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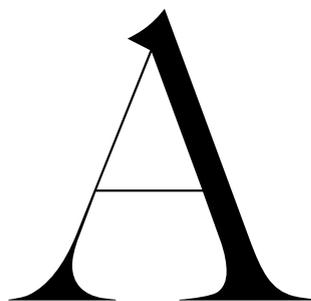
# CUBA





IT IS TRULY A PRIVILEGE  
TO BE STANDING HERE,  
IN THE VERY CAMP WHERE  
FIDEL LED THE REVOLUTION





At 10.00am on 11 May 2012 just as everyone was gathering outside for the official opening of the 11th Habana Bienal at the Gran Teatro de la Habana, the great doors of the opera house slammed shut in the face of the bemused crowd.

A small number of us — Cubans, foreign visitors, an American actress (who had somehow managed to squeeze through the closing doors) — waited patiently in the grand neo-baroque hall for something to happen. After 45 minutes in the un-air-conditioned heat, — and on no apparent cue — we all surged, as of one mind, up the massive double staircase, past invisible halls where members of the Cuban National Ballet were rehearsing to the clack of castanets and up to the exhibition.

Within a huge area of ornate marble, graceful arches and tarnished mirrors which spoke nostalgically of past splendour, cubicles had been created for individual artworks. I entered one: pitch darkness within. Conceptual art? I entered another: pitch darkness. Perhaps I was missing the point. An attendant shed light on the situation. “No funcionan,” she said. Not working.

Elsewhere in the hall, installations by invited artists were, fortunately, up and running: the Testimony of Yoshitaka Kawamoto, by Indian artist, T.V. Santhosh; the disco ball... the video and sound installation of Colombian Rolf Abderhalden, who had arrived for the opening. I admired a series of photographs of curious tattoos by Javier Castro, and

the monumental wooden pier abutting onto three screens depicting beach-and-seascapes by one of Cuba’s most famous artists, Alexis Leyva Machado, aka ‘Kcho’. By the time I walked out into the spring sunshine, the gathering of international press, public and museum curators waiting on the pavement, had swelled. No-one had told them that the opening had been postponed until 7.00pm that night!

This, in a nutshell, is Cuba: maddeningly chaotic on the one hand, but excitingly vibrant and brimming with opportunity on the other. Under Raúl Castro, Cuba is in the throes of social and economic reform, which has seen the Caribbean island become a focus of international investment in both the cultural and commercial arenas. But in Cuba, I quickly learned, you have to bend with the rice. Bending with me were some 1,300 American collectors, dealers and curators who, according to officials, had registered to visit the Biennial — a situation made possible, despite the ongoing trade embargo, by President Obama’s easing of restrictions on travel to the country.

Representatives from European galleries were also on the prowl for new talent, amid talk of an exhibition of Cuban art at London’s prestigious Saatchi Gallery. The Cuban capital’s 11,000-odd hotel rooms were full to capacity and, at the Saratoga — the result of a joint venture between the Government and a British Investment Fund and the closest Cuba comes to international notions of a luxury hotel — a free bed was as rare as hens’ teeth.



The 2012 Biennial featured 180 artists from 45 countries — including American-based Andrés Serrano, Marina Abramovi, and Emilia Kabakov. Havana, indoors and out, was transformed into a heterogeneous exhibition space of both official and ‘collateral’ offerings, the distinction not always clear. Rafael Gómez Barro’s giant ants swarmed over the Teatro Fausto. Roberto Fabelo’s red cage, its open door suggesting the escape of the two flanking bronze lions which reside on the Paseo del Prado, was a conversation piece.

Along the line, art with political overtones slipped through the net. Along the esplanade of the Malecón, facing Miami, Arlés del Río’s ‘Fly Away’ — a wire fence with a plane-shaped hole smashed through it — becomes a poignant reference to the sticky issue of travel and emigration. “It is very difficult for us to go abroad,” one architect told me. “You have to pay the equivalent of \$150 for a permit to travel, plus \$250 for a letter of invitation, before you even begin.” In a country where the average monthly state salary is the equivalent of US\$25, payable in local pesos (Cuba, like the former USSR, still operates a two-tier currency system) and hospital consultants have to moonlight as taxi drivers to make ends meet, it would seem all but impossible.

Change, however, is in the air, fanning the ambitions of Cuba’s youth. As part of a raft of economic reforms, a law was passed in November 2011 permitting Cubans — for the first time since the early days of the Revolution — to buy and sell property to each other while, at the same time, individual enterprise is being encouraged in what is being carefully termed the ‘non-state’ sector, with self-employment in over 180 professions legalised.

Since 2010, over 350,000 Cubans have been granted licences to run their own business — with 700,000 more applications pending — for activities ranging from hairdressers to mechanics. Finance comes via the novel (since December 2011) expedient of bank loans, or remittances from Cuban-American relations. Already, the fruits of private enterprise are evident in the immaculately restored 1950s’ cars available for hire: orange Chevvy’s, scarlet Buicks, emerald Dodges ... all weaving proudly among their poor jalopy-cousins of rust and glue that left such an enduring impression on my last visit, some 14 years ago.

Thankfully, gastronomic standards have also improved spectacularly, as businesses that interface with tourism — and thereby have access to the convertible currency used by foreigners — are highly desirable.

La Guarida, located in an atmospherically crumbling mansion in Central Havana, is one of the rare paladars (privately owned restaurants) originally licenced for just 12 seats in the brief wave of liberalism, following the snuffing of the Soviet Union’s economic lifeline in 1991. It has been a haunt of the international jet-set for the last 15 years. Today, however, with restrictions lifted, it has serious competition from a new spate of rivals such as Habana Chef and ultra-fashionable Le Chansonnier — paladars whose owners have returned from, respectively, Germany and France, to set up thriving businesses in their homeland.

For what is arguably the best food in all Cuba, I would recommend the slickly sophisticated Río Mar, its grilled marlin with ‘sea butter’ is without compare. Yet, secreted within a residential building in a distant corner of Miramar, without inside knowledge, you would never even know that Río Mar was there. The tools of advertising, in Cuba, have yet to make their mark, and — despite talk of legalising home-use of the internet — access to the worldwide web remains as elusive as it is expensive, censored and slow.

If finding gen on what’s on and where to go in Havana is difficult, travelling solo to the remote province of Granma would have been nerve-janglingly so, without the services of Esencia, a company that smoothes out all the practical and bureaucratic creases that could seriously crumple the will to live. They are specialists in bespoke tours of the island, providing everything from concierge service, excellent drivers and special-interest guides, to serviced apartments (another recent reform has legalised their rental) and fully crewed yachts, where local facilities leave something to be desired.

Cosseted by Esencia’s ministrations, I set off to explore ‘El Oriente’ and the province of Granma. It seemed appropriate, as Cuba cautiously begins to emerge from 50 years of Communism and turns full circle, to visit the cradle of the Revolution against Batista’s Mafia-backed regime, which began on 26 July 1953 with the abortive attack on Santiago’s Moncada Barracks.

It led, in brief, to Fidel’s imprisonment and exile to Mexico, from whence he famously returned with his brother Raúl, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara and 80 men in December 1956, aboard the boat, Granma (after which the province was triumphantly named), to base his revolutionary HQ deep within the Sierra Maestra mountains. This was my destination.





And so, from the airport in Santiago, I was driven along roads treacherous with potholes and free-ranging chickens, cows and pigs, and into a different world. Truculent goats blocked our path. Handsome criollo horses trotted by, while oxen ploughed fields and carried off sugar cane that workers chopped down with machetes. There was scarcely another car in sight, only tarpaulin-covered trucks that served as public transport. Viva Fidel! Declared the roadside slogans, Socialism or death! Everywhere, the face of Che gazed heroically from posters. Through a pre-industrial paradise of lushly exotic forests we went, stopping at stalls to negotiate the purchase of succulent mamey, guava, pineapple and coconut, for local pesos, the sums so small you could calculate no equivalent. In contrast, Havana seemed like a major metropolis.

We arrived at Santo Domingo, a little hamlet nestling in the foothills of the Sierra Maestra, whose social hub is a spreading mango tree, where campesinos gather in the shade to play dominos or chess (this is, after all, the country of Capablanca). Rum bottle in hand, cigar clenched between teeth, they shoot the breeze when not tending their farms. In this middle-of-nowhere, my hotel for the night — rustic but endearing — was remarkable for its fully functioning plumbing; less so for the ubiquitous hairy black pigs that snuffled between the cabins. As pork was not on the menu, I decided to dine out, fording the limpid waters of the Yara River to the opposite bank.

A paladar had reached even this remotest of spots, where a feast of roast lamb, spinach salad, and a black-and-white rice dish known, without fear of political correctness, as 'Moros y Cristianos',

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awaited beneath a flower-strewn pergola. There could have been nothing more heavenly, nor less expected.

In the east, as Graham Greene once remarked, everyone is a rebel at heart. Next morning, on the three kilometer climb through the Sierra Maestra to Castro's camp at Comandancia de la Plata, my guide presented his revolutionary credentials: "My great-grandfather was murdered in Santo Domingo by Batista's men, for refusing to divulge the whereabouts of Fidel's camp," he told me, as we retraced the steep, rocky path the revolutionaries had hacked through the undergrowth, 54 years ago. It was hot as Hades, the mountains blessedly fragrant with hierbabuena and mimosa, and resonant with the chatter of woodpeckers and the Cuban trogon. The vocal but rarely sighted tocororo, as it is known, is the national bird, its red, white and blue feathers symbolic of the Cuban flag.

Panting, we finally reached the camp — a collection of some dozen cedar and palm-thatch buildings, which have been carefully restored. They include Che's post (where he doubled as dentist), the 'administration building' where Fidel signed the first Agrarian Reform Law, a guesthouse, and the rebel radio station, as well as a small museum — a later addition — of revolutionary relics.

The ultimate goal, however, is to be found nestling beneath a canopy of trees, perched on the edge of a small ravine: the two-room cabin Castro shared with Celia Sánchez, fellow rebel and rumoured lover of Fidel. In lieu of an entrance or windows (to thwart surprise attack) the hut's wooden walls open upwards like

garage doors, to reveal the Spartan interior with double bed, fridge and an escape hatch below. In other circumstances, it might have been a romantic hideaway. Instead, I learn of the 74 days of battle that raged in the surrounding hills during the summer of 1958, ultimately won by Castro against vastly superior forces. Today, amid twittering birdsong and darting butterflies, it is difficult to imagine such scenes of carnage. "Santo Domingo", Castro was to later write "the greatest rebel triumph!"

I overheard my driver — a man of refined taste and few words — who had studied nuclear physics in Moscow — speaking with the guide. "We were all taught and are familiar with this period of our history," he was saying. "It is truly a privilege to be standing here, in the very camp where Fidel led the revolution."

Not for the first time, I wondered how it was that, despite all the economic hardships, the personal restrictions and the longed-for reforms which are finally filtering through, the Cuban people still harbour such palpable affection for Fidel and his ideals. It is something no one was able, nor willing, to explain. One thing is certain however: now that the lid has been lifted on Pandora's box — out of economic necessity — if not for ideological motives — there can be no turning back. I give up trying to reconcile contradictions, and settle for that most Cuban response: "In Cuba" as anyone will tell you, "it's complicated!"

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