

FORTY YEARS AFTER: A CANDID RECOUNT OF EXPERIENCES AT TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN CUBA

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For many of the last forty years I dedicated my career to the tourism and hospitality industry. I began as Comptroller of the famous Havana Hilton Hotel, continuing in the area of hotel development and finance in the United States, Chile, Italy, Brazil, Argentina, Saint Maarten, Mexico, Honduras, Colombia, and other Latin American and Caribbean countries, returning to the tourism and hospitality industry after a hiatus in the direct sales industry, marketing cosmetics and toiletries in ten countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America

These experiences converted me in an “expert” in the tourism and hospitality industry. In July 1993, a group of specialists in different areas of the tourism and hospitality industry founded in Miami the Cuban Society of Tourism Professionals. This organization is a depository of information and analyses of the activities of Cuba’s tourism industry.

Wearing three hats—professional, academic, and as president of the Cuban Society of Tourism professionals—I visited Cuba in October 1998. Although I am a United States citizen since the mid sixties, I am considered by Cuban law a Cuban citizen, as I was born there. However, for me to enter Cuba I

needed a Cuban government visa or permit that took 30 days to obtain and was given to me on arrival in Havana.

The following is a recollection of some of my experiences during this trip. It is presented in anticipation of a more formal document to be published in the future. I am thankful to all the persons I interviewed in Cuba, government officials and others, for their friendly and cooperative attitude and for providing information and candid commentaries regarding the tourism industry in Havana and every destination area visited. I certainly admire their professionalism in spite of the difficult working environment.

BASIC STATISTICS ON CUBAN TOURISM

Cuba’s hospitality industry has developed via a semi-organized “leaps and bounds” method. The vertical power organization of the island has influenced the direction in which new tourism development projects are created, often in a capricious fashion. The Cuban government has created many corporations dedicated to tourism and development of destinations and properties to serve the growing foreign clientele. The principal corporations, and their number of hotels and guestrooms, are:

1. I wish to thank the people and sources that contributed to the preparation of this paper and presentation: Acuarela de Inversiones; Ambos Mundos Hotel; Revista *Bohemia*; Cubanacán; Cámara de Comercio; Chateau Miramar; Nicolás Crespo III; Angeles Crespo; Marie L. Dexter; El Aljibe; FINTUR; Fantástico Viajes Tours; *Granma*; Gran Caribe; Habaguanex, S. A.; Horizontes; Hotel Nacional de Cuba; Instituto de Investigaciones del Turismo; *Juventud Rebelde*; MINTUR; Ministerio de Finanzas y Precios; Ministerio de Inversiones Extranjeras; José A. Menéndez; Opus Habana; Oficina del Historiador de La Habana; *Opciones*; Riu Hoteles; Sol y Son; *Tribuna de La Habana*; Tryp Hoteles; *Trabajadores*; Viaje en la Memoria. I regret omitting the names of many local professionals involved in tourism and hospitality industry and governmental officials interviewed during my visit.

Corporation	Rooms	Hotels
Gran Caribe	9040	41
Cubananacán	8741	40
Horizontes	7000	48
Islazul	3758	48
Gaviota	2200	18
Total these corporations	30739	195
Total rooms in Cuba	31000	

Together the mentioned five corporations, all owned by the Cuban Government, represent the 26th largest hotel company in the world according to the July 1999 issue *Hotels*, a magazine of the hospitality industry.

Visitors to Cuba have steadily grown at the rate of 19 percent during the last four years, five times faster than the rest of the Caribbean. Present estimates indicate 1.7 million visitors in 1999, with 2.0 million anticipated in the year 2000.

Government officials project that by the year 2010, Cuba will have 100,000 hotel rooms. To achieve this goal Cuba will have to build 69,000 rooms, that is, at the rate of 6,270 new rooms opened each year. Based on the current financial situation and Cuba's difficulties in accessing long-term loans, these plans appears to be overly optimistic.

However, considering all the difficulties attributable to many different factors, including the incompatibility of the system with healthy and efficient economic growth, the island continues to dedicate a significant portion of the national resources to develop an impressive tourism infrastructure. This concentration of resources overburdens other segments of the economy and dilutes many basic services to the population.

VISITS TO TOURIST DESTINATIONS

My trip to Cuba took place at the time that no direct flights from the United States were permitted. Therefore I flew to Nassau, Bahamas, to make connection with a Cubana Airlines flight to Havana. Without any explanation, the Cubana airplane was two hours late in arriving in Nassau.

We boarded a modern Soviet-made Cubana airplane, decorated inside in baby blue and tan colors. As I had never flown this type of plane before, I noticed with

concern that at seat level the whole cabin was filled with a cool steam that covered the floor of the cabin. No flight attendant was available except the agent that was busy receiving the passengers. After I sat down, I suspected that this was a premeditated game organized by the management to entertain passengers who were amused watching the concerned faces of each passenger that boarded when they saw the "man made" clouds. Later I learned that the clouds were not a preview to paradise but the air conditioning system that runs along the length of the airplane's floor. The fruit candy provided during the flight was delicious. The rest of the flight was uneventful.

My arrival at José Marti Airport was at Terminal Three, the recently inaugurated state-of-the-art airport terminal built by a Canadian consortium. Handling of immigration, luggage, and customs was as efficient and fast as in any other international airport. I was very glad to get the green light at customs, which permitted me to go through. My luggage, including two enormous duffel bags (*gusanos*), was so efficiently packed that a real *gusano* (the crawling kind) would have died for lack of oxygen to breathe. I don't know what I would have done if they had asked me to undo those miracles of the packing science. Probably I would have spent my whole trip trying to assemble it back. The uniforms of the airport personnel looked like military uniforms but with terrible undefined color, poorly tailored and too warm for the local climate.

Old Havana

My visit to the office of the Historiador de la Habana, who also happens to be the senior official overseeing the restoration of the city, was a memorable one.

I was offered various pieces of literature and documentation regarding the Master Plan for the restoration of Old Havana. I interviewed two young architects that have responsibilities in planning the work. These capable professionals talked with justifiable passion about the work already carried out and the substantial future work to be performed in accordance with the Master Plan.

One good example of completed restoration is the area of the old Lonja del Comercio (the Bourse). This building's restoration has been completed and most of the office space has been leased to foreign enterprises. The Lonja is located across from a completely restored trapezoid "plaza" at the intersection of Oficios and Lamparilla streets, named "Plaza de la Lonja." In one corner, the Café Habana offers different types of coffee, pastries, sandwiches and other light fare. Only dollars can be used to pay for food with reasonably good service.

From the Plaza de la Lonja and along Oficios Street, turning right at Teniente Rey (Brasil) we found complete restorations of colonial residences that were converted into art galleries, museums, restaurants and a mix of boutique stores. There are a substantial number of properties that have crumbled and are fenced in order to preserve the stone for restorations.

Plaza Vieja

Continuing Teniente Rey (Brasil), we reached Mercaderes Street and a splendid view of the Plaza Vieja. If there is a place in Havana where history and *habanidad* are present, it is in the now-called Plaza Vieja, bordered by Teniente Rey, Mercaderes, Muralla and San Ignacio streets. The square was planned in the sixteenth century as the substitute of the Plaza de la Iglesia, which later became what we know today as the Plaza de Armas. However, there was little enthusiasm to complete the square nor there were many families interested in building homes on the sites that were acquired around the Plaza Nueva. It was about the middle of the eighteenth century that important families began to build homes in what would become the most important address of the time. Most of the homes built around the Plaza Nueva were examples of the richest and purest architecture of the time

The Plaza Nueva (which became The Plaza Vieja after construction of the Plaza del Cristo) suffered several substantial transformations through the years. During the government of Capitán General Miguel Tacón (1834-1838) a modern market, El Mercado de Cristina, was constructed. Masonry buildings with the most current hygienic market installations of the time displaced wooden stalls. The Mercado de Cristina was demolished in 1908. Most recently, as part of

the Master Plan for the Integrated Revitalization of Old Havana, the semi-underground parking facility and a very ugly amphitheater, built in 1952, were demolished. The façades of all the homes and buildings of the Plaza are being restored, bringing back beauty and "señorío" to the Plaza Vieja. The Plaza Vieja stirred in me the same pride and pleasant feeling that Italians experience looking at the Piazza Navona in Rome or the Piazza San Marco in Venice.

I was born in the oldest building in the Plaza, in the second floor above the Bar La Argentina, a bar bodega owned by my father and my uncle, at the corner of Muralla and Mercaderes, across from the then-called Hotel Cueto, a magnificent sharp corner French rococo style building presently in line to be restored according with the Old Havana Master Plan. To my disappointment I found the building in ruins and boarded. It seems that the building has been abandoned and in ruins for years. Only the façade was saved from the ravages of time and the weather thanks to reinforcement and scaffolding.

Some of the buildings' interiors of the Plaza Vieja are saved and some are in use, but most of the restorations seem to be temporary, perhaps waiting a second phase when there will be interest and substantial funds to really restore the structures to a usable condition. In the meantime, the restoration of Habana Vieja will resemble, as a tourist from Texas said, a ghost town set for a Western movie.

La Cabaña Fortress

La Cabaña Fortress has become a popular attraction among tourists visiting Havana. It also provides popular and inexpensive entertainment for the local population. Half an hour before 9.00 p.m., the ceremony of firing the *Cañonazo de las Nueve* begins. This is an well-orchestrated show, re-enacting the ceremony as it was performed during Spanish colonial times.

You need however to stand where the wind does not blow the fumes toward you and be aware of pickpockets. The Cabaña has a museum of military and colonial artifacts worthwhile seeing. There are also quite a number of shops offering some fine souvenirs and art crafts. There are also the usual T-shirt emporiums, carrying the typical tourist junk, including T-

shirts with images of Che Guevara, a local hero who commanded La Cabaña's military facilities in the early days of the revolution.

La Cabaña Bar and Restaurant

Overlooking the Morro Castle and the Cabaña Fortress, across the entrance of the Port of Havana there is a restaurant that has seen better times. During my teen-age years, it was common to end up after the movies or a party to end up at the Bar Cabaña to have a late snack. I remember the famous *croqueta preparada* and the rice pudding.

Today this is a "dollar" restaurant where two plates (both based on chicken) are offered throughout the day. If you are a fan of a particular brand of beer you will have to accept the complexities of the restaurant procurement system: only one brand is served until it runs out and then the restaurant can switch to a different batch. Also, if you are not too fond of mice (guayabitos) you should not seat at tables near the side street. During my visit, there was some construction work nearby and the rodent population was very active, with many restaurant customers feeding them crumbs. There was also a good trio singing old boleros and romantic ballads. One curiosity is the rest room attendant: this gentleman could double as an excellent public relations agent for the restaurant. In a sunny day, the Cabaña Bar is a pleasant eatery.

Inglaterra Hotel

I remembered the Hotel Inglaterra at Central Park with its beautiful tiled restaurant and lounge. I visited the hotel almost at mid day and, to my surprise, the place was dark and the restaurant was almost empty. I asked why the lights were turned off and I was told that nobody comes for lunch.

On my way out I met a young lady who immediately began listing the sexual favors that she would render for the price of lunch. She had not earned any money in twenty-four hours because there were too many girls working the area and this was the low tourist season. She did not seem to be deterred by my comment regarding the fact that I was old enough to be her grandfather. So I proceeded with my professional research on her activities. We walked toward the old Capitol Building, now the Academy of Sciences. She

answered my inquiries candidly and I rewarded her with a few dollars. This girl was a representative of the contemporary prostitutes called "jineteras."

Professionals of the local hospitality industry interviewed have a spectrum of opinions regarding this activity: "It has always existed but tourism has encouraged it." "The government knows but does nothing to control it." "This is due to the low quality of tourists that come to Cuba." "Capitalism is the culprit of this activity." "This happened because we were spoiled by the economic support from the Soviet Union and now we have to work according to each one's own abilities and resources." "I wish I had a big a--- and a pair of t----- to be able to eat a hot meal every day." "Castro gets a percentage of the business."

Power and politics, as well as economic distress, breed crime and prostitution on normally law-abiding and morality-conscious members of society. The perception of a hopeless situation due to abuse of power imposed by a dictator such as Hitler in Europe at the time he was withdrawing his troops and losing the war, and the subsequent arrival of the new allied invaders, made prostitution an important means of family survival in major cities in Europe. We have all heard the stories of a pack of cigarettes or a pair of nylons to be fair price for sexual favors. Promptly after the war was over, democracy began to take hold and the economic situation improved partly because of the Marshall Plan and the vision of the leaders of post-war Europe. Many who practiced prostitution found legal sources of subsistence and became respectable and honest citizens.

History repeats itself. Those who succumb to crime and prostitution, for whatever reason, once the reasons that provoked the distress have disappeared, usually tend to return to their normal behavior and to a law abiding life, becoming parents, teachers, professionals, leaders, etc., in a more just and civilized society.

Varadero

I was able to share a leased car with other persons planning to visit Varadero and therefore had the opportunity to enjoy the view of the countryside from

the Via Blanca highway. The sharp green color of the countryside reminded me of my younger years in the island. My plan was to use the same car to take me to visit the principal hotel properties of the peninsula. I discovered that my driver, a local Cuban, could not accompany me to any foreign tourism hotel, restaurant or dollar establishment reserved for foreigners and foreign tourists. Understanding, but not accepting, embarrassing explanations such as “if we let the Cubans in, they would steal everything that is not nailed down,” it reminded me of other discriminatory situations I had observed in other parts of the world.

I visited several of the properties and found that those operated by professional foreign management companies and wholesalers were in general cleaner and offered relatively better services. Management personnel appeared competent, helpful and eager to respond to my professional questions.

In comparison, only a few management personnel of non-foreign operated hotels confirmed appointments requested by telephone in advance. Those who responded and were interviewed were equally knowledgeable of the trade and market as their foreign counterparts. Their main problem was maintaining a steady flow of supplies to be able to operate their hotels.

Varadero is a mature tourism destination that offers the range of amenities offered by similar destinations in the same climatic and geographic areas. As in most of parts of Cuba (and increasingly popular in other Caribbean vacation destinations), many of the hotels operate under the “all inclusive,” system where guests pay in advance for all expenses, including room, food, beverages, entertainment, and air and land transportation. Cuba’s principal tourism competitors are the Dominican Republic, Isla Margarita and Cancún, and to a lesser degree, Panama, Costa Rica and Jamaica.

The food offered in most of the Cuban restaurants patronized by foreign tourists tends to be monotonous and lack variety. Local rum is the king of beverages, served at bars almost always in cocktail form and decorated with tropical fruits. Imported liquor

normally is not found in “all inclusive” establishments. Havana is different from the beach resorts, as there is more variety in hotel restaurants. Imported liquor is easily available and may be acquired for a reasonable price in dollars.

Cayo Largo del Sur

Cayo Largo is a small island located east of the Island of Youth (formerly known as Isla de Pinos), in Cuba’s southern coast. Cayo Largo, the second largest cay in the Canarreos Archipelago, is accessible by air from Havana. Vessels bring most supplies and construction materials from the mainland.

I took a tour in a large catamaran to a black coral reef, populated by multicolor fish, and to a sand bar with a myriad of seahorses and sand dollars. Cocktails and a tasty home-cooked lunch was served as part of the tour at a well-appointed restaurant constructed as a “ranchón.” Dozens of iguanas sunbathed around the ranchón waiting for crumbs thrown by tourists. In all three locations, guests enjoyed swimming in clear and calm waters warmed by the Caribbean sun. The food and beverage service is provided by a couple that works 20 continuous days in the island and rests 10 days in the mainland, where most of the employees live. Very few people live permanently in the island and most of them are employed on the 20/10 days basis system.

There are at least eight hotels in Cayo Largo. The Hotel Pelicano is the largest, with 230 rooms. It is comfortable and offers full service in a relaxed atmosphere. The southern side of the island has several excellent unspoiled beaches.

I was not able to obtain an explanation to the immigration procedures, in my view redundant, required both on arrival and at departure from the island. In my opinion the value delivered for the one-day tour was very satisfactory.

Cayo Coco, Ciego de Avila

The name of this island in Cuba’s northern coast is attributed to a bird that lives in the area and not to the coconut tree, as most would presume. The one-day trip I took consists of air transportation from Havana to Cayo Coco airport, use of the grounds and public facilities of the Tryp Hotel,² meals and

drinks, and return to Havana the same evening. Available at an additional cost are trips to other cays, such as Cayo Guillermo and Cayo Romano, or to Morón and Ciego de Avila on the mainland. The access to the mainland is over a causeway, a controversial issue for ecologists and marine biologists.

In addition to the two Tryp hotels, there are several attractive properties including two Meliá Hotels. Cayo Coco and Cayo Guillermo are becoming tourist destinations of some importance. Most of the hotels operate under the all-inclusive system. Guests arrive mainly on chartered direct flights from Europe. There are scheduled flights from Havana and other locations in the Island.

Compared to other Caribbean destinations, Cayo Coco appears to be a good value for the prices charged by the all-inclusive hotels. There are plenty of activities for tourists included in the price or at additional cost.

Habana Hilton (Habana Libre)

When the Habana Hilton was “intervened” by officials of the Ministry of Labor in June 1, 1960, Hilton Hotels International operated the hotel under a lease contract with its owner, the Confederación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores Gastronómicos (Federation of Food Workers Unions). As mentioned earlier, this hotel provided my initial step in my career in the hospitality industry when I served as Controller. Several people that I interviewed, including executives of the hotel, were not aware of the fact the hotel had been Cuban-owned, by a labor union.

The Hotel still maintains its elegant tropical design, except that its lush landscape is either gone or substituted by poorly chosen plants that show lack of care. The fountain in the lobby is empty and needs repair. The lobby reception area was refurbished in a modern style that would have made the original designers turn in their graves because it clashes with the over all tropical décor design originally intended. The pool area and the coffee shop and adjacent bar area are still delightful, but show signs of deterioration. A mix of

un-coordinated furniture is the result of cannibalizing furniture from other areas.

The 360-degree view from the lounge on the top floor is the best in the City. The under-utilized room has been converted into a discotheque and renamed Pico Turquino, in honor of the tallest mountain in Cuba.

Coinciding with the celebration in Havana of the 40th Anniversary of the Hotel, a group of ex-employees of the Habana Hilton celebrated a reunion in Miami. The group gathered in Miami on March 19, 1999, exactly 41 years from the official opening of the hotel. The invitation to the party was an exact replica of the original invitation sent to VIPs who attended the festivities surrounding the inauguration of the hotel on March 19, 1958.

At the entrance to the party was a large display of pictures and memorabilia of the Habana Hilton, which became the gathering point of old friends, many of whom had not seen each other for forty years. We expected a small party of about 25 people, but the first set of invitations generated such enthusiasm that we wound up with 55 persons from New York, Puerto Rico, and Spain. A number of the chefs flew in from places such as New York, Puerto Rico, San Francisco, Colorado and Switzerland. Also there were Manolito, the office boy before the opening of the hotel, later a pageboy; our popular doorman, Vicente; most of the “girls” from the office; many of the department heads; a good representation from the kitchen; and Jesús Moreno, everybody’s favorite band leader. The party was a tremendous success, and its organizer, former General Manager of the hotel, José A. Menéndez, announced that plans are being made for the next party — at the Habana Hilton in a democratic Cuba!

Havana Riviera

The Havana Riviera is one of the pre-revolution icons of the tourism industry in Cuba. It competed with the Hilton and the Nacional for the clientele that ignored the occasional terrorist activities of the

2. Tryp is a Spanish hotel chain that operates several tourist hotels in Cuba.

various groups opposed to President Batista's regime. Today the hotel looks tired and dated. Carpeting needs to be replaced. The most significant memory of my visit is the strong mildew odor in every area of the hotel.

Seville Hotel

The Seville Hotel belongs to the early Republican era. It has been restored recently to its deserved elegance. Its first class international category equals that of some top hotels in Europe. The restoration of this hotel is superb.

Nacional Hotel

This hotel, built in 1930, has recently been restored to its glorious past. Except for some shortcuts taken because of budget constraints, the rehabilitation of the Nacional Hotel may be considered of museum quality. The hotel's splendid restaurant, Comedor de Aguilar, offers a varied international menu and wines unusual in most of the other hotels in the city. Service is impeccable. There is a lounge, named Salón de la Fama, with walls covered with pictures and drawings of famous people who have been guests of the hotel throughout its sixty-nine years of existence. The restaurant captain was eager to inform that the Comandante's [Fidel Castro's] picture is not posted on the wall because he has never been a guest of the hotel, meaning he has never slept in a room there.

Maqueta de La Habana

In Miramar, there is an exhibition of a Maqueta de la Habana, which people like me find interesting and worthwhile visiting. It represents 144 square kilometers of the city in a 1/1,000 scale. It took twelve years and nine technicians to build. The different colors indicate the period of construction of the City. Several elevated areas facilitate the view from different angles. One of the highlights of this exhibit is to be photographed pointing your finger at the location where you used to live. If you wonder why I mentioned this exhibit it is because it is the only educational activity that is not contaminated with political rhetoric.

The Shrinking of Havana

A surprising discovery is that the area of Metropolitan Havana has shrunk. This is due to new roads that

have been built or expanded during the last forty years.

To visit the beaches at Miramar or Náutico it is no longer necessary to go toward Havana (in opposite direction) then cross the Almendares River and take the Fifth Avenue west-bound, driving a triangular route. Today a combination of new highways and streets and the scarcity of automobiles have shortened the distance and time in more than half.

The First Circular Ring of Havana (Primer Anillo Circular de La Habana) bypasses Metropolitan Havana and connects with the Vía Blanca for those travelling to Varadero or points east.

The Rancho Boyeros Highway that leads to José Martí International Airport is one of the busiest arteries. It offers easy access to Mazorra's Mental Asylum, the National Zoo and the Lenin Park depending on your preference or needs. Mazorra is a National Psychiatric Hospital with an international reputation.

REFLECTIONS

A New Culture, A New Language

One important thing you will discover when you visit Cuba after a long absence is that you feel that you are in a changed, almost foreign country. Forty years of social and political changes have had a profound impact on the use of the Spanish language in the island. You will have to learn the colloquialisms or you will be left out of a conversation. At the same time your archaic Spanish will make you sound to the locals as if you just arrived with Columbus.

The official or governmental language you hear in the radio or TV is amazingly ambiguous and sometimes incomprehensibly "cantinflistic" (referring to Mario Moreno a famous Mexican comic and comedian who created a character named Cantinflas). You perceive information that seems to mean the opposite of what it is. The tone of the speaker celebrating or attacking a particular subject sounds as if he was intending the opposite. Example: *Excederemos nuestras metas en la medida que los recursos nos permitan*. We will exceed our goals to the extent that the available resources permit us.

Eleven Million Shareholders

Among the various materials collected regarding laws and regulations on how to do business or invest in Cuba, we found excellent information and promotional literature. The material states in several languages the procedures to follow for a successful association with the Cuban State.

A magazine titled *Acuarela* that publishes, in a sleek format and in Spanish and English, information regarding foreign investments in the island contains an article with information attributed to the Minister for Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation. The article is titled “Eleven Million Shareholders” and in the first paragraph it says: “On the executive board of any Cuban enterprise there are 11 million

shareholders, the entire population, and for that reason the level of responsibility and commitment of the businesspeople on the island is very high.”

I certainly agree that the fact that a person owns shares of an enterprise engenders feelings of ownership. However, none of the people I visited—including government officials of the tourism industry—showed any awareness of being, or acted as, a shareholder of the enterprises they worked for. The Minister for Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation seems to be a serious and dedicated government official. He may have failed to realize that the excessive poetic license of an overzealous publisher might misrepresent and ridicule the meaning of socialist property.