

Beyond Havana: Organic Farms, Eco-Tourism and Hints of Pre-Columbian Peoples

by Joan Conover

There's plenty for sailors coming to Cuba's north coast to do in and around Havana, but if you have time it's worth seeing more of this unusual country. My husband, our three dogs and I arrived at Marina Hemingway aboard our Morgan 511, *Growthtiger*, as part of the Salty Dawg Rally on April 5th, 2017.

Getting Out and Around

Currently, mass transportation systems in Cuba are not really the best option for tourists, so getting outside of Havana to the mountains or to the beaches offers creative challenges to visitors.

Some vans can be rented, but our experience was somewhat negative: "our" vans were canceled on the very day we were supposed to have them — apparently when they were needed for a special festival event — causing several of us to miss seeing some areas outside of Havana. It might have been partially due to a misunderstanding or a need for more vehicles for larger, better-funded groups than our small batch of cost-conscious cruisers. Rental cars are available, but we were more comfortable having Cuban drivers, who knew the traffic patterns and roads, and were unaffected by possible insurance issues. The major roads — a few four-lane, circa 1960s US-interstate style highways — feed into winding and bumpy country roadways, sometimes two-lane, sometimes very narrow and some with overpasses leading nowhere. "To be done later" was the comment from our host.

The best transportation options for visitors are the formal, government-provided, large tour buses and the unique and privately owned 1950s-'60s classic-car taxis. The large tour buses are found on most highways, but these are usually transporting groups from cruise ships and land touring companies. During our trip, large tour buses seemed to be regular fixtures on all the narrow roads we traveled, but they did not visit the small family in-home restaurants known as *paladars*. Instead, they stopped at the more scripted locations: those with the obligatory musicians or mimes, the mojito bar with Cuban rum and beers, the oxen to ride, and the post-card/souvenir shops. On the road, big buses weaving around horse-drawn carts were a little concerning, but the horses seemed resigned to sharing their roads.

The classic cars are a staple for tourists, and with a vocal and multilingual driver, more can be discovered about Cuba than just seeing a commercially packaged

creative encouragement has led to a young and dynamic performing-arts scene in Cuba's various major cities.

While it's clear the government has provided strict guidance and regulations to all businesses in regard to



Clockwise from above: A horse-drawn cart prepares for rural bread delivery; fresh seafood at a paladar; privately owned classic-car taxis are a transportation staple

and nearly five-star dining experiences with uniformed wait staff, always with live music.

Our visit to an off-the-beaten path paladar in Viñales, in the province of Pinar del Río, was eye opening. No parking lot, horses tied out anywhere there was grass, chickens roaming at will — a very rural scene. We sat family style outside under a tree, ordered Cuban specialties, and watched guitar-playing troubadours wander between the tables and then, continuing to strum and sing, walk across the dirt road to another paladar. A mother hen with her newly hatched brood of chicks kept guard under our table until we were able to gently suggest she might find better snacks somewhere else; our toes were endangered or we would have shared more.

The in-home paladars offer a wonderful look at traditional Cuban foods, with *ropa vieja* (a shredded-beef stew, literally "old clothes") a good example. Waiting

for our meals, we watched a young man dash away on horseback, returning with a backpack full of the red-and-green-skinned tomatoes we soon found on our plates in a salad with sliced onions, cucumbers and a simple olive oil dressing. This dish is a staple for Cubans, as is rice. Natural fresh fruit drinks, with Cuban rum, lots of it, rounded out the meal.

Outside of a major city, it's difficult to find the large commercial hotels that most international travelers are used to, and privately licensed B&Bs fill those niches across the Cuban countryside. Viñales, along with other rural communities, offers bed and breakfast



tourist show. The classic-car taxis can be hired for 30CUC (CUC = US\$1) for four hours; small yellow cabs are also available in town. One of the things that makes Cuba unique is that your taxi driver or tour host may have a PhD in English or engineering — they find greater income from tourism, and they are forming a new middle class. In Cuba, education is said to be available to all, and on our drives from Havana to the countryside, medical training facilities, housing and universities were pointed out with pride.

Also unique to Cuba is a major focus on higher education in the performing arts and music, and it is clearly evident. The emphasis on music and art supports the wonderful live music we found in the local bars and paladars, and is the salvation of the traditional Cuban music forms, dances and art. All of this

how Cuba is portrayed to visitors, there is the definite impression that one goal is protecting the unique Cuban heritage. Venues ranging from Havana night-clubs to rural eco-tourism sites place an emphasis on local music and traditional foods. A downside of this is that at major tourism venues, the Cuban music (albeit played live by skilled musicians) and the Cuban tourist trinkets can seem "scripted".

Paladars and B&Bs

It's hoped that the new US regulations will not damage the growth of an emerging middle class of Cubans whose livelihoods depend on tourism. Even outside of Havana, the countryside shows some tourism focus, with family farms in all communities adding in-home restaurants, or paladars. In the town of Viñales, as well as in Havana, we found both family-style eateries



opportunities, again carefully regulated by the government. The B&Bs show very similar styles and are designed to appeal to travelers; our driver, Adonis, mentioned that private homes and buildings had been rebuilt along government guidelines; the similar style of engineering is evident.

The Special Period

In the 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its subsidies on oil and gas, Cubans faced an economic disaster. In that "Special Period" Cuba faced what the US society would face if there were a nationwide electric grid failure. Gas stations closed, food became harder to find, public transportation was infrequent and crowded, there was no electricity — the country nearly ground to a stop.

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The daily lifestyle, for most Cubans, regressed to 19th-century mode. According to our driver, it has only been in the last few years that the rural areas have gotten electrical power again. Rural communities still operate with a foot in the past; with their “transportation vehicles” tied out in front yards or trotting in

harness along four-lane highways, and with oxen yoked to plows. Without fuel for the cars, Chinese bicycles were key for transportation. However, once cars became usable again, this model faded; today, other than the bici-taxis, relatively few bikes are seen on city streets. Only the brave attempt bicycling in the confusing, mostly one-lane streets of the local com-

munities. Drivers, experienced in the bumper-to-bumper sequences, weave in and out around parked vehicles with silent signals, but beep their horns to say “hi” or “thank you”.

On and In the Land

During the several-hour drive from Marina Hemingway to Viñales with Adonis, we learned about

BERNIE KATCHOR (2)



JOAN CONOVER



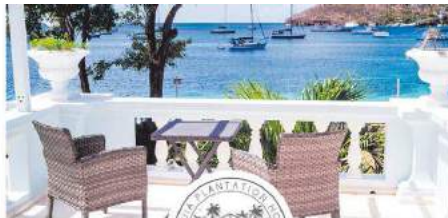
Clockwise from upper left: Other than the bici-taxis, relatively few bicycles are seen today on city streets; with a knowledgeable driver like Adonis, much can be learned about Cuba; the trains are not for travelers who seek luxury or speed



the agriculture and the local, small farms along the Soviet Union-era highway. Red soil was everywhere, as in April all the farmland was plowed, waiting and ready to plant as soon as the monsoon rains came. Even the trees and native vegetation were leafless, waiting for the first rains to sprout.

An emphasis on small farming plots, around apartments and on government-held fields, provided food during the Special Period. Currently organic family farming — very similar to the 1970’s “back to nature” agricultural movement in the US — is alive and well in Cuba. In almost every small area with any soil, small private plots grow greens and other vegetables. As part of 1990s reforms, the Mercados Agropecuarios Libres or free agricultural markets, allowed residents to buy local produce from private stands, outside the official system of rationing; since the normal taxation is 90 percent to government and ten percent to individuals, the tax-free private markets became a godsend. Viñales, and the entire Pinar del Rio area, are showcases of this movement towards self-sufficient agriculture. Touring the tobacco fields, we saw many family farms producing their own unique tobacco seeds. It’s likely that the heirloom crops — such as the red-and-green striped tomatoes, onions and cucumbers found on every paladar menu — are homegrown.

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As the economy changes, inner city vegetable plots may be on the downtrend, but outside of major population areas they are around homes everywhere. The larger government-sponsored organic growing fields are showcased in several areas, and in some places have become major tourist stops.

To know Cuba, and both its agriculture and tourism potential, it's important to understand a little about its physical environment. Cuba has been in the forefront of countries protecting their environment, joining the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 1981, and by 2011 having nine World Heritage sites ranging from Old Havana and its fortifications to the Viñales Valley. Funding for upkeep and protection of these sites is provided by our tourism, something to keep in mind.

The karst landscape of the Viñales Valley, formed by the dissolution of soluble rocks, including limestone and dolomite, features fertile red alluvial soils dotted with dome-like *mogotes*. *Mogotes* are isolated, steep-sided residual hills, which are composed of limestone, marble or dolomite. The deep red color and consistency of the soil resembles flood loess similar to that found in Pleistocene-era pampas formations in South America.

The karst landscape has also produced cave systems and rock faces, and world-class spelunking and rock climbing are becoming a real eco-tourism opportunity, with Cuban clubs set up to provide information and maps. There are also mountains on the island's northern edges as well as on the far southeastern coastline, where rock climbing and cave explorations are growing tourist activities.

Adonis took our little group of five to spelunking caves in Viñales, followed by a visit to a privately owned tobacco farm for cigar-rolling lessons and a sample of homegrown espresso coffee. Talking with the family, we learned that they had farmed the large level fields the same way for over four generations, with no sign of use of earthworks or irrigation canals, just depending on rainfall for crop moisture. They said they survived the past decades as small farmers, far from major cities and pretty much on their own for most of the Special Period. Life is still very rustic and without much in the way of electricity usage for rural citizens.

Spelunking in the crumbling limestone faces of the *mogotes* was the highlight for the crew of one cruising boat, who shared stories of rock climbs and then treks across nearby farmers' fields. As these adventures also included being invited into rural homes with gracious offers to sit down and rest with homemade cigars and freshly ground coffee, it sounded like an excellent opportunity for cultural exchange.

Hemingway's Finca Vigia

Ernest Hemingway's legacy is celebrated country-wide at favorite stops ranging from bars in Havana to art galleries. And even though it's a popular tourist stop — with the obligatory musicians, mojito bar with Cuban rum and beers, plus postcard/memento shop — a visit in the countryside to Hemingway's Finca Vigia (Lookout Farm) is a must.

An hour's taxi ride from Havana, the restored and protected home and grounds are a rich acknowledgement of how beloved the American writer is in Cuba. We were surprised to find an eight- by 12-inch black-and-white photo in a place of honor in the bedroom. It was Buck Lanham, Hemingway's long-time friend — an uncle of ours! Amazingly, we had somewhat ignored the family lore, but it was heartwarming to see this recognition by the Cubans of his friendship.

Not Just Tourists

As we all know, US citizens can't travel to Cuba merely as tourists. Our visit fell under the acceptable "educational" category. On our sail to Havana from the Virgin Islands our cruise along the Old Bahama Channel, viewing the Cuban beaches and shorelines,

provided data for the research we have participated in for several years as volunteer citizen scientists for the Sargasso Sea Commission and as part of the SSCA Clean Wake efforts. The data is also provided to the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory as written updates and photographs of seaweeds encountered at sea.

After arrival, based on our participation as part of an officially organized rally, we researched and documented assigned educational-research topics. Ours included a short written review on possible prehistoric earthworks on the island. In my research on pre-historic peoples and earthworks found in the Americas, I found that Cuba has hints of earthworks whose patterns match those of Bolivia and the Amazon rainforests. Our visit provided an exciting visual comparison to similar pre-Columbian irrigation systems.

A pre-Columbian people living in Cuba were the Taino. The Taino Amerindian peoples were present in many Eastern Caribbean islands and are thought to have slowly migrated up the island chain from the Orinoco region of South America many thousands of years ago. Archeologists have found remnant middens, or living areas, and petroglyph drawings on many islands, along with amazing pottery and gold. They are now an extinct group of people, dying out during the Spanish invasion of Cuba and the Caribbean.

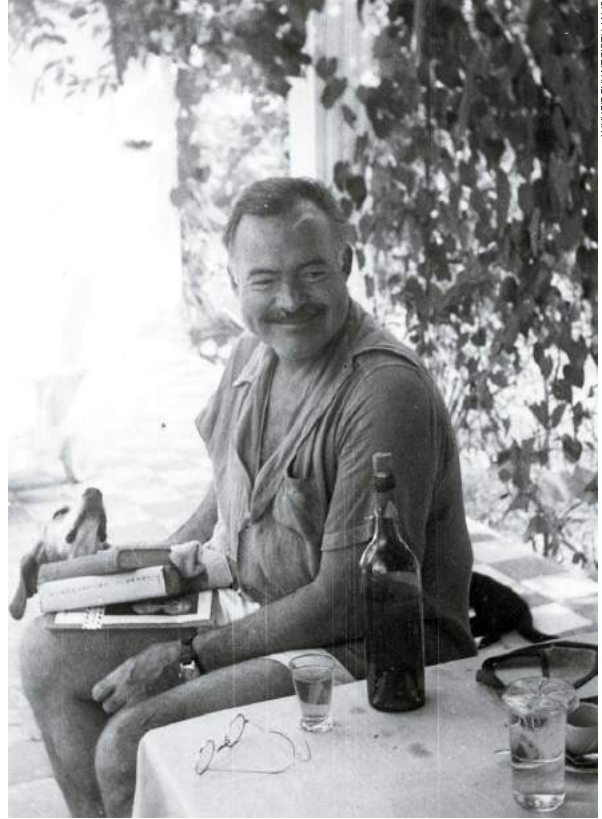
A very educational tourism stop is the recreated Taino village, named Guamá after the last Taino chief who fought the Spanish. The village is situated on an island in Treasure Lake, as an adjunct to Varadero's tourism program, with a museum, sugarcane fields, an operational train, and alligator farms.

It is not clear if the earthworks I studied in Cuba, still underground and acting as water-management systems, were built by the Tainos. Certainly the style matches similar structures found underneath areas of the Amazon rainforests, placing their potential ages at early Holocene or even Pleistocene eras. Many thanks to Jay Stuart Wakefield for his photographs documenting his visit to the village and to Cuba; Mr. Wakefield is the author of several books on pre-history civilizations and had traveled to Cuba to research the Taino histories in early 2017. It is hoped in the future, research in Cuba will include the earthworks discovered during this trip.

Planning to Return!

Will we go back to cruise other locations in Cuba? Yes! While the US president's announcement in June of his intention to retighten regulations affecting US visitors to Cuba — which will end informal, individual "people-to-people" travel — might be off-putting to the independent traveler, "people-to-people" visits as part of a group will still be allowed, so the small-group environment we enjoyed with our sailing rally participants should still be possible (see www.treasury.gov/

resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/cuba_faqs_20170616.pdf). Certainly charter groups (such as Harmony Yacht Vacations of Key West), and the organizers of numerous boat races, regattas, fishing tournaments and yacht rallies are investigating possibilities. We are positive the *Waterway Guide Cuba* authors will also be exploring the possibilities, and *Cruising World* magazine, the Seven Seas Cruising Association and the Salty Dawg Sailing Association are all continuing to plan 2018 rallies to Cuba.



Ernest Hemingway at his Cuban country home, Finca Vigia. Today the restored house and grounds comprise a museum that's well worth visiting

The revised regulations for US citizens have not yet come into effect, so check official sources such as www.treasury.gov for accurate information. It is difficult for us, as US cruisers, to believe that the amazing professional contacts, local friendships and cultural outreach that are evolving between ourselves and the Cuban people could be jeopardized; all cruisers are doing so much to foster understanding with the people and places we visit.



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