

Cuba On The Cusp Of Change

By Don Mankin



Adventure "Geezer" reliving his adolescence in a classic 1963 Chevy convertible

A lone, untethered horse wandered down the dusty main drag in the light of the full moon, munching on tufts of grass by the side of the road. There was no other traffic on the road, no one else in sight. The serenity of the scene belied the bloody history of this historic place.

I was sitting on a patio in front of my room in Playa Larga, a sleepy little town of low-rise cinder block houses strung along the beach on the infamous Bay of Pigs, the site of a 1961 invasion by a para-military band of 1,200 Cuban Americans in an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro.

It's amazing how a place with such a dark history could be so placid. This

low-key town, devoid of pretense and manufactured charm, is as authentic as it gets. History played out along these mundane shores, men died, reputations ruined. It's hard to believe how important this simple, peaceful place once was.

Sitting on a patio drinking a Bucanero beer on the Bay of Pigs is not exactly what I would have guessed 55 years earlier as I read the news about the ill-fated invasion. But then again, there is a lot I wouldn't have guessed back in those days about what I would be doing today.

I was in Cuba for my host, ROW Adventure's (www.rowadventures.com) seven-day people-to-people kayaking trip, one of the first trips of its kind since President Obama re-established diplomatic relations with Cuba last year. In fact we arrived in Cuba at pretty much the same time that Obama did on his historic visit in March, close enough to significantly delay our flight and the arrival of our



Chillin' on a lazy river near Trinidad

luggage on the baggage claim carousel. I could forgive him all of that but the changes in our dinner plans that evening were too much.

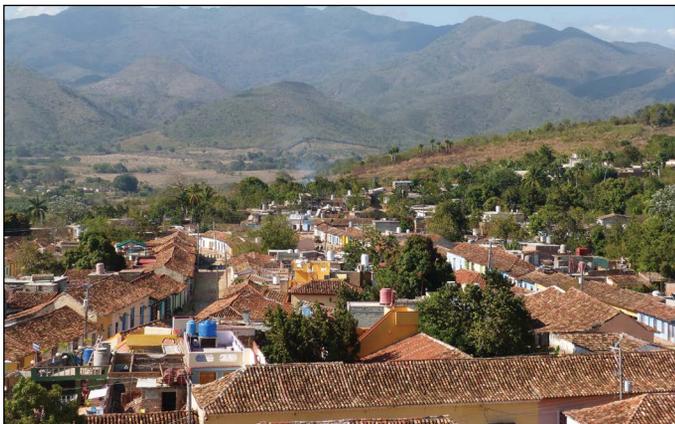
Those inconveniences aside, nothing better captured the changes happening in Cuba than our two-day visit to the Bay of Pigs. The kayaking on these once bloodied waters was sublime. On our first day, we paddled for a couple of hours around the shallow bay in the late afternoon. There was nobody else on the water. Not a boat or kayak other than our own, just the birds and the wind.



Pink flamingos in a lagoon near Bay of Cienfuegos

The next day we paddled for 4-5 hours in nearby Zapata National Park, a vast saltwater marsh dotted with islands covered in mangroves and low brush. The water is so shallow we could have walked from island to island if the bottom weren't so soft and silty. Again, we had the place to ourselves. No structures, boats or other kayakers. Nothing but egrets, flamingos and other birds. It's hard to imagine that it will stay like this for very long, especially now that Cuba is opening up to tourism from the United States.

We kayaked somewhere almost every day. Besides the Bay of Pigs and the shallow wetlands of Zapata National Park, we also kayaked across a lagoon surrounded by lush mangrove forests to gawk at a flock of pink flamingos, along the Caribbean coast near Cienfuegos, and up a river near the World Heritage Site of the colonial city of Trinidad.



View of Trinidad from the tower of Palacio Cantero

We also snorkeled, visited a crocodile breeding facility, toured Trinidad and Havana, and met many Cubans. For the moment, "people-to-people" programs are the only legal means for Americans to tour Cuba (cultural exchange, family visits, and educational and scientific programs are also legal), so this was an important element of our trip. We met with the Director of Zapata National Park, a botanist from Jardin Botanico Cienfuegos, and an entrepreneur in Trinidad

who will no doubt be very rich in a few years as economic ties between Cuba and the US improve.

But the most telling vehicle for these people-to-people interactions came via our hosts at the *casas particulares*, a Cuban version of a B&B, where we stayed most nights. Our hosts were typical Cubans with the vision and ambition to embrace and take advantage of the changes just beginning to shape the lives of every-day citizens.

This was not my first visit to Cuba. In 1997, I came to Cuba, legally, to present a paper at an international conference. Things looked very different then. Classic old buildings were crumbling, doctors were driving taxis, engineers were selling tchotchkes in flea markets and the grass on the campus of the university that was the venue for the conference looked like it hadn't been cut in years.

Now the roads are in much better shape and the streets and sidewalks of Trinidad and Havana were clogged with tourists who have to pick their way around one reconstruction project after another.

I'm glad I made it to Cuba now. It is going to look very different in a few years. If you want to get a taste of history while the taste still lingers, go soon. I'm not sure what it will be like in the future.

For more information and photos see the blog, under the Caribbean category on Don's website, www.adventuretransformations.com

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