

CUBA

By Stan and Mary Redlus

What a trip! The AACCA sponsored a trip to Cuba in the late spring, April 23 to May 1st of 2015. Mary and I decided that this would be the best way to see this country, and the "cars". We never had plans to go to Cuba, but this tour, given by International Expeditions, would be our best opportunity. The tour was possible because in 1999 President Clinton implemented the "People to People" educational exchange.

We left from Kennedy Airport to Miami. All the attendees met in Miami for a meeting the evening before our chartered flight to Havana. This gave everyone a chance to meet our guides and each other. We were 44 people strong, the largest group they had ever done. An interesting note, the chartered flight was an American Airlines Boeing 737. Waiting at the Miami airport to board the plane, you would not believe the number of TV's that the residents of Cuba were taking home. I think that we saw at least 35. The flight was a brief 50 minutes to Havana. The airport at Havana is open to the elements. You have to walk down on a portable set of stairs. There was no rain, and it was hot. The plane did get close to the Cuban Custom's hut. It seemed to take more time for the Cuban citizens to get thru customs than we did. After we retrieved our luggage, we got on a bus, made in China, to go to the hotel.

On the way to the hotel we stopped at Revolution Square. As we sat in the bus the guide was telling us about each building and monument. At the outer end of the square were seven 1950's American convertibles. When they let us off the bus, we all went to the cars and not the monuments. As we got closer, we realized that all but one did not start out as an convertible. Each one of these "taxis" were for hire. As we continued on the bus to our

Havana hotel we began to see more of the American cars.

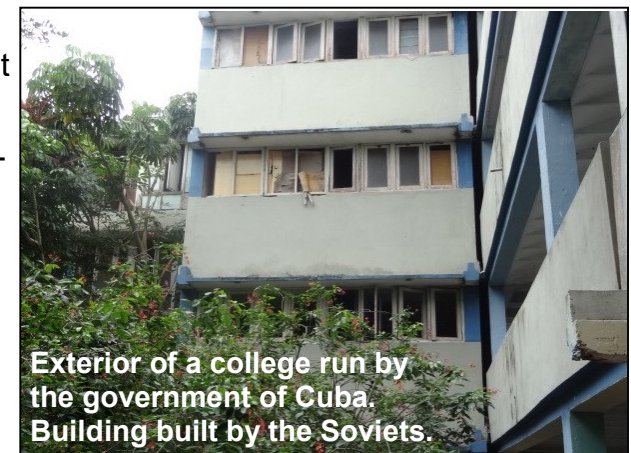
The fall of the Soviet Union was devastating to Cuba. The Soviet Union was providing almost everything. The island had allowed itself to become completely dependent on the Soviet Union. When the Soviets left, they were there on Monday and gone on Tuesday. They took with them the money, food, hospital staff, and other service personal.



Truck left by Soviets, still in use

It took Cuba almost 10 years to become a modest self supporting country again. Cuba is still 100 percent Communist. The government has control over everything. The infrastructure is poor. They tell you where to live. There are allotments for almost everything. A household gets an egg allotment of 8 eggs per week per adult. Education is mandatory until age 17. Cuba has a 98 percent literacy rate. If you qualify, college is paid by the government. The "arts" are encouraged, and if you excel, you go to an "arts" college.

The Cuban government sent 130 doctors to Africa for the ebola outbreak a few years ago, but the doctors were chosen by the government. The government educated them so they could not say no.



Exterior of a college run by the government of Cuba. Building built by the Soviets.

There are medical clinics and hospitals, but don't be in a hurry. Cubans seem to have only one speed. Service at the bar or restaurant is non responsive. We ate most of our meals at "private" restaurants. The Cubans call them "paladar". The food was simply prepared, plentiful, and good. Our first day in Havana we had a tour of Old Havana. The guide was an architect, and a little hard to understand, but the history given from his point of view was like no other city tour we had ever experienced. During our four night stay in Havana, we had a dinner 'on our own' night. Two friends, Mary and I decided to go to the famous Riviera. The Riviera was the hotel and club built by Meyer Lansky. The likes of Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr. were regulars at the hotel. Well, it looked like most of the common areas have not been changed or redecorated from new. During dinner, remember not to be in a rush, we were afraid to reach under the table. We did not know who's chewing gum we would find!



Nicest gas station in Havana



City square in Old Havana



This is a typical gas station

Another evening in Havana, we all piled into various late 1950's American convertibles to go to a cocktail party at the other famous hotel, the Nacional. The driver was pretty good at handling the car since the steering rotated about 120 degrees before the front tires started to move. They all have installed after market horns and were not afraid to use them. It was an interesting 20 minute ride. Most of the cars have been mechanically modified. They cannot get parts from America, legally, so they have become very good at doing what they have to, to keep them running. A lot of the cars have Nissan diesel



Parade of cars on our way to The Nacional Hotel. Can you tell who the man in black shirt is? Answer at end of article!

engines and manual transmissions. Some have modified rear ends. There is bondo everywhere. They made convertibles out of coupes and four door sedans. Don't ask, I have no idea if the necessary frame modifications were done to make a non-convertible into a convertible.



This photo taken in front of The Hotel Nacional



Check the hat worn by PBR Member Stan Redlus

After about an hour of drinking and wandering around the Nacional and veranda overlooking the ocean, we got on a chartered bus to go to dinner. This was at another "Paladar". Again, the food was very good.

The next evening we were asked to be judges at a local cruise-in. There were 8 cars and 4 motorcycles. The "judges" voted the 1958 Plymouth the best car. Toni Rothman, who volunteers at AACA headquarters, bought the awards. It was a lot of fun and informative talking to other car enthusiasts in Cuba.



Two cars under repair in someone's back yard...notice the Cuban jack stand!

Small street (alley) to Hemingway's favorite bar



Stan Redlus and John Ferrell standing outside a very small and very dusty car museum in the outskirts of Havana.



This was a "rest stop" along the "National Highway"



Studebaker "pickup"

Our next trip was to the Bay of Pigs. It was a 4 hour bus ride. There was only one place that the bus could stop to let us use a facility. Thank God we had been instructed to bring our own TP. As I said the infrastructure is pretty bad. The Bay of Pigs is an area on the south side of Cuba. It has a museum that celebrates the Cuban victory of the invasion.



Russian Tank at Bay of Pigs Museum

There are a few "motels" in the region, but it is a basic fishing village. We stayed over night in one of the motels.



Our cottage at Bay of Pigs—Window at right, bedroom; window at left, bathroom

The motel was individual cottages, with a main building that had a lobby, bar, and small restaurant. This was a real Cuban place. We had no towels, so I had to chase the help that were on bicycles, to get some. There was no chair to sit on, just two very old twin beds, a dresser, a closet, a TV (all Spanish), and a gecko on the wall, that tried to sell me insurance. It was relatively clean. Some of the other cottages did not have working A/C, some only had part A/C, one had no electric at all. The luggage was also all mixed up. Well it was only one night and dinner was at another paladar, and this one had entertainment. After a poor night's sleep, we got on the bus and headed for Varadero.

This is a peninsula that sticks out into the Atlantic ocean. It is filled with American style hotels. We stayed at an all inclusive that was good. There are a lot of Canadian's on vacation in this area of Cuba. It is a direct flight, and very inexpensive for Canadians . There is no trade restrictions between Canada and Cuba.



A paladar on a farm about a 2 hour ride, outside Havana

We did get to a Cuban auto restoration shop—Nostalgicar Restoration Shop. It was in a group of small buildings with outside working areas. They had 7 cars under various stages of restoration.



One of the cars was a 1959 Chevy that has had a Mercedes diesel and automatic transmission installed into it. The work was done very well. At the time we were there, the entire front clip was not mounted.



1959 Chevy with Mercedes Diesel engine under restoration.

The glass was very good. The car was to be painted when all was ready. This car has been seen on "What's my car Worth" TV show and other car forums. Most of the cars that are being restored are not done the way we have cars restored in America. Some of the cars under restoration, are going to be "taxis". The owner of the shop had a 1956 Chevy Belair. The interior and the paint were fantastic. It had a tall stance. He used a modified pick-up truck rear, and powered it by a Nissan diesel and a manual transmission with the shifter coming out of the floor.

The most popular car in Cuba is the Lada. The Lada is a Russian made car. They were brought in by the thousands. There is a stock pile of new parts as well as used parts for these cars. When I asked our Cuban guide what car he owns, he said that he does not have enough money to buy one, but if he could he would get a Lada. The local repair shops repair Lada's all the time. People can work extra jobs to make additional money, if they can find a job.



A Lada car at gas station/Bodega



A Lada Taxi



This is a very nice home in Cuba that has fallen into disrepair. It was a private home under Batista. We were told that the government was going to repair it, but as usual there are no funds available. We were also told on the tour that when completed, it would go to some government official.



Poor conditions in Cuba. Notice the decaying concrete in the foreground.

The government makes it very hard for business, as the government takes 51% off the top of all business income. The last night in Cuba, we had dinner in the old Dupont Estate, "Xanadu". The house is on a small bluff, over looking the Atlantic. The workmanship and attention to detail is not to be believed. The Dupont's were warned that it was time to leave Cuba. The house was used by the military during the revolution and is still owned by the government. One of our group is from the Philadelphia area chapter of the AACA of which Irene Dupont is a member. He told Toni, that he was a young man the last time he was at Xanadu. He told Toni about some specific details, like the most elaborate bar room that I have ever seen in a residence, located on the top floor, and asked her to take loads of pictures. Even at night the view was awesome. The Cuban people are happy and very friendly. The country is safe and there are no drugs on the streets. There is no court system. If you get arrested, you go to jail. We came home safe and happy.

Stan and Mary Redlus



**Answer to question as to who is the man in the black shirt....is Barry Meguiar.....From the TV Show Car Crazy.....
...Meguiar's Wax Products.**

A great big "Thank you" to Stan and Mary Redlus for taking the time to share their trip to Cuba—Excellent article and photos!!!