the Revolution Christianity almost disappeared. For 40 years, Cuba was an atheist state, but is now a secular state. The development of the Christian faith and liberation theology* is complicated by the presence of the Santeria belief system.
- ▶ * Liberation theology refers to forms of local or contextual theology that proposes that knowledge of God based on revelation leads necessarily to a praxis that opposes unjust social and political structures.

Plaza de Armas

The Palacio de los Capitanes Generales (1) is the former official residence of the governors (Captains General) of Havana. Located in Plaza de Armas in Old Havana, it is home to the Museum of the City of Havana. The last of the Colonial governors vacated the palace in 1898 when Cuba gained independence under the terms of the Treaty of Paris. It was used by the US military governors from 1899 until 1902 and as the presidential palace of the Cuban Republic from 1902 until 1920, when the president relocated to the building which now houses the Museum of the Revolution. The Palacio became once again the offices of the city council which moved elsewhere in 1967. In 1968 the palace became the City Museum.



Touring the Plazas



Plaza de Armas



The Temple is a small neo-classical building constructed in the early 19th century to commemorate the first mass and council held in the town of San Cristóbal de La Habana in 1519. Each year this event is celebrated by a series of commemorative events the most notable of which is the custom of walking three times around the Ceiba tree that is planted at the entrance of the Temple.



The park and surrounding architecture at Plaza de Armas are delightful.

Plaza de San Francisco

The Havana skyline from high up a turret in the:



Centro Memorial Martin Luther King, Jr.

- ▶ From 1959 to 1961, the first two years of the Cuban Revolution, eighty percent of the professional priests and ministers of Cuban churches left Cuba for the United States.

By the early 1970s, the Council of Churches of Cuba (CCC) had been able to organize cooperative church leadership across the country to help congregations survive and grow, building bridges with sister denominations in the United States and other countries. In 1984, under the leadership of the Rev. Raul Suarez, the CCC invited delegations of leaders from African American churches and Historic Peace Churches to visit Cuban denominations. This initiative, aided by a meeting between the Rev. Jesse Jackson who led one of the delegations, and President Fidel Castro, was successful in opening up dialogue between church and state.

- ▶ In 1987 the Rev. Raúl Suárez, (sponsored by the CCC) founded the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center (blue building next to Ebenezer Church in the picture at right) to provide training and education for Cuban religious and community leadership, based on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s philosophy of nonviolence. Rev. Suarez (pictured at right) was director of the Center until his retirement in 2005.

- ▶ We left several boxes of medications at the centre.



More about Centro Memorial Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Rev. Raúl Suárez

- ▶ The Martin Luther King Center in Havana, Cuba, is at the forefront of promoting Christian social responsibility and progressive change throughout the region. Within Cuba, the organization is involved with the distribution of medicines, HIV prevention programs, and housing projects. In the spirit of popular education, it runs extensive training workshops to empower Latin Americans and promote social involvement. The center also participates in the promotion of social responsibility of Christians throughout the world and in movements such as the Landless Worker's Movement (MST) and the World Social Forum.
- ▶ The first pillar of the center is the Cuban ecumenical movement.
- ▶ The second legacy of the center is that of popular education. Popular education is a concept grounded in notions of class, political struggle, and social transformation. Popular here means 'of the people'.
- ▶ The third legacy of the center has to do with this issue of international solidarity and outreach.
- ▶ In 1990, Rev. Suarez, at the time president of the CCC, dialogued with Fidel Castro on the subject of religious discrimination in Cuba. This dialogue was filmed and aired on television. Ever since, radical changes have taken place in terms of the lives of the churches and believers in Cuba.
- ▶ The following year the Communist Party removed atheism as a requirement for party membership. The constitution was changed to ratify the secular (neither religious nor atheist) nature of the state. The problems of religious discrimination that had plagued our country were left behind.
- ▶ As an unpaid member of the Cuban parliament, Rev. Suarez works to make government see the importance of the role of the church in society, teaching that the economy is not the answer to everything; a strong moral and ethical grounding is fundamental.

Day is done.

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- ▶ A lesser known Havana attraction is the CANNON CEREMONY held each night at the La Cabaña fortress. The Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña was built around 1774 by the Spaniards to control access to the Havana Port. In the fortress is a museum about Che Guevara. In 1959 Che Guevara took possession of the fortress on his triumphant conquer of Havana during the fall of the dictator Batista. Soldiers dressed in 18th century uniforms fire a cannon over Havana bay at precisely 9 p.m. The ceremony is a historical reconstruction dating back to the colonial era. Back then, the cannon fire announced the official end of the day and the time to close the city gates for the night.

Question

- ▶ It is apparent from our interviews with two dynamic Cuban community leaders, Gustavo Andújar and Rev. Raúl Suárez, that many of the tenets of Socialism are embraced by Cuban people. Popular Education works to achieve just societies and political structures' as does Liberation Theology. The latter has been described as "an interpretation of Christian faith through the poor's suffering, their struggle and hope, and a critique of society and the Church through the eyes of the poor." Detractors have called it Christianized Marxism.
- ▶ Thought: could it be that because there is no economic reward for merit within the Cuban system, that people seek personal reward (gratification) from personal and professional development and intellectual achievement? Might this explain the high average levels of education and the high levels of enrolment/participation in academic pursuits including the arts, humanities and in social and spiritual pursuits as well?

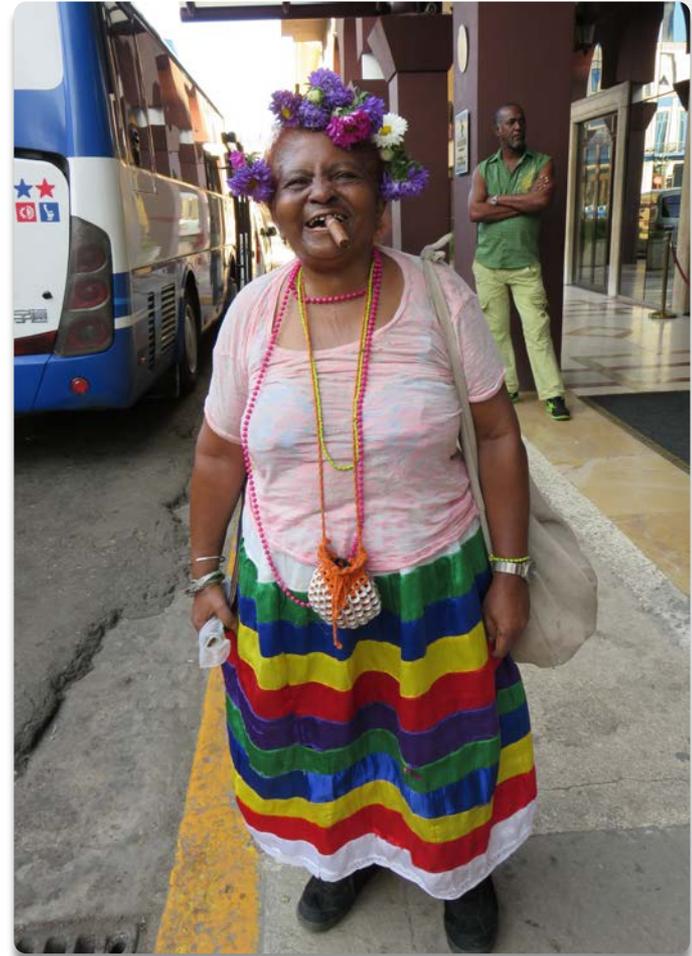
What do you think?

Tuesday

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My Girlfriend

This local Cuban lady met us outside of our hotel each morning. Dressed to impress the tourists, she was happy to have her picture taken for a couple of pesos.



Plaza de la Revolución

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Revolution Square in Havana is the political and administrative center of Cuba. The most important structures in the Square are a 109-meter tall star-shaped tower, and the statue of José Martí, Cuba's national hero and acclaimed poet and journalist. Construction of the Civic Plaza began in 1953, the project awarded to a relative of Fulgencio Batista. Batista never got to use the facility as he left Cuba in 1959. The square is the gathering place celebrating the revolution May 1 every year and for major events like the Pope's visit.

Huge images of Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara in the front of the Ministry of Interior, and of Camilo Cienfuegos (another leading figure of the Cuban Revolution who mysteriously disappeared during a night-time flight in October, 1959 and is presumed to have died) on the Ministry of Informatics and Communications, emphasize the revolutionary character of the Plaza.

Latin American School of Medicine

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Escuela Latino Americana de Medicina (ELAM); in English: Latin American School of Medicine (LASM), is a major international medical school in Cuba and a prominent part of the Cuban healthcare system.

Established in 1999 and operated by the Cuban government, ELAM was originally planned for 500 students; other countries collaborated and now ELAM has 2300 students from 18 countries, 500 teachers (augmented by foreign professors) and 1200 workers. The school has graduated more than 28,000 students. Tuition, accommodation and board are free, and a small stipend is provided for students. Our guide tells us that "Cubans live poor but die wealthy", i.e. Cubans die less of the diseases of developed nations. Life expectancy in Cuba is 78 years of age.

In Cuba, doctors provide tightly controlled (assigned) family doctor services supported by nurses to enable quality care of the population even in the rural and mountainous areas. Thus the focus is on prevention ("grassroots medicine"). 46% of Cuba's budget goes to health services. Doctors are better paid than other professions - teachers too, are well paid but not as well as doctors. We left several boxes of medication at ELAM.



The Cuban Diet



We lunched in a private dining room at El Palenque Restaurant. Meals everywhere were delicious and the facilities were comfortably, but not extravagantly equipped. But by Tuesday it became apparent that the Cuban diet is somewhat limited by locally available staples – your choice of chicken, pork or fish accompanied by rice, yams and taro potatoes with a side salad. With occasional exceptions this menu was offered repeatedly throughout the week.

Religions in Cuba: A Mixed Bag

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The Municipal Museum of Regla is a treasure trove of historic displays, related to the Santería religion. The influence of this African religion on Cuban culture has been significant. African religions arrived with the importation of slaves from Africa after the local natives were eradicated by the earlier arrival of Spain. Santería has been practiced so widely and for so long, it is no longer called an Afro-Cuban religion, but a Cuban religion of African origin. Although gods are personalized and familiar, in Santería there is a hierarchy of gods with one supreme God. Under social pressure practicing Africans accepted many Catholic worship practices but ultimately worshipped their own gods. The religious and historical pieces and artifacts on display are emblematic of the syncretisation of belief systems that took place between the Spanish colonizers and their African slaves.

There exist museums like this one in the proud and poor town of Regla, in every province of Cuba. 3 associated religions are described in the museum. 1) Santería, 2) Abakuá, a secret society for men only and 3) Palo Monte.

Downtown Havana

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. . . from the roof of our
hotel,

and from the streets
below . . .



A walkabout downtown Havana is a study in contrasts – between the core of the city preserved for the benefit of tourism and the surrounding city blocks, a deteriorating residential infrastructure. In this and the next several slides I have tried to capture something of the downtown architecture, the people and the lifestyle of those living in the area.

Downtown Havana

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... colorful residences,
colorful laundry ...

and a proud history ...
... la Revolución!



Downtown Havana

37



... colorful cars,
crowded buses ...



and a proud history ...
... la Revolución!



Downtown Havana



. . . The beautiful Paseo di Marti boulevard . . .

. . . and adjacent streets -
poor but not destitute.
. . . la Revolución!



A Night on the Town!

39



Dinner at the Hotel
Florida
and . . .



. . . onto the clubs – La Zorra El Cuervo, ("The Fox and the Crow"), a government run jazz club, is a Havana institution . . .



. . . where this young jazz musician fiddled like nothing you have ever seen.



Music is VERY BIG in Cuba!

Wednesday

Lourdes Regueiro, Ph.D., government economist

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- ▶ At Luyanó Church Lourdes Regueiro, government economist, detailed elements of the Cuban economy since the Revolution. A few of the more interesting economic developments are noted below:

From the Revolution (1959) through the 90's, over 95% of working people were employed by the government. The officially reported unemployment rate in 2013 was 4.3%; unofficial estimates are about double the official figures and substantial underemployment might be noted.



- ▶ Salaries provide a basic living standard and are classified according to the importance of given functions within society at a ratio of 1/4 (i.e. poorly paid positions earn 25% of best paid positions). In developed world market economies the standard ratio is 1/400, so Cuba's managed economy strives for a more egalitarian society. Additionally, the government provides everyone with equal basics of food, health services and education at no direct cost to the people.
- ▶ With the Revolution, land owners were eliminated and the government allocated the land back to people and social organizations like churches in limited amounts on condition that the land would be cultivated to grow assigned crops and net income would be taxable. The system was modified 4 years ago such that people allocated land can grow what they want to.
- ▶ The 3 biggest exports in Cuba right now are not goods but services - medical, professional sports and education. Export goods include: biotechnology, tobacco, nickel, rum, sugar, some coffee; high quality goods are sold to buy lower quality goods for local consumption.
- ▶ Investment is permitted only through public/private partnerships. Originally the Cuban government had to hold a majority interest but that is no longer the case in all sectors. Cooperatives are encouraged in favor of individual entrepreneurship. The government prioritizes investments according to the country's needs and monopolies are prohibited. Russia has forgiven 90% of Cuban debt and Mexican and Japanese debt is being renegotiated.
- ▶ Subsidies are being considered in place of food ration cards and more changes are being implemented, but progressively to minimize shocks to the people.

Luyanó Presbyterian Church

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Lunched at Luyanó Presbyterian Church where the Minister, Pastor Daniel, explained that the church was founded in the 1870's. In 1984, Jesse Jackson preached there and Fidel Castro attended the service. Pastor Daniel spoke of the church as a social instrument - serving the needs of people with exercise programs, Alcoholics Anonymous, sailing, English courses, hospital ministries, water distribution (more than 4000 gal/week), a garden (medicinal, spices), needlework, tai-chi classes etc. - available to the whole community and run by lay people of the church. Financial support is provided by churches abroad. The church is located in a Santería neighbourhood and works to integrate Santería people with the church, a practice of which Catholics are more accepting than Protestants. In Cuba there are 3 presbyteries, 32 congregations, 20 mission churches with only 24 pastors. We left non-prescription medication at this location.

An estimated 60 to 70 percent of the 11 million Cuban people are believed to be Roman Catholic although only 4 to 5 percent regularly attend mass. Membership in Protestant churches is estimated at 5 percent of the population: Baptists and Pentecostals are probably the largest Protestant denominations; Jehovah's Witnesses, 94,000; Methodists, 35,000; Seventh-day Adventists, 33,000; Anglicans, 22,000; Presbyterians, 15,000; Quakers, 300; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 50.

Dinner at the renowned Hotel Nacional de Cuba

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Winston Churchill



Nat King Cole



Frank Sinatra



Ava Gardner



Ernest Hemingway

Following a visit to the crafts market at Mercado de Artesania we enjoyed dinner outside at the Hotel Nacional, the nation's hot spot through the 30's, 40's and 50's when Cuba was "America's Playground" and was host to countless celebrities and dignitaries, people like Nelson Rockefeller, Marlon Brando, John Wayne, Mickey Mantle, Stan Musial, Walt Disney and many more besides those pictured above. The remarkable history of the hotel, of its guests and its staff, is the subject of a daily historical guided tour.

Question

- ❑ “Cuba’s managed economy strives for a more egalitarian society” . . . Cuban government economist, Lourdes Regueiro. Equality, according to socialist doctrine, necessitates the sacrifice of certain freedoms that, in our capitalist, market economies we value highly.
 - What products/services should be equally accessible to all? What freedoms should we be prepared to sacrifice in the interest of equality for all?
 - How can we be assured that those to whom we surrender our freedoms will not abuse their powers?

- ❑ Pastor Daniel spoke of the church as a social instrument and Rev. Suarez works to make government understand the importance of the Church in community.
 - How important do you think the church is in your community? How important should it be? What do you know of the work of the church within communities around the world?
 - In its activities and programs, what balance should the church strike between worship, community service and political involvement?

Thursday

On Thursday morning we boarded our Hippie Bus to leave Havana and return to our home base at Seminario Evangélico de Teología (SET) in Matanzas. Along the way we stopped briefly at a lookout point affording this (below) view of the Bacunayagua Bridge and the surrounding countryside.



Met Ophilia Ortega. Google her - she is famous, the first woman Presbyterian pastor in Cuba. See picture at right with Alyson.

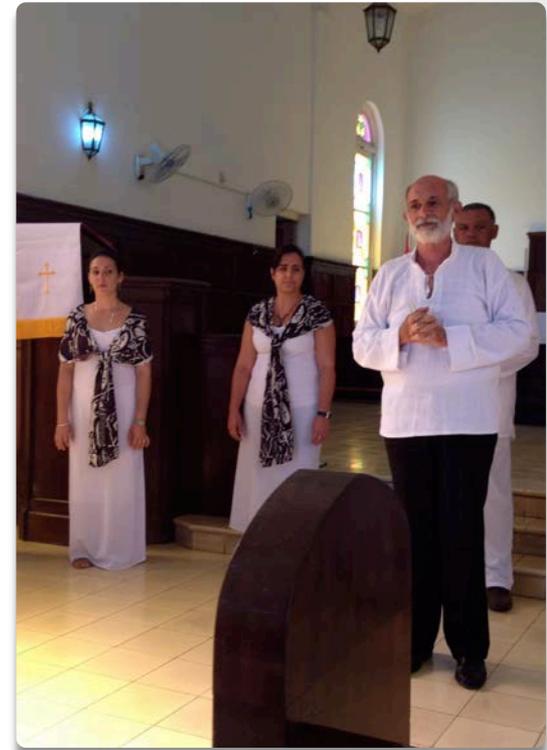


Music is VERY, VERY BIG in Cuba!

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Thursday afternoon, in the seminary chapel, we experienced a concert by the Matanzas Chamber Choir directed by Dr. José Antonio Méndez Valencia. The choir, which has won several prizes around the world, is also a school of choirs, teaching children abroad in poor areas. Many choir singers also lead the choirs of their own churches. Their music was breathtaking and you can catch a sample of it at these YouTube stops:

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKIM13B2NQw>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FW3RBYbrtME>



"There is no cultured music, no popular music . . . There is only good music."

Kairós Center for Liturgy, the Arts and Social Services



Thursday afternoon we also visited the Kairós Center, a Christian center (Baptist Ecumenical) whose mission is to offer liturgical training to Cuban churches and partnerships that encourage a discipleship of service and human solidarity, integrating the arts and social services. Paul Durber and I found the presentation a little dry and although the lady presenter herself, was very animated, we struggled not to succumb to our need for an afternoon snooze.

Hanging Out.



From the Kairos Centre we walked back to the seminary in time for tea and along the way Anthony engaged some local Matanzas boys in a friendly game of basketball.

Music is VERY, VERY, VERY BIG in Cuba!



Thursday evening we attended a concert at St-Peter's Church (Iglesia de San Pedro Apóstol). Spectacular, and all free of charge for the Cuban people!

Question

- ▶ Caring, giving, sharing and a deep, well-developed culture among the Cuban people.
- ▶ A higher standard of living would be preferable, more human rights and individual freedoms, but at what cost?

Friday

Friday morning we gathered in one of the classrooms at SET to hear more about the seminary from Isabella Gonzalez Chavella, secretary to the president of the seminary. SET was founded on October 1, 1946, the only ecumenical institution in Cuba that is dedicated to theological education and social service. SET is governed by a Board composed of eight members of the two founding Cuban Churches: Episcopal and Presbyterian. SET has 556 students, 34 staff and 14 faculty, Episcopalian and Presbyterian. Professors from other seminaries, universities and churches are also engaged to round out the course program.

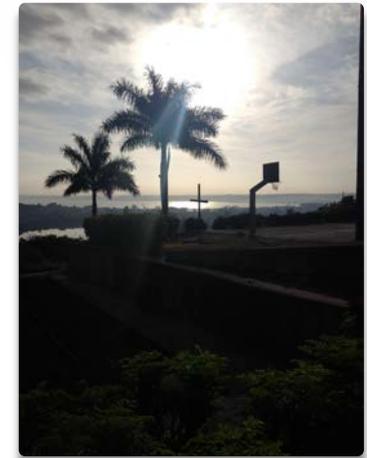
The 1990's (the "Special Period") were so difficult for Cubans that many turned to God across all denominations and faiths and church Leaders had insufficient training. The college was crowded with 150 students and their families and student fees (paid by the students' churches) could not sustain the seminary. SET modified its instructional model, reduced the live-in student body to 25 and established satellite operations across Cuba that now teach to 500 students who travel to SET, or to one of several other SET satellite class locations, 4 times a year for one-week of instruction, completing the rest of their course from home.

Both lay leaders and pastors study at the seminary. The on-campus lecture room has a corner booth where translators work to enable a multi-linguistic student body. Training at SET includes instruction in business admin so that pastors can go into their communities and critically analyze the economic and market structures to develop ideas for improvement through the church, i.e. to become community leaders, and church leaders.



The SET campus

More pictures from around campus



Financial sustainability remains a very serious challenge at SET although the recent accord with the U.S. has injected hope where there was none before.

On the way to Los Arabos

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Back on the bus we drove to the countryside - Los Arabos in East Central Matanzas province. We passed sugar cane fields and this sugar factory on the way. The sugar factory recently restarted production for part of the year, creating some welcomed employment opportunities. Plant workers do maintenance work during the remainder of the year. There is also a factory of canned fruits and vegetables, polyclinic and dentist supplies, etc. Los Arabos has a population of 25,700 but has difficulty keeping young people in the countryside. Many leave the country in search of opportunities in the cities.

Los Arabos - Church of Cuatro Esquinas

In Los Arabos we visited the Episcopal Church of Cuatro Esquinas. founded in 1907 by the Americans Louis Himely, M.D. from Charleston, William, Henry and Charles Himely. From inception the church educated the slaves who were working in the sugar fields. Here again, although a miscommunication resulted in us being 3 hours late for our appointed meeting, we were received with warm hugs, grace, love and appreciation for the interest we have shown over the years.



Los Arabos - Church of Cuatro Esquinas

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The church's minister is Carlos Alberto Tamayo López, married to Dre Arianna Toledo, Family Doctor. The church manages a 123 hectare farm that funds church activities and many social assistance programs including Alcoholics Anonymous. The church trains the leaders of 3 churches – the Presbyterian congregation and two other evangelical churches with whom the premises are shared. There are 25 children in the Sunday School and youth leaders in the church are special, offering multiple programs that include Bible study, games, dramatization of Bible stories, beach and park trips, visits with sick children and volleyball and other sports competing with other churches. Children 6 and older participate in liturgy and in communion with the adults.

Lunch chez Pastor Carlos!



After meeting with leaders from Pastor Carlos' church we were invited for lunch at the Pastor's home. Heart warming hospitality and a freshly roasted pig with ample side dishes made for a superb lunch and time of sharing in these modest surroundings. At right Alyson chats up Pastor Carlos' lovely daughter.

Necessity – the mother of invention

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This is Pastor Carlos' backyard – a lesson in home economics. The contraption on the right is a great example of Cuban inventiveness in the face of poverty. Not only does Pastor Carlos raise his own chickens and pigs, but he dumps the pig manure into the first cement tank where it ferments to produce a bio-gas that flows to the second tank where it passes through water to eliminate any odor and then moves through a second pipe to his house et voila . . . We're cooking with gas . . . free gas!!!



Scenes in and around Los Arabos



No wealth, or even the potential or utility for wealth accumulation . . .

but Cubans are a happy people . . .

and they get by . . . they get around.

Making the system work

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As we made our way around the Los Arabos community, Arteros stopped to pick up piping at one location and deliver it to another. Above you can see us as we load bottles of tomato juice and boxes of bologna onto the bus for delivery to the church from where it is distributed to those in need. We also left some of our boxes of medication for Pastor Carlos' wife's medical practice. People share (and bend the rules as necessity dictates) to make the system work.

Question

Making the system work is different than creating a system that works. While all Cubans are poor by North American standards, they do possess a sense of security provided by food rationing and free medical and education services and I believe that most Cubans are happy, friendly and community oriented.

- ▶ Understandably, no one argued against the merits of egalitarianism in and of itself, but some that we spoke with sought expanded human rights and individual liberties to enable entrepreneurial initiative and thus greater wealth creation for the nation as a whole.
- ▶ I guess we all want “the best of both worlds”. The question is, “is it achievable?” or are we faced with hard choices as we attempt to strike a fair and just balance between opposing political, economic and social systems.
- ▶ What do you think?

Saturday: Goodbye Matanzas

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Farewell to Matanzas on a Saturday morning as folks are hanging out and taking their weekend leisure.

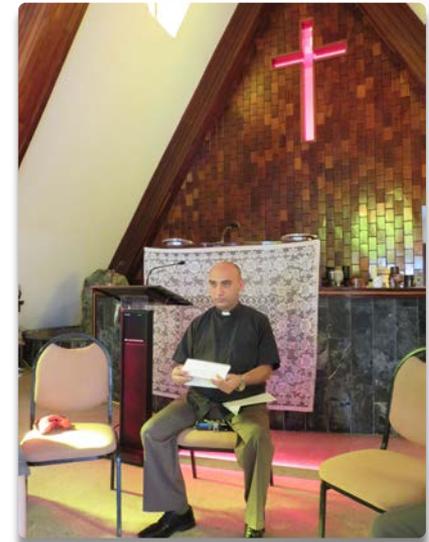
Hello Varadero

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First stop Iglesia Presbiteriana Reformada Dora E. Valentin, Minister Joel Ortega Dopico, president of WCC in Cuba. Pastor Joel discussed the history of the church in Cuba and said that his biggest concern today is the rate of economic change and the speed at which businesses are developing which he feels renders people more individualistic, with less concern for their community. He would like to see more cooperatives and more participation in the political arena to develop a more sustainable socialist system but he understands the need for more education in the realm of business and governance as people have not needed these skills under the communist regime. Services at Dora E. Valentin are held in Spanish with simultaneous translation into English.

The interest among Cuba's best educated people in perpetuating the socialist experiment was both surprising and interesting to me.



Again, limitless hospitality



We walked the beach and the town of Varadero and then regrouped for lunch at the church. Check out the spread above. Cubans are very friendly and extend themselves to make their guests feel welcome and comfortable. The motorcycle was parked in front of the church and I didn't ask whose it was but noticed that it dates to the earliest years of the Revolution so thought it worth a look.



Casa del Cariño (Loving Care Home)

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Here I will admit that I expected to be a little bored. Not a chance! The Center was founded in 1999 to arrange and provide spaces of educational, cultural and healthy recreation that will contribute to nourishing physical, psychological and spiritual benefits – free of charge – for a sector of the population that is highly vulnerable – young people with different ailments, acute or chronic, including terminal cases and children living in foster homes and elderly persons residing in senior citizens homes. The Center was the brainchild of Sergio Arce Martínez (centre of bottom picture). He was given the house (pictured above right) by an alcoholic who had allowed it to deteriorate and Sergio and his wife Nacyra (next to me in the picture) raised money in 1995-98 to repair the house, opening in 1999. The donor of the house was so excited by the project that he soon reformed and was hired by the Center to drive their bus.

During the Revolution Sergio studied at Princeton and got a Ph.D. in Philosophy and Letters from the University of Cuba after which he decided to come back to Cuba where he met with Fidel Castro and Ché Guevara. He taught theology in Toronto and published the book [The Church and Socialism: Reflections from a Cuban Context](#). More available on his political and philosophical views at:

http://www.adital.com.br/hotsite_ecumenismo/noticia.asp?lang=PT&cod=48733



Xanadú Mansion - outdoors

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Next stop – a study in contrasts. Mansion Xanadú was built in the 1920's by U.S. millionaire Irénée Du Pont, complete with a nine-hole course for his private enjoyment, overlooking one of the most beautiful beaches of the world. Named "Xanadú" after the exotic palace built by the legendary Chinese warrior and conqueror Kublas Khan, it features precious woods that were brought especially from Santiago de Cuba for the ceilings, stair rails and columns, while the floors and bathrooms were done in Cuban, Italian and Spanish marble. The mansion, now a hotel and restaurant, has 6 bedrooms, each with private balconies, featuring 1920's classical furniture. Pure air, lush vegetation, quietness and peace characterise the green and blue environment of the Varadero Golf Club, the grounds on which the Mansion Xanadu is set.



Xanadú Mansion - indoors

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The lobby,



Alyson, clearly enjoying the attentions of the gentleman saxophonist.



Paul, first to the bar upstairs,

Question . . .

Why did the chicken
cross the street in
Varadero?



Answer . . .

To get to the other
side!!! Ho! Ho! Ho!



That's a Wrap!

- ▶ That wraps up our one-week study trip to Cuba. Lessons learned, many questions answered and more questions raised. One thing is certain: an eye on Cuba's future will prove fascinating to anyone interested in understanding more about the strengths and weaknesses of various political, economic and social systems, and the role of the church within all. Cuba has been, and will continue to be, a social experiment with lessons for all of us – an incubator with a “Window on the World”.
- ▶ If you are interested you may find more answers, and more questions at Yoani Sánchez' most excellent blog which you can find at: <https://generacionyen.wordpress.com/>.

Conclusions

So, what have we learned? Unsurprisingly, a week in Cuba has raised more questions than it has provided answers. Was the Cuban Revolution of 1959 a good thing, or a bad thing? This deceptively simple question gives rise to questions about the differences between capitalism, communism, socialism and totalitarianism that are well beyond the scope of this paper, but questions that need to be answered if we are to engage in any intelligent conversation about Cuba.

Flowing from these questions about political and economic systems are more questions about social justice and human rights, freedom and equality.

And given that the central purpose of our visit was targeted at achieving an understanding of the history and status of the church in Cuba, perhaps the most pressing question is this one:

“What balance should the church in any society strike between worship, community service and political involvement?”

So I leave you with all of these questions, and reverting to the history of the man who inspired my original curiosity, with one more . . .



And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13

... Who is the REAL Che?

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... a young man hungry to uncover his destiny, heavily influenced by his witness of poverty and suppression during his early travels around Latin America?



... An impatient and severe disciplinarian dedicated to guerilla warfare including the execution of enemies of the cause as the means to achieve his political ideals?



... the heroic guerilla warrior captured in this popularized version of Alberto Korda's famous photo?



... the charming, thoughtful and intelligent revolutionary leader essential to his time and place?

Answer . . .

*He is all of these,
and much, much more . . .
After all he, like us, is a child of God.*