

View from Castillo de San Pedro de la Roco
(El Morrow Fort)

Chai Missions

(Exclusive Expeditions is a division of
CHAI Missions)

Travel Journal - March 2015

The trip to Cuba begins...



Parque Cespedes at night

Gathering Day - March 5

Miami, Florida

"We all gathered for our "union" meeting and light supper. I could see that we were all so very interesting - each one of us - and different, but the same..."

Lots of great and interesting stories and people - and their lives - strangers became friends - we all look forward to our trip ahead. So much curiosity about this country tucked into our lovely Caribbean - traveling to islands "all around" Cuba. And now we are going!! We can't wait for all the history, people, contacts, food and Cuba Libres! and cars! - off to sleep.



Quaint Santiago de Cuba

Day 1, March 6 - Miami to Santiago de Cuba

Early rise (0400) - bus to airport - check in - TSA- finally, a lovely jet to Santiago, Cuba.

For me, a special day as Randi called me over to introduce me to Ed Trippe, traveling with a Pan American Heritage group. WOW! What a great terrific feeling and so special! Juan Trippe's son, Ed. Juan Trippe was the founder of *Pan American!* He rests in Rock Sound, Eleuthera, where I wanted to go. Ed's wife said, "The house is still there and been renovated." How lucky for me that we ran into the group that Jason and I would have been on had we not signed on to Chai Missions! I knew several of the former "stewardesses." A reunion at Gate F-12! I loved the feeling of connection and still meeting people traveling. One stewardess and I laughed as we exited the aircraft bathroom. "Did you wipe the sink?" "Yup." I always wipe the sink out to be tidy. Some things never change!

Santiago de Cuba, Cuba's second largest city (pop. 443,000) is located on the far east side of the island. Founded in 1515, by Diego Veracruz, it was the site of heavy fighting during the Wars of Independence.

We met Manny, our wonderful, knowledgeable guide and were excited to begin our tour...we all settled on the bus and enjoyed our first stop, the beautiful **Cementerio Santa Ifigenia**. It was hot but we drank water on the bus to HYDRATE!

Next, a wonderful lunch with fun conversations on the patio at **Zun Zun** and lovely music by a pair of charming twin musicians! We all got photos of them! Everyone is comfortable with each other. A little more business of the day and rest at our Melia Hotel. A bit surprised! The rooms were very nice, grounds lovely - a large operation.

Off to **Shul** and the local Jewish community. Such fun - and I love the experience of a new country with so much history. Changing even more now -and in the future...

The experience at the Shabbat Services with the Jewish Community of Santiago de Cuba was overwhelming! It was tucked in amongst the local people and their homes, stacked



First Stop: The beautiful
Cementerio Santa Ifigenia



Shabbat with the Jewish Community
of Santiago de Cuba



El Morro Fort

together - a beautiful, warm synagogue. The service was “the same,” everyone was involved. For me, it was a beautiful moment when Jason said Yahrzeit for his Mom, with the community. I could tell he was emotionally involved and so happy to do that within this service.

They welcomed us with a lovely oneg - generous and proud. We all enjoyed meeting the small community, babies and young adults and the leaders...off to dinner.

Day 2, March 7 - Santiago

After breakfast buffet in Hotel Melia the group met at 9 am in the hotel lobby. Greetings from Manny, our wonderful, knowledgeable guide, who announces a surprise for the group. Our first stop is unexpected: **San Juan Hill Memorial to the Cuban/American War** where we view statues of both a Cuban and an American soldier.



Juxtaposition of ferris wheel and cannon

Next, we visit **Castillo de San Pedro de la Roco, also known as El Morro Fort** built in 1638. The outcome of the U.S. victory over the Spanish fleet in August 1898 took place in the bay. It was also here that Castro launched his ill-fated assault on the Moncada barracks in 1953 and suffered great losses to Batista’s forces. During the “Cuban/Spanish/American War,” corcairs came out of the inlet bay and American ships outside captured all but two ships. Those two ships chased the Americans. Shortly after, one ship was captured; it was more difficult to capture the second ship. In the end, the American fleet took Santiago. Fifty years later, the Castro Revolution occurred.

(There was a charge of 5 CUC to take a photo of the fort.)

Our second stop was the **Museo Ambiente Colonial Cubano**, dating from 1522, which was originally a trading house and gold foundry. Our guide, Jorge Jordan, was very knowledgeable and passionate about Cuba and art. The wood pieces are all handmade of hardwoods that were most likely alive for centuries and heavy and ornate wire.

While on the tour, the bus drove us through neighborhoods with doors and windows were ajar. We could see amazing pieces of furniture in homes of all sizes. The hand carving is extraordinary. Elaborate carving and high standards mean that one mistake



Chai guide gets locked up!



Resting in Plaza Cespedes

deems a door ruined. “Must” sees included: artwork from China, Spain and other countries.

(Again, 5 CUC charge to take pictures.)

Lunch was served at **El Morro**, with an awesome view of the Bay of Santiago and the El Morrow Fort. On our visit to the **Plaza Cespedes**, the site of Fidel’s first speech after his 1959 overthrow of Dictator Batista, we interacted with very nice vendors along the path. They love to make deals for their goods, which are mostly created from the many great Cubano woods.



Casa Diego Velazquez Museum

Discussion items of interest:

Education - preschool thru university and lifelong is FREE...65% of women attend universities. University education consists of five years - except for doctors who attend six years. During the second year of university students test and decide if they will continue on with their education or choose another profession.

Yep, college is free, as is **health care**. People with disabilities are cared for for free in state run institutions.

Abortion - free and legal to women 18 years and older. Under 18, mother must sign approval prior to procedure.

Equal wages for equal jobs.

Divorce - Mom automatically gets custody and father pays percentage of salary to mother for their care.

Income Tax - None, worker are paid cash with nothing withdrawn.



Dancing on the 19th floor of the Larof Hotel

Dinner at **Melia Santiago de Cuba** (our hotel), which was very nice. Reservations for tables of more than 5 are recommended. The evening consisted of Flamenco music and dancing at the top nightclub located in the **Larof Hotel**. About fifteen of us danced and danced with the entertainers. *Very Cubano!*



Welcome to Guantanamo!

Day 3 - March 8

Guantanamo



Guantanamo window art



Guantanamo baby captures our attention



Sharing lunch with Guantanamo community



Teens dance for us



Mutual admiration

“Compared to Santiago, Havana is wealthier and more cars are seen here.”



Anyone interested in a shoe swap?

“Our guide was a very well educated man who was married and had a child. He has to work two-plus jobs to make ends meet.”

Day 4, March 9 - Havana

Another early day - bags out and breakfast at 6 am so we can be out the door on the way to the airport at 6:30 for our 8:30 flight. Breakfast not quite as planned - ham and cheese sandwiches not ideal for our Jewish tour group, but some pastries arrive just in time!

Cuban airport check-in is “leisurely” - but they aren’t going to leave without us. Our plane is a Russian Antonov 158 - kind of squat and stubby, but it gets us to Havana. Beverage service goes quickly when your choices are limited to water or black coffee!

Once off the plane, we wait for and grab our luggage, but there’s a snag: the bus had mechanical problems so we pile into taxis (unfortunately the cool, unique models) for the ride to the hotel. The **Melia Cohiba** is larger and perhaps newer than the Melia in Santiago. Since we’re still waiting for the bus and the rooms aren’t ready, **Chai Missions** treats us to a drink in the lobby bar.

Some of us explore and some of us make our first purchases in Havana. No problem, since we arrived in Havana earlier than originally planned - *and, hey! - we’re on vacation!*

We grab more taxis to the saladar for lunch. **La Moraleja** is beautiful with a lovely walk into the charming restaurant. We’re in a private room. We were delighted with lovely table, consisting of beautiful mis-matched china place settings, and perhaps the best meal of the trip, so far. Served family-style, the fish, lobster, and lamb dishes were delicious. Don’t miss the ropas viejas! Plus, Manny treated us to an extra drink to make up for the morning’s inconvenience. *Good times!*

After sustenance, it’s time for some substance, so we get on the (finally arrived) bus and are on our way to the **Sephardic Synagogue**. Such a contrast between this facility and the two souls in Santiago and Guantanamo. The congregation is larger, approximately 50 families. There is no rabbi, of course, but the congregants lead services and conduct B’nai Mitzvoth. Again, it strikes me how similar Jewish life looks regardless of where it is and how humble or grand the sanctuary, an ark, a net amid, some tallit - it’s the same ingredients wherever you go.



Our Holocaust survivors offer tzedakah to Havana's Sephardic Community

“To my mind, the fact that the Jewish community can continue, despite the large number of interfaith marriages (what else can be expected with so few Jews?), is a triumph for Judaism. These families, and their children, remain affiliated with the Jewish community

We have a gracious welcome from Mayra Levy, President of the Sephardic Synagogue, who tells us that at one time, after WWII and the flight of the Jews from Eastern Europe, the Jewish population of Cuba reached a total of 15,000 people. Now, after the revolution in 1959 and the exodus of Jews from Cuba, the population stands at about 900. Most Jews intermarried, many of them from families where the mother was not a Jew, or not a converted Jew by Orthodox standards. Hence, the break with Chabad, which excluded huge numbers of the Cuban Jewish community from its activities since they did not meet Orthodox standards.

After speaking with Mayra, we visit the senior center area to see a Holocaust exhibit with information from the Weisenthal Center. The information includes Cuba's role in the WWII era - its acceptance of immigrants fleeing the Nazis. Even those who were not permitted to stay permanently were allowed temporary entry and safety.

The most interesting part of the exhibit (for me) was focused on the Cuban Revolution and why Jews stayed after the revolution in 1959. According to the exhibition, 4 of the thirteen participants at the founding of the Cuban Communist Party (1925) were Jewish, and, after the revolution (1959), some Jews saw the revolution as similar to the Kibbutz movement - a desire to live in community so that all would be equal. Sadly, that hope wasn't realized and the 10% of Jews who remained, for whatever reason, were subject to the same deprivations as their non-Jewish countrymen. It is amazing how Judaism persevered through those difficult times.

The Hotel Nacional is exactly what you imagine of Old Havana. It's a stately, colonial hotel with Caribbean/Spanish touches. We ate at **La Barraca**, an open air restaurant in the backyard of the hotel near the sea. Peacocks were strutting outside the restaurant and calling for their mates. We ate another family-style meal and ropas viejas (one of the better examples). The guava dessert was served in small rustic clay bowls inscribed with the name of the restaurant, “La Barraca.”

After dinner, we had a little time to explore the hotel before loading our bus. We studied the dark wood and tiles and photos of celebrities popular in the 1930's, 40's and 50's were hung in the



Cubans are such friendly people!

“One observation...people throughout Cuba that we have encountered have been so charming and kind. It was interesting, however, to see a somewhat different attitude from Ayelet, the curator at the Museo de Belles Artes. She was generous with her time and shared her extensive knowledge with us, which we appreciated. I hope she was aware how much we learned from her and appreciated her tour.”

bar, along with a narrative of the U.S. Mafia’s history of introducing casino gambling to Cuba in the 40’s which described the role of “the Jew, Meyer Lansky,” in the development of gambling in Cuba. While there may not be anti-semitism in Castro’s Cuba, they still paid attention to who was Jewish and who was not, at least at the time that the exhibit was created.

Day 5, March 10 - Havana

We began the day with a tour of the **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes**. Our tour guide was Ayelet, a Sephardic Jewish woman who is a curator. She gave us a wonderful overview of Cuba’s art history, including the words of the only Jewish artist in the museum. She told us not to worry about trying to understand Cuba - its politics, economy and society are surreal and even she doesn’t understand it. She also brought out the idea that the Revolution had positive implications for the people: art schools became available to everyone on the island for free. Cuba isn’t filled with an abundance of super-talented people, just lots of people with the opportunity to learn about and to be trained in art.

The collection was very extensive and included an interesting collection of “political” art that the museum bought post-revolution, even though it couldn’t be displayed. It was a wonderful overview of Cuban art!

On to Old Havana and our walking tour. We saw beautiful renovated buildings from the 1800s and earlier, including the magnificent **Hotel Raquel**. We started at the beautiful **Plaza de San Francisco** by Havana Bay and will return for our farewell dinner. The restored buildings were remarkably beautiful with grillwork on the upper levels which is reminiscent of Spain, France and New Orleans. Some buildings in the midst of being restored had incredible recently uncovered wall paintings and we saw what Havana must have been like in its heyday.

A highlight for me was seeing the exterior and interior of Hotel Raquel. The building was built in 1902 as a home for one family and I think Manny told us there were stores on the bottom level. It was taken by the government due to the Revolution and was closed until approximately 10 years ago when it was restored and opened as a hotel. Because the area around Hotel Raquel was the



Cubans teach us to make coffee

Jewish quarter (i.e., where many Jews lived) it was decided that the interior would be a tribute to the Jews. On the ground floor the restaurant has beautiful stained glass dividers with Stars of David and menorahs as decorations. There is a store with some Jewish items and there are several monuments, including a stone from Europe as a memorial to the Holocaust and a statue described as being Moses being saved by Pharaoh's sister. On the second level each hotel room has a mezuzah (there is also a mezuzah at the entrance to the hotel) and is named after a Jewish prophet or one of the twelve tribes. I was delighted to find two adjoining rooms that had a lot of meaning for me - Benjamin (my grandfather) was next to Ruben (my father). The wall art was all Judaica-related and the upper level was covered by a magnificent stained glass skylight. This is one of the most delightful hotels I have been in, probably because of its location.

Lunch at **La Domenica Restaurant** was a very welcome break from standard Cuban fare. As a state-run restaurant my expectations were low, but the pizza was great, service was very good and we got to sit down for a while. We also visited a Cathedral and the **Cathedral Plaza** with its highly decorated buildings on all sides of the plaza. Our visit to the **Crafts Mercado, in Almacenes San Jose**, was a fun time to pick up some crafts, t-shirts, dominoes, art, masks, wooden jewelry, etc., etc.



Adela Dworin thanks us for the Passover Macarons

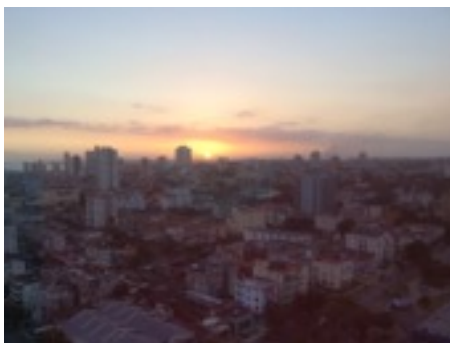
Another highlight of the day was the time spent at **El Patronato**. The building's gate, and front doors to the Synagogue show how magnificent the original Synagogue and community center must have been. Although the main entrance and half of the building were lost to the State when the mortgage couldn't be paid, the community appears to make good use of its facilities and provide extensive services to the children in the community and the 900 members.

Adela, the President of the Havana Jewish Community, is a dynamo and her enthusiasm must have kept spirits alive in this community. She has an incredible sense of humor along with a belief that things will get better. What an inspiration she must be to so many people here, as well as around the world. After seeing the pharmacy in the Center, I understood more clearly why certain medicines are not always available and how great the need



Cube Libre!

“By the way, we highly recommend Anejo Rum. We drank it on the rocks for the first time - but not the last, at the Larof Hotel nightclub. Mojitos are also very good everywhere, but the very, very best was at the Sheraton Airport Hotel in Miami!”



Sunrise in Havana

is to provide these meds, medical supplies, etc. Fortunately, we will have the chance to leave some meds here before we leave Havana.

Lovely dinner at the paladar on the fifth floor of an apartment building. It is interesting to compare this private restaurant with the state-run restaurant where we had lunch. Both offered fairly similar experiences today. After dinner, seven of us went to spend a delightful evening watching the Buena Vista Social Club-like concert. My shoulders couldn't stop moving to the music!

Day 6, March 11 - Havana

First thing on our day's agenda was a lecture by Maritza Corrales, notable historian of the Jews and Cuba, an amazing woman who kept us spellbound for over an hour with her knowledge. Then the questions started and it was difficult to stop. Maritza's personal history was especially impressive and included meeting several heads of state from countries such as Israel and Cuba.

Next we went to a cigar factory where we observed the process of cigar-making...starting with the sorting of leaves, removal of veins from the leaves, to the finished product. Watching the workers roll the cigars, cut and glue the ends was fascinating. Some of the workers' families have worked there for generations. Each day they can take home four cigars for free, but some take more. They receive a free lunch each day. The wages are very low in the cigar factory. We bought cigars in a cigar store, which was another learning experience!

Lunch followed at a lovely restaurant called **La Fernina**. We ate in a large patio with musicians serenading us. In addition to juice and salad, we dined on beef, chicken and vegetable shish-k-bobs - something different than we've been served before. We ended the meal with flan. This restaurant had been a private home/restaurant, but was taken over by the state.

What a surprise awaited us as we boarded the bus and drove to Jose Rodriguez Fuster's home/studio, which is like a mosaic Disneyland: full of colors, sculptures and walkways to walk and climb. He was definitely influenced by Gaudi's work in Barcelona, Spain. Lots of photos were taken and memorable tiles purchased. The evening consisted of dinner at leisure plus a Chai Mission treat of listening to the band playing in the **Habana Cafe** at the



Dinner with friends at Paladar Vista Mar

hotel. What wonderful musicians! And the cafe had a few old cars in it and the placemats were full of pictures of vintage American cars. Cuba is like going back in time.

Day 7, March 12 - Havana

Our first stop was at the Christ statue overlooking Havana and Havana Bay. We met Fidel Castro who helped us take pictures of each other. There was a small craft market where some of us purchased small trinkets. **The Che Guevara Museum** was across the street, as was the beautiful **Civil Defense monument**.

Then we toured the **United Hebrew Congregation Cemetery**, which has the history of the Jewish (Ashkenazi) community. The very rich and the very poor are buried there. The grave of a Korean War soldier is there as well as Fidel Castro's personal pilot. The pilot was buried there in 1961, with his mother, father and children. His children buried his wife there with him after her death along with a plaque commemorating his piloting exploits. We had the opportunity to look at the book of all those buried at the cemetery. At the Holocaust Memorial, the first in the western hemisphere, we participated in a moving ceremony.

At the "frozen-in-time" Hemingway Estate, "**Finca La Viglia**," where lots of people were looking through the doorways and windows. Hemingway used a Royal Typewriter and stood to write his books. His formerly beautiful pool stood empty, his boat "The Pliar," served as a great prop for photos, and there were lots of crafts and Hemingway memorabilia available for purchase.

The last stop of our day was **Ajiaco Cuban Restaurant**, where we were served delicious peasant soup, vegetables, and meat mixed with filling along with the usual fare of rice, beans, chicken, pulled meat and fish. Mojitos and flan were served at the beginning and the end of the meal. We wrote our names on the wall as a permanent reminder that we and Chai Missions had been there. The staff was introduced to us and we gave them a round of applause in appreciation. On the way back to the hotel, people got off at **Sloppy Joe's Bar** and the gift market. Tonight is our farewell dinner and tomorrow we head to the airport and then home.



Last stop: Sloppy Joe's Bar and the gift market!