Americans in Cuba-Jazz and Art Tour 2013

Smooth and electric Jazz music, energetic art, Cuban history, colorful people, cars and architecture…I will attempt to convey the magic of our Cuban experience in this journal of my point of view straight from my heart and intended as a recorded memory of our trip…as Americans in Cuba touring together and with many new friends on the Insight Cuba Jazz and Art tour.

(Disclaimer: Please forgive any missed or mistaken information, poor grammar, misspelled words and overall Oklahoma “slang-isms”).

Tuesday, May 14th, 2013

Off to an early start we arrived in Miami via Atlanta early evening. We collected our bags and rolled them right into the International Airport Hotel lobby inside the Miami airport. This was a first for us to stay inside of an airport hotel.

*Sidebar story: God Bless our US service men and women.* On our flight to Miami a few US Marines were passengers. One of the Marines was sitting in front of us. The flight attendant leaned over to the Marine from around the beverage snack cart and asked him what he would like because a gentlemen seated up front of the plane wanted to purchase all the snacks and beverages those marines desired! The Marine was humble and just asked for a bag of peanut M&Ms along with his beverage.

Wednesday, May 15th, 2013

Up and off to the lobby inside the airport to check-out then to check-in for American Airlines Flight to Cuba! We were greeted by Gene from Insight Cuba Tours. We then mingled and chatted with fellow travelers from New York, LA, Denver, Minnesota, Boston, San Jose…and many more places.

Our flight to Cuba was delayed due to the “tug” malfunctioning. It then departed Miami at 11:34am. Terri sat next to me from Minnesota, she was traveling with her high school buddy Judy. Tony and I watched the tip of Florida fade away from sight out of the plane window as we “escaped” to Cuba!

As our plane descended into the sunny skies of Cuba’s Jose’ Marti’ Airport the anticipation of adventure and excitement was building in our American brains and hearts…what are the Cubans like, will they welcome us…will they turn us away? No way! They are friendly! We walked down the stairway from the plane onto the sunny tarmac and the balmy breeze whisked us toward the colorful airport. Busy people greeted us with “hola” and “Buenos Dias”!

Inside we stepped up to the line of entry into Cuba. The custom officers were inside small rooms ready to review our documents and asked to scan our faces. After a buzzer sounded we walked individually through the narrow white doors into Cuba! The airport was so clean and unassuming, no flashing ads or people constantly chatting on cell phones, or crowds rushing through. We exchanged our dollars into CUCs one dollar to one CUC.

Our Cuban guide Danielo “Danny” greeted us and escorted us outside to the gua gua (bus) to meet Roberto our bus driver. The first image I saw was a billboard with Che’Rivera’s image. (I would see this image of the slain soldier on buildings, t-shirts, mugs, banners, flags. He is a beloved figure in Cuba.) We walked outside and saw many Cubans anxiously waiting for their family and friends to emerge from the airport. We then met Anna our American tour guide from Minnesota as we settled into the gua gua for the ride into Havana. Our first Cuban food experience was at a beautiful hacienda with a spacious patio with tables covered in lovely linen tablecloths that provided an elegant setting for dining. We ate family style from bowls of rice, beans, potatoes, and salad. We were served a cocktail. (Our meals would include one or two drinks, salad, main course, bread and dessert.) The servers brought a skewered assortment of grilled meats to our table and used large bladed knives to slide the meat from the skewers onto our plates. Such a ­presentation! We were entertained by a trio of Cuban Jazz musicians…our first glimpse of Cuban Jazz and CD purchasing…more on this later. We strolled through the beautiful patio garden and hopped on the gua gua.

R..R..Roberto drove us to a community that was literally covered in Mosaic art! The sidewalks, walls, ceilings, benches, and stairways were shining in the hot Cuban sun with a tiled mosaic art style of artist Jose’ Fuster. He was part of a community art project to encourage art in neighborhoods. We were invited into his home by his nephew to view most of his home and studio. The whimsical, fun artwork reflected the feeling of Cuba and its people; bright, cherry, maybe a little broken into pieces by their turbulent history…but glued together in a creative bond…as their youth yearns for a bright future. We strategically climbed the slick tile stairs to see a charming view of the city from the top of Fuster’s home. Again, literally everything is covered in Mosaic of his home, even the roofs! He arrived home to demonstrate his style of drawing on some clay pottery to my huge delight. He was so friendly and welcoming.

Our hotel Melia’ Cohiba was standing tall across from the Malecon (sea wall). The ocean sparkled and winked at us as if to send us greetings of fun ahead!

The hotel lobby was spacious and a tasteful Vegas like decor, tropical flower and rose arrangements set the luxurious tone. Check-in was painless and quick. As we opened our door to our room an ocean view appeared surrounded by a spacious, stylish décor with all the amenities one could want. (We learned the shower was fantastic providing super pressure and lots of big white towels to refresh ourselves after our hot treks through the city.) The sparkling pool reflected the Cuban skies with its inviting cool water.

We took some time before our orientation meeting with Anna to take a taxi ride on the Malecon. Ron the taxi driver helped us into the pink ford classic 50s convertible to cruise through the streets of Havana to Old Town Havana. Tony used his GoPro camera hanging out the side to capture our fun ride and the surrounding beauty of the ocean, and the tall crumbling structures alongside pristine colorful restored beauties of homes and buildings.

Our orientation meeting later that evening with Anna was so helpful to acclimate ourselves to the schedule ahead and to each other. We introduced ourselves as we sipped cocktails.

*Terri’s tumble:* Unfortunately, Terri the lovely lady that sat next to me on the plane ride had fallen in the lobby and split her chin, a nurse (with an actual white nurse cap on) came into the orientation and insisted she have it looked at by a doctor at a local clinic. Terri had four stitches and was patched up ready to go. She is one tough lady!

Our dinner setting was in the tallest building in Cuba, La Torre, with a lovely view of the city and ocean. Again linen cloths with good china and silverware provided the dinner setting for salad, fish and scrimp, and dessert of flan.

Later, Tony and I and a few others sipped cocktails (for me straight Cuban rum) at the Jazz Club Casa del Habano, inside our hotel. A trio of musicians and a female singer performed smooth jazz while some of the men smoked Cuban cigars. The club had choices of every cigar, and high priced liquor on display inside glass cases and of course a humidor room that housed those wonderful creations of Cuban tobacco.

Thursday, May 16th, 2013

With a breakfast buffet stuffed tummy we were ready for a full day ahead. We all greeted each other and headed for a very special experience at a local recording studio; first the inner workings of the technical aspects of the working studio, then we were an audience to four young musicians. It was a pure delight to listen to the Cuban jazz rhythms. These remarkable young fellows shared their stage with two of our tour members, Walter, who brought his own trumpet and Auggie you sang and played the Box instrument provided by the studio. Walter is from Denver and Auggie is from Hawaii. WOW! Words can’t describe the energetic talent and grasp of jazz by the young and “older” players! They seamlessly bonded into a presentation I will never forget! I sketched the drummer and he was thrilled. I will send him a copy by his email he gave to me. We were invited to lounge for a while at the deco styled bar for beverages. The pineapple juice is delicious in Cuba.

Anna and Danny guided us to Old Town Cuba, the historical district with jaw dropping samples of colonial architecture! I could hardly contain my joy at the artistic haven before my eyes. Our procession stepped on the cobblestone streets that were being repaired around every corner. Tropical plants dotted the courtyards of brightly colored buildings in yellow, aqua, blue and pink with high walls soaring up to the open air tops.

*Wrought Iron:* To my delight I began to really appreciate the variety and quantity of wrought iron throughout Havana and Matanzas. I snapped shots every chance I could get to have a treasured photo album of the beauty of those” hard laced” iron works of art that stood time and history. Oh what stories those guardians of windows, doorways and walkways could probably tell us!

A magnificent cathedral loomed with its head in the bright blue sky and its feet surrounded by a huge plaza, filled with restaurants, crafts artists and women costumed in colorful dresses and headwear from colonial Cuban times. I ventured through the cathedral’s gigantic wooden and iron hinged doors to say my daily prayers to Jesus Cristo, thanking him for all my blessings. Catholicism is the most practiced religion in Cuba, alongside Mormon, Muslim and Afro-Cuban religions.

As I was eagerly feasting my eyes on the art of a young man sitting on the plaza steps with brilliantly colored watercolors and pastels…the costumed woman were eagerly feasting their eyes and lips on my Tony! (I can’t take him anywhere without the women giving him kisses. ☺) Actually they were selling him kisses and photos. He left the Plaza with two lipstick kisses on each cheek and sans some CUCs. I finished chatting with the artist and purchased two drawings for $10 each!

Our adventure continued…a long 6 block trek among the busy Cubans shopping, dining, chatting, and busy construction workers repairing the broken streets, sidewalks and plumbing within inches of us, needless to say, safety is not a priority in Cuba…a worker was using a pick ax in the dirt as I stepped around him…glad I had on my athletic shoes with my tootsies covered! In Havana pedestrians are second billing to automobiles…better move on out of the way fast! Anna always had our back…shouting to us to watch out, cross the street quickly! And, as usual I am the one lagging behind snapping shots and getting honked at. The only “birds” I saw were on the ground or air…is it a universal sign?

After this fascinating journey of sounds and smells through the streets of Havana, which I will never forget, the sights of busy people and color all around us, we arrived perspiring at La Floridita restaurant for lunch at another Hemingway haunt. The restaurant had memorabilia of Hemingway and even a bronze bust of him standing by the bar. We waited for the notorious daiquiris’ that were invented at this bar freshly prepared by the busy bartenders.

*“Gary’s Sad Daiquiri”:* Ahhh those drinks were a welcome treat after our long hot walk. The first daiquiri served to us was in a normal size glass and we all slurped it down. The second daiquiri was served in a glass half the size of the first one…Gary looked at the drink and exclaimed, “This is just sad!” Jumped up and went to get a regular size daiquiri at the bar…he would not live this down the rest of our trip. Every time he had a drink we all asked him if it was so sad! ☺

*Fish and Scrimp:* All our meals on our first days of the trip consisted of a variation of fish and shrimp…the restaurants are owned by the state…and we tourists were owned by fish and shrimp…again we would not let that one live down for the rest of the trip…hey Danny what are we having for lunch?

*Danny:* Can you say adorable and intelligent and handsome about one person? Yes, Danielo! He was easy to locate in his red golf shirt and skinny jeans as he guided us through Havana, not one hair on his head would dare to blow in the breeze away from his perfect haircut and spiky style. He had a passion for his country and tried to be open minded about any negative remarks or questions, answering us with the poise of a diplomat! He truly wanted us to understand the Cuban way. I respect Danny so much for leading us through incredible Cuban history, customs, and any details about our destination points. With a sweet shrug of his shoulders he reminded me of Ricky Recardo’s television personality charm, and yet his English was impeccable as well as his knowledge…well maybe not everything…he did not know who Ricky and Lucy were! :) He was a good sport and really focused on his job to guide, educate and thrill us with informative interpretations of the art, music, and culture of Cuba! He loved the recent movie Lincoln…Cubans love Lincoln!

*Cable TV:* Tony and I enjoyed some cable news and shows in our hotel room at Melia’ Cohiba in our down times. Several of the channels were in Spanish, also a few in English with subtitles. Danny explained that the Cuban people do not see the same channels that we saw in our hotel. But, they do enjoy American movies and Cuban entertainment and news…hey…really who needs cable when you have the Malecon’ day and night and jazz and art on every corner to feed your soul!

*Malecon’ (sea wall):* Indescribable for me, of course it is a sea wall made of concrete and stone, but it is much more to the people of Havana. It is their living “facebook”, with interactive music, dance, laughter, romance, quiet solitude and with the backdrop of the big blue sea! In Havana the natives love to get outside as much as possible in their free time, day and night. The people of Havana are living in crowded homes of possibly three generations of family. There are some lovely neighborhood and city parks but the Havanaites treasure the Malecon’ for its wide expanse and opportunity to walk by the cool ocean breeze. Tony and I grew to love it too for the quiet, breezy, cool walks in the evening and also rushing past it as Roberto steered the gua gua over the wide busy parallel road way.

We exited the La Floridita to wait for Roberto. Some elderly people were asking for just one peso on the street corner. It was so difficult to not share our CUCs. Danny or Anna would request they move on at times to the persistent people. Our guides advised us earlier not to give money.

*Cuban rations and social income:* Cubans receive $30 dollars per month including food rations in benefits from the state. The food rations only last about 13 days for an average Cuban. They must be resourceful in gaining employment by the state and anything means to make a living, for example; taxi driving, asking for money for tourists, and performing on the street, or creating arts and crafts to make extra income. When we tip our service providers it will go to all the family.

*Housing in Havana* is the biggest complaint from the people, because of the shortage of restored or new buildings. Half of the structures are literally crumbling. Havana is restoring many stately, historical sites, and you can witness this throughout the city…watch your toes!

We rumbled into a narrow street and parked in a Havana neighborhood to observe children making whimsical fun papier-mache’ art. The children and volunteer teachers were underneath a canopy directly on the street, making it even narrower for traffic that we quickly learned to dodge. (Anna has trained us well.)

The rambunctious, spirited artiste with dred-locks bouncing educated us about the art project with a booklet filled with photos and stories about the accomplishments…Tony called it a “hard-copy powerpoint.” The artiste’s passion was evident as he even swayed and bobbed with the flow of his Spanish as Anna interpreted. (Anna and Danny would take turns interpreting at each tour spot.) He explained that the group would join other artists and dancers for various events around the city. The daily newspaper was used to create the papier-mache’ creatures, large and small and we watched the children working as he educated us on the project. To our delight the children had created a crayon drawing for each of us to take home with us! He invited us into his studio/home for a visit. The front of the home was covered in creative inspirations from the artiste, as well as the walls inside. I will try to describe the indescribable…montaged, collaged, and printed art filled every square inch. Found objects de arte, such as discarded old TV screens, old telephones, metal objects, and those whimsical papier-mache’ creatures filled all the rooms. Tony and I gave the artiste postcards from Oklahoma…in hopes he would incorporate them into his art. He was delighted!

*Ubiquitous well-driven American Classic Automobiles:* Again I must mention the Havana traffic that seldom stops. Late model cars are interspersed with 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s model classics cars. Cubans are very proud of these and grateful to own some of them personally. Many are taxi’s that provide that extra income. What a fun happy surprise every few minutes to see the classic cars with a range of colors dot the streets and highways as the parade of life size “toy car models” cruise by. Some are pristine gems…some are sagging, smoky relics. All are a tribute to the resourceful Cubans!

Dinner that evening was served in a lovely ocean side restaurant a short distance from our hotel. Restaurant 1830 was a former home. The elegant yellow walls, crystal chandeliers, linen cloths and a talented pianist playing a grand piano in the foyer greeted us. The salad was a fun change from the simple salads we have been served each meal. It was created from various veggies to simulate a palm tree. Grilled lobster tail and chocolate ice cream completed the delicious change from…you guessed it…fish and shrimp! Tony and I topped off the day with a nice stroll to our hotel via the Malecon’. The people were strolling or sitting on the sea wall in groups, some were night fishing with only the spools of fishing line stretched over the wall into the clear water below, no pole was used. We were ready for our comfy bed in our room…what another incredible day in Cuba!

Friday, May 17th, 2013

We were prepared for a nice 2 hour drive along the ocean side highway to the city of Matanzas. It is known as one of the best cities in Cuba. Tourists will fly into Matanzas for the resort beaches.

The bus traveled to Matanzas as we relaxed and enjoyed the views of Cuban countryside. The oil pumps along the beaches reminded Tony and I of the oil pumps in Oklahoma. The thick crude in Cuba is not good enough to refine for purposes other than electricity.

*Cuban Rest Stop:* On our journey to Matanzas we made a pit-stop to see a lovely vista from atop the rest stop that provided restrooms, arts and crafts for sell and yummy pina coladas. I greeted the rest stop by “gracefully” tripping on the doorstep and falling down on my side and sliding ride up to the bar…I asked for a pina colada and five gentlemen rushed to help me on my feet after I shook off the embarrassment. The view was great and a jazz trio was playing…CD time! They invited me to dance with them and I seemed to get caught up in the rhythm and beat of the music…I did a combination of cha cha, rumba and “Margeeita.” I hope that does not make Facebook…ugh.

The Abraham Lincoln Cultural Center would become one of the most endearing moments on our Cuban tour. We were entertained by sweet uniformed school children dancing and singing Cuban songs that were a tribute to the various religions in Cuba. The children pulled us from our chairs to dance and sing with them, it was a loud, boisterous mix of children and adults moving and laughing in unity. The children’s sweet faces were filled with curiosity about the American visitors. We were invited to climb up to the top of the building to see a great view of the neighborhood and city of Matanzas’s rooftops, streets and the school house next door as students were working at their desks.

As we ventured on in the gua gua friendly Matanzas people waved and gave a thumbs up…I realized it was the younger Cubans who have no frame of reference of life before the US embargo.

Our lunch was served in the palacious hotel Val Lasco at the town square. The inner square was a quiet, green park, the outer was filled with busy traffic. Fish and rice and beans oh my. Danny, Anna and Roberto would dine at their own table away from us tourists…a much needed rest I think.

A publishing house was our next destination. After a short walk we entered tall green wooden doors to a work room with three people assembling books. One was sorting, one was gluing and one was trimming. Completed book creations were on display for purchase. The books were collage, montage gems. The brilliant white paper was produced from sugar cane…I longed for a piece to take home…but I settled on a lovely small book for 5 CUCs! As we circled around the manager of the house, Danny interpreted her explanation of the process of making the books. We exited through the tall green doors into a musical dance delight! Several brightly colored costumed dancers were poised on tall stilts. (Also, several brightly costumed gay men were watching the dancers as well). The balanced stilted dancers and sang and did acrobatic stunts to upbeat Cuban music.

After a ride through town we entered an antiquated theater with wooden and metal seats, peeling paint and a high stage filled with Afro-Cuban performers. These dancers and singers were demonstrating the dance and songs of the Afro-Cuban religious heritages. The dancers changed costumes three times and swirled around the stage with bare feet, stepping lively to the Afro-Cuban beat. The dancers came quickly down the stage stairs inviting us to dance and eagerly asked us to purchase CDs of their music. Maria and I became dance partners with one of the ladies…eventually straying away from the salsa to the twist, jerk and mashed potato versions. The dancer was desperate for me to please buy a CD for 15 CUCs then wanted us to pay for our photo with her. She was shaking as she took the money from my hands, and then rushed to show her fellow dancers the prize, remember Cubans make only 30 CUCs per month. I know this was a good deal of money for her, she was very happy!

We dined at the hotel restaurant that had a large buffet of a huge selection of Cuban food, very good and satisfying. Tony and I crossed the boulevard to listen to some modern jazz music. The server sat a bottle of rum on the table along with their version of cola and a bucket of ice. We would actually make our own drinks! We were privileged to meet Anna’s sweet, friendly Cuban boyfriend. He wants to open a pizza restaurant in Havana.

*Cuban education:* All Cubans are provided free education through college. Unfortunately they cannot always find jobs in their chosen studies. Cuba has a high literacy rate because of their educational system, one I know they are so proud of.

*Anna:* With a lovely soft voice and impeccable Spanish, Anna made our journey in Cuba a very satisfying treat! Her fresh natural beauty, with large bright blue eyes and shy smile complemented the backdrop of the tropical Cuban environment. Her casual easy mood made us relax, but also commanded us to want to listen to her detail descriptions of each experience we were having…she patiently kept us on tour time…but always kindly understanding how we wanted one more moment before we turned away from one experience and visual “eye candy” to another.

After dinner we dressed for the opportunity of a lifetime to enjoy the music of the Buena Vista Social Club! Before the evening event we were invited to meet Lori, Dewaye, Bobbie, and Auggie at Sloppy’s Joes’s Bar, another Hemingway haunt.

*Taxi mix-up and a very tired peddler:* We entered a nice late model taxi from the hotel driveway and preceded on to the Buena Vista Social Club restaurant/bar…we thought. I started realizing the area he was taking us to was not familiar…I kept telling Tony this is not familiar we are at the wrong place…it is a genetic trait that men cannot ask directions…and it did not help that the driver could speak no English. The taxi pulled up to a group of valets ready to escort us out of the taxi and into the wrong Buena Vista Social Club, we showed him our tickets and then he quickly shouted and whistled to our taxi that was already pulling into the traffic. Whew, he heard the valet and stopped to stuff us back into the taxi. Apparently there were two Buena Vista Social Club locations in Havana. He then got us close by the right location of the social club but we could not find Sloppy Joe’s that was supposed to be across the street…we begin to walk and graciously Tony made up for his gene trait and hired a bicycle cart peddler to peddle us to Sloppy Joe’s. We have not laughed or giggled so much on our trip until this moment. The poor skinny lad had taken on more that he had bargained for by seating a large sized American couple on his cart. He continually huffed and puffed his way over those broken bumpy cobblestoned streets, with sweat rolling down his face. Every now and then he would look up and back at us and make a groaning sound. I felt sorry for him…as I giggled through the whole trip. We tipped him as he hustled off after leaving us a block away from Sloppy Joe’s…he just couldn’t make it any farther with us onboard.

Tony made reservations for the Buena Vista Social Club the day before. We entered a charming high ceiling restaurant bar. To our delight we were taken right to the front of the room directly across from the band in our reserved seats. The famous band members entered the room to step in front of the microphones just inches from us and began to take us on a jazz journey like no other. Several of our tour members were seated around us as Tony and I sat mesmerized to the talented charismatic singers and players. Drums, trumpets, keyboards and backup singers belted out the traditional club music. A lovely female dancer appeared with a cute male dancer both costumed in dance outfits and began to salsa and sing. As they twirled around us the male dancer filled my hair up in a sassy move! We all started laughing and cheering. Maria and I were invited to jump up and dance and of course we did, we are seasoned dance partners now! Then we were all led around the room in a conga line singing and dancing to the beat. It was a memory making experience that I will dream of for years to come.

Saturday, May 18th, 2013

Happy birthday to my dear mother celebrating 97 years with my sister and brother, and sister-in-law at home in Oklahoma! (By the way we made no cell phone or internet usage on our Cuban journey…refreshing for a change…I did not miss it…except to wish mom a happy one!)

Up and sleepy from our late night at the jazz club we yawned our way to Casa del Nino y Nina, that was an after school program for children of all ages. The children learn art, music and dance in this neighborhood program. Framed children’s art surrounded us on the walls of the small classroom. We were entertained by the children as they danced and sang Cuban music. The teacher explained in
Spanish with Danny interpreting the studies that the students were focused on. She was so honest and kind in sharing the pros and cons of her Cuban neighborhood. The camaraderie of the neighbors in close relationships and bonds, education, music and art were definite pros for this community. The crowded homes and few parks and no trees by their housing were disadvantages for them. Tony and I shared small gifts with the children and grateful teacher. (Watercolor paint and paintbrushes, raisins, candy and little cartoon character designed washcloths). It was such a pleasure to see these happy, artistic people making all the best of what they have…people are the same all over this big blue marble!

The Santa Amalia Project house was our next visit in Havana. Those senior salsa, rumba dancers were amazing people full of energy and great dancers. In a room the size of a normal living room with the front door open wide we all circled around the dancers to watch them partner up to dance to the wonderful Cuban jazz recordings. A couple even tap danced on the burnished wooden floor. The age range was 57 to 85 years old. These dancers are truly Cuban treasures. Like the sweet faces of the Cuban children, these elders winked magical expressions from their wrinkle defined faces as they escorted us around the room to dance with them! The ladies were dressed in flowing dresses and had their fans waving and the gents had their Cuban hats on. It was a scene straight out of a movie! The hostess could speak English and lead us through various dance steps. She was a Chiquita in a tight dress and high heels and brazzy short red hair. The ceiling and walls were covered in historical memorabilia that the elderly lady owner of the house proudly displayed, posters, newspapers, art, photos and a collection of beer and rum bottles perched on shelves. We were graciously served rum punch on the covered porch for our parched throats after laughing and then belting out Guatanamera (Cuba’s beloved unofficial national song…that tour guides don’t want to hear one more time…Danny) at the top of our lungs! We hugged and kissed the seniors adios and they posed on the front porch for a classic group photo that visually will live in my heart forever.

Tony and I were invited by Karen to take a side trip to a printmaking studio instead of having lunch with the tour group. Anna arranged for a friend of hers to escort us by his taxi to the studio back in Old Town by the plaza. Unfortunately the studio was closed, but Karen had plan B, we would go to the Mercado for arts and crafts shopping. We scooped up necklaces and bracelets made of delicate colorful seeds and shells to take home as gifts. Anna’s friend rushed us back to the small taxi car and we unknowingly stopped in his neighborhood to see a neighbor’s selection of fine Cuban cigars for purchase.

*The Cigar Story:* Since my Spanish is limited I misunderstood Anna’s friend. What I thought was his need for a smoke break evolved into this venture into his friend’s home to purchase cigars. We explained in broken Spanish that we could not take them back to the Estados Unidos. He was so disappointed and I was so embarrassed. Again, Cubans are so resourceful in making a living! He kindly took us back to join our tour group as they were exploring a gallery of two local artists Juan Moreira and Alicia Leal’s in their private home. I purchased a small lovely black and white wood block print for 10 CUCs. (And to my disappointment I never did get to puff on a Cuban cigar!)

We traveled back to the hotel for a needed rest and to dress for dinner at a privately owned restaurant.

Before dinner we received one of the best performances in Cuba by trumpet player Yasek Manzano in his private home. He was accompanied by three lady cello musicians and a drummer, pianist, and bass player. It was an honor to be in this intimate environment with this talented group of artists. Words cannot express the exquisite melody of his trumpet as he gave us our own private glimpse into the life of these remarkable Cuban’s personally composed selections and some recognizable classics. Of course CDs were ready for purchasing. He graciously autographed them for us.

Anna guided us through the neighborhood on foot, as we stepped lightly on uneven broken sidewalks past beautiful homes with lush tropical landscaping, to dinner at a privately owned restaurant in the owner’s home. La Esperanza was a deco inspired treasure. The owner of the restaurant was a Nathan Lane look alike, talk alike, and walk alike. The food was delicious and was so different from the state owned restaurants. Actually more garlic and spices were used. The dessert was lemon pie. The salads in Cuba usually contain shredded white cabbage. I began to enjoy this crunchy addition to the greens and tomatoes. (Fresh slices of mangoes, pineapples, guava, and melon were always available at breakfast time in our hotel.)

Cuban’s regular diet consisted mainly of rice and beans…we were even served rice and beans (all types of beans) for breakfast. The black beans are delicious.

Sunday, May, 19th, 2013

Up and ready for breakfast and check-out time and the opportunity to gather in the lobby to say our goodbyes and well wishes and to get all the contact information. We again gave our best to Karen from Boston in hopes that her city would heal quickly from the Marathon tragedy. (Later in Florida Tony and I would need our own comforting as we learned of an F5 tornado ripping again through Moore, OK on Monday, May 20th.)

Roberto loaded our bags onto the gua gua and we dodged cars one more time to cross the boulevard to the Jazz Café. What a delight! 3 Cuban jazz artists were awaiting to play for us and one of them was the bass player from the recording studio session. Hola! Hola! A drummer and pianist joined him as we sipped rum and cola at our tables and cast our eyes one more time out the windows at the ocean view. You cannot sit still as you listen to Cuban jazz. You must tap a foot, clap your hands, bob your head to the fabulous beat! These fellows played their hearts out for us!

Roberto drove us to the Cuatro Caminos Food Co-Op. Immediately we were greeted by a friendly little nino asking us to look at the beautiful flowers ready to purchase. Lush fresh smells of flowers, fruits and vegetables attacked our senses as well as our sight. Bright greens, yellows, reds and melon colors of the produce made my mouth water. I was snap happy on my camera…one lady even encouraged me to take more photos…she was so proud of the cut guava fruit. Vendors would wink and give us a thumbs up pose. One happy fellow asked me where I was from. I said Oklahoma in the center of the US. He pointed proudly up at a sticker of the American flag on his booth. Jeanetta bought a large bunch of small bananas to share with us on the gua gua. The co-op also displayed fresh meat for sale, meat sitting in the open air with no refrigeration and hanging from some booths as the shoppers touched and poked to see how good a selection to buy. Antique scales awaited those selections. Tony surprised me with a colorful bouquet of flowers. The happy little greeter was still at the entrance as we left, Lori and Dewayne gave him an Oakland A’s ball cap…he was thrilled! I handed Anna my flower bouquet as we settled onto the bus.

For dinner we visited a thatched roof open air restaurant, El Aljibe. It was surrounded by a lush garden of palms, flowers and tropical plants with giant leaves, as well as a beautiful natural rock wall. On the wall as we entered was a large poster sign honoring the American captured Cubans…it was interesting to read their side of the story. The meal was delicious and topped off with yummy pineapple ice cream in caramel sauce served in a glass dish. We were serenaded by a trio of musicians. Can you say CD one more time?

*CDs:* Every Cuban performer took the opportunity to sell us their CDs…how can one resist! I will treasure these CDs as a great memento of our Cuban music experience. May the future open our borders to all people to exchange freedom, peace, art and Jazz! When Tony and I slip those CD disks into our player and gaze at the 100s of photos and videos we will always have the special memories of us cruisin’ in Cuba.

As we took our final ride to the Jose’ Marti’ airport Anna passed the microphone around for us to share our favorite and challenging moments in Cuba. It was emotional for me to say adios to all.

*Roberto:* He was quiet with a flashy smile, dark skin and thick black hair, always attired in uniform short sleeved shirt. He enjoyed the opportunity to get us off the bus for a smoke break, rush us back on and get us to our next stop. R…R…R…Roberto was a hard working chauffer always ready to haul us to our tour destinations.

May each sunrise and sunset in Oklahoma, USA remind us of the people, our guides, our chauffer, our new friends and the adventures of a lifetime in Cuba!

Gracias Amigos!

Love, Margee and Tony Gaeddert