

Preface

'No es fácil'

'It's not easy,' goes the Cuban refrain. *'No es fácil'* rolls out whatever the problem - meddling in-laws or cranky children, heavy weather or waiting in line for bread, the bus, to get paid, to get married. For me, a gringa struggling with Spanish, even less is easy here. Whereas I usually face such challenges with aplomb, after a couple of years living in Havana, it dawns on me that I must be half crazy - at least slightly mad - to be making my life here.

Despite the doubts my mind succeeds in conjuring, choosing Havana seemed as natural as snoring. When I got my first glimpse in 1993, it was love at first sight – palpable, commanding, irresistible. Unlike passion that strikes like lightning and fizzles at the first squabble, this attraction has endured and matured. Over time, through rolls of sticky red tape, I became hooked by this island's siren song that has been the bane of many. But if it was Cuba's soul that first entranced me, it is Havana's heart that has me in its grip.

Havana is the city most like my beloved New York: raw and unpredictable, hideously flawed and criminally gorgeous, slightly wary of outsiders, run through with secrets both trifling and grand. A birthplace of art, music and trends. Above all, Havana, (quite like New York), is fiercely and maddeningly proud; superior even, lending it a conscious hubris. Striking on these connections, I discovered other New York-Havana similarities: both cities are for walking and

neither ever sleeps; tourists see one face while residents quite another; each neighborhood is completely contained and self-sufficient; private lives spill unabashedly from homes into the street; and there's too much garbage, grit and filth of a general sort. Tremendous luck is yours in either Havana or New York if you find a public phone that actually works and more likely than not, your cab driver has a PhD. Perhaps most strikingly, in both cities, it's all in who you know.

My budding love for Havana put me in mind of E.B. White's panegyric *Here is New York*, a timeless rendering of my home town, uncanny in its accuracy, admirable in its brevity. An idea began to brew.

Trying to distill the essence of a kaleidoscopic city like Havana, with so many worlds spinning to their own drummers, is a Sisyphean task. At least Sisyphus had a rock to push – something tangible and tactile, whose progress he could measure, however futile it proved to be. The only rock in my journey is the one in my metaphorical shoe, that discomfiting pest reminding me that the myths and mysteries of this city leave even native Habaneros shaking their heads. 'You *are* mad!' suggest the raised eyebrows and smiles when I tell my Cuban friends about this project. I suspect they harbor doubts that I'll cobble together any images or flavors that accurately capture the wiles of this place. As one friend joked: 'the gringos will never be able to crack our code because even *we* don't know how to decipher it.'

However, unlike White, who wrote for could be-would be-wannabe New Yorkers everywhere, I'm not writing for a Cuban audience. I can't crack their code for them and wouldn't presume to try, leaving that to homegrown masters like Alejo Carpentier, Nicolás Guillén, Fernando Pérez, and others who have depicted La Habana so lyrically. No, this essay is not for

my Cuban compadres, (though it would be disingenuous to deny hopes of winning over one or two), but instead for all the outsiders like me wanting to sneak an inside peek. The prosaic Cuba as 'Forbidden Isle Getaway,' set to a Buena Vista Social Club soundtrack won't be found in these pages. Nor the sexy mulattas, classic cars and fine cigars which hold such fascination for incidental visitors, but are woven seamlessly into the fabric of our daily lives here. In this essay you'll find little discussion of such elements that indeed flavor the flan, but are far from the fat or form holding together the Cuban reality.

Here is Havana is divided into chapters, each of which explores a facet of city life. Since Cuban Spanish is so unique, constantly flexing into a rhythmic language wholly of these times and this place, I've opted to leave Spanish words and phrases in the text without translation. Instead, a glossary of terms is appended at the end.

Here is Havana.

¡*Disfrútaló!*

Havana, 2004-2007