

Cuba ? where one truly gets ?away from it all?

By Constance Scrafield

Landing in Cuba from a Canadian city is an instant transport to a very different world, a different place in time.

A mix-up of time: antique cars from the 1950s; horse-drawn carts of all kinds carrying individuals, families, goods, construction materials; acting as busses. Horses are not simply pets, but transportation.

The drive from the airport at Santiago de Cuba to the resort Brisas Sierra Mar is an hour's trip through countryside that is hilly ? larger than hills, smaller than mountains ? covered in bushes, not jungle, speaking of a dry land. The road runs flat between the hills and the ocean. All along the way, there are people: living in small houses and complexes of buildings as holiday places for Cubans. They wave at the bus as they go about their lives, riding bicycles, on donkeys, inevitably horses, horse-drawn wagons. For anyone in an automobile, there are no speed signs so they just drive any speed they like, but the roads are not uniformly safe or paved ? some caution is required.

The Brisas Sierra Mar is a three-star resort, not luxurious, but people from all over Canada and Europe come to stay, many of whom could well afford to book elsewhere. Lots of people come year after year, for years and many stay for anywhere between three to six months.

We met Graham, retired for some years, who stays in Cuba for three months a year and observed, as he wiggled his flexible, happy fingers, ?I don't have any arthritis here, which I sure do in Canada, especially in the winter!?

He smiled so broadly and dashed off for a walk. Nice alternative to Florida, maybe.

Going to Cuba so soon after the death of Fidel Castro, and having been fed mostly negative stories about the man, we were naturally determined to learn how Cubans themselves actually felt.

The Saturday after our Wednesday arrival, we took the tour to the city of Santiago de Cuba, partly to see the grave site of Fidel Castro and talk to people about him. Our tour guide was really clear. ?We are so sad about his passing,? she told us. ?He had been Cuba's leader for 50 years. For lots of people, he was the only leader they ever knew.?

Combined with a determined force of fighters, Fidel brought to an end the corruption of dictator Fulgencio Batista and various elements of American mobsters and drug dealers in early 1959. (The Godfather II is an interesting history lesson about that period in Cuba). To most Cubans, Fidel Castro was a great leader and they were sad at his death.

In conversations with well-educated Cubans, Fidel's mistakes are admitted and excused. As they inevitably point out, where is there a government without punishment and mistakes?

In Cuba, education is free: go as far as you can: the MC and entertainment manager at the resort has a PhD in English literature and history. He speaks four languages fluently and his English is polished and very colloquial. It is not for money that Cubans go on to university: a doctor will earn the same as a barkeeper, but Cuba famously produces more well-skilled doctors per capita than anywhere else in the world. Cuban doctors fill the gap in many countries, where they can earn real money; then, they go back to their homeland, Cuba.

Chivirico is the town nearest Sierra Mar, a small town with a few restaurants, a bank, some shops and a park on the beach with food vendors and others. It is a meeting place, with people gossiping and playing music.

For music is the heart and soul of Cuba, where so much of what is Caribbean music originates in Santiago de Cuba. Influenced by the African and European historical presence in the island, Cuban music is loved around the world. The Rumba, Cha-cha and Son found their birth here. Wherever one goes, there are really fine musicians and singers. Many foreign musicians coming to Cuba to visit from abroad bring musical instruments to give, so impressed are they with the talent they encounter there.

Ours was intended to be a restful break from life here in Canada and the enslavement to the Canadian winter. However, we also went horseback riding, dashed about on mopeds and snorkeled over a coral reef.

As we were riding one day along a wooded path, a sow and her eight piglets were grazing, free to roam where they wanted. When the piglets saw us coming, they all scurried under their mother's belly. Very cute.

Later, along the road, crossing a bridge over shallow water, there were egrets just hanging out with four or five cows to take advantage of the bugs exposed when the cows uprooted a bit of grass.

On our last day, we took a hike up a steep hill to catch the view. On our way back down, we wandered through a village where we were greeted with smiles and offered coffee, grown in those hills, brought down and roasted nearby.

The houses are small with yards in which chickens peck and tropical fruit trees stand. Everything is neat and swept. And wonderful.