

7. A Tale of Two Countries: February 20-26

February, 2016: The Hotel Bella Costa, near Varadero, Cuba

The bus that took us (Vernon, Tammy, and myself) from the Varadero airport to our hotel did what you might call a milk run. Our hotel was located towards the end of the peninsular hotel strip that stretched for many kilometres east of Varadero, with the sea on one side and a lagoon on the other. I lost count of the numerous stops at each of which a bevy of people got off at the hotel for which they had booked, but finally after an hour, we had reached our destination. It had obviously rained and it was quite windy and chilly by tropical or subtropical standards, although balmy in comparison with the winter cold we had left behind in Halifax. Check-in was expeditious; we were impressed with the courtesy and efficiency of the staff at the front desk. There we also converted our first batch of dollars into the so-called convertible pesos which visitors to Cuba must use rather than the local currency. The convertible peso is pegged to the American dollar against which at that time the Canadian dollar was a low of 68 cents; the exchange at the hotel took off a few more pennies, so that, somewhat to our chagrin, for the week we were there we could not expect to get more than 66 cents. Our stay at the Bella Costa was all-inclusive covering all food and drink, including alcoholic beverages, so the three of us lost no time ordering and enjoying a stiff drink at one of the bars which was still open. This was our night-cap. What with four and a half hours of air travel (coming after a somewhat late departure from Halifax), the security, immigration, and custom formalities at the airport, and finally the one-hour bus trip, it was very late in the evening and we were tired. My room was almost incongruously large, with two double beds, a roll-out bed (which was eventually removed), and all the other standard furnishings including a television set. The bathroom was also spacious, reasonably well lit, and with hot water flowing readily.

I woke up the next morning quite refreshed. To my disappointment, I discovered that my room was not at the back where I would have had a view of the large courtyard with from which there was access to the beach but overlooked the hotel's front driveway. Breakfast was served buffet-style in the big dining hall, with table service for coffee, tea, and juice. Food was ample and varied. It was as good as at any first-class North American hotel. Eggs, ham, bacon, and sausage were prepared to order at the grill. What impressed me most of all was an enormous clear-glass contraption which squeezed the juice from dozens and dozens of oranges at the same time and where you could serve yourself if you wished; I had never seen anything like this before.

The weather was clear and beautiful now and would remain so for the rest of the week— sunny skies with temperatures during the day ranging from the low to mid-twenties. I immediately adopted a daily routine that marked most of my week at the resort. I am not a sun worshipper or a beach person, so unlike many—perhaps most of the —hotel guests I did not care to laze for much of the day on a lounge chair on the beach. In the afternoon I would join Tammy and Vernon for a hour or so on the beach, after having lathered myself well with sun-screen, and half-doze on my lounge chair. I tried wading into the sea once, but it was not to my liking. The sea-floor was extremely

uneven and at any point you might find yourself in deep water, and with the heavy surf and obvious undercurrents swimming in the latter was out of the question. I got the extremely salty seawater into my good right eye, which as a result began to sting ferociously and I had to flee into the hotel to wash it out with fresh water. However, walking along far along the beach, which stretched for kilometres in both directions, was a great pleasure.

For most of the day, I was perfectly happy to sit in the large pavilion overlooking the beach, reading the books I had brought with me and a compelling novel set in the contemporary Philippines which Vernon lent to me, and gazing at an ever-dramatic seascape of—most of the time—a crashing, white-capped surf and of a deep azure with shifting patches of aquamarine and emerald. Lunch was served at the pavilion, so that I did not have to go to the big dining hall. For the afternoon, I would have my thermos filled up with ice-water and rum at the pavilion's bar and sip contentedly for hours. For dinner I would go to the big dining hall, where the food continued to be very much to my liking. It was not *haute cuisine*, to be sure, but it was copious, nutritious, and mostly very tasty: salads and veggies galore, lots of well prepared pork, chicken, and fish. Beef was not much in presence. I heard one guest complaining about the cheap ox-tails served, but I found them delicious. The soups, which I like hearty and spicy, were, to be sure, thin and bland; in fact, all the cooked foods were bland, not at all of the spiciness which I associate with the Caribbean, and some guests complained about this, but for me it was not a big negative. The resort also featured themed restaurants, which were free but for which you had to make a reservation. Here you had at-table service all the way. Tammy, Vernon, and I tried the Japanese (!) restaurant, and found it very much to our liking; ditto the fish restaurant the big pavilion was transformed into one evening .

Every night featured entertainment. One night brought extraordinarily accomplished dancing, folk- and ballet-style both, on the stage which fronted the large courtyard. Every night, a combo of talented musicians played both Cuban and American pop music in the huge bar lounge on the main floor; they gladly played to request, and the three of us spent hours there. Late in the evening, in my room, ignoring the faint creakiness of the chair I was sitting on—the Bella Costa was one of the older hotels along the strip—I would usually turn on the television (getting to know how its switches worked was a bit of a challenge at the beginning). I discovered to my surprise, it offered also non-Cuban channels, including a German, Chinese, American (sports only), and a Montreal channel.

One afternoon Vernon and I broke away from the hotel's bubble with a trip by taxi to nearby (6 km or there-about) Varadero. This was the Cuba of the lovingly maintained 1950's cars and the occasional horse-drawn (and in the countryside, even oxen-drawn) cart. Far less motorized traffic than in any comparable Canadian or American town. A small part of the town with its plush-looking shops clearly catered to the tourists. The big attraction there were the cigars (expensive) and rum (cheap even when paid for with convertible pesos); Vernon could not keep away from the former; I did not buy anything. We wandered into the town's section which was for the locals. Very modest-looking shops and offices; one place looked like an Internet-cafe. Exteriors of most houses and

some buildings looked somewhat shabby, but I understand the typical Cuban family lavishes its attention on the interior. The people we saw, young and old, were well dressed in the super-casual, sporty way that has become the norm across the world. Of destitution there was no sign whatsoever. Vernon and I hailed a guy with a three-wheeled scooter to take us back to our hotel.

Our big excursion, for all three of us this time, was to Havana. For this, we hired a taxi complete with chauffeur and guide, the latter a young woman who was a university student and spoke excellent English. The capital was only 140 kilometres away, but it was a long two-and-a-half hour drive along highways that would not have been out of place in Canada of the 1930's. Even along the best portions, 80 kilometres per hour was the safe maximum, and the highway wound its way through many a town and city. For a while it skirted Cuba's mountainous and forested interior; here we stopped at a resting place, restaurant, and souvenir shop graced by a terrace which offered a spectacular vista. The parking area with its line-ups of '50's vintage cars looked absolutely surreal. Buses were continually going in both directions, with clusters of prospective passengers standing along the road. We understood that drivers of private cars were strongly encouraged to pick up such folk.

As we nearer the centre of Havana, traffic thickened but was still sparse by our standards. Our chauffeur aimed first for the boulevard along the renowned Seawall. Late in the morning though it was by now, everything looked deserted. For the first time, we noticed that the sky had filmed over, there was haze in the distance, and the air felt slightly smoggy. Was it from the diesel fumes of buses and trucks? I was astonished at the sight of the large highly ornate monument honouring the *Maine*, which had been totally destroyed, with great loss of life, in a mysterious explosion in 1898, thus launching the U.S on its war with Spain: that this commemoration testifying to Yankee imperialism had been allowed to continue to stand! Next we visited a cigar-factory: guided tours only. The vestibule was packed with visitors waiting for their turn in a guided tour. For me, the place was claustrophically crowded and noisy and I came close to stepping outside in order to wait there for Tammy and Vernon to come out after their tour. However, I relented and soon we were on our way in our tour. The factory was located in a building of several stories where hundreds of people were working. But the word "factory" is somewhat misleading: just about everything was done by hand; I saw no machine operation whatsoever—a recipe for full employment and the norm, I am sure, for much of Cuba's economy.

The privately-run restaurant which the chauffeur and our guide took us to did not live up to our standards. One look at the menu made me see it was expensive, and I ordered only soup, which was OK. Vernon and Tammy ordered a full lunch with a main course which they pronounced to be mediocre at best. In addition, service was excruciatingly slow: we were there for well over two hours. For the rest of the afternoon, we toured the city. Shabby-looking apartment buildings, their balconies, however, often colourfully festooned and with people looking out on the streets below; I would not call them slums. Handsome buildings in the neo-classical style in the government sector. A cafe which claimed to be the one where Ernest Hemingway liked to hang out, a large

bust of him next to the bar. It was crowded with tourists: a few minutes there was more than enough. Next, a visit to a large park busy with families and dominated by a fortress from the colonial era. A large store specializing in cigars; Vernon spent a lot of time here; for me, it was only look and see—the cigars way too expensive. Finally, a walking tour of Old Havana, all of it being beautifully if gradually restored. The only beggar, an elderly woman who did not look quite right mentally, I saw during my week in Cuba. In the nearby harbour, a German cruise ship looming high; many of the folks exploring this part of Havana must be from there. Coffee in a very large, again privately-run, restaurant. This time reasonable prices and efficient service; this is the kind of place we must seek out on our own in the future.

Back to the hotel now. It was turning dark. Our car was stopped by military-looking police. Our chauffeur was speeding according to them—so we understand after a while. It took him a lot of time to talk himself out of it, but then we were on a way again, and finally arrived, well into the evening, at our destination. Fortunately, the dining hall was still open, and afterwards we reviewed our day's adventures over a few drinks. I overindulged in “Tequila Sunrises,” and next day, feeling queasy throughout and eating very little, paid the penalty. In the evening we were bussed back to the Varadero Airport for our flight back to Halifax, back to the cold and snow (fortunately, not too much of the latter) of a Nova Scotia winter.

Cuba is a year now in my past. I have looked several times at the photos I took and so I believe I am in a good position to look back and draw up a balance of impressions. Like Vernon and Tammy, I went there mainly for summer-like relaxation in a scenic environment. Maybe there will be more sightseeing when I go back to Cuba, especially of the country's beautiful mountainous interior, but basically I was perfectly content with my routine at the Bella Costa Hotel. The negatives of Cuba are, of course, all political and economic, and I'm sure you'd get of an earful of them when talking with many a Cuban-American, and I recognize them myself: the one-party state, the political prisoners, the stagnant economy, and so forth. I myself was keenly aware for decades of the persecution of gays and lesbians. This has, thanks be to God, disappeared. Long before his death, owing to the reformist efforts of his niece, Fidel Castro repented of his homophobic sins, which he rightly attributed to the excesses of a traditional macho culture. Gays and lesbians are welcomed as visitors to the country; I am sure I saw at least one gay couple at the Bella Costa.

Cuba is to be applauded for its free health care and education, a model for all of Latin America and indeed the U.S. Despite the persistence of the one-party state, Cuba enjoys a vibrant culture of music, song, film, and literature. Yes, the standard of living is at the poverty level by Canadian standards, and so the people who work as at the resorts are grateful to be able to supplement their meagre incomes with the convertible pesos they receive as gratuities from the visitors they serve there; I'll never forget the graceful note of thanks written in excellent English I received from my chambermaid. The young lady who was our guide in our excursion in Havana, when she was asked by us if she looked forward to the restoration of normal American-Cuban relations and the lifting of the U.S embargo (which a large propaganda billboard in Havana pronounced to

be genocidal), and the inevitable cascade then of American investments, said she indeed looked forward to this, but her expressed anticipation seemed guarded, and rightly so. Cubans do not want and do not deserve the excesses of American neoliberalism with its 'Trumpian' divide between "winners" and "losers." Like most Cubans, I am sure, I hope that the Cuban state will morph over time into a robust social democracy, a supreme model indeed for all of the developing world. Perhaps the next time I visit Cuba, which I hope will be in the not too distant future, for I have become very fond of the country, the winds of positive change will be blowing even stronger..

February, 2017: The Surfside Resort Motel, Pompano Beach, Florida

Great that Ingrid and Marv met me at the Fort Lauderdale Airport. It was the darkness of well into the evening now, but it became soon obvious that we were driving through part of a metropolis; as I saw later on a map, it was the Greater Miami Area with Pompano Beach lying on its outskirts. High-rises almost right next to the motel. The motel, as I learned the next day, was built in '60's; however, it has been scrupulously maintained and renovated by the Polish-American couple who now own and run it as well as by their predecessors: everything gleams like new. My room was large and commodious and included a microwave and small fridge, in which Marv had thoughtfully placed bottles of water and cans of beer. I sat for a while, sipping a cold American beer, with Ingrid and Marv in front of the small apartment they were renting for two months. Back in my room, I watched television for half an hour or so; it was all about Trump on CNN, which was going to be the only news channel I'd be watching over the coming week.

The next morning starting at nine, I accompanied Ingrid in her daily three-kilometre walk mostly along the beach; the indefatigable Marv starts much earlier and goes for much longer walk. A beautiful walkway stretching for more than one kilometre together makes the walk a special pleasure which I was to repeat many times on my own as well. There was no time to linger because that day we were to be to head for Naples on the Gulf Coast to visit Baldwin and Lucy who were staying there for the month. Under clear blue skies and with temperatures in the mid-20's, the drive took about two hours straight west across southern Florida. Stretching to the horizon along both sides of the highway a landscape of tall grasses—must be marsh I thought—later woodland appeared as well. I looked for alligators in the creeks running along the road on my side of the car. Ingrid said she has spotted one, but I could not make out any—we were driving fast and alligators are well camouflaged. It took a Marv a while to find his way in Naples; he said more than once there was a mistake in the instructions Baldwin had given him. However, we finally made it, greeted first by Baldwin on the street at some distance from the condo he and Lucy were renting. There we were welcomed by Lucy as well as by their daughter Liane and her husband Jason who, along with their baby girl Alexis, were visiting from Toronto. I was pleased to be able to present Lucy and Baldwin with a copy of my memoirs—they are destined only for family and friends—which I had just printed off; Ingrid and Marv got theirs the previous evening.

As we were driving into Naples, I had already been impressed with its ultra-modern, upscale look, at least from what I was able to see: everything—houses, buildings, parks— simply looked beautiful. None of the grunginess of some areas which one inevitably encounters in virtually all Canadian and American cities. This impression was reinforced by the elegant restaurant on the waterfront—we sat on the terrace— where Baldwin treated us to lunch.

We returned to Pompano Beach late in the afternoon, and for my remaining days I followed the kind of pleasant, relaxing routine I had also enjoyed a year earlier in Cuba. Walks with Ingrid and by myself in which I got to appreciate even more the amenities of the walkway along the beach and venturing out on the pier stretching far into the water; there I saw close-up, for the first time in my life, the comical-looking pelicans on the look-out for any stray fish caught by the anglers there. I walked on the beach, but remembering my Cuban experience, did not swim, contenting myself with some shallow wading up to my knees. The near-perfect white of the sand bordering the water was offset by a broad band of faint-brown nearer to the low-lying dunes, and I remembered that I had read that many of Florida's beaches in the Miami area were being heavily eroded and endless truckloads of sand needed to be periodically brought in order to preserve them. Twice I stopped at Briny's, the Irish pub, for a cold beer; on the Sunday I was there crowds were already gathering to watch the Super Bowl later in evening. Although I am not at all a football fan, I watched much of the game in Ingrid and Marv's living room *cum* kitchen, but left to go to my own room and to bed when it seemed most obvious that the Atlanta team had the match all wrapped up, and then learning, to my utmost surprise, the next morning that in the final third the New England Patriots had forged ahead spectacularly and won.

Much if not most of my time I spent with Ingrid and Marv—often joined by his sister Karen and her husband Gerry who were staying at the same motel—relaxing outdoors in front of their apartment, a large parasol effectively shielding us, except in late morning and early afternoon, from the sun, which was bright and powerful even in February. Temperatures remained summer-like, reaching the high twenties and even thirty during my last few days, but the humidity stayed away. There was a attractive swimming pool—equipped with a remarkable mechanical contraption by which the physically handicapped could lower themselves into and raise themselves from the pool—but I did not go in, content as I was to read Margaret Atwood's two most recent novels supplemented during the last two days by Jodi Picoult's most recent, ultra-contemporary novel Ingrid had read and highly recommended and which I, too, found most compelling.

I went with Ingrid and Marv to a Sunday morning service at a Baptist church. I enjoyed the singing and the music as well as the upbeat, welcoming ambiance of the service. The sermon, however, was too repetitious and commonplace to justify its length, being basically a minutely narrated disquisition on the trials and tribulations of Joseph in Egypt, as told in the book of Genesis, which finally, of course, end in complete vindication and triumph for him, the moral of the story being that in all the twists and turns of our lives, which are surely inevitable, we must see the guiding hand

of God, who will make it all good for us. From the drive to the church, which was located at quite a distance from our motel, I had an insightful look at parts of Pompano Beach which were less upscale, perhaps working or lower-middle class, with touches of grunginess far removed for the touristy glitter of the boulevards along the sea-board

A great pleasure of my stay in Pompano Beach was being utterly spoiled by Ingrid and Marv. I treated them to a nice Italian restaurant and in return they took me, along with Karen and Gerry, to an elegant large restaurant which served American-style classics, but apart from these two outings, I had all my meals with them, with Ingrid as the superb cook she always is. I was very touched when, in our final goodbyes at the Fort Lauderdale Airport, Ingrid got out of the car and took my arm and guided me into the terminal, making sure my flight was still scheduled on time, and sending me on my way to Security clearance—with my less than acute one-eyed vision that boon of reassurance from her was most welcome.

So how do I compare the Cuba of sedate socialism and the America (or at least, the southern Florida which I visited) of hustle-and-bustle capitalism? Of the horse-pulled carts still seen occasionally in the countryside and in the smaller towns compared with the endless streams of motorized traffic? The uniformity of public social and political discourse of one country compared with the raucous, conflicted debates all over the place of the other country? Cuba needs certainly needs more of the pluriformity it is lacking now, but, on the other hand, I strongly believe the United States of America (or the perennially “Excited States of America,” as one Canadian wit once called it) needs to take the edge off its capitalism, so hard and brittle at the same time, and marred too often by the “winner / loser” mentality. An unbridled capitalism inevitably becomes as detrimental to a country's wellbeing as a rigid, authoritarian socialism. The Aristotelian golden mean that comes with social democracy is my choice.