



## Terry's Travels

TT29-1 First Stop Tonga April 21st 2009

Tonga was just 2h40m from Auckland and it was an easy feeling jumble on collecting our luggage. The transfer bus was waiting but our names were not on the list - no problem we got on. It was dark for the half hour transfer with a stop to buy bottled water. The hotel was a total delight, Italian owned and Colonial feeling even though Tonga has never been a colony. They do, however drive on the left in largely vehicles that have been very well used. Our balcony was lovely, cooled by sea breezes and with aircon to sleep in comfort.

The fishing boats land their catches just across the road, it seemed wrong that they were catching the most brightly coloured tropical reef fish for eating. Massive conch type shellfish too along with lots of spiky sea urchins. From the same harbour boats are available to take you to one of the 40 or so inhabited islands that make up Tonga. We opted to laze and walk around just in Nuku'alofa (the capital) of the Kingdom of Tonga.

By luck or good management we were there for Sunday - everything closes! as the population goes to Church. The population of Tonga is 101,000 and we saw about 1,000 of them cramming the large local Catholic Church, the country is Christian. Di and I sat on a wall under a tree in the grounds as the bells tolled and the happy friendly people arrived in their Sunday best. Most wear a tapa which is a wrap around mat/skirt made of woven tapa (leaves). They were all very smart and young girls were wearing what we would call party dresses. We were invited several times to go into the Church but were happy to watch from outside. The service started and the choir singing was truly a heavenly sound, something else Tonga is known for. Family and Church are the main things in life for Tongans who are also known for their large girths.

When I was 13 I remember Queen Salote of Tonga as being one of the most colourful guests at Queen Elizabeth's Coronation. It was so nice some 56 years later to visit my 59th country. Tonga is struggling following the riots of 2006 when many Chinese owned properties were burned out. It suited us to be here as a stopover and they need more visitors when the planned cruise ship terminal is completed. Do visit my Flickr site to view more and bigger photos.



*Waterfront Hotel Nuku'alofa*



*From our balcony, TONGA*



*Cars are not pristine!*



*Friendly people go to Church*

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## Terry's Travels

TT29-2 via LA to Margaritaville April 26th 2009

Earwiggling at the local Reef cafe we heard about a yacht that had been wrecked, I got a couple of sneaky photos before the security guard came! This was quite a new Bavaria 38 until it crunched a coral reef and sank, can you imagine how the owners day was spoiled! You can see that it is registered in Southampton UK, we heard no casualties. The wrecked boat was still dripping.....

Our 3 nights in Tonga had worked out well but now we headed to Los Angeles with a touch down in Samoa, but only saw the airport before flying on to LAX (Los Angeles Airport), this certainly was another affluent and busy world after the quiet and poor and friendly Pacific Islands. The Marriott was fine for an overnight stay and we went to the Sports Bar there. Can you believe 50 TV screens - and all working and well set up. We had a small beer each and ate fast food (ugh) at the bar. The people watching was just great. A statuesque African American lady came in nearly wearing a crocheted dress, but best of all a pretty, tidy looking size 4 lady at the bar was drinking a pint, putting on specs briefly to read the menu and getting into conversation with a 30 year old handsome guy who bought her another pint. We left before we saw the outcome!

Four hours flying and we arrived in Cancun Mexico, got Pesos from the ATM and took the shuttle bus getting to see how Cancun has exploded along the coast since we were here 12 years ago. Other passengers were dropped at new stylish Resort hotels on the beaches, we were dropped last in our chosen downtown cheaper Hotel Sens. We wanted to be amongst the locals rather than the tourists, our choice was good and the hotel quiet, in fact everywhere seemed very short of business. Eating breakfast and dinner in the local restaurants has been easy and cheap with good fruit from the supermarket for lunch. You need to be out of the sun mid day but good breezes have kept it comfortable for sleeping without aircon.

A visit to Jimmy Buffets Margaritaville was a must and was a party atmosphere with a fun cabaret. To end a good night out the local bar/restaurant was packed on Friday night, customers pouring in until after 11pm to eat and socialise, it brought out the fancy cars and fancy women who appreciated the busy valet parking - it was yet another view of Mexican life....



*Expensive Crunch*



*From Southampton UK*



*Kids loved to pose*



*Shot seller!*

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## Terry's Travels

TT29-3 CUBA and Havana.... May 1st 2009

I had wanted to visit Cuba for a long time and now I have made it my 60th country visited (of around 200). I shall start by telling you the good things and in my next TT will tell you about the bad. The many good things include the amazing buildings and layout. The timewarp giving some feelings of the 1950s - especially the number of American cars of this vintage. The Cuban cigars for the smokers, the music and dancing. It's a photographers paradise and my Lumix camera is getting hot with the electronics working so hard - see the many pictures when I have loaded them on Flickr. The different ethnicities make the people fascinating.

Our 6 nights will allow us to have a good look around Havana and district with its population of around 2 million out of a total population of 11 million. I chose our hotel as a mid price range, The Hotel Sevilla is perfectly located near the centre on the stylish Prado which is an Avenue connecting the centre to the 9km Malecon the esplanade that gets pounded by the sea. The Hotel Sevilla was opened in 1908 and a few of the famous guests include Al Capone, Errol Flynn, Nat King Cole, Gloria Swanson.....

All the photos are taken during walking in this area. We will not rent a car but depend on walking, taxis and tour buses. Havana became the capital in 1600, Cuba was discovered by Columbus in 1492 and is located in the Caribbean some 150km S of Florida. Jumping to 1959 Che Guevara and Fidel Castro brought a revolution to get rid of Batista, Fidel made it a Communist country "nationalising" American owned land and became friendly with similar red countries - especially Russia. In 1962 the world came very close to Nuclear war with the Cuban missile crisis. With Russia getting into its own difficulties in the 1990s support of Cuba was lost and the already poor economy became even more desperate.

The poverty becomes very obvious and 45% of the population is living in uninhabitable property in Havana - but still there are many smiling faces even with so little. It's a third world country in so many respects and yet when you see the Capital Building this is world class standard. In short Cuba is a challenge to understand and it will change quickly, especially with Obama routing for change and Michelle buying Cuban fashion!



*'50s US of A, Capital building*



*Happy with his taxi*



*Sunday dominoes Malecon*



*Kids happily playing*

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## Terry's Travels

TT29-4 Scams and Dodges.... May 5th 2009

I really don't blame them, the Cuban people are living through very tough times and imprisoned on the Island. There are two currencies, the Peso (for the people) and the Convertible Peso (CUC for the tourist). The Peso has a value about a 25th !! Of the CUC. One English pound buys 1.29 CUC if you are careful!

**Scam 1** - you are given change in Pesos, yes I paid 25 CUC for a taxi and got 5 Pesos "change"

**Scam 2** - Cuban cigars from street sellers are duff

**Scam 3** - we were walking and resisting the many approaches to buy anything when the young couple befriended us, they were holding hands and giving the impression they were going dancing, "it's Salsa Festival" we went along with it, saw a dance school and then into an adjacent bar for a Mojita - Hemingway drank these. I am ever the optimist but Di is the pessimist. I still thought we would get to see music and dancing. She thought we were about to be drugged (Rohipnel?) and nasty things happen to us. The sting was the 24 CUC for the drinks! I paid and we got out.

**Scam 4** - a tout told us this restaurant in a splendid building had a special at 10CUC per meal. We went later and pointed out this as the menu showed 15. It was agreed and we ordered 2 local beers (going rate 2CUC) - they brought the bill with 2 beers 24CUC - total with tax 48. I paid 24 and we left, the owner chased after us down the stylish marble staircase but two guys on the door said we must pay. I gesticulated in disgust and we left - we haven't been locked up.

**Scam 5** - we walked through the locals shopping street, not only do they get pitiful wages but when they have to buy things they have to pay about 3x the US or UK price. We ate at what looked like a failed Chinese restaurant that now does pizzas, surly service but OK food. Again the beers charged a bit higher and the change not fully given so I didn't leave a tip. **Scam 6** Taxi "misheard destination" etc.....

Di is sure she would not want to come again with things like this happening, I don't feel at all the same. What I would do is to get some of the Pesos and join the two currency game - they would quickly tell me if I was paying in the "wrong" currency! The next TT will tell you more good stuff and especially the music which is everywhere. Do not be put off, this is an amazing place to visit and in six days we are only trying to see the capital Havana and the districts within about 20km.



*Facade to be saved*



*Beware of Isabel & Luis*



*Mojitas - the sting*



*Another rip off.....*

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## Terry's Travels

TT29-5 Ration Books May 5th 2009

A ration book system controls 30 basic necessities and gives subsidised prices on them, its nothing like enough to live on and people have to pay 20 times more in normal cash for extras making even soap an expensive item. To contrast this the cigar factories here hand make Cuban cigars which cost typically 5 to 20 CUC each cigar, boxes at 800CUC. We visited the Partagas factory and I had hoped to see my fantasy of them hand rolled on the inner thigh of a dusky maiden. The closest I came is shown in the photo.

Another contrast is an outdoor show at the Tropicana, the setting is outdoors with massive trees and creatively built sets and dance floors. The sound system and lighting is state of the art. The show lasts some two and a half hours starting with 9 players from the large orchestra. When the dancing starts the costumes colour and energy are captivating. The show uses **200** people and makes for an astounding spectacle. Cuba has such training in all forms of the arts and to see such superb physical specimens you realise that its no wonder this small nation has been so successful in boxing and the Olympic games. I do hope you enjoy some of the photos since the scam on this one was to take another 5CUC from you to take pictures 15CUC to use a video camera and this is after 11% to use a credit card. A 200CUC night out that was worth every Peso.....we were lucky to sit with mum and son from Moscow, the final photo shows him staring into the eyes of a superb dusky maiden, you can see that she was really looking at me.

Cuba was in its heyday in the 1930s and the Hotel Nacional was built then and had guests like Churchill, the Duke of Windsor and more recently Stephen Spielberg, it was a shock to see Ken Livingstone (Red Ken) amongst the stars because of his political views.

You see all this and then you are told that Cubans do not have their own TV or radio channels even for local news, the internet is terrible so I suppose that is another scam at 8CUC for an hour and it crawls and hits and misses (censorship?) - but we have heard so much really good live music. Breakfast at our hotel has been excellent, dinner passable at different places, don't try wine - it can be putrid. The local Bucanear and Crystal beers are quite good. The climate has been wonderful.....



*Once was a dusky maiden*



*Enjoying the expensive*



*Outdoor Tropicana*



*Our Russian friend with dancer*

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TT29-6 Swine 'flu May 8th 2009

I already mentioned a photographers paradise - look on Flickr for MANY more and better quality. With our balcony overlooking the Prado we have seen school concerts and Salsa dancing on the marble avenue. I have avoided pointing my camera at the pretty things with their "sugar daddies" - mainly for my own safety, but I love watching and need a paparazzi type lens. I may have become an email pal with a musician and a taxi driver, I hope so, they are great intelligent people and I really like the place. I would use the taxi driver as a tour guide to explore further afield if I came again.

Now we have seen the more affluent but sometimes less safe Miramar area I can see why Cuba attracted so many stars and Royals in the past. It feels ready for change, people are thankful for the good things achieved but change must and will come quickly. Visiting will make me take more notice of Cuba. When we had our house on Cocoa Beach Florida I often ate at a Cuban restaurant which had a wrecked boat in which Cubans attempting to escape had drowned.

There are few images about of Fidel Castro and his brother Raul who carries less respect, but many images of Che Guevara. The last photo is of them having succeeded in the Revolution just over 50 years ago. Things seem so much worse now but things could improve quickly with the healthy, adaptable and well schooled population. It seems to me that Communism is a great ideal but it's capitalism that works in the real world. Everything shuts down for marches tomorrow May 1st. It's nice of them to celebrate my birthday!

5am and we are being taken to the airport, many people and crowd controllers are already on the streets. Some flights were cancelled by Mexicana due to Swine 'flu - bummer - we bought a ticket from Cubana instead and got out to Cancun some frustrating 18 hours late. Happily we befriended two other couples, one from the States and one from OZ. It made the waiting more bearable. Back in Cancun we were back at the airport after 6 hours in a hotel. Masks and health checks made travel unpleasant and difficult but we got our flight to Miami, a good connection overnight to London, tube train, mainline train with WiFi onboard! And back into Bingley on a pleasant sunny day. We settled in, cut the lawn and collapsed to bed.



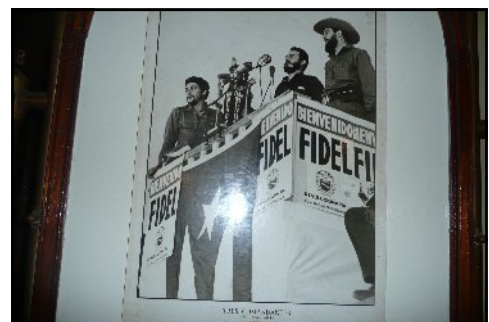
*School event*



*Hotel Sevilla to harbour*



*Quite a few convertibles*



*Che left and Fidel Castro right*

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