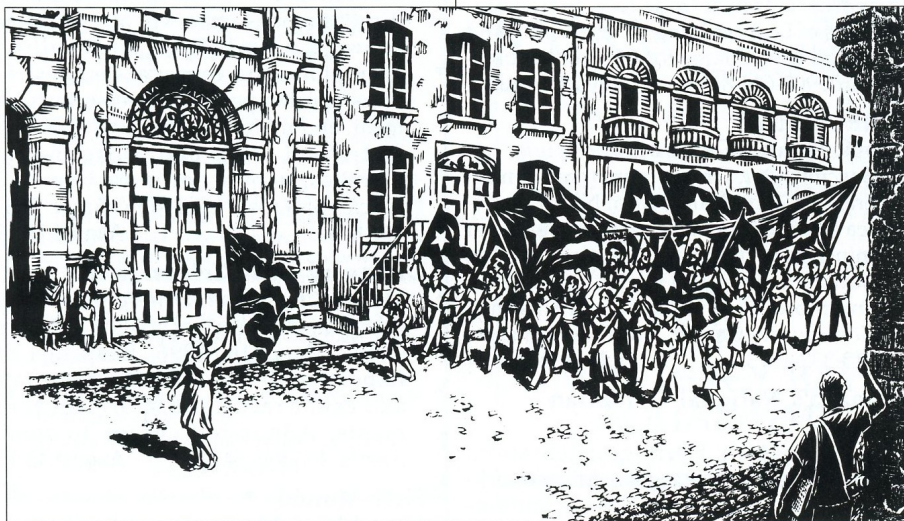


Stumbling into history



By Paul Martin

One of the more persistent travel itches is our fascination with things historical. For years, literary history has been a motivation for my own travels. As a Hemingway-infatuated English B.A., I journeyed to Paris long ago in a suitably shabby houndstooth check sports coat and stood before Shakespeare and Company, the Left Bank bookstore hang-out of Hemingway, Joyce, and other literati. I had someone snap a photo-

graph of me, one hand shoved into the pocket of that ratty jacket, my aspiring-writer's beard and stern expression intended to convey a certain depth and seriousness. (Still have the picture. Still have the coat!)

Usually we file past history's icons in reverential silence, then head home with our clutch of memories and brochures. But on occasion, encounters with history veer sharply from the serene. In those rare instances when world events overtake our travels, history can reach out and grab us by the lapels, and we may find ourselves, say, looking on as the unfolding petals of democracy are crushed beneath steel treads in Tiananmen Square, or observing the Soviet Union as it splits and falls apart like a worn-out boot. Events once seized me in such a fashion, on a trip I'd undertaken for frivolous reasons.

In April 1980, during the benign Carter years, I ventured to Cuba. I was drawn in part by a fondness for Graham Greene's little gem of a book, *Our Man in Havana*, a comic tale of a bumbling vacuum cleaner sales-

man entangled in a web of political intrigue. What I encountered in Cuba, however, was far from comic. I stumbled into the unfolding drama of the historic Mariel boat lift, when thousands of Cubans clambered aboard anything that would float and set sail for Key West and freedom.

I had gone to Cuba on a two-week economy package arranged by a leftward-leaning New York travel agency. Most of my companions were budding socialists, making a pilgrimage to the shrine that Che and Fidel built. From Miami, our little group left for Havana's José Martí Airport aboard an Air Cubana DC-3, a vintage craft that would have gladdened Sky King's heart, a great throbbing, roaring prop-job that never let you forget you were *flying*.

Our itinerary called for us to spend two days in Havana, followed by ten days visiting the rest of the island, then another two days in the capital at the end of our stay. On our first full day, we were given a tour of Havana. Our guide was a slender, dignified young black man with the un-Latino name of Eddie Brown, a former infielder on the Cuban national baseball team.

We set out to see the sights in a gleaming Cubatur bus, conspicuous among the dented and patched '58 Fords and Chevys left over from pre-revolution Cuba. On the carriage-width streets of Old Havana, we strolled past magnificently decrepit baroque apartments and the imposing Havana Cathedral, all motley and gray, a venerable whale marooned on a hostile shore. Back aboard our bus, we swept round the curving seawall drive of the Malecón. We passed the modern high rises of Linea Street and rolled through once exclusive neighborhoods where cream or pastel blue stucco villas—legacies of the old high-rolling days of *capitalismo*—shimmered under the relentless Cuban sun.

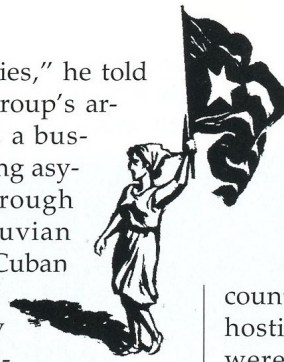
Suddenly our bus drew up at a wooden barricade that sealed off the street ahead. A grim-faced soldier waved our driver down a side street. Other soldiers were fanned out behind the barricade. We asked Eddie Brown what was up. "Some trouble

at one of the embassies," he told us. Just before our group's arrival in the country, a busload of Cubans seeking asylum had crashed through the gates of the Peruvian Embassy. A young Cuban guard had been killed in the fracas. Possibly to embarrass the Peruvians for granting asylum to the people aboard the bus, Castro announced that anyone wanting to emigrate to Peru would be allowed to enter the embassy undeterred.

Castro's designs were quickly derailed. Within 48 hours, some 10,000 people had packed the embassy grounds. Doctors, teachers, taxi drivers—Cubans of every stripe—all had abandoned everything they owned in a bid to escape their homeland. Those 10,000 Cubans were still inside the embassy grounds when our bus passed by, half a block away. Naturally, they had become the talk of the island. The issues raised in their attempt to flee—and their countrymen's reactions—were to lend a perspective to our group's tour of Cuba that no amount of sight-seeing could provide.

THE DAY AFTER OUR BUS HAD BEEN turned away from the street of the Peruvian Embassy, we left Havana aboard a Russian-built jetliner, bound for Santiago de Cuba at the opposite end of the island (hard by the hill Teddy Roosevelt climbed to national prominence). Sitting gingerly in my seat, I was trying to calm myself as I surveyed the misaligned doors of the jet's overhead compartments, the rivets that appeared to have been driven home with a hatchet, when a fellow passenger leaned across and whispered that the body of the young soldier killed at the embassy was aboard our flight, on its way home for burial.

That was only the first reminder of the extraordinary chapter of Cuban history we had happened into. As we wound our way back toward Havana by bus over the next few days, we stopped in all the larger cities: Holguín, Camagüey, Santa Clara, Cienfuegos. At each, we en-



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countered marchers displaying their hostility toward those Cubans who were seeking to leave the country. Schoolchildren paraded alongside adults. Dressed in their colorful uniforms, the sweet-faced youngsters carried placards depicting their countrymen in the Peruvian Embassy. *Los gusanos* the people were labeled—worms. "Let the worms leave," the children chanted.

Spontaneous demonstrations or government-mandated sham? I asked Eddie Brown what prompted the fervor we were witnessing.

"We are taught to share sacrifices in this country. Those who run away for an easy life are traitors."

I could not voice my thoughts: Can anyone be a traitor to totalitarian rule? And hadn't Castro's own reign produced a Cuba that required ever greater sacrifice? I knew the answers. I was aware as well that America's 20-year trade embargo had contributed to the average Cuban's need to sacrifice. Yet despite a continued U. S. policy of isolation, the people here still welcomed Americans with genuine warmth. I recall sitting by an old ebony gentleman in Cienfuegos at the local *casa de la trova*, site of evening get-togethers at which singers perform traditional ballads or songs of the revolution. During a lull the old man inquired where I was from. When I told him "los Estados Unidos," he stared at me for several seconds, unbelieving, then he held out a calloused hand.

THERE WERE MOMENTS OF DISCOVERY and magical scenes in this hauntingly beautiful land: Our group stopping for lunch in a fine old Spanish hotel, being ushered into the deserted dining room, where an elegantly dressed woman entertained us while we ate, playing Cole Porter on a grand piano and singing in a voice of smoke and velvet. The checkerboard fields of green and gold sugarcane.

The great bonfires of red and orange bougainvillea engulfing the sides of buildings. There was the powdery white beach of Guardalavaca, with its gamboling French tourists. And the boyishly hipped ballerinas we met at a swimming pool outside their academy in Camagüey; even standing still they exuded an ineffable grace. And always there were those densely flavorful cigars and the sugary-fragrant Havana Club rum, served up in daiquiris so cold that it hurt behind your eyes when you drank them.

Of all the memories, though, none is so vivid as our last day back in Havana. A mass rally had been called to demonstrate the solidarity of the Cuban people in the face of the international criticism that had erupted over the incident at the Peruvian Embassy, where thousands had been confined in abominable conditions for two weeks.

Castro had given the whole island the day off, and he promised that a million marchers would parade in protest against los gusanos. Vans with loudspeakers prowled the

streets, urging everyone to turn out. Lumbering cane trucks packed with workers poured in from the countryside. The vast Plaza de la Revolución, with its towering portrait of Che, was jammed.

But even as this tumult was occurring, our group waited quietly for the bus that would take us to the airport. Eddie Brown waited with us. I sat down beside him and posed a question. "Will our countries ever get back together?"

"It would be so simple," he replied, sitting up in his chair, his eyes alive with emotion. "Just grant us the right to exist on our own terms." It seemed the precise sentiment that 10,000 Cubans were attempting to express to Fidel.

So what then, I ask myself, does a firsthand view of history really yield? At the least, a glimpse of events unvarnished by official interpretation. Inescapably, the reminder that it is living people who profit or suffer from the intransigence of governments. And, occasionally, the impetus to try to understand views we do

not share. For myself, I found it easy to empathize with those Cubans seeking to leave their communist homeland. I wished sincerely that Eddie Brown could explain to me the reasons for choosing to stay.

That last day in Havana our group happened to be waiting in the lobby of the Hotel Sevilla, the setting for several scenes in Graham Greene's novel. I asked Eddie to take a photograph of me as a final souvenir. I was enthroned in an ornately carved mahogany armchair, surrounded by tropical greenery. I puffed on an outsize cigar and cleverly displayed a copy of *Our Man in Havana* in my lap.

I still have the picture.

Days after our group's departure, Fidel Castro widened the refugee crisis by proclaiming that anyone who chose to could leave the country. The ensuing Mariel Freedom Flotilla lasted five months and brought to the United States 125,000 Cubans. □

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