

Viva Cuba!

Gary Friedman took his Dynax 7D strictly off the tourist trail in Fidel Castro's backyard

All my life I had heard that Cuba was a photographer's paradise. But the only pictures I ever saw from Cuba were from Havana, its largest city. What was the rest of Castro's Cuba like?

I found out earlier this year, as I had an opportunity to travel to the north-eastern corner of the island with others who had been there before and knew many of the locals. We flew directly into the city of Holguin, and spent two weeks in a tiny rental car, travelling on dirt roads going from village to village, making friends and taking pictures. An ideal trip!

With me were my Konica Minolta 7D, 11-18mm, 24-105mm, and 100-300mm APO lenses, and another trusty camera – my Konica Minolta A2 – as a handy backup. I also had a 5600 HS(D) flash and attached a cardboard light modifier, so that when it was used, it wouldn't have that "Hey everybody! I used a flash!" look to it.



The first thing you should know about Cuba is that not all cars are classic American cars of the 50s. Yes, they were there, and yes, I took pictures of a great deal of them, but the vast majority of cars I saw were either trucks, ox-drawn carts, or tiny Renault cars.

The second thing you should know is they have set up two separate economies – one for the tourists, and



The myth (left) and the reality (above and below). Transport in Cuba.



one for everyone else. Visitors can only exchange their hard currency for “Tourist Dollars”, which can only be spent in tourist hotels and restaurants. They are of no value anywhere else. This is good for the Government, of course, who can now have their finger in what would otherwise be an underground economy, but awful for people like us, who want to patronise local businesses and eschew touristy stuff. It is also having a slightly negative impact on morale, since the maids who are lucky enough to work in the tourist hotels and resorts can make substantially more money than the average Cuban doctor.

I also learned that Cuba has more doctors per capita than any other country. They emphasise preventative care, and manage to do keep the population relatively healthy with very few resources. Their infant mortality rate, for example, is lower than that of the United States. And they have a reputation for being able to work in very poor conditions (think “Doctors without Borders”) without whining and complaining like many Western doctors do.

Many of Cuba’s economic problems are a bit puzzling. Although the Americans have kept a trade embargo on the island since the rise of Fidel, no other country has announced similar intentions. Tourists flood to Cuba from all over the world for the tremendous travel bargains. Small cars are imported from Europe. Israel and others have invested in their farms. Why do there continue to be such drastic shortages of basic goods? Why does much of the population still live in (what seems to us) poverty-level conditions?

Don’t shy away

The way I usually shoot countries that I visit is to establish some sort of rapport with everyone I meet – even if I don’t speak the same language – before I ever pick up my camera. Then I’ll show them the first shot or two on the camera’s display, and after that I usually have the most un-shy subjects a foreign photographer could hope for.

Notice I used the word “usually”. Cuba was the first country I visited where I didn’t actually have to work that hard to build rapport. Once people saw my camera they became excited and started posing for me. Some even invited me into their homes and had me take pictures of them next to their television sets (a status symbol!). I never had it so easy. Between the people, the ageing buildings and the 50’s era cars, how could I NOT come



Above: street dominoes, a picture which has now been used as a book cover in Finland. Below: showing the families he photographed on the back on his 7D, Gary was able to find his way back to his friends – see ‘Bread Crumb Trail’.



back with sellable photographs?

Their friendliness helped in another way, too. One day I was wandering around the streets of the Gibara fishing village, and took a quick detour when I saw an impromptu dominoes game taking place on the sidewalk. After shooting

a few frames, I started striking up small conversations with my very poor Spanish, and learned that one of the players was a musician. I instantly whipped out my Xaphoon (*a small musical instrument which I carry everywhere and is another great way to make new friends in foreign*

lands; see <http://www.troubadour.uk.com/accessoriesorderpage.html>) and started to play a few notes. He became so excited that he brought me up to his apartment and started going through his old photographs – and there was a picture of him when he was a band leader during Cuba’s heyday! The portrait I took of him just then is my favorite image from the entire collection.

Bread crumb trail

Alas, this side trip had caused me to become separated from the three others I was travelling with, and of course I had not taken any mental navigation notes since I figured my friends would know the way back.

I WAS LOST!

After wandering aimlessly for two hours without recognizing a single landmark, I suddenly realized that I had taken many “bread crumb” pictures on my camera – each image showing scenes from the path I had traversed. At the very beginning of the day I took a picture of the family we were staying with.

I called up the image and stopped a random bystander: “Donde está ésta familia?” (“Where is this family?”)

Being a small village everyone knew everyone else, and the man kindly walked me to the very house I was seeking. Saved by my 7D and the kindness of strangers!

The detour was worth it; for the picture I took of the sidewalk dominoes game was recently licensed for use as a cover to a book in Finland.

My standard procedure when traveling is to get people’s mailing addresses and then send them pictures after I return home. But Cuba was the first country I’ve ever visited



For Gary Friedman, a musician himself, the legend of the old Cuban dance bands came to life unexpectedly when he took out a pocket saxophone during a conversation with this villager. The subject turned out to be a former bandleader and radio star in real Club Havana style. Gary always carries his Xapboon (which our readers may notice is sold in the UK by your magazine publishers!) but his greatest skill lies in being willing to mix with real people wherever he travels. His web diaries of journeys and working life in many countries are well worth reading.



Reflections on a world which Cartier-Bresson would have felt at home in: above, women in doorways; below, a filmstar in the USA perhaps – a cabbage seller in Cuba! Top right: 90-year-old matriarch of a Cuban village family. Below right: a mournful face, but squaring up to the camera with pride.





where the addresses that people wrote down for me were completely illegible. The solution? I scanned the handwritten addresses and pasted them onto the envelope, along with thumbnail images of the intended recipients. (Hey, if the post office can't read the writing, the village was small enough that the pictures would surely ensure proper routing of the letters.) (And it worked!!)

Not as safe as you think

While I was there, all the interesting stuff was taking place in Havana. A well-known Czech supermodel-turned-disadvantaged children's advocate, Helena Houdova, was arrested in Cuba for taking photographs in a slum (and was not allowed to talk to the Czech embassy while in custody).

Also, Castro had arranged a huge Anti-American rally, protesting an electronic sign installed outside a US Mission building which spewed excerpts from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The protest, which drew hundreds of thousands of people (who were promised an additional day off for participating), brought traffic to a standstill for several hours, and it was covered on all the TV channels



for hours. Posters compared Bush with Adolph Hitler. I wish I could have snapped a photo of THAT!

Probably most entertaining for me was to watch Castro on local TV almost every night, looking quite old and disoriented, hosting Town Hall meetings and rambling on for tens of minutes in answering a simple question (as a charismatic leader ought!).

Sustainable agriculture

In the past Cuba's economy relied heavily on sugar production, which was sold at higher-than-market prices to their main ally, the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union broke apart, not only did their revenue stream evaporate, but the years of overproduction had taken its toll on the soil.

Since the early 1990s, many experts on sustainable agriculture have come in and advised Cubans on alternative crops, growing without the use of fertilizers or pesticides (or heavy machinery), and breaking up state farms into individual and cooperative farms, each one having land set aside to feed its owners. The goal is for the island to



become completely self-sustaining. It's too early to tell if the strategy is working, but the world is watching their progress very closely.

One of the reasons I felt it was important to grab this travel opportunity now rather than later was the perception of scarcity – once Castro dies, it is expected that everything will change, and the kind of charm that present-day Cuba provides will be gone forever. I am certainly glad I did!



Above: Cuban secretary with green desktop and red wall. The colours of Cuba are fascinatingly consistent. Right: the colours of Cuba show themselves again in one of Castro's posters. Below: Castro and Cuba are synonymous for the island's people at present. This bus shelter graffiti says it all.

Visit Gary Friedman's award-winning photo website, www.friedmanarchives.com, to read many more travel tales and see some of the best Minolta 'people' photography around.

