

Mexico – Cuba 2009

Tim Radford

A self-guided tour of Mexico and Cuba, mainly by bus...

In 2009 my wife's twin brother and his wife lived in Southern California. We were organising our trip to California to celebrate the twin's 60th birthdays and our son's 33rd birthday (they're on the same day) before heading to Mexico and Cuba.

"You're taking my twinnie to where?" my brother-in-law asked me.

"Mexico," I replied.

"No, you're (#@%\$) not! They murder, kill and rape people down there," he replied.

We appeased my brother-in-law by starting in Mexico City and not going further north. Our suitcase also had a short holiday in Guadalajara and caught up with us a day later. We never felt unsafe in either country.

Mexico outline

Our flexible, independent trip began in Mexico City (4 days) before heading south by tourist bus to Oaxaca (4 days) – a well preserved colonial city, not to be missed. We then went east to San Cristobal de la Casas (2 days) by a comfortable overnight bus before heading through bandit country to the amazing, fairly recently discovered Palenque (1 day). Buses also transported us along the Yucatan Peninsula to Campeche (2 days) and Merida (2 days) before reaching the amazing Chichen Itza and finally Cancun (3 days). The flexibility of our itinerary came in very handy when we discovered our Sydney bank had given us incorrect advice and we needed to withdraw Mexican money and change it in small lots into Cuban visitor currency at many banks (so as to stay under the maximum withdrawal limit!). The Cuban peso is equal to 100 centavos and they are used by Cubans. Tourists use Cuban Convertible pesos known as CUC\$ with a mark-up of about 10%.

Note: We found only one ATM in Havana and none in the rest of Cuba (in 2009). Check it out before going. Our advice is to take cash. There is little or no internet and mobile coverage is expensive, where possible.

Mexico City is huge and only a small part can be covered. We stayed at the Catedral Hotel near the Zocalo (city square) as found in most towns and cities. The military lowers the national flag each day at 6.00pm. The huge Catedral off the Zocalo is the largest in Latin America (definitely see the statue of nails outside). Casa Azul, the Blue House where Frida Khalo lived, is worth a visit. Nearby is Leon Trotsky's house. Not to be missed is the Museo Nacional de Antropologia (accessible by the underground train system). The train lines marked on the ceiling of the walkways are excellent. Outside the museum, we were fortunate to see the costumed Voladores (four men tied by the ankles to four ropes) flying upside down circling the 30 metre pole thirteen times.

We took a tour of 'the three cultures' – tenoch, Spanish and Mexican – which was excellent.



Voladores spinning out

Outside Mexico City is the amazing archaeological ruins of **Teotihuacan** which held over 100,000 people before the Aztecs occupied the temples, palaces and pyramids. It requires more than half a day to walk the length of it and is still being unearthed. If time permits, Puebla is worth a visit.



Teotihuacan: Looking south from the Pyramid of the Moon



Paved streets and Spanish houses, Oaxaca

The colonial city of **Oaxaca** (pron. Wahaka) has wonderful paved streets and houses with pastel-coloured walls. The zocalo or Plaza de Armas is the centre of activities with shops, cathedral and market just off it where 'chapulines' (grasshoppers) are sold! Restaurants abound with lots of great local food. It is a great place to walk in the evenings and is quite safe. The bus station is a walkable distance from the Zocalo.

Nearby is the spectacular Zapotec city of **Monte Alban** with its Ballcourt, observatory, plaza and pyramid mounds. It is a must see.



A must-see: Monte Alban, Oaxaca

To get to **San Cristobal de la Casas**, we took the overnight double decker bus with reclining seats and a guard. It is a quiet town although there is a difference of opinion between the Zapistas and the Spaniards. We had no troubles here and enjoyed seeing the medical museum and soaking up the atmosphere. Ten kilometres out of San Cristobal are some Indian villages including **San Juan Chamula** with its colourful pottery and cloths and just off the Zocalo and market place is its beautiful church which is a strange mix of religions. Well worth a visit but no indoor photos are allowed.



Market in front of Chamula Church

Palenque is a Mayan archaeological site much of which is still covered by the thick green jungle. There are numerous archaeological sites across this region and visits depend on your available time. **Campeche** is an enjoyable seaside city with bastions constructed to keep out naval attacks. **Merida** is a worthwhile stop with its museums and restaurants surrounding its plaza which has open air evening concerts.

Which brings us to **Chichen Itza**, which is a well-preserved outstanding Maya site. Its centrepiece is the pyramid, El Castillo. Other features are the Ballcourt, the Sacred Cenote (limestone sinkhole), and many other well preserved edifices. Well worth a stay over to beat the daily traffic.

Cancun was a small village until the Mexicans saw they could turn it into a resort and attract cashed-up Americans. It was also the stepping off point for our Cuba visit.



Palenque ruins uncovered

Cuba outline

We flew from Cancun to Havana (2 days). Then we set out by tourist bus to our favourite stop Trinidad (4 days). Camaguey (2 days) was not really much and was very hot. Historical Santiago de Cuba (3 days), where Castro started his coup, was very interesting before we flew back to Havana (1 day). Next day we travelled by bus to the cigar capital of Vinales (3 days) before returning to Havana (5 days) where we sat on our level 9 balcony overlooking the harbour each afternoon and had a few 'Cuba libres' (Cuban rum and colas, notice not US CocaCola).

Wonderful, safe, the real 1950s

Starting in Havana really blows your sight and mind. Ancient crumbling buildings, 1950s cars with their make written across the windscreen, 1990 Russian Lada cars, little yellow cocotaxis (coconut-shaped taxis carrying two passengers), many races mingling happily with no acrimony and all helpful to visitors. Lots of photos and posters of the dead Che Guevara and yet only a few of the then-alive Fidel Castro. Be patient as sometimes things in Cuba lack maintenance and break down or do not run on time.

Accommodation in Cuba can be in a hotel but we preferred to use their 'casas particulares'. When the USSR dissolved in 1991, Cuba struggled financially so Fidel Castro allowed people under certain circumstances to rent rooms to tourists. We had three wonderful weeks staying in private homes where accommodation and breakfast was supplied and most would offer dinner. It was a marvellous way to meet the locals, contribute to their incomes and learn so much about their trials, tribulations and happiness. They have their own accommodation network and can book ahead for you or you can switch to another house suggested by other independent travellers.

Modern coaches travel the length of the country and there are several airlines that serve the country. Be early because they sometimes over-book seats. Pre 1950s cars can be negotiated with to act as a taxi. Some are immaculate, others are less well maintained. The English speaking paper, Granma, can be purchased to keep you up-to-date with world news. Most Cubans pronounce 'v' as a 'b' thus Habana.



Fidel Castro: 50th Anniversary



Dilapidated building still occupied

There are several city bus tours to settle you into **Havana**. We took the one which included the Hotel Nacional where many well-known US people stayed prior to 1992. It leaves from numerous places including Parque Central opposite Hotel Inglaterra. Places to walk to and through are Vieja (old) Habana – narrow streets with fascinating architecture, small restaurants, plazas, churches and the Capitolio (like Washington DC). Next to the Capitolio and worth a look is the Gran Teatro and then Hotel Inglaterra. The wide Paseo de Marti is a great stroll down to the harbour. To the right is the must-see Museo de la Revolucion and the Granma Memorial. A walk along the Malecon (seafront) to the Nacional Hotel is a chance to see Habana. The Plaza de Armas and Cathedral Square are also worth a visit.



Cocotaxis and old cars



Trinidad: Old rooftops and square

We chose not to stop at **Cienfuegos** (by the sea) or **Santa Clara** (renowned for Che Guevara). **Trinidad**, with its cobblestone streets and its pastel-painted houses, and surrounds are not to be missed. There are churches, towers to climb and see over Trinidad, the Plaza Mayor, museums and music venues. The church at the top of the town has beautiful music and choirs to enjoy in the evening before going just outside to near La Casa de la Trova to enjoy the Cuban music and to be swept onto your feet to do the salsa with a local.

Trinidad was known for its sugar cane production and the Valle de los Ingenios (Valley of the Sugar Mills) was the centre point. The steam train, built in 1907 to transport the cane, still makes its way to and from the valley and to the tower overlooking the fields used to watch the slaves. The farmer's house is now a good restaurant with a small market outside. The other side of town is the white sand beach, Playa Ancon, which provides a place to swim or get a massage.

Our final point east was the historical city of **Santiago de Cuba**, the place where Fidel Castro began his revolution with his speech from the balcony of the Casa de Diego Velazquez (now a historical museum), the oldest building in Cuba. After dinner in our casa particulares, we strolled up into the city, sat on the balcony of the Hotel Casa Granda opposite the Diego Casa to enjoy a Cuba libre while listening to different bands on the balcony and in Park Cespedes. Nearby is the Museo Del Ron (Rum) which is worth a visit.



Trinidad: Train to the canefields



Moncada Barracks with bullet holes



Cuban ration book

Places to visit around Santiago include the **Moncada**, the army barracks which Castro tried to capture in 1953. He failed but the walls still show the bullet holes and it is now a museum. The Cementerio (Cemetery) de Santa Ifigenia shows much of the history of Cuba and includes the Mausoleum of Jose Marti (a national hero of Cuba) and headstones of many officers. A local 'taxi' will get you to the Bay of Santiago to see the imposing Castillo del Morro with its fortresses, guns and tunnels. It was here where we saw the Cuban ration book in use.

As time was against us, we flew from Santiago back to Havana and next day took an early bus west through Pinar del Rio then up the beautiful valley to **Vinales**. The valley is dotted with mogotes (unusual limestone hillocks covered in greenery) and fields of tobacco. Sheds of drying tobacco, packing tables and Cubans making Cuban cigars are well worth seeing.

We finally came back to Habana to explore the narrow streets, cathedrals and ladies dressed in traditional colonial costume and coffee shops frequented by Graham Greene and Ernest Hemingway. We found a restaurant, Los Nardos, opposite the Capitolio which served great meals at reasonable prices. Once there was a short queue but it soon went.



Cigar making in Vinales

Contributor details

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Tim trained at Armidale Teachers' College as a primary teacher before being transferred to Secondary. He met his New Zealand future wife in 1972 while travelling to the UK to teach on an exchange scholarship. They travelled extensively then and have continued as mainly independent travellers throughout the world – Iceland to Antarctica, Europe to Buenos Aires. He retired as Principal at Macarthur GHS (1997-2003).