

# Cuba: People-to-People | Trip Report

March 14 – 25, 2018 | Written by Woody Wheeler



**Guides Woody Wheeler & Gustavo Puig, with Renata, Bill, Linda, Jim, Lori, Kit, Denise, Mary Kay, and Marsh.**

## **Day 1: Miami to Santa Clara**

As our plane from Miami descended below the cloud cover, the verdant agricultural landscape of Cuba came into view. Relatively small plots compared to those of U.S. agriculture were evident with palm trees around the edges. The first vintage cars appeared, as did horse-drawn carriages, bicycles, and motorcycles.

Customs went relatively smoothly and we soon met Gustavo, a friendly engaging man who was our main guide for the Cuban journey. Gustavo directed us to our spacious and comfortable bus, introduced the driver, Humberto, and beckoned us to board. Soon we were on our way to our first hotel, Las Caneyes, in Santa Clara, Cuba.

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Upon entering the park-like grounds of the Las Caneyes Hotel, we noticed large thatched roof tops on the various hotel buildings. The campus was adorned with artwork, fountains, and intricately-carved doorways. It was a delightful place to call home on our first night in Cuba. We celebrated with our first Cuban beers, wine, and a buffet-style dinner. A young woman entertained us by playing a diverse array of violin tunes; then a surprise fashion show troupe paraded through. This set the tone for the variety and frequency of live entertainment we experienced throughout our journey.

### Day 2: Santa Clara to Cayo Coco

We awoke to new sounds and sensations on our hotel grounds. One of the loudest sounds was emitted by a Helmeted Guineafowl perched on a nearby tree limb. Soon we also encountered our first Red-legged Thrush and our first endemic — a Cuban Blackbird.

Gustavo walked with us to a place near the hotel grounds called the Cacique Forest. Although Hurricane Irma toppled much of the forest, there were still a variety of birds present including American Redstart, Common Yellowthroat, Black-throated Blue, and Palm Warblers. Soaring above the lodge were Antillean Palm-Swifts. A Gray Catbird and several Cuban Pewees rounded off our first birding outing.



*Red-legged Thrush*

After a generous breakfast buffet, we took a short bus ride into Santa Clara to visit the Che Guevara memorial and museum. This attractive monument to one of Cuba's top revolutionary heroes was full of quotes, photos, and Che's personal items. Fidel Castro was quoted as saying of him: "Che was a master of war, and an artist of guerilla warfare." Che Guevara himself said: "We must come to the inevitable conclusion that the guerrilla fighter is a social reformer, that he takes up arms responding to the angry protest of the people against their oppressors, and that he fights in order to change the social system that keeps all his unarmed brothers in ignominy and misery."



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We then strolled the central plaza of Santa Clara. Its tallest building, the Santa Clara Libre Hotel, is still pock-marked with bullet holes from the battle between Che Guevara's troop and Batista supporters. The 1959 battle for Santa Clara proved to be a pivotal point in the Cuban revolution.

Today's lunch spot, Palador Aldabra, (the door-knocker) was in a lovingly restored building with a courtyard, plants and an abundance of historical décor. The owner told us about the restoration process, which earned him several awards. The food and atmosphere were delightful, including the guitarist/singer who entertained us.



In the afternoon, we drove through the Cuban countryside dotted with mostly small towns and one larger town named Moron. This city name elicited chuckles due to its English interpretation. Fields with crops of sugar, plantain, corn, cattle, pigs, and goats comprised the primary scenery.

On the way to the causeway to Cayo Coco, we stopped for a rest/birding break at Mayajigua, a resort complex with several ponds. Here we found a lone female Ring-necked Duck, two Flamingos, an Osprey, and several trees filled with nesting Little Blue Herons and Cattle Egrets with young.

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In the late afternoon we drove across a 17-mile long causeway to Cayo Coco, aka “Gardens of the King” or the “Cuban Keys.” Our first gulls (Laughing) and terns (Royal) were seen on this stretch along with Magnificent Frigatebirds and Roseate Spoonbills. Our day concluded with a pleasant Asian-themed meal and a walk in the refreshing sea breeze to our rooms overlooking the Caribbean Sea.

### Day 3: Cayo Coco

While waiting to start our day, a Cuban Blackbird flitted through the bustling hotel lobby with recorded salsa music in the background. We then departed the hotel to explore more remote natural areas in Cuba’s “Keys.” On the way we pulled over to view tidal flats populated by Reddish Egret, Tricolored and Little Blue Heron, and Roseate Spoonbills.

Farther on, we walked on the edge of a palm/mangrove salt marsh. Local guide Yadier and our main Cuban guide Gustavo teamed up to find our day’s first endemic — the Zapata or Cuban Sparrow. These handsome sparrows were soon joined by other Cuban or West Indian endemics including: Cuban Bullfinch, Cuban Vireo, and Oriente Warbler. Continuing eastward we found more endemics: Cuban Black Hawks with nestlings, and a colorful Cuban Tody.





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The latter perched on a thin branch at waist level just ten feet away, singing its staccato song, reminiscent of an old typewriter. This fabulous view of a truly charismatic bird will stay with us forever.

We struggled to find the Cuban Gnatcatcher in a brushy area. Only Marsh and Renata were fortunate enough to see them. Hundreds of Short-billed Dowitchers, a few Neotropical Cormorants, Great Egrets, and a White Ibis capped a highly productive morning. During the heat of the day we took lunch and a siesta back at the hotel. Some birded, finding a

covey of Zenaida Dove on the hotel grounds. Others swam in the ocean, and some of the group rested.

In the late afternoon, most of our party resumed birding on Guillermo Key and at Cave of the Wild Boar. On the way we encountered a large group of birds feeding on tidal flats near Hemingway's Bridge. Among them were Semipalmated and Black-bellied Plover, Short-billed Dowitcher, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Tricolored and Little Blue Heron. At the Boar's Cave, a unique night club in a cavern with birds inhabiting the grounds during the daytime, we found five Key West Quail Dove, Yellow-faced Grassquit, a Black-throated Blue Warbler, and a female American Redstart. This concluded a fine day of birding despite the area having been directly in the path of a recent major hurricane (Irma).

### Day 4: Cayo Coco to Trinidad and Los Helechos

We departed from our beachside resort to travel across Cuba from the northern to the southern coast at Trinidad. During this four-hour trip, Gustavo played the thought-provoking biographical documentary "Fidel" for us. Meanwhile, our journey included a stretch of the main east-to-west Cuban highway traveled by Fidel and Che to celebrate the victory of the revolution in 1959, and much later to mourn Fidel's passing in a three-day funeral procession from Havana to Santiago in 2016.



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Our route branched southwest to one of the island's oldest cities, Trinidad. Here we walked the cobblestone streets past brightly-colored buildings with large historic cathedrals looming on the horizon. Lunch at the Paladar Vista Gourmet lived up to its name. Situated on a perch on a hill overlooking Trinidad's Plaza Mayor, red-tiled roof tops, and cathedral, the view was outstanding. A welcome breeze blew through while we enjoyed the attractive, well-prepared food.

After lunch, we walked to the patio bar La Canchanchagra that serves a drink made of various fruit juices and rum, accompanied by a house salsa band. Then we strolled through a craft market with unique hand-made items sold by charmingly effective sales people.

In the late afternoon, we drove 2,500 feet high in the Sierra de Escambray Mountains to our lodge at Los Helechos (the ferns). We were greeted by hotel staff with Cuba Libre drinks in hand. A pleasant meal followed in this lovely montane forest setting.



### Day 5: Los Helechos and Vicinity

We awoke to a beautiful sunrise and cool temperatures. Most of our group walked and birded on the grounds before breakfast. They found the Cuban Oriole, Cuban Trogon, and Cuban Emerald hummingbird. After breakfast, we met our local guide Yoani, a former college history professor. On our morning walk with him, we had multiple close looks at Cuban Trogons, a Cuban Tody, and several Black-whiskered Vireos. In addition, we had scope views of two Red-tailed Hawks and a sky view of a Broad-tailed Hawk.

We then shifted to the human cultural mode by visiting an art museum that exclusively featured Cuban artists. The paintings, photos, and sculptures here were

outstanding in a building with scenic views of the surrounding landscape.



After lunch on another pleasant restaurant patio with a refreshing, cool breeze overlooking



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mountain scenery, we travelled to the Colorado's coffee plantation. Here we met an amiable Cuban family that welcomed us in to their home and patiently answered our questions. We tasted their delicious peanut butter honey bars and fresh bananas. Most everyone purchased coffee and/or the aforementioned bars. This visit provided an insightful glimpse into the lives of Cuban farmers.

### Day 6: Los Helechos to Playa Larga



In the early morning we drove downhill, back to Trinidad and between the Sierra de Escambray Mountains and the royal blue/aqua marine waters of the Caribbean as we headed west. This scenic drive took us through the major city of Cienfuegos, named after another key revolutionary hero, Camilo.

Our next stop was in the countryside at a wet palm meadow where a colony of Fernandina's Flickers resided. They emerged from their nest holes in palms with the top fronds blown off by Hurricane Irma. Some made forays to find and then deliver food to their families in the nest hole cavities. We found at least three pairs of this beautiful golden-tinted endemic flicker.



A few miles ahead we met Orlando, our guide for the morning. After making introductions, Orlando walked a few steps to the edge of the forest and promptly found a group of Cuban Parakeets and Cuban Parrots feeding on berries, preening and perching. Just a few steps down the trail, two Cuban Parrots flew over us and perched conspicuously on a branch, flashing their rainbow-colored tails.

Orlando then led us to a palm snag with a cavity nest. He tried to lure out a Bare-legged Owl without success. Then he led us to another nearby snag and this time



succeeded in coaxing the owl out of the nest chimney by tapping on the trunk. It perched nearby where we all had extended looks at it. In addition, we saw a Black-throated Green Warbler and several La Sagra's Flycatchers.

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From here we took a short drive to an area where Bee Hummingbirds can be found. At first, we found instead a Cuban Emerald hummingbird. A pair of West Indian Woodpeckers perched on an abandoned settlers cabin. Then, Orlando called out and pointed to a Bee Hummingbird moving from shrub to tree to a power line where it eventually perched, flashing its crimson gorget in the sun.

Last but not least, we stopped at Cuevo de los Peces to see a covey of seven Blue-headed Quail Doves. The beauty of these birds, with their exquisitely blue-

patterned heads, was breathtaking.

Prior to lunch, we visited the Bay of Pigs museum. We were awed by the scale and the human loss that occurred due to this invasion and several other attacks staged beforehand in the U.S. attempt to topple the Cuban government. Cubans take great pride in their ability to successfully withstand these attacks and defend their long-fought independence.

We stopped in the town of Playa Larga and had a fine lunch in a restaurant overlooking the Bay of Pigs from an open-air balcony. This town is now a lively beach resort destination. In the afternoon, we had siesta time, during which a number of us took a refreshing swim in the Bay of Pigs. This former battle field is now a fabulous gradual sand beach with clear warm waters.

In the evening we heard an informative presentation by Frank Molina, director of Zapata Peninsula National Park. He shared with us the biological wonders of the park he manages and the many programs and partnerships employed to help maintain its ecological health. At 5,000 square miles in size, Zapata National Park comprises the largest wetlands in the Caribbean.

Dinner at the intimate but lively Milly's Café was thoroughly enjoyable. Several musicians entertained us with well-known Cuban and Latin hits including, of course, *Guantanamera*. Eventually, they lured us out of our seats to sing and dance with them. What a festive way to wrap up a sensational day!

### Day 7: Playa Larga to Soroa

Today we started by walking from our Playa Larga hotel to nearby roadside habitat areas with a new local guide, Hernando. This short stroll was remarkably productive, starting with a pairing of two West Indian endemics on the same tree branch: a Cuban Crow and Cuban Parrot.



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Nearby, several Neotropical warblers appeared, including an Ovenbird, Magnolia Warbler, and Palm Warbler. Continuing along the road we saw our first Great Lizard-Cuckoo and two Cuban Green Woodpeckers. One of the latter flared up its red crest, contrasting with its lime green mantle in a stunning display. Only a few steps further on this very birdy stretch we saw a Cuban Pygmy Owl that stared at us with its penetrating yellow eyes.



After this spectacular start to the day, we shifted once again into cultural mode by visiting the Korimako fine arts school. According to its director, the purpose of this school is to enhance the natural creative talent of its students who were between 17 – their 30s. The school is 90% supported by the Cuban government and 10% by sales of school recordings and artwork.



We then enjoyed a sophisticated short concert of instrumental and vocal jazz. Afterward we asked questions of the performers, who told us that their music reflected many styles of music ranging from

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traditional jazz to new age and gospel. Their outstanding musical performance was followed by a brief dance performance by another group. The second act was innovative like the first, but also athletic. We were inspired by the quality and creativity of the performances by these young artists.

Just down the street from the creative arts school, we pulled up to a home in a residential area where Gustavo announced a “surprise.” Intrigued, we greeted the home owner and proceeded to their jardin (garden) where multiple hummingbird feeders paired with appropriate vegetation attracted Cuban Emerald and Bee Hummingbirds. Here we had close encounters with the world’s smallest bird, the Bee Hummingbird and the Cuban Emerald. To further enhance the experience, a Louisiana Waterthrush flew into a shrub in the jardin. This was a surprise indeed and a very special one at that.



It was now time to depart for Havana and Soroa. Along the way we took a rest stop near a series of ponds where we had a terrific look at a Purple Gallinule in full sunlight hopping across lily pads as it pursued and caught a frog.

Our rich and full morning gave us a good appetite for a wonderful restaurant, 11 Divino, another appealing open-air place with a jardin behind. After a delicious meal and pleasant stroll in the jardin we drove westward from Havana to Finca Vigia, one of Ernest Hemingway’s homes. He spent some 20 years in this commodious home with a sweeping view of Havana and lush gardens all around. Hemingway alternated staying in Cuba with his home in Ketchum, Idaho. Tatiana, our informative tour guide, answered every question we had. Hemingway was pictured with Fidel Castro in one exhibit. Apparently, Castro was sympathetic to the author as was shown by his decision to leave the home and its grounds as a tourist attraction after the revolution. Fidel read some of Hemingway’s books. His favorite was *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In Hemingway’s writing perch on the top floor, a Royal manual typewriter and photo of a hunting expedition were on display.



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We then proceeded to the forested hills of Soroa on the Soviet-built freeway that led to a smaller road that wound through the forested hills leading to our hotel. The hotel itself was a former castle on a hilltop with a 360-degree view of the surrounding mountains or mogotes — karst limestone formations. While waiting for our baggage to be delivered to our rooms, we savored a welcome drink and watched as several Gray Kingbirds flew overhead and perched on a bare tree branch.

An excellent dinner at the castle followed with spectacular views all around. We tallied our bird and species list and retired for the night as a refreshing cold front blew in, making for excellent sleeping conditions.



### **Day 8: Parque Nationale Vinales, Organic Farm, Vinales, Tobacco Farm**

Early on a mild, partly cloudy day, we set out for Parque Nacional Vinales Sendero entre Valles y Montanas (between valleys and mountains). Here in a pasture surrounded by

wooded hillsides with steep karst mogote formations, we heard a Cuban Solitaire singing high on the ridge. Eventually, Gustavo found it and we enjoyed watching it sing its beautiful, resonant song amplified by the rocky cliffs below. While searching for a closer Solitaire, Gustavo came across a group of five Cuban Trogons in a small area at the base of the mogotes. Renata referred to this as a “triumph of trogons.” One called repeatedly, its tail vibrating with each vocalization.



*Cuban Trogon photos by Lori Cohen*

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We then searched for warblers — particularly the endemic Yellow-headed Warbler. In a complex of shrubs, we first spotted a Black-and-white Warbler, then a Yellow-throated before Gustavo called out the Yellow-headed Warbler. It flitted through the brush offering peek-a-boo views. More warblers joined the party: Palm, American Redstart, and Yellow-rumped. Then came several Cuban Bullfinches.

As clouds moved in and our first rain drops in Cuba fell, we retreated to the bus. By the time we arrived at the organic farm, the rain storm was over. We savored a fresh, locally-grown, organic lunch surrounded by gardens and mountain scenery, complemented with a Pina Colada.

After this outstanding meal, we toured the organic farm with Renaldo, a local guide and farmer. He encouraged us to sniff and taste plants along the way. At one point he showed us Bija seeds used to color foods, and formerly by indigenous peoples for face paint and lipstick. Much effort was made in this garden to compost, avoid pesticides, and to keep everything organic. Renaldo was clearly passionate about working in such a beautiful setting.

In the afternoon, we searched for the last of three Cuban endemic warblers amid pine trees. It did not take long for Gustavo to find them high in the canopy.

Eventually the Olive-capped Warblers came down to lower levels where we could see them. Across from the pines, we had the best look yet at a Yellow-headed Warbler.

In the mid-afternoon we went into the town of Vinales to explore its shops and craft market near the central plaza. We found gifts to take home and to share with the school kids on the next day. We then drove to a scenic viewpoint overlooking a valley with mogotes behind where a live band performed a blend of Cuban and Gospel music. Some in our group were inspired to dance.





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Our final activity of the day was a stop at a tobacco farm where we learned about the cigar-making process from a grower's point of view. Bill sampled a cigar and several others tried their local coffee before we bid farewell to this farmer who expressed his hope that trade with the U.S. will resume.

On the drive back to our hotel, we spotted Brown Pelicans and a Barn Swallow out the bus window over several large ponds. We spent the remainder of the afternoon relaxing at our beautiful hotel before heading to dinner and debriefing from another eventful day.



### **Day 9: Soroa, Orchid Garden, Las Terrazas, Pig Farm, Havana**

Our breakfast put us in an especially good mood when the chef made us pancakes topped with Cuban honey. Afterward we walked the short but scenic distance to the Orchid Garden. There we met our guide who capably interpreted the orchids, birds and history of this elaborately landscaped garden.

By mid-morning we boarded the bus for the short trip to Las Terrazas, an eco-community and vast restoration project. An accomplished



salsa/rock band greeted us with live danceable music. We then met our local guide Otis for the next field trip. He turned up new birds at nearly every turn of the road in this forest, lake, and mountain setting. Highlights of this walk included a brilliantly-colored Western Spindalis (formerly Streaked Tanager) and a Tennessee Warbler.

Next, we visited an elementary school that Otis' son attends. The vice principal and several teachers spoke with us about the curriculum. A group of students and their teacher clustered around Lori as she read English to them from their workbooks. Our group generously donated gifts, games, musical instruments, and school supplies. The teachers and administrators were most appreciative.

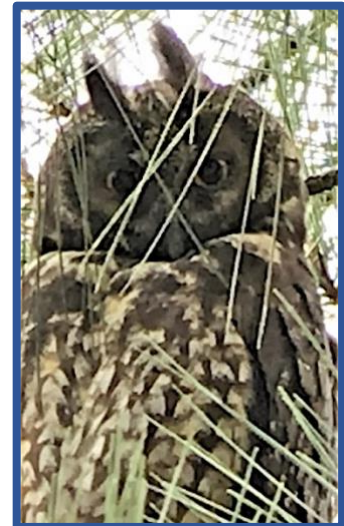
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Lunch took place at the historic Buena Vista Café — not the social club of musical fame — but instead a picturesque, well-preserved building that goes by the same name. As we sat down to eat, another very good band proceeded to play music for us. We will miss these impromptu concerts, which happened with great frequency at tourist points of interest in Cuba.

After lunch we walked through a grove of tall pines where Otis first spotted one, then two, and finally with Bill's help, three Stygian Owls! We all enjoyed scope views of all three and took many photos. Seeing them at all was a treat; seeing three of them at relatively close range was incredible.



Stygian Owl by Bill Drucker

Our final stop before heading to Havana was at a pig farm where a sizeable number of Cuban Grassquits were present, along with a Shiny Cowbird and Killdeer. By late afternoon we settled in for the ride to Havana where we arrived at the Melia Cohiba hotel.

### Day 10: Havana

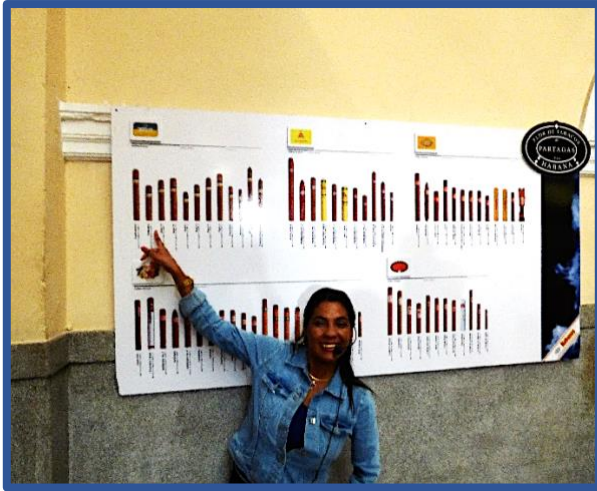
What better way to experience Havana than to start the day off with a tour of a cigar factory? We were met at Partagas Cigar factory by a tour guide. One of 49 cigar factories in Cuba and one of eight in Havana, this factory has 530 employees that turn out 27,000 cigars per day. The leading markets for these cigars are #1 Spain, #2 France, and, #3 Switzerland. We purchased cigars to bring back home.





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Following this fascinating visit, we went to Gustavo's favorite museum in Havana: the Museo de Bella Artes. Here we had another tour guide, who was well versed in art history, take us through the Cuban contemporary art exhibits. We were genuinely impressed by these artists and with the tour guide. Some of us purchased reprints in the gift store. From here, we took a short walk near Havana's bustling waterfront to our restaurant in a very old building with tall, narrow, winding staircases. The food and atmosphere enhanced by open air views of the city and its harbor were delightful.

We strolled directly from the restaurant into Havana's central historic district with Gustavo interpreting along the way. Street performers ranging from kissing girls in elaborate colorful dress, to a troupe of dancers on stilts, to a man in costume with over-sized cigars, captivated us. A restoration effort is underway to preserve some of Havana's colonial architecture. This bodes well for the city's future.

Our final stop was at Havana's huge crafts market where we found ample gifts and souvenirs. The salesmen and women were persuasive; most spoke English. Items for sale ranged from hats and shirts to jewelry, musical instruments, clothing, and an extensive selection of paintings.

In the late afternoon we took a break in our comfortable hotel, then headed out to dinner at a place that featured fresh, well-prepared seafood. After dinner, we attended the Buena Vista Social Club show near our hotel. This was a



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hyper-energetic, flamboyant showcase of Latin music and dance. It was spellbinding and put an exclamation point on our Cuban cultural experience.

### Day 11: Havana and Homeward

On our last morning in Cuba, we visited the expansive Colon Cemetery, established in the early 1800s. We were joined by an excellent guide who took us down the central row of mausoleums. He interpreted the meanings behind the funeral art. Among the great many buried here was the famous singer in the Buena Vista Social Club, Ibrahim Ferrer.

After our tour, Gustavo arranged for a small fleet of classic cars to pick us up and take us on a driving tour of Havana. This was a fun, nostalgic ride through Cuba's largest city in shiny pink and red Pontiacs and Chevys reminiscent of our childhoods. We drove through attractive residential neighborhoods, diplomat row, and through Havana's main metropolitan park, crossing the Almendaras River.

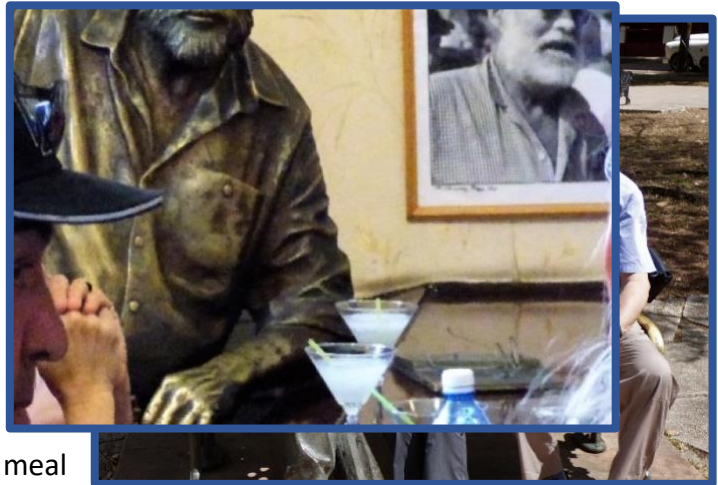
We made a quick stop to see a statue of John Lennon and the words to the song *Imagine*.





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Our final meal together was at La Mora Lejas Restaurant, a leafy, intimate place with delicious food, including fresh lobster. We toasted our successful, eventful journey and thanked our hard-working, dedicated Cuban guide, Gustavo, as well as our terrific driver, Humberto.

In the afternoon we strolled the capitol grounds, went into the Floridian Bar that Ernest Hemingway frequented, and admired the elegant, well-restored

former Bacardi Rum headquarters building. Then we strolled Avenida Prada's pedestrian walkway lined with vendors and artists. This was a fitting finale for our journey in this diverse, stimulating country.

When asked for adjectives describing their impression of Cuba, here are words that our group shared:

**Cuba is ...**

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Hopeful | Musical | Full of contrasts | Spirited | Friendly | Welcoming | Resourceful | Proud | Full of potential | Passionate | Enigmatic



One band we heard perform has a song entitled “A Cuba Yo Volvere” (To Cuba I will return). Given our positive impressions from this visit, this may well be the case.

*Report by Woody Wheeler. All photos by Woody Wheeler except for two by Lori Cohen and Bill Drucker*