

Jim and Mary Schwing's Travel to Cuba

We traveled to Cuba with Natural Habitat Adventures from April 2-13, 2016, with 11 other travelers. We sandwiched the Cuba trip between extra nights in Miami. We figured we should do this trip now before Cuba becomes too commercialized now that diplomatic relations have been restored between the U.S. and Cuba. The trip seemed like a step back in time to the 1950s. Many of the 1950s model cars were similar to ones that Jim drove as a kid.



Some 1950s era cars outside Havana Airport

Because of the U.S.-led embargo of Cuba, the trip needed to be a “People to People” educational exchange. Consequently, activities were centered on learning the local culture, economy, environmentally significant sites, as well as learning how local citizens live.

Travel to, around, and from Cuba requires a large amount of flexibility and patience. The charter flight on April 3 to Cuba was supposed to go from Miami to Cienfuegos in the south, from where we would travel by bus to Trinidad; but instead, we had to land in Havana and take a 5-hour bus trip to our first stop. This was after waiting 3 hours to retrieve our luggage, which was quite entertaining; so no one seemed to mind. Cuban natives traveling between the two countries transported flat-screen TVs, brass headboards, and other household goods all shrink-wrapped and loaded on the plane with all of the luggage. Then the items were hand-unloaded from the plane and moved to the two baggage claim carousels by hand carts. Needless to say, the baggage claim area was jammed; but no one seemed to mind. This gave us time to get acquainted with our group and folks traveling from elsewhere.

Once we had our luggage, we had time to exchange money while we waited for our bus. Money exchanging was an interesting experience. Cuba has two types of currency, one for the natives and the other for travelers: the Cuban Peso and the Cuban Exchangeable Peso (CUC). Obviously, we had to use

the CUCs. Exchanging U.S. money incurs a special tax; so we purchased Euros, which are not taxed, prior to leaving Salt Lake City.

The roads in Cuba are in need of repairs, but the U.S.-led embargo has made the needed repairs difficult. Consequently, surface travel around Cuba is challenging and slow. Our bus trip to Trinidad was also slowed by river crabs on the highway. Apparently, the crushed shells can damage tires. We eventually made it to Trinidad without incident.

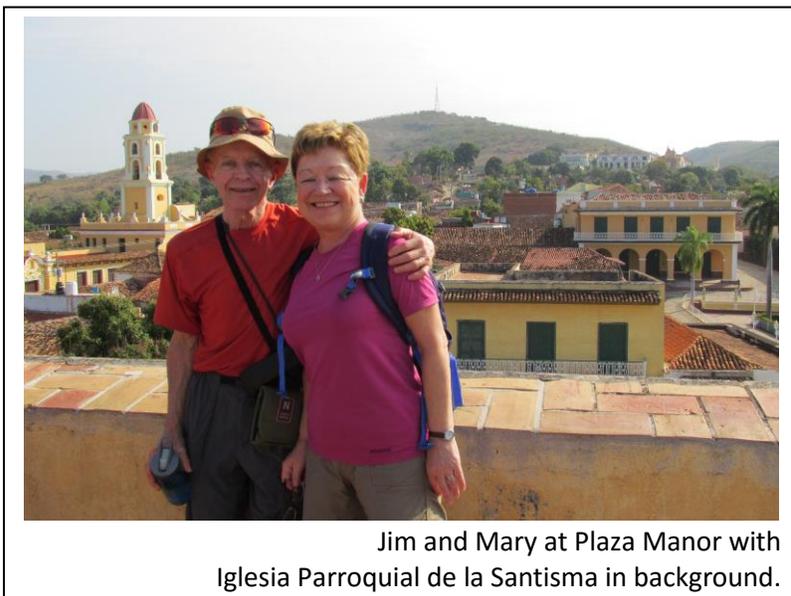
Trinidad was founded by Diego de Velasquez in 1514 as a base for expeditions into the “New World.” Trinidad is the crown jewel of Cuba’s colonial cities. And today, the city is maintained just as the Spaniards left it during its period of greatest opulence. It was filled with fine palaces, cobbled streets, and tiled roofs.

The following day, April 4, we learned about Trinidad’s historic treasures and contemporary lifestyles. Around Plaza Mayor, we found the Iglesia Parroquial de la Santisima Trinidad.

This 19th-century cathedral is the largest church in Cuba and is renowned for its acoustics and altars made of precious woods.

Next we drove to Valle de Los Ingenios, once the center of Cuba’s sugar industry. Trinidad’s immense wealth was created in this valley, though most of the sugar

mills were destroyed during the War of Independence and the Spanish-Cuban-American War. Today the cultural significance of the area is recognized in its status as a World Heritage Site.



Jim and Mary at Plaza Mayor with Iglesia Parroquial de la Santisima in background.

That evening we enjoyed dinner at a special private restaurant—Casa de Los Conspiradores—owned by the artist Yami Martinez who achieved international recognition for her work depicting the strains of life on Cuban women. The building remains one of the oldest and architecturally significant 18th-century houses in Trinidad and one of the most photographed colonial facades in the city.

The next morning, April 5, we drove to Topes de Collantes. Just west of Trinidad, the road climbed into the Sierra Escambray, with slopes draped in Caribbean pines, ancient tree ferns, bamboo, and eucalyptus. This area lies within the Gran Parque Natural Topes de



Soviet era luxury vehicle for our drive into the Sierra Escambray.

Collantes, a protected reserve encompassing some of Cuba's lushest natural scenery, including rushing streams and waterfalls. The wet winds coming off the Caribbean Sea have made the north face of the mountains a luxuriant refuge for plants and animals, while the drier south face also hosts important ecosystems.



Cuban and U.S. flags in the rear window.

We took a nature walk that highlighted much of the natural biodiversity of the area. There are more than 40 indigenous species

of orchid and 100 species of fern, wild plantain and banana trees, several representatives of the ginger family, and some 40 species of coffee. Birdlife here is also profuse, with several unique species of hummingbirds.

After lunch, we made our way back to Cienfuegos. Cienfuegos was founded by French settlers in 1819. A tour of its historic center included the Tomas Terry



Cantores de Cienfuegos Choral Group.

Theater, which opened in 1889 with a performance of Verdi's Aida. We attended a performance by Cantores de Cienfuegos, an internationally acclaimed choral group who is scheduled to present a performance at Montana State University this summer.

On April 6, we visited Cienfuegos Botanical Garden, established as a center for tropical plant research in the early 1900s, where one can find thousands of tree and plant species imported from around the world.



Plants and trees at Cienfuegos Botanical Garden



Later that day, we drove west along the coast to Playa Giron, made our way to the east side of the Zapata Peninsula, and stopped to search for the endemic bee hummingbird—the world's smallest bird. We did, in fact, see one; but it was nearly impossible to get a photograph because they're so small and skittish, even for an advanced photographer, of which neither Mary nor Jim are.

On April 7, we drove to Bermejas, home to many endemic plants and a haven for birds, where we met with local birding experts working for Zapata National Park. They were extremely knowledgeable about the species in the park, which include the Fernandina's flicker, one of the rarest woodpeckers in the world (we didn't see one).

We had hoped to visit the Bay of Pigs Museum for a discussion about the significance of this site in Cuba's history, but we were not able to because the government was preparing to celebrate the 55th anniversary of the Bay of Pigs Invasion.

Next we drove to Playa Larga, nestled between the beach and the forest along the Bay of Pigs. From here, we had easy access to Ciénaga de Zapata National Park at the heart of the Zapata Peninsula. This UNESCO Biosphere Reserve covers 1.5 million acres. Much of its marshes and brackish lagoons comprise the largest wetlands in the Caribbean. The park harbors some 1,000 plant species, of which 130 are endemic to Cuba. It showcases a great diversity of habitats such as grasslands, mangroves, varied types of forest, coastal lagoons, and coral reefs. The focus of our visit was Las Salinas, home to huge numbers of winter migratory birds as well as rare endemics. We were able to see flamingos, several species of heron, vultures, raptors, waders, and many others.

On April 8, we saw more of Cuba's rural scenery as we drove for just over 2 hours to the western part of the island. We visited the community of Las Terrazas, an ecotourism center in which a sustainable rural economy has been developed based on the use of local natural resources and a strong focus on public environmental education. Several thousand people live in this 12,000-acre mixture of habitats, mainly working in agriculture, raising cattle, reforestation, and producing handicrafts. A number of scientists are involved in research here to improve tropical reforestation methods.



Several species of orchids.

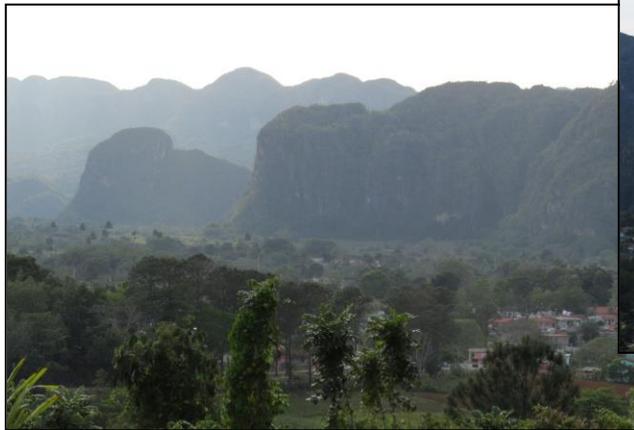
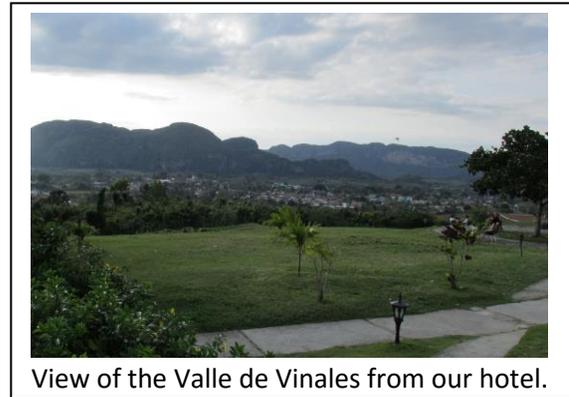
Next, we visited the Soroa orchid farm at Sierra del Rosario, a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve. The garden

is the largest in Cuba with more than 20,000 plants, including 700 orchid species, along with other ornamentals flourishing amid palms and towering trees draped in vines. The hilly grounds contain more than 200 species endemic to Cuba, and thousands of specimens of ferns.

We continued on to the Valle de Vinales to admire Cuba's most famous landscape. This area was the last refuge of the Ciboney, an indigenous hunter-gatherer tribe. The mountains here are riddled with caves, some running underground for many miles, in which Ciboney burial artifacts and rock paintings have been found. We enjoyed dinner at our hotel overlooking

the valley, with vistas of steep-sided limestone mountains called mogotes that rise from flat valleys where farmers cultivate the red soil for tobacco, fruits, and vegetables.

We explored Vinales National Park the morning of April 9 and were accompanied by a local naturalist for a close-up look at this fascinating ecosystem. The famous mogotes are dramatic 250-million-year-old, loaf-shaped limestone mountains. These karst formations have been worn away by hundreds of years of erosion, becoming small islands that are self-contained ecosystems.



Mogotes in the Vinales Valley

A walk along the Coco Solo Palmarito Trail revealed rich plant and birdlife. Over lunch at an organic farm, we met the family, learned about their ecologically supportive growing techniques, and sampled some fresh produce.

Later, we visited a typical Cuban tobacco farm. With the development of the European tobacco market in the early 19th century and the perfection of the Havana cigar, Cubans realized Pinar del Rio guarded a treasure: soil and climate that produced the world's best tobacco. The scenes here epitomize rural Cuba—thatched homesteads and farmers, called guajiros, driving ox carts with their faithful dogs trotting at their heels.



Tobacco farm.



Tobacco drying.



Cigar making.



Mary sniffing, but not smoking!

On the morning of April 10, we visited the Cuevo del Indio—"Cave of the Indians"—the largest system of underground caves in Latin America, covering a network of 30 miles with an underground river flowing beneath. The Guanajatabey Indians cut spaces in the mogotes to shelter themselves from the sun and inclement weather. Relics and pictograms on the cave walls confirm their existence here.



Inside Cave of the Indians.



We then drove to Havana. At the city's heart, the Plaza de la Revolucion is the most politically important square in Cuba, standing witness to many rallies and revolutions that altered the course of Cuban history.



Revolution Square; Jim and Mary at right.



On the morning of April 11, we listened to Dr. Rena Pérez, formerly with the Ministry of Agriculture and retired advisor to the Ministry of Sugar. Dr. Perez is a U.S. citizen, but is married to a Cuban citizen. Dr. Perez's slideshow discussion addressed "Living in Cuba Today," with an emphasis on some of the new economic changes.

As many of you know, Cubans have been quite ingenious in maintaining the 1950s-era cars that were present in the country at the time of the U.S.-led embargo. These well-maintained cars are plentiful in Havana being the country's largest city. Here are a few pictures of the cars that I'm sure many of you remember.



Vintage cars

The strategic and commercial importance of Havana as Cuba's capital is reflected in the fortifications surrounding the city. The original city was built around a plaza, one of the largest city squares in the world, in 1519, followed by the construction of the 17th-century walls that ring what is now Old Havana.

That evening we met Dr. Norma Guillard, a University of Havana professor who studies psychology and gender. She was instrumental in helping Cuba attain 100-percent literacy. She is featured in the documentary film *La Maestra*, which we viewed, that tells the stories of young women literacy workers who traveled across Cuba after the revolution to teach. The film can be found on Netflix, and Mary and I suggest that anyone who has Netflix to view it. The documentary was quite moving.

That evening we were on our own for dinner at one of Havana's paladares privately-owned restaurants. We had the chance to ride in a restored spitfire to the restaurant.

Mary, Jim, and two other travelers for a ride to our restaurant in a Spitfire.



April 12 began with a roundtable discussion with economist Ricardo Torres on the “Changing Forces of Cuba’s Economic Structure.” Mr. Torres, a professor at the University of Havana, spoke about the monumental economic changes afoot in Cuba as forces for liberalization and privatization continue to gain greater hold. He had several opinions of the potential impact of the upcoming U.S. elections (the presidential primaries were still underway) on Cuban-American relations.

We stopped at the National Theater to watch a dance class at the Danza Contemporánea de Cuba. This extraordinary dance group melds classical ballet and American modern dance with folkloric Afro-Cuban dance, Cuban rumba, and Spanish flamenco.



A performance by the dance class at the Danza Contemporánea de Cuba.

Then we visited the Havana Botanical Garden for lunch, where we also listened to a panel discussion on the conservation of biodiversity in Cuba. We also visited the new Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes: Arte Cubano (Cuban Collection). The origins of the museum date back to 1842 when the San Alejandro Art Academy started its collection, forming the nucleus of the museum founded in 1913.

That evening, our grand Cuba adventure concluded with a farewell dinner at La Guarida, perhaps the best known of the trendy new paladares in Havana. La Guarida attained fame as the locale where the 1994 Oscar-nominated Cuban film “Strawberry and Chocolate” was shot.



Dinner at La Guarida on our last evening

The following day, it was back to Miami where we spent an extra day before heading back to Salt Lake City.