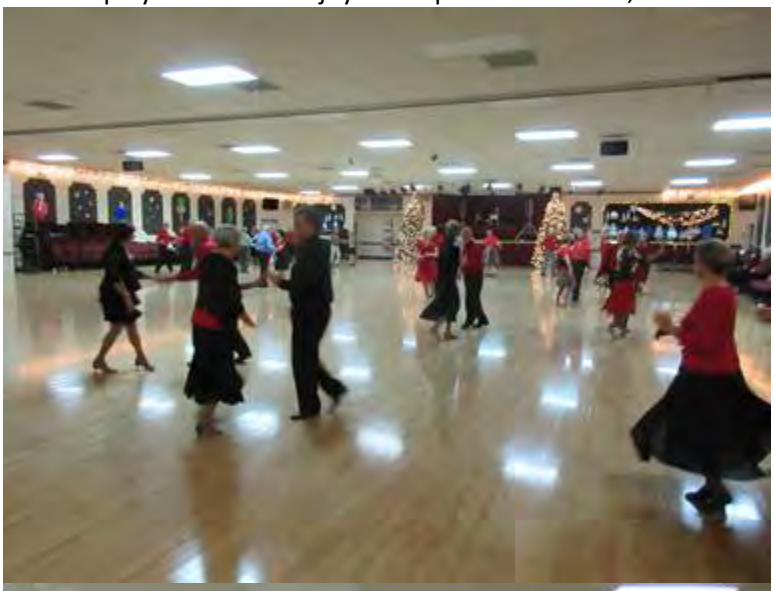
pam@gphurd.com

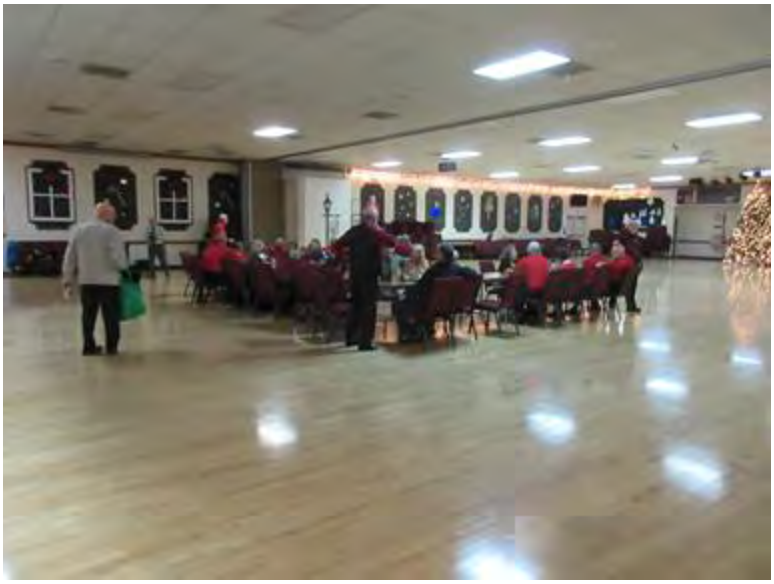
From: pam@gphurd.com
Sent: Friday, January 18, 2019 7:22 PM
To: 'pam@gphurd.com'
Subject: Pam's Cuba Revelations, Dec 2018 - Chapter 1 - Miami

Dear Friends & Family,

"Started writing about Cuba while in Florida, then events got in the way. Actually back in Mesa & in the midst of High Dance Season, but just now working on them again & starting to send them out. Hope you enjoy reading about our Cuba adventures. Planned to have about 20 Chapters!!"

Yippee! The Hurd's are on the move again! At this time, we're actually back in the US in Key West. Had no time during the actual Cuban travels. We've been dreaming of this adventure for quite a long time. Finally going to fill in this box! Hope you want to enjoy the trip with us. If not, let me know & I'll delete you from the list!!!





Peace
on
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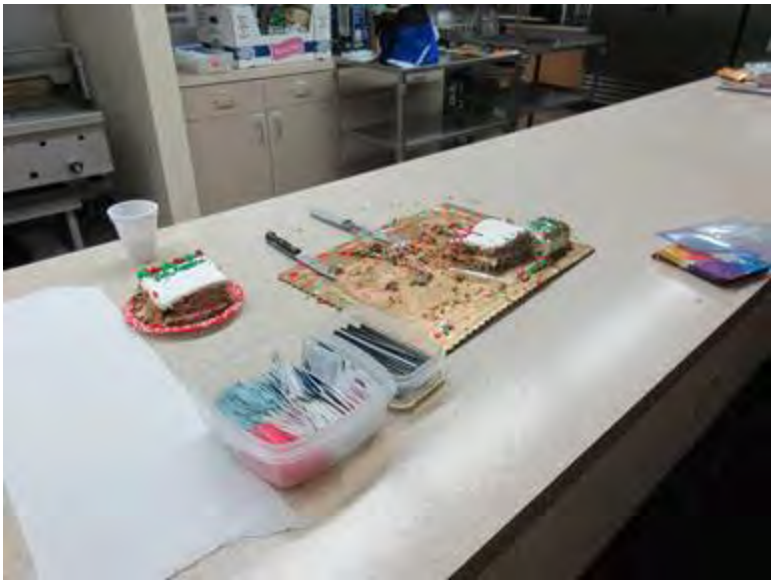
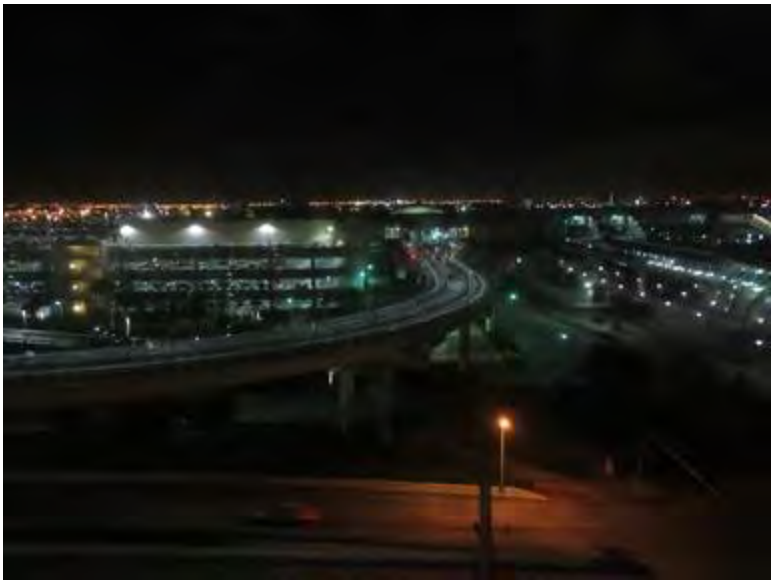
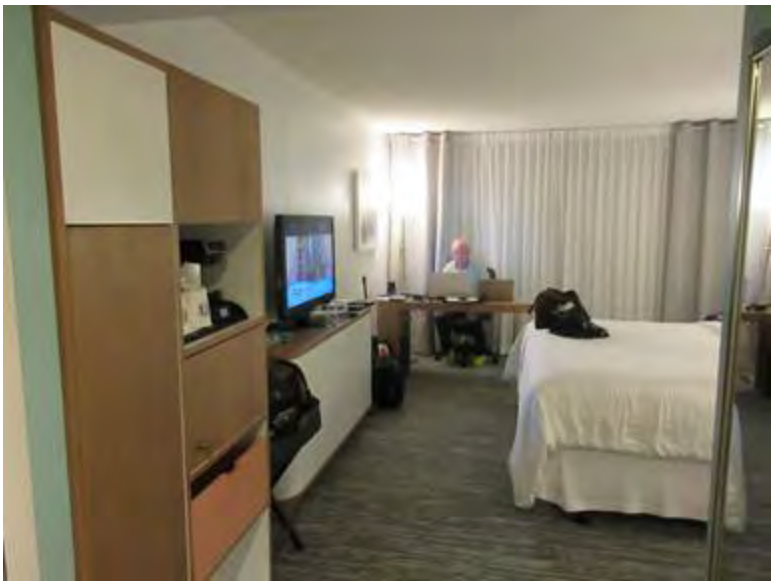


Due to the scheduling required for this trip, we had to have our Annual Holiday Dance in Mesa a week early! So it actually fell on Thursday, 6 Dec 2018. Luckily for me, that was also my 62nd birthday! Yippee, I'm Social Security eligible now!! It was wonderful fun. Imagine 32 couples dancing & smiling & eating at Greenfield Village – the most loved dance venue in Mesa!! I got several awesome presents & a few that are not suitable to talk about in mixed company. I do have a few friends with a quirky sense of humor that matches mine to a T! Anyway, the dancing was great & the social visit afterwards was quite successful. George & I made it home about midnight & were up a few hours finishing up packing for the trip!!





Our flight to Miami on Friday afternoon was a little late taking off & a little bumpy enroute, but the 3 couples (Hurd, Hibner, Toth) made it all the way & were happily checked in to our Sheraton Miami Airport Hotel by 10:45pm. George & I had lucked upon a discounted room with Club Room access, so we got to celebrate our arrival in Miami with the group in the Club Room! We got a really nice room on the 10th floor overlooking Amtrak Rail Station & the International airport runway.

We had looked at several options for our free day in Miami, but hadn't made a decision. About 10:30am, we met in the lobby at the Concierge & after discussing the options, we elected to use UBER to go to the Everglades Holiday Park for an afternoon on an airboat with an Alligator Wrestling show thrown in for spice! It was almost an hour's drive away, but

the trusty UBER driver got us there easily! Once there, we only had a few minutes wait & we were on our boat with Captain Charley.

The airboat took us through some quintessential examples of the Florida Everglades landscape, a mix of mangroves, sawgrass, & muhly grass. Charley passed around a piece of sawgrass, warning us to only feel the edges by sliding up, if you slid your finger down, it would slice the skin!! It's been called a "river of grass." There were channels dug out back in the early 1900's when developers had a plan to totally drain the area to make land for homes. Thank goodness that plan was stopped before it totally destroyed this amazing environment!

Although we didn't see a huge number of birds, we did get to see a few: Anhinga, Boat Tailed Grackle (both male & female), white Heron, & the Purple Gullinole.

Our goal for the day was to find alligators! We found lots of them & also marine iguanas. Unfortunately for the environment (& any local fishermen or boaters), it was obvious that the boat captains feed the alligators to attract them, but for us, it made for great fun! Had alligators coming at us from all directions. The captain denied that he was feeding them, but we saw him dropping "bread crumbs" for both the alligators & the birds.

The Captain showed us all how to make a lovely flower lei - Everglades style – with a lily pad flower & stem! Pretty cool!

Next stop was the Alligator Wrestling. The theater was set up pretty well & we were looking forward to the show!

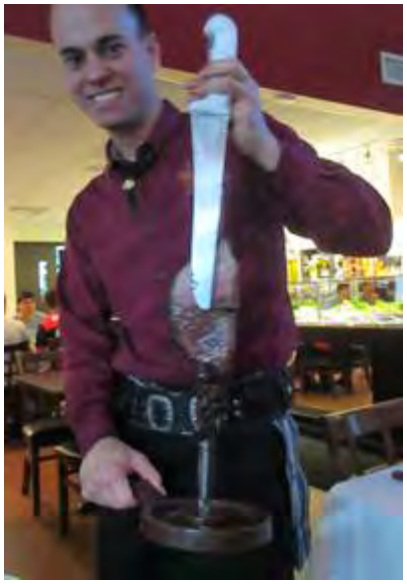
Paul Bedard (of the Gator Boys TV show on Animal Planet) introduced himself & told us about the Rescue program of the Gator Boys Rescue team. He was really funny, but also educational & rather impressive. He started out by telling of some standard traits of the alligator – like being laid back & calm on a general basis. He treated them rather like a

trained dog (never asked them to fetch or anything). He said he usually used a different one in each show so as not to overly stress them.

He definitely did some things that deserved the “don’t try this at home!” warning.

After the show, we circled around the grounds to see the Albino Alligator (you could get your picture made with it – none of us did!!), the Hawkbill Sea Turtle, the Albino Python, the Red Fox, Pot bellied pig (??? How did he fit in?), & the guard Peacock!

We had a coupon for a free group picture! So here we are – starting our big Cuban adventure!'



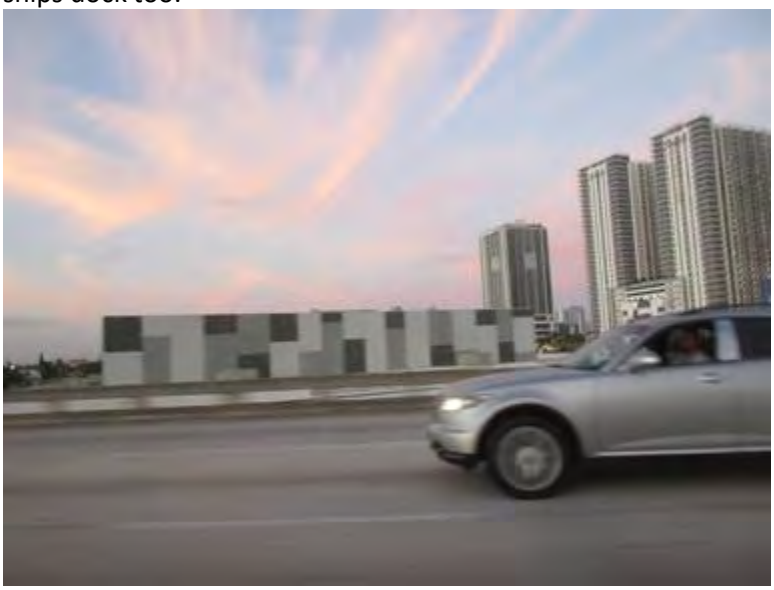
We called an UBER to take us back to the hotel & Connie asked him for a suggestion on where to eat dinner around the hotel. He suggested that he drop us off at the Brazilian Steakhouse (guess what? He was Brazilian!!). We decided to try it & WOW! It was awesome! There was a 2 part buffet – one with salads & cold veges and one with hot sides like beans, rice, soup, potatoes, etc. The hot buffet also included chicken. The servers circulated with 9 different types of meat on

skewers. They sliced it if you wanted any. We had to wave them off after we were stuffed beyond comfort!!! The taxi driver had also suggested that we try the Caipirinha – the Brazilian National drink. It's made with sugar cane liquor & fruit syrups. Most of us had one & found it tasty, but not for regular consumption!! I discovered a pickled pepper that I had not seen before that was extremely tasty. I also enjoyed a spinach vege dish that was different than I had experienced before. John & Kay know of a restaurant like this in Mesa also. We'll have to give it a try. We were also pleased that it was a only a moderately priced meal – only a little more expensive than the hotel's breakfast!!

After stuffing ourselves, we decided to walk around downtown Miami a little. We had a little over an hour before sunset, so we started walking toward the beach. The area we were in was safe & clean & there were quite a few others walking in the area.

With generic instructions, phone GPS, & following the noise… we soon found the waterfront. There was a live band with folks dancing & clapping & singing along. There were quite a lot of sidewalk entertainers & tons of places to eat & drink – with the associated hawkers trying to get your money! It was lively & fun & we enjoyed walking along the edge of the

water. Enjoyed seeing a little dog curled up at a sidewalk bar, oblivious to the excitement around. Saw where the cruise ships dock too.



We called UBER again & an easy ride got us back to the hotel. One funny thing – our driver passed up the 2 left lanes that were turning & realized he needed to turn left. They were all stopped for a red light. He says, "I'll teach you a

Miami trick" and stops as he was driving past & backs up to the front of the line!!!! Crazy. Not a single horn honking or gun shot! Anyway, we were soon back & met up in the Club room again to chat & review the day & anticipate our flight to Cuba tomorrow for the real adventure to start! Air conditioning was pretty strong (at least for one of us!) , so George went to our room & grabbed John our robe to fend off his shivers & hyperthermia!

Soooooooo….. tomorrow we fly to Cuba! Hope you stay tuned to join us!

Lots of love,

Pamela & George

pam@gphurd.com

From: pam@gphurd.com
Sent: Friday, January 18, 2019 8:02 PM
To: 'pam@gphurd.com'
Subject: Pam's Cuba Revelations, Dec 2018 - Chapter 2 - Miami to Camaguey

Good Morning Friends, Family, & Travelers,

This epilogue starts the true Cuban adventure. Hang on for the ride!

George & I had our included Buffet breakfast to start the morning. Everyone else had to pay $22 each! Way too expensive. I mentioned in my survey to OAT at the end that I thought that was chintzy! It was an okay breakfast (you could get eggs to order), but certainly not worth $22 each!

Starting off with a map to give you an idea of where & what we've got ahead of us. We were to fly from Miami to Camaguey (come ah WAY) to start the adventure. We were to stay in 4 hotels over 11 nights – 3/3/1/4. We had chosen this particular trip with OAT (actually Grand Circle Foundation because of the legal requirements for Americans to visit Cuba) because we'd at least be able to see half of the island. Most of the People to People interactions required by law on this tour are to be dance & music related with some baseball & dominos thrown in!

We had a morning meeting with a Grand Circle Miami representative at the hotel to meet the 20 folks in our group & get some instructions for the check – in at the airport. The local Miami rep – Nikky – gave us our Cuban guide's name (Mily – but we all thought Millie) and assured us that she would meet us when we landed. The flight was through American Airlines, but it is considered a contract flight – not a regularly scheduled flight. Because of that, there was a bit more

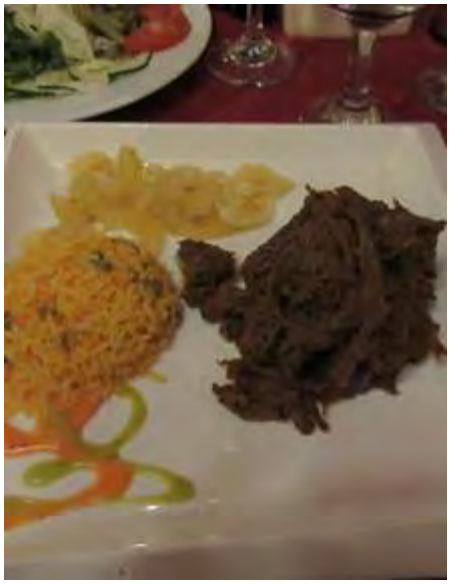
confusion with getting our boarding passes (they didn't have George & I sitting together) & I got TSA pre-check, but George didn't! Things were a little confused, but we persevered & all made it through security & on to the gate. Didn't have long to wait & before long, we were in the plane & whizzing our way to Desi Arnaz's home country! Our first view of Cuba was the outer islands. Looks gorgeous! Only an hour plus a few minutes to get across the Atlantic. Even the same time zone! Our representative at OAT said that Cuba was the most exotic destination closest to the US!

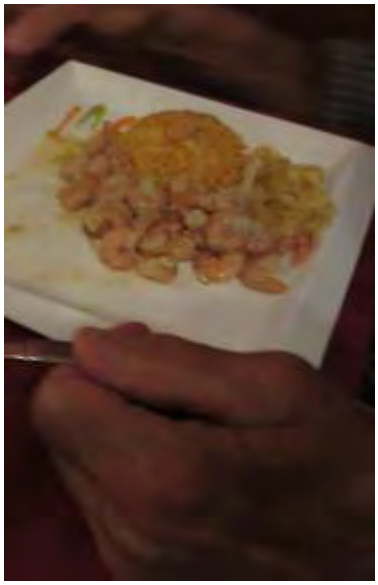
Checking in at the Camaguey airport was not too bad. The only almost problem, was when the security/customs personnel pulled 2 computers out of George's computer bag! She was calling over her supervisor & saying "something something TWO." I noticed & motioned that one was mine! She said "Ah!" and everything was fine. We had been warned that it was illegal to bring in excess electronics because they thought we were going to try & sell them. But situation was averted! Thank goodness! Otherwise, the only significant thing was that we noticed & were jealous that all the lady security personnel had these beautiful patterned hose! And they were all young & adorable with little mini skirts! Interesting! And unexpected! No pictures allowed of course. It was only a short drive to our hotel in the main square of Camaguey. There we learned the first interesting fact. Cuba has just recently gotten internet/wifi access & it is always available in the center squares of the town. Along with all the city residents! On their cell phones!!! While we were there, they were just offered their first monthly rate plan. Our guide had purchased it! Have no idea what it cost! We were assigned our rooms (from 2nd to 4th floor – ground floor was the lobby - and no elevators!). And told to meet on the 5th floor for our Welcome briefing & first Cuban drink! Our guide, Milagros (Mily), told us we were leaving in less than an hour to walk to our first restaurant & gave us a few tips about our upcoming time in the city. Excitement is building!

It was only about a 3 block walk to our restaurant. Enroute, we learned a bit about how we were going to mostly visit Privately owned “paladars”. That is what they call the restaurants that are privately owned. “Paladar” literally means palate. To get a license, it is supposed to be a “family home.” Several that we visited had a family actually living there, but quite a few started that way, but are now strictly used for the restaurant. The State does not seem to be monitoring it. Regulations are getting softer. This one had given us a set menu to order from & we got our first taste of Cuban food!

They settled our group in one of the private rooms & one of the owners came to greet us & we had our first toast in Cuba - **Arriba, abajo, al centro y adentro.**

Up, down, towards the center, and down the hatch. The toast was with the Cuban National Drink – a Cuba Libre (rum & coke). Here's a bit of history about the drink, compliments of Wikipedia! *"Fausto Rodriguez, a Bacardi advertising executive, claimed to have been present when the drink was first poured, and produced a notarized affidavit to that effect in 1965. According to Rodriguez, this took place in August 1900, when he was a 14-year-old messenger working for a member of the U.S. Army Signal Corps in Havana. One day at a local bar, Rodriguez's employer ordered Bacardi rum mixed with Coca-Cola. This intrigued a nearby group of American soldiers, who ordered a round for themselves, giving birth to a popular new drink.[1] Bacardi published Rodriguez's affidavit in a Life magazine ad in 1966. However, Rodriguez's status as a Bacardi executive has led some commentators to doubt the veracity of his story.[2][8] Another story states that the drink was first created in 1902 at Havana's Restaurant La Florida to celebrate the anniversary of Cuban independence."*





We all ended up ordering something different. All of us were pleased with our choices (Shredded beef for me, Cuban Shrimp for Connie, Garlic Shrimp for John, & Chicken with onion for George – John & Kay were at a different table, so not sure what they got for this first meal) our first Cuban meal was a success! The black beans & rice were a staple

throughout the trip, as was the salad with cabbage, tomatoes, cucumbers, & green beans. The ice cream with the caramel sauce was unfortunately a one time deal! It was really really yummy.

We walked back to the hotel & had our first end of the day party in our room! We've made it to CUBA!!

I'll end here & make this a short one. Tomorrow we start our first full day in Cuba!!! Thanks for traveling with us! Stay tuned!

Love ya,

Pamela & George

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pam@gphurd.com

From: pam@gphurd.com
Sent: Sunday, January 20, 2019 1:43 PM
To: 'pam@gphurd.com'
Subject: Pam's Cuba Revelations, Dec 2018 - Chapter 3 - Camaguey, Mon, 10 Dec

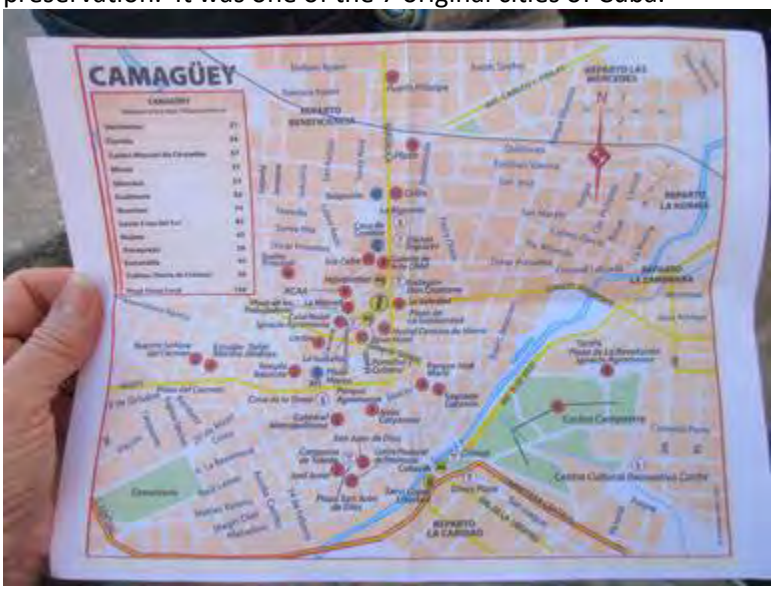
Good Evening Friends, Family & Fellow travelers!

Time to really get into Cuba! Let's go!

Up at 6:50am (you know how we love early mornings!!) & upstairs for breakfast. The roof top dining room was partially restored with a balcony in disarray around the outside & some windows with beautiful glass pictures. We met our guide, Milagros (Mily) to start our morning. She walked us across the road to meet up with our parade of Bici Taxis or Pedi cabs – they called them both.

Our driver was Alesandro. His taxi was owned by the State & he received his salary from the State. Our first stop was Plaza de la Merced Square with the beautiful Santa Cecelia Convention Center. We had walked past this to go to our restaurant last night. On one corner of the Square is the Lady of Mercy Church – one of the oldest in Cuba, built in

1748. This entire city is a UNESCO World Heritage site due to it's historical value & Colonial architectural preservation. It was one of the 7 original cities of Cuba.



Our Pedi cabs took us all over the city. We stopped for a while in front of the Camaguey Theater and the drivers all gave us some info about themselves. We were all supposed to have found out information about our drivers to share – Alesandro had 2 children, one absolutely beautiful 15 year old daughter that he happily showed us from pictures on his cell phone. He had just given her one of the HUGE parties that are required as basically a "coming out" presentation at 15 years old. They sometimes spend thousands of dollars to do this – going in debt just to present their daughters! They pay to have a photographer to follow them around & take glamour shots in multiple fancy outfits. More about this later with pictures of one of them. We got a photo of John & Kay behind us on the street – our guy worked very hard to be in the lead! Note the condition of the "window" we were taking photos through! The State did not do much in the way of upkeep for the drivers on the equipment! Heard during a briefing in Havana that the State had purchased these Pedi Cabs from China during the "Special Period" in the early 90's after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Cuba could not get any fuel & needed someway of providing public transportation. This was the solution!

Our local transportation continued to the Plaza del Carmen, best known for the bronze statutes by Martha Jiminez. This women artist is considered a symbol of the city & the life size statutes are awesome. The Newspaper Reader had a local mimicking him and the lovers are quite thought provoking due to the expressions on their faces – had they had an argument? Was he proposing? Best known are "The Gossipers." These 3 ladies are so life like & entertaining, it makes

you want to sit down in the spare chair to join in the conversation. She usually works in clay, but these statutes in the square were bronzed to protect them.

Her gallery is actually on the square, across from “The Gossipers.” She was not there when we visited & we were not allowed to take pictures of the art. There was a garden out back where she had some parrots. We were told to make sure we noticed “the Holy Water” Fountain. Too funny!

We walked down the street from the gallery & made a stop in a local Ration shop. This was a very interesting stop. As this is a communist country, the State provides each individual (regardless of age), a certain ration of food. This amount is basically what they have decided a person could survive on. Not enough, according to Mily, but a predetermined amount, none the less. Each individual is provided a book & once a month they bring it into this shop & this young man notates on it what he gives them. He also has pen/paper records of what he hands out. Each Cuban is now supposed to receive a monthly ration of seven pounds of **rice**, half a bottle of cooking oil, one sandwich-sized piece of **bread** per day plus small quantities of eggs, **beans**, **chicken** or **fish**, **spaghetti**, white and brown **sugar** and cooking gas. His store also has on had items that can be purchased over the rations amount – such as rum, cigarettes, wine, etc. They can also purchase additional regular supplies, he just has to keep record so that he can request resupply from the government. There are also regular markets & stores where they can buy other items, but the imports have been severely limited over the years. Now that they have internet & more people have permission to travel off the island, they have lots more items available. It happened to be the operator's birthday, so we sang to him & Mily gave him a hug. We also donated pens for his record keeping!

Back in our pedicabs, we continued along the main streets, we booked right along – our guys was passing anytime he could! As you might notice, the streets were quite clean (state paid employees cleaned up every morning at dawn – so we were told!) & there were many small parks – a little oasis of greenery for the locals to gather. Alesandro took a picture for us before we said goodbye to him.

Now on foot, our next stop was the workshop/home of Magdiel Rosales, a local artist (one of many in this city known for it's artistic & cultural scenes). He works mostly in leather & had a beautiful assistant that entertained us with a chattering explanation of what he was doing. He even allowed one of our group (an amazing Guatemalan couple that now live in New York City) give it a try. One of his most amazing pieces was a 4'+ humidor made of cedar & covered in his special leather. No, we didn't buy one!

As we walked to our next point of interest, we enjoyed looking at the locals in full view on both sides of the street. As you walk, there are openings with full view of whomever & whatever is inside. Sometimes it was an individual home, sometimes an artist gallery, sometimes a meeting place where folks were either just sitting talking or most often playing dominos! It was incredibly interesting. We were soon inside the home/gallery of Jovel and Ileana Sanchez, well known contemporary Cuban painters. Both of them paint, she in a riot of colors & he in a darker more conventional palette with religious undercurrents. They pointed out that like many of the homes throughout Cuba, the floors are often ancient holdovers from the Spanish occupation days. One thing I loved was that most of the homes (obviously in the more financially affluent residents) had a central courtyard with plants & art & seating to allow the enjoyment of outdoor privacy! Although most were small, they had an economy of space usage that we really appreciated.

We were soon on to continue our walk to Ignacio Agramonte Square, named after the Spanish revolutionary fighter from the late 1800's. Although originally used as the central point for executing the Independence fighters, now, the Square is beautifully maintained & is a local gathering area for wi-fi! It's famous statute was carved by an Italian artist & unveiled by his wife in 1912. There are several examples of the "tinajons". These are the symbol of the city. They are EVERYWHERE (in the previous courtyard, right?)! Sizes vary from small to big enough for people to stand in! They were originally pots designed to catch rain water & keep it fresh for later consumption. I'll probably show more later! On we go!

We stopped for lunch at a local state run restaurant. Forgot to even get a picture of what we had for lunch & the only picture of the adorable 4 man group that entertained us turned out blurry! But it was good, and then we were on to the next!! Stopped at another Artist Gallery. There were some interesting humming bird carvings, but I most enjoyed the courtyard with dozens of different kinds of orchids. Only a few were in bloom, but it was beautiful & a lovely, restful, peaceful, area.

After lunch, our bus picked us up to take us to a state run Musical Conservatory. Besides hearing a group of children practicing for a classical performance, we wandered around the school grounds (actually pretty dilapidated!). Couldn't resist a picture of the beautiful nails of one of the girls acting as our guide. A perfect teenager, huh? As we were wandering to look for other students, we found a group of mothers?, kitchen workers? Cleaning some rice for lunch! They were literally sorting it on a table to clean out the unacceptable rice kernels! Interesting! Then found a young gentleman practicing his trombone out in the plaza. He had 2 young girls cheering him on. When we stopped to chat with them, one of the young girls mentioned that if she had her preference, she would be studying singing. So we got an acappella version of Besame Mucho. She was incredible!

Back on the bus & we rode the 15/20 minutes back to our hotel. Thought I'd share a picture of our room. We were lucky enough to be on the inside & looking into the center Courtyard. John & Connie and John & Kay were in outside rooms and had to deal with a lot of street noise. All the rooms were about the same size with the same amenities (should have taken a picture of the bathroom – it was HUGE with a big tub, sink, toilet. The locals have trouble getting decent soap/shampoo/lotion, so our guide suggested if we didn't use everything from each of our hotels, we should give it to her & she distributed it among the folks we visited. They provided lots of it for us, so we always had a lot to share with her. This is probably a good time to mention that the financial situation in Cuba is in a mess. The professionals, like doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc are paid by the state – low salary and not allowed to go private. The average salary is 30 CUC's (about 1 to 1 with the US dollar) a month. Yep, a month! Whereas the hotel maids were receiving 1 CUC per person per day in the hotels. That means they are rich! Also, the taxi drivers. And most anyone else in the tourist business, now allowed to run private businesses out of their homes – both restaurants and B&B's. Definitely an upside down financial triangle. The government is trying to figure out where to go from here!

Last stop for the day was to a private "paladares" – Restaurante 1800. Raul Castro started granting licenses to individuals to run these restaurants out of their homes about 10 years ago. This one was beautifully decorated, with lovely place settings including gorgeous crystal wine glasses. We got really tickled because we were allowed 2 alcoholic drinks with our meal & thought we'd be drinking out of those gorgeous glasses. But rather than coming to the table & pouring into the glasses, we were brought these tiny little wine glasses (but with quite generous filling!). Unsure what they served us, but it was definitely drinkable. We found that they were generally serving us wines from Chile. Food on the huge buffet was quite good – lots of chicken, pork, sausage, rice, beans, pumpkin, squash, cabbage, tomatoes, green beans, plantains (they have both what we call bananas – served for breakfast & stand alone snacks and what we call plantains – a firmer species that is cooked & eaten much like a potato). Beef, if served, was normally shredded. Chicken was either legs or shredded. The meal was quite tasty & the venue was excellent. Have to do a Trip Advisor recommendation! They all had Trip Advisor signs up!

So ended our first full day in Cuba! Off to an awesome adventure! Hang in there with us. This particular adventure was AMAZING!!!

Pamela & George

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Look at pictures, videos, & Photo books on Shutterfly http://pamspicts.shutterfly.com

pam@gphurd.com

From: pam@gphurd.com
Sent: Thursday, January 24, 2019 12:36 AM
To: 'pam@gphurd.com'
Subject: Pam's Cuba Revelations, Dec 2018 - Chapter 4 - Camaguey, Tues, 11 Dec

Good Morning Friends & Family,

Here we go!

After our regular morning breakfast, we took a walk along the pedestrian walk across from our hotel. Mily had promised to show us a place to purchase something she called “useful art.” We’ll be back there later. She was always stopping on the street to talk to different people. She seemed to know everyone.

Then back to the hotel & on the bus to our first major stop of the day – En Dedans Dance Company. I believe this is a state run dance school. The style was a mix of contemporary & standard ballet. Their ages were be between 18 – early

30's. They were beautiful young people & seemed thrilled to perform for us. Although an old building & a bit dilapidated, they had a great sound system & seemed quite satisfied with it.

After they performed for us – we performed for them!!!!!! So exciting! Unfortunately Kay had already been hit by the Cuban version of Montezuma's Revenge & weren't able to dance! But John & Connie and George & I danced Cake by the Ocean & Papillion!! The kids all lined up at the back & seemed mesmerized by our performance. We could see them in the mirror while we were dancing.

After we had finished, Mily had them all come & sit in front of us & we had a Q&A session – first us to them – general questions like “do you enjoy what you are doing?”, “how long have you been dancing?”, etc. Mily had them all introduce themselves & say how old they were & where were they from also. They were from all over Cuba & most had been with the company for 5+ years, but a few were newer. When they were allowed to ask us questions, one of the older (30ish) couples had Mily translate a comment that “they were happy to see that when they were ……” long pregnant pause. Then restated, “when they had danced together a long time, they could still do a different style of dance together!!!” It was adorable! We asked to change clothes before we left (planning to go to a farm & didn’t want to be in our “dance clothes!) & the group leader had them clear out an office space for us! They had curtains up in a different room & had some restrooms, but the curtained area was pretty open – we could see the youngsters changing there! And the restrooms were pretty abysmal – small & kinda dirty – no flushing! They have to bring buckets of water in to pour in the toilets to flush out the bowls. Saw that in quite a few places. Apparently they used to have it, since the toilets themselves looked regular. Thought it was extremely considerate that they went to special effort to try & make us comfortable!

After a short bus drive (maybe a half hour?), we arrived at Casanova's Family Pottery Studio. It is a private family owned pottery & most of the family is involved in some way. After a short demonstration of how to prepare the clay, they invited one of our group to help! Then the youngest son gave us a pottery wheel demonstration with a manual wheel. The father showed his expertise with the electrical wheel. He had quite the beautiful smile! And was incredibly

talented. He made a collage of items & put them together. He was really quick & the different items just appeared out of nothing in his hands! They gave out a few gifts & I was lucky enough to get one – a sweet memory with a small lovely vase!

Touring the rest of the complex & hearing about the varied activities (both painting & collecting paintings), we found Mom involved making pottery bead bracelets. Most of us bought some of these (already dropped it on the floor & broke a couple of them!! Phooey!). And then next adventure – we divided up & hopped on a local horse & buggy to get to our next location!!! This place is amazing! Such a mix of old & new! Again – some of the guys owned their own buggy's & some were state run. Regardless, they seemed happy & healthy! And most of the animals seemed pretty well cared for. Can't ask for much more than that!

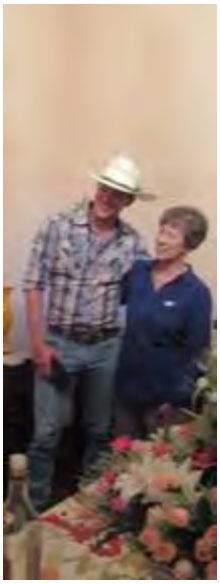
This stop was Zaragozano Ranch. It is a family operated ranch & we were invited to just feel at home! Obviously these folks are at the top of the food chain in Cuba – the house was gorgeous, the grounds were immaculate & the peacocks were a symbol of those that have time for endulgences! We hopped off our horse & buggy transportation & snapped a few pictures as they departed. The eldest son waved goodbye as he bicycled off to a class in medical school!

Mom & Dad (current owner/operators) of the ranch met us with a translated welcome to their home/business. Never quite understood how many acres they have now – the property has been in the family for years (since before the revolution), but over the years, they have been forced due to financial concerns to sell off more & more. I suspect that they are now pretty much alive due to the tourist aspect of their situation – I have found mention of the ranch on several blogs on line about visits. Actually, one of the most enjoyable aspects of the visit was the youngest son – Javier. He is drop dead gorgeous & struts his stuff to the max. His Mom & Dad obviously think he hung the moon! He is a trained Veterinarian, but probably makes more money working in the tourist industry. After leading us to a covered sitting area (that had bird cages hanging all around with a pair of Love birds, several parrots & parakeets) for a welcome Mojito, he led us around the farm, showing his skills at milking & introducing us to a day old calf.

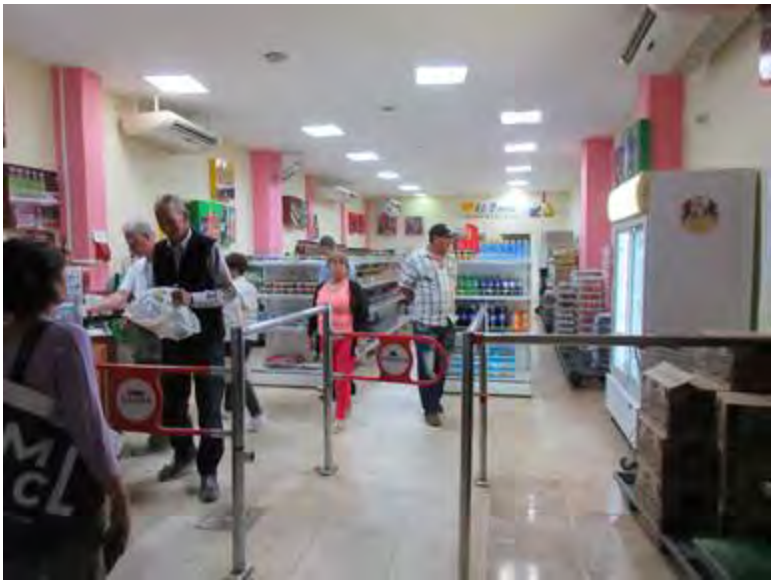
He brought out his horse, don't quote me, but I think it's name was Night because it's mother was in labor all night before it was delivered? Anyway, a local blacksmith was there to show us how he not only made a horse shoe out of a strip of rebar, but shaped it & nailed it on the hoof, after filing the hoof too. It was really interesting to watch & the young man obviously knew his business! That small wooden box was his traveling tool box!

We were invited to a lovely outdoor dining area for a buffet lunch that included a freshly roasted pig shoulder. Everything was scrumptious. I failed to get a picture of the whole spread, but especially enjoyed the rice pudding at the end! And their was a lovely soup. I kneeled down & pretending to have some food scraps in my hand to attract a few of the wandering peacocks!

After eating (& some real silliness between Javier & Mily), the family invited us inside the house. When Javier heard that I was from Texas, he started madly searching for something. He never found it, but he finally told me that he had been given a cup that had Texas on it & wanted me to see it! Too funny! The house was quite nice – kinda 60ish, but clean & neat & full of all sorts of family memorabilia, including a beautiful old antique lamp that they were quite proud of.



As we were supposed to be leaving, they asked Mily if they could share some fun with us! They brought out the "good" rum & we all had a sip! Mily said they hadn't offered that to anyone else she had brought to visit, so we were very Special!! Then all the girls started wanting a picture taken with Javier!! He was happy to oblige, modesty did not appear to be his strong suit. I even got to participate because I presented him with a set of the wine glass jewelry I had brought with me!



Our last night in Camaguey did not include any other activities. Mily had invited anyone that wanted to, could join her at a restaurant to visit some of her local friends. She had also provided us with a list of restaurants, but after the huge buffet lunch, we decided to take a quick trip down to buy some souvenoirs at the Useful Art Store, then take a walk around the hotel area to look at the local stores. Then we made a stop at the little corner grocery store for wine (mostly Chilian wine) & snacks & spent the evening in John & Connie's room chatting about our adventures so far & what was to come for the next few days! Wish I had taken some more pictures in the grocery store. It is always interesting to see what they have to offer! There are stores that accept both the local currency – Cuban Peso National - CUP (very limited quantities of items on the shelves – these are maintained by the government) and others that either accept both or just the Cuban Convertible Peso - CUC (much larger selection, but more expensive). The CUC is pretty much dollar to dollar with the US. The CUP is about 1/25th to the Dollar. We stopped in one shop that was CUP only and it was one room – about the size of a small 7/11. It had 2 girls working there & 3 glass counter cases. There were quantities of 1 or 2 of a diversity of items – everything from hankerchiefs to children's underwear to an engine piston. Really strange. There was an iron bed stead set up for sale in the center of the store. It was about 250 CUP or $10.

Soooooooo. Tomorrow we are off to the next location. Don't go away!

Lots of love,

Pamela & George

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Check out our web site! Hurd's Round Dance Home Page
Check out our dance demo videos www.DanceRounds.info
Look at pictures, videos, & Photo books on Shutterfly http://pamspicts.shutterfly.com

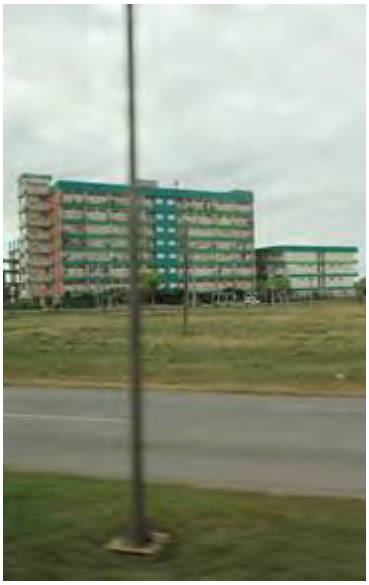
pam@gphurd.com

From: pam@gphurd.com
Sent: Wednesday, January 30, 2019 12:12 AM
To: 'pam@gphurd.com'
Subject: Pam's Cuba Revelations, Chapter 5 - Camaguey - Remedios, 12 Dec 2018

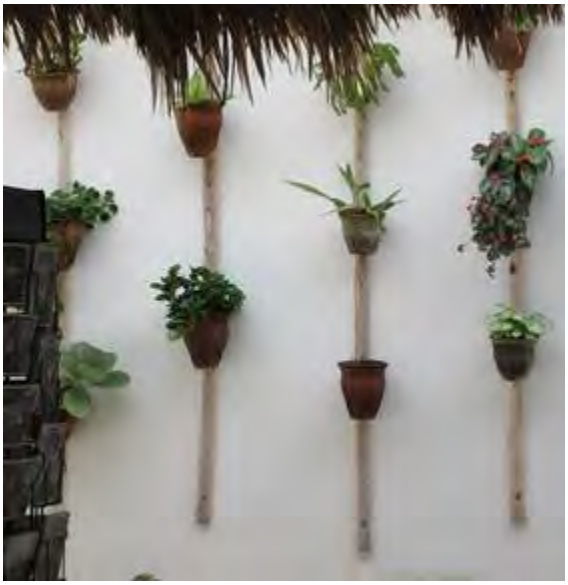
Hi Everyone,

Let's continue – we've got lots of miles to go!

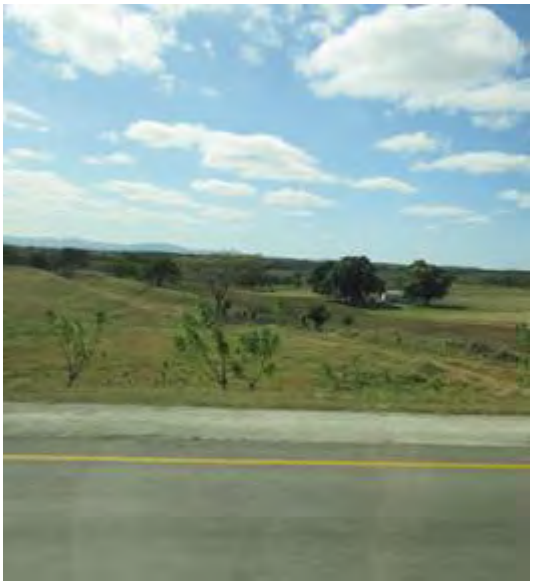
Had an early morning – bags out & up to breakfast by 7:15am. Our goal was on the road by 8:30am & even with a chat with our bus driver's wife before we left, we were putting Camaguey behind us by 8:19am! Yippee!



We had about 200 miles to drive for the day. From A (Camaguey) to C (Remedios) with a stop at B (Santa Clara). The highway was in pretty good shape & the speed limit is about 62 MPH (100KM). The scenery was a mix of sugar cane, small cities, Palm Trees, small rivers, mostly flat land. Other than the normal struggle to stay awake on a bus, it was a pretty easy drive.



After about 2 hours of driving we stopped at a small restaurant/gift store for a 20 minute break. We all bought a few little knick knacks. I heard hummingbirds in the trees out back, but couldn't ever find them. There were a few cats & dogs running around & some inviting trails heading off into the woods, but we didn't have time to try them out!!



We had about another hour to drive before our first stop. It was a bit more populated for this bit as we neared Santa Clara, the 5th largest city in Cuba with a population of almost a quarter million. The landscape was a bit more interesting with large rivers (check out how green this one was!!) & rolling hills in the distance. Lots of small homes along the side of the road & some bigger towns along the way also.

Our most impressive stop of the day was the Che Guevara Mausoleum. Although we were allowed to visit the mausoleum, we couldn't take pictures. Che's remains along with 6 of his comrades that died with him in Bolivia are inturred here. Che is definitely a National Hero. When his remains were discovered & returned here, Fidel Castro said "Why did they think that by killing him, he would cease to exist as a fighter? Today he is in every place, wherever there is a just cause to defend. His unerasable mark is now in history and his luminous gaze of a prophet has become a symbol for all the poor of this world." The monument was actually started in 1982 & completed in 1988 & then when his remains were located in Bolivia, they were interred here in 1997. Inside the mausoleum, there are lots of photos & memorabilia. Although Mily was not supposed to be actually guiding inside it, she made a point of showing us a really interesting photo of Che in disguise when he was escaping from the CIA's man hunt in Cuba. It was amazing. He looked more like Mr Rogers than Che Guevara!!!

The monument was established here in Santa Clara because it is the sight of the final battle in Castro's takeover from Batista. After the guerilla's (one contingent led by Che Guevara) conquered the city, Batista fled the country leaving Castro in charge. From the bus, we saw additional monuments to that last battle – the bulldozer that Che's guerilla's used to overturn Batista's supply train & destroy the tracks.

Next stop was lunch. This was another privately owned restaurant. You can look it up on line Sabore Arte This particular restaurant is run by 2 women – friends, not relatives. The reason I gave you the website, is because I didn't take a picture of the restaurant itself. It was well decorated with several rooms, divided. Our group filled one room (next to the street – it was rather noisy) and there was another room next to us with the regular guests & it was probably quieter. They provided us with a buffet, it was divided into fruit, rice, beans, salad, & also hot dishes (seafood pasta, pork carnitas, fried chicken legs – where did the rest of the chicken go??, and a vege rice mix. We had some beautful serving dishes. The side plate even had the restaurant name engraved. Lovely! They also served us red or white wine or a Buchanero. This was the beer that we drank almost exclusively while we were in Cuba. There was another (Crystal, but it was very light & we preferred the Bucanero). Unfortunately, like Cuban cigars, we can't get it in the US. Darn government!

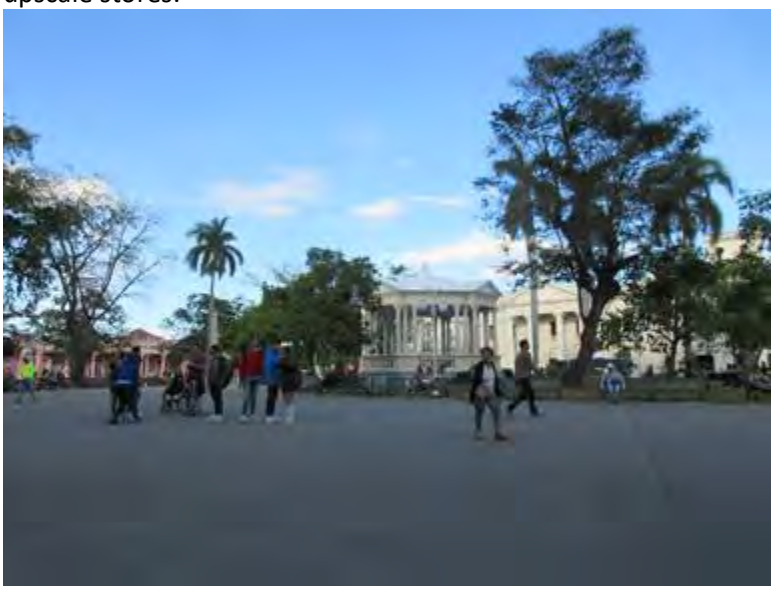
After eating, we took a walk around the center of town. It was definitely a more upscale city than Camaguey. The buildings were more upscale & there were lots of folks around. Walked past a pet store with lots of birds & hamsters for sale. Several houses had flowers decorating them. I especially loved seeing the orchids!

We had a really funny incident. We noticed noise coming from a store across the street & we all started looking. A man walked out with the "ghost buster" looking contraption in his hand. We were trying to ask Mily what it was & the assistant with him decided to give us a demonstration!! Luckily for us, it was pointed away from us (directly onto some young passersby) & he turned it on. It's a hand held insect fumigator!!! We fled the area immediately while the fumigated folks coughed & sputtered!!! After that we noticed signs in several stores (we were looking to buy wine!) that they were closed for fumigation. Apparently ever so often, the guy comes around & does all the businesses in a certain area. Not sure if that was a state function or if it was an enterprising private businessman!

We made our way to the Parque Vidal – the city's center. It covers an entire city block & is surrounded by several of the city's major architecteral sites – The Gran Hotel, Teatro de La Caridad, and the former City Hall. It is very well landscaped. Historically, the residents used to meet here & walk around the park – women on the inside & men on the outside!!

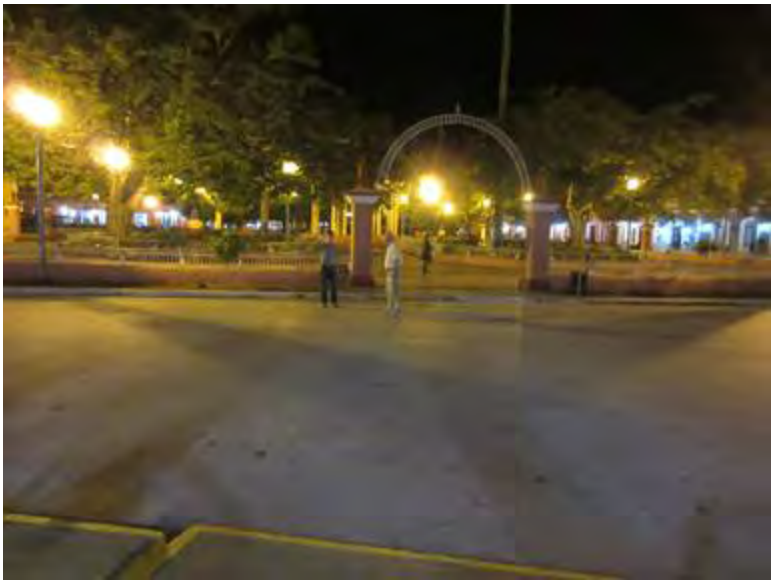
We had about an hour on our own. George and I tried to find a high point to get a picture of the whole park, but couldn't get up high enough at the correct angle. We saw the major memorial in the park. It's to a woman, Marta Abreu de Estevez (her husband was first Vice President of the new republic after the Spanish revolution in 1902). She donated tons of money & even supervised the building of several schools, an asylum, a train station (the Teatro de La

Caridad above!) ...it goes on & on. We extended our wanderings & found a pedistrian boulevard with tons of people & upscale stores.



We returned to our meeting point in time to find our very own “Mod Squad” & for George to show our guide his appreciation.

We loaded back on the bus & after a short drive, we found ourselves at the Hotel Camino del Principe in Remedios. It was a lovely surprise – easily 3+ stars.



LA PIRAMIDE
Bienvenidos Welcome

Mily gave us a few minutes to get our luggage settled & then we were out the door & walking to our local paradar (privately owned restaurant) for dinner. Wow! It was lovely! Beautiful setting – lovely presentation - & the food was so good I forgot to take pictures until it was gone!

Back at the hotel, we found a fabulous after party meeting place on the balcony above the town square! PERFECTION! Thrilled to find that wine from Chile was available (for a somewhat reasonable price) everywhere! Even one of our favorites – the Carmenere grape!

More about this city in the next epilogue. This one is already so large, it is slow to load! Hope you enjoyed the day. It just keeps getting better! Stay tuned!

Love ya,

Pamela & George

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Look at pictures, videos, & Photo books on Shutterfly http://pamspicts.shutterfly.com

pam@gphurd.com

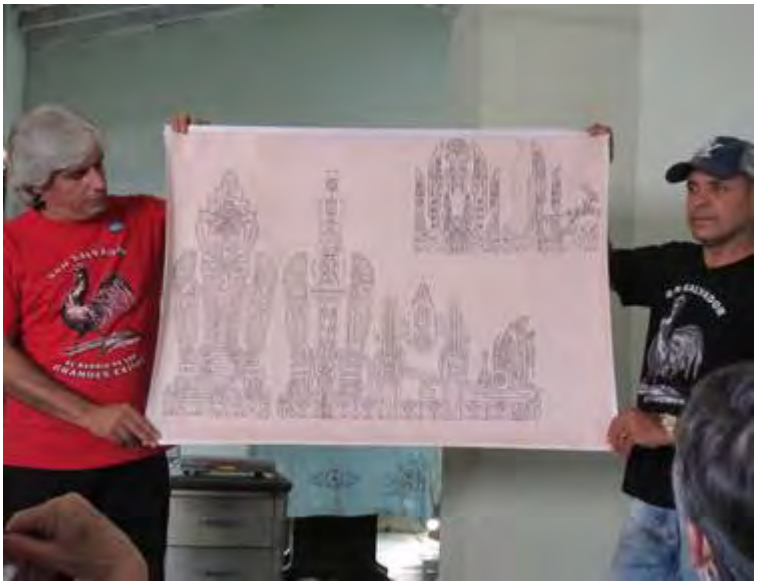
From: pam@gphurd.com
Sent: Saturday, February 9, 2019 11:27 PM
To: 'pam@gphurd.com'
Subject: Pam's Cuba Revelations, Chapter 6, Remedios, 13 Dec 2018

Good Evening Everyone,

We've just barely scratched the surface of the beautiful country of Cuba, so let's just move along!

We woke up at 7:30am to a clear beautiful Cuban day. Took a look off the balcony before breakfast to see the main square in day light. Looks very nice. Also happy to see that John still has his exciting socks to start our day! Downstairs at 9:30am to start exploring. Mily introduced us to Roa, our special guide in Remedios. We noticed pretty quickly that Mily tends to surround herself with men that are quite lovely to look at! She seems to just collect them! First a bit of info about Remedios, officially known as San Juan de los Remedios. It is one of the oldest settlements on the island – declared a city by Isabella II of Spain while Cuba was still a colony. It has a population of about 47,000 & is approximately in the center of the island. It is a part of the Villa Clara Province. To keep that in prospective – Cuba has

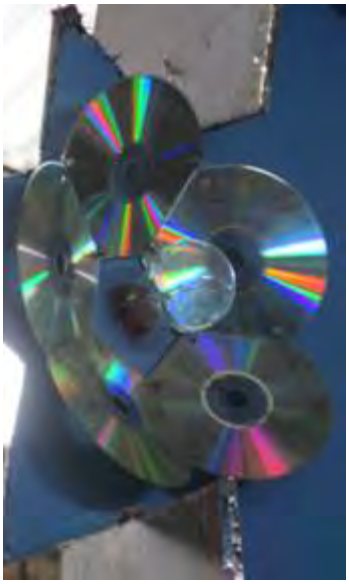
16 provinces & about 11 million in total population. It's about 4 hours by bus from Havana, about 3 miles from the northern coast & an hour from the beach resorts in Santa Maria.



First stop was a short walk to a home just off the square where Roa & an assistant introduced us to the Cuban National Festival – a Parrandas. Roa is one of the few artists who actually designs the overall presentation for a annual

festival. So first off – the Parrandas is a Christmas festival that was began by a priest in the early 1800's to try & get more folks at midnight mass. In 1871 it became officially structured & the basics have continued since then. The priest encouraged the young kids to run around town making as much noise as possible to force the adults awake & willing to come to mass. Over the hundreds of years, it has evolved in to a fierce competition between 2 neighborhoods (in Remedios they were represented by a Rooster (our team) and a hawk (the opposition!)) in about 16 different towns in the Las Villas province. Roa showed us winning designs from previous years & some videos of the celebrations in the past.

We moved on to one of the building sites for San Salvadors projects. This will give you an idea of the massive scale of the projects. Now keep in mind, the was 13 Dec. The festival competition was to be 27 Dec!!!! How the heck would they get everything all done??? There are 3 parts to the competition – fireworks, an in place plaza presentation, & a float.



Some of the workers are paid by the state through funds for the Parrandas Foundation, but most are just volunteers. They now have access to the internet to purchase things from China which gives them access to some low price products and they also reuse stuff year to year (check out the flowers made by cd's! The San Salvador president displayed the Plaza design – it's a secret, but the basis will be Beauty & the Beast. It was to be like 25' high & 60' wide! With lights & massive sculptures made of Styrofoam, plaster of paris, foil, & light bulbs!!!! They have an electronic schematic for the lights that is run by computer. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiIBa8R1Hzs This is a You Tube of the 2018 Parrandas – it is over an hour long!!!!! At about the 22 minute point you can see some of the fireworks that we got to experience – I'll explain that in tomorrow's report. It was exciting for us to watch – we had seen where they were building everything. And you can see their interpretation of Beauty & the Beast!!

We headed back to our hotel for an interesting lunch! The appetizer was tuna fish salad with the Cuban bread we had had a few times – very heavy consistency and a rye flavor (yummy). We were serenaded by 2 gentlemen – discovered that Guantanamero & Besame Mucho are definite staples in the musical repertoire for tourists! But they were definitely enjoyable. I do believe that musical talent is in the blood of if not all, at least most Cubans! The main course was a rubik cube of melon, pineapple, mango, cheese, & ham! Really cool & very good!! Then ice cream with a Cuban version of Boston Cream Pie. Could I have another please? Definitely not going to lose any weight here!

After lunch we headed out walking again. Just right around the square, to their late 18th-century church, Iglesia de San Juan Bautista, whose interior features a baroque altar clad in gold, and a clearly pregnant Madonna statue (& she's dancing!!) that is said to be the only sculpture of its kind in Cuba. This sculpture was brought here by Falla Bonet, who spent a fortune (at least 1 Million dollars back in the early 1940's) to restore this church. During the restoration, they

found that the white paint throughout the church covered real gold accents & that the ceiling was a Mudéjar style roof. The Mudéjar style was a remnant in Spain from Moorish rule.

Religion, & specifically the Catholic religion has a very complicated history in Cuba. Catholicism was brought to Cuba by the Spaniards, so after the Spanish Revolution it was viewed with suspicion for many years, but still survived. But after Fidel took over, he banned all religion & declared Cuba an Atheistic State. In 1961 he dismantled the Catholic School system & seized the properties. Then, in 1992, there was a change in the constitution to make the country secular & then in 1996, he had a change of heart & returned to his early training in Catholicism, actually went to Rome to visit the Pope & then sponsored 3 different visits by pontiffs during the remainder of his rule. Cuba became the only country in

all of Latin America that has been visited by the last 3 pontiffs. Today it is believed that 60 percent of the population of Cuba is Catholic.

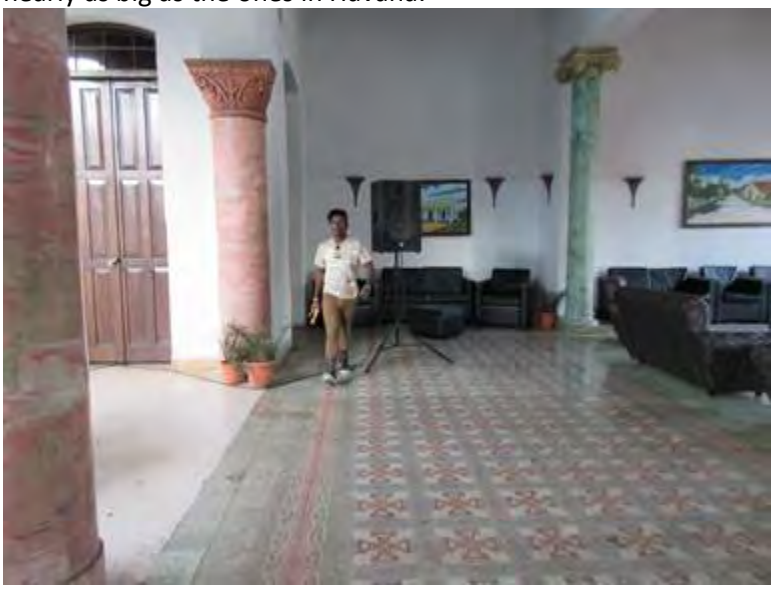
Then the real fun started! We walked to the Remedios Classic Car Club Bar!!! Called the Driver's Bar, we were going there to meet & chat with several classic car owners & get to ride in their cars (& motorcycles!!!). The visit was really fun. Of course we got another version of the Mojito while we were chatting!!

After a question & answer period about fuel prices, how long they had been involved in classic car ownership, other clubs in Cuba, etc, we got to go outside & inspect the cars. The owners were thrilled to share all the details of when & where they had purchased them (our owner had found his 1948 Studebaker in a barn covered with roosting chickens about 25 years ago!!!). And of course all the details of engines, renovations, etc.

Then we got to choose which we wanted to take a cruise in (or on as Connie immediately hopped onto the back of the motorcycle!!! – leaving John waiting for us on the corner!!!) We were lucky enough to ride with Raul & Marie who helped with interpretation & kept Leon, our owner/driver chatting. He even drove us past his home & pointed out the "garage" which was actually another room of the house!! We sped by it too quickly for me to get a picture. It was one of the many homes that are just a part of the block of buildings along the street. Our particular vehicle was in immaculate shape & the owner had rebuilt it piece by piece himself (he was a mechanic by trade) & actually drove it on a regular basis. It purred like a kitten. He said he regularly took it to Havana for a weekend drive with his family & it would easily go 60MPH. We didn't doubt him at all. He was one of the lucky ones with funds & American contacts (I believe he said his son actually lived in Miami) to keep his in perfect condition.

We traveled in a short caravan for about 20 minutes all around Remedios. Locals were used to this activity & waved at us from the curbs!

The owners were happy to pose by their cars. Besides this 1955 (56? 57?) Chevy, there was a Russian classic car & several others also. During the rest of our time there, we noticed lots of them coming & going in front of the bar (it was just right around the corner from our hotel. Roa had told us that this was quite an active club, even though it was not nearly as big as the ones in Havana.



We had a couple of hours of free time before dinner, so we had found a Salsa class on the square. I was busy dancing & only got the one picture of our little instructor & the hall we were working in. We went over & enjoyed an hour of Salsa basics. There were about 10 of us from the whole group & the young teacher seemed pretty pleased with our turnout. Our group did pretty well & he kept adding figures until we all cried stop! The music was really loud & fast, but we had kinda expected that! He was actually a pretty good teacher & pretty much followed the basics that you could look at on line if you googled "salsa basics!" Anyway, it was fun & was can say we took Salsa in Cuba! He did a little of what the Cuban's call Rumba. It has absolutely nothing in common with our American or International Rumba!!! I could not make any sense out of it at all. Seemed to be based on a tap step action that involved taking weight on the same foot twice! I thought that was IMPOSSIBLE! Anyway, he quickly dropped that & just taught another Salsa figure. He taught in the standard ballroom style of men on one side & women on the other. He showed both parts equally well. We were moving right along until he showed us the last amalgamation. He showed the man's & then the woman's. We could do them fine. Then he ran out of time & told us we could practice on our own. We kept trying to put together the last sequence & it felt really awkward. Finally Connie stopped him (he was running back & forth fiddling with the music for a session coming up) & asked him to show her that last sequence. When he did it with her, we realized we were supposed to be changing sides!! It was really funny. Because he had never shown it with a partner, we didn't recognized the cross over. Worked really well then!

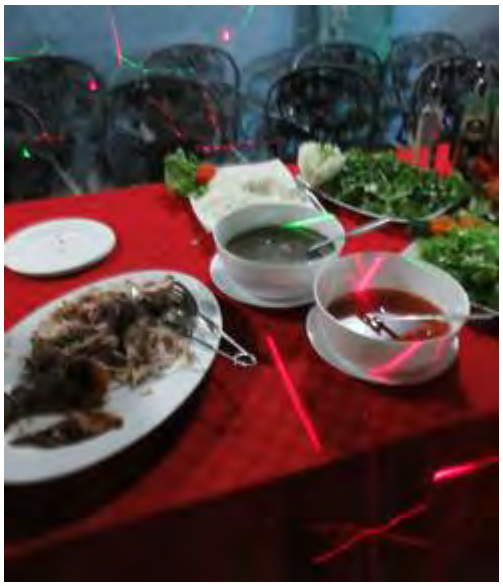
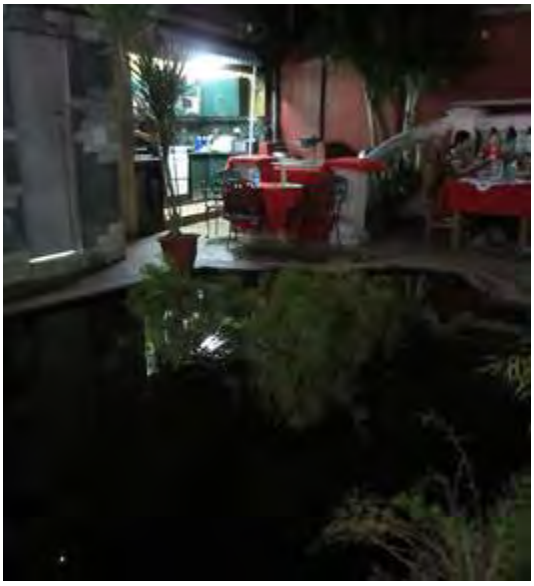
By the time we had finished our Salsa lesson, it was time to meet for dinner! We met in the hotel lobby & found Mily all dressed up! John H couldn't hide his appreciation! She looked quite fine! Anyway, we took off walking around the corner to our evening's dining experience. I've included the poor shot that I got of the door to try & give you an idea of how everything just blends in along the street sides. If you didn't know about this place, there is absolutely no way, you

would stop there! I found some pictures on line during the daylight to let you see what it's like from the outside & then what we saw as soon as we stepped inside! It's actually mind boggling!

The owners of this beautiful venue are antique collectors. They have opened up their home as licensed to both rent rooms (3 are available) & run a restaurant. The public portion of the home is immaculate & filled with lovely antiques – just perfectly decorated. The ceiling is beautiful. The full size photo of their daughter on her 15th birthday shows some of the extravagance of that celebration! But isn't she beautiful??? Not sure if anyone plays the grand piano, but it's in good condition!

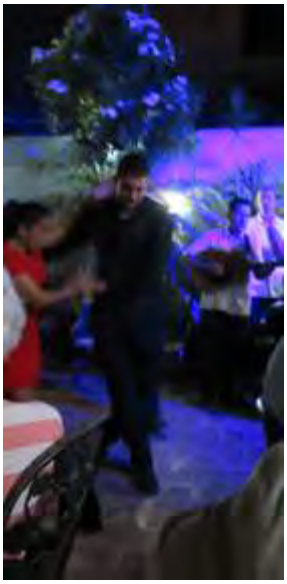
One of the rooms they rent was open for us to view. It had a double & a single bed & a separate full bath. Most of the home is open for the renters to use, including a beautiful patio, 2 living rooms, & a formal dining room. http://www.laestanciahostal.com/en/ You can look it up on line – they have a beautiful website. Prices for the rooms aren't listed, you have to contact them via email for the reservation. Seems to me we asked & they said the

rooms were between $50 - $100. Pretty reasonable for everything you have access to use. Most of the B&B's & restaurants have their own websites & are on Trip Advisor. Usually if you look something up about Cuba, there is a warning that our government doesn't sanction travel there.

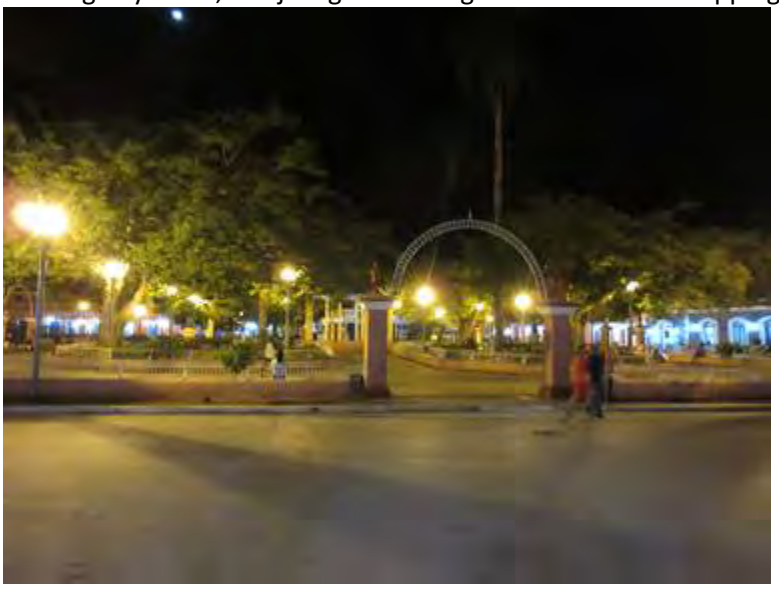



After our tour of the house, Mily led us outside to outdoor seating around the 2 pools. A buffet had been set up for us. They had a full service outdoor kitchen/bar set up across the pool.

Our plates were all decorated with these lovely napkins formed into roses. Better than the cruise ships do it!! And we had to laugh when we saw the Kirkland salt & pepper shakers on the table! I continued my quest to gain as much weight as possible on this trip! The 2 sauces for the pork carnitas were both wonderful – one slightly sweet & one a little spicy. The ever present plantain chips, rice, beans, & shredded cabbage were still good. There were multiple desserts, fruit & several kinds of cream filled cakes.



After we finished eating, the band that had been playing nice dinner music, revved it up & Mily got everyone up dancing. Our Mesa dancers got up for a cha cha & Mily led a lot of the women in some line dances. She danced a very complicated salsa with the owners son (while his pregnant wife looked on & clapped). When she couldn't get us up dancing any more, she just got us doing some exuberant clapping along. The band was very good.



After we walked back to our hotel, our Mesa group met upstairs on the balcony to discuss the day & “wine” down. We were just chattering away when a small wooden window slid open in the wall behind us. Turns out that there were rooms that opened onto the balcony & they weren’t real happy with our cheerful chatter! It was only about 10:30pm, but we apologized & headed on to our rooms to call it a night!

So ended another day in Cuba. Full from early morning until late evening! Stay tuned for tomorrow’s adventure!!

Love ya,

Pamela & George

****

Check out our web site! Hurd's Round Dance Home Page
Check out our dance demo videos www.DanceRounds.info
Look at pictures, videos, & Photo books on Shutterfly http://pamspicts.shutterfly.com

pam@gphurd.com

From: pam@gphurd.com
Sent: Saturday, February 16, 2019 1:58 PM
To: 'pam@gphurd.com'
Subject: Pam's Cuba Revelations, Chapter 7, Remedios to C&C, 14 Dec 2018

Hi Everyone!

No dilly dallying – let's get to it!

Our second day in Remedios began at 7am, with a hotel breakfast & then straight onto the bus to leave town! We were immediately heading Southwest to Camajuani for a tour of the Tabacuba tobacco factory there. The drive was not long, & gave us a view of green scenery & lots of circling vultures. I have spent lots & lots of time Googling the bird situation

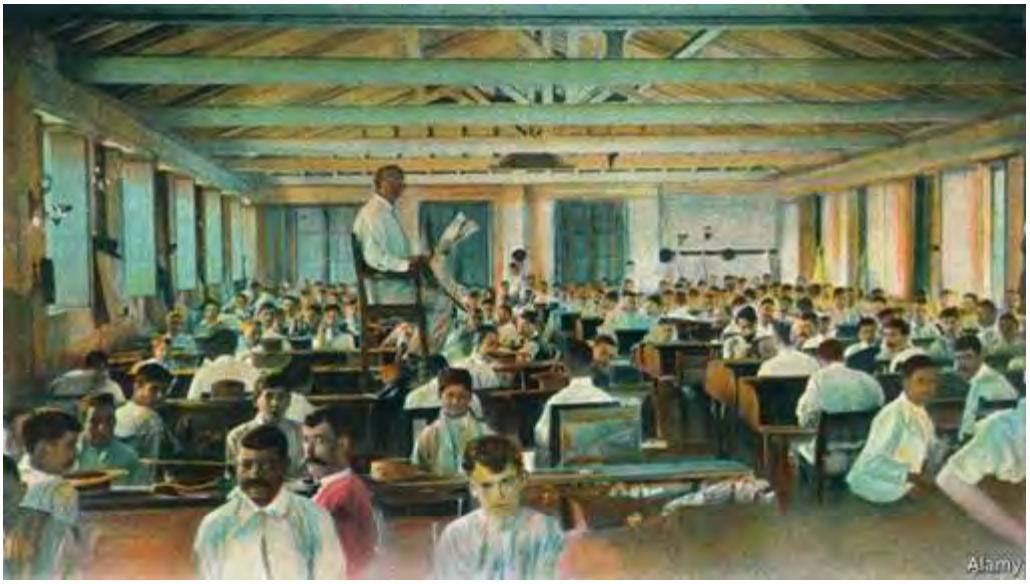
in Cuba & have found nothing definitive. First off, we saw tons & tons of vultures circling the sky throughout our entire trip. And not many other birds – at least by comparison. We heard a few speculations, but I've not been able to verify any of them – one that birds were eaten during the "special period" after the Soviet Union collapsed and second that the birds were actually killed during that time because they were a threat to the change to farming for survival. Birds would eat the seeds during planting – thus proving a detriment. I could not verify either of these, but there was definitely some issue. We have visited 20 or more other Caribbean islands & never ever seen soooooooo many vultures compared to the other birds. This drive also gave us another indication of the disparity in economic conditions. The roads in general were in pretty poor condition, with areas well maintained & others that looked like everything was falling apart.

After driving through the small central area of Camajuani (established in 1841 & population of about 60,000 – same province as Remedios – Santa Clara), our driver somehow managed to get our huge bus parked in front of the Tabacuba Tobacco factory. They hand roll cigars here and like all other cigar factories in Cuba, it is State owned. We were told that there are some industrial factories that use machines for the cigar rolling, rather than hand rolling. Our guide was Cookie & she seemed thrilled to show us around.

4095

They did not allow photography inside the factory, so I have no pictures taken personally. However, I Googled & found some photos that give a good representation of what we saw. First off, it was a huge building – no indication on the outside that it was a cigar factory inside. The inside was open & airy. Just like these pictures, there were wooden stations with 4 or 5 individuals at each station. There was room to walk between the rows of stations. Each individual had pretty much the same set up, although there were different types of knives & scissors – they must be allowed to purchase their own if they would like. Cookie explained that each individual had to do the entire process, from the tobacco filling, to rolling the covering, to cutting, & pressing. When they reported to work each day, they were given their tobacco product for the day. They all had a daily quota of cigars. They could choose their own hours – to a point. Some came in early, finished up their quota & left early; some came in early, did more than their daily quota so that they could take off the next day. Each individual had their own press & after shaping & rolling, the cigar was placed in the press for no less than 20 minutes – some left them for an hour or more.

They all had a number assigned & when they finished their batch of cigars for the day, they were turned in to a quality control person. That person had a Drawmaster machine. I actually found this machine available to purchase on line!!! It's made in Georgia. It is exactly what we saw there. Cookie had some of us put our finger inside the tube to fill it "draw". Each cigar was tested for it's "draw" and if it did not make the grade, it was returned to be redone!! Obviously that would slow down completion of your quota! AND.. if you had too many cigars returned, you could be reprimanded or fired!

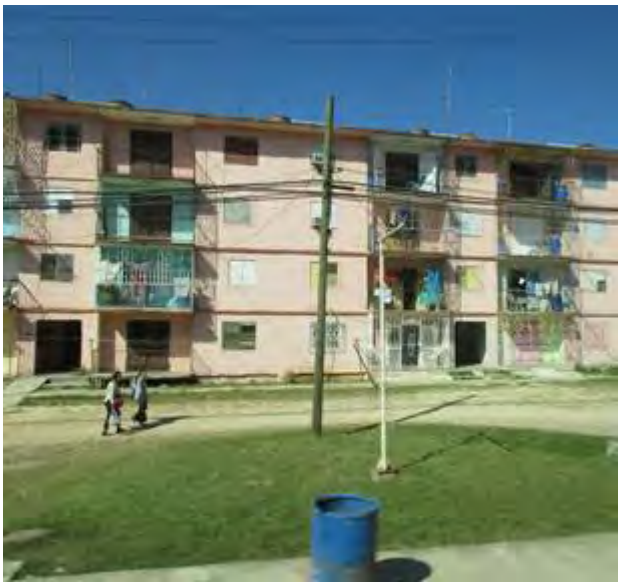


But actually the most amazing fact was about the daily “Readers.” The “Lectores” as they are named in Cuban have been used since a political reform leader proposed this practice in 1865!!!! Originally the other factory workers contributed to the pay of the individual reading to make up for their lost cigar rolling time! But now, they are on the State payroll. At this particular factory, the Lectores comes in twice a day – 9am she reads for an hour from a classical

text – Romeo & Juliet, Count of Monte Cristo, etc (do you recognize that these became names of cigars? Yep – named because a particular story became a favorite at that factory!!) and at 2pm she returns to read snippets from the local newspapers. This was not only to relieve boredom, but to help educate the workers and just keep everyone informed. Cool, huh?

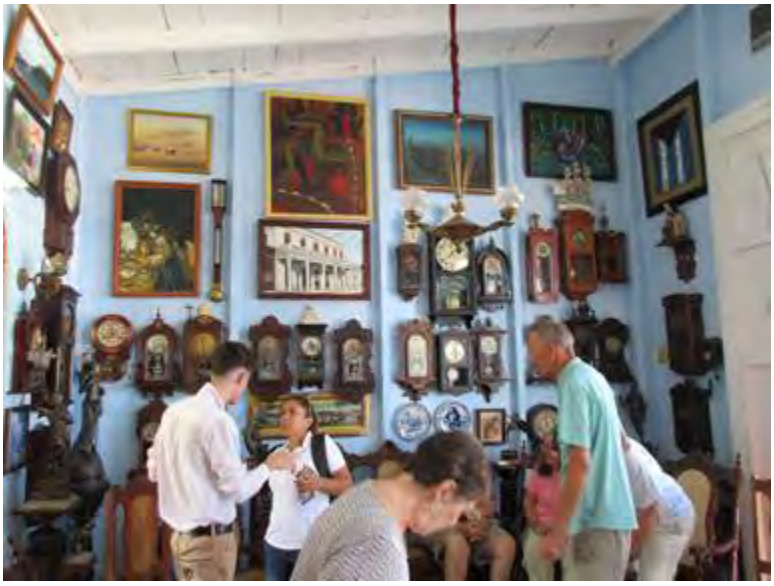
We were allowed to watch any individual we chose. They all had quick precise hand motions. The tobacco inside is of a lessor grade than the tobacco leaf that is used for the cover. They let us feel the 2 different grades – the ones used for the covers felt like suede. Another thing that I found incredibly interesting was that a particular factory was given a contract for a specific purchase. All ingredients for a specific batch would be delivered to the factory & handed out to the workers. The more expensive cigars are made from higher quality ingredients & actually have different dimensions. The factory we visited had just completed a contract for a $10,000 cigar purchase. Meaning that a single humidor of cigars (I believe there were 300 cigars in this particular humidor) would cost $10,000!!! Cookie said it was for someplace in Europe – she thought Switzerland. All the workers were allowed to work on the contract & they received a percentage of profit from the sale!!!! That part doesn't sound very Communistic to me! Things are definitely changing in the political climate there! Like the picture above, several individuals had a cell phone at their station. A couple were listening to music thru ear buds. They trained the workers on site. Whenever they needed new employees, they would run advertisements for workers and bring them in for intensive 6 weeks of training. It is considered an excellent job.

Leading us from the main room, she took us into a separate Quality control room. Besides the draw, someone would check size & looks. Then she showed us one of the completed humidors – of the expensive purchase – again, no pictures, but like this one I found online, it was made of Spanish cedar, had multi colors of inlaid wood, elaborate carving & humidity controls inside. It was imported from somewhere in Europe – she said they didn't make anything like that in Cuba. Then she showed us her own Quality control station. Like this last picture, it was in a fairly small room with about 6 stations. At these stations, a select number of individuals, "Catadores" (cigar tasters) would sit & smoke a cigar sample from each individuals full days quota. It was a blind selection for them – they had no idea who had made the batch they were testing. During their smoking of the cigar, they would check for draw, burn, aroma, flavor, strength & overall quality. Purely Subjective. She had been allowed to test on of the $10,000 cigars!!! If she found anything below quality, she would report it & the entire days' work would be rejected. Pretty scary for the regular workers! AND she said she LOVED LOVED her job! By the way, many of the workers were smoking cigars while they worked. Forgot to ask if they were allowed to test their own product for free. I assume they were. The room seemed pretty well ventilated, so it wasn't a problem for us as we walked through the room. Cookie did say there were times it was EXTREMELY hot in the room – no air conditioning!

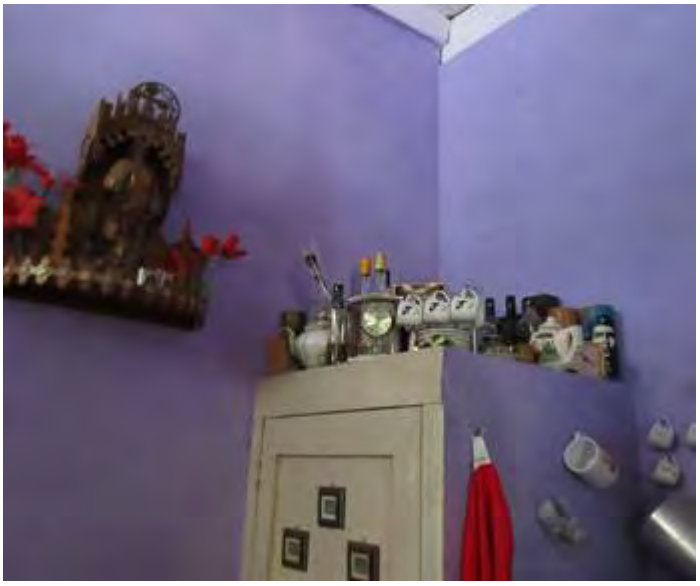


Back on the bus, we made our way north, back through Remedios, to Caibarien (on the North Coast & established in 1832 with a population of about 38,000). Enroute we saw a guy with a horse & buggy, various neighbor hoods, a local

hairdresser at work with waiting patrons, & what appeared to be some new fancy apartment buildings (empty) next to older ones (in use!).



We made a short stop to visit a local home of a doctor in Caibarien. I included the poor picture so that you could see what the outside looked like to compared to what we saw inside!!! The family were eclectic collectors of tons of stuff, including clocks. Yes we were there when they chimed on the 12:30pm time! Luckily we were not there at noon!! It was quite noisy! Even the floor is another of the historical tiles from Spanish days. Neither of the parents were there when we first arrived, only the youngest son. He told us a bit of history & explained that the collection was open to any & all who passed by – basically considered a public museum. He had already started adding a few things to his father's collection – a few coins from his visit to South America. He was studying to be a lawyer. He said their family was lucky enough to have done some world travels, including South America & Europe.



They allowed us access to more of the home: the outside garden/courtyard & the kitchen (hard to believe it is really used for cooking???). We could peek in one of the bedrooms, but another of the sons was in there working on a computer, so I didn't take a picture. When we got back to the front of the home, the mother had arrived (she looked like a model!!). One of the sons had contacted Mili & let her know that today was Mom's birthday, so Mily had picked out a jewelry set (donated by our own Kay Toth!!!) to present her. It was quite an interesting visit.

We took a drive along the coast – this is the Atlantic Ocean! This city is also known as La Villa Blanca (the white city) because of it's beaches & waterfront. It is mostly a fishing village. General population is not allowed to own boats. They are regulated by the state! We passed by an area where there were a few house boats. Some looked really well cared for & pretty large. We never made it to see the Marina where we could have seen the fishing fleet of the city.

I have to share a few pictures just to show you the dichotomy that is Cuba. This vibrant little town has some areas that just defy explanation – A totally demolished yard with a tire? Cement columns around a horse pasture?? A neighborhood street Roman columns, but dilapidated, unpaved or grated pathway & chaos across the street? And this totally overgrown home with a horse in the doorway??????? Hard to describe.

We had an interesting experience as we retraced our drive along the beach to go to eat. We had passed a couple of guilty looking young boys on the sea wall. As we passed them the second time, Mily & Roa asked the driver to stop. After they got out to chat with the boys, folks materialized from everywhere. Turns out the boys had "caught" a pelican while fishing. They had managed to pull it ashore with the fish on their line & had it wrapped in the fishing line to pester it. Roa convinced them to release it & then we all ended up out of the bus to chat with them & the rest of the crowd for a few minutes. Mily gave them some of the toothpaste, tooth brushes, games, etc that folks had brought to donate & when we drove off, we saw a couple of the boys eating the toothpaste! The sample containers that we had taken were bubble gum flavored, so they were happily licking them as we drove away. Not exactly what the dentist ordered, but guess it won't hurt them in the long run! Did wonder if the 2 original boys might think that capturing a pelican might be worthwhile in more ways than one!!!

Next stop was a late lunch at en Familia (state run). They had a lovely seating area for us with an interesting meal with interesting appetizers and a mix of fried fish & chicken & French fries! A first for us in Cuba!! Loved the decorations – swans, flamingos, & a little chef & Santa Claus!

After lunch we stopped at a community volunteer "Art School." The adults there are strictly volunteers. The state did "donate" a venue – it's a dilapidated piece of a building that was originally used for dumping trash! The volunteers cleaned the place up & teach the local children (mostly homeless) about art, mostly painting. The children were amazing. The children were happy to show us what they could do. They had them introduce themselves & one little girl burst into tears when she accidentally tried to do her little speech & mispronounced her name. She got over it & painted us a picture. No not that one – but she was still quite talented!! Some of the paintings that covered the wall were quite risqué. Not sure what they represented & I'm not sharing them!!

I fell in love with this precious little 3 year old boy. He was the son of one of the volunteers & I played with him and his dominos for most of the visit. I showed him how to line them up to have them all fall down. He loved that & then he wanted to show me how to build a house. If I could have a child…..

On our return to the hotel, we passed the main entrance to the city. Mily was trying to tell us what we would see & we realized she was trying to emulate the HUGE crab statute! Too funny. We also passed a large well maintained cemetery. It didn't look very old.

Back at the hotel for a short nap. Our room attendant had been very busy in our absence! She had made use of the little silk roses yesterday's Parrandas workers had given us and combined them with the red silk bed spread footers!

I am going to stop here for this missive. It is already too big & I don't want to skimp on the evening celebration. I'll let that one stand alone, so stay tuned & enjoy your weekend!!

Love ya,

Pamela & George

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Check out our web site! Hurd's Round Dance Home Page
Check out our dance demo videos www.DanceRounds.info
Look at pictures, videos, & Photo books on Shutterfly http://pamspicts.shutterfly.com

pam@gphurd.com

From: pam@gphurd.com
Sent: Sunday, February 17, 2019 12:51 AM
To: 'pam@gphurd.com'
Subject: Pam's Cuba Revelations, Chapter 8, Parrandas de Remedios Celebration, 14 Dec 2018

Hi All,

We'll continue with the UNESCO Ceremony!

Tonight is a special celebration. I found this official announcement on line. "The popular **Parrandas de Remedios** have been inscribed on Wednesday as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in the list of UNESCO." UNESCO had evaluated Remedios & the Parrandas festivals & decided to approve them into the system!!!! Here is the official write up on UNESCO's site – https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/festivity-of-las-parrandas-in-the-centre-of-cuba-01405

Festivity of Las Parrandas in the centre of Cuba

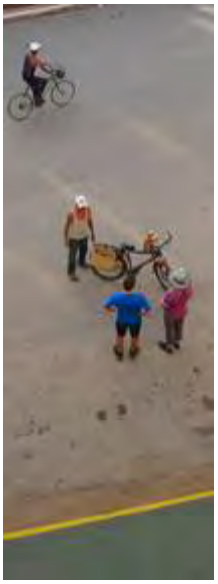
Cuba

Inscribed in 2018 (13.COM) on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

© National Council for Cultural Heritage, Cuba, 2017

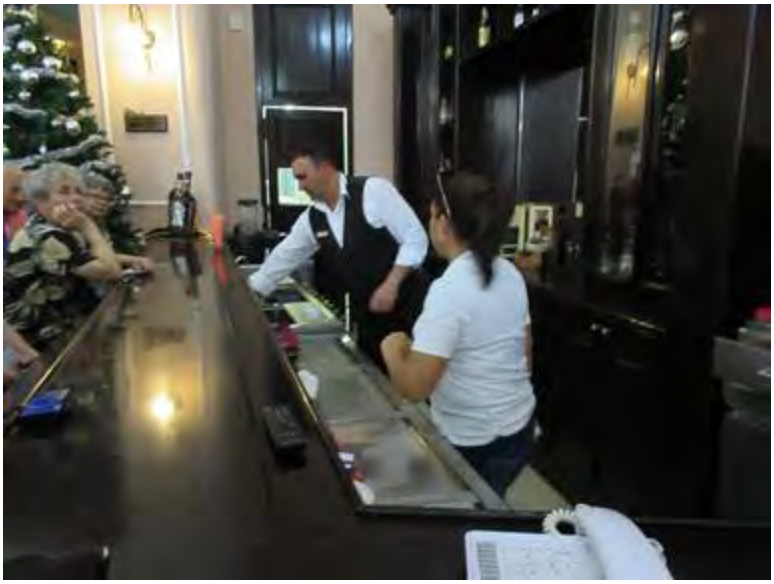
Held for the first time in 1820 in the town of Remedios, the Festivity of Las Parrandas is now celebrated by eighteen communities in the centre of Cuba, mostly taking place towards the final months of the year. The Parrandas is a cultural competition between the two neighbourhoods or parties into which each town is divided, with 'spies' attempting to spoil the surprise of the opposing neighbourhood on the night of the festivity. The two parties work all year long to prepare for the competition, which takes place on the night of the Festivity of Las Parrandas. The festivities involve a wide range of expressions, including: the design and construction of replicas and monuments, floats and costumes; songs and dances; fireworks; and decorations such as lamps, lanterns, banners and emblems allegoric to each neighbourhood. Everyone in the eighteen communities, regardless of their social class, gender, age, religion, profession or background, is involved in the festivities, and the monuments, replicas of monuments and floats constitute a spectacular display of the imagination and creativity of the groups, who recreate and re-enact stories using lights, colours and shapes. Traditional knowledge and skills related to the element are constantly combined with new elements, meaning that Las Parrandas are always traditional and contemporary at the same time.

We happened to be here for the celebration. When we got back to the hotel, things were already starting to build up. Now, I need to be clear, this is not the "real" Parrandas. That will be on Dec 27th. This is just a mini celebration due to UNESCO's acceptance of the Festivity of Las Parrandas into their Cultural Heritage of Humanity list.



By the time we took a short nap, then headed back downstairs for a presentation by the bartender, the crowds were really starting to build. We stopped to look out the balcony & saw one of our couples down on the street chatting with a young man who had brought his dog with him to the celebration. Not sure I've ever seen a dog sitting up in a child's seat & holding onto the handle bars! The groups were starting to form into somewhat recognizable divisions.

From the balcony we could see the “fireworks” cylinders showing up & then they started placing them in the middle of the street. Uh Oh! That’s right in front of the hotel’s door!!



We headed on downstairs for our Bartender's show. He showed us how to make several of the Cuban signature drinks – Cuba Libre (rum & coke), Mojito, & Banana Daiquiri (not frozen, just on the rocks). We got to taste them & then ordered our standard Buchanero Beer & Red Wine!!

In the meantime, the sun had set & the activities were heating up outside. Mily didn't really want us to leave the hotel – I don't think she trusted us out in the midst of the celebrating Cubans!! But most of us were content to stand at the front & just look across the street to the square. A few folks wandered over, but they didn't stay out very long.

The official ceremony started about 7pm with announcements from the Pavilion (all in Spanish – we couldn't understand a word!!) in the square center & there was even a State Danzon exhibit. We could see it in the distance. George got a couple of videos, but you can't hear the music very well, we could mostly just see the lovely colorful costumes. Basically it is a partner dance, something like a European quadrille. Similar to our Round Dancing, all the couples were doing the same thing at the same time! According to Roa, it is considered "old fashioned" now.

We had thought we would be able to watch “fireworks” (called “fire” by Mily) from the balcony. Turns out that they set them off directly in front of the hotel in the street & closed off the balcony & made us step back from the front of the hotel. They had set up huge metal tubes – somewhat like a roman candle holder, but 2’ tall & about 5” in diameter. Roa

called them “mortars”. They dropped about 30 of them one at a time in the cylinders. They were continuous flame blowers!! Seemed completely unsafe! Sparks flew everywhere!

George broke the rules & snuck out the door to try & get some pictures. Look how close all the people were to the explosions!! You can read on line about a tragedy during one of the Parrandas in 2017 – more than 24 folks were injured when several mortars exploded before they were supposed to!! But this celebration had no problems & we just enjoyed the fun!! We had ordered soup (dinner on our own) & it was just getting ready to be delivered when the festivities started, so had to wait until after to eat. Darn it, the soup was cold!

Mily had hidden as soon as the fireworks started (they lasted about 20 minutes), she said she was really scared of them!! But she showed back up afterwards & was happy & silly!

Afterwards finishing our dinner, we headed up to the balcony & watched the celebration that was extremely loud & boisterous until about 11pm. Each of the 18 cities that hold Parrandas were represented & they would march around the square with their musicians & dancers & supporters making as much noise as possible. It was amazing. And we didn't have to worry about disturbing the folks in the rooms along the balcony as it was so noisy down in the square, we

could barely hear ourselves talk anyway!! Ha! By the time we gave it up, we had recognized that lots of the folks were just joining which ever group was marching. The folks were just enjoying marching & making noise! We cheered for our Rooster whenever he marched by! Lots of folks had loaded onto buses & apparently headed home! But our Rooster was still going around when we headed to bed!

I'll close this special edition to my travelogues with pictures I downloaded from the 2018 video of the official Remedios Parrandas. It must have been fantastic! As far as I could understand the articles, our Rooster won the Festival this year! Yea!!

Okay! Time to leave Remedios & head to our one night stand in a real Resort area on the beach! Stay tuned!!

Lots of love,

Pamela & George

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Check out our web site! Hurd's Round Dance Home Page
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pam@gphurd.com

From: pam@gphurd.com
Sent: Saturday, February 23, 2019 4:31 PM
To: 'pam@gphurd.com'
Subject: Pam's Cuba Revelations, Chapter 9, Remedios to Mantanzas, 15 Dec 2018

Good Morning Friends & Family,

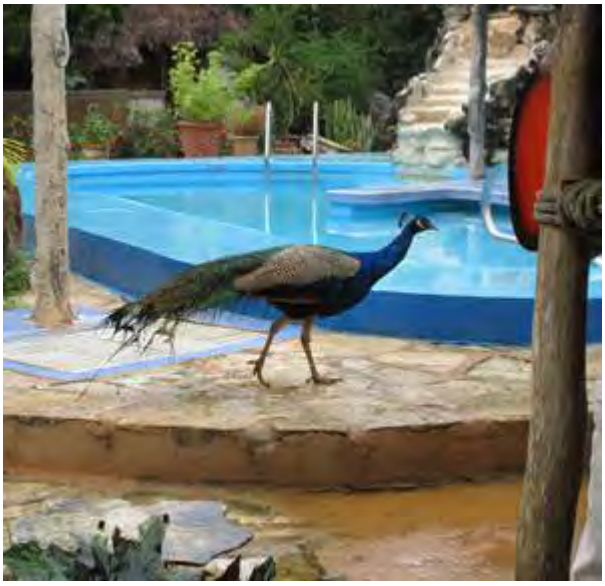
We really need to continue our journey through Cuba! It's time to move to the next location!! Let's go!

Early morning! Up about 6am so that we could have bags out by 7:15am & head down for breakfast! Amazed at how clean & quiet the square looked this morning!!! Mily told us that the State paid clean up crew were working before dawn! They did a great job! Although I must mention that during the celebration last night, I saw lots of folks actually taking beer bottles & cups to the trash cans on the street. I was quite impressed with that!

Had to say good bye to Roa! So sad!!! And good bye to Remedios!

We hit the road & drove west for about 2 hours, passing some hilly green country with lots of small creeks/rivers.

We made a stop at a pretty cool rest stop with a store that had some of everything. Most of us bought something – wine, a blouse, post card, chocolate! They had it all! There were a couple of adorable kitty's. They were pretty friendly. This one reminded me of my Booger cat. Can't resist a black cat. Is that Freudian?



On for another hour, we stopped in Jovellanos for lunch at Finca Luna (Finca means ranch or estate & the owners are Luis & Nancy! Cool, huh?) – a privately owned garden/farm/restaurant. We didn't get to meet the owners, but the wife's brother was there to entertain us as was her father, his twin brother & friend (the band that greeted us!). This place was awesome. The food was really good – great selection & plenty for all of us!

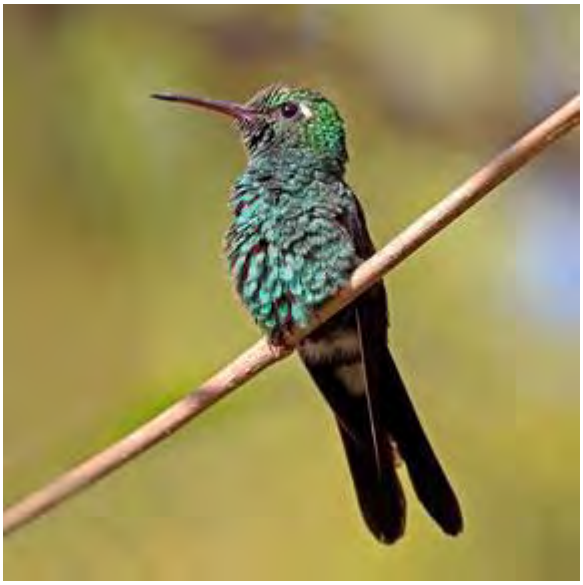
We spotted another "fiesta de quinceañera." Mily went over & chatted with them a little while. Found out that they would have her change into 6 different outfits during her day's celebration. We only saw 2 of them.

Then they took us on a tour of the property. It is not only an agricultural retreat, it is also a Micro Zoo! There were various birds free ranging around & there was a wine bottle garden growing quite profusely. They must have just the right atmosphere for proliferation! Ha!! Actually they were using wine bottles throughout the area to demarcate the walking paths & for decoration around some of the trees.

Luis & Nancy are also well known potters in Mantanzas, so the Big Rooster was just one example of their work on the property. The Jack Fruit trees were doing quite well & he offered us some to taste (sweet, but kinda mushy). I liked the interesting orchid hangers – unfortunately none of them were blooming.

They had several types of really beautiful roosters, some in cages & some free ranging. There was a Cayman that was quite active & a huge tortoise.

Continuing the tour, we came to a large Falcon (I think he was wounded somehow) & several guinea pigs. The most exotic animal in their Micro Zoo, was the Hutia, a large rodent that was lured from it's daytime den by the offering of Jack Fruit!

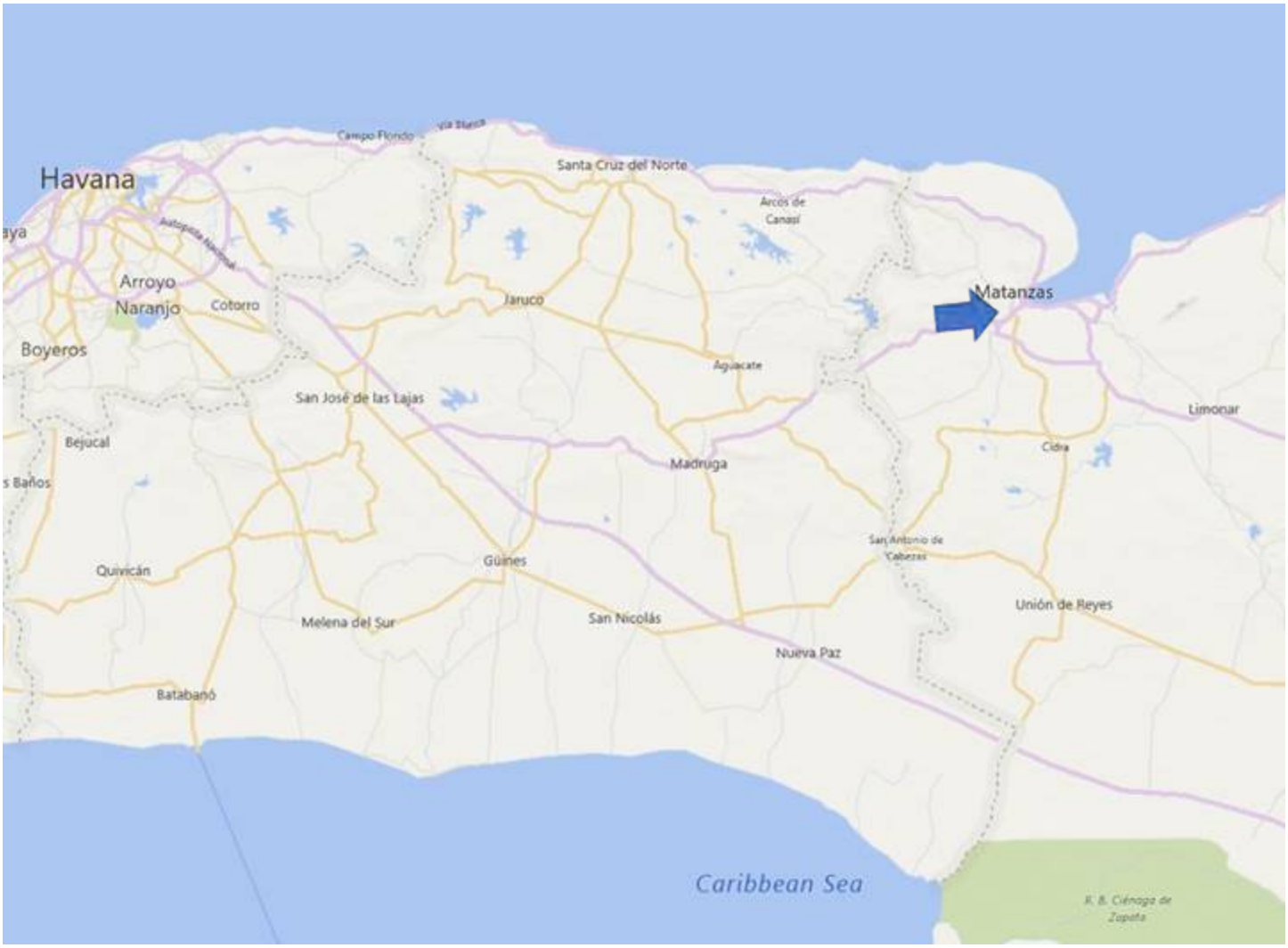


Most exciting for me was seeing the Cuban Emerald Hummingbird. I didn't get any really good pictures, but it's very easy to confirm it's a hummingbird!!! We could hear them in the trees around us, but it wasn't until we were almost ready to get back on the bus that we actually saw one. The last picture is from Wikipedia. Confirms it is an Emerald!! Still hoping for the "Bee" Hummingbird.

Next stop was Palmeras de Junco Stadium where the very first official Cuban Baseball game was played in 1874!! It is the longest continuously used stadium in the World!! It is now used for minor league teams & we were lucky enough to find a game going on. But Mily, our slave driver only let us sit & watch for a few minutes! We sat in the Home bleacher & yelled along with them. The opposing side was empty as you can see! Didn't find out their home location.

Next was a tour of the Cuban Baseball Hall of Fame Museum by a previous winner, Jose Estrada Rodriguez. There was a 50 year hiatus of the National Cuban league (due to the Cuban revolution in 1961), it reformed in 2014. Jose told us that most Cuban players dreamed of playing in the US, but could only do that if they renounced their Cuban Nationality!!! He had been unwilling to do that. A few days after our visit, while we were still in Cuba, the 2 associations: Major League Baseball and Cuban Baseball Federation signed an agreement to allow Cubans to play on US National teams without defecting. That was a big big decision! Jose had told us that was the one thing they were really hoping for! Glad the political groups could at least agree on that!!!

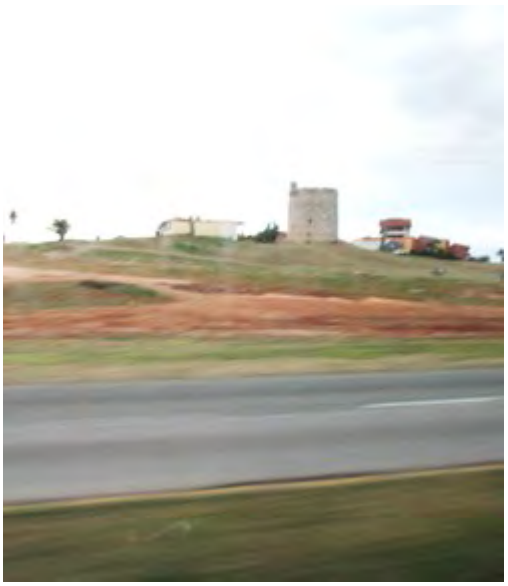
Our last stop in the Museum was a room covered with signatures. They handed out pens & we could sign the wall. I wrote our nephew's name (maybe he can come see it himself someday!!!) & got him a baseball signed by Jose! I got a hug & a picture too!

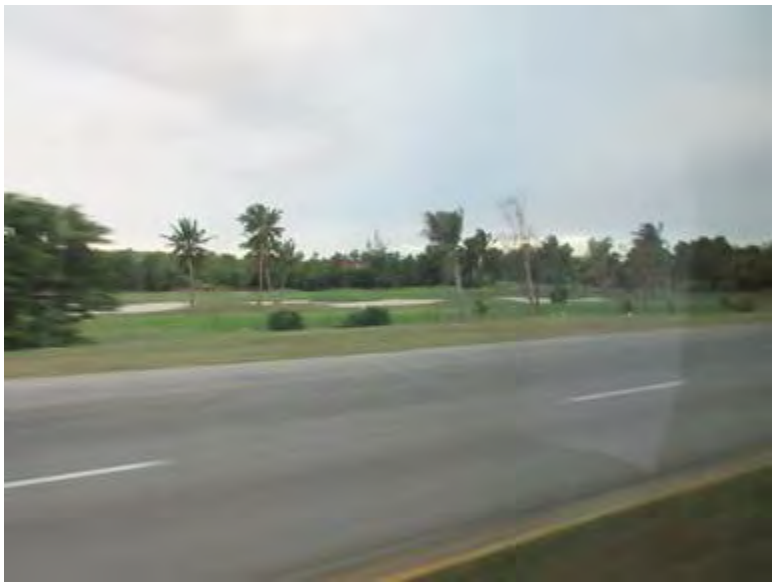


Since I love maps, I thought I'd give you another look at exactly where we were traveling. We had been traveling west from Remedios through the center of the island. Our lunch at Finca Luna was in Jovellanos. Then we drove north west & to Matanzas for our Baseball stop at Palmeras de Junco Stadium. Now we traveled along the coastline north east onto the tiny peninsula extending into the Atlantic Ocean that is Varadero.

Back on the bus, we were soon out of Matanzas & driving along the northern coast of Cuba. Although it was an overcast day, we were excited to see the water & some of the miles & miles of well known beach fronts of Cuba.

Kept zooming along – lots of water, low lying land & greenery.





There was a toll booth to actually cross onto the Hicacos Peninsula & we quickly started seeing evidence of the resort atmosphere in Valadero. The peninsula is between the Bay of Cardenas & the Straits of Florida and is about 87 miles east of Havana at the eastern end of the Via Blanca highway. It is only ¾ of a mile wide at its widest point. The entire

peninsula is more than 12 miles long & its tip, Punta Hicacos is the northern most point of the island of Cuba. This area has been used as a resort area since the mid 1800's!

I found this NASA view of the entire peninsula & this aerial photo of the resort. We were all excited to get a chance to see the play area of the people of Cuba! GCT had to fight with the US government to get permission to stay here. They justified it by saying that it was one of the most reasonable places to overnight between our allowed "personal interaction" stops! This all Inclusive resort is a favorite amoung Cubans & International tourists. It was totally decorated for Christmas! They served us a extremely sweet, bright green Welcome drink to toast our arrival while we waited for our rooms to be assigned.

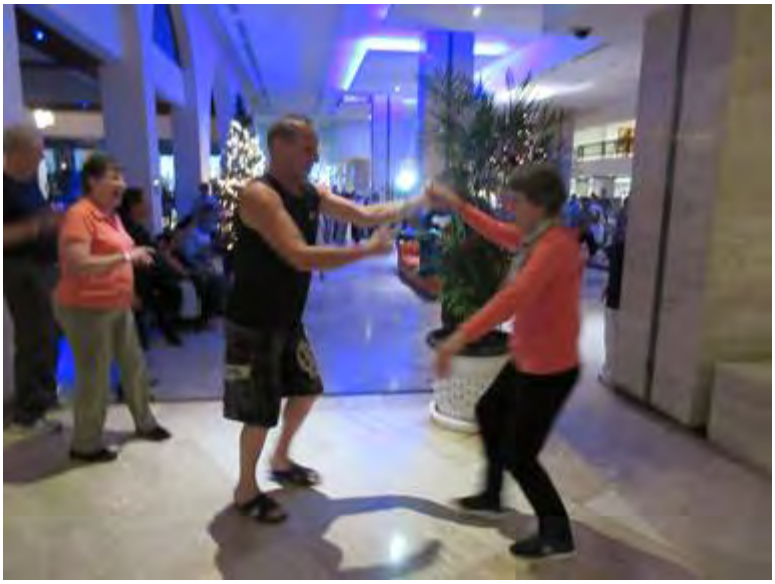
After a quick run upstairs to put stuff away in our rooms, we met down stairs to start taking advantage of our “all inclusive” status! We wandered for a few minutes to check out the resort.

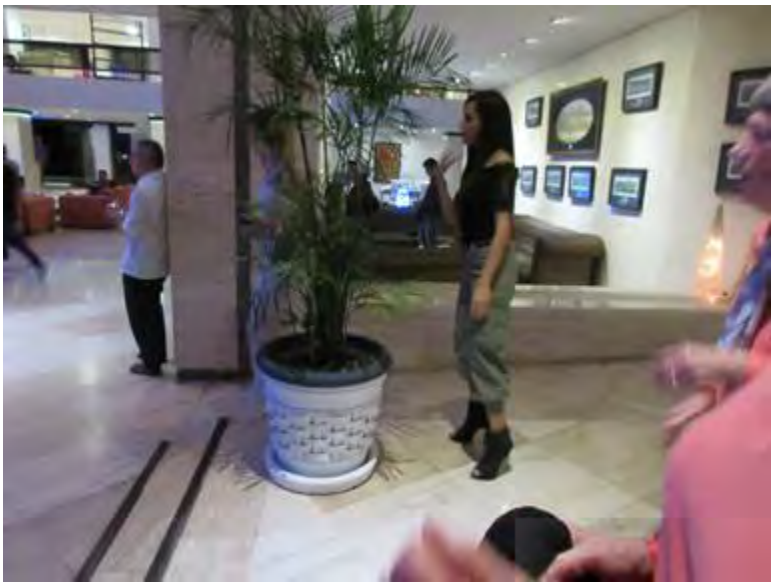
There were 6 restaurants in the resort, but all except the buffet required reservations. After seeing the entire buffet area, we were not disappointed! We just had to figure out a way to eat some of everything without killing

ourselves! There were separate islands of tasty treats – from salad, to hot entrée's to active grilling, to bread, & multiple types of desserts. It was incredible!!!

I made my decision & after devouring everything on my plate, I couldn't resist a personally made crepe with Banana Foster!!!! Even got to choose my own flavor of liquor! Yum Yum Yum!!!

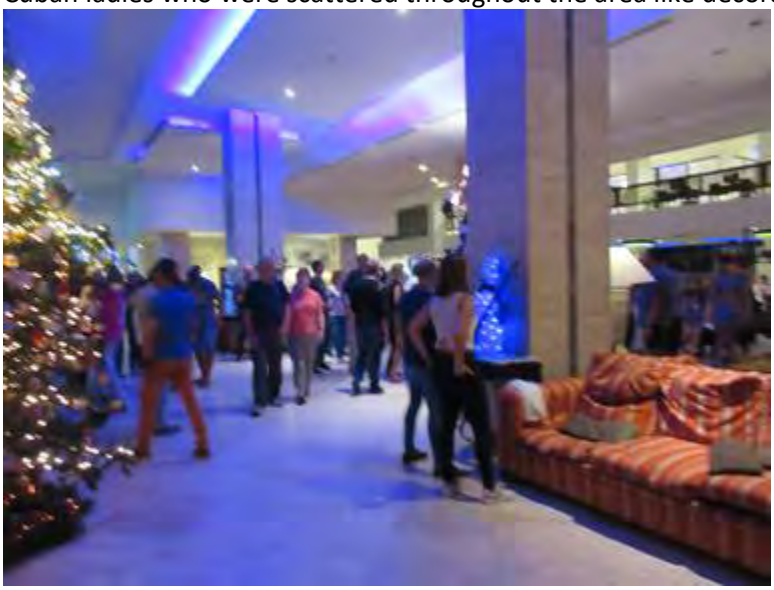
After gorging ourselves, we went looking for an activity to use up some calories. There was a fashion show of sorts with shopping (interesting crocheted dresses – the owner was a real hard sell!!). That didn't use up any of our energy, but then we found a band playing American 60's music!!! We were in heaven & danced our toes off.

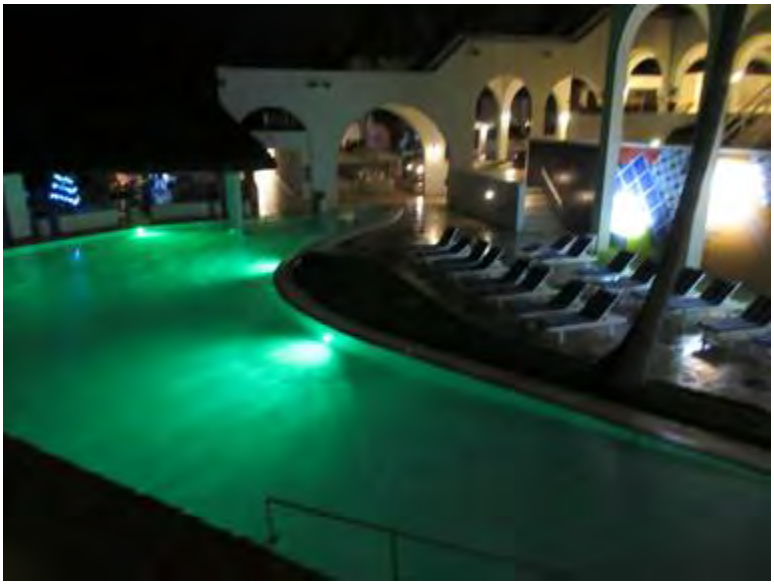


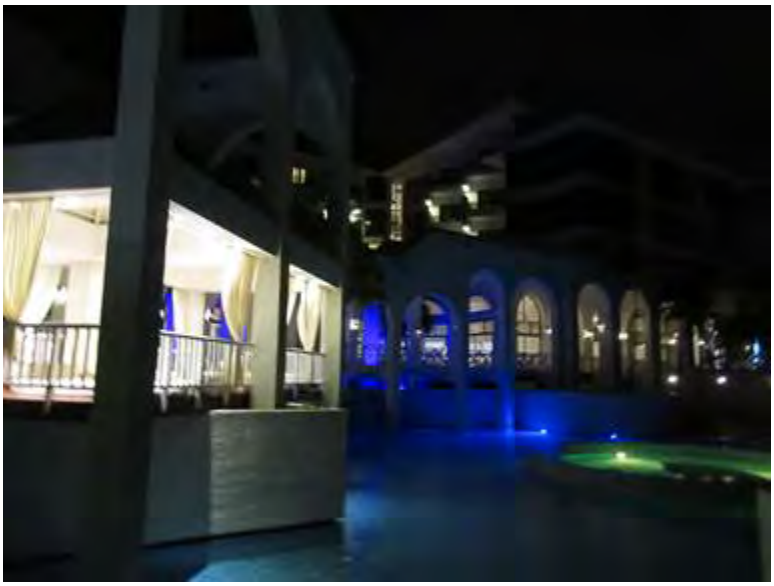


We had read that there was going to be some dance lessons in the reception area, so we headed there when the band took a break. The dancing (to a boom box) was not quite as good, but Connie helped with Internation Relations when

she danced with a young (& very drunk) Russian man! We clapped & cheered! We enjoyed seeing some of the young Cuban ladies who were scattered throughout the area like decorations!







We went back to dancing with the good band until they closed it up at 11pm. We were still pretty wired, so we continued wandering the area & enjoyed seeing all the lights & specialty areas connected to the main building. We finally gave it up & headed to bed about midnight! It was a very very full day!!!!

Tomorrow we head to Havana! Don't go away!

Love ya,

Pamela & George

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Check out our dance demo videos www.DanceRounds.info
Look at pictures, videos, & Photo books on Shutterfly http://pamspicts.shutterfly.com

pam@gphurd.com

From: pam@gphurd.com
Sent: Sunday, March 3, 2019 12:58 AM
To: 'pam@gphurd.com'
Subject: Pam's Cuba Revelations, Chapter 10, Varadero to Havana, Sun, 16 Dec 2018

Good Morning Everyone,

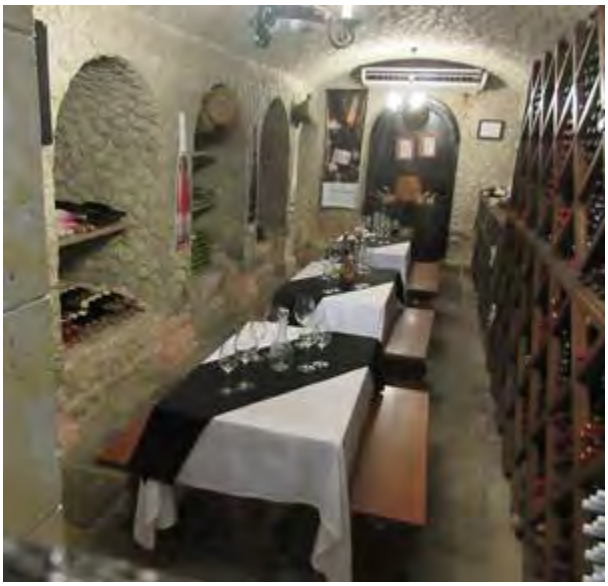
Lots more to see & do as we continue east to Havana! So here we go!!

After our fun time dancing last night, it was marvelous to sleep late! We woke to a bright, somewhat overcast morning. GCT had been kind enough to schedule us a noon check out & we still got to have lunch in the buffet before leaving (could have had breakfast too, but we chose to sleep instead!) We did have instant coffee in the room! And even instant Cuban coffee is pretty darn good.

Our room had a balcony with a view of the rest of the hotel & the inlet behind us. Found a really cool clothes hanger on the wall. Would be great for drying your swimsuits & towels!

On the way downstairs, we took a picture of the golf course. The view from the back door of the resort down to the beach was very very inviting! The resort is beautiful!! More on that later. We grabbed a coffee & some muffins from the bar downstairs on our way out the door!

Our goal for the morning was to tour the Dupont House. We really didn't know much about it, except Mily made a big deal about it & said we had to go. It was only a 5 minute walk from the door of the hotel on the connected property.



The place was gorgeous inside. I had hoped to find some information about why it was there & the history behind it, but there was NOTHING! We met John & Connie there & the 4 of us around checking it out.

The cream de la cream of the building was at the top! There were no signs, but we saw the small stairs & up we went! Views of the surrounding area was awesome!!! Can certainly understand why this area has become a world renowned resort area.

The bar was lovely & had an outside balcony over the parking area. The building seemed to be under renovation, but it didn't really look like it was currently active renovations! Maybe they were waiting for more money? Or better weather? Chatted a little with the bartender, but when we asked him for history on the building, he said we'd have to ask downstairs (& there was no one around anywhere!).

Through Google, I found out the mansion was built by Irénée du Pont (American DuPont Chemical entrepreneur) in the early 1930's. If you have any interest, I found this interesting article about it in the Cuban Journal on line. http://cubajournal.co/duponts-cuban-mansion-xanadu-is-now-a-hotel-and-golf-club-house/ He called it Xanadu. The last time he visited was in 1957. He was apparently quite good to the local Cubans. He built a school

there & rebuilt the local cathedral when it burned down. He also arranged for potable water. There is a notation that it cost $1 to golf there & half went to the caddy & half to the local school. He spent several months a year there until 1957. More than likely the estate was expropriated by the government. Now it is a state owned hotel & museum. You can rent it out for parties. Should we plan a Round Dance weekend there?

We walked around to the ocean side of the building just for pictures. Although it was overcast, it felt really good & folks were enjoying the ocean breeze & the water. We found a cool old convertible to check out as we walked back to our hotel.

We still had a little more time before meeting for lunch, so we wandered around the resort property a little more. Found some amazing pools, really interesting vegetation, & even koi. Wow – wish we had at least another night here!

Back to the buffet for lunch & we supplimented the massive quantities & selection of food with Mimosa's! Great way to start our trip to Havana!

Back in Matanzas, we stopped to visit a “house temple” of a Santerian prietess. Santeria is one of the local Cuban religions that developed as a mix of Catholicism & Yoruba (the Western African religion brought over with the slaves). It is basically a worship of the saints & it is typically observed with rituals & contributions at shrines. The Priestess & her Priest son performed a ritual blessing of our group that consisted of drums & singing & dancing. Mily lit some candles & left some beer & wine at the feet of the Shrine of St. Lazarus. This was the official celebration of his day. Most of us thought it was rather hokey, but we tried to be respeciful anyway.

After the religious rituals, we were allowed to see most of the rest of the house. Several family members were there helping prepare the feast that was scheduled to take place later that evening. We recognized some of the dishes (rice pudding, plaintains, apples, bread). The daughter was cooking some type of meat dish??? Couldn't tell what it was. There was a mean looking dog caged up that was barking & growling at us (didn't get a picture of that!!). At the back of the courtyard there was a indention with bones & ashes. Figure it was where they sacrificed chickens, etc. When you read about the Santeria religion that seems to be an integral part of their rituals, but they didn't mention that to us!!

After a bit more time on the road, we took a short break at the Bacunayagua Bridge overlook. It's a common rest area along the Blanca Highway from Varadero, well known for it's Pina Coladas served in fresh pineapples & made with fresh coconuts (we didn't have one!). There are several shops & kiosks at the stop with gorgeous views of the Bacunayagua

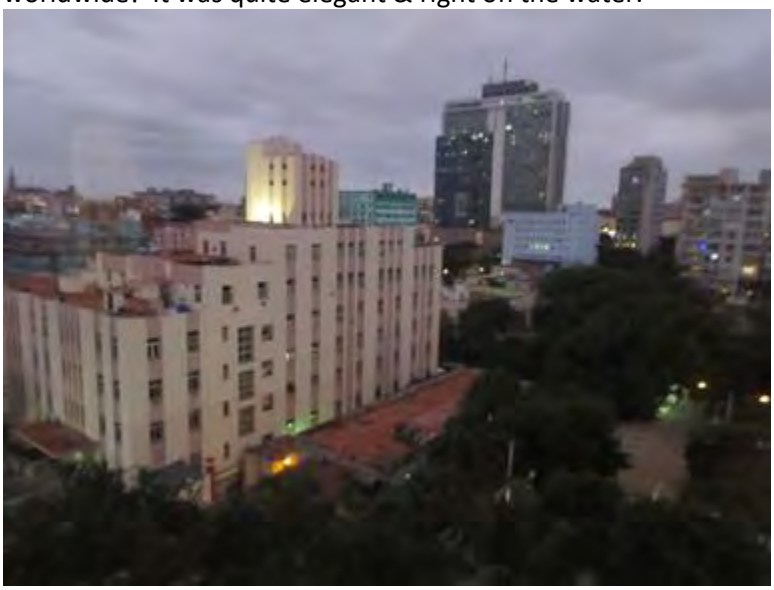
Bridge. This bridge is the tallest in Cuba & is on the list of the 7 man made wonders of Cuba (who knew?). It is about 360' above the river in the Yumuri Valley & is over 1000' long. It was built between 1956 & 1959.

We took the opportunity to get a group picture & other people pictures & just enjoyed the lovely views.

We continued our drive & in no time, we were in Havana. Immediately got the sense of entering a historic city! Very exciting to finally arrive in Havana! The Cubans have all pronounced it “leabana.” As if it was La (the) and Habana without an H sound & one word. We were soon driving along the fabled sea wall along the Malecón. We could see downtown Havana in the distance.

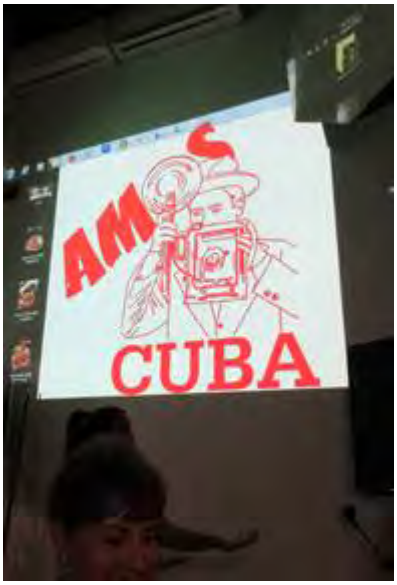
We arrived at our hotel – the famous Hotel Nacional de Cuba!!!!! While we were waiting for all our paperwork & luggage to be transferred upstairs, Mily took us on an orientation tour of the hotel. It is quite large & there are pictures everywhere of all the famous folks that have stayed here over the years. Not only the famous of Cuba – like Fidel Castro

himself, but also folks from all over the world, international presidents, actors, all the richest & most famous folks worldwide! It was quite elegant & right on the water.



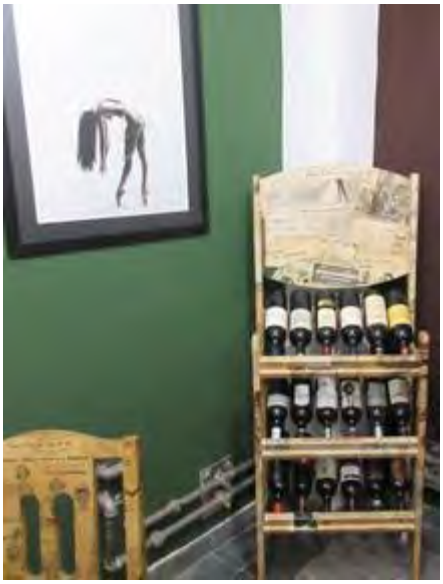
We all headed up to the 6th floor to get settled into our rooms. This was the Executive floor & we got free internet & breakfast was included!! GCT had really splurged! It took us a while to get settled, we changed rooms 3 times!!! The

original room had a leak – not a little one! It was like getting a shower to walk into the front door – something was going on upstairs & it was coming through the ceiling! They assigned us another room & it was not renovated & had a tiny little bathroom & no closet! Unacceptable! Then they gave us a choice of 2 other rooms. We chose one that has a tiny little view of the ocean if we plastered our nose to the window & looked to the far right! But it was fairly good sized & the bathroom was reasonable & there was a closet! We'll be here for 4 nights, so figured it was pretty important to be satisfied with it!



After just a few minutes to get settled into our rooms, it was back downstairs & we were off to dinner, Galeria Amos. The setting was incredible. It was rather a small building with multi floors, and everything artistic – walls, pipes, lighting. Just amazing.

Another privately owned palador, this one was in Centro Habana & owned by 2 incredible entrepreneurs. Amos Reynaldo Batiste - Mily said he was not related to the authoritarian president Batista, but I found many other comments on line that he was indeed a descendant, and Alex Castro – the son of Fidel Castro by his first wife!!!! Both of them are extremely talented photographers – Amos specializes in series photography like an incredible depiction of Hurricane Irma (would have bought one of the photos if I had the money and if our RV had a wall to put it on!!!). Alex specialized in doing photography of the Cuban National Ballet. But what was even more special was that they do hours of volunteer work with children!!! They teach them photography, painting, designing, decorating, just everything. They have entire summer long schools for free, even Mily's niece had attended one of the summer sessions.



Our meal included some really good wine and great coffee. Even the visit to the toilet was fun – handles on cabinets & doors were made of spoons, sinks were buckets. Even a 3 legged chair was covered with newspaper print! It was a really impressive night. We made it back to our hotel & had a little mini after party in our room to celebrate the final arrival to Havana! End of a lovely day!

Please don't go away, we still have 3 more nights in Havana & a few days in Florida to share on this vacation!

Lots of love,

Pamela & George

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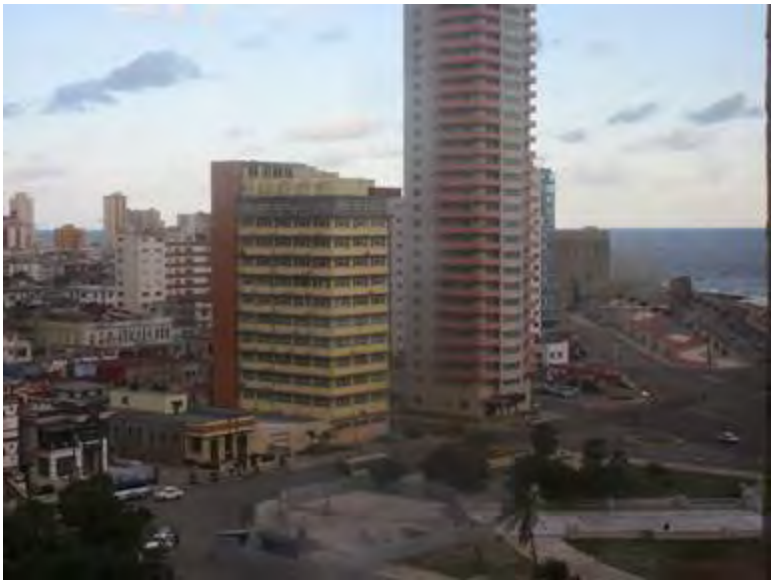
Check out our dance demo videos www.DanceRounds.info
Look at pictures, videos, & Photo books on Shutterfly http://pamspicts.shutterfly.com

pam@gphurd.com

From: pam@gphurd.com
Sent: Sunday, March 10, 2019 5:26 PM
To: 'pam@gphurd.com'
Subject: Pam's Cuba Revelations, Chapter 11, Havana, Mon, 17 Dec 2018

Good Afternoon Everyone,

Now that I've finally gotten us all to Havana, the fun just gets better! Off we go!!



Up at 7am with a quick peak out side to see what Havana looks like first thing in the morning! Wow! Great view! And check it out - if we press our noses to the window & look right, sure enough – there's the ocean!! With a tiny view of the famous Malecón!

We followed our ears & noses down the hall to the private breakfast for the Executive floor. Holy Moly – what a spread. We could get used to this for sure! AND, on the second morning we found out that we could even order eggs from the kitchen! This is where they have been hiding all the breakfast rolls! They were yummy.

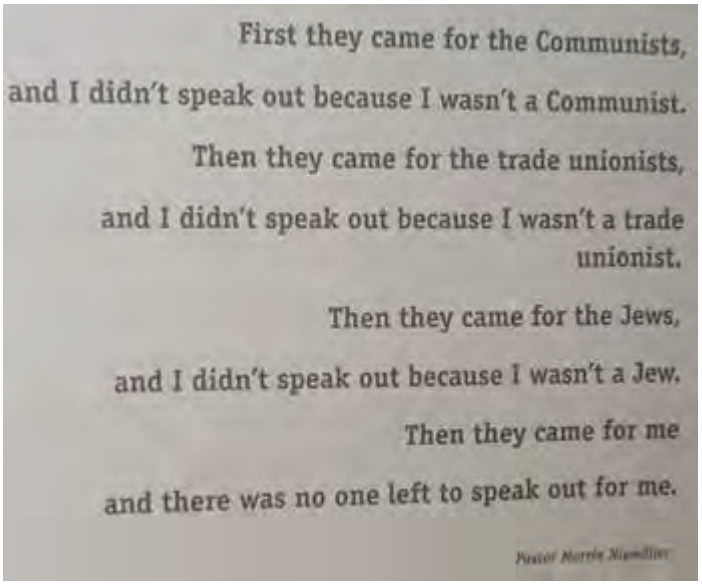
After breakfast, we all trooped down to a small designated “class room” for the first of our 3 morning lectures. We (meaning George & I) were assuming we would be struggling to stay awake with early morning lectures in a small crowded uncomfortable room. I must say we were not looking forward to it. But instead, we were enthralled! Our first speaker, Fernando Sáez, is the Executive Director of the privately owned Cuban Classical Dance troupe, Malpaso. We would be visiting them for a private look at one of their rehearsals shortly. Fernando was a brilliant speaker. We were mesmerized by his elocution & his talk about running a private dance company in Cuba.

After Fernando's lecture, we met outside for a short bus ride to Malpaso's practice venue. Other than transporting back in time due to the old cars on the street, we could have been driving through any big city in the world. The streets were

clean & well managed, dotted with small parks & public areas. Folks were hurriedly going about their weekday business like anywhere else in the world.

The dance venue was a bit of a shock. It was huge & behind a metal fence. There was a small Jewish Synagogue in one corner of the building.

We spent about an hour watching the company practice. Here's the website about the group & their US season tour. https://www.malpasodance.com/ They are an amazing group of talented men & women. Most in the mid 20's & 30's & most had been state trained since before school age. There was a visiting coach from the US. As round dancers, we were amazed to listen to her commands during their practice – we actually understood a lot of it & would understand her comments (all in English) about lifting their upper bodies & softening the knees to maintain balance. The most amazing thing to me was to find out that they memorized a long routine – like 10 minutes & NOT TO MUSIC! They usually don't hear the music that they will perform to until the DRESS REHERSAL!!! Mind boggling to me. And their memories were incredible. She would show them the routine once & then command them to perform it. Sometimes the entire troupe – sometimes in ones or twos across the stage. It was incredibly interesting & refreshing. I downloaded the photo with the white costumes from their website. Afterwards Mily & Fernando had them introduce themselves – telling us their names, ages, where they were from (most from varied places in Cuba, but one from Bolivia & another from someplace else in South America). They were allowed to ask us questions too, but just asked very generic questions – like "are you enjoying your visit here?"



As we left the building, we were directed to walk through a small Holocaust Museum. There was a man acting as docent (he didn't speak much English). He said his Grandfather was a survivor. Apparently many Jews had escaped to Cuba after the war. Didn't know that. Another ingredient into the soup of Cuban culture.

Back on the bus, we circled back along the Malecón. Watching the huge waves crash over the sea wall, it's easy to see how storms constantly cause damage & flooding in the city center! Today was relatively still, with mostly sunshine & no winds! We spotted a wedding party posing for photos & then we arrived at the location of our next adventure – dominos at The Melen Club.

First the local Domino club gave us the basic instructions to play. My parents loved to play dominos as I grew up, so I was quite interested in hearing the Cuban rules. One change was that each player (they always played in sets of 4 people) only drew 10 dominos & the rest were out of play – no drawing! They usually played with Double 9's. After handing out the rules & discussing it for a short time, the 3 club members joined us in the lovely outdoor seating area for lunch. We kibitzed throughout lunch – about dominos & life in general in Cuba. We were entertained by a live band while we ate & chatted.

While we enjoyed our dessert, several of our more elite were invited up to play with the band. The bestest with the mostest was our very own John Hibner! He was a STAR!!! Then Mily & one of the "domino" players did a Cuban version of the Flight Fantastic to end the lovely lunch!

Then inside for the serious competition! Soooo much fun! The 3 players wandered from table to table giving advice & encouragement. Mily tried & tried to hurry us along, but we delayed our departure as long as we could! This was the best! They even gave away a beautiful set of Cuban dominos. John & Connie won it!

After Mily finally forced us to leave, we headed back to the Hotel to enjoy a private concert by William Roblejo's Trio jazz band. They were excellent & played a mix of some American songs we recognized & some popular Cuban jazz that we also really enjoyed. The venue in the hotel was a real mix of former elegance & dilapidated history! I got tickled at the

foot position of the guitar player. My ankle would have been permanently bent after an hour of twisted support! I watched & he didn't even wince when he finally stood up!

After a few short minutes to freshen up, we were back to the bus for a short right to the Vedado neighborhood (central business district) for another great dinner by a private owner. This paladar is extremely popular with the locals. The owners were supposed to be there to greet us, but they were in Las Vegas receiving their 3rd annual Award of the Certificate of Excellence for the restaurant! How about that? As a celebration, we were given a cigar & a splash of rum for an after dinner treat! Several folks pretended to light up, but no one actually did it! We did, however; drink the rum!

The final celebration of the evening was finding Mily's husband waiting to see her as a Surprise! We all enjoyed meeting him & letting him know how much we all loved his wife! After a lovely celebration in our room again, we finally called it an end to another perfect Cuban day!

Stay tuned for the last couple of adventures! We're not done yet!
Love ya,

Pamela & George

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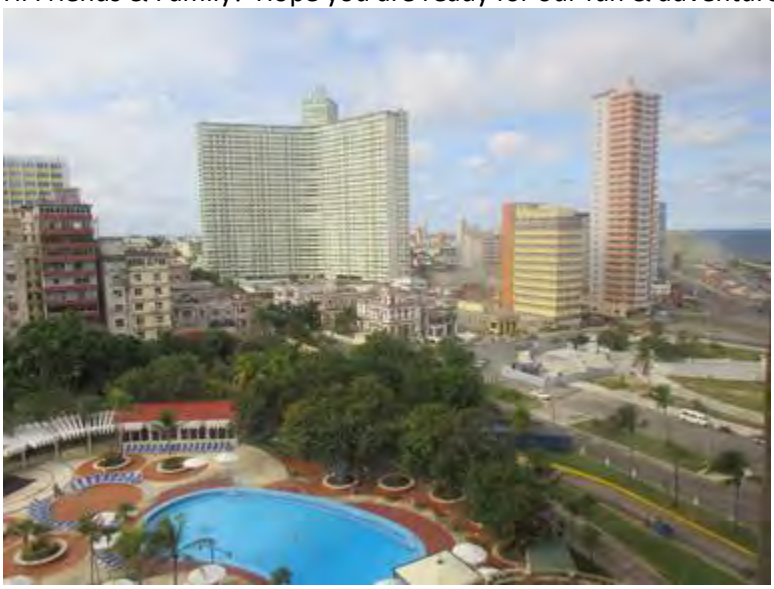
Check out our dance demo videos www.DanceRounds.info
Look at pictures, videos, & Photo books on Shutterfly http://pamspicts.shutterfly.com

pam@gphurd.com

From: pam@gphurd.com
Sent: Sunday, March 17, 2019 3:37 PM
To: pam@gphurd.com
Subject: Pam's Cuba Revelations, Chapter 12, Havana, Tues, 18 Dec 2019

Hi Friends & Family! Hope you are ready for our fun & adventure to continue! Let's go!



Up about 7am & had that lovely breakfast again. Another beautiful day in Cuba!!! Over to our lecture room for a delightful talk by Alberto Faya. According to Wikipedia, he was born in 1944 and is a Cuban singer, researcher, composer, and professor of music. He had multiple instruments with him & besides giving us a short concise history of Cuba, he sang, used a slide show, & played snippets of music for us. His history started with the little information about the indigenous people that is known. They were all wiped out by the Spaniards. But they've found some cave drawings that depict them dancing & playing drums, so music is in the SOUL of Cuba! He continued with the European influence, the African slave influence, even American influence & so on & so forth!!!! He was just incredible. I found this You Tube video of him singing for a visiting Jazz Group back in 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hHMRTWqJAs

We hopped on our trusty bus & headed out to see some of the historical sites. Enroute, we enjoyed seeing a very interesting lawn care apparatus, a welcome sign near the fortress at the coastline, & a big clipper ship out in the bay.

Deberes y derechos del

Our first stop of the day was to the museum/cigar shop of Jose Castelar Cueto. He was there in person rolling cigars. He has 5 consecutive Guinness World Records for the longest hand rolled cigar. The latest was in 2016 – 90 meters long, in honor of Fidel Castro's 90th birthday. He said it was actually a little longer, but they cut it to make it 90! They had the previous winners displayed around the museum & gift shop. We bought a cigar for Tom Brown while we were there! It was NOT hand rolled by Jose! We love Tom, but couldn't afford that!

We didn't actually tour the famous Morro Fortress & Lighthouse that guards Havana Bay, but the museum was at the entrance, so we stood around & got some pictures (the first one is from Wikipedia!) This fortress was originally built in 1589! What a gorgeous day to be outside! Lots of tourists wandering the area. All nationalities.

As we motored on to our next stop, we passed a huge outdoor display of the Cuban version of the 1962 Missile Crisis. Apparently the Cuban's also considered that a HUGE historical & scary event. We also passed by the Art Museum with amazingly beautiful statues. The bus let us off at a parking lot to walk to the viewpoint we were there to see. As it is a big tourist area, there were lots of old American cars (taxis) waiting to take us for a ride. This was not our time, so we just took pictures!

The visit to the El Cristo Statute was glorious. The panoramic view of Havana is magnificent. According to Wikipedia, The Christ of Havana (Spanish: Cristo de La Habana) is a large sculpture representing Jesus of Nazareth on a hilltop. It is the work of the Cuban sculptor Jilma Madera, who won the commission for it in 1953. The statue was carved out of

white Carrara marble, the same material used for many of the monuments of the Colon Cemetery. The statue is about 66' tall. It weighs approximately 320 tons. The statue was built from 67 blocks of marble that had been brought from Italy after being personally blessed by Pope Pius XII. The figure of Christ is standing with the right hand held near the chin and the left hand near his chest. We heard that he's supposed to be holding a cigar in one hand & a mojito in the other! Hummmm? The sculpture is located 167' above sea level, allowing the locals to see it from many points of the city. I've got a picture that I'll share later, looking up at it! The sculpture, located in the Havana suburb of Casablanca, in the municipality of Regla, was inaugurated on La Cabaña hill on December 24, 1958. Just fifteen days after its inauguration, on January 8, 1959, Fidel Castro entered Havana during the Cuban Revolution. It was commissioned by the wife of Batista to try & save their lives, might have worked, but they were run out of town while the statute still remains. We took advantage of the fabulous weather & the awesome view to take a bunch of group photos! The adorable young black father & daughter were there to enjoy the view also. When the little girl heard us speaking English, she asked if she could have her picture taken with me. I was so very honored!

Then it was time for lunch & off we went to another amazing paladar. This one also grew much of their food organically. The building was beautiful & well decorated with a huge aquarium (have I mentioned that that was quite popular? I haven't included them, but many of the restaurants & homes had large aquariums). This amazing painting

got our attention. It looked as if you could feel the skin and experience the history behind the aging of these hands! They led us straight through the main restaurant & seated us on the outside veranda.

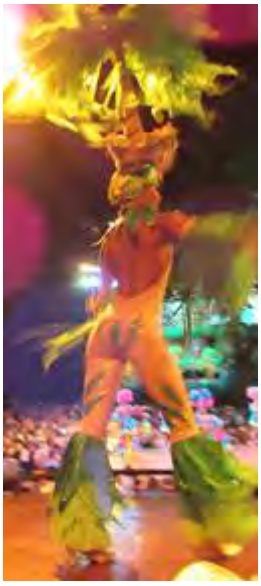
Lunch was good – but consisted of the Cuban Standard: beans, rice, carnitas, & plantain chips. We celebrated the 50th anniversary of our American/Guatemalan couple. Then had a short tour of the beautiful & well maintained grounds. There was an out building where the local seniors came to socialize & to make little projects to sell for some spending money. I kept hearing hummingbirds & saw them from a distance while we were eating. I wish I had gone out then to look at them, but I waited until after we ate. Couldn't find any then. The young woman that showed us around said that they had 2 types of hummers & one was smaller – she didn't know the names. I think I missed my chance to see the Bee hummingbird!!!! Phooey!!!!

Next stop was a lovely hour watching some of the most talented children I've ever seen. Angeles del Futuro is a community project that teaches children the art of circus performance! There were 2 young boys age 14 (looked like 10), an 11 year old boy, a 15 year old girl & a 17 year old boy. The 17 year old had only been at the school for 8 months! They had no safety net & the young boy that did the high acrobatics had his ropes held taunt by 5 other young

boys! I had given Mily blinkies to give them & she gave them each one. I had her tell the 17 year old that he could give his to his girlfriend. He let me know that the girl he was performing with (that looked soooooo young) was his girlfriend! Well okay. What do I know? It was really rather disconcerting – their leader was telling us how thrilled they were that the government had given them this venue for their practices & performances. It was falling apart!!!! There were holes in the ceiling & the chairs had all the padding torn off & lots were broken. Apparently it was a theater that had been condemned 20 years ago. Another example of the dichotomy of economy facing this country. By the way, several of these children were orphans. Made me want to adopt one!

We headed straight back to the hotel & had the evening free. Tom & Marilynn Anderson had found a Las Vegas type show that was really good when they visited several years ago, so they had suggested it to us. Mily highly recommended it & helped us arrange the tickets & transportation. Ten of us took a taxi across town to the Tropicana & it was awesome! (He even waited for us outside!) I took zillions of pictures, won't bore you with all of them (they are posted on Shutterfly – took movies too, but they didn't turn out very good, so won't share them!). Even the venue was AMAZING.

Here's the website about it. https://www.cabaret-tropicana.com/en/tags/historias/



The venue has been used as a night club for more than 70 years. It is truly spectacular. Some call it the best cabaret in the world. We certainly wouldn't argue. We were outside (it was a perfect evening!) and there are multiple stages – all around the arena. The costume changes alone were amazing. We had a dance platform right in front of us which really made us feel like we were a part of the show.

Anyway, so ended another fabulous day in Cuba. Our taxi driver whisked us back to the hotel & we had a meeting in our room again – so much to discuss & we were so excited we couldn't go to sleep yet anyway!

We only have one full day left in country for me to describe to you. I've taken so long to get this vacation completed that we are about to leave on another one. I'm determined to finish this up – so please hang in there with me!

Love ya,

Pamela & George

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Check out our web site! Hurd's Round Dance Home Page

Check out our dance demo videos www.DanceRounds.info
Look at pictures, videos, & Photo books on Shutterfly http://pamspicts.shutterfly.com

pam@gphurd.com

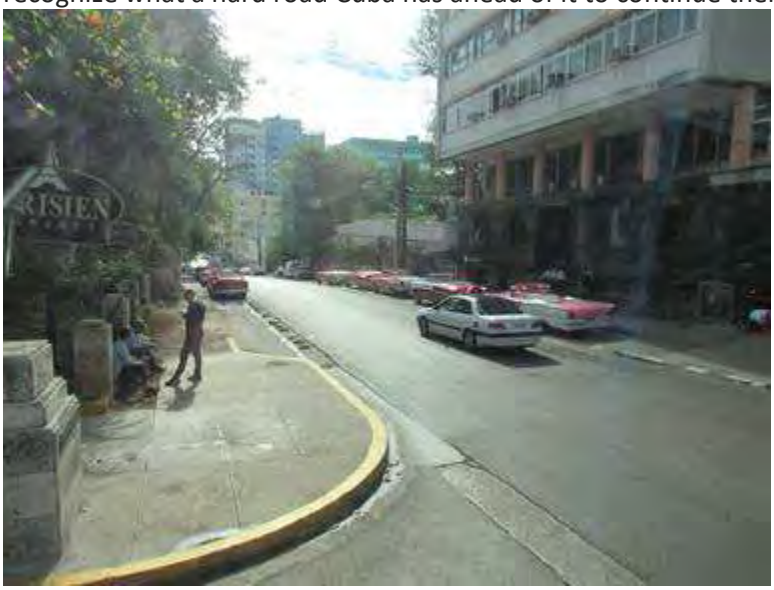
From: pam@gphurd.com
Sent: Friday, March 29, 2019 11:32 AM
To: 'pam@gphurd.com'
Subject: Pam's Cuba Revelations, Chapter 13, Havana, Final, 19-20 Dec 2019

Good Evening Everyone!

Well, I'm finally down to the last full day in Cuba. Tomorrow we fly back to the US. We have more adventures in Florida that I might add to the Travelogue later, but in the meantime, lets finish with our amazing adventures in Cuba!

We woke to another magnificent morning in Havana, Cuba. On to our huge breakfast buffet & then to our now familiar educational classroom. Again, George & I were anticipating boredom bordering on nap time from our lecture by a Cuban economist. We couldn't have been more wrong! Professor Jorge Mario Sanchez Egozcue was absolutely brilliant! His professional presentation was funny, clear, entertaining, thought provoking, & just overall awesome. He has a doctorate of Economics from the Universidad de La Habana, Cuba, but has multiple other degrees from Colleges in Canada. He has spoken all over the world & I found mentions of him speaking at the University of Texas as early as 1992. He even told a funny story about his first invitation to speak in Texas & his preparation to speak in English – then

finding out that Texas has it's own special dialect & vocabulary. Then after working hard to master that, he was sent to speak in Boston!!! Yikes! What an introduction to the US! Anyway, the lecture was incredibly interesting & we now recognize what a hard road Cuba has ahead of it to continue their current growth.



On the bus, we headed for our walking tour of Havana Viejo (Old town) – past all the old car taxi stand & the now familiar **Malecón.** The bus let us off outside the city walls (so to speak – the original city walls are long gone!) & we followed Mily like a herd of sheep!

We started our tour in one of the 4 main squares of the old city – Plaza de Armas (Parade Ground). This was originally where all the military parades were held & was the political center of the city. The old church is supposedly the site of the first catholic mass in Cuba. All of Havana Vieja is a UNESCO World Heritage site & list approximately 900 buildings that are of historical significance. Believe me, Mily pointed out many of them, but for me, the names & purposes went in one ear & out the other!

We did step inside the old church, whose walls are covered by mostly restored paintings of historical events.

More fun for us was walking around the famous Ceiba Tree. According to Mily (& the internet), this tree has been considered good luck for hundreds of years & if it died, it was replaced with another one! Folks were to circle it 7 times & then touch it to give them whatever they wished for! We gave it a try!! Right now I can't remember what I wished for, so have no idea if it came true or not!!

In the center of the square is Parque Céspedes, pinned by a white marble statue of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, initiator of the Cuban wars of independence and Father of the Homeland. Surrounded by royal palms and ceiba trees, the statue was made by Cuban artist Sergio López Mesa and replaced a statue of Spanish King Fernando VII. Note that the street on the west side of the plaza is a parquet of wood. This, supposedly so that passing carriages would not disturb the

governor's sleep. Originally of long-lasting ironwood, the street was recently redone with blocks of inferior quality and is deteriorated. Can you tell that I copied & pasted that from Wikipedia? There were individuals all over the park that were dressed in period costumes. They were anxious to get their pictures taken with you. We didn't participate in this although Mily was encouraging. Just felt too too touristy! Consequently I didn't take any pictures of them since I didn't want to pay them.

We continued our talking tour & thoroughly enjoyed watching a parade of singing & dancing costumed performers passing us by. We thought we had arrived during a special presentation, but researching on line, I found they are there every day!!!

Many of the streets have been totally restored & it was a joy to walk through them. Notice the iron work silhouettes hanging over some of the doors. Like many places in Europe – they designate the type of business inside – much like an address or written sign. And we often looked up to see something odd approaching, like this walking Spanish Iron Sailor dragging his canon behind him!

The Havana Cathedral (or Catedral de San Cristobal) is the center piece of the Plaza de la Catedral. It was completed in 1777 – it took almost 30 years for the Franciscans to build it from ground breaking in 1748. There is a claim that the remains of Christopher Columbus were kept there from 1796 to 1898, but not sure if that's true or not. It is certainly beautiful regardless.

So we strolled down the Calle de Obisbo to see the Hotel Ambos Mundos where Ernest Hemmingway lived for 7 years in a room on the 5th Floor. He paid $1.50 a night from 1932 until 1939. He started his famous novel *For Whom the Bells Tolls* while living in this room. We saw lots of cats (possibly descendants of Hemmingway's famous 6 toed cats?). The dogs had paper tags on their necks that Mily said proved they had been vaccinated & were "legal" to be there in this historical district! The cats had no such tag on them!

We took a peek into the City Museum's outdoor grounds & enjoyed the wall paintings across the street. We passed by the Palacio Del Marquis de Arcos - one of the best preserved buildings from 1700 Spanish Colonial days & previously

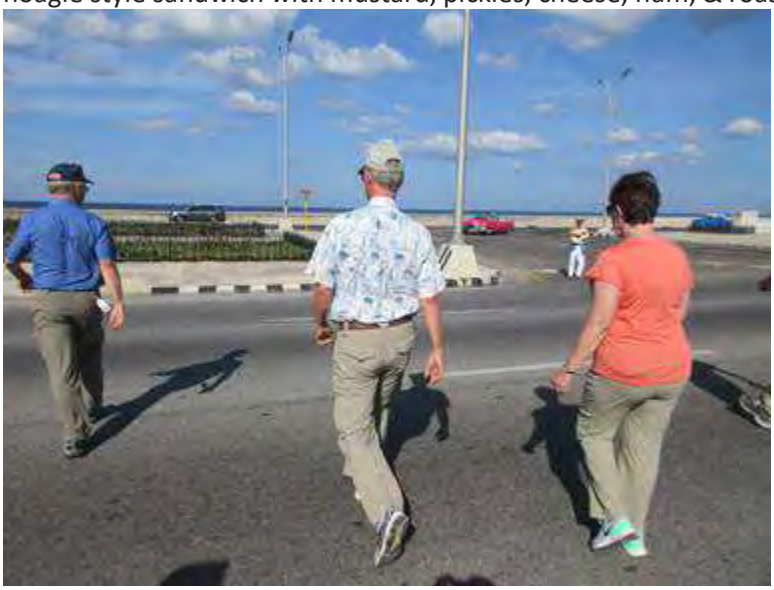
Havana's main post office – note the stone carved face to deposit your mail, but I was more intrigued by the street vendor selling strings of onions!!

Then Mily led us down some streets that hadn't been renovated. Some were looking a little scary – cement edges crumbling onto the pavement, & balconies shored up by 2X4's! And a little boy waving & saying hello from his French balcony! He was soooo cute!

Last stop was the Plaza de San Francisco – a most beautiful square – almost totally restored. The center of the square is dominated by Fuente de los Leones – fountain of the lions. It was carved from carrara marble by Italian sculptor, Giuseppe Gaggini & donated to the city in 1836. The location was originally a freshwater supply point for passing ships. But we were even more intrigued by the huge statute of a naked woman, (except for her stiletto heels) riding a rooster & brandishing a huge fork. It was designed & sculpted by Cuban artist Roberto Fabelo & placed in Plaza in 2012. I could not find any acceptable meaning for it, but she looks rather fierce.

We were to have the afternoon off. Mily gave us the choice of hanging around in Old Town & walking back (or getting a taxi) or bus back to hotel. We had originally planned to walk back (about 5 miles), but it was really hot – pushing 90

degrees!, so we just took the bus back & enjoyed lunch outside by the pool. We shared a Cuban Sandwich – basically a hoagie style sandwich with mustard, pickles, cheese, ham, & roasted pork. Had to have Mojitos one last time too.



With the whole afternoon off, we had to really walk on the famous **Malecón,** officially Avenida de Maceo. This esplanade, roadway, & seawall was built in 1901. Now it's one of the most famous aspects of Havana, stretching 5 miles along the edge of the city. We started at the Memorial to the USS Maine – built in 1925 to honor the American sailors that died in the explosion of the USS Maine in Havana's Harbor in 1898. This basically started the Spanish-American War. Too hot to stay out too long, But nice view of our hotel with the backdrop of blue skies!

George & John stood in line at a local grocery store, planning to buy some wine. But after the 15/20 minute wait, there wasn't anything on the shelves they wanted to buy (just bought a bottle at the hotel – more expensive, but better selection!). We saw more street vendors – this one selling some type of bread products – looked good, but we didn't try it. Took another walk around the hotel grounds – this place is gorgeous!

After a few hours spent packing, we met downstairs to hear Ensemble Vocal Luna. They are Cuba's only all female choir. They are state sponsored, so basically this is their job. All had graduated from full time music schools. The leader used a tuning fork for pitch to get them started and they sing acapella. We all have some recordings, but it doesn't do them justice. They sang classical, folk, hymns, you name it, they could sing it. We got to have a Q&A session with them & they were all very animated & fun to talk with. They were in the World Choir competition in South Africa last year & had won. They sang us their winning number. It was an African folk song in Africaan with all sorts of fun rhythm noises. They told a cute story about how their plane had been delayed in Amsterdam for several hours & they had found a corner & were practicing. Turns out most of the other passengers were African & when they heard them practicing, they started offering help on pronunciation. They feel like that probably helped them over the top!! I actually looked it up on line (you can find ANYTHING on the internet!) & they had actually won 2 Gold medals in 2 different categories. One of the highlights of the trip & a fabulous way to end our adventure!!

But…..we still had a few more things to do! Mily had arranged for us to take another ride in old cars. This time they took us on an hour gad about town on our way to our "last supper." All convertibles again & truly amazing!! And of course we had to have something happen! One of the cars (also of course it was the one with Mily in it!!!) broke down!!! It was too funny. They all piled in one of the other cars & we continued the parade. Lovely crazy fun time!

Habanera
BAR RESTAURANTE

Our last dinner was at the Habanera, another private owned restaurant that is amazing. We toasted everything throughout the meal. We had all put together a special donation for our driver, Aramus. I love that he was with us for the entire trip. The meal was great, but mostly enjoyed the time with our friends. A truly memorable vacation.

Our final day in Cuba was beautiful. Warm & sunny with clear skies. After a fairly early breakfast (had to be up a little before 6am to have bags out by 7:15am!!), we had a few minutes to wander the grounds. I actually found more birds during that few minutes than we had seen on the entire trip! Saw humming birds, finches, wrens, verios, & this gorgeous woodpecker – a Flicker of some type. Should have been out there every morning to bird watch. Oh

well. Next time!! Ha! Anyway, soon, we were on our bus for the last time & loaded onto our Contact flight back to Miami. No problems & easy flight – right on time! So ended an incredible vacation & adventure. Thank you all for allowing me to share it. If you have an opportunity to go to Cuba! DO IT! Beautiful country & lovely people – forget the stinking politics! Thanks to Grand Circle Travel for allowing us to experience it.

Our friends Mark & Pam were at the Miami airport to pick us up & we swooped down to Key West for 4 incredible nights there (beach sunsets, cold beer, margheritas, the Butterfly House, aquarium, tours galore), then up the coast to Venice for Christmas. More adventures there & then New Year's dancing at Worlock's. I wish I had time for all of that. But time moves on & we have to go to!

Soooooo, I've finished this epilogue just in time for our next one. We are leaving in just a couple of hours for a Celebrity cruise that will take us to an entirely new part of the world – Singapore to Abu Dhabi!! Soon I'll start reporting about that!!!

Stay healthy & let me know what adventures you are experiencing!!!

Lots of love,

Pamela & George

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