

Cuba 2016 – Travel Report



BLUE = Visited Points

Sunday, June 05, 2016

London - Havana

It's 8am as we leave the flat in London - forever. In Holborn Station we wait for the Piccadilly Line, which brings us directly to Heathrow airport terminal 4. Check-in was done already online. After baggage drop off we sit in a Costa coffee and have breakfast. The flight with a S-320 to Paris is quickly done. There we collect some Euros from the caching machine, drink another coffee and start the bigger flight with a Boeing-777 to Havana. During the whole time we have daylight and comfortable seats in the last row of the airplane. We enjoy our stay on board watching some cinema movies (e.g. Hitman 47, Battalion), have dinner and sleep a bit. During our arrival in Havana it is raining strongly and warm with 26°C. All the formalities like passport control etc. are done quickly without any problems. To get pesos we had to try different cashing machines, but at the end we were successful. There are two currencies in Cuba, moneda nacional (CUP) and moneda convertible (CUC). The exchange rate is about 25CUP = 1CUC. We only get CUC with our DKB cards.

The taxi driver was already waiting for us with our names written on a paper. His car was very new and luxurious one, actually not what we hoped for. On the already dark streets we see several very old American cars, beside many Russian and Asian vehicles. We pay as agreed 30 CUC for the trip. The hostel named "Peregrino Consulado" is located at Centro Habana. We'll stay not directly there but with a neighbour which is fine. We are tired, and after registration and a shower we go to bed. The window stays open. It is ca. 11pm – Good night.



Monday, June 06, 2016

Havana

At 9am we enjoy our breakfast together with other travellers and get a few tips for our journey. Later we talk with one of the guys from the casa particulares and arrange our transfer to Vinales for tomorrow. Now we're ready for our first stroll through the city. We're about to walk along the

Paseo de Marti towards the sea as a guy starts talking to us. He and his wife quickly manage to involve us in a conversation about the city, interesting sights and the movie Buena Vista Social Club. They guide us gently to a bar where the movie has been filmed. We ended up on a table with cold orange juice a nice cigar and conversation about buying cigars. Apparently there is a sale of the cigar cooperation that is only once a month and for a really good price. Of course by now we know that we're in a typical tourist trap and think about how to escape. As the friendly tour seems to have now effect we give the guy 5CUC for the orange juice and start to leave. He keeps the money for himself and tells us that we have to pay for the drinks in addition. The bills states unbelievable 20CUC, we pay just our bit of 10 and make our way out of the bar. Really annoying experience for us, we should know better after all the journeys we've made so far. Anyway good lesson! Arrived at the Malecón – Havana's 8km-long sea drive we take our time and enjoy the rest of the cigar.



We decide to walk to the city centre to join a Bus-Tour through the city – that should give us a good overview. Unfortunately it starts to rain quite heavily and we get wet and need to make a stop at home to get changed. Now we take a closer look at our neighbourhood have a snack and buy water at the supermarket. The supermarket is relatively good equipped with products of course there is a lack of variety. We're surprised to find even German products like beer and salad sauce. Some things are rare, for example cash machines and WiFi spots but easy to find when you know where to look. WiFi spots are noticeable because of a crowd holding mobiles and laptops in their hands and being busy to connect. Usually you buy a card with a username and access code and you have an hour of a flaky internet connection for 3-4.50CUC. Finally we manage to get a connection sitting in front of a hotel and enjoy a malt drink. Later we stroll along the sea make a break and enjoy a beer.

Back home we take a shower and have a power nap before we look for a dinner place. Our first intention is a Chinese restaurant at Chinatown, which is closed and we're about to get wet again. Finally we decide for a place called "Castropol" where we get a table on the first floor with sea view. Really nice. The rain gets stronger and stronger and as it was close to home we opted for running rather than Taxi. By the time we reached the door we're completely wet but in a good mood as the temperature was still high and we're not freezing. Now we call it an early night and are in bed at 10pm.

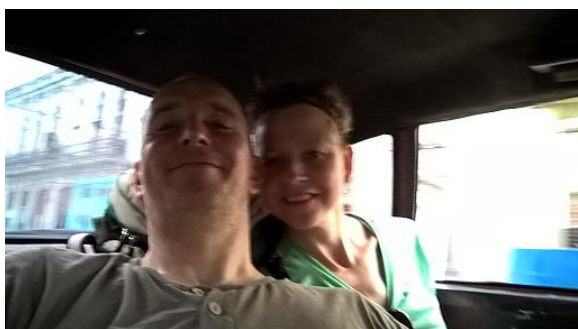


Tuesday, June 07, 2016

Havana - Vinales

We have to get up at 6am to have breakfast with one other guy and get our taxi to Vinales at 7:20am. The car is an old red Moskvich and the ride starts pleasant with music and good weather conditions. The highway is in a decent shape but the rules are different. You'll find pedestrians, horse carriages, cyclists and people who sell grilled chicken. You're allowed to change sides, drive on the highway from everywhere and overtake vehicles from every side. Half way through the journey the weather changed completely, it's pouring down and we're not always sure that the car can cope with that at a speed of about 100km/h. Luckily after 2.5 hour drive we arrive at Vinales. As an orientation of the area Lonely Planet states: "When you spy a cigar-chewing guajiro driving his oxen and plough through a rusty-coloured tobacco field, you know that you must be close to Vinales". Yes, it's like that – a very tiny laid-back town in a beautiful environment.

We get a nice room, lend an umbrella and start to explore the city. Although there is not that much to see and the weather stays bad. That's why we join a few other travellers on a terrace of a tapas bar and enjoy an ice-cold beer and some snacks. Later we visit a travel agency to buy tickets for a Viazul bus to Cienfuegos for the day after tomorrow. Back at home we spend a relaxed afternoon at home with a nap and a bit of reading, respectively studying. Our hosts provide a tasty diner for us at 7pm with chicken and fish, lots of vegetables and fruits. After dinner we take a short walk before we enjoy homemade cocktails on our terrace. We go to sleep at around 11pm.



Wednesday, June 08, 2016

Vinales

We get up 7am and have breakfast an hour later. At 9am the horse man picks us up at our house and walks with us to the horses that are “parked” just a few 100 meters apart. He doesn’t speak English as most people we’ve met so far, which gives us the chance to polish our Spanish. Andi gets his horse, named Negrito, first and feels quite comfortable given it’s his first time on a “real” horse. Jules horse hears of the name Chickechito (or similar) and is very calm too. We’re happy that it is not raining as we start our journey.

Few minutes later another group of 3 horses joins us. The guys are from Austria. It starts raining and we’re fine with it as it is quite warm. We make our way through the red sand and water. In the middle of the tour we stop at a house with a tobacco leave roof. The horses get tight to trees and we’re invited in the house to watch how a cigar is made and to enjoy one. Beside we have a nice chat with the Austrian guys. 3 hours later we’re done and happy to pay 25 CUC incl tipp. The tour guide of the Austrians is not as fair and tries to get double the amount from them. They end up paying 35CUC as that’s everything they have.



We go home dirty and wet, take a shower and have a small snack. Later we sit in the living room and read and try to fix the Bluetooth connection between different technical devices. As the rain stops walk to an Italian restaurant to take another small snack and a short stroll through other parts of the small village. Back at home we sit in front of the house with a Cuba Libre and Pina Colada and realise that the weather is as good as never before. That’s why we slip in our running outfit and do a quick 1.5km uphill run to a hotel called La Eremita. The reason being is a swimming pool they offer for no guests as well. We pay 5CUC, get towels and jump in the cooling

water. The view over village and mountains is worth it and the bar keeper gets us beer and Mojito directly to the pool. Jule tries to kiss a frog without much success. We get back at home around 7:30pm and have dinner 30 minutes later. Afterwards we pay our bill and have a small after dinner walk. We're in bed by 10pm.



Thursday, June 09, 2016

Vinales - Cienfuegos

We get up at 5:30am and sit in the bus to Cienfuegos at 6:30am. The journey is supposed to take about 8 hours. Two stops are included where we can buy breakfast and lunch. Additionally the bus stops to grab other passengers from the street or to have a chat with people on the highway or any other occasion. That's what makes the journey quite draining. However we arrive at Cienfuegos in time. The weather is hot and the sun is shining. A man is waiting for us, put us in a bicycle taxi and off we go to our casa particulares with the name Puchy. A charming old lady is welcoming us and shows us our room. Equipped with aircon and bathroom like the other ones but only one window to the corridor...not our favourite but fine for 2 nights. After we've changed clothes we're going to inspect the roof terrace which is lovely. In between we have a chat with an American couple and plan a day trip for tomorrow with them.

We start for a walk to explore the city. Cienfuegos is Cuba's so-called Perla del Sur (Pearl of the South) and arranged around the country's most spectacular natural bay. Earned a Unesco World Heritage Site listing in 2005 because it's one of Cuba's most architecturally interesting cities. We stroll along Paseo del Prado towards Punta Gorda which was Cienfuegos old upper-class neighbourhood. We won't arrive at the top of the thin knife of land slicing into the bay as we're tired and sweated just half way through. We return home relax a bit on the terrace and have dinner at 6pm. Here we get to know that the woman of the American couple got send to the hospital because of a bad cough she had cached. She would need to stay for 7 days in the hospital because of the antibiotics and infusions she needs to take. We enjoy our meal with tasty fish, avocado, baked bananas and pineapple.

Now we have a shower and get ready for another city walk. This time to the main square called "Parque Jose Marti" with the impressive Teatro Tomás Terry, the Museo Provincial and other important buildings. We take photos and get some cocktails in the theatre bar. A live music event is about to start at 10pm which we don't catch today but we promise the bar keeper to come back tomorrow. We have a relaxing walk back to our casa and go to bed.



Friday, June 10, 2016

Cienfuegos

Our day starts at 6am because we want to go for a run before the sun gets too high and the cars pollute the fresh air. People in the streets look at us full of disbelief as running is not common here. We make our way along the bay, the weather is lovely and the pink sky is mirrored in the sea. Half an hour later we are back home and are quite exhausted by the heat and humidity. After a shower we're ready for breakfast and some tips what to do. Our charming host only speaks Spanish and does that incredible fast which makes it nearly impossible for us to understand everything she says. Nevertheless we think we get the main things ☺.

First we go to Cubanacán – a travel agency – as we want to book a boat trip along the coast. Unfortunately the service person is not able to reach someone to book the trip for us. That's why we make our way directly to the pier of the Marlin Marina – it is a long and very hot journey and we try to stay in the shadow wherever we can. Luckily we arrive at the pier just in time for a cruise to start along the bay, so we pay 12CUC and start only few minutes later. Together with us is a group of travellers where we meet a girl from Germany and talk about our journeys. Minutes later we need to change to a bigger boat as the one we are at is having problems. After the change we go for an hour long tour with nice view and some fresh air. Back at the harbour we walk to the top of the semi-island and take our first bath in the ocean. The water is warm but still a bit cooling.

Now we take a small snack (sandwich con queso) and afterwards a bicycle taxi back to the city centre as it is too hot to walk. The driver is a big fan of German football and tells us all the names of the players. We make a stop at the Cine-Teatro Luisa as we hope to watch a Cuban movie but the cinema is under construction unfortunately. Then we go home to relax and to escape the heat. By chance we find out that the European Championship is broadcasted on TV so we switch it on, get a cold beer and enjoy France versus Romania. Afterwards we walk to the main square, upload the travel report without issues and check our emails. Now it's time for dinner at home. After a shower we take a small walk as we want to see the Museo de Locomotivas – well, it's basically four old locomotives side by side – but worthwhile. It's a pity that's a bit dark already therefore the photos are not really brilliant. Anyway.

To celebrate our last evening in Cienfuegos we go to a bar with a balcony that overlooks the main boulevard. Here we enjoy live music, few cocktails and a Cuban cigar. At about 10pm we leave the bar and spot another bar on our way home. That one is on top of a house with a big canvas that shows movies or something similar. A guy picks us up as we're about to look at the menu and guides us to the bar. The way is a bit tricky as you need to go to the first floor of one house then on the terrace of the house then via a spiral staircase all the way to the top.

There was only one other guest – a Swedish student, who is in Cuba for 3 months to study Spanish. The other people are service personal. We order a Mojito for Andi and a Cuban rum for Jule and ask the waiter if we can go up one more level, as there is a small tower on top of the roof that can be accessed via a steep metal staircase. He approves and off we go. It's completely dark up there except a few colourful flashing lights. There is one table with four chairs – a quite

exclusive place for diner. We enjoy the view and the drinks. A lot later we get back on the street and home. Nice farewell!



Saturday, June 11, 2016

Cienfuegos - El Nicho - Trinidad

We get up at 7am and have breakfast an hour later. Afterwards we pay our bill and get ready to leave. Our taxi – an Oldsmobile from 1950 with a Toyota engine– picks us up at 9am. The driver a professional constructor does now work as taxi driver as there is more money to make from it. On our way to the park “El Nicho” we pass a cement fabric that was built in cooperation with the DDR. Our driver wants to know whether we think Socialism or Capitalism is the better choice. In broken Spanish we try to make clear that both systems do have their advantages.

Our ways leads us deeper and deeper in the mountains with many curves. Finally we arrive at the park and are more than 700 meters higher than Cienfuegos. Here we pay an entrance fee of about 10CUC per person and make our through the park. In theory we should have waited for our guide but as she is not there is time we start on our own. Soon we get to see the first attraction – a blue-green bath place. We take the chance and jump into the refreshing water. Although the temperature is perfectly fine for us it’s still far too cold for Cubans. A few meters further we achieve the main sight – El Nicho the waterfall on the Rio Hanabanilla – really impressive.

After the obligatory photo session we proceed to the second bath place which is at a smaller waterfall. Later we join a German tourist group and get to know some plants and other viewpoints in the park. Our tour ends after approximately 2 hours. The driver is asleep as we arrive at the car. He quickly fixes himself and off we go towards Trinidad. It’s a 60km journey along the coast with a beautiful view and plenty to see. We enjoy the ride and imagine how it would be to do the entire Cuba tour with such a car.



We arrive at Trinidad at about 2pm and need to find a cash machine as we haven't expected other than the driving costs of 70CUC. The first two banks are closed that's why it takes Andi a while to find one whilst we're waiting in the car. It's incredible hot. Finally we arrive at a pink house at Frank Pais 562 and Belky the host is already waiting for us. She has a very welcoming smile and takes her time to show us around and explain the features of the room. We're at the first floor with a private terrace, fridge and bathroom. We love it – even though it's unbelievable pink – take two beers from the fridge and take a breath on our terrace. Later we start to explore the city – but not without walking in the shadow as the sun is burning.

Trinidad was declared a World Heritage Site by Unesco in 1988 and is well travelled by tourists. Nonetheless retains a quite atmosphere. We manage to find the post office and buy stamps and the Etecsa office to buy access codes for Internet (2CUC for 1.5hrs). After a few messages to friends and family we decide it's time for a beer. We walk to Las Ruinas del Teatro Brunet – roofless ruins of an 1840-vintage theatre which is now an entertainment space and beer garden. We enjoy some and wander then back home for dinner. Its fish – as usual – together with rice, beans, baked bananas and some salad. Really tasty! Afterwards we're quite tired, have a shower and have some rest on our terrace before we go to bed.



Sunday, June 12, 2016

Trinidad

The first sound in the morning is the clip-clop of horses' hooves on the cobbled streets. We have breakfast around 8am and go quickly to the Viazul ticket office afterwards. There we buy tickets to Santa Clara for the next day. Unfortunately the bus at 3pm is fully booked that's why we take the morning bus at 7:30am. Now we get ready for our day at the beach. Our hosts were so kind to organise bicycles of a friend for us. Raphael the house owner makes sure that everything is to our satisfaction and we're happy that the size of the bikes fits to us. We need a few moments to get used to the fact that the cycles have no gears and no hand breaks. The way to the Playa Ancón is easy to find and is about 12km per tour. It's already pretty hot so we need to be quick. On our way we realise big crabs on the street...most of them very flat and no longer alive because of the traffic even if there mostly horse carriages, cars and motorcycles. 4km down the route we pass the small seaside village "La Boca". Our way guides us along the coast. Suddenly we spot an old tower which must have been a viewpoint in former times. We decide to stop and have a closer look. The construction does not seem really trustworthy as a ladder connects ground and steps higher up as the lower steps are broken. Further the handrail is missing for most of the way upstairs. We're not sure.

A woman approaches us and explains that many tourists stop to have a look and the "entrance fee" is 1CUC...obviously rubbish but anyway – we do hand over the 2CUC and decide that Jules goes first to test the steps as she's not as heavy as Andi. The way up is alright - we try to stay close to the centre of the staircase - but seems a bit risky nonetheless. On the top we enjoy the view and take pictures. Back on the ground we cycle the remaining 8km to the beach. The water is crystal blue and clear. Annoying that the Cubans leave their waste on the beach what disturbs the experience a bit. The water is really salty and we're not going too far as a reef starts a few meters apart from the beach with sharp stones. Happy about the refreshing bath we're lying under a palm umbrella drink a beer and relax. Looking at the other guests on the beach we further recognise that nobody seems to go into the water without a bottle of beer or rum. However we believe it's only tourists not residents.

Later we have a small snack and convince the receptionist at the beach hotel to let us play one billiard game on the tables that are reserved only for guests. Further we buy a book written by Fidel Castro about his memories of Che and some postcards. We start our way back around 3pm, the sun stands more or less directly above us, there is no shadow and it's incredible hot. After 8km we stop at a small bar to get two large bottles of water and to rest under a mango tree. That's a bit dangerous as it is mango season and there falling from the tree every now and then. Both ways we're hardly meeting other tourists on bicycles, most of them get taxis because of the weather conditions. Probably the more healthy option, but with sun cream level 50 we haven't experienced any issues so far.

Back at our home we are just in time for the second half of the Germany – Ukraine football game which we watch together with Raphael and we are very pleased about the result of 2:0. A bit later we start with the walk through the historical centre of Trinidad. It's interesting but exhausting as

well as people are sitting everywhere on their doorsteps, watch us, talk to us and offer all sorts of things. Finally we take a shortcut and go directly to the restaurant we have picked for tonight. “La Ceiba” a recommendation a German couple gave us in Vinales. Here we take Canchanchara the traditional cocktail and chicken in honey and lemon sauce as speciality of the restaurant. Delicious! Afterwards we return to our home, have a quick drink on our terrace and start to pack our stuff for tomorrow. Another night that is unbelievable hot where we couldn't sleep without air-condition.





Monday, June 13, 2016

Trinidad – Santa Clara

Our day starts early, breakfast is at 6am. The temperature hasn't cooled down over night. We thanks and pay Belky and leave for the bus station. There we check in for Santa Clara and leave our bags in the luggage office. There is a bit of waiting time as the bus is late. We get seats in the second row which is a lot better than row 1. The reason for that is that the bus drivers have always something to arrange on the way. There are people who need to be picked up or dropped off somewhere. There are things to deliver and so on. Normally there are more people than seats; therefore some people stand in the front of the bus. The bus takes not the direct route to Santa Clara but the way via Cienfuegos which takes 3 hours in total.

Arrived at the bus station of Santa Clara which is about 2.5km apart from the city centre we get surrounded by taxi drivers who offer their services. We start walking but take the wrong direction unfortunately. Later we get picked up by a bicycle taxi that drives us to our places. The driver explains that there are a lot cheaper options for casas particulares - we have always paid 25CUC per night and got the recommendation from our previous host. We decide to give it a try in the next city we'll visit and look around on our own. Arrived at the house of Javier & Katia, Katja pays the 3CUC for our taxi as we have no small money. Javier shows us around – everything fine as usual.



It's 11:30am and we want to make it to Cubatur before 12 to buy tickets for the tobacco fabric. The woman tells us that the last tour will start in 15 minutes and we should make our way directly to the factory which is about 3 street blocks apart. Half way to the factory Jule realises that her camera is missing and we both run back to the Cubatur office. Luckily the camera is still there and we have enough time to go back. 3 minutes before 12 we arrive at the door of the factory and a friendly woman greets us and asks us to take a seat. She is also the one that guides us and explains everything. Her English is pretty good; we understand and have the chance to ask questions. It's a pity that there are no photos allowed as we would have loved to take some shoots of the room where people were sitting and rolling cigars. We learn the following:

- there are 3 types of cigars with a different quality; Cohiba is the best one and smoked by Fidel Castro (1 cigar cost up to 30CUC depending on the size), second best is Monte Cristo and was smoked by Che, third best is Romeo & Julietta
- the best tobacco plants are in the region of Pinar del Rio
- mostly women work in the factory and roll between 80 and 170 cigars per day – depending on size and performance (of the cigars 😊)
- worker get paid by amount (if the quality is accordingly of course)
- training to become a professional cigar maker takes 9 months
- worker get entertained by specific music or stories they can choose to ease the work
- worker have 1 hour lunch break and another half an hour for a snack
- they work 8 hours per day in total
- cigars don't get rolled on the upper leg...it's a normal board
- quality control does check weight and smoke ability

We're happy about the tour, give our guide 3CUC tip and cross the street to go to the shop. There we spend some time in the humidor to choose the right cigars to take home. We end up with a pack of 20 cigars of Monte Cristo and a small pack of Cohiba. Further we enjoy a coffee before we go back to the city centre.



There we check the possibility to get pounds/euros exchanged to CUC and get to know that the rate is ok. Until now we have picked cash with our DKB but have still some cash (pounds/euros) with us. In addition we buy Internet tickets and take some time to sit at the main square and to write messages to friends and family. Now we return home to relax, write postcards and update the travel report. Afterwards we look for the post office which is, like many other places, not easy to find as there is no sign at the door and the dark glassed windows make it even harder to discover. However we get there and hand over our post cards.

Later we upload our travel report and have dinner at an Italian restaurant. That reminds me not to trust the Cuban Italian kitchen anymore as pizza and pasta are far from the European (not even Italian) standard. Our after dinner walk leads us to the "Monumento a la Toma del Tren Blindado". On our way we stop at the Revolution Café and enjoy an Russian coffee and a Revolution coffee surrounded by photos and documentation of the revolution. Now we arrive at the monument where on December 29, 1958 Che Guevara and a band of 18 revolutionaries derailed an train using a borrowed bulldozer and homemade Molotov cocktails. The battle lasted 90 minutes and was an important milestone for bringing Fidel Castro into power. We make photos of the bulldozer and train and return to the city centre. There we decide to take a last drink on the roof terrace of the Hotel Santa Clara Libre from where we have a nice view over the city.



Tuesday, June 14, 2016

Santa Clara - Camagüey

Our day starts with breakfast at 8am. We pay our bill and wait for the taxi our host Javier has organized for us. Pleased to see that the car is a white, Trabant looking car we enjoy the short ride

to the bus station. There is a special office where foreigners have to book their tickets so we queue and wait. As usual we quickly get bothered by taxi driver who pretend to offer a cheaper, quicker, better service. This time we ignore them. In the office Jule makes a reservation for the 2pm bus but isn't yet allowed to pay the tickets. Instead we should come back an hour before the trip starts for check in and payment. Kindly the guy shows us where we can leave our backpacks for a fee of 2CUC each. We're happy to get rid of the bags as it is incredible hot and we want to visit the "Conjunto Escultórico Comandante Ernesto Che Guevara" which is about half a km away from the station.

Arrived at the mausoleum and museum complex we realise several groups of pupils and soldiers. Later we'll find out that today is a special day as it is Che's birthday. We get advice of a soldier that we're not allowed to access the areas where the groups are but anything else. We wander around and take pictures of the large bronze statue of El Che. It was erected in 1987 to mark the 20th anniversary of Guevara's murder in Bolivia. Unfortunately we're not allowed to visit the mausoleum because of the celebrations. It contains remains of 17 guerrillas including Che that were discovered in a secret mass grave in Bolivia and brought back to Cuba in 1997.

It's 10 before 10am and we think about the possibility to catch the earlier bus to Camagüey at 10:30am. We make our way back to the station and join a large queue in front of the ticket office. People are getting nervous as they want to catch the 10:30am bus as well and nothing seems to move. Some get angry as people try to jump the queue. Suddenly the guy steps out of his office and ask for people who want to take the next bus. Everything happens fast now, we hand over the money, don't get tickets and were advised to hurry up and jump on the bus. We do so and everything works well. In the middle of the tour the bus stops at a restaurant where we have a beer and chicken with rice and banana chips.



At about 3pm we arrive at Camagüey. The bus station is located 2km out of town and we start to walk towards the centre. Luckily the heavy rain has stopped. Few meters on our way it starts raining again. A bicycle taxi driver stops us and offers a price of 3CUC to take us to "Los Vitrales" the house of Rafael where we want to ask for a room. We agree and feel with the cyclist as we're quite heavy together with our bags. Andi tries to help which is kind of welcome. Arrived at the house Rafael explains us that we can have a room for one night. We agree and have a look. We're amazed of the restored colonial house that was once a convent. The guest rooms are arranged around a shady patio with over 50 different types of plants. Rafael is an architect which the rooms show. He gives us a few recommendations of the city and off we go.

On our way through the city centre we make a break at the roof terrace of the Grand Hotel and enjoy a cocktail and a cigarillo. It starts raining again and we watch some impressive lightning as well. Hopefully for the last time in Cuba we try an Italian restaurant with the same result – the food is not brilliant. After that – it's still heavily raining – we walk along "La calle de los Cines" (cinema street) with cinemas that opened in the 40s and 50s. First we try to enter the Cine Casablanca, a multiplex cinema which is supposed to show English speaking films. There we meet to guys sitting in the dark entrance hall and explaining that there is no film tonight. Further he

guides us to another place – that we wouldn't have find on our own – where a film is offered. As we get there a few people sit around and explain in Spanish that the film is about Marco Polo and is about to start in 30 minutes. We agree and pay 3CUC each for the tickets. Andi quickly runs back to the restaurant as he had forgotten his cap. Jule waits for him and both enter the empty cinema room. The movie starts immediately and tells the interesting story of Marco Polo and his journeys around the world. We leave the cinema about 2 hours later and try once again to get Andi's cap back from the restaurant. Andi couldn't see it in the first place that's why he came back empty-handed. We talk with a lady from the restaurant; she did find it and handed it back to us. We return to our home and go to bed.



Wednesday, June 15, 2016

Camagüey - Holguín

We get up at 7am, enjoy our breakfast in the lovely garden and start for a city walk. The sun is shining and we take a few pictures. Further we want to have a look at the Mercado where everything gets sold, but here we are too late and most of the vivid offering and negotiating is already done. A pity.

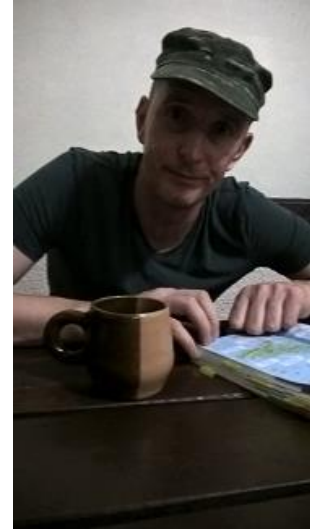
Later we try to exchange money as the day before the bank was already closed. We have again no luck as the exchange requires a passport that we don't carry with us. Arrived at home Andi takes the passport and starts for another try whereas Jule stays in the garden reading the Che Guevara book. At 12 a silver Ford from 1950 waits in front of the door to bring us to the bus station. There Jule deals with the booking office to get tickets for the next bus to Holguín (11CUC p.P.) and meets a Cuban lady who has travelled the entire island, give some recommendations and explains that she decides to stay in hotels during her travel even though she's short of money because she wants to enjoy the service. Whilst waiting for our bus – which is a bit delayed as usual – Jule buys some beer and sandwiches at the Cafeteria. We chat and drink until the bus arrives. The journey lasts 3 hours and we arrive at the early afternoon.



The bus station is only 1.5km from the city centre and the weather is not too hot, that's why we decide to walk and ignore the taxi driver. We find the location of our potential casa particulares (Casa Don Diego) without issues. The friendly owner tells us that he has a room but only for one night because of another booking. We decide to take it and make our way into the colonial house with incredible high ceilings. We meet his wife, son and the grandmother. The way to the first floor and roof terrace is a bit tricky but beautiful because of narrow spiral cases. Our host quickly gets us a bucket filled with ice and beer and we enjoy it standing on the roof terrace with a good view over the city.

As the sun gets down a bit we start with a city walk along the beautiful squares. Holguín is the nation's fourth-largest city but it barely features in Cuba's tourist master plan as you won't find 4 star hotels, revitalized colonial buildings and tour guides that speak to you in English. Sounds about right for us 😊 The city is famous for its own brewed beer though which we'll intensely test later. First thing after our city walk is dinner at "Restaurante-Bar San José with an open kitchen. There we enjoy a soup as a starter and Cordon Bleu (Andi) and shrimps (Jule). The bill comes in moneda nacional and is converted in "Peso convertibles" quite cheap for what we have experienced so far.

Now we enter the Taberna Mayabe where we hope to get a different type of Buscanero (the local beer). It is kind of different as it is from the tab and served in ceramic mugs. The prices are also in moneda nacional – we pay incredible 4CUC for 8 beer. In the pub there are only some other guests but there are interested to get in touch, make us listen to their music and want to talk. Back at home we watch the repetition of the football game France vs. Albania (2:0) and sleep around 11pm.



Thursday, June 16, 2016

Holguín - Baracoa

We start with breakfast at 8am and are still not sure about how to proceed. Yesterday we have asked our host to talk with a few taxi drivers about the costs for a ride to Biran (birth place and museum of Fidel Castro) and further to Guantanamo. The cheapest offer is 120CUC which we're not happy to accept. After the breakfast we pay our bill and talk with grandmother and service lady about other options as well. Finally we pack our bags, leave them in the house for now and want to go to a main square where we can have a look in the internet for our options. On our way out of the house we meet the taxi driver and negotiate again...the price comes down to 100CUC...still too much for our understanding. We thank him and take his phone number just in case.

A look at the bus options on the Viazul bus page tells us that there is no direct connection to Guantanamo, means we have to go to Santiago de Cuba – stay a night – and take another bus the next day to Guantanamo. We're not convinced and start towards the local bus terminal to check the Truck options. Trucks are normally only for residents and take other routes than tourist busses. It's hot and we need to walk about 1km to the station. Arrived there we get in touch with taxi drivers again and start to talk options. We already know that there is a truck to Moa...but are not sure about the booking procedure. Rumour has it that you need to get your name on a list and have to wait 2 or 3 days for the tour to start. Moa is not our preferred target, which would be Baracoa which is even further east. A driver offers the entire journey for the two of us for 70CUC which is quite a reduction as the first driver offered the same tour for 180CUC. Reason for the high price is according to the first driver the bad road conditions and the high distance. We can start immediately and are supposed to arrive in Baracoa 3 hours later – we're quite sure that we'll never meet the timeline but we don't care as the way is part of the experience. So we accept the offer – agree on 5CUC more as we need to pick up our backpacks from the casa particulares - and jump into the red and rusty Super Buick from the 1950ies.

The journey starts at about 10am and the way till Moa feels quite smooth. There are no interruptions whatsoever and we make good progress. We have lots of space in the car so that Andi can get asleep on the bench in the 3rd row. In Moa we stop at the bus station and wonder what that is about. Our driver tells us that we need to change car as the road is getting a lot worse and only a jeep can manage. We understand but find the situation a bit suspicious, especially as we should give him the agreed 75CUC now and another driver will take us further. We're afraid that we'd need to pay another fee but they assure us that it won't be the case. So we change to a blue old jeep with two guys in the front and us in the back. Another guy joins us, who is clearly a bit drunk and one other man. The driver asks Jule if it would be ok to pick up a cake on the way. Of course we agree to that. The journey now becomes a typical local journey. First we pick up cake – a quite big cream cake without coverage – which a guy in the back is holding in his hands.

We wonder how long the cream lasts in the sun before melting. Then we pick up to boxes of beer, oil and balloon gas along our way. The road is a lot worse and we're happy about the jeep. The cake changes position to another guy who has joined the journey. At least it's in the shadow now. Unfortunately the slightly drunk man falls asleep and slips his arm in the cake as he missed the handrail of the jeep. He clearly enjoys eating the cake leftovers from his arm and the driver is not happy. 100km down the rocky path the cake is where it should be. Still looking incredible good given the fact of the hot weather conditions and all sorts of hands, elbows and even a naked tummy in/on it. Not to forget the dust that covers everything. That leaves us to say "Bon provecho"!

We carry on and pick up respectively drop off people along the road. At about 4pm (3 hours later than scheduled) we arrive at Baracoa. Close to the city centre we decide to get of the jeep and walk the last bit as the guys don't know where to go. One guy leaves the car with us and we can't get our head around if he's helpful or annoying as he tries to convince us to take another home even though Jule told him several times that we have picked one already. After a while we manage to get rid of him and arrive at the potential home. The hosts tells us there is only one night available – but offers to bring us to another house if we want. We agree, so he brings us to a house slightly further down the road. A very friendly woman (apparently a German guest lover) greets us and shows us our room at the first floor. We like it as we have a lot private space and a roof terrace. We take the urgently needed shower and enjoy a beer in the shadow of the roof terrace. Later as the sun comes down we make our way to the Atlantic which we can see from the terrace and take a few pictures.

Afterwards follows a tour through the small city centre. Baracoa is Cuba's oldest and most isolated town. Founded in 1511 and semi-abandoned in the mid-16th century the town became a Cuban Siberia where rebellious revolutionaries where sent as prisoners. It's famous for its cocoa and coffee plants. Here you'll get some of the dark and bitter chocolate in many drinks and dishes. We go for diner at the Bar-Restaurant La Terraza, have a table on the balcony overlooking the city and enjoy a 3 course menu and some ice-cold beer. Fantastic! As last guests we leave the place at about 11pm and have another drink on our roof terrace before we go to sleep.



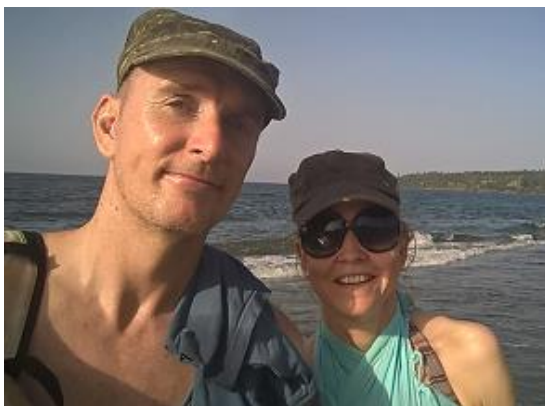


Friday, June 17, 2016

Baracoa

Today we sleep a bit longer and have breakfast at 9am with coffee sweeter than usual. Later we visit the travel agency Cuba tour because we ask if boat trips through the mangroves are offered. The guy lets us know that we're unlucky as no boat trips are available because it's not the right season to spot manatees. We sit down at Plaza Independencia and Andi takes a bit time to answer his birthday greetings. Afterwards we spent some time at home to update the travel report, study etc. before we go back to the Plaza Cafeteria for a small snack and to upload the report. It's about half five as we have a look for the Viazul bus station that is about 600m apart. The office is already closed and we're told that we have to come back tomorrow at 7am if we want to take the bus to Guantanamo at 8:15am.

We walk back home to get changed for the beach. It's a pity that there is no access to the water close to our home, we have to walk about half a kilometre to reach the stony beach. There are quite a few people on the beach and we decide to go separately into the water. It's not fun as you have to overcome quite a rocky bit before reaching the deeper water. That's why Andi puts his shoes on and is able to swim for a while in the ocean. Jule stays closer to the coast. After the refreshing bath we walk along the beach and are back at home short after 6pm. An hour later our lovely hosts serves us with the Baracoa speciality (fish in coconut sauce) at the roof terrace. A great dinner in a wonderful atmosphere. As dessert we get a coconut cream with cinnamon. Delicious! Our last event for the day is an after-dinner walk together with a farewell beer sitting on the city wall with view over the ocean.



Saturday, June 18, 2016

Baracoa - Guantánamo

Our day starts at with breakfast at 6am. Thereafter we pay our bill and wave good bye to our host. We walk to the bus station along the ocean and take a picture every now and then. Getting tickets to Guantánamo is no problem even though the bus is busy. We leave at 8:10am and arrive at Guantánamo bus station around 11am despite some smaller interruptions for collecting/buying stuff of the drivers. The station is rather inconvenient situated 5km west of the centre but we haven't to search long for a driver who brings us for 2CUC to the centre. Dropped off at Parque Martí we walk directly to our potential home. Lissett the owner greets us friendly and gives us her best room at the roof terrace. We like it as we have much space for our own. After a quick break we ask her how to get to the "Ranchón La Gobernador" bar-restaurant with a lookout tower for the US Naval Base. She recommends a car from the street but advises us not to pay more than 25CUC. Most drivers tend to take much more from tourists.

Back on the street getting a taxi seems harder than ever before. There is absolutely nobody who asks if we would need a taxi. Further there are only a few cars on the streets, some of them Taxis but with no one inside. We stroll through the city, the sun is burning and we find nothing. Finally we stop a car in the street but the guy is telling us that the lookout tower is closed...which is true for the former tower called "Mirador de Malones" since the late 2000s...but there is now the restaurant that is open for visitors. A misunderstanding that we couldn't solve with him so we walk further. Now we try two tourist offices to seek for help which is also pointless as both are closed although the opening times at the door state otherwise. Later a guy talked to us and offered a taxi service for 25CUC. We try to negotiate but he's not willing to reduce to 20CUC and tells something about prices getting up over the weekend and so on. We thank him and move on. Suddenly a car stops next to us. The driver asks where we want to go and agrees to a price of 20CUC. We're happy and jump on the backseat of the green Moskvich. After a quick stop at the driver's home our 20km journey begins.

Guantánamo bay (or Gitmo as US marines dubbed it) was initially established to protect the eastern approach to the strategically important Panama Canal. In 1934 an upgrade of the original agreement reaffirmed the lease terms and agreed to honour them indefinitely unless both governments accorded otherwise. An annual rent is set of US\$4.085, a sum that the US continues to cough up, but which the Cubans won't bank on the grounds that the occupation is illegal. Facilities of the base include a dozen beaches, a water-desalination plant, two airstrips and Cuba's only McDonalds, KFC and Starbucks. Approximately 9.500 military personal are based there. As of early 2015, 136 prisoners remain in Guantánamo.

We reach the open restaurant and make our way to the lookout tower. Unfortunately the promised strong binoculars are no longer there so we try the zoom of our camera. The base can be seen without equipment but it's impossible to identify anything even with camera. Most things seem to be covered with a roof or something similar. Moreover we're just able to see a small bit of the base from where we stand. A pity but at least we have an understanding of the small but important territory the base takes from the Guantanamo region. With a cold beer in our hands we enjoy the view over the mountains. The bar-restaurant is a nice venue that the Cubans use to drink and celebrate. Shortly after 3pm we leave the bar and return to the city. There we have a quick stop at home before we look for a restaurant. That also seems to be a bit tricky here. The places we find are either closed or supposed to open up much later in the evening. That's why we end up in an annoying fast food restaurant with a terrible noisy atmosphere and bad food. The chain is called "El Rapido" and is clearly not recommendable!

At the supermarket next door is apparently Chicken-Day as a crowd is surrounding a fridge-style box that contains plastic bags with chicken parts in it. We manage to buy water despite the illogical queue system. In the city we realise that people do queue in front of some shops but not others. Only a few people are allowed to be in the shop at the same shop. Back at home we take a break. Around 8pm we walk to a bar-restaurant "La Ruina" a shell of a ruined colonial building with 9m ceilings. We take a seat and finally ordering chicken breast, potato chips and rice with black beans after a very vivid description of our very patient waitress. Further we enjoy two beer and watch people.

A guy approaches us, we're required to pay an entrance fee of 2CUC. The guy isn't able to give us the change back in convertibles that's why we get 100CUP (moneda nacional). After diner we walk to Parque Marti in order to take another drink on the roof terrace of Hotel Marti. Entrance fee is 1CUC p.P.. The bar offering is not very delighting – you can get beer in cans and rum in plastic cups. We go for a beer named Sol that is served in bottles. The music is alright but the ambient sober as people are sitting on light metal chairs and tables. We spend a bit time standing watching people and enjoying drinks. Later we make our way home and go to bed.





Sunday, June 19, 2016

Guantanamo – Santiago de Cuba

We get up shortly before 8am and walk downstairs for breakfast which a guy starts to prepare as he spots us. We take a seat, get joined by a couple from St. Petersburg and have a nice chat over breakfast. Around 10am we pay our bill and pack our stuff as the taxi is already waiting. In a blue Lada we make our way to the bus terminal. Check in goes quickly, and then we take a seat in the waiting hall where we have time to read. The bus is delayed; the journey to Santiago de Cuba starts around 12 and takes roughly 2hours with a 30 minute lunch break in between.

It takes us a while to figure out that the bus hasn't stopped at the National Bus Station but the train station. Luckily we meet some helpful guys and are soon on our way to the potential casa particulares. Some streets do have no street what makes it a bit harder to find the way. A guy gives us company for the last meters and shows us the house where another woman rings the bell for us. A lady opens and shows us around. We take the room upstairs as we have our own floor and private garden. The area is quite as we're approximately a 15 minutes' walk away from the city centre. We get freshly squeezed pineapple juice as welcome drink and enjoy it in the garden.





We leave the house and walk back to the train station. Here we want to understand when the next train to Havana leaves and whether we can book tickets. The office is hard to find but with some help we manage. There are two guys who look at us and are not very keen to give information. We figure out that one train will leave tonight (around midnight) and the next one on June, 22nd. First they give us the impression that we can buy tickets what then gets refused and we get told to come back on 22nd in the morning to make the booking and start the journey on the same day. We're fine with that although we would have preferred to purchase immediately. However we now start to explore the city and walk alongside the harbour towards the centre.

It's incredibly hot, a thermometer at the bus station stated 38 degrees. We turn left and wander the "José a Saco" uphill. Here we want to make a break and eat ice cream at the "Jardin de los Enramadas". The garden, actually the whole pedestrian zone looks shinningly new. There are numerous service people but nobody seems to have anything to do and we get a "no hay helado" back on our answer for ice cream. We decide to take another cafeteria close to the garden and receive ice cream served in a coffee cup due to the lack of proper plates. However, the ice is very tasty but we need to hurry up as deep black clouds make their way towards the city. We find a "taberna" where the second half of football game France versus Switzerland (0:0) is broadcasted, take a seat, order beer and watch the play. We need to convince the waitress that we are interested in football as she puts Cuban music on and switched to a music video channel. Other guests are happy too as they want to see the game as well.

Now it's raining heavily, we're glad about the air cooling down at least for a moment. After the end of the game we proceed with our city tour and walk all the way up to the Plaza de Marte where people are celebrating Father's day. Hunger lets us think about a dinner location and we opt for "St. Pauli". Lonely Planet says "in a city of no great culinary tradition, St. Pauli has arrived like a hurricane in a stagnant gastronomic desert". We agree, the food is delicious and we go for a pumpkin soup as a starter, followed by fish in tomato-olive sauce as main dish. Taste and optic of the food together with perfect serve are so much better than many other dishes we've seen before. Just great! Afterwards we go for an after-dinner-walk and want to test a specific bar at the 15th floor of the Hotel Meliá Santiago de Cuba. There are not many buildings as high as that one; most houses in town are not taller than 2 storeys. We approach the woman at the reception and are asked to wait for the woman who is handling the lift. She takes a seat at a high chair in the lift and gives us permission to enter. We do so and wonder how the small cabin should deal with 12 people as mentioned at a sign.

Later on our way down we'll realise that the ceiling of the lift is missing and you can see all the way up – even though it's just a dark tunnel. The bar provides a fantastic view over the city but is astonishingly light of drinks. We asked for rum, first of all the oldest one is just 7 years old and in addition to that the waiter wants to serve it in shot glasses. As we ask for other ones he shows us juice glasses. We refuse and change to cocktails – the one each and every bar has – Mojito. We sit down; enjoy the view and the drinks. Later we stroll back home and end our first day in Santiago.



Monday, June 20, 2016

Santiago de Cuba

After long hours sleep we take breakfast around 9am. The lady who prepares everything apologises for being a bit late but we're not worried as we have plenty of time sitting in the garden reading. Later we start for the "historic walk" through the city. It kicks off with "El Tivoli" a quarter with red-roofed houses and steep streets. We take the famous Padre Pico steps, a terracotta staircase built into the hillside. Here we're always conscious not to step outside the shadow as the sun is burning already. We need a break, sit down at a patio and drink a cold pineapple juice. The walk continues on a street named "Heredia" one of Cuba's most atmospheric streets where you get offered everything from cigars, tours, taxis, chicas whatsoever. We pass two more squares, Plaza de Dolores and Plaza de Marte and are done.

At "Café Sophia" we sit down at the roof terrace. Jule orders cold sparkling water, Andi nothing as they don't have cold beer. We upload the travel report, check emails and some news before we leave the venue. Several times we circle the Parque Céspedes hoping to find the Librería International in order to buy books from Cuban authors in English without success. Instead we spot the Etecsa office and queue to buy Internet tickets. The queuing system works as follows; the person who joins the queue asks "ultimo" (who is last?) and the person who joined before raises a hand or say "yo" (me). People are standing in a bulk but know exactly when they are due. We stroll around a bit more and walk then back towards harbour. Many restaurants, bars and cafes are closed as it is Monday.





We decide to walk to Club Nautico a bar-restaurant suspended over the water with a great view across the bay but change our mind and enter the one next to the club that looks as a former ferry or similar. There we have a few drinks and tasty fish as a snack. A boat is arriving next to the restaurant to drop-off / pick up guests. We believe to understand from our waitress that the boat is going on a tour every day and comes back at 5pm. That's what we want to try tomorrow. Later we start to find the Bacardi Rum Factory which is located close to the train station. It opened its doors in 1868 and the Cuban government continues to make traditional rum here.

The Spanish-born owners fled the island post-Revolution. In total the factory produces 9 million litres of rum a year, 70% of which is exported. The signature rum is Ron Caney brand, as well as Ron Santiago and Ron Varadero. Unfortunately no tours are offered. That's why we visit the Barrita Ron Havana Club – a bar attached to the factory that offers rum sales and tastings. Happy to be inside where the temperature is strongly cooled down – outside it has 41 degrees right now. We take time to look at the different bottles of rum, cigars and other souvenirs, before we pick some to buy. We have a sip of rum called “Ron Cubay” which tastes good as well. Not able to stand the heat outside we ask for a cold beer but can't be served as the beer in the fridge is by far not cold enough. We leave and make our way home where we have a long, cold shower and a break.

At 7pm we get served dinner in our garden – chicken with rice and banana chips. Afterwards we walk to Iris Jazz Club and have a beer in the bar as the club will open at 10pm. The atmosphere of the bar is not brilliant, the light is too bright and the temperature is too low because of the air-condition. We stroll around and find another roof terrace bar around the corner where we drink cocktails and enjoy the view over the city. Heaven is pretty dark; you can hear thunder and see lightning every now and then. Around 10:30pm we return to the Jazz club, the performance has already started. We sit down and order two glasses of rum (15 years old).

Three or so songs later the show is over and the singer thanks the guests. We're surprised as the poster outside states that the performance starts at 10:30pm and lasts till 12:00. The waitress confirms that the performance has started at 10:30pm but also says it lasted one hour, which can't be the case as it is now 11pm. Yes, the waiter at the bar told us before that the doors will open at 10:00pm but we haven't expected the show to start immediately. Never mind – we are a bit disappointed having paid 5CUC entrance fees each for 3 songs, but what can we do. On our way home we have a look here and there but as it is Monday nothing is going on. Arrived at our house we have a quick chat with the owner about the experience and he advises us to visit the “La Trovia House” tomorrow night where traditional music is played. We promise to think about it and go to bed.



Tuesday, June 21, 2016

Santiago de Cuba

Today we sleep a bit longer and have breakfast in the garden at 9am. Afterwards we stroll to the city centre to go online and message friends and family. The promenade called José a Saco is definitely busier than the two days before. People use umbrellas to protect themselves from the sun. Looking at all the people we realise that Cubans are very social and communicative. They take time to chat, and life seems a lot more relaxed. Further people don't spend as much time looking at their smartphones...of course they are only able to be online in certain WiFi zones and have to pay quite some money for time-limited access. It forces them to use their time online more purposefully.

Later we buy some water at the supermarket, which is incredibly well equipped and return back home to get ready for our boat trip. Arrived at the pier we don't have to wait long for the boat. At around 1pm two boats make stop and we decide for the one we've seen the day before not knowing about direction, price or other differences. It turns out that the other boat has been chosen by the more obvious tourists and makes a cruise along the bay. The boat we're at carries people from nearby islands and other Cubans who want to make a daytrip. A guy starts talking to us. He's fisher and lives on an island named "Cayo Granma" where the boat is going to. We pay 1CUC p.P. for one way of the journey. The guy tells us about new built hotels for Americans, shows us an residence of Raul Castro and a lot more interesting things. We stop a few times along the 40 minutes trip to drop off / pick up people.

Finally we arrive at Cayo Granma a small island with red-roofed wooden houses – many of them on stilts above the water - with a church at the highest point. At the beginning of our walk around the island the guy gives us company and recommends the restaurant of a friend. As he leaves us we proceed with our journey and find out that it takes us only 15 minutes to surround the island. We decide to look for a place to swim and find a hidden one where we can leave our stuff and jump into the warm and crystal-clear water. Amazing! No one is around is, it's quiet and peaceful. After the refreshment we step into a restaurant with name "Cayo". We're the only guests and ask the waiter whether it's still open and they have some food for us. He's very friendly and serves us with very cold beer and a fish plate. It's a speciality of the house – grilled fish over baked with tomato sauce, crabs and cheese. And coffee is there too!

We absolutely love it sitting above the sea with a refreshing breeze and delicious food. Shortly before 5pm we leave the restaurant and return to the pier to wait for the boat back. There we watch kids and dogs playing in and around the water. We get on the boat; the sun is burning as we haven't managed to get a seat on the shady side. The journey is rather quiet as a group of young guys with too much rum is on board as well celebrating.



Happy to be back at Santiago we take a refreshment break at Club Nautico. The atmosphere and the service aren't as brilliant but the freezing cold served beer (President) pays off. A lot later we go for an evening walk. On our way we meet a guy who was studying at Odessa and returned to Cuba to work as a doctor. He complained about donations the government kept and he'd never received. Further of being blacklisted and no longer allowed to work or travel. Finally he has one request, namely that we send an email to a professor in New York with the info that he's still alive. We leave him and slender towards the bar-restaurant where we've been the day before. We have some more cocktails before we go home. What a nice day.



Wednesday, June 22, 2016

Santiago de Cuba

We start with breakfast at 8am followed by packing our stuff up and paying the bill. The backpacks stay with our host and we walk to the train station in order to buy tickets for the train to Havana tonight. There are some people waiting in front of the small office. We ask the woman who controls access to the ticket counter where we can buy the tickets and she replies that there is no sales yet and that we need to come back at 3pm. We explain that we've been told on Monday to come today between 9 and 9:30am. She sends us to a counter where we meet the woman we've

spoken to on Monday. She doesn't look very happy and speaks only to her manager behind her and the woman at the entrance. Finally the woman from the entrance comes back to Jule who is sitting in front of the ticket counter and explains that we need to come back at 3pm as there are no capacities. Whatever that means.

We walk back towards the city centre have a refreshment break in a garden café and decide to use the time to visit the Fidel Castro house. Arrived in the area we can't find the house where Fidel Castro lived as a student and ask a woman in a nearby museum. She points at a very small house opposite the museum and asks us whether we are interested in the museum as well. It's the Museo de la Lucha Clandestina and contains an exhibition about the underground struggle against the Batista regime in the 1950s. We're happy to pay 1CUC per person and stroll along photos, clothes, weapons and other exhibition material. From the impressive colonial balcony we take first pictures of the Castro student home. It's nearly 12 and we join the Taberna in the city to escape the sun and watch the football game Hungary vs. Portugal (3:3). Later we have lunch there as well before we walk back to the train station for another attempt to buy the tickets.



The woman at the entrance guides Jule to the counter again. The woman from before is still not very keen to serve us and talks to her manager. The woman from the entrance approaches Jule again and explains that there are no capacities at the moment and we should sit down and wait. We do so and one minute later we were asked to change to a waiting area in front of another counter. The woman there is much nicer but tries again to convince us that the bus is much more comfortable because the train has no air condition. Jule explains that it is completely fine for us and hands over the passports. In the end we hold the tickets in our hands and have paid 30CUC per person. The train will leave at 11:45pm and we need to do the check in an hour earlier. We stay at the station to watch another football game (Sweden vs. Belgium).

On our way to the bar-restaurant at the pier we stop home and ask Lola (our host) whether it's possible to have dinner at their home. She agrees and offers us to have a shower as well before going to the station which we thankfully accept. Afterwards we enjoy a farewell drink at the pier and go for a little walk as the sun gets down a bit. Back at our casa we take time to read, have a shower and dinner before we shoulder our backpacks and leave for the train station at about 9pm. There we spend some time with reading and talking before we go to do the check-in. Thereafter we are a bit confused where to wait and try several places at the train station before we get advised for the correct one. The waiting area is quite busy.

Suddenly people are moving towards the gate which is open now. We're standing right in the middle of the chaos and are wondering if the seat number will matter or not. At about 11:30pm the crowd makes its way to the train which is formed of 10 coaches. We question a service person at the last coach and are lucky as that is ours. We find our seats and are not entirely happy as it's one of two seat groups with four seats, means 2 people will sit opposite us. It turns out that we're in a better place as the people next to us where 3 big guys / ladies sit together with lots of stuff and rare leg space. We get a man and a youngster who put their luggage in the overhead lockers.

There is space for 76 people in every coach and ours is nearly full. The windows are open but it's still very hot. Technicians walk around and do a check of the breaks and train in total. Further 3 guys from the National Revolution Police patrol through the train and will give us company for the entire journey. The service woman gives us instructions about the journey and about the security standards. It's 11:45pm and we're wondering whether we will start in time. Behind a fence we spot the Viazul bus – the normal tourist transport vehicle – and we know that it will start its tour to Havana at 12:30. We wait...and wait...and wait. It is 12:30, the Viazul bus is starting and we have no idea what's going on.

Then the service person explains that the locomotive is broken, that they are looking to find a mechanic and that they don't know if and when the journey will start. Cubans are incredible relaxed people. Most of them remain in their seats and try to sleep whilst waiting. We decide to wait outside because of the heat. First we sit down and chat a bit; there are some more people outside smoking, buying drinks, chatting. As a cockroach is running towards us we stand up and walk to the top of the train.

On our way we do realise that our coach is the most basic one. Firstly it's the only one with no light but mainly because of the shabby seats that are not adjustable to lean back. Now we understand why we've paid only 30CUC and not 50CUC as it was stated in the Lonely Planet. Further we see that the train is quite full and that the locomotive is missing. We think about potential alternatives if the train won't be able to leave Santiago and agree to take the next Viazul bus at 6:30am if nothing has moved until then. Of the entire train there are only very few people who are not patient, end their journey and leave the station. The rest is just waiting. After a while we step back into our coach and try to sleep a bit. Later we hear a locomotive horn and are hopeful. Indeed the train is moving, finally at 2:30am.



Thursday, June 23, 2016

Santiago de Cuba - Havana

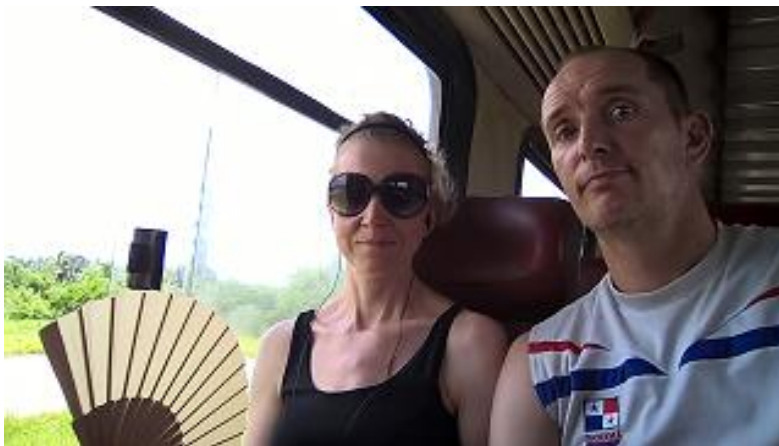
As the guy who was sitting behind us was one of the few quitters and is no longer with us Andi occupies his seat to sleep. Jule used our two seats to get a bit sleep. The breeze from outside is quite cold, we close the windows and manage to get at least a few hours sleep. The train makes its way but is at times really slow as the pick-up / drop off procedure we know from buses and cars is surprisingly the same with trains. Means people get off the train wherever they want, bags get delivered along the track and more reasons we don't know about.

Further we stop at some rather small train stations where the train becomes a market place as many traders sell stuff like sandwiches, drinks, beach balls, cake, ice cream and candy. We buy two sandwiches with cheese for breakfast and pay 1CUC with is far too much but we don't want to spend our moneda nacional. The sun rises and it becomes hot again which is inconvenient especially when the train stops and there is another long stop as there is some technical problem again. It takes them 20 minutes or so to fix it and the journey continues. If a stop at a station comes to an end and the train is about to continue its journey it makes a quick sound. However there are always people who need to run and jump on the moving train which is not a problem as all the doors are open anyway. One time we miss a person and couldn't believe that the train stopped again after it left the station to wait for the running late comer. Astonishingly social but it

explains the fickle train schedules.

Being already more than 12 hours in the train the journey becomes draining but there is still some way to go. It's hot; we're sweaty, dirty and hungry as we haven't managed to buy something after the sandwiches. We arrive at Havana around 7:30pm after a 17.5 hours train ride and are exhausted but happy about the experience. The weather is lovely and we walk towards a potential casa particulares within the old town of Havana. Unfortunately it's fully booked but the owner is very helpful and phones other people. He tries 5 or so before he finds a free one and asks us to sit down for a moment before the owner arrives to pick us up.

Shortly after that a friendly woman is welcoming us and leads us to her house which is only a few meters apart. Our room is small and not a pretty as in the colonial building we were in before. We take it nonetheless as we quickly want a cold shower and something to eat. Approximately half an hour later we are refreshed and ready for a city stroll. We stop at Plaza de San Francisco de Asis as beautiful place with a church and other colonial buildings. Here we decide to sit down and have dinner together with a cold beer. Later we make a quick stop at the sea to go online and check emails before we stroll a bit further to have another drink and buy some water. We're back at home around 12pm and are tired.



Friday, June 24, 2016

Havana

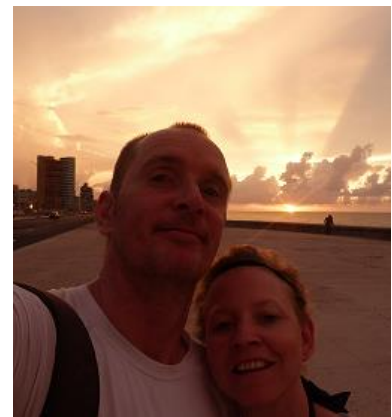
The day starts with breakfast at 9am and a chat with our host Kristina and her friend who is preparing the breakfast for us. Nothing is as static as breakfast for us as there is always some fruit, bread and butter, honey, coffee and eggs. If we're lucky there is cheese too. We realise that the owner of the casas particulares seldom provide the service for their guests themselves. Often a second person is there to help and serve breakfast or does the laundry. Further it seems that the owner is constantly at home as it never happens that we come back from a tour is no one is there to open the door.

After breakfast we start to a walk through Havana Vieja. It's the oldest part of the city and contains over 900 buildings of historical importance. We start at Plaza Vieja which buildings housed some of Havana's richest families. The tour continues to Plaza de San Francisco de Asis with a church that carries the same name and was once Havana's tallest building. We then walk down the Market Street (Calle Mercaderes) and reach Calle Obispo where we see townhouses from the 1570s. A guy talks to us and recommends the roof terrace of a hotel close by for a break. We follow and enjoy a nice view over the city together with a Mojito and a Pina Colada Special. Afterwards we explore the Plaza de Armas together with the fort (Castillo de la Real Fuerza) and finally the Catedral de San Cristóbal. We are happy about the tour. It changed our view of Havana as buildings and places are taken care of and don't look as rotten as the city centre. We buy some water and have a look in some more shops on our way home. Arrived at Calle Luz 109 we sit down at our terrace, have a cold beer and take some time for travel report and studies.

At around 5pm we start with a walk along the bay with Hotel Nacional located at Havana Vedado as final goal. The way is nice because of a wide pedestrian stripe and an excellent view over the ocean. Half way through we leave the Malecón in order to find a place to eat. We're lucky and spot a good looking restaurant that doesn't quite fit into the rather rough area. The waiter is very friendly. We take white wine, a carrot soup as a starter, fish and chicken as main course followed by coffee and dessert. Fantastic. First we are the only guests but it gets busier later on. It's slightly raining as we proceed with our journey but stops just a few moments later. We pass the Monument of Antonio Maceo and reach Vedado. There is another hotel that catches us – Hotel Habana Libre. It was the former Havana Hilton Hotel and commandeered by Castro's revolutionaries in 1959 just 9 months after it had opened. During the first few months of the Revolution, Fidel ruled the country from a luxurious suite on the 24th floor.

We turn right and arrive at the Hotel Nacional – a national monument that was built in 1930 and place of putsches and meeting of the North American Mafia. It's really impressive and we wonder whether we can get in because of the backpacker fashion we're wearing. Yes, we can and make our way through the lobby to the terrace and garden. There we order 2 Mojitos, smoke a Cohiba and enjoy the view over the ocean and the beginning sunset. Later we slender along the bay and take some amazing pictures of the sun sinking in the ocean. Back in Havana Vieja we take a seat outside Café Paris for one last drink and watch people. A dog with a sign around his neck interests us and we start to call for him. He trusts us and lays down next to our chairs. We have time to look at the sign that states his name, that he's (kastriert), belongs to an organisation and should be treated nicely. We like it! We go home as they close the bar and go to bed.





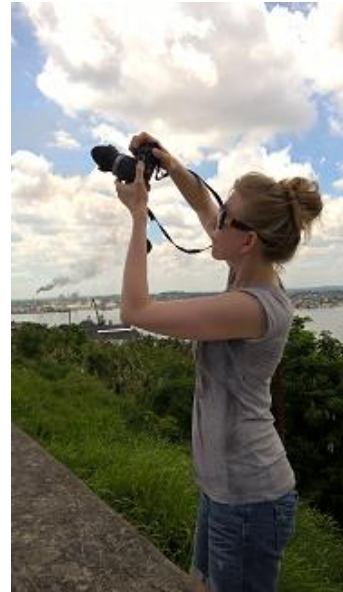
Saturday, June 25, 2016

Havana

We start again with breakfast at 9am together with a conversation about country and people with our host. She explains that Cubans are concerned to be behind other countries and that she clearly sees the differences when she looks / speaks with tourists. Most Cuban people have not enough money to travel and if they do there are many restrictions for example with a journey to Europa. Beside a visa they need an invitation and other documents. She knows about Germany's strong economy and is informed about the Brexit. We enjoy the chat and manage to understand the context but would be happier if our Spanish skills would allow us a better expression of our thoughts. Anyway. Afterwards we get our stuff ready, pay, leave the bags and start our last holiday.

We decide to visit the area Casablanca where the Parque Histórico Militar is located. We take the ferry. It's a 5 minute ride and we pay 2CUC. Arrived at Casablanca we walk uphill to the large Cristo Statue. Thereafter we visit the Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabana the largest Spanish colonial fortress in America. The sun is burning and there is no shadow so we try to be quick and finally rescue us in a café to enjoy cold drinks. We then walk back and are just in time for the ferry to the city side of the bay. No we take some time to check emails before walking towards the city centre to visit "El Chanchullero" one of the bohemian cafes recommended by Lonely Planet. Unfortunately we can't find it and end up in a similar nice one. Here we enjoy coffee, sandwiches and some beer.

At around 5:30pm we return to our casa particulares, take our stuff and wave good bye to our host and her son. On the street we're looking for a taxi to the airport, hoping to get a better price as for an organised one through our host. We don't have to wait long, not one but two men are looking for potential driver. Both get a car at the same time and we go for a purple vintage car. On the journey we have a nice chat with the driver. We arrive at the airport around 7pm and have enough time to get changed, eat something and go online. The flight starts in time at 11:55pm. We have a small meal, watch a movie and sleep for a while.



Sunday, June 26, 2016

Paris - London

We arrive at Charles de Gaulle airport without issues 30 minutes ahead of schedule. Here we have a second coffee and watch the football game France vs. Ireland. The flight to London is scheduled for 6:15pm.