



CUBA REDUX

Memories of motorcycling
through Castro's Cuba

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[previous page] A 1950's Chevrolet Styleline Deluxe faces its own twilight, at sunset in Cienfuegos

Four years have passed since President Obama announced a rapprochement with Communist Cuba; and eight years since Raúl Castro eased up on *cuentapropistas* (private entrepreneurs); and twenty-three years since I rode my BMW R100GS PD on a three-month journey through Cuba, in 1996, as a professional journalist.



January 2019. I'm thrilled to be back in the saddle, retracing my journey through a country I've grown to know well and love dearly. I'm leading an Edelweiss Bike Travel tour group - the fulfilment of a two-decade's old dream. Our rides are late model BMW F700s

and 1200GSs plus a medley of Harley-Davidson models, shipped in from Europe. They seem totally out of place in this twilight zone country, half-frozen in time.

In 1996, I chanced upon a 1938 BMW - the only Beemer I've seen in three

[top left] Christopher P. Baker with his BMW R100GS PD in the Valle de Viñales, Pinar del Río province, during his 7,008-mile journey in 1996

[top right] Christopher P. Baker on an Edelweiss Bike Travel BMW 1200GS, at the Bay of Pigs Museum; taken while leading a group tour in 2015

decades of reporting on Cuba - in the provincial town of Las Tunas. Luis Manuel Fernández, the owner, had shipped it in after a working stint in East Germany. Over the years, he'd had to jury-rig it like Frankenstein's monster, including a racing fairing, a tail fender from a Czech-built MZ, a gas tank resembling a German Wehrmacht helmet, and homemade aluminium footplates forming a handy support for a second battery that supplied power for the front headlight.

I asked how he had kept it running all these years, through decades of shortage. "¡El cubano inventa!" he replied, with a wink. Mostly he jury-rigged parts from Soviet Urals - or, failing that, any vehicle whose components could be tinkered to fit.

Such colourful personalities embody the resourcefulness, ingenuity, and indomitable spirit of this iconoclastic socialist isle in the sun.

My journey coincided with the 'Special Period,' a time of devastating hardships, after the Cuban economy imploded following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Cuba's former benefactor), in 1991. Cubans sweated through daily *apagones* (electricity black-outs) which lasted for hours. Cats disappeared - eaten by starving Cubans because of a lack of food. Cuba was years away from becoming today's destination du jour. I had the isle to myself as I roamed 7,008 miles, touring Cuba end to end.



My first impression was of being caught in a 1950's time warp. Most cars and buses were garaged for want of gasoline, but a few rusting relics of Mafia-era ostentation still rumbled down the road to the rhythm of the rumba on the radio. They pattered along beside Russian-made Ladas, dour 650cc Urals with sidecars, Soviet tractors, and creaky wooden carts pulled by oxen.

'The enemy shall not pass our frontier!' screamed a billboard outside Guantánamo. Others reading 'Patriotism or Death!' and 'Long live socialism!' left me in no doubt that I was in a Communist nation. Che Guevara's face was everywhere, also, alongside that of Fidel. Yet everywhere I went, I was feted. It seemed a strange juxtaposition: rousing anti-imperialist murals offset by three generations of Cubans sending reassuring waves to a Yank. "Why does your government not like us? They are too hard on us Cubans!" a Cuban lady scolded before kissing my cheek and thrusting a bag of ripe tomatoes into my hand.

It was the same all over the island. Cubans I'd met only moments before embraced me, called me *'amigo'*, and invited me into their homes. Rum and beer were passed around. The music was fired up, until hot enough to cook the pork. Friends and neighbours arrived. Hands were extended. I was hugged warmly by Cubans I did not know. It's hard to believe that the U.S. government's Trading with the Enemy Act is directed at these genteel and generous people. How often have I laughed, even cried, dancing groin to groin with the 'enemy'?

I liked the panache of touring Cuba by motorbike. I saw myself, somewhat wistfully, as a latter-day Che Guevara, whose own motorcycle journey through Latin America on a Norton, in 1952, would have been the adventure of a lifetime had he not met Fidel.

"Cuba is endlessly photogenic, and the people love to be photographed," says Christopher



"Everything for the Revolution" exclaims this billboard in Havana, suggesting that the revolution is an on-going process of building a better society

Motorcycling through Cuba you can't get away from Che. I was once served a macchiato with his iconic image sprinkled in cinnamon atop the spume. The Guinness Book of Records claims the image of the bearded revolutionary, wearing his beret with five-pointed star, is the most replicated of any individual in the world. If so, half the images must be in Cuba, I mused as my January 2019 tour group stopped to photograph a billboard of a smiling Che and his famous phrase: "Hasta la victoria siempre" (Until victory, always).

La Victoria... That's the name, coincidentally, by which Cubans refer to the disastrously ill-conceived 1961 CIA-sponsored invasion at the Bay of Pigs.

In March 1996, I arrived at the spot where socialism and capitalism squared off. Cuban families and Canadian tourists were sunning themselves on pearly sands and swimming in the teal-blue Caribbean. It was difficult to imagine that blood and bullets had mingled with the sand and the surf here five decades before. I gave a Cuban my camera and asked him to snap a shot of me straddling the bike in front of a huge billboard reading 'PLAYA GIRÓN - THE FIRST ROUT OF IMPERIALISM IN LATIN AMERICA'.

With all the hoopla about politics, it's easy to overlook the sheer beauty of the place. The talcum-powder beaches, the chartreuse cane-fields, and the emerald

valleys full of dramatic formations. The ancient cities are evocative of the once-mighty power of Spain. The whiff of cigar smoke and sea mist wafts over the Malecón as the sun sets and Havana succumbs to nights of sizzling salsa.

Walking Havana's streets in the mid 90's, I felt as if I was living inside a romantic thriller. It was intoxicating. Still laced with the sharp edges and sinister shadows that made Ernest Hemingway want 'to stay here forever.' Before the revolution, Havana was a place of intrigue and tawdry romance. The whiff, the intimation of romance, of conspiracy, was still in the air.

One night, I settled myself at the bar of La Bodeguita del Medio, Hemingway's

favourite watering hole, half a block from Havana's antique cathedral. Troubadours moved among a sprinkling of thirsty *turistas* as I savoured the proletarian fusion of dialectics and rum. Seduction, however, kept creeping in. I sipped a mojito, the rum mint julep that Hemingway brought out of obscurity. They were strong, and as a sultry *Cubana* stared into my eyes I felt a glimmer of the 'other charms' to which Hemingway had succumbed. Socialism and sensuality. It was almost surreal. Finally, my last night in Cuba....

I bought a ticket and headed out to the Tropicana open-air cabaret nightclub, then in its sixth decade of Vegas-style paganism.



Rumbling drums... Trilling trumpets... Whirling spotlights...

The lights went down and a troupe of near-naked showgirls, wearing silver thigh-high boots and glowing chandeliers atop their heads, appeared at the back of the auditorium and sashayed down the aisle. I watched, mesmerized, as rainbow-hued searchlights swept over other *figurantes* dressed (barely) in outrageous costumes, parading twenty feet up amid the palm trees like tropical birds. Ninety minutes into the show, the beauties streamed up the aisles to dance with the patrons. Suddenly, standing in front of me was a drop-dead gorgeous *figurante*, gyrating her glistening body in an erotic frenzy.

I leapt into the aisle and, in Spanish, uttered five words - nothing more: 'You're beautiful! I'll wait for you outside.'

She smiled, then turned and sashayed back down the aisle for the explosive finale. The lights went up. The crowd filtered out. I was left alone with my simmering desire.

To my astonishment she appeared, dressed all in white, including a turban that hid her shaved head. Copper and bronze amulets glinted upon her arms, and she wore many necklaces - *collares* - of colourful beads. Mercedes had just been initiated as a *santera*, a follower of the Santería religion; dressed thus, I knew that she believed herself possessed by a guardian deity and lived in a high state of grace.

She took my hand, and I sensed the simplicity with which desire can strike heavenly miracles from charming scenes of tropical naiveté in Cuba.

We hailed an illegal taxi - a '53 Ford with blackened windows - tucked ourselves in the back seat, and rode hand-in-hand through the dimly-lit streets of Havana. Suddenly, a policeman leapt into our path and frantically waved down the jalopy. A man lay bleeding in the street. The policeman wanted to bundle him into the car and commandeer it for a trip to the hospital. "¡Ay, mi madre!" Mercedes exclaimed. She leaned forward and spoke through the driver's window. "¡No se puede! Soy Oyá". The policeman, a young black man, looked aghast, then waved us on and ran off to look for another car. "What did you tell him?" I asked, astounded. "I am not myself. I am Santa Teresa, patron saint of the dead," she replied. "If he had put that man in the car, I might have killed him".

I felt a chill run down my spine and pondered what my next few hours had in store in this unexpectedly haunting realm, full of eccentricity, eroticism and enigma. 🍷

A flamboyantly dressed *player* at Tropicana, the open-air cabaret that has been in continuous operation, under the stars, since 1939