

FA 62
Forbidden Land

by
Lionel Martin

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The DC-8L comes out of the northern sky, positions itself for the approach and lands on a Caribbean island.

Several hundred northamerican tourists file down the ramp. A few hours before, they had boarded the plane dressed in winter clothing. Now most of them are in Caribbean holiday clothes. As a group they are typical: cameras ^(changing from their) ~~on~~ shoulders, some men in Bermuda shorts, some women in broad-brimmed sun hats - all in all, a medley of bright colors.

They are typical but the place is offbeat: Havana, Cuba. And though the tourists are northamerican and speak English like yanquis from California, Indiana or Pennsylvania, they are not from the United States. They are Canadians.

For American tourists, Cuba is forbidden land, verboden or as they say in Spanish, prohibido. The U.S. State Department issues permission to go to Cuba to the chosen few - journalists, scholars, and people like Senators Javits and Pell.

But, for America's northern neighbors, the Canadians, Cuba is as accessible as the other Caribbean islands - Jamaica, the Barbados or Trinidad. A Canadian citizen does not even need a visa to visit Cuba.

Since package-plan Cuban tours began in 1972, Cuba has become the hottest item in the Canadian tourist trade. Beginning this year, five planes from Canada, three chartered by Unitours,

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two by Sun Tours, ^{have been} ~~was~~ touching down in Havana each week to discharge their cargo of sun worshippers. Reservations have to be made months in advance.

This year, around 15,000 Canadian tourists will spend vacation holidays in Cuba. That compares with just a few hundred before the package-plan trips began. Canadians are attracted to Cuba by the splendid beaches and the warm, sunny weather. But they also come in droves because the price is right. For as little as \$329.00 they get an all expense paid week in Cuba: the round trip flight, accomodations, meals and dozens of little free of charge extras. Most Canadian travel agents agree that Cuba's one-two tourist punch is hard to beat.

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In October 1959, the American Society of Tourist Agents (ASTA) held their annual convention in Havana. The Cuban revolutionary government had been in power for ten months. Diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba still existed.

The convention's inaugural session was held at the Blanquita, now the Charlie Chaplin theater. In attendance were two thousand American tourist agents, many of them with their spouses. The speakers that day were two Americans and two Cubans: ASTA's president, Max Allen, U.S. Ambassador in Cuba, Phillip Bonsal, Cuba's president, Osvaldo Dortico and Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro.

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Max Allen declared that inaugural night: "We know by experience that Cuban hospitality has no political limitations." He said that when they returned home, the two thousand travel agents - "the best salesmen in the world" - would begin publicizing the wonders of Cuba.

Ambassador Bonsal spoke and then the Cuban president. Fidel Castro sat listening, dressed in his olive-green uniform, a big cigar protruding through his beard. Finally it was his turn. His speech was a siren song aimed at attracting tourists to Cuban shores. "Our ambition," Castro said, "is to transform our island into the finest vacation spot; into the best and most important tourist center in the world."

Castro's speech to the ASTA convention marks an historical turning point. It was the last time that he and a high representative of the U.S. government would be together in an atmosphere of peace.

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Even as the ASTA convention was in progress, Havana was bombed by a plane piloted by ^a/Cuban exile who had taken off from a Florida airfield. Other planes dropped fire bombs on sugar cane plantations causing widespread damage.

Exactly one week after the inauguration of the ASTA convention, Fidel Castro made a three hour speech to the Cuban people. In it, he spoke of the "extraordinary interest" that Cuba had in developing tourism. He said that the enemies of

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the Cuban revolution had deliberately stepped up their activities while the ASTA convention was going on in order to sabotage Cuba's plans to attract tourism. In his impassioned speech, Castro accused the United States government of allowing Cuban exiles to use U.S. territory as a staging area for their attacks on Cuba.

Castro's dream of converting Cuba into a bigger and better winter tourist attraction for Americans was trampled by the subsequent rush of events. By the end of 1960, U.S. holdings in Cuba were totally nationalized and the United States had cut off Cuban sugar imports. Revolutionary Cuba was on a constant war footing. By then, CIA plans were already underway for the Bay of Pigs invasion.

In January 1961, the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba. The U.S. State Department clamped a ban on travel by Americans to Cuba and the economic embargo against Cuba moved into high gear.

Today, more than a dozen years later, there are still no diplomatic relations between the two nations and Cuba continues to be off bounds to most Americans.

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"After détente come the tourists," (Après la détente viennent les touristes) the French diplomat in Havana told me. "Just look at China." We were speaking about United States-Cuban relations. He predicted that détente between the two countries is not very far off, a year or two at most.

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Let us suppose the French diplomat was right. The forbidden land is suddenly opened up to a torrent of American tourists. Cuba ceases to be a non nation (one airline company went so far as to eliminate Cuba from their map of the Caribbean area). Cuba, for Americans, is put back on the map.

What hidden surprises can the American tourist expect to find in Cuba after all these years of estrangement. Before, Cuba was the essence of the typical Caribbean holiday spot. Now a Canadian travel brochure on Cuba advises: "Forget everything you've learned to expect from a typical Caribbean holiday."

Big changes have taken place in Cuba. Americans who knew Cuba in pre-revolutionary days more than sixteen years ago would be most amazed. What are some of them?

No Free Enterprise

Just about every business in Cuba is government owned and run. There are still driver-owned taxi cabs and 180,000 small farmers, but all hotels, bars, restaurants, movies, stores and apartment houses are property of the government. In this respect, Cuba is no different from the Soviet Union or China. INIT, Cuba's national tourist agency is every tourists' principal host.

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No gambling

Pre-1959 Havana was ^a world renowned gambling center. Every hotel had its gambling casino; every cafeteria, bar or cigar store its one-armed bandits. Gambling was outlawed with a vengeance in 1961. There is no longer hide nor ~~tail~~ ^{hair} of it. If one likes to gamble, Cuba is the wrong Caribbean isle.

No sex business

Cuba was known as a nexus of vice and pornography. Prostitution, smut and the most genital-explicit floor shows in the world were its stock and trade. No more. The red light districts are gone and former call girls have been recycled into new jobs. The floor shows are colorful and lively but genteel by comparison with the past. Porno magazines and movies just don't exist.

No parking meters

Like any American city, Havana's streets were lined with parking meters. Came the revolution and thousands of people rushed into the streets with everything from ballpean to sledge hammers. Five days after the triumph of Castro's Rebel Army in January 1959, not a parking meter was ticking in all of Havana. That's the way it's been ever since.

No beggars

In most Latin American tourist centers, beggars abound. Cuba was no exception. Begging disappeared

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in Cuba as jobs and welfare benefits became available. Canadian tourists are sometimes approached by children, often in their school uniforms, who ask for chicles (chewing gum), carámelos (candy) or bolígrafos (ballpoint pens). The explanation is that there is no chewing gum in Cuba, that ballpoint pens are in short supply and, as for candy, it's cheaper to get it from a foreigner. The Cuban government discourages tourists from giving handouts to children. They argue that it only serves to corrupt them.

Although it's not generally known, more than two thousand U.S. citizens have visited Cuba over the past six years without State Department permission. But officially, Cuba is still out of bounds and most Americans comply with the regulation. Because of possible political complications, neither Sun Tours nor Unitours of Canada will allow U.S. citizens on their Cuban vacation trips.

This year, Canada is expected to send more tourists to Cuba than any other country. It's been suggested frequently here in Cuba, that if you want to get an idea of what future U.S. tourism to Cuba will be like, just take a look at what the Cubans are offering the Canadians.

Canadians can choose either a one or two week package Cuban vacation plan. Some, like Unitours Beachcomber Holiday and Sun Tours Cabañas del Sol offer a full seven

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days at the beach. Others include both a beach resort and Havana. Prices for week long vacation plans range from \$329.00 to \$409.00. Unitours' two week vacation plan runs from \$499.00 to \$599.00 per person.

Marlys Edward, a lawyer from Toronto had chosen the \$329.00 Cuban Discovery plan. She was sitting in the lobby of the Hotel Nacional with her travelling companions, awaiting the bus that would take them back to the airport. In a few hours they would be stepping out into a freezing temperature in Toronto. I shot questions at her.

Did you enjoy yourself?

Tremendously. I think everybody on the trip did.
What kind of people were on the trip?

Quite a few families with children, lots of older people and a fair number of younger men and women like us.

What were the biggest gripes at your resort?

No hot water and no toilet seats. For me personally it was the hot water. They're putting in a hot water system out there but it's not ready yet. Of course, the people at other resorts like the Hotel Internacional in Varadero didn't have those problems.

What kind of accomodations did you have?

Confortable. In one of the xi or seven motel-style buildings. The rooms had painted concrete walls and Miami windows.

Did you get in much swimming?

Yes, and the water was wonderful. Most people spent a good deal of their time soaking up the sun. That what they came down here to do.

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How was the food?

Surprisingly good. Bacon and eggs for breakfast. Soup, salad, frogs legs, steak or something of that order for lunch and a similar supper. My favorite desert was rum and raisin ice cream. The Cubans make wonderful ice cream, you know. Oh yes, and one free glass of beer or wine with lunch and supper, if you so desire.

The service?

Leisurely. Just get set to spend an hour or an hour and a half at each meal. The waiters were very meticulous and polite but they weren't in a hurry. You can eat just about when you want to - breakfast from seven to ten; lunch from twelve to three and supper from seven to nine.

What if you want to drink?

Prices are more than reasonable. Sixty-five cents for a Cuba Libre - that's rum and coke - and eighty-five cents for a Daiquiri as only their inventors can make them. A bottle of Havana Club rum costs only \$2.00.

Were there any special fiestas thrown in free of charge?

There were three of them. The first was a drink-as-much-as-you-want-on-the-house fiesta. During that party you could order any rum base drinks. There was also a lobster party on the beach. I understand that sometimes its roast pork, also a typical Cuban dish. We spent our last two nights in Havana and on one of them we were taken to the Tropical^{na} night club to dine and see the show.

What else did you get for free?

There was one bus tour every afternoon free of charge. There were also free boats available - paddle, sail and row boats.

Could you move around freely?

Yes. If you wanted to, you could take a bus to other cities in Matanzas or Havana provinces. But they did want people to be back at night. That's part of the understanding. You can snap photos just about everywhere but don't aim your camera at military installations.

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What costs extra?

Scuba diving costs extra. Also the full day trip to the southern coast - we were on the northern coast. The trip was to the Bay of Pigs and cost ten dollars. You can go out to eat whenever you want but some of the better restaurants are quite expensive.

Besides the ~~\$129.00~~ basic fee, how much more did you spend?

I spent \$50.00. Many got along with as little as \$20.00 and theoretically its possible to have a perfectly good time and not spend an extra cent. There's not even tipping. But if you want to go out to eat at least once and buy rum or cigars for presents fifty to hundred dollars will do fine.

You are a lawyer. Were you interested in finding out something about your speciality here in Cuba?

Yes, and I was lucky. I met some Cubans who took me to the Havana Municipal Court. One of the judges took such an interest in us that the session he was presiding over had to start late.

Did the Cubans try to propagandize the tourists?

Politically, you mean. No, not at all. In fact, some people who wanted to know more about Cuban politics were frustrated because it was hard to get the guides into heavy discussions. Of course, you can find Cubans to talk politics to if that's what you're looking for. On the bus the Cuban guides will point out new schools and factories and will tell you about education in Cuba, the free public health plans and that sort of thing thing. But not even a page of political literature was given to us.

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When he spoke to the American Society of Travel Agents back in 1959, Fidel Castro projected a vision of Cuba as a tourist paradise. Then came the sixties and nary a word about tourism - there were other more important problems.

But the dream did not die; it was merely deferred. Cuba now has serious intentions of going forward on the tourist front. Already, Canadians, Britishers, West Germans and Frenchmen have participated in the resurgence of the tourist industry in Cuba. Many observers believe that it won't be long before Americans will also be back in Cuba as tourists after all these many years.