

Cuba: Day 2 — Walk through heat of Havana proves gorgeous, dangerous

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...by the light of day—

The atmosphere in my room at the Hotel Caribbean on the Prado is cool like a fall evening at home, and I lie awake in a state of disbelief.

“Am I really in Cuba?”

I put my hand out in the dim light of the early morning to reassure myself that I wasn't just floating through some vivid dream.

After 20-minutes of trying to fathom the reality of being in Cuba, I sat up and put my feet on the cool floor and smiled to myself as a feeling of giddiness welled within me.

The cold shower was unbearable after the air-conditioned sleep. I danced in and out of the spray of water just enough to wash the soap off. It would be the last time I would feel so chilled during my stay in Havana.

I dressed in canvas shorts, Chaco sandals and a North Face sport shirt that is supposed to wick away moisture. I put my silver-frame sunglasses on my head like a good American tourist and opened the door to the blast furnace of a Havana summer morning.

I'm not much for riding in American elevators, much less small foreign elevators that only hold two people and three pieces of luggage, so I descended four flights of stairs into a 47-year-time-warp.



Timothy Alex Akimoff/Statesman Journal
A barrio, or neighborhood, near the Prado Promenade comes alive in the hours just before evening.

The series

Reporter Tim Akimoff begins his adventures in Cuba by going clubbing deep into the humid night.

Coming tomorrow: Tim joins a group of children and adult chaperones on an adventure out of the city.

White-shirted, bow-tied doormen and bartenders scurried around the lobby of the hotel. They served up breakfast, eggs, dry toast and cafe con leche, to European tourists who still smelled of rum and sweat.

Outside the tall glass doors, the white disk in the pale blue sky bore down hard on black street cleaners and an Afro-Cuban woman washing the marble sidewalk next to the hotel. A faded, red 1953 Chevy sat in the street, its chrome gleaming almost white in the morning light.

The smell of a cigarette burning nearby seared my nostrils, a reminder that I'm no longer in the safe, smoke-free corridors of America. The breakfast was unremarkable, though the cafe con leche tasted better than the burnt coffee at Starbucks.

A second cup costs a peso, which at \$1.21 to the convertible peso, or CUC, is expensive for a third-world country, but it's early in my trip and I didn't yet realize how little the depleted dollar would buy in Havana.

My sweat-wicking shirt was no match for the heat, even in the semi-air conditioned lobby of the Hotel Caribbean, which is a mid-level priced hotel, and one I only stayed at for two days. I was already pulling my shirt away from my damp skin.

With my digital Canon slung over my shoulder, I left the hotel to take a look at city life along the Prado Promenade. A midnight black doorman smiled a brilliant grin as he opened the door as I stepped out into another level of heat and intensity.

The Malecon is busy, with none of the romance from last night. Two fishermen with inner tubes and fishing poles display their catch of silver mackerel. A 1954 Buick on a raised suspension careens across an intersection, reminding me that pedestrians have no right-of-way in Havana. Huge, finned Cadillacs, Chevys and Buicks in colors that match the chipped and faded pastels on the buildings make me want to slick my hair back, roll the sleeves up on a cardigan sweater and do the twist.

Tourists pose in front of El Morro, the fortress that has stood watch over Havana harbor since it was built between 1589 and 1630. The white walls are graying with time and the rusted cannons haven't fallen silent for a century or more, no longer needed to repel pirates seeking the gold of the Spanish empire.

Along the Malecon, Afro-Cuban children swim in the murky harbor water, shirtless and in jean shorts. Men and women

hold hands as they walk, sharing bits of information in quiet whispers and giggles, they stop and flash me a serious look when I point my camera their way. Some ask for money, but dollars don't do much in Cuba these days. When they find out I don't have any euros, Swiss franks or Canadian dollars, they continue on their way.

I take a brief rest from the merciless sun under a Cristal umbrella. The waiter only speaks Spanish, but I know enough to order a cerveza and that it will cost me about \$1.50. The beer is cold, light and perfect. For a fleeting moment I'm caught in between the two-worlds of Havana as a few modern Audis and Volkswagens speed along the Malecon and the clean tables and cold, expensive beer remind me of other tropical tourist traps.

A left turn from the Malecon takes me into the barrios of Northeast Havana. Garbage littered streets smell like an open sewer. Small markets operate out of barred windows; cobblers, stray dogs and dirty children live beneath cracked colonial buildings that yawn with age and weariness. The colors are faded to something south of pastel, a unique Caribbean hue, and next week's color du jour at Home Depot. The faded blues, yellows and reds are warm and tropical, not like the cold, communist concrete I'm used to from travels in Eastern Europe.

I work my way toward the Plaza de La Revolucion, the well-known backdrop for Castro's 4-hour speeches. A stern Jose Marti, poet, journalist and revolutionary, sits near a building bearing the outlined image of Che Guevara. The masses of Habaneros do not descend on the plaza on this day. In fact, unbeknownst to me at this time, Castro is suffering from a bleeding stomach, for which he will go into surgery several days later, giving control of Cuba to his brother, Raul, for the first time. It will usher in what many Cubans believe to be the end of their suffering.

Cuban busses transport people in an unreliable, sardine-like fashion. Converted 18-wheelers pull massive trailers that look like trains in India or passenger ferries in Bangladesh.

I walk back through China town, a barrio curiously devoid of Chinese. I would later learn that there are Chinese in Cuba, though they've intermarried and do not retain their Asian features. A Chinese waiter I meet does not appear to be Asian until he dons an Asian cloak, but his Spanish is impeccable, as is his understanding of Cuban culture, for he is in every way a Habanero.

The Capitolio is a replica of the American capital, but today it

houses a museum and an Internet café. It is a popular hangout for Cuban young people, who wait in long-lines for a chance to spend half their monthly income to communicate electronically with each other and the outside world. The steps of the building are covered with tourists dehydrated by the dusty, decrepit concrete streets of Havana. They sip bottled water and stare at the few royal palms that stand like sentinels along the building.

By the end of the day I've covered at least a 10-mile swath of the city. I've seen statues, scantily clad chicas, teachers, students, pro-Castro graffiti, propaganda and churches turned into museums. I've eaten sparingly, unable to find more than pomme frits (French fries), a cola and a couple of beers.

At one point I stumbled on the Romeo y Julieta cigar factory, but it is a holiday. A nearby government shop sells every kind of Cuban cigar, but I'm not sure I can afford the \$20 price tag for a Cohiba.

On my way out, several men approach and ask if I'm interested in purchasing some cheaper cigars. I know better, but I follow them to an apartment several blocks away, where they show me several boxes of high-quality cigars. I ask them in broken Spanish if these cigars are the real deal.

One man leaves for several minutes and returns with a wrinkled old man with brown tobacco-stained fingers. He smiles a toothless grin with bloodshot eyes and mimics rolling the cigars for a few minutes until I get the idea that he's the one who got these cigars. That's the only proof I need.

I glanced around the rock walls of this unfurnished cave of an apartment while a woman in curlers peeped over the edge of the balcony looking for secret police. The room is sparse, devoid of personal items except a bunch of small rum bottles. I'm not supposed to be in their house because the government doesn't want me to see how Cubans really live.

After much negotiating, I leave with five packs of Partagas cigarillos. My new friends steal me out of their apartment and they disappear as I hit the street. I'm lost; I've got a bag full of cigars and nothing with which to light them and I'm thirsty.

When I do find water, it seems excessively expensive so I opt for another beer.

My heart leaps a little with familiarity as I find the shaded promenade near my hotel. My hunger pangs underline the frugality of life in Havana. I'm determined to get a shower and go in search of good food.

With some confusing instructions from the hotel clerk, I find the Bodeguita de Medio, a bar frequented by the likes of Hemingway, famous boxers and politicians. I order a mojito, cristianos y moros, (rice and beans) fried plantains and a cucumber salad. Everything tastes wonderful if it tastes at all. The mojito, with fresh mint and ice cubes, seems to refresh away the taste of poverty that coats my mouth like dust.

Finding a light for my after-dinner cigar proves to be a difficult task as a light-skinned Cuban uses his last two matches fruitlessly against a soft breeze off Havana harbor. But he runs off and returns moments later with a lighter. He stands in front of me to block the wind for several minutes until he's sure my cigar is lit. Then he motions for me to turn the cigar in my mouth as I pull the smoke through it. He indicates that the cigar will burn smoothly, and it does for the length of my 45-minute stroll down the Malecon.