

PhotoFile

A MINI-MAGAZINE FEATURING PHOTOGRAPHY AND ARTICLES BY
John R. DeLapp

Number 5, May 2015



Havana!



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PhotoFile is published and printed on an irregular basis. Printed copies are available for purchase from the editor or from www.magcloud.com.

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May 7, 2015

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Front Cover Photo:
Early morning at Parque Central in Centro Habana (Havana) as taxi drivers get their classic convertibles ready for the day's first customers.

PhotoFile #5 - Havana!

In the early spring of 2014, I discovered that an eminent photojournalist, Peter Turnley, would be leading a photo workshop in Havana, Cuba in February 2015 under a People to People Educational exchange license organized by Cuba Cultural Travel.

Peter had previously led at least fifteen of these exchanges so this was a great opportunity to travel with an experienced guide to a country so close yet mostly forbidden to U.S. citizens. In addition, the workshop would be focused solely on street photography – making candid pictures of people on the streets of Cuba's capital and largest city. Since my photography has focused mostly on scenics and wildlife, I knew this would be a great new photo experience and learning opportunity for me.

The workshop offered a reduced rate for a non-photographer companion to accompany the primary participant so my wife and I agreed that both of us would sign up for February 2015 trip. We spent seven days and six nights in Havana and all of the photographs and Cuban experiences described in this issue of *PhotoFile* took place in or near Havana.

Other Publications by John R. DeLapp

Mini-magazines (available for purchase from www.magcloud.com)

PhotoFile #1: *Chinitna Bay Bear Camp*, October, 2012.

PhotoFile #2: *Redpoll Rally*, March 2013.

PhotoFile #3: *Denali*, July 2013

PhotoFile #4: *Road Trip*, July 2014

Books (available for preview or purchase from: www.Blurb.com)

Rock, Rock Art, and Ruins. Black and white photographs of travels in the southwest U.S. April 2012.

Road Trip, Colorado to Alaska, May 2011. Photographs and notes from my solo road trip from Grand Junction, Colorado to Anchorage in the spring of 2011.

Norah, With Her Family in Connecticut. Photographs and commentary celebrating the birth of my granddaughter. April, 2011.

Stories from My Early Years, by Warren DeLapp and John R. DeLapp. Stories and photographs of Warren DeLapp's early years with additional biographical notes about his later achievements and life. December, 2008.

Animals, A Portfolio of Photography. A presentation of my favorite wildlife photographs. November, 2007.

People, A Retrospective of Photography: 1968-2007. October, 2007.

Others

Sam and His Earliest Moments. Photos and notes commemorating the birth of my grandson. October, 2006. (www.lulu.com)

Reaching, The Story of a Young Minnesota Girl and Her Dream to Fly, by Mary DeLapp. Published 2005 by John and Tina DeLapp (out of print).



A mural of Che Guevara on a residential street in Havana.

Havana!

Cuban History

For those of you whose Cuban history is as fuzzy as mine was before this trip, here is a short review. Cuba was “discovered” by Christopher Columbus in 1492 when he landed on the north shore thinking he had found a route to Asia. A year later another sailor circumvented the land and determined that Cuba was, in fact, an island with a small population of Taino Indians and not part of Asia. Spain claimed the island and in the 1500’s settlement began and African slaves were imported to work gold mines. Later, sugar cane and tobacco became important export crops.

During the 1800’s, as Cuba struggled for independence from Spain, there was much civil unrest, and slavery was finally abolished. In 1898 the Spanish-American war began with the U.S. siding with Cuba. By 1902 a new republic of Cuba had been formed and the U.S. had established a naval base at Guantanamo Bay under a long-term lease, paying \$4,085 annually. During the 1940’s and 1950’s, the dictator Fulgencio Batista was Cuba’s president. During that period, Havana became a popular international playground and Americans flocked there for its glitter, gambling, golfing, horse racing, and country-clubbing. Huge amounts of American capital were invested in banking, agriculture, industry, and electrical systems. At the same time, there was a dark side with a mafia presence, crime, extreme poverty in much of the population, and lack of education for Cuban children. Some called it “a sunny place for shady people.”

By 1959 Fidel Castro and Che Guevara had led a successful revolution that ousted Batista. Batista supporters were rounded up and jailed or executed. Many of the country’s rich, educated, and people of power fled to Florida. Cuba and U.S. relations soon deteriorated with the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis in 1961 and 1962. Under Castro, personal freedoms were restricted, the government nationalized businesses (including many U.S. interests), took land, controlled the media, and established ties with the Soviet Union that were maintained until the Soviet collapse in 1991. The revolution also resulted in reduced crime, and a reduction in poverty and income inequality. The literacy rate rose to 99.8%, college was provided free, excellent healthcare was provided, and cheap or free housing was provided for all.

When Fidel’s brother, Raul, took over as president in 2006, he eased some of the restrictions on personal freedoms and allowed limited free-market capitalism. There are now small private businesses such as restaurants, markets, professional services, and people are now allowed to buy and sell houses and own cell phones. Some travel by residents outside of Cuba is now being allowed.

In late 2014, President Obama pushed for ending the Cuban embargo that had been in place since 1960. The first step was to ease the travel ban to Cuba by American citizens. Diplomatic relations between the two countries are being re-established at the time of this writing and the embargo may finally end, although fully ending the embargo will require congressional action.

General Info on Cuba

Cuba is approximately 800 miles in length and has a population of 11.2 million people. Havana, the capital has a population of about 2 million and is served by the Jose Marti International Airport. Despite the large population, the airport consists of a single airstrip with a very small terminal and apron that will only handle a few large planes. A portable stairway is used to enter and exit all planes. Although Havana is only about 90 miles south of Key West, Florida, the flight from Miami to Havana is farther and takes about forty minutes.

Cuba has two currencies; the Convertible Currency or “CUCs” used by tourists, and pesos, used by the local people for everyday purchases. One CUC is worth about US \$1.15, while \$1 U.S. is worth about 24 local pesos. This two tier money system is confusing and it is hard to understand how both currencies can exist simultaneously. Most things tourists pay for are paid in CUCs, and for U.S. tourists, always in cash, since American credit cards are not used due to the U.S. embargo; that may change in the future. Restaurants we ate at used the CUC currency and the prices were roughly comparable to restaurant prices in the U.S.

Healthcare is provided to all Cuban citizens at no cost and is reportedly very good. Their infant mortality is 4.8 per 1000 live births, while the U.S. rate is 6.1. The doctor patient ratio in Cuba is 1:156 compared to a U.S. ratio of 1:417.

However, some Cuban doctors are working other jobs (like driving taxis) because the government pay for doctors is so low (\$20-\$30 per month).

The government owns all the hotels, tour companies, healthcare facilities, most restaurants, sports facilities, night clubs, most housing, and a local airline. Professional sports were banned soon after the revolution. Sport by the masses was encouraged and in 1992 Cuba collected 14 gold medals in the Olympics and ended up in fifth place overall in the medal count – an impressive record for a country of only 11 million. Cuba has also produced a number of impressive boxers and major league baseball players, not surprising since those are the two most popular sports in Cuba.

It might be easy to consider Cuba a third world country but given its level of education, healthcare standards, culture, and society, it probably would not be warranted. Yes, it is a very poor country with low wages and much of its infrastructure is now crumbling, but most of its population has jobs and receive many benefits from the government. The unemployment rate in 2012 was reportedly only 3.8%.

Despite the embargo, we saw all kinds of items such as wide screen TVs and other consumer products being checked in at the Miami airport as baggage bound for Havana, presumably for Cuban relatives living there or for re-sale on the black market.



A view of central Havana and the Capital building from the roof of our hotel.



First view of the north shore of Cuba. Havana is just out of view in the upper left.



A view of central Havana's residential area with the Straits of Florida in the background from the roof of our hotel..



Tamara, the hotel maid who cleaned our room during our week long stay in Havana.

Travel to Cuba

Although the travel ban to Cuba had been eased by the U.S. at the time we travelled to Cuba in February 2015, there was no overt indication that travel had changed in any way. What did change was that it was now possible to buy and bring home limited amounts of Cuban products such as cigars and rum that were banned under the embargo. But flights into and out of Cuba were still by charter flights (ours was operated by ABC Charters using an American Airlines plane and crew) and special authorizations from the Cuban government were needed to board the flights and enter Cuba.

Before the U.S. travel restrictions were lifted, travel to Cuba by U.S. citizens was highly controlled and only specific approval given for scientific or licensed cultural exchange purposes. However, some earlier travelers managed to visit by entering Cuba from another country, typically Mexico or Canada. In theory, these travelers could have been arrested upon re-entering the U.S. if caught. Although punishment for violation are quite severe, in practice convictions have apparently been rare and not likely now, but the laws are still on the books. Also, before the travel restrictions were lifted, it was illegal for Americans to spend any money in Cuba. This is no longer the case, although U.S. credit cards are not recognized (yet).

At the time of this writing, it is legal to travel to and from Cuba from the U.S. but it appears that special authorizations by the Cuban government will still be required, i.e., through a cultural exchange company licensed by the

Cuban government. Any changes in Cuban travel policies will probably take place slowly (if at all) so it is likely the existing procedures will still be needed for some time.

We were advised by our tour guide to respond to questions about the purpose of our travel by referencing a people-to-people cultural exchange rather than mentioning a photography workshop. He explained that a photography workshop might be interpreted as having journalistic implications about which the Cuban government would be concerned. A government “guide” accompanied our group to all of the planned stops on the tour, but there were many opportunities for us to wander around Havana’s streets on our own without any government oversight.

One final note about travel to Cuba: When we checked in for our flight to Havana at the Miami airport, many of the passengers had their bags wrapped in plastic, apparently to make it difficult for thieves to pilfer articles from the bags. Our bags were not wrapped and were identified with our travel company’s tag and we had nothing stolen on the trip to Havana. However, on the return trip to Miami, two items—a headlamp and a pair of shoes—were removed from my bag somewhere in route to Miami. Our outgoing baggage was in the Havana airport for several hours prior to the flight so it is likely the theft occurred there. This is a reminder not to put any attractive or valuable items in checked bags. It may also be a wise practice to have bags wrapped in plastic, like many of the locals were doing.



Cuba Cultural Travel
Bringing People Together

LETTER OF AUTHORIZATION
FOR TRAVEL TO CUBA

Please be advised the following individual is authorized to travel to Cuba under the auspices of Cuba Cultural Travel pursuant to 31 CFR §515.565(b).

Authorized Traveler's Name: **John Robert DeLapp**

Authorized Dates of Travel: **February 14-20, 2015**

Name of Tour Operator: **Cuba Cultural Travel**

Previously operating under OFAC License No. _____

Additional inquiries regarding this authorization may be made by calling (760) 645-3269 during business hours (9:00am - 5:00pm EST).

Sincerely,



Cuba Cultural Travel
Bringing People Together
760.645.3269
www.cubaculturaltravel.com

My letter of authorization to travel to Cuba.



Notes for Street Photographers

Our workshop leader, Peter Turnley, gave the group the following recommendations on camera settings for making candid photos of people and methods of interacting with would-be subjects:

- Have your camera always ready to use; no lens caps allowed!
- Use shutter priority mode and set the shutter at 1/125 second –this will freeze most motion.
- Adjust ISO setting to match ambient light; learn what ISO is needed for various conditions.
- Use a white balance setting for “cloudy”; it provides a little warmer palette than white balance set for “sun”. White balance for RAW images can be set later in Lightroom.
- Stick with one focal length and aspect ratio so photos will provide consistent appearance and perspective when used in a photo story.
- Choose one focal length and stick to it. You will achieve an expertise in using it and will be able to know where to put your body for every picture.
- Use focal length in 28-35mm range; don’t worry too much about depth-of-field.
- Frame subjects near the center of the frame in order to include background and context.
- Avoid using vertical format except for special purposes (like magazine covers).
- Get close by moving your body closer rather than zooming the lens.
- Shoot RAW + jpeg so that you can quickly edit the jpegs for content and sharpness then discard all losers and then just load the RAWs into Lightroom for processing.
- Don’t assume that you always have to ask for permission to make a picture. Your actions and body language is often enough. Be respectful and professional. Share the image with the subject. Email a photo if appropriate. Turnley discourages paying locals for taking their picture.

Camera Equipment That I Brought to Cuba:

Canon EOS 7D Mark-II digital SLR

24-105mm f/4 L IS lens

75-300mm f/4-5.6 L IS lens (did not use)

Olympus OM-D E-M10 micro 4/3 digital camera

20mm f/1.7 lens

Small tripod (did not use)

Most images in this publication were taken with the Canon equipment.



Peter Turnley, our photo guide and workshop leader.



Mary, a photo workshop participant, shows children the pictures she took of them.



Young Cubans hang out on the marble clad promenade on the Prado (Paseo de Marti).



High-top sneakers worn by the little girl to the right.



A little girl watches a Santeria (religious) outdoor performance.

Lodging and Food

We stayed at the Hotel Parque Central in old Havana, a first class hotel that would compare favorably with most good hotels in the U.S. The hotel was included in the price of the workshop and included an excellent, free breakfast buffet. The buffet was elaborate and extensive with many choices, including foods not normally eaten in the U.S. for breakfast; we did not recognize some of the fresh fruits that were available each morning. Other than breakfast, I would describe the food in Cuba as good but not inspiring. The local fish, however, was always fresh and excellent.

We were advised to drink only bottled water since the Havana water system was generally unreliable and the combination of broken pipes and outages could affect the water's purity. During our tours through neighborhoods, we noted that nearly every home had a good sized raised water tank which insured their access to water during interruptions to the city's system.

The hotel's location was perfect for exploring the older areas of Havana and was within easy walking distance of the capital, and the Malecon, a popular seaside avenue that fronts on the Straits of Florida. Several other hotels were in the area as well as a number of private restaurants called paladares.



Entertainers dance during one of our lunches.



Street view of our hotel at Parque Central on the Prado, a divided road with marbled promenade.



Artists sell their wares on the aging marble promenade in the median of Prado (Paseo de Marti) near our hotel.



Vendor at a public sports complex.



A couple sells tomatoes at the private Egido Market in Central Havana.



A local restaurant owner is hopeful that our small photo group will eat lunch at his establishment while Alain Gutierrez, one of our Cuban photo guides, explains that we already have other plans for lunch. Although these two have never met, Alain touches the man's shoulder, a common example of personal interactions in Cuban society. As some have said, "You are never a stranger in Havana".



First lunch in Havana—mystery meat plus a weak mojito.



Above: The hotel left a bottle of wine in our room on my birthday.
Left: A vendor sells vegetables in a Havana neighborhood.



Above: Women selling flowers have a discussion at the entrance to an upscale restaurant.
Below: People we encountered on the street just outside their homes.



Local People

The local people were the most open and friendly people that we had met anywhere. No one that we encountered ever indicated any reluctance at having their picture taken or pictures of their children taken. In fact, it often seemed that they felt honored to have their picture taken. Most were eager to talk to Americans and wanted us to understand and appreciate their country.

We had only a superficial ability to speak Spanish which put us at a disadvantage in talking to the local people. Since most of them spoke little or no English, our experience would have been richer had we been more fluent in Spanish. Our two local photo guides helped bridge the language gap and helped us make friends everywhere we went.

We usually found the interactions with local folks genuine and rewarding. Cuban culture seems to include more physical touching in personal interactions, even among strangers, than Americans are used to. This may be uncomfortable for some, but we found it warm and endearing.

We were told in our pre-trip briefing, to avoid talking politics with locals as the government has no tolerance for denigrating comments by its citizens or visitors. The population is closely watched by government CDRs (Committees for the Defense of the Revolution) who are located on virtually every residential block and are responsible for maintaining a compliant population. Regardless, most locals seemed quite happy interacting with us, and didn't mind our intrusion into their neighborhoods. In fact, we were invited into several homes and private businesses. The street in front of our hotel was about the only place that local people asked for money or tried to sell us items.



I was "adopted" by this family after I took their picture with their phone. I was invited to sit in the sand and drink rum, which I did!



Left and Above: People we encountered on the street in front of their houses.



This woman and her husband lived in a private upscale water front home in a Havana suburb. They pointed out a nearby building that used to be a restaurant where the writer Ernest Hemming would sometimes eat. She served our group coffee during our visit.



Above and Left: This lady and her husband graciously invited us into their small home to see how they lived. The house was very modest and old with a portion of the roof being held up with a wooden pole. They had no yard in the front, back, or sides and the front of the house opened directly onto a narrow sidewalk on the street. Neighboring homes connected to theirs on both sides.

Their entrance from the street lead into a small outdoor courtyard where they grew a few ornamental plants and housed a pet bird in a cage. They also had a slightly elevated concrete water storage tank that was their source of water during outages of the city's water system. The interior of this house was very dark, probably like many homes in Havana, with few windows and poorly lit interior spaces.

The woman had a treadle (foot powered) sewing machine set up in their bedroom and was proud to have her picture taken as she repaired a pair of trousers. It was not clear if either worked or how they made a living.

Houses in Havana do not have heating systems but a few do have window type air conditioners. The day of our visit was cold by their standards (in the mid-60s F) and the husband was wearing a jacket.

We were moved by their warmth, generosity, and willingness to share time with us.



Two boys watch the street in front of their house.



Young Habaneros enjoy a visit to the seawall in front of the Bahia de La Habana.



This is a typical residential side street off the Prado, although



most neighborhoods did not have this many parked cars.



Clothes drying on balconies or from windows was a common scene in residential areas of Central Havana.



This lady was pleased to have her picture taken with what we assumed was her granddaughter.



I saw this dog sitting on the marble stairs in the entry to a home of what must have been an elegant residence back in the 1950's.



Above is Nestor Marti, one of our Cuban photo guides, showing his work at a gallery. He is an architectural photographer.



Our photo group was invited to the house of local photographer Claudia Corrales where she lived with her mother and father. Here she shows some of her B&W prints to our group. We learned that her grandfather was a photographer during the Cuban revolution and there were books published of this work. A few original prints of his work still exist and one member of our group asked if he could buy an original print of Fidel Castro riding a horse. He was able to purchase it for US\$ 5,000.



A woman participates in a candle lighting ritual at a local Catholic church in Havana.



Two residents and their dog wait for a ride next to a building with an interesting mural.



The photos on these two pages depict the many forms of transportation that are common in Havana.

Transportation

Car ownership in Cuba is 38 per 1000 people. By comparison, ownership in the U.S. is 800 cars per 1000. This is not too surprising given the extremely low wages and cost of owning and maintaining a car in Cuba. It is interesting to note, that while many living expenses are heavily subsidized by the State, the price of diesel and gasoline is roughly the same as in the U.S., about US\$ 3.00/gallon.

There are still many vintage cars from the 1940s and 1950s on the road, many of which are being used as taxis. The owners do an amazing job of maintaining and keeping these cars running. It was common to see cars being worked on at the side of the road, or in some cases broken down in the middle of a busy street.

Based on the packed buses that we saw, it is clear that most local people use this form of transportation to get around town. Bicycle taxis are common and used everywhere as well.

The State owned tour buses are modern, air conditioned and well maintained but are reserved only for tourists.



School

Our photo group had the opportunity to visit a school for primary and secondary students located in Central Havana in a building that used to be occupied by a U.S. insurance company prior to the revolution. Due to its location in a crowded urban area, there was no outdoor playground at this school but we did see children on a wide sidewalk involved in some type of game related to arithmetic.

Following the 1959 revolution, all educational institutions were nationalized and the Castro government placed a high priority on educating its citizens. According to UNESCO, the government has been spending 10% of its central budget on education and the results have been impressive. Huge gains in the literacy rate has occurred compared to pre-revolution days, with literacy now reaching nearly 100%. Education has given women more options to have a much greater role in social, political, and economic opportunities. For students who have the interest and ability, higher education is available and free. For example, there are 23 medical schools in Cuba.

Students get free lunches and free uniforms. We noted that some wore uniforms and some did not, so apparently uniforms are optional. Many schools provide free day care in the morning and afternoon to accommodate families with working parents. It appeared in our visit that the class sizes were smaller than what we are used to in the U.S. In fact, references state that Cuba strives for classes no larger than 15. Teachers are well prepared, half with Masters degrees.

The students and teachers were very patient with our intrusion and picture taking. The school had a computer lab with aging but useable computers.





My wife Tina, encounters a group of school children waiting to enter the school while she was trying to leave.



Primary school students sit on chalk numbers placed on a sidewalk as part of an arithmetic game.



Two primary school girls pose for a picture wearing uniforms that some children wear.

Santeria Performance

We attended a Santeria performance at a small neighborhood park in Havana Vieja. There was live music and a dance with colorful characters that told a story related to the Santeria religion. About 30% of Cubans relate to this religion.

Santeria is considered a syncretic religion, i.e., one that is a union of different or opposing forms of beliefs and practices. It has no equivalent text like the Bible or Koran and religious rites are communicated orally. One of our guide books described Santeria as a complex and mysterious but fascinating blend of Catholicism and African slave culture. Castro's government discouraged Santeria and other religions during much of his reign but, by the 1980's, no longer tried to restrict it.

Included on this page are photos of the band and some of the characters who performed that day.





Above: Two boxers practice moves with each other on the floor between the ring and bleachers.
Below: The coach at the Rafael Trejo Boxing Gym provides instructions to one of his boxers.



Sport and Dance

Sports are encouraged and popular in Cuba, especially baseball and boxing. The government portrays sports as a right of all people, not just the wealthy. In support of this belief, professional sports have been banned for many years. The commitment to public sports has paid off as Cuba has and been quite successful in fielding competitive Olympic teams, especially considering their small population.

We visited a major public sports complex on a Saturday morning and it was being fully used by local people of all ages running, playing soccer, basketball, baseball, softball, and tennis. The climate of course, is amenable to year-round outdoor sports.

We also visited an outdoor boxing gym tucked in between residential buildings. The morning we were there, a group of young boxers were training and being put through drills by their coach.

Both recreational dance and ballet are popular. On a Sunday afternoon we had a brief and limited chance to experience the world famous La Tropical dance hall. Basically a bar with a huge outdoor dance area and sound system, it has a reputation for being wild and rowdy. As it got dark and crowds began to arrive, our guide gathered us up and responsibly returned us to our hotel. The evening dancers were being screened by a metal detector as they entered the facility.

Later in the week, we had nice visits to Centro ProDanza, a ballet school for children and teens (pictured on this page), and the Compania Habana Compas, a commercial contemporary percussion dance group (pictured on page 33).





Top: Children participate in a fun run at a public sports field.

Above: A softball player leaving the field befriends Tina but she has no idea what he is saying to her, although he was very friendly. We eventually determined that he had relatives in Florida who visit him at times.

Left: A coach gives his player a hug during a Sunday afternoon softball game at a neighborhood field in Havana.



Our photo group watches a practice session at the percussion dance studio.

Work and Infrastructure

Havana has lost the luster it must have had in the heyday of the 1940s and 1950s but efforts are underway to correct the infrastructure deficiencies. For example, the capital building is being given a face-lift, but many, many buildings are crumbling, falling down, or are being torn down all over Havana due to safety concerns. What is lacking is the money to do repairs and make the upgrades that are so desperately needed.

If restrictions against private entrepreneurship continue to be removed, it will be interesting to see if this will bring about a return of a society with troubling economic class divisions, the very thing the revolution was designed to eliminate.



A street-side entrepreneur sells cut flower arrangements.



Above: While visiting the ballet school, I heard the familiar sound of a router shaping wood. I followed the sound to a back alley and found this man shaping slats for use in cabinet doors or window shades (like on the window behind him).



A mostly outdoor auto repair shop was established in a space between two building, probably where a previous building had been torn down. The mechanics were in the process of installing a Toyota engine in a 1940s-something car.



Top: Typical building that has been torn (or fallen) down. Alain, one of our local photo guides, keeps an eye on me so I don't get lost in a Havana neighborhood.

Above: The carpenter's shop at the percussion dance studio. Nice, clean shop but lacking any modern equipment.

Middle Right: A small shop fronting on the sidewalk sells hand-made dresses and a few other items.

Right: I saw these two men working on the sidewalk placing a new tile facade on the outside of a building.



Havana!

