**Habana, Cuba
June 23-29, 2015**

Many of you have maybe been waiting on bated breath for this write up, lol, so I will do my best to give you an insight into our 7 days in Cuba. It is not an easy task since there is just so much that happens on these trips, it is really impossible to give you an accurate feel. You might just have to go on our next Cuba trip ;)

So, first let us establish the difference between traveling to Cuba with the BBP and traveling with other organizations. Unique experiences and flexibility. Travel to Cuba for Americans is not set up to be flexible. Through good relationships in Cuba though, we are able to offer a flexibility which provides the opportunity to really explore the country in much deeper way than with a regular tourist organization. So, let’s get started.

**Day 1 – Tuesday Miami, FL: USA to Habana, Cuba**6:00am meet-up….sooo early! Luckily, although I am not a morning person, most everyone else was, so most arrived in great spirits and ready to go! Then again, we were headed to Cuba so, WooHoo!!! After meeting and greeting, getting our paperwork taken care of, checking in with the charter and getting some much needed coffee, we were on our way.

We arrived in Havana, enjoyed our first sips of Cuban rum in the VIP lounge and once we all had our luggage we were off to the historic Hotel Nacional. We were in luck as we were early and rooms are normally not available that early but, our Cuban guide Martin worked his magic and made it happen. So, after enjoying our welcome mojito we were free until we met for dinner that night. Before we all got our room keys however, on the beautiful outside grounds of the Nacional, while some waited in the magnificent Bar of Fame, adventurous Jan had a small fall. She was shaken up and busted her lip but handled it so well. She looked like the winner in a fight. She visited the nurse who took good care of her and followed up to make sure she was doing well. This was our 1st experience with medical staff in Cuba.

**Day 2 – Wednesday- Havana, Cuba**Today was a loaded day. We got to see a lot of Old Havana. It included a lot of history and cool stops along the way. We also got to see a Venezuelan Navy ship that had arrived early that morning, which might not sound like a big deal, but, there just really aren’t many boats to speak of in Cuba ;) We visited several of the more renowned plazas and landmarks and had a few tours. Among them were the Havana Club Rum Museum where we got to do a little rum sampling. Another great stop was the “camara obscura”. Now, we had several in our group that had braces, boots, bad knees. They were troopers all the way, through all the walking we had to do, so some opted to have a drink while we climbed up, since the elevator was broken. I can’t remember how many stories it was because after about 4 flights I stopped counting as I was just trying to catch my breath. The view from the top was spectacular and once you’re inside the small dark chamber, it’s quite incredible all that you can see. There are only 24 such chambers in the world.
One of our younger world travelers, Morgan, had his own show going on. What started as a photo op when his Mom asked if he could hold the guitar and just play it a little for some pictures, turned into a small local concert of sorts. At one point some of the people walking by, tourists and locals alike, stopped by to watch and listen to this very obviously not local kid, just rockin the guitar with the locals.

That night for dinner we all gathered outside to welcome in unison, our pretty sweet rides. The beautifully maintained convertible classics came down the line in runway fashion, for a door to door service to La Guarida. The building that houses La Guarida also has a pretty new bar that is like nothing most of us had ever seen, even those that live in swanky San Fran and L.A. I would tell you more about it, but we want to keep it a secret ;) But seriously, talk about one of the best rooftop views ever! And at night, it was nothing short of spectacular!

**Day 3 – Thursday- Havana, Cuba**
This morning we had a pretty special treat; we got to visit a working tobacco factory. It’s not something that a ton of visitors get to do because of its high level security restrictions. No pictures or video are allowed in the facility. That being said, there’s always one. You know, the one person in the group who does the stuff they’re not supposed to but they are so good at having that loveable streak that they get away with it and even come out on top..…..yup. After we figured out that the person leading us through was in on it, all was good. So, some may or may not have exited the building with a souvenir or two. Then it was on to Hemmingway’s finca Vigia in Cojimar which is now a government owned preserved museum. It is not difficult to understand why Hemmingway loved it there so much. The home gives an insight into the gregarious and interesting man that Hemmingway was, down to his obsession with his weight and his love of hunting. We got to see Pilar (his boat) and taste the yummy Guararon that was said to be his favorite drink while there.

After a very tasty lunch is was on to our private Salsa lessons. We went to the same studio that we used back in October and it was once again, a blast. Joey held down the fort on the couch while everyone else shook up the fort with their sweet Salsa moves ;) This already exciting and exhilarating day out and about ended with a visit to a dance company, complete with an awesome percussion presentation! It must be said; the girls in this dance company kicked butt! Props to them!! That night’s dinner was at the Decameron, a wonderfully decorated paladar where the food was top notch! Might have been the best meal of the trip; It’s a must visit! We traveled in style that night and in what might have been the most fun ride of the trip: in Coco taxis!!

So, remember Jan who had a small fall on arrival day. Well, the nurse had called to check up on her and when they arrived back from their long day, she had a bottle of champagne waiting in her room! Talk about follow-up!

**Day 4 – Friday- Havana, Cuba**Today most slept in, had a leisurely breakfast and took advantage of the flexible schedule provided by the guide, to explore Cuba. Some took the historic tour of the Hotel Nacional including a walk through the belowground bunkers. Others took the day to visit the Cuban hand craft market places and treat their palates to the local cuisine while others took the day to explore the nooks and crannies in Old Havana that they wanted more time in. Most came together in the evening to enjoy dinner and a show. The Cabaret Parisiene show “Cubano, Cubano”. Here is where things took a small turn. A couple people didn’t show up for dinner because something they had eaten had not settled well. Nothing too new; that has happened before.

**Day 5 - Saturday – Would be busy day turned recupe-day**Time: About 12:30am. The show ended and all were pretty spent from a long day of exploring and trying new things while out and about. Me personally, I called it a night as my stomach felt a bit queasy and we had an early and busy day coming up.

Time: Approximately 2:00am. After tossing and turning since going to bed I finally gave in to the feeling and allowed my body to reject the contents in my stomach. Once the first wave was over my first thought was that I normally have a stomach of steel and something must have been wrong with something I ate. My second thought was “crap, I better call the general manager and ask him to make sure there was nothing wrong with the food”. Third thought was “I SO hope no one else is sick”. After another trip to the porcelain bowl and a conversation with the General Manager I got the call that started it all. Jodi, the mom of 2 awesome teenage boys called me and said her youngest son had been up vomiting and that after calling the nurse she was taking him to the clinic; they indicated he was severely dehydrated. Then came the next call. After a few more hours, a few more conversations with the hotel on-call nurse, calls to all our people, and a quickly growing list of all who were sick, I called our Cuban guide and together we started seeing about changing our activities for the next day as it was clear the majority of us were going nowhere that day. After getting up to get some toast in my stomach, coordinating visits for all of our under-the-weather people with the hotel nurse and doctor and getting a visit myself, I crawled into bed and slept for the next few hours, thanks to the anti-vomiting shot we got and the prescription grade motrin for the fever, aches and pains. Some of our more tolerant people made it out to the beach that day while others laid low helping to nurse the sickies back to health. That night, a descent sized group of us went to dinner. We stuck to pretty unadventurous food and called it an early night. The restaurant and their staff were so accommodating to our needs after the night and day we’d had.

I must do a shout out to Jodi, who having read all the information we sent out on the trip and then some, was SUPER prepared. She had crackers, protein bars, medicine….she was a lifesaver to me and several others. Also, my sister was amazing. With my being down in the dumps that day, she jumped right in and did what I couldn’t do. I AM the older sister, so I tend to be type A and kind of bossy, but she was so understanding. Plus she took care of me and never complained ☺ So, I’m sure you are all wondering what the verdict was, as we were. After a conversation with the general manager, the nurse and both hotel and independent doctors, nothing came back consistent for food poisoning but for severe dehydration. After some deliberation amongst ourselves, talking about the busy and hot days we had, it made sense. At dinner that night some were wondering how we would finish all the champagne, if we all got the same follow up that Jan did!

**Day 6 – Modern Havana**So, nothing lost. We were able to move everything we had scheduled, to today**.** Yess!And the best part, everyone was feeling just about as good as new ☺So, Revolution Square was first. A pretty neat square surrounded by all the main government buildings that Castro wanted at the ready and away from the center of the city. While we were there, a few classic cars in pristine condition drove up. For many, our stop at the Revolution Square became another opportunity to oooh and aaaah at these beautiful machines.
Upon departure from the square we headed to Jose Fuster’s house. Fuster is a Cuban artist with a very unique style who has and continues to use his art as a form of beautification for his and other communities. His entire home is an expression of his art and is quite something. On our route to Fuster’s home, our Cuban guide Martin, gave us as much of a tour as possible through the 5th Avenue (Quinta Avenida) in Miramar, where many of the foreign embassies are located as well as the International School of Havana, where most diplomat’s children attend school. Before the revolution it was home to much of Havana’s upper crust as there are many large homes and mansions however now it mostly belongs to the government.

After visiting Fuster’s house it was time for lunch. We were set to visit china town but we decided to eat elsewhere, still trying to stay pretty safe on the food side. But, back to China town…..so, all I will say is that if you ever make it to Cuba, you can skip this “community”. Everyone joked how you might miss it if you blinked and even if you kept your eyes open and looked really hard, you would be hard pressed to find any Chinese people! It was pretty sad; Cuban Chinatown is not much to speak of present day. So, we went to a local brewery for lunch. Yup, local brewery, right next to the water and the marketplace. The atmosphere was great and they have those long cylindrical glass containers with the ice in the middle and the spout on the bottom…..like the ones in Mexico. Apparently they do Karaoke there on some nights; definitely a must-visit. That night was our farewell dinner and we chose to close at La California and we took our last ride as a group in the beautiful Classics.

**Day 7 – Havana, Cuba to Miami, FL**
This morning some went out for a some last minute shopping and touring. Other’s just enjoyed the grounds of the Nacional which are worth exploring. I went and made a visit to our prior tour guide who is having a baby and was due any minute! Then, it was off to the airport. The VIP lounge provided a nice place to hang out and talk about the week we had just experienced.

We made a little pit stop on our way to Miami, as Miami was closed due to weather. So, we got a couple more hours to chat and of course, all our pilots immediately brought up all their electronics to look at weather and any and every piece of information they could about our current weather situation! Lol! But, a couple hours later we were on our way to Miami. So, we woke up in Cuba and we went to bed in Miami. Long day, but, fun ☺ Some of our people stayed at the Sofitel hotel in Miami and apparently some of the people from Premios Latinos ( I think that was the awards show) were there so their party continued. Some went on to catch connecting flights and the rest of us had departures the next morning so our beds were calling our names!

Had such a great time with everyone. We had ladies-man Virgil who probably had a dozen numbers by the time the trip was over. We had some great couples on this trip where the men were true gentlemen and treated their ladies like the queens they are. We had ladies that brought sass, spice and class. We had two teenage boys who are some of the best travelers I’ve ever met. We had Ricky our world traveler by profession and, my wonderful sister Vanessa who of course, I was elated was able to join the trip ☺ Everyone was so different, bringing something unique to the dynamics of the group but melded together so well. It was a pleasure and an honor discovering Cuba with them all.

To check out our growing picture album for the trip, visit us on Flickr ☺

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