Our Girls in Havana - a Cuban Journey

February 20, 2016 By Grace Campbell

My daughter and I had talked about travelling to Cuba for years. Being Australian citizens there are no travel restrictions on our going there, only the fact that it's halfway round the world and a country that is not much visited by Australians (only 7,000 Australians travelled to Cuba in 2014, compared with nearly 30,000 who travelled to Canada). And we speak virtually no Spanish.

For years Cuba has sat at the edge of our consciousness: a country steeped in mystique, rum, cigars, sunshine and music. Old American cars. Beautiful architecture. Crumbling cities. Revolution. A country of incredible juxtapositions. What better place to celebrate the end of a challenging year?

We flew into Jose Marti International Airport to be met with the first Cuban tradition: queuing. Cubans queue a lot. They queue for internet, for access to banks, for service - and they do it with good grace and a firm sense of where they are in the line, even if you can't really see a line. At one point four lines merged into one as we exited Customs control and joined the line to go through security. We joined the line and queued like Cubans do, after all we are Australians and we know how to queue too!

I had arranged for a taxi to collect us from the airport to save waiting (and queueing to exchange our CAN$ into CUCs at the cadeca at the airport) and we quickly experienced our second Cuban tradition and subject of this next section:

Ladas I Have Known

There are a huge range of cars that could be called taxis in Cuba. The yellow Cubataxis are generally Ladas, mostly from the 70s by the look of them. In fact, many of the cars are Ladas. I'm beginning to think that come the nuclear apocalypse, all that will be left is cockroaches driving Ladas.

Most taxis do not have a meter. Or if they do it's purely ornamental. They don't have seatbelts. Or if they do, they don't work. Be prepared to haggle over price. One Lada that took us to our digs in Habana Vieja had a metal pipe in the back to hold up the boot while the driver put our bags in the back. I could see the road underneath through holes in the floor.

We were particularly disconcerted to get a taxi from Vedado to Habana one afternoon which was equipped with a dvd player. Not because of the sophistication of the technology, mounted as it

was in a 1970s Lada. Not that. The thing that threw us was that it was in the front so the driver could watch it. As he drove.

Equally as exciting as the normal everyday Ladas were the American yank tanks. These are the cars you think of when you hear the word Cuba: huge gas guzzlers from the 40s and 50s with space age fins and hood ornaments, rumbling down the road like oil prices will be low forever.

Every few minutes, particularly in the tourist areas of Habana around the Prado you'd be approached by a Cuban with a line like "Beautiful American car for a beautiful American lady?". The good thing is that they know there's always another "beautiful American lady" coming round the corner, so a polite "No, gracias" and a smile is all that is needed. They don't harass people, there's no need. Plenty of people want to drive around in a 57 Chevy convertible with the top down.

All over Habana Vieja were my favourite taxis - the bicitaxis. Here's where you saw Cuban backyard engineering at its best. Like the pedalled rickshaws so popular in Asian countries, bicitaxis could carry two people and they scooted around the narrow cobbled lanes in ways a car never could. You'd often see a little welding shop in a building where men were welding together new bicitaxis, or repairing old ones.

That's not to forget the cocotaxis. These cheerfully bright motorised three-wheeled scooters zip all over the place and do a roaring (that's a pun folks) trade ferrying people around the city. They have a yellow fibreglass shell exterior which is very eye-catching. Imagine someone asked Disney to design a cute little cartoon taxi. You'd get a cocotaxi (or huevito as I've heard it called)

The Legend of Skippy
As a fifty-something Australian, one grand unifying feature of the 60s in Australia was the TV show Skippy. Never heard of it? It's a kids' show about a family who lived in the bush on a national park from memory. They had a pet kangaroo called Skippy who was one of the most intelligent marsupials I've ever seen. And trust me, roos are not known for their smarts.

Skippy knew when people were in trouble. When a fire was coming. When baddies were around. When someone was hurt. And somehow, through some miraculous kangaroo mind meld process, he managed to inform the young kid on the show

Skippy: "Tsktsktsktslktsktsk."
Sonny:" What's that Skip?"
Skippy: "Tsktsktsktslktsktsk!!"
Sonny: "Someone's in trouble?"
Skippy: "Tsktsktsktslktsktsk!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"
Sonny: They've fallen down the old mine shaft?"
Skippy: "Tsktsktsk!!"
Sonny: "Gosh Skip! We'd better go rescue them!"

So armed with that information you will be able to appreciate the following story.
Every time we got into a taxi the driver would say “Where are you from?” deducing that we were not Cuban.
“We are from Australia.” we’d answer.
And often they’d say “You’ve come a long way!”
“Yes we have.” we’d say.
But WITHOUT FAIL, every time - EVERY TIME - they’d say “AUSTRALIA!! SKIPPY!!!”

The first time I looked at them in amazement. Skippy? They’d heard of Skippy?

Heard of him? Skippy was a staple of Cuban TV for years. YEARS. Skippy was a legend. They LOVED Skippy. Taxi drivers all over Cuba bonded with us over Skippy. Bless his little furry paws.

You Can’t Always Get What You Want
I could just say “never trust the menu, never trust the signs, never trust the advertising material” but I do like a catchphrase.

One of our most enjoyable activities in Cuba was to see how many things on the menu were actually available for sale.

So the sign over the freezer at a cafe advertises Nestle ice-cream. A range of ice creams appear to be available, most of them bearing a resemblance to something you might buy in Australia. Cornettos, Paddlepops etc. You think to yourself “An ice-cream would be nice. It’s hot. I’ve just walked 5km. Id like an ice-cream”. You walk to the freezer and discover there are no ice creams such as those advertised on the sign. There are some tubs of frozen/defrosted/frozen/defrosted/frozen ice-cream down the bottom of the freezer but that’s it.

Or you want into a cafe to grab a sandwich. After all you’re hot. You’ ve just walked 5km. You haven’t had an ice-cream. You look at the list on the board. Hoping your Spanish is not too execrable you attempt to order:
“Buenos dias, un sandwich de jamón y queso por favor?”
“No.”
“No?”
“No. No jamon.’”
“Ah, si. Pollo?”
“No. No pollo.”
“Oh.”
“Pizza?”
“Si. Okay. Pizza. Gracias.”

All of this makes me sound like an ungrateful tourist. I’m not, at all. I actually loved my time in Cuba. I found the Cuban people delightful and their country is incredible. I tried very hard not to be a rubber neck tourist. I was very aware of not being exploitative. I didn’t take over gifts as I’ve

heard so many people do, but I tipped fairly. The only time I ever haggled was in a taxi and that when I knew I was being ripped off.

The Cuban people I met were proud of their country and particularly proud of its achievements in education and health care. I don’t blame them. They are achievements to be justly proud of. Everyone asked us what we thought of their country. When we answered (honestly) that we loved it, they visibly glowed. They love it too. I know you can do that about your country, warts and all.

I just enjoy seeing the quirks in a country. Every country has them.

Stay tuned for the final Cuban installment. Coming to you when my arm recovers from all this typing!

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