



Foreword

When I first visited Cuba, in 1993, the cats had disappeared—eaten by starving Cubans begging for basic essentials! The island was in dire straits following the collapse of its benefactor, the Soviet Union—a grave situation made intolerably worse by a five-decade-old U.S. embargo that, shamefully, had just been tightened in hopes of causing Cuba’s collapse. Things were truly grim! There was no gasoline. No electricity. No tractors working the fields. No trucks to bring foodstuffs to cities in any case. Malnutrition, unknown since the 1959 Revolution, had reappeared. Despite which, the streets of Havana were pulsating with plaintive melodies of son and spontaneous evocations of sizzling salsa. I witnessed humbling examples of sharing, and a resilient community spirit born of Cubans’ capacity for endurance and their appreciation for the simple, and sensual, pleasures of life.

It was the first hint of why my affection for Cuba was instant. Despite the island’s terrible moment-in-time anguish, its stage-set exoticism combined with a uniquely surreal—and utterly intoxicating—complexity to invoke an exhilarating, life-changing feeling not unlike the heady dopamine-induced sensations of falling in love. I was hooked, and determined to make Cuba my personal and professional calling. Of

course, back then there were very few tourists: Cuba was years away from becoming today’s destination du jour. In 1996, I had the place to myself as I roamed more than 7,000 miles by motorcycle, touring the isle end to end. I was only 90 miles from the neon-lit malls and McDonalds of Florida, but I’d transported my BMW across an arcane threshold to discover an unexpectedly haunting realm full of eccentricity, eroticism, and enigma.

In many ways, Cuba has changed beyond recognition—and, economically, much for the better—since my first visit. The sharp edges and sinister shadows have softened. But it’s lost none of its irresistible and intangible aura. After almost two hundred visits and three decades of reporting on Cuba, the place is still under my skin. Today’s first-time visitors are no less bewitched by its mysterious Alice in Wonderland quality, full of adventure and promise. Step foot one time in Havana, and you can only succumb to its Delphic allure. It’s impossible to resist Cuba’s mysteries and contradictions. Walking its streets, you feel like you’re living inside a swoony novel or Hollywood thriller!

Even the armchair traveler knows the clichéd vision of Cuba as a place trapped in a 1950s time warp. The first impression is that

everything still looks so nostalgic. All the glamor of an abandoned movie set is there, patinaed by age. Not least, on every block “yank tanks” of yesteryear—Cadillacs, Buicks, and Chevy Impalas with fins sharp enough to draw blood—conjure up the decadent decades of martinis and mafiosi. They putter along beside Russian-made Ladas, dour 650cc Urals with sidecars and, in the countryside, Soviet tractors, and creaky wooden carts pulled by oxen. On a recent visit, I exited Havana’s José Martí Airport and hailed a 1950s cacharro taxi. The passenger door swung open, heavy on its creaking hinges, and in I jumped. We set off, the 1958 Dodge Coronet’s wedge-shaped tail fins slicing the hot air of Havana in May. I slid around on the well-worn, but still slick, vinyl covered bench-seat while the chauffeur shifted the gears with a push-button TorqueFlite selector. I cruised into Havana in, well... not quite land-yacht luxury, but enough late-’50s style to generate in me a sense of Twilight Zone incongruity that echoed Cuba’s singular and enchanting mystique.

A more inspirational setting for photography is hard to conceive... not least because the beguiling, caught-in-the-fifties setting is made more poignant by Cuba’s urban decay. Much of Havana—the sultry seductress of prerevolutionary days—is corroded and crumbling. Like the battered American automobiles that rumble down the streets to the beat of reggaeton on the radio, many timeworn edifices are held up by makeshift wooden braces and look ready at any moment to collapse onto the rusting relics of Eisenhower-era ostentation sure to be parked outside.

With all the hoopla about the dishevelment and pathos and “poverty” (you want true poverty, then travel to Haiti or Jamaica, or back in time to pre-revolutionary Cuba), it’s easy to overlook the physical beauty of the place: The talcum beaches and bathtub-warm seas the colors of peacock feathers; the bottle-green mountains and

valleys with waterfalls tumbling to jade-colored pools. Its landscapes are soft and calming, epitomized by chartreuse cane fields undulating like a great, swelling sea. Royal palms are everywhere, towering over the countryside like columns of petrified light. And then there’s Viñales, a two-hour journey west of Havana, where mogotes—sheer, freestanding knolls the size of skyscrapers—loom over a broad valley suffused with the sunlit softness of Pissarro.

What these travel brochure and influencer blogpost images fail to capture is the beauty and uplifting spirit of the Cubans themselves. Their revolutionary spirit. Their enviable value system that lays little store by capitalist consumerism (although that is changing). Their pride and dignity. Their non-judgmental treatment of others; the gracious welcome they give to all human beings.

“Why does your government not like us? They are too hard on us Cubans!” a Cuban lady once scolded before kissing my cheek and thrusting a bag of ripe tomatoes into my hand. It’s the same all over the island. Cubans—yes, even loyal Communists—you’ve met only moments before embrace you, call you amigo, and invite you into their homes. Rum and beer are passed around. The music is fired up until hot enough to cook the pork. Friends and neighbors arrive. Hands are extended. You’re hugged warmly by Cubans you do not know. It’s hard to believe that the US government’s Trading with the Enemy Act is directed at these genteel and generous people. How often have I laughed, even cried, dancing cheek to cheek with the “enemy”?

Appropriately, award-winning photographer Jeremy Woodhouse’s gorgeous new coffee-table book, *Cuba Through My Lens*, opens with a double-page spread of five joyful schoolgirls. Laughing. Smiling. Full of cheer. That’s Cuba! Although several dozen coffee-table books on Cuba have been released in recent years, few portray the gritty character of the isle and its remarkable people with the deeply caring sensitivity

expressed by Woodhouse’s hauntingly beautiful treatment. Whether it’s of wizened elders posing serenely in their sillones (rocking chairs), or tobacco farmers gilded in the golden hour of sunset, or buses teeming with passengers beaming into his camera, Woodhouse’s photo-journalistic imagery captures the tender side of Cuba’s proud and dignified culture.

Woodhouse made his first trip to Cuba in 2004 and, like myself, fell instantly under the island’s spell. He’s returned many times since to document this idiosyncratic and spellbinding country. “The fact that I speak some Spanish is a passport into the Cubans’ homes and into their lives,” he reflects. “I’m not good at expounding in words on the ‘human condition,’ as so many ‘humanitarian’ photographers seem to do. I try to let my pictures tell the story and let people draw their own conclusions.”

Cuba Through My Lens offers approximately 200 color and black-and-white illustrations that speak eloquently of life in contemporary Cuba. They’re also cleverly curated and paired or grouped by theme. Children playing in the waves splashing over the seafront Malecón boulevard... Identical twins with arms draped over each other’s shoulder... Quinceañeras in sweetheart ball gowns beaming like Cinderella on her way to the ball... Freckled youngsters self-confidently staring into the lens. Inordinately warm and passionate people, making do and rejoicing despite hardship and struggle, wringing pleasure out of their paucity.

Thankfully, Woodhouse presents a vision beyond the trite tourist cliché. You won’t find brochure-style images of Pepto-Bismol-pink classic cars preening for visitor rental. Nor the gentrified Beaux Arts, Art Deco and Modernist manses that now serve as private restaurants and boutique hotels. Nor the world-famous Tropicana nightclub, the open-air cabaret extravaganza now in its eighth decade of high-kicking

stiletto-heeled paganism. No photos, either, of the lovingly restored cobbled colonial plazas of Camagüey, Trinidad, or Habana Vieja (Old Havana)—all UNESCO World Heritage Cities containing collectively perhaps the finest collection of Spanish colonial buildings in all the Americas.

Instead, Woodhouse pushes the envelope in search of poetic and emotionally charged images that spark the psyche. His dramatic cityscapes and landscapes hone in on a narrative. His portraits and street photography evoke their own nostalgic and seductive response, piquing subconscious analysis about the emotional, social, and cultural complexities of contemporary Cuba. In so doing, he awakens the viewers’ sensibilities to the gentle beauty of a gritty place. You can almost smell the air scented by mimosa and mildew as you study the faded murals stained by the grime of centuries soldered into façades by the tropical heat and humidity. You can hear the clack of the dominoes and the laughter, and the creak of jealousies on rusted hinges as a cooling breeze sweeps in from the sea. You can sense faintly the tawdry demimonde lingering in the air like the intoxicating aroma of añejo rum; and, more strongly, the pride—always the pride!—of a passionate and lovable people.

The sum is a visual study that offers a paean to the extraordinary Cubans who face their tough realities with resourcefulness, ingenuity and indefatigable good humor.

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