

A CUBAN ADVENTURE

featuring Mirren Gidda



Mirren Gidda

Mirren took her exams this summer and her success meant that she was able to take up the offer from University College London to read English. She has now moved out of the Suburb during term time and lives in a Hall of Residence in Camden. Between exams and University she travelled with a friend to Cuba.

During the dark and wintery days of April 2011, I found myself slumped before my desk piled high with coursework, revision and past papers which seemed to multiply every day. What was I to do? I had already spent half the morning on Facebook and the other half making tea, plainly my usual methods of procrastination were exhausted and so I chanced upon the excellent strategy of booking a holiday. Inspiration flooded in from the most unlikely of sources: "heat!" I declared glancing at the rain outside, "beaches!" I shouted plucking at my three jumpers, "cars!" I exclaimed as a traffic warden across the road cheerfully wrote out a ticket and then glancing at my Cold War textbook I cried out, "Cuba!"

We fast forward now to late August and clutching my backpack, boarding pass and best friend I clambered aboard my Virgin plane positively giddy with excitement. Of course, as with all flights, this lasted for a few minutes. Wedged into seats sticky with chewing gum and next to the toilets it became a 9 hour flight from hell accompanied by the dreaded sound of a baby experiencing cabin pressure. Exhausted and disorientated we touched down at Jose Marti airport in Havana, yet we weren't to witness Havana until the next day owing to us having booked our first night in a local suburb (I stay true to my roots). In true backpacker style we decided to travel into Havana on a local bus but language limitations and intense overcrowding made that impossible. Settling for a 1950s car we rolled into Havana blasting out samba music and experiencing the joy of a car without suspension.

For those who haven't ventured into Cuba, Havana has to be its most incredible city, and I say that having travelled the length of the island. Unlike most other capitals there's no sign of crass commercialism; no billboards or flashing lights or gaudy adverts. Instead its wide boulevards are decorated with propaganda declaring 'Viva Fidel!' 'Viva la Revolucion!' and of course 'Hasta la Victoria Siempre!'. Havana is also beautiful, with both Centro Habana and Habana Vieja exhibiting pristine squares and buildings of magnificence and splendour that wouldn't seem out of place in Barcelona. We were staying in a casa particular (the Spanish term for a Cuban's home) which is perfectly legal and a vital way for many Cubans across the island to earn money. Casa particulares were one of the best things about Cuba, not only do you have the opportunity to soak up Cuban life but the houses are often old colonial buildings with soaring ceilings, stunning terraces and patios filled with plants. The owners were always welcoming and often the best food we had was in their homes, for £20 a night for two people it was an infinitely better option than the state run hotels so desperately in need of updating and better service.

Yet not all homes were of this calibre, venturing into the residential streets sometimes only a few minutes walk from five star hotels we witnessed buildings with no windows and collapsed walls, sewage in the streets, people sitting around with nothing to do and nowhere to go and the ever present Cuban dogs who are seen as pests and treated as such. These scenes were to plague us throughout our trip, and although they provided the richest insight into Cuban life and were forever interesting, it brought home the realisation that the socialist dream had failed. Nowhere was this more evident than in Cienfuegos where we stayed in a casa with a swimming pool, king sized beds, welcome mojitos (a mint cocktail) and an army of staff whilst the owner, collagen enhanced and manicured made calls on her iphone. Certainly all the children were in school and everyone has access to Cuba's healthcare system,

considered one of the best in Latin America and the Caribbean, yet as a Brazilian couple pointed out to us, that doesn't make it socialist. After all how can a country be said to be so when doctors earn less than taxi drivers and there is a very clear rich/poor divide between those who work with tourists and those who do not.

It became incredibly frustrating as we travelled around Cuba to be met time and time again with this problem. As foreigners we were spending Cuban convertibles, a coin worth twenty four Cuban pesos. This tourist currency is very difficult for the Cubans to come by unless they earn it through working with tourists. These people as a result can afford to live comfortably whilst the vast majority struggle with dwindling rations and strict government taxes. One farmer explained that he gives 90% of all he harvests to the government whilst workers in a cigar factory were earning the equivalent of half a Montecristo cigar a month.

But the political situation isn't all doom and gloom. The government of Raul Castro, Fidel retired in 2008 due to ill health, has begun to relax certain rules such as permitting street sellers and easing communication channels between Cubans and tourists. Cuba is also so much more than restrictive politics and poor governance. It is a fantastically beautiful country possessing postcard perfect beaches and stunning tropical forest. We visited a place called Baracoa on the southernmost tip of the island and there, hidden by lush rainforest and gorging on tropical fruit we managed to forget some of the hardship so evident in parts of Cuba. We also experienced some fantastic moments on our travels, from swimming in an underground cave in Viñales, Cuba's tobacco heartland, to scuba diving alongside beautiful coral reef in Camagüey.

Another real bonus of Cuba is that despite the plethora of government hotels marring much of the coastline and encroaching on the landscape it has, unlike the rest of the Caribbean, remained relatively unspoilt, although this can make travel to certain areas quite difficult! Nevertheless Cuba has to be one of the most interesting countries I have visited and I only urge you not to fall for the tourist traps in resorts such as Varadero which are marred by monstrous hotels and a total absence of authentic Cuban culture and instead travel around Cuba, soaking up and experiencing all that it has to offer. We used Viazul buses. Each city or town in Cuba provides something new to see and experience. Typically the cities offered us music, vibrant, fast paced living and all the propaganda we could handle whilst the towns were in richly verdant areas and possessed an enviable tranquillity not found in London. Although at times confusing, Cuba was to me always fascinating and I deeply regret not having been there for longer. **S**



Marie and her daughters

GAELIC AND GUJARATI COOKING

featuring Marie Meer

Marie Meer is no stranger to the Style pages, her hospitality is renowned in Erskine Hill and beyond and her recipes have featured on these pages before.

Now Marie has turned her skills into a book of recipes that anyone can follow. Gaelic and Gujarati because Marie, from Dublin, married Siddiek whose family was originally from Gujarat.

At a launch party in Fellowship House, their four daughters, who have each played a part in the production of the book, spoke with affection and pride of their mother's achievement. To order a Marie Meer Gaelic and Gujarati Cookbook at £20, call 8458 4554. **S**

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From our Safer Neighbourhood Team

I would like to take the opportunity to raise some issues regarding thefts from vehicles.

For several years suspects have been gaining entry to vehicles without causing any damage, rifling through glove boxes etc. and on occasion stealing property from within the vehicle. We are aware that this problem occurs a lot on the Suburb, other parts of Barnet and in other boroughs.

Over the past couple of years officers from the Safer Neighbourhood Team (SNT) have been trying to tackle this issue and research it. This problem is extremely difficult to solve. There are various types of devices in circulation which allow criminals to access vehicles bypassing the locking system. Websites apparently sell these types of devices.

Despite researching these items we have struggled to find much in the way of prevention advice. Car manufacturers have been made aware and we are in the process of making further contact with them to see what can be done.

In the meantime we offer some very basic advice for you to think about.

Consider locking your car doors manually by using the key. We are not able to say for certain if this will make any difference but I would certainly be interested in finding out if this has any benefit whatsoever.

When storing keys inside your property please avoid leaving them near doors and windows. Lock them away in a drawer or somewhere well out of reach. Often house burglaries take place with the purpose of taking car keys, usually for a vehicle parked on the driveway or outside the property. Please don't leave keys on display on tables in hallways/near doors etc. if this can be avoided.

Please continue to report all crimes and suspicious incidents,

however insignificant they may seem to you. Crime reports can be made using the new 101 non-emergency number. If a crime is happening at the time please call 999.

Officers from the SNT are running plain clothes 'covert' operations in hot spot areas to try and catch people in the act of committing these crimes. A lot of this will be taking place late at night and the early hours of the morning. The team have also been carrying out stop and searches where necessary and distributing as much crime prevention advice as possible. A recent arrest was made in Holne Chase following an attempted theft in Winnington Road. This was following a call to police from a member of the public.

It is clear to us that many residents have heeded advice and are taking all the steps they possibly can to prevent these thefts occurring but I must still point out that most days we receive reports of valuable items (often sat nav's) being left inside unattended vehicles.

Many vehicles being targeted belong to visitors, for example dog walkers on the heath or those visiting family and friends. Please remind your visitors and if you see someone leaving valuables on display just politely remind them.

Finally, number plates are being stolen from vehicles left unattended. Please consider using some of the security kits available on the market which I am told are very effective.

Thank you for all the help and information we receive at the SNT and for your continued support. If you would like to discuss the matter with one of the team members please email us or phone/leave a message and we will contact you.

SERGEANT MARK KELLY
Garden Suburb and East Finchley
Safer Neighbourhood Teams
Tel: 7161 9016 / 9014

Hampstead Rugby Club

The club had a successful 2010/11 season finishing 4th in the London NW league division. They have now been transferred to the London NE league which unfortunately entails travelling much further - as far afield as Great Yarmouth and Beccles. This has added greatly to travelling costs! However, they have started off this season very strongly: played 4, won 4, 4 with points for 138 and against 43.

The women's team again was very successful and gained promotion. They now put out two XV's and play on Sundays on the Heath Extension at about lunchtime.

Perhaps the biggest success was the launching of a juniors' section. This is now thriving thanks to the help given by some of the senior players (both men and women) and the involvement of parents. Over 60 children aged between 6 and 16 turned up for the first raining session.

Altogether, the club is now very successful; recruiting has produced many new members in all three sections but there is ample space for more. Whatever your standard, you will be welcome and guaranteed a game.

For information go to www.hampsteadrugbyclub.co.uk

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