

TRAVEL

Despite poverty, Cuba retains former glory

BY JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

(First of a two-part series)
I became intrigued by Havana, after hearing my stepmother tell of its beauty and excitement based on her trips there during the 1940s and '50s.
After spending a recent week walking its streets and talking with its people, I understand what she was talking about.
In spite of its crumbling architecture and deprived population, you can see what Havana was and what it could be again. Even in the poorest neighborhoods, there are buildings of stature.
We went to Havana, legally, as part of a combined tour sponsored by the Jewish Community Center of Metropolitan Detroit and Central United Methodist Church of Detroit. After flying to Miami, we made the short hop on the daily charter to Havana.

A first impression as we approached Cuba was of a verdant green island surrounded by aquamarine waters. Although a road system was evident, no cars could be seen until we sighted Havana itself. Poverty in combination with gas and oil shortages makes owning a car impossible for all but the most privileged Cubans.
But as you've heard, Detroit's imprint on Cuba remains. Some are still driving your father's, no your grandfather's, maybe your great-grandfather's Chevy. Many have been turned into taxicabs to serve Cuba's number one industry: tourism. I recently read in the New York Times that they are planning a museum dedicated to the best of these vintage cars.

Though the United States only allows restricted travel to Cuba, its beaches, in particular, are a lure for people from many other countries. We heard, for example, that Cuba is the number one Caribbean destination for Canadians. Hotels are often joint ventures between Cuba and top hotel chains from other nations.
Although its guest rooms left something to be desired (like any type of dresser and a drip instead of a stream from the shower head) I was happy that we stayed at the historic Hotel Nacional, run by the state and offering a glimpse into Havana's grand past. Built in the style of The Breakers in Palm Beach, its public rooms, two outdoor pools and numerous bars are as opulent as they were in days gone by.

Plus, the Nacional overlooks the ocean and the Malecon, Havana's noted sea wall that serves as the gathering place for Cubans of all ages. That's the only view for most Cubans. Like most of Cuba's tourist hotels, the Nacional is off limits for ordinary Cubans. It's known as "tourism apartheid."



PHOTO BY JULIAN GREENBERG

The apartheid is even more noticeable as you line up at Coppelia, the well-known ice cream store that is featured in the outstanding Cuban film *Strawberries and Chocolate*. Cubans line up for hours to pay in pesos for the ice cream, most flavors of which are mere exotic than strawberry and chocolate. But as a foreigner you are hustled by police into a separate area where there is no line at all and where you pay in dollars.
"Havana is a city you can get your arms around," Myrtle Everett had told us on our first day. She and her husband, Robert, have been guiding groups with special interests to Cuba since 1996.

Some of my best memories were walking from our hotel in the Vedado section a mile or so to see the Museum of Dance; coming upon the "Hot Corner" in Parque Central where Cuban men meet to talk baseball; and visiting Salvador's Alley, where the accomplished muralist Salvador Gonzalez has painted an arresting block-long mural dedicated to Afro-Cubanism. I purchased one of his smaller works, designed to pay for a re-paint of the mural.

Through the Everetts, we had access to many facets of Cuban society. But a couple of our planned meetings had to be can-

called due to the inability to finalize arrangements in such a totally bureaucratic country. The Everetts told us that is par for the course.
Still, we visited a social service agency for women and families and had lunch at the posh Havana Yacht Club. We took a day trip to the fancy Veradero Beach, but ate lunch at a Community House there that provides meals and lodging at the beach on a weekly basis for some of Cuba's poor, old, and disabled.

We met with a top state department official at the U.S. Interests Section, the "embassy" rented from another government, since the United States and Cuba have no formal relations. "We're here to promote a peaceful transition to democracy," consular general Teddy Taylor told us. "If unleashed this country would probably become the engine for Caribbean development," he told us. "I'm not asking anyone to agree with me. But Cuba is not all right. There are no civil liberties here."

The Interests Section holds an annual lottery that allows a minimum of 20,000 Cubans of the half a million who apply to immigrate to the United States each year. Taylor encouraged us to contact our elected senators and representatives if we con-

sidered the U.S. embargo to be wrong. But, he warned, "you will never divorce from the equation that Cuba is 90 miles from the United States."

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is a former managing editor of *The Eccentric Newspapers*. Your questions and comments are welcome by calling (734) 953-2047 or, preferably, by e-mailing jberne@aatt.net

If you go

- Legal ways to visit Cuba: U.S. Exchanges, LLC, 7015 Harbor Place, St. Clair Shores, MI 48080-1515. E-mail: xchanges@aol.com; watch for trips sponsored by universities; or browse the Internet.
- Recommended guide book: CUBA, a Moon Handbook, by Christopher P. Baker
- Recommended reading: *Trading with the Enemy* by Tom Miller.
- Recommended films: *Soy Cuba* (I am Cuba), 1964; *Fresa y Chocolate* (Strawberries and Chocolate), 1994; *The Buena Vista Social Club*, 1999.



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Architecture: Above, Havana's incredible architecture can not be denied, despite dilapidation and hanging laundry. Left, The Nacional, now state-run, is a monument to Cuba's past.

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