

ICWA LETTERS

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THE AMERICAS

Paige Evans is an Institute Fellow looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts.

Los Turistas

HAVANA, Cuba

October 20, 1998

By Paige Evans

I had been in Cuba for almost three months and had not yet ventured outside Havana. I was curious about the island's culture, people and landscape beyond its capital city, was eager to see its provinces and smaller towns. Usually I ride buses and trains to explore a foreign country; public transport provides an interesting cultural window. But since the "special period" began when Soviet aid dwindled in 1991, public transportation throughout Cuba has been scant and unreliable. So, though I only recently learned to drive and was phobic about it, I intended to rent an automatic car to travel the central section of the island.

Then Ismael, my shopping guide in BPE-3, suggested he join me on my trip as driver and general aide. At first, I balked. I had been planning to travel alone; I knew Ismael solely within the context of his working on my apartment and helping me find furnishings; I was uncomfortably aware that he harbored a romantic interest in me I did not reciprocate. I told him I would think about it.

My dread of driving led me to seriously consider Ismael's proposal. He had been a truck driver and could drive a stick shift; maybe he could teach me to drive one, too. An economy-sized Subaru would halve my expenses in rental fees and gasoline. Probably, too, it would be easier to have a Cuban man along on my first trip around the island.

Over drippingly sweet scoops at La Coppelia, Havana's favorite ice cream parlor, I invited Ismael to come along on my journey. He was thrilled. At 29, he had never been outside Havana, his birthplace. Like many Cubans, Ismael could not afford to travel his own country and had not been allowed to visit others. Though trepidatious, I too felt pleased. The idea of seeing the provinces alongside a Cuban who was exploring his country for the first time appealed to me.

* * *

Miramar, Havana

I meet Ismael outside the Copacabana Hotel, where we make our way to the Transauto rental-car desk. As I peel off six crisp 100-dollar bills to cover hefty rental fees and a 200-dollar security deposit, I sense Ismael's eyes boring into the cash. In the parking lot, he tells me: "It made me go cold, seeing all that money. Just spent. For an eight-day trip."

It is illegal for Cubans to rent and drive rental cars, but the Transauto representative does not flinch when Ismael checks the tools and spare tire in



Ismael and me in front of the Subaru we rented for our eight-day journey

our car's trunk, takes the keys and climbs into the driver's seat. Several Cubans have assured me we will have no trouble with the authorities: Cuban police do not stop cars with telltale "TUR" tourism plates.

Ismael watches as I strap on my seat belt. Though he drove a Soviet-made truck for four years, he does not know how a seat belt works. Few vehicles in Cuba have them. "Cubans are ignorant about many things," he laments, shaking his head. "I am afraid to go on this trip with you, Paige. I have never been friends with a foreign woman before. But I do not want to remain uncultured. I want to learn." He clicks his seat belt buckle into place, then grins and intones: "*La educacion.*"

Varadero, Matanzas Province

The 20-kilometer, white-sand beach of Varadero — one of Cuba's main tourist centers since the 1930s, when Dupont and other U.S. millionaires built extravagant estates here — is lined with deluxe resorts and international-style tourist hotels. Ismael and I look instead for a more economical *casa particular*, or private home, in which to spend the night. No signs indicate which houses have rooms to rent, and — surprisingly — no touts approach us wielding business cards. We ask a woman sitting on a stoop if she knows of *casas particulares*. She leaps to her feet, eager to help us find a place and so earn herself a commission, usually five dollars, that will be added to our nightly rent.

Our landlady, an earnest woman named Mirta who is struggling to raise her young daughter alone, tells us that business plummeted for Varadero's private landlords in 1996, when a local law was passed forbidding private rentals to foreigners. The law was presented as an official effort to curb the dissolute tourism burgeon-

ing in Varadero between foreign men and Cuban *jiniteras*, or prostitutes. Conveniently, it also served to diminish the private enterprises that competed with Varadero's many state-run tourist hotels. Varadero's private landlords are now legally permitted to rent their rooms only to Cubans, most of whom cannot afford a night's rent.

While swimming early the next morning, I encounter a jellyfish with my face. I speed into the luxurious Hotel Tuxpan, pad wetly across its glossy lobby to the kitchen. There I ask for vinegar, which works to counteract the jellyfish sting. Though concerned about my face, Ismael is far more interested in the Hotel Tuxpan. "What was it like?" he queries intently, when I meet up with him on the beach. I dismissively reply: "Like a luxury hotel. It does not interest me. There was nothing Cuban there. That hotel could be anywhere in the world." Impressed, Ismael exclaims: "Incredible! In something, we have reached the level of development of other parts of the world!"

Leaving Varadero, we drop Mirta off in a nearby town where she hopes to find a three-pronged outlet to accommodate a clandestine foreign guest. The road is lined with people standing under a hot sun eager to *coger la botella*, or hitch a ride. With scarce public transport, strict restrictions on buying cars and exorbitant gasoline prices (90 cents per liter, or about U.S.\$4 per gallon), the "transportation problem" is a primary issue in many Cubans' lives.

Ismael pulls over to the side of a flat, untrafficked stretch of road and suggests we begin our first driving lesson. As I adjust the driver's seat and we strap on our seat belts, Ismael grins, announcing he has never before been in a car with a woman driver. Patiently, he teaches me to coordinate clutch, accelerator, and brake while

shifting gears. The car jerks as I shift into first. Gradually, though, I grow more comfortable using the clutch and as we move smoothly along the road, I savor an unexpected burst of confidence. Ismael sits back, lights a cigarette. In a chatty tone, he mentions: "Several people have asked me whether you are a spy." I stall the car.

I had imagined Cubans might suspect me of espionage. Nonetheless, hearing the actuality of it is unsettling. Ismael chides me: "You cannot let it bother you, Paige. What does it matter what other people think?!" He scoffs. "These are country people! They see an American, and they automatically assume you are a spy. That is typical Cuban — always suspecting the worst."

After all, most people we meet assume Ismael is a *jinitero*; they murmur innuendoes to him and knock together extended forefingers to suggest we are having sex. He assures me this does not bother him. Our imposed alter egos — spy and *jinitero* — become a running joke between us.

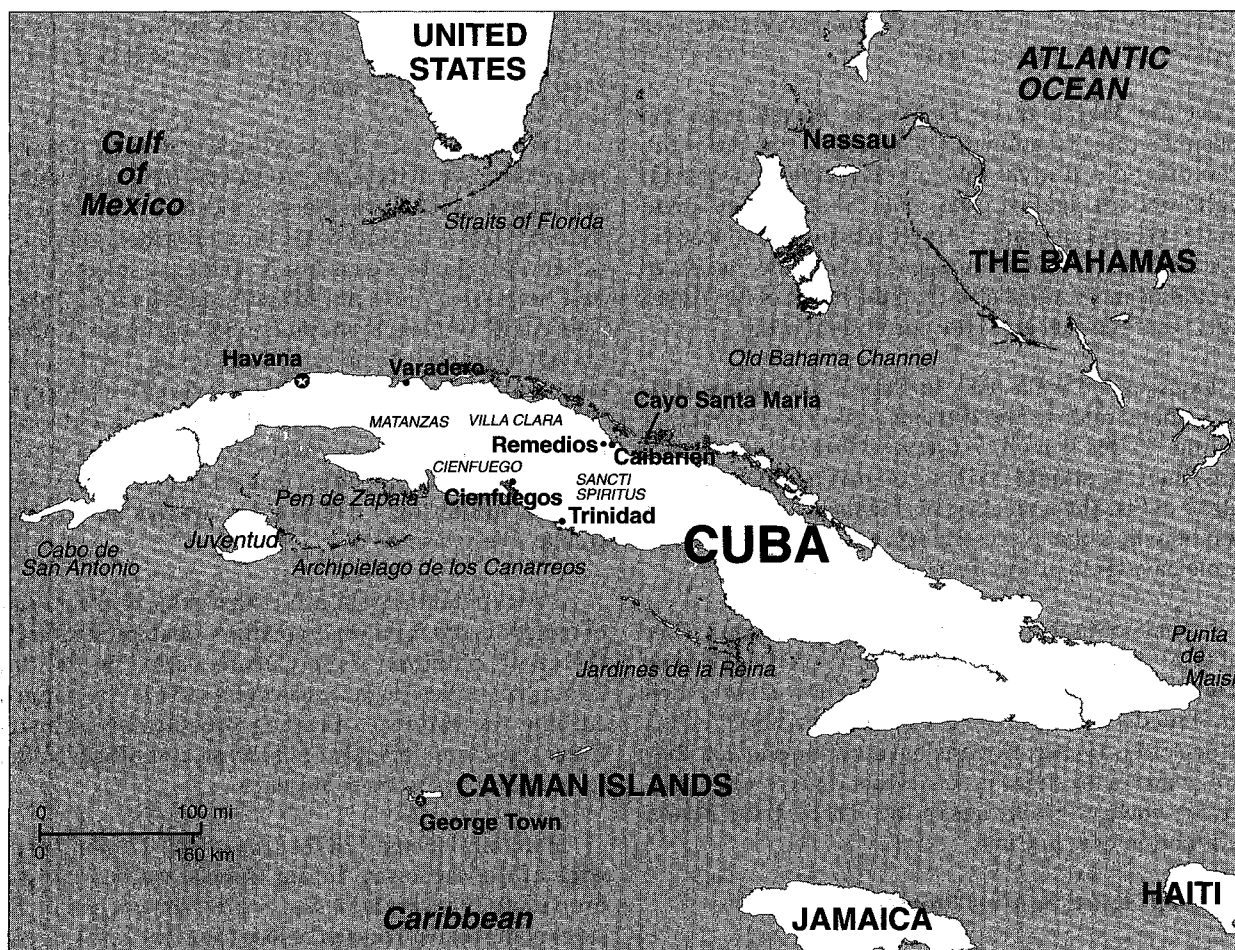
Cienfuegos, Cienfuegos Province

As we drive down the port city of Cienfuegos' main

avenue, a bevy of young *jiniteros* catch sight of our "TUR" plates and swarm around our car. Determined to get commissions in dollars, these street hustlers offer us information about private homes in which to stay and private restaurants, or *paladares*, in which to eat. We try to dismiss them, arguing we can find a room on our own. But the *jiniteros* doggedly pursue us.

In hopes of ditching them, Ismael makes a sudden turn onto a side street. The road is crowded with people — walking, talking, biking, eating and watching the world go by. A table of men playing dominoes blocks our way. Ismael honks at them, but the men continue playing, undisturbed. Cyclists and pedestrians also refuse to give way.

"No one is working here, just like in Havana," Ismael observes. "Why work? The state does not pay anything — maybe seven or eight dollars a month. Seven dollars cannot buy anything! Everything in Cuba is so expensive! So people do not bother." He nods towards a group of young men passing a bottle of rum between them. "Instead, they sit around drinking rum. Talking. Blah blah blah blah. Cubans talk and talk about all their problems, but they do not resolve anything. The next



morning, they wake up with a headache. Their pockets are still empty, and everything is still the same."

Ismael swerves onto the sidewalk, where we pull up to a house advertising rooms to rent. The *jiniteros* flock around its front door. I enter the house as Ismael parks the car. He is talking to the *jiniteros* when I emerge. A few of them step away from him. Others head off on their bikes. I ask Ismael how he managed to dissuade them. He explains: "I told them I am a *jinitero*, too; and you are mine. I said I get the commission here, not them."

Remedios, Villa Clara Province

Both Ismael and I are relieved to find no *jiniteros* trailing us as we drive into Remedios' main square. This peaceful old town thus far remains relatively free of tourism and its attendant irritations. Its streets are clean, its brightly-painted colonial homes strikingly well-maintained. It seems preserved in a by-gone era. Ismael gapes as we pass a group of clean-cut youths, marveling: "These people all seem so innocent, so uncorrupted. The women wear gold chains without worrying that they will be stolen. You cannot wear gold chains in Havana! Nobody here seems to care about us — they just look and leave us alone. No one is on the make for dollars. I did not know there was anyplace still like this in Cuba!"

At the *Museo de las Parrandas Remedianas*, the museum's director animatedly describes the *Parrandas*, a centuries-old festival that pits Remedios' two main neighborhoods against each other in an annual street parade. When I mention I might return for the festival in December, the director suggests I stay at her house, as it would be more affordable than the home of her friend Jorge, where Ismael and I are currently renting.

Later, as we walk back to Jorge's, Ismael explains that Cubans refer to the director's ploy as *la pirata*, or pirating. "If she is really a friend of Jorge's, as she says she is, then she should not have offered her home to you instead of his. She is stealing his business. That happens often here in Cuba. Necessity has made people change. People have to steal and lie in order to survive."

Ismael points to a tree with red, waxy blossoms. "See that tree? During the special period, when there was no shampoo, many Cubans rubbed those flowers into their hair. It made their hair smell a little better, left it feeling a little softer... When Cubans have nothing to eat, they drink water with sugar in it. At least it gives you a momentary energy." He shrugs sadly. "That is hard. That is the situation here in Cuba."

Caibarien, Sancti Spiritus Province

In the port town of Caibarien, Ismael and I stop at the local Rumbos — a state-run, tourist-oriented snack

bar chain — to buy tickets to Cayo Santa Maria. We have been warned that the entry fee for Cayo Santa Maria, an island with 14 kilometers of reputedly idyllic white-sand beach, is an exorbitant five dollars per person and that Cubans are forbidden entrance.

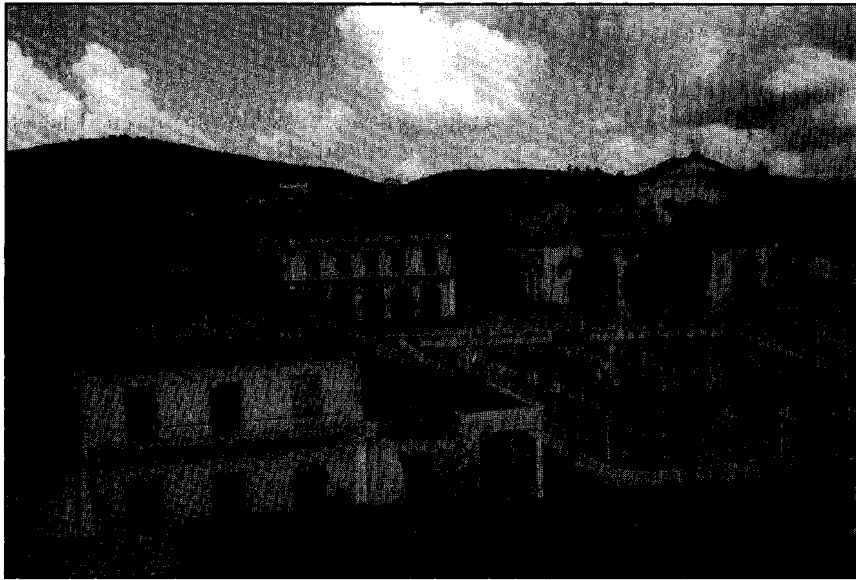
Ismael waits in the car as I go inside to investigate the situation. In a cramped, specially-designated office, a smiling attendant peruses my passport, transcribes its number on an official form, takes my 10 dollars and hands me two tickets. I ask him whether Cubans are admitted to the *cayo*. He shakes his head, changes the subject. I ask why the tickets are so expensive. He sighs and rotely recounts: "Cayo Santa Maria has a good deal of virgin nature. We are doing our best to protect it. Not everyone can afford the five-dollar entry fee. By asking a high price to visit the *cayo*, we limit the number of people who go there."

For the past nine years a 48-kilometer causeway with 45 tidewater bridges has been under construction between Caibarien and Cayo Santa Maria. More than 100 million Cuban pesos have already been spent on the still-unpaved road; once the causeway is finished, 25 hotels containing a total of 10,000 rooms are scheduled to be built on the island. The Cuban government has courted numerous foreign investors for this massive tourism development. The *cayo's* virgin nature will not just be raped; it will be gang-banged.

As we approach the gate leading to the causeway, Ismael and I switch places. He moves to the passenger's seat, dons my dark sunglasses and tries to look like a tourist. I drive up and hand the uniformed guard our tickets. The guard's gaze holds on the passenger's seat, and he politely asks me Ismael's nationality. I freeze. The guard swivels towards Ismael, barking: "Cubans are not allowed." As he turns back to me, his tone softens: "But I will let you go." He scowls at Ismael again, his voice hardening: "Do not stop or speak with anyone. If anyone discovers you are Cuban and I let you by, I will be held responsible." Ismael hands me my sunglasses, muttering: "Cubans can always tell another Cuban. We can smell it."

As we enter the gate, a *Turistaxi* exits, bearing a pair of male tourists fondling two lithe Cuban girls. Clearly, the guard admitted these Cubans earlier in the day. Though countless legal restrictions exist in the name of curbing the country's thriving prostitution industry, Cuba's tourism depends on *jiniteras*, and officials often turn a blind eye to their presence.

Boulders labeled "FIDEL" and "RAUL" stand at the edge of the causeway. In our travels, we have passed myriad political *propagandas*, or advertisements, by the sides of the roads. Though billboards in the touristic center of Varadero advertise state-owned products such as Cubita coffee and Bucanero beer, those lining most of Cuba's roads



A rooftop view of the colonial city of Trinidad

advertise the Revolution, with brightly-painted slogans like "SOCIALISMO ES EFICIENCIA Y CALIDAD" (SOCIALISM IS EFFICIENCY AND QUALITY).

Trinidad, Sancti Spiritus Province

On entering the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Trinidad, we head directly for a stately colonial home recommended by our Remedios landlord, Jorge. The owner, Julio, shows us two spacious rooms for rent as well as antique-filled communal rooms. He asserts that his home almost always has lights and water. An important tourist center that depends on private homes to house its foreign visitors, Trinidad is the only place in Cuba free from regular blackouts. (Tourist hotels elsewhere on the island have their own generators.) Julio says his rooms are rarely empty; tourism is down this

time of year. Though Julio's house is lovely, his prices are unusually high. We decide to look around.

Signs advertising "Hostal" proliferate in Trinidad's historic district. Ismael and I amble down cobblestone streets, inquiring about rooms to rent. We are told there is no space in one colonial home. Then in another. Then in yet another. Though we see few tourists, every place seems to be full.

We head for a *casa particular* mentioned in my Lonely Planet CUBA guidebook. There, a young man named Carlos eyes us. Though there are no signs of foreigners in his home, he tells us his rooms are occupied. He offers, however, to phone a family member who occasionally rents out rooms. The call takes an inordinately long time. From the neighboring room, we hear Carlos re-



A Trinidadian "Son" band

peat: "It is a Cuban boy with an American woman. A Cuban boy." He returns to say his relative has no room.

I question the prejudice Trinidad's landlords seem to harbor against Ismael, a fellow Cuban. Carlos tells me a law forbids Trinidad's landlords from renting to Cubans. I rail: "That is ridiculous! This is his country! It is not my country! It is Cuba! He is Cuban!"

Shaking his head patronizingly, Carlos says I do not understand. He explains: "Usually it is a Cuban woman with a foreign man, not like the two of you." He speaks in a confiding tone, as if he genuinely believes our situation to be an exception, runs a forefinger along the pale skin of his opposite forearm. "These women are not honest types. The man brings the woman into a house, and she steals from him, or she steals from the house. He phones the police. The police fine the owners, because it is their responsibility when a foreigner is robbed in their home... Trinidad is a small town. If someone is robbed

in your home, everyone knows it. You get a bad reputation." As we walk away from Carlos, Ismael mutters ironically: "Cuba for the Cubans."

We return to Julio's house. He informs us that no written law forbids Trinidad's landlords from renting out rooms to Cubans; the city's landlords simply have a verbal agreement. Julio, instead, judges his fellow Cubans individually, deciding in each case whether he deems the person trustworthy or not.

* * *

As we drive along the southern coastal road leading back to Havana, I tell Ismael his country is beautiful. He chortles and retorts: "This is not my country. It is *His* country." He pauses, then continues: "It is beautiful, though. And I have the good fortune to have seen some of it. Most Cubans are not so lucky. I will always have this trip to look back on." □

Index to ICWA Letters by Paige Evans

Entries refer to ICWA Letter (PE-I, etc.) and page, with Letter number given before each page entry

<p>A</p> <p>Agromercados 3.2</p> <p>B</p> <p><i>babalao</i> 1.1 bata drums 1.5 black market 1.2</p> <p>C</p> <p><i>Cadeca</i> (currency exchange) 3.2 Caibarien 4.4 Capitolio 1.4 Carey, Maria 2.2 Carlos Tercero 3.4 <i>casa particular</i> (private home) 4.2 Cayo Santa Maria 4.4 Centro Habana 3.3 Chango 1.1 Ciñfuegos 4.3 Ciñfuegos Province 4.3 Cigarettes 3.6 computers 3.1 Copacabana Hotel 4.1 crime 2.4</p> <p>D</p> <p>divorce 3.4 dollar economy 1.2 drumming 1.5</p> <p>E</p> <p>e-mail 3.1 Elegba 1.5 espionage 4.3 exchange rates 3.2</p> <p>H</p> <p>Havana 2.1</p>	<p>Housing Ministry 2.2</p> <p>I</p> <p>International Yoruba Conference 1.1</p> <p>J</p> <p><i>jiniteras</i> (prostitute) 4.2 <i>jinitero</i> 4.3</p> <p>K</p> <p>Kenny G 2.2</p> <p>L</p> <p>Lonely Planet CUBA 4.5</p> <p>M</p> <p>marriage 3.4 Matanzas Province 4.2 Miramar 4.1 Mother Drum 1.6 <i>Museo de las Parrandas Remedianas</i> 4.4</p> <p>O</p> <p>Obatala 1.1, 1.5 Ochun 1.4 <i>orishas</i> 1.1 Our Lady of Regla 1.1</p> <p>P</p> <p><i>Parrandas</i> 4.4 <i>peso convertible</i> 3.2 prostitution 4.4</p> <p>R</p> <p>race 2.4, 3.4 rationing 3.6 real estate 2.1</p>	<p><i>Regla de Ocha</i> 1.1 <i>Remedios</i> 4.4 rickshaws 1.2</p> <p>S</p> <p>Sancti Spiritus Province 4.4 Santeria 1.1 shortages 4.4</p> <p>T</p> <p>tambor 1.5 <i>Taxi Colectivos</i> 1.2 <i>Taxi Particular</i> 1.2 The man with the beard 2.2 tourism 4.2 trade embargo 3.1 transportation 4.3 Trinidad 4.5</p> <p>U</p> <p>U.S. dollars 2.1, 3.2 U.S. Trade Embargo 1.2 UNESCO World Heritage Site 4.5</p> <p>V</p> <p>Varadero 4.2 Vedado 3.1 Villa Clara Province 4.4</p> <p>W</p> <p>water 2.1</p> <p>Y</p> <p>Yemaya 1.1 Yoruba 1.1, 2.2</p>
--	--	---