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FIRST-TIME
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CUBA

by Michelle Lowe



I had waited all my life for this moment to arrive, and knew it to be true, as a feeling wafted over me that could only be described as a moment of *déjà vu* and panting excitement. As the warm moist air touched my face on the drive from the airport to my hotel, it was the first time in a long while that everything I expected to happen didn't happen and the first time that nothing that I expected did. The humid air whispered to me "welcome to Cuba, welcome to Havana." I felt a wave of excitement as I entered her city of many contrasts and contradictions.

Number one on my bucket list for some years has been Cuba. In London, where I currently live, I was out Salsa dancing with a close friend who is a great Cuban salsa dancer. He challenged me to see how good my New York style salsa was in the hope of converting me to Cuban style salsa. I was amazed at how many people of all shades

and shapes were seriously enjoying Cuban salsa at a level, which I had never seen while living in New York.

On that night, I fell in love with Cuban salsa, never to return to the former style of which I had danced some 20 + years in New York. My new goal was to somehow become as agile on the floor as the folks in front of me on the dance floor but better. How does one achieve that? Go to Cuba and learn! I scoured the internet wandering around like a lost soul looking for the ultimate salsa trip. Nothing seemed quite right and I reverted to my friend requesting a suggestion and in that moment my life changed for the better when he suggested 3 words: Key 2 Cuba. Armed with his visits on one of her memorable trips, he advised it was the "only" salsa trip to take and boy ... I was not disappointed.

It made sense ... what better way to enjoy a holiday and tick off the

number one on your bucket list than to combine it with the thing you love most - SALSA. I was fortunate enough to speak with the owner of Key 2 Cuba, Kerry Ribchester and before I knew it, four months later, I joined her 3-week summer programme. In Havana Airport at a cambio pinching myself, as I couldn't believe I was actually there. Greeted by a beautiful Cuban woman named Eva, (the first of many I was to encounter) we were given a brief tour of the city in Spanglish (a combination of English and Spanish words). I was excited as it gave me at long last an opportunity to practice my Spanish.

As we drove through Havana in an old taxi with the windows down at night, my eyes feasted on the grand, yet imposing derelict buildings, with their rich Spanish Colonial architecture as the warm moist air skimming my face. The city has definitely been stuck in a time warp, needing much 'TLC' (tender loving care) and the taxis from the 1950s are old yet pristine and have been maintained in an unbelievable manner that keeps them working without fault, yet more or less, maintaining the same precision of any vehicle built in the 21st century. Regardless there is so much beauty in what once was and what could potentially be.

Upon arrival to our hotel in Havana Vieja (Old Havana) - we dropped our bags, showered, changed and were off on our first adventure to see a live Rumba show in a nightclub on the other side of town. As my ears filled with the sound of incredible singing, my eyes followed as dancers appeared in costume interpreting the Orishas (gods deriving from the Yoruba faith in Nigeria). The importance of witnessing this dance is that every Cuban is assigned an Orisha at birth along with a Catholic saint.



Images courtesy of Key2Cuba



Images courtesy of Aguirre Rolando (Tusisuena)



Images courtesy of Aguirre Rolando (Tusisuena)

The performances are intriguing, enabling you to learn so much about the gods through the interpretation of their dance. It is too hard to explain but an amazing experience to watch. Fortunately you can learn the dance through Kerry's course.

Filled with joy of my dream becoming reality, I knew we had just touched the tip of the iceberg. The next day, the view from my hotel lobby was awesome. I could see lots of beautiful people of color walking around the city in an elegant manner that I had neither seen before nor expected. From the lobby of the hotel, to the parks, to the nightclubs, there was literally music everywhere. In every corner, car and taxi, music was emanating. And while dancing in the varied nightclubs the sound of salsa permeated my every thought - it was wonderful! The wafting sounds of salsa, reggaeton, rhumba, son and bachata are everywhere; restaurants, public places, parks, bars and of course clubs. Every evening we had the pleasure of watching and dancing to live music, at indoor and outdoor clubs, at the beach, the carnival and even a private home. Kerry made it all possible.

Walking around the city we encountered a few people asking

for money. Albeit in creative ways; it was never threatening, at times, insistent and over zealous, but never uncomfortable. Often, their approach is from a position of a sweet manner for the most part. One of the most impressive things I noticed was a comfort level in regards to security. I never once felt insecure or unsafe. That being said, like any big city you should be aware of your surroundings. If you are taking US dollars I would suggest you convert it to Euros or GBP. The value of the dollar is low and you are unable to use US credit or debit cards there. I repeat there are no ATM machines or banks with the ability to convert US currency to CUC. (Convertible pesos - the currency used by visitors and not by locals.)

My focus was redirected and enthralled by the stunning sight of colonial Spanish architecture. While most buildings are dilapidated there is so much beauty within the crumbling and the decaying painted structures. The buildings reveal the stories of how decadent life had been in the 1950s before Castro's revolution took place. I urge you to read up on Cuba, its history and current evolution it is slowly experiencing now and gradually scooting them on into the 21st century.



Our accommodation at the Sevilla Hotel, a 4 star property was a beautiful structure. The service was slow but they always eventually delivered. The rooms were standard and clean and the hotel overall was nice. The staff was amazing, always smiling and happy to help. From the lobby security to the chambermaids, everyone was lovely. Be aware, for those of you travelling from the US, you must adjust your expectations. Their standards are not the same, remember, Cuba is a socialist country ruled by a Communist ideology. Therefore the term luxury, while it does exist would be considered comparatively moderate for US standards. While staying at the beach just outside of Havana, we stayed at a basic hotel which I would not recommend unless you are on a very tight budget and don't mind where you stay unless as long as you have a bed. There is alternate option of staying at a Casa Particular (a private home with rooms rented by local Cubans), which I would liken to Airbnb. I had the distinct pleasure of staying at an amazing Casa with access to rooftop where you can enjoy the evening and views of the city. Although a steep walk up, what welcomes you is a clean and modern two-bedroom apartment with a washing machine and wonderful hosts Janet and Silvio. I highly recommend it. For alternate accommodation, check Lonely Planet, Trip Advisor and Cuba Board of Tourism <http://www.travel2cuba.co.uk/hotels-in-cuba/> or the official site for Cuban Travel <http://www.cubatravel.cu/en>

Speaking of expectations lets look at the food situation and service in general. Lets just say if you love "arroz con pollo" - chicken and rice, you will be in heaven. Essentially, Cuban cuisine is lacking good spices and seasoning and variety. Fruit and vegetables tend to be seasonal which is a good thing. Yet, out of need, there has been a rise in nouvelle cuisine restaurants popping up which are equal to any in the US, in terms of quality, invention combined with a "mezcla" of Cuban, French, Spanish and American influences, or infusions of Cuban flair in a contemporary sense. Service tends to be slow, so don't go out starving and if it is a popular place expect a long wait. Especially, should you choose to dine at some of the popular Paladores.

As a true foodie, the little I experienced of this new food scene was excellent and on par with restaurants of like in New York and London. Check out Trip Advisor's top ten restaurants. The restaurants I enjoyed with great admiration were, in terms of consistency and price, Asturias Bar Restaurant - Italian, Sia Kara - French with an eclectic space and handsome waiters; 304 O'Reilly's, great menu and cosy and fun environment. At their sister restaurant El Del Frente: great music, excellent menu and bar, with an additional rooftop area for dinner and drinks. And one of my favorites for extremely warm service and be sure to ask for Wilson. He was such a wonderful host and easy on the eye too! Get my drift? It's not just the food or the ambience that made these restaurants reach the top of my list!

Let's talk about Wi-Fi, the bane of my existence in Havana. I would use two words to describe it, lacking and expensive. In order to have access you need to purchase a Wi-Fi

card for approximately £3.50/ \$5.00 per hour on a scratch off card. And depending on where you purchase the card it can cost you more or less. In addition, depending on where you are it may or may not work. It is inconsistent and you can get dropped at a moment's notice and thus your card is no longer valid. Your best bet is to find a hotspot at a park for uninterrupted access, which I learned by the end of my 3-week visit. Finally, frustrated beyond belief, I decided to have a Wi-Fi free holiday - well at least for the most part, in order to not waste money and retain my sanity.



In terms of sight seeing, you can take an official red bus tour of which I hear is okay, but is an audio tour. In my opinion, your best bet is to walk. There is so little and yet so much to see which you can discover along a side street, you may happen upon a large mural on a main street or a huge sculpture along the Malecon. Sitting at the famous waterfront the Malecon could simply be the most romantic thing you can do if you are with that special someone.

I highly recommend you see as much of the city by "Biccie" (pronounced bee cee) a two-seated open-air bicycle somewhat comfortable while a young, strong strapping Cubano cycles you around town. Unless you have my luck, which on two occasions involved a one armed cyclist moving me slowly from point A to point B with no sense of urgency. I actually wanted to get out and give him

a ride but that's another story for another day.

The main sights are the Revolution Museum, the Bella Arts and the Ballet. But my favorite is Calle de Hamel known mainly for what it represents, a genius idea of the Cuban artist, muralist and sculptor known as Salvador. Salvador González Escalona began Calle de Hamel in April 21, 1990 where there is a combination of Afro-Cuban art, restaurants and bars. The proceeds go to teaching the children in the neighbourhood art and other community funded projects. As Lonely Planet describes it as the "Havana's high temple of Afro-Cuban culture in Centro Habana is the frenetic rumba music that kicks off every Sunday at around noon."

READ MORE

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/cuba/havana/entertainmentnightlife/other/callejon-de-hamel>

The best sight is the Cuban culture that you see and experience every day and every minute specifically in the music and dancing. It comes effortlessly to the local Cubans and you wonder with appreciation and admiration if you could ever be as good at skill that permeates the very thread of their being. Which brings me to my "piece de resistance" of Cuba, Kerry Ribchester, owner of Key 2 Cuba.

I mentioned briefly that Kerry's course came highly recommended but I was unprepared for what I was to experience. Kerry and her dancers that work with her from the dance troupe Raíces Profundas.

Her attention to detail and methodology for teaching is second to none. Not only does she have the ability to teach well no matter your level, it is clear that she loves what

she does and she exudes her love and pride of the Cuban people and their culture. The level to which she breaks down the various dances, for example; salsa, son, rumba and mambo to name a few are with such care, description and passion that I doubt anyone can top what Kerry has to offer. Her dancers are a combination of mostly young, strong and handsome men with a few gorgeous women to assist in teaching and improving your moves. They are all extremely professional, highly skilled and very patient to a fault. To add to exhilaration you feel from the classes, you have the option to enhance what you have learned in class and put it further into action at night. Nightly dance parties are arranged for you to dance till you drop with the dancers at a variety of nightclubs throughout Havana. Due to Kerry's long term alliance and relationship with many professional artists, we had the pleasure of meeting, mingling and having VIP treatment at concerts, venues and clubs.

She even arranges a special event at the beach along with several unexpected treats. If I had to give Kerry a 10 out of 10 for her program she would certainly receive an 11.

A phenomenal way of preparing for your wedding dance and creating a sexy experience as a



couple would be to take Kerry's Key 2 Cuba excursion in Cuba. Kerry offers the trip 3 times a year; around Easter, summer and New Year's as well as private classes in the UK. If necessary, Kerry can tailor make your dance tuition or plan your wedding in Havana. Cuba is a wonderful place to fall in love, because it opens you up to a wonderful bonding experience. Check her out at <http://www.key2cuba.com/>

Cuba has a Caribbean flavor with a strong influence of Spanish and African culture. The women and men are beautiful and handsome respectively. My bucket list is not extensive but the one place I had to visit was Cuba. I can truly say if tomorrow doesn't come for me, I have completed number one on my wish list.

Between the music, the affection of the people and attention of the men don't be surprised if you leave your heart in Havana, needing to return to recapture it. Havana feels like the lover you crave for and can't get enough but yet know you shouldn't have. It is eclectic, creative and still full of promise. I know because it happened to me and when I think of Havana my heart pounds with excitement and joy.