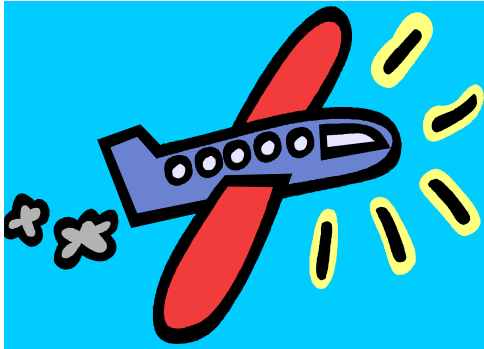


## Rijumati's Travels – Part X: Cuban Cameos, and home at last...



Dear Friends,

I have arrived back in Europe, Barcelona to be precise, after more than a year of absence. It does indeed feel strange, and it is certainly a lot colder than Cuba!



I had to get a flight back from Havana to Madrid since sadly the freight ship on which I had a confirmed and paid-up berth was cancelled, probably as a result of the poor economic situation. Thus I was left quite literally "high and dry" since the only options that the agent could offer me meant either abandoning a friend in Cuba for almost a week of our holiday (changing her flight was prohibitively expensive) or waiting another 6

weeks, neither of which I was prepared to do.

As luck would have it when Iberia flight 6620 reached Madrid, the airport was closed due heavy snow so we were re-routed to Barcelona, the original port of call of my ship and my intended destination. There followed immense confusion all round as the multitudes of re-directed passengers from Madrid tried to figure out what to do next. At one point I ended up running down an up-escalator in order to reconnect with my luggage! This I eventually managed to do and then I just bolted for the city leaving the airport heaving with huge queues of bored, confused and stranded passengers.

### **Back in Europe**

It feels very symbolic to have arrived back in Europe at Barcelona. Supposedly it is the city to which Columbus returned from America, or more precisely Cuba, after his first voyage of discovery in 1492. So I am making an equivalent journey as I return to discover Europe, and more to the point who I have become. How appropriate! So far, though it is wet, cold and expensive I am enjoying being back in Barcelona, it must be over 20 years since I last visited, and they have managed to build just a little bit more of Gaudi's glorious Sagrada Familia cathedral in that time.

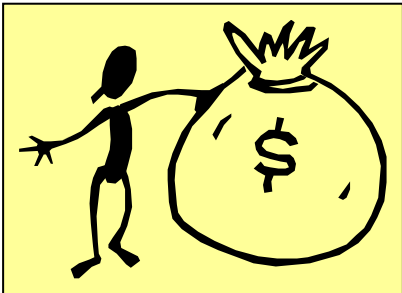
Below is a long piece about the adventures we had in Cuba, an amazing and idiosyncratic country which at this very time celebrates 50 years of the Socialist Revolution. This is probably my last travel letter, though perhaps I will find something worthwhile to say about the Return Journey.

Looking forward to seeing many of you soon,

Love  
Rijumati

## Cuban Cameos

Arriving in Cuba, more so than many of the places I have visited, is a shock. For many days I felt a jaw-dropping "how on earth does this country work?" The first and most pressing issue was money. At Havana's Jose Marti airport none of the ATMs would accept any of our debit or credit cards, and though we had a stash of US\$ and Euros, they wouldn't be enough to cover the whole duration of our stay. In the phlegmatic mood of the budget traveller I just put the problem aside assuming that somehow we would find a solution.



In fact money in Cuba is a universally confusing and troublesome. The financial infrastructure feels more like the 1970s than the 21st century, with long queues emanating from the banks which are managed by a major domo who billets you to the appropriate cashier, all of whom are young Cuban beauties. It turns out that the international Cirrus/Maestro debit card that I have used in every country I've visited for many years is only accepted in one place in the whole of Cuba - Guantanamo Bay where there are 5 of them!

Since visiting the USA's expatriate torture camp didn't seem like the ideal activity for a romantic holiday (and I doubt the immigration controls would let me in anyway!) I decided that I would have to bite the bullet and make a cash advance on my MasterCard, thereby not only incurring Cuba's crushing 11% tax on dollars (they only accept MasterCard payments in dollars) but being stung by the interest and exchange rate charges from my own bank. The whole deal was a killer, leaving me wishing we'd just brought a large wodge of Euros with us. I consoled myself by reflecting that in this country that is desperately strapped for foreign cash we were certainly doing our bit to support the regime, in which, whatever one's political persuasion, the high literacy and world-beating healthcare seem more honest and worthy than in many developing countries.

The other utterly bizarre aspect of Cuban money is that there are two currencies, the National Peso (peso), used by the majority of the populace and the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC), used primarily by the tourists. I must admit that I never really understood how this worked or why it was even necessary, despite a long explanation from Rafael, a fluent English speaker who worked as an engineer for the Havana port authority. Of course the definitions are clear enough 24 peso nacional = 1 CUC. But when is one currency used rather than the other, does one pay the equivalent price in either currency, why are some shops purely in CUC and others in peso, how can one tell which currency is being quoted? These and other arcana of the dual currency system led to the classic newly arrived tourist cock-up of paying 24 times over the odds for our first taxi trip - since I gave the young black Cuban driving an old heap of a Chrysler from the 1950s 10 CUC, instead of 10 peso for a short hop up Avenida Rampa. His eyes rolled a little as he accepted his windfall ride of the day, and I felt very stupid later on. But hey, isn't it nice to feel that you really made someone's day!

From pizza to croissants, from Cuban beer to bus tickets, I never really knew in which currency and how much to expect to be charged. And of course add to this the opportunistic pricing that all Latin American countries practice for the unsuspecting or

even the suspecting tourist and one has a recipe for confusion and large infusions of one's hard won greenbacks into Cuban public and private coffers. It is just part of the deal; however you play it a visit to Cuba is going to be expensive!

### Malecon Meanderings



**The Malécon in Havana**

No vista is quite as evocative of Havana as a walk along the Malécon. The Atlantic breakers spraying over the paving stones make for an exciting if perilous stroll as one gazes at the gentle curve of the bay along Centro and Vieja Habana to the Castle and the entrance to the harbour. And of course there are the jiniteros, or touts, to contend with, each with a story and wanting to make a buck or more out of the rich tourist money walking their streets.

Miguel approached us as we were sitting on the massive concrete seawall reading about the history of Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution. He was racially negro, handsome with bright eyes, a little cap and addressed me as "friend." We started talking about Cuba and what it was like for a young man living in Havana. "We are in a prison" was one of the first things he said, unprompted by anything we had said. And it isn't hard to see why he felt that way, since the prospects of travelling outside Cuba were very remote for Miguel and his contemporaries. Owning a camera or mobile phone were largely out of his reach as he explained that he could only earn 12 peso per hour, equivalent of US\$0.50. We talked for a while about the changes taking place in Cuba and I asked the big question that everyone thinks about here "What will happen when Fidel dies?" Miguel had no real answer to this, anymore than others to whom I spoke to about it, but it was clear that a young man like him was desperate for an opportunity to break out of the limits of a world in which he felt trapped. In a way he was really just facing the archetypal challenge that every young man faces in his life, how to get out into the world and "prove" himself.

Had he lived 50 years earlier perhaps he would have been part of the heroic band of 82 revolutionaries who set sail from Venezuela for Cuba in 1956 to liberate the country from its oppressors. As it was Miguel was a grandchild of the "Revolucion" and looking for a way out. After 20 minutes of seemingly innocent and friendly exchange of ideas and experiences the "invitation" that I had been expecting finally arrived, "I can take you to the Buena Vista Social Club very near to here, just two blocks." The warmth and rapport were by this time so strong that I almost accepted his offer, which no doubt would have included an expectation of some sort of payment. But in the end, intuition was tuned in to the scenario more strongly so we just thanked Miguel and continued with our walk along the Malécon. He seemed quite unperturbed and just started chatting up two pretty girls sitting a few metres away from us, clearly Miguel was an incorrigible opportunist!

The Malécon is utterly emblematic of modern Cuba; here one will see the wonderful contradictions of this country that seems to live in a time warp. Alongside grand crumbling colonial buildings from the fin de siècle are communist era high rises, many of them quite passable compared to the Soviet functionalism I had seen in Siberia. Rolling along the broad rutted carriageway are the iconic Chryslers and Chevrolets still going after nearly 50 years, belching out clouds of unburned petrol fumes, being overtaken by sleek new Peugeots and even the odd Toyota and Mercedes. The gap between richer and poorer is opening up even here in Communist Cuba. And so the Malécon is an entrance into this unique and idiosyncratic world.



Like money, shopping in Cuba is not an easy affair. Trying to find somewhere to buy a few rolls or croissants for breakfast can take several hours of walking around looking into the front windows of seemingly residential buildings where one can spy the hint of goods for sale in a dark and dingy room. Whilst this can be rather frustrating there is something wonderfully refreshing about the absence of the globalised shopping mall. Most striking is the complete absence of advertising hoardings; what billboards there

are all dedicated to lauding some aspect of the Revolution. Here one will find no Gap, no Starbucks and no MacDonalDs, but rather a hodgepodge of private and state owned establishments, most of them with a total absence of consumer hype and a very limited collection of wares displayed in fading cabinets with hand written price tags - if you're lucky! The sense of relief at actually finding a bread shop is palpable, as if one had finally achieved the source of the Nile, or discovered a lost city in the jungle. As I waited to buy a few rolls and cakes in a windowless corner "shop" a stream of women came into and presented their little books wherein a tick was duly made and they left clutching a clump of rolls. The bread man kept putting up his palm asking me to wait as he served these rapid little Cuban women. I wondered if I might need to await for 1000s of these mothers and wives to collect their ration of bread before he served me. But finally my turn came and he accepted my CUCs in payment with a questioning look as to whether I wanted any peso nacional change. As usual I had no idea whether I was paying the right amount so I just gave him two CUCs and left gratefully clutching my rolls and cakes.

Accommodation too, like everything else in Cuba, is redolent with idiosyncrasies and confusions. Broadly one has two choices, grand tourist hotels with English speaking staff, slick service and a price tag to match or the "casa particulares" i.e. living en famille in a rented room. The casas, where we stayed, vary from plush with their own en suite bathroom to rough and ready, like one might find in an Indian budget hotel - and amazingly they all seem to charge roughly the same price. There doesn't seem to be the concept that the grand colonial room with en suite is worth more than a concrete floor and peeling paint. Perhaps this is just communist indifference to the capitalist ideology of supply and demand.

In Havana we stayed in the Verdado, the delightful colonial district east of old Havana with its broad tree-lined avenues. We had found Esteban and Barbara's elegant marbled

penthouse apartment on the internet, and it turned out to be the swankiest stay I had been in all year (best to leave these things to a woman's touch rather than a male budget traveller!) Off to the side of a grandly furnished hall we had our own room, replete with elegant wooden cabinets and marble-topped dressing tables, with a beautiful bathroom to boot. On either side of the large hall were balconies overlooking the tree-lined promenade of Calle 2. It was a lovely find.

However, true to Cuban form, things were not quite what they appeared to be. Firstly Esteban was rather pushy about money, which we paid in advance, and even charged us US\$9 more than he should have, which we never got back. And secondly in a bizarre Kafkaesque drama the apartment started to dissolve. One day we returned from exploring the byways of Havana to find that some of the pictures had disappeared. I didn't think much of this at first, and even wondered whether perhaps I had imagined some of the décor. But the next time we came back the ceramic laughing Buddha who greeted you in the vestibule had seemingly evaporated and the time after that the table on which he sat had gone. Slowly more and more furniture just seemed to disappear and then the other guests, and finally all the cleaning staff, so that in the final two days our room no longer got cleaned. I wondered if one day we would come back to find our bed had disappeared and that there was just a pile of our things on the floor, or worse still that part of the building had ceased to exist and I would open to door to our room and find an empty gateway into the Void. At last all that remained were the two of us, Barbara, and a few tables and chairs that miraculously moved about the apartment at different times of day as if doing their best to make it feel lived in and full.

It seems that Barbara and Esteban were having a tragic and rather messy divorce, whilst their guests were still on hand. Fortunately I had reduced our reservation to only 7 days so that we were able to extricate ourselves from the matrimonial trauma rather sooner than we might have. Esteban only seemed to turn up when money or officialdom were called for, usually at times when we were in a passionate embrace. On one occasion he came with a policeman in tow and proceeded to return our long absent visas. Barbara on the other hand never seemed to leave the premises but would spend the evenings bemoaning the tragedy to an ever changing circle of friends. We offered our sympathy, but kept our heads down as much as possible. On our final night I said farewell to Barbara and in a touching moment of self-transcendence she apologised profusely for the inconvenience that her tragedy had caused us. Naturally, not wanting to add to her pains, We didn't complain but just offered her our sympathy, and left as soon as our time was up. And so our elegant colonial stay in Havana was deeply etched with a human drama, rather unprofessional but profoundly real!

As a further note to our accommodation adventures I had come to the conclusion that we should book our homestays in advance as much as possible, since New Year is a busy time for the Cuban tourist trade. For our next stop, Trinidad, we once again chose a grand colonial casa from the Rough Guide (since she's the one with style and intuition about these things) and I managed to make the booking with the help a receptionist in Havana's swanky Melia Cohiba hotel, though it cost US\$10 to do it! However when we arrived in Trinidad it seems that the old mother of the lady in whose casa we had booked had become rather scatty and confused the days (I remember the receptionist clearly stating the correct days twice in Spanish) so we were left temporarily bereft of accommodation in this popular and full to the brim tourist haunt. It would seem that the Cuban homestay accommodation is not bound to be straightforward.





And lastly there is the challenge of the public phonecall. Having been shocked at paying \$10 for an abortive room booking I tried my best to get out current hosts to help us to book the next place to stay, and by and large they were most generously obliging. However for my departing flight confirmation I ended up on own. What ought to be a simple operation for any society turned into an almost impenetrable thicket of confusions. Clutching my recently purchased \$5 phonecard I headed for the nearest cardphone, but after 3 different refusals by electronic women in incomprehensible Spanish I realised that something was wrong with my card.

In the Capitolio, almost certainly the grandest building ever to host an internet café, we found another cardphone which also failed but the kindly woman curator explained that in Cuba there were two types of phonecard and the one we had wouldn't work in most of Havana's public phones. Arghh! Fortunately opposite there was a payphone that took coins. Unfortunately it only took national pesos and of course being tourists we only had CUC. Arghh! However in an act of sublime altruism the afore mentioned curator offered us what change she had to make the call. Thanking her profusely I made the call but at a crucial point as the Air Europa officer told me that my flight had been changed the money ran out and we got cut off. Arghh! Ever dogged I headed for the lobby of the 5 Star Parque Central Hotel. However the receptionist informed me that their phone system was playing up and so I couldn't phone from their lobby, but she assured me that my phonecard would work in one of the phones over the street. Alas her certainty was misplaced since I found I was faced with the same problem as before, the card wasn't accepted. In an act of sheer desperation, just as I was on the point of throwing myself in front of one of the red double decker tourist buses in despair, I wandered into a café and asked them if they knew a phone where I could use my card. The woman cashier looked at me sympathetically and said "no" but that I should try the Hotel Plaza next door. Here at last, after an hour of effort, I was able to pay a receptionist to use their phone and get my rearranged flight details. Sometimes it is sheer hell not knowing how the little things work!



Havana: the Plaza de la Revolucion

### **Songs in Santa Clara**

Perhaps the most decisive moment in the Cuban Revolutionary War is the Battle of Santa Clara which took place from 28th to 31st December 1958. A daring Revolutionary Brigade led by Commandante Che Guevara attacked and captured the strategically crucial town at which point the government resistance crumbled, Fidel Castro commenced his victorious march from Santiago de Cuba

to Havana and the American backed dictator Batista fled the country. As luck would have it We arrived in Santa Clara on the 29th December 2008, amidst grand celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the Battle.

The Santa Clarans are clearly proud of their Revolutionary moment in history and they were out in numbers thronging in the spacious Plaza Vidal where a thousand seats had been arranged in front of a temporary stage and video screen. As the band arrived, performers hung about in the wings and the Plaza filled, veterans of the war with their uniforms and medals took pride of place in the front row. Many were the warm embraces and handshakes, the greetings of old friends from a heroic time. When the band started to play the Cuban national anthem immediately the entire crowd rose to their feet and an air of respect descended on the Plaza.

The first act was a group of school girls singing and dancing, dressed in lovely white. In between the musical offerings two men and two women read passionate extracts about the Revolutionary War with great gusto, the mood in the Plaza was building. There followed a guitar sextet, a flute ensemble, more singing and dancing schoolgirls and a lovely solo performance by a woman who accompanied herself on guitar as she sang a haunting melody for "Commandante Che Guevara." Whilst the performances proceeded original footage from the victories of 1958 was played on the large video screen, and occasionally in between the musical offerings one would here the voice of Fidel or Che giving one of their legendary speeches lending a historic and triumphant air to the evening

The piece de resistance was when a large grey-haired Cuban diva, Sara Gonzalez, the sort of woman you feel you recognise even when you have never seen her before, came onto the stage amidst rapturous applause. With her swinging backing band she sang three celebratory songs, the last finishing on a powerfully held note with her fist in the air as the crowd burst into cheers and the firework display exploded into life. By this time the mood of the crowd was palpable: celebration, victory, joy and mutual congratulation. I felt privileged to be able to witness the people of Santa Clara celebrating a defining moment in their history.

The strange irony of our chance encounter in Santa Clara's Plaza Vidal was that it was the only event we managed to attend celebrating the 50 years of the Revolution in Cuba. There was a big gathering in Santiago de Cuba, too far for us to attend, but in Havana itself, though I asked many people where to go, the only signs of the 50th anniversary were the banners and flags draped on the buildings. Rafael, our host in one of the casas, explained to me that the 3 hurricanes of 2008 and the struggling economy meant that there was no money for big public events of that kind. So we had to make do with our Santa Claran surprise party and watching the 1st January anniversary programme on Cuban national TV. I felt it was sad that the country wasn't able to celebrate its defining moment in style!

### **Carlos the Jackal**

When it came time to leave Santa Clara for Havana we were faced with a putatively simple problem: transport between these two major Cuban cities. However the official bus agency, Cubatur, as well as being almost impossible to find down an all but sealed off alley, informed us that they had no reservations available for several days. So there seemed to be no prospect of circumventing the arcane handwritten waiting lists and

huge queues as we had done in Havana. Therefore after a moving morning spent paying our respects at the Che Guevara memorial, we headed for the nearby long distance bus station in the hope of a lucky break.

We hadn't even got to the front door of the bus station when Carlos approached us. "You want to travel to Habana?" he said in perfect English. He was in his 50s, with a rough grizzled face, deeply lined with the cares of the world, but his demeanour was upbeat and friendly. After a few minutes negotiation Carlos convinced us that an "unofficial taxi" at 50CUC was only marginally more than two bus tickets and it would save us a lot of hassle and time. We went for the deal which included a morning pickup from our casa particulares. Carlos however had no phone so there was no way to contact him or know if he would really turn up.

Ironically as we were sitting in a café ruminating over our plans to travel onwards from Havana to the former pirate enclave of "Isla de Juventud" we saw Carlos wandering down the street. However we weren't on the ball enough to grab him and renegotiate our departure time in the hope of making a connection with the ferry shuttle bus to the island. In any case the complete absence of information from the official travel offices for anything other than local departures meant we had no way of confirming the time for the shuttle's departure. Travelling around Cuba is definitely not a joined up process!

The following morning we waited expectantly at our casa, and were on the point of giving up on Carlos and heading back to bus station when the doorbell went. He appeared smiling, offering a big handshake to us and our hosting family and with a young man in tow. However there was a small problem the fare had gone up to 70CUC, equivalent to a 40% price hike. Carlos became very agitated when I refused. He had some insistent yet unconvincing reason for the new price. I thought that I had managed to negotiate him down to 60CUC but then he pushed me back up to 65. I really should of just quit and gone to the bus station to look for someone else, but Carlos was a loveable rogue and being with my lady put me in a softer mood so I gave in. Whilst we were arguing over the price, the young taxi driver said to us aside in quiet Spanish that he would be happy to make the journey for 50CUC but that Carlos was there, implying that we were paying his commission.

As soon as we the deal was settled and we were in the taxi, Carlos became his jovial self again. He introduced the young driver as his son, saying that he was a very safe driver. However the rapport between them was nothing like a father and son. As we dropped Carlos back at the bus station, obviously his stomping ground, he asked for 15CUC to be paid to him now "for refuelling the benzene, it is now very expensive" with the balance paid to our driver in Habana. Since we didn't fill up anywhere it seemed that Carlos was just trying to cover up his commission fee, and I became sure that our driver, also called Carlos, was not his son. I wondered why he had so casually lied to us when it wasn't in the least bit "necessary." Perhaps for some people lying becomes a way of life, Carlos the elder really was a charming rogue, I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him!

Young Carlos was the least communicative Cuban that we ever met. The only time he seemed to acknowledge our presence in his car was when we approached a police checkpoint. He would roll up the tinted windows, slow down and raise his fist in the air in some incomprehensible gesture to us. Eventually I guessed that he was trying to tell



us to keep our heads down so as to avoid getting caught in an unofficial taxi (the official price is more than twice what we paid). However, there being little else we could do than just sit there, we carried on chatting oblivious to the police checkpoints. None of them stopped us.

As we got close to Havana however, for some inexplicable reason the police had closed the autopista and we were forced to head off into the suburbs and try to find another way into the city. In virtually any other country the closing of the main motorway into the capital would be accompanied by at least a few detour signs, not so in Cuba. For the next 20 minutes Carlos kept stopping to ask directions, some of which were diametrically opposed, until a consensus built up about the way back to the autopista. When he eventually managed to get us back on track, with a very unlikely looking shortcut through a high-rise apartment estate I tapped him on the shoulder and said "well done" in my best Spanish. Carlos gave the barest turn of the head to acknowledge my gesture and then turned back, seemingly oblivious of my compliment.

However our young driver was not as heartless as he appeared. Ten minutes later he had pulled up to see if he could help a carload of strangers whom we had passed several times whilst lost in the suburbs and whose vehicle seemed to have conked out on the hard shoulder. Despite the delay in our journey, I was rather touched by this selfless act of helpfulness. This is something that I saw many times in Cuba, strangers stopping to help each other, as if there is a communal spirit to the people "we're all in this together." It is one of the most delightful aspects of Cuban culture, almost certainly allied to the years of communist ideology and common economic hardships.

After 5 minutes Carlos, seeing that he couldn't do much to help, drove us onward. The final twist to our journey was an amazing suburban tour through lost parks, a river valley, foreign embassies and driving the wrong way up a slip road as we suddenly emerged from the least promising of back alleys onto the broad Avenida Linea, our intended destination. Carlos dropped us at the door of casa and took me aback with the warmth of his handshake as we parted. In fact he was to surprise us one more time, when in a "it's a small world" re-encounter we met him again at the Astro bus station that afternoon (where we completely failed to buy a ticket to the Isla de Juventud). He rushed across the road, smiled broadly at us both but hugged me before heading back to converse with his taxi buddies. Never judge a Cuban by his placid demeanour, inside is almost certainly a man of passion!



### **Ten Year Old Rum**

The most familiar of our homestays was chez Rafael and Ileana, in which we lived in a small room carved out of their living room by Rafael himself; a feat of DIY of which he seemed rather proud. Since there was no official sign on the door, nor were our passports requested I gathered that this was an "unofficial" stay. It was all arranged by our procuress, the enigmatic Doctora

Olga, who seemed to be in charge of everything in the large apartment block on Avenida Linea in which we were billeted. In keeping with her enigmatic persona we only met the Doctora once, and that was solely in the lift between the 3rd and 6th floors. In fact shortly after this meeting the lift stopped working completely for the entire duration of our stay - a fact which I found rather suggestive of intrigue. Olga was a short and exceedingly tough looking woman of latter years who demanded of me two kisses, one on each cheek. She took us to the 6th floor, pointed us in the direction of Rafael's flat and that was it. However I never lost the feeling that somehow Doctora Olga was controlling every aspect of our lives whilst we were on her patch. Her final act was to set us up with another Doctora, Maria Diaz, in Vinales village, our next excursion. Perhaps here the "old boy network" of the British Imperialists is replaced by the "old Doctora network" of the Cuban communists.

Rafael was fluent in English and Russian, having learnt his trade as an engineer in Odessa during the heady days of Soviet-Cuban co-operation of the 1970s. He seemed delighted to have some guests on which to practice his second languages, and occasionally would substitute some Russian into our discussions, which I was able to appreciate after my own rather shorter stay in that great country. Invariably we would both burst out laughing at his linguistic confusion. Rafael was a very warm and talkative person.

Ileana was a kind, friendly, rather quieter person, but no soft touch when it came to money. I managed to haggle her down in price a little, but once again I felt it was the Cuban women who really ruled the roost. Rafael seemed very happy to leave all of that to his lady wife, and kept telling us how his 10 year old daughter, Laurene, was so spoilt by her mother that he could no longer tell her anything. And it was true that when a Brazilian soap came on the Cuban TV channel, it was Laurene who called the shots, telling her father, and by implication us, to talk more quietly since she was trying to listen. Laurene will one day make a formidable wife!

Rafael really loved to talk! As we sat on his balcony awaiting the opening of the new year, we spoke about Cuba, Russia, economics, politics, travel and prefaced by a confident "we are all adults here" Rafael would discourse on sexuality. His favourite topics being the way in which Russian men run the risk of being cuckolded for failing to satisfy their wives sexual appetites, the dangers of an extended erection (i.e. prostate cancer), gay marriage (which he found baffling) and how he wouldn't want his daughter to have a baby with a negro for fear of a rare but strange genetic pairing that would give the child red hair.

Occasionally Rafael would say to us, when installed on his balcony rocking chairs enjoying the warm evening breeze off the Atlantic, "but perhaps you want to be together, I leave you alone." However he would always come back a few minutes later. On one occasion he returned with a bottle of very dark looking rum, and informed us that it was 10 years old and had belonged to his Aunt, whose flat this was and who had died 6 months previously. He opened it in our honour, explaining that dark rum was much better quality than the clear rum that is sold for export. We were of course obliged to drink some, though being a good Buddhist I just sipped a short glass very slowly so that it lasted me a good hour or two. I have to say Rafael rather chucked it down.

And to good effect. For as the evening wore on we were blessed by a demonstration of Rafael's dancing prowess. In his younger days he was exceedingly handsome and no doubt had charmed many Cuban women - Ileana was not his first wife, nor Laurene his first child. I no longer remember the pretext for starting to dance, it must have been exceedingly flimsy, but the image of Rafael giving a salsa lesson is indelibly marked on my consciousness. As a true gentleman, he did of course ask my permission first, so that Ileana and I gave each other a knowing smile as Rafael whisked her around the very tight space of his living room. I have to say that they looked rather good, and he seemed delighted with his new student, rather more than can be said for my own attempts. To say that I have two left feet for salsa would be putting it kindly, and Rafael looked distinctly puzzled as I failed again and again to get my feet to move in the simplest of salsa steps. And thus we saw in 2009 with a rather dashing Cuban engineer and his family, it was a delightful encounter!

### Sea, Sun, Sex and Salsa



No tale about Cuba can be complete without mention of beaches and music. In Trinidad we were to find both. The town founded in 1514 is a model of colonial charm, laid out on a grid pattern and still maintaining its old grandeur and cobbled streets. It is most famous as the place from which Herman Cortez gathered his army of conquistadores and set off on his greedy, lucrative and brutal conquest of Mexico. Apparently he took so many of the young men from

Trinidad with him that the town virtually disbanded for the next 100 years.

However Trinidad has more than recovered since those bloody days and as a holiday destination it is blessed with the fabulous beaches of the nearby Ancon peninsula and endless evenings of Cuban music tumbling out of every casa.

What can one say about the beaches? With 100s of islands in the archipelago, the abundance of keys and long stretches of both Caribbean and Atlantic sands Cuba must have 1000s km of perfect beaches. Many of them are taken straight out of a Bacardi advert, with thatched huts emerging from the palm trees looking out over perfect blue-green waters and offering rum cocktails served by handsome latinos and negros.... Is it any wonder that many wealthy widows flock here? Of course global tourism has a habit of tainting whatever it touches and there are many tourist-only resorts, built up with huge monolithic hotels from which Cubans are prohibited. We studiously avoided these and made our way to the long golden sands of the sweeping Ancon peninsula which curls into the Caribbean sea. We spent a few days soaking up the sun, swimming in the aquamarine waters, snorkelling on a reef with otherworldly coloured fish and walking the several km to the mangroves at the peninsula's tip. Here I sat looking out across the Caribbean and dreaming of pirate adventures a la Jonny Depp. Perhaps it is best to let a few pictures do the talking.

Halfway up the broad steps that rise from Trinidad's main square next to the church one will find the patio of the Casa de la Musica and the salsa centre of town. Every night another band would take pride of place and the tourists and locals would take to their feet for what the major domo invariably announced as an evening of "wakey wakey, shakey, shakey!" The standard of dance was quite daunting, and we suspected that many of the tourists were salsa teachers coming for some fun and to brush up on their steps. As for the locals, well for Cubans salsa is just in the blood. There is something wonderful about seeing an old couple in the 70s gracing the cobbles. Like us, many of the visitors just sat on the steps gazing on in amazement at this wonderful fiesta, all free of charge. Occasionally an elderly Cuban gentleman, often with a toothless smile, would drag a protesting young or not so young tourist onto the cobbles and swing her with great aplomb and a huge grin on his face.

As well as the salsa on the steps there are many bars each with their own offering of music and dance, usually for little more than \$1 entrance. The most startling show we saw was an African-Cuban dance troupe of tall and very beautiful negro men and women accompanied solely by drums and chanting. The sheer power and energy of the male dancers, jittering their arms so hard that one thought they might erupt from the shoulder sockets, was breath-taking. Their prowess as they wielded machetes to the pounding rhythms left me very glad that we weren't in the front row in the direct line of action! The women danced in a sexual but unaffected and natural way. This was clearly a dance emerging from the culture of the West African Yoruba people taken as slaves, but there was no hint of despair or oppression. The dance was alive, vital, visceral and indomitable. There is something very remarkable about the spirit of these people who were stolen from their homes and endured so much at the hands of the Europeans.

And so the music of Cuba just seems to penetrate every aspect of life, whether it is in a bar, a casa de la musica or just blaring from in a taxi.

Rijumati, January 2009