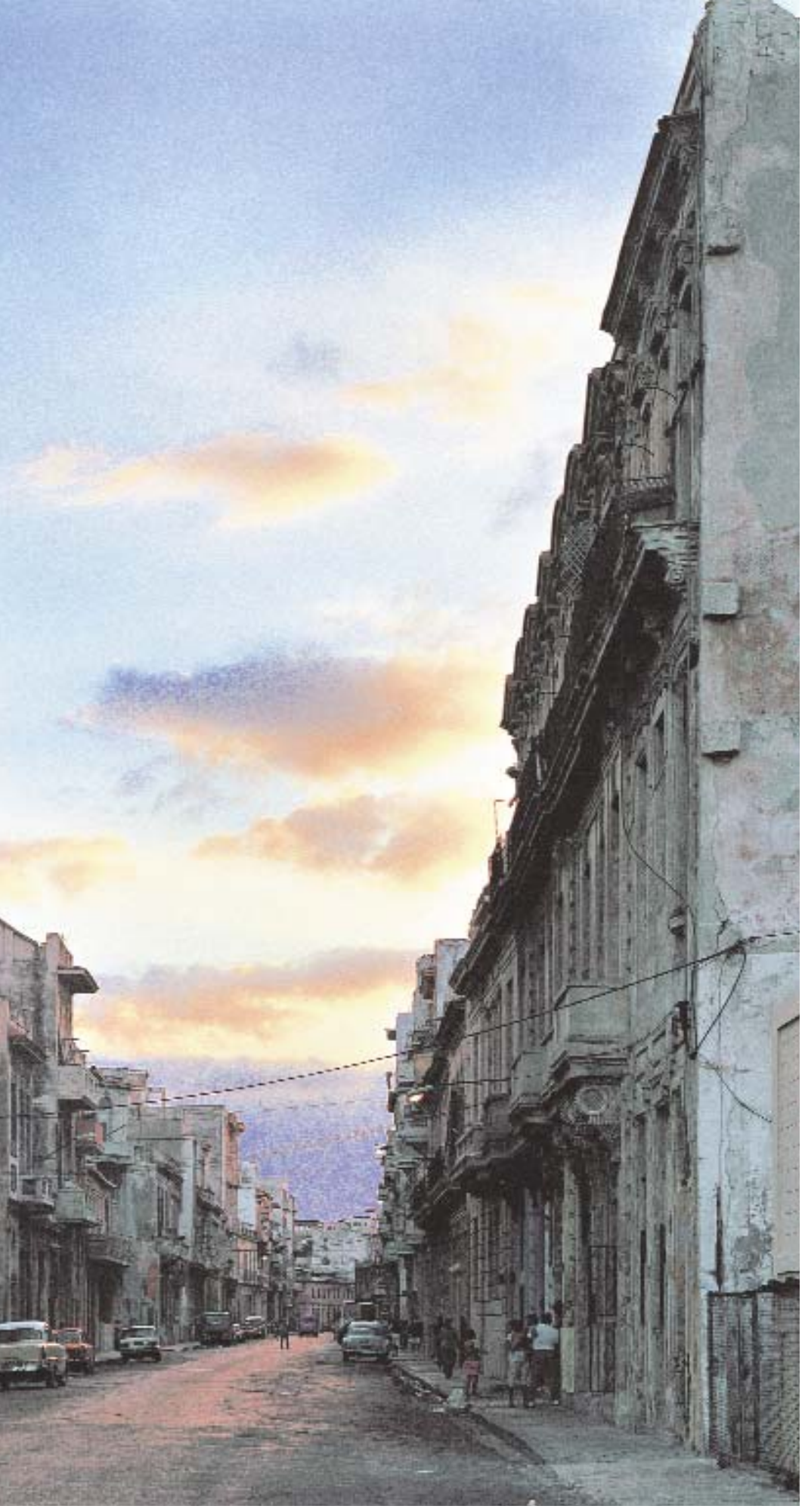

THE REAL HAVANA

IN THIS GLORIOUS OLD CITY, THERE'S LIFE BEYOND THE TIRED ATTRACTIONS THAT CASTRO WANTS YOU TO SEE

BY PAUL WILSON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT POLIDORI

There's a joke making the rounds in Havana these days. A good man dies and goes to heaven but he quickly becomes bored and asks God to send him down for a quick taste of "the other place." God complies, and the man finds himself in a land of long white beaches, swaying palms and sparkling blue water, where musicians serenade him and beautiful young women cater to his every whim. After a week of this he goes back to heaven and begs God to send him to hell forever. "No offence," says the man, "but it sure beats heaven." Again God complies, for surely a good man deserves to have his deepest desires fulfilled.

This time, however, the man arrives in a dark, foul-smelling place where sulphurous fires fitfully illuminate a landscape of ruins, and devils with pitchforks strip him naked and drive him into a lagoon filled with boiling oil. "There must be some mistake!" the man shrieks. "I was here just last week. It was nothing like this."

"Ah," says one of the devils. "Then you were a tourist. Now you live here."

These days, the Cuba in which ordinary Cubans live is not exactly a hell on earth, but it does very much resemble an endless purgatory (particularly for the hundreds of

Left: Avenida San Lázaro, Central Havana, 1997

political prisoners who remain in Castro's gulag). By now, every Cuban knows that, instead of "la victoria siempre" that Che Guevara promised, the far more likely outcome of their revolution, especially once "la solución biológica" kicks in and Castro is dead, will be massive uncertainty, followed by social and economic changes on a scale that Cubans can now scarcely imagine. No wonder, then, that at the end of last November, the famous Cuban cheerfulness in the face of adversity seemed to be wearing a little thin.

The old man was trundling a battered olive-drab bicycle along the narrow concrete walkway that skirted a patch of rubble and weeds just across the water from the brilliant white walls of El Morro, the ancient fortress that guards the entrance to Havana Bay. He was carrying a long fishing pole with a rusty reel fitted to the cork grip; a filthy cloth bag was draped over the handlebars. It was ten o'clock, the sun was high and warm, and a fresh breeze brought the tang of salt off the shimmering waters of the Florida Straits, driving away the pervasive smell of Havana, diesel exhaust mingled with decay. As he approached, he flashed me a weathered smile.

When I said "Hola!" he stopped and peered at me closely, as though my response had been unexpected. I asked him if he'd had any luck. "Si," he grinned, pointing to the cloth bag. I was curious, because for the last hour, I'd been walking along the sweeping curve of the Malecón, Havana's spectacular sea-front drive, deserted at this time of day except for some workers trying to shore up a building that had apparently collapsed, and a few men down on the blackened reef below the seawall, fishing. Some were casting into the swell, some were tending lines they had set out in the water, but the only evidence I'd seen of anything worth catching was a string of small squid in the hands of a barefoot man who was crouching down on the reef and poking into crevasses with a homemade spear. Further out, some men were floating on huge inner tubes, trying their luck where the water was deeper. There was not a boat in sight.

The old man unslung the bag and tipped its contents onto the dusty sidewalk. There were eight small, nondescript fish and a black skate-like creature that looked like a miniature stealth bomber. "For supper?" I said. "Si si," he said. Kneeling down, he picked up each fish in turn and showed me with a sinewy finger how he would prepare it. The skate would yield two small steaks, one from the top of each wing; the rest, perhaps a pair of thumb-sized fillets each. This would be supper, perhaps with a side dish of rice and black beans. I remembered the classic Cuban joke: What are the three greatest achievements of the revolution? Education, health care, and independence. And the three greatest failures? Breakfast, lunch, and supper.

As we walked towards Old Havana, skirting the inevitable potholes, he tried to explain the reality of his daily life. His pension, he said, was eighty Cuban pesos a month, the equivalent of about five Canadian dollars. I was carrying a hundred times that amount in my pocket in newly minted pesos convertibles, which since mid-November have replaced U.S. dollars as the main tourist currency. He pointed to his trousers, which were worn and shiny with a patina of filth. A new pair would cost him fifty Cuban pesos, he said. A new pair of socks, thirty. The litany of expenses went on. "Es muy duro," he concluded. Life is very hard.

And yet as tough as life was for the old man, with his pathetic, hard-earned catch, he never asked me for money. After he'd showed me a picture of himself and his wife in better days – he was dapper then, in a suit and tie, holding a chubby baby boy – I gave him a packet of Italian coffee, the least I could do to help brighten his mornings before he set off each day to fish for his supper.

> The city is a 24/7 bazaar where millions of pesos change hands tax free

There is something both sad and bracing about the way Cubans make do, especially the estimated 60 percent of the population who have little or no contact with the tourist trade and therefore live out their lives using the Cuban peso, officially called *la moneda nacional.* The average monthly wage – pretty much the same whether you're a labourer or a brain surgeon – lasts about a week, forcing everyone to make up the rest with a combination of individual enterprise, ingenuity, and mutual support. In some ways, this unofficial economy – unofficial, but tolerated, sporadically – is one of the wonders of the postmodern world. The sad part is that it is almost always involves theft – which Cubans see as justified – from the public sector.

If you hang about on any of the main streets in Havana – especially those away from the main tourist areas in Old Havana, like Calle Agramonte, or the Calzada de Infanta, the busy, arcaded avenue that separates Centro from Vedado, a newer, residential area of Havana with wide, tree-lined streets – you will catch glimpses of the peso economy in action. The man with the leaky plastic bag is handing a block of ice to a young woman in exchange for a couple of home-baked pastries. The pensioner leaning against a pillar in the arcade is flogging Titanes, the cheapest and strongest Cuban cigarettes, available only by ration book. The woman hovering inside a half-open doorway is dispensing tiny cups of muddy Cuban coffee for a nickel each. A bunch of guys have their heads inside the hood of a 1953 Chevy sedan, fixing something. The man guarding a parking lot has let a hairdresser set up shop outside his hut, along with a geezer who will repair your shoes or recharge your cigarette lighter with gas while you wait. The city – indeed the whole country – is a perpetual, twenty-four-seven bazaar where millions of pesos change hands every day, tax free.

The Cubans sometimes jokingly call this *sociolismo,* the word *socio* in Spanish meaning an associate, a compadre, a buddy. The peso economy is a rudimentary survival economy, but at least it's a real economy, one where everyone benefits.

The tourist economy, on the other hand, is an artificial and centrally planned zone from which ordinary Cubans are excluded. It has been designed by economists and ideologues in classic Marxist fashion to siphon off the maximum amount of hard currency as directly as possible into government coffers, with a minimum of trickle-down. As a result, the Cuba in which the dollar – and now the convertible peso – rules is a strangely inert and lifeless place. For the layman, a good indicator is the bar life. The liveliest bars in town are raucous joints where the customers, mostly Cuban men, gather to talk about sports and women and do deals. (You come across them, for instance, in the narrow lanes of Old Havana, and among the dilapidated tenements of Centro, or along the upper reaches of Calle 23 in Vedado.) The tourist bars in Old Havana, particularly the places where Hemingway once drank, or in the big hotels, seem more like movie sets, make-believe places that look cool but are devoid of atmosphere. They are overstaffed with personnel who seem more intent on book-keeping than on keeping you happy, while

Above: Facades on the Malecón, Havana's spectacular sea-front drive, 1997

in the background, musicians perform the same tired old goldies like "Guantanamera," "Yolanda," "Dos Gardenias," and Buena Vista Social Club hits, and then try to sell you their albums.

Some Habaneros seem to know this. When I mentioned to a local resident that I was thinking of a trip to the Tropicana – the gigantic, open-air nightclub famous for its risqué floor shows – he advised me to save my money. "You'll pay to sit in an empty bar drinking overpriced cocktails until the tour buses arrive and fill the place up. Then you'll watch a flashy floor show, and when it's over, the tourists leave and you'll be eighty bucks in the hole. It was probably a lot more fun when the Mafia ran the place."

There is life on the fringes between the two economies, where the hustlers ply their trade, but that zone is often heavily patrolled, and closely watched. One night in Vedado, I saw a cluster of stunning young hookers dressed in colourful, body-hugging Lycra, prancing about on the main drag, La Rampa, giggling and trying to flag down cars. But they vanished like a puff of smoke when a phalanx of cops moved up the street, checking IDs. It was as if someone had waved a wand and the street went dead. But only temporarily.

I took to frequenting one of these places on the fringe, a clean and airy hangout on the corner of Calle O and 25 in Vedado that served decent coffee and sandwiches and watery mojitos. Cubans and tourists alike could pay in their respective currencies, and the decorum seemed to preclude overt hustling. Occasionally some head-snappingly gorgeous women would come in and sit down, but they would leave you alone if that's what you wanted.

It was here I met a man I'll call Roberto. He's in his mid-forties – about as old as the revolution – and has a highly responsible job in one of the ministries. As we talked and sipped on our Bucaneros, a local beer, the layers of reticence peeled away until finally he leaned in close and said, in an English charmingly tinged with '50s hipster phrases of about the same vintage as the old American beaters wheezing up the street: "You know, man, there's one thing that I am the most proud of in my life, more proud of than anything I have ever done. I have never ever believed what these guys were saying. I have always had my own thoughts."

And then he told me the story of how he came to be that way. A favourite uncle was sent to jail for six years for a crime against the state he didn't commit. The injustice was so blatant to the ten-year-old Roberto that it immunized him against ideology for life. But Roberto's greatest disappointment was his relationship with his father. His father had always seemed to be a firm supporter of the regime, until, on his deathbed, he confessed to Roberto that it had all been a show, that he had pretended to believe in the system to protect his son from the adverse consequences of belonging to a family that had spawned a political prisoner. And here's the kicker: All his life, Roberto, the secret free-thinker, had despised his father for being, as he thought, a true believer. "The thing I most regret," Roberto told me, "is that I never got to know my father as he really was. What great conversations we could have had! Can you dig me?"

Ultimately, the glory, and the truth, of Havana today is in the streets, and in the people, not in the official museums and historical sites that fill the guidebooks, although many are certainly worth a look. The irony of being a tourist in Cuba – more so than anywhere else – is that, to see the place as it really is, you have to step out of your role as tourist. But when you do, Cuba will reach

photographs courtesy of nicholas metivier gallery

out to embrace you. Havana is still one of the great cities of the world, despite the battering it has taken in the last forty-six years. And like every great city, it has bred a proud and resilient people with a unique spirit and character, born out of a shared sense of joy, hardship, tragedy, and – yes – the pain of separation. Cubans have even evolved a rhetorical sleight of hand to ease that pain. When someone has left the country, they say, "Se quedaron" – "they have remained," meaning that they have remained in Miami, Montego Bay, or Madrid. And they won't be back until Castro dies.

But return they will. The pull of this place is so powerful that it remains a mystery even to those who feel it most deeply. It helps to explain the diabolical charisma that Castro has been able to exert over his people. And it will be a major factor – hopefully in some democratic form – in reshaping the place when he is gone.

Meanwhile, the best advice I can offer to visitors comes in the form of a Cuban farewell: "Ve por la sombra" – literally "Walk in the shadows" – which means, "Take care, safe journey," and, I would add, don't be afraid of the dark. T

getting there

Airlines

Air Canada offers daily non-stop and direct service from Toronto to Havana and weekly service to Varadero from most major Canadian cities.

getting ready:

Movies:

Memories of Underdevelopment
(1968. Dir. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea)
Strawberry and Chocolate
(1994. Dir. Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío)
Guantanamera (1995, Dir. Tabío and Alea)
The Waiting List (2000, Dir. Tabío)
Suite Habana (2003, Dir. Fernando Pérez)

These filmmakers, working under the aegis of the Cuban Institute of Cinematic Arts and Industry, have managed, despite censorship, to create stunning fables of modern Cuba, warts and all.

Books:

1. The best guides for independent travellers are the *Havana* and *Cuba* Moon Handbooks by Christopher P. Baker
2. A great introduction to modern Cuban writing is Ann Louise Bardach's anthology, *Cuba: A Traveler's Literary Companion.* See also her recent book, *Cuba Confidential: Love and Vengeance in Miami and Havana.*
3. For an overview of Cuba's revolutionary history, Alan Twigg's *Cuba: A Concise History for Travellers* is a good place to start.
4. *This is Cuba: An Outlaw Culture Survives*, by Ben Corbett, gives you the inside, up-to-date scoop on just about every aspect of life in Cuba.

Currency:

As of last November, U.S. dollars no longer circulate legally inside Cuba. Nor can you use AmEx cards or travellers' cheques. Take Canadian cash or credit cards and exchange as much as you think you'll need into convertible pesos (1 CP = CND$1.25) when you land at the airport. Reconvert anything you don't spend on the way home.

la moneda nacional

convertible peso

Cuban pesos are officially referred to as *la moneda nacional,* and the official exchange rate is fixed at twenty-six Cuban pesos to one convertible peso. Keep a few hundred of these in small denominations for excursions into the peso zone.

What to Take:

1. A universal plug that fits any drain, since not even the hotel rooms have them.
2. Extra toilet paper
3. A small flashlight, since streets are badly lit, there are frequent blackouts, and you may need to find a house number or a keyhole in the dark.

Gifts:

1. Cosmetics
2. Over-the-counter pain relievers
3. Books in Spanish, especially translations. The two volumes of Harry Potter in Spanish I took with me were a huge hit, purchased at Toronto's Spanish Centre (www.spanishcentre.com)

accommodation:

To get into the country on a tourist card, you have to have some accommodation arranged in advance. Most of the guidebooks offer reliable advice on both hotels and private accommodation (*casas particulares*), most of which can be reserved from Canada by telephone or e-mail. Book a night or two at a hotel through a travel agent, and then move into private accommodation, if that's what you'd prefer. A reasonable hotel, like the Hotel Vedado, will be about $60 a night, but you can go much higher. The standard rate for a *casa particular,* with a private room and bath, hot water, a fridge, television, and air conditioning, is between 30 to 40 CP per night.

Food:

I was told that Cubans make love first, and then eat. When you try most Cuban food, you'll understand why. Even the best of dishes consist mostly of heavy, sleep-inducing fare. The best way to find a decent place to eat is to ask other tourists or, if you can find them, foreigners who live in Cuba. Here is a list of recently visited and recommended *paladares* – small family-run places – in and around Havana:

Dona Carmela, *Comunidad 1, Casa 10, Habana del Este, tel: 863-6048.* The specialty here is seafood, next to El Morro fortress.

La Guarida, *Calle Concordia # 418, between Gervasio and Escobar, Central Havana, tel: 862-4940.* This was the setting for the movie *Strawberry and Chocolate.* Popular with the Cuban elite, you'll need a reservation.

La Cocina de Lilliam, *Calle 48, # 1311, between 13 and 15, Miramar, tel: 209-6514.* Features the best Cuban and international cuisine. President Carter dined here.

La Fontana, *3 Avenida, # 305 at Calle 46, tel: 202-8337.* Decent barbecue and Cuban food.

left: photograph by davida threlkeld-dean