

Discovering Havana

Havana was a shock. Coming from a tranquil Cotswold village it was doubly so. I was rudely awakened by a loud noise that in my jet-lagged stupor I feared to be the rumbling of revolutionary tanks once again rolling into the city. The reality was more prosaic - the noise was the thunderous roar of antiquated buses ferrying commuters to work. It was the first of many shocks but thankfully the others were less startling.

In spite of my rude awakening I loved Havana. It beguiles and intrigues like no other city, even if it is one of the most difficult places to explore without bumping into a cliché or tourist, my second shock of the morning. Whilst traipsing around the old town, I was surprised by the number of groups of tourists.

Yet it is easy to see why the tourists come - Havana has one of the coolest, most easily identifiable images of any travel destination: the iconic 1950s cars, the revolutionary bombast of its billboards and the ramshackle charm of the old town. Havana really does live up to its postcard image of rusting balustrades, crumbling colonial houses and exfoliating pastel buildings - Old Havana boasts more colonial buildings than any other city in the New World.

Usually groups of tourists are an anathema to me but Havana's charms enthralled me to such an extent that I swallowed my traveller's pride and even signed up to the mandatory stop at a cigar factory. In spite of the brusque and uninterested manner of our young Cuban guide and his American English (a betrayal that revealed that he would rather be somewhere else), I was rather impressed by the tour. Not so much for the disinterested commentary or the building - although I loved the old worn wooden stairs and banisters and the faded hand written signs showing one the way out in an emergency - but in discovering more about the cigar-making process, in particular how they are rolled. I was transported from selection of the tobacco leaves to rolling (the most skilled process in which the 260 workers had to roll 110 cigars a day) to the boxing of the cigars.

Rolling was the most interesting of the processes, the deftness and skill were impressive. Alas they were not rolled on the thighs of a Cuban mulatta but despite this loss of flavour, it was aesthetically pleasing to watch. There was a tactile and sensual pleasure to the process that led to desire. Such craving along with the ubiquitous posters and postcards of Che Guevara puffing on a huge Havana are a seductive combination. So much so that it is easy to see how even tea-total, non-smoking right-wing tourists leave clutching a bottle of Havana Club, a pack of Monte Cohibas and a Che T-shirt.

Back in Havana I sat on the rooftop terrace of my hotel watching the sun set over the city. As I savoured the refreshing mintiness of a mojito - another Cuban cliché - I reflected that a mojito, mint coupled with sugar and rum, is a bittersweet metaphor of Cuba. Bitterness is in the control and the lack of choice the sweetness is in the culture, music and people. I had enjoyed the charms, the stereotypes, the quirks but for me the real pleasure came in understanding a little better a way of life that is so very alien to ours. And like my mojito I wanted more

About the Author

Steppes Travel (<http://www.steppestravel.co.uk>) specialises in arranging tailor made holidays to exotic destinations. All Steppes Travel consultants have first hand and in-depth knowledge of all the countries they cover. For further information, please call 01285 651 010.

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