

# CUBICLE TO CUBA

*desk job to dream job*

LOOK UP

HEIDI SIEFKAS

## **CUBICLE TO CUBA**

*desk job to dream job*

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Disclaimer: This book describes the author's experience and opinions relating to her travels through Cuba and around the world. Some names, details, and sequences in the book have been changed to protect the identities of those involved. The rest is a true adventure.

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# DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the Cuban people who have welcomed me into their culture and hearts. A sincere *mil gracias* to all who opened the doors into Cuba for me and, in essence, for all of us.

Here's to looking up!

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# PROLOGUE

Under a banyan tree decorated with white holiday lights, I sipped a mojito and savored a meal of squash, slow-roasted pork, and *moros* (rice and beans). Seated at a table for one on La Ferminia's patio—a place where Fidel himself has dined—I was near Havana ringing in the New Year and a new era. I didn't know that, coincidentally, it was years before, on January 1st, 1959, when Fidel and his revolutionaries turned a page in Cuban history.

I, too, turned a page in my own history. Whether it hinged on a New Year's resolution, the liquid inspiration of multiple mojitos, or a combination of both, I made a big audacious decision that evening. That's when my life as an author and adventurer began.

Join me now! On these pages, I share my adventures of leaving behind the corporate world of “Cubicle Land” to embark on a career of traveling and writing around the world via Cuba. This travelogue highlights another side of Cuba and the perspective gained over my years of life on the road. Be prepared for twists, turns, and even jumps. This adventure starts in Cuba and makes its way to Kauai, Australia, and other far-flung places, but always returning to Cuba for more.

*Cubicle to Cuba* will teach you about Cuba, but it will also inspire you to think out of the cubicle, travel more, and embark on your own Life 2.0.

Make it full of adventure!

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# CHPTR 01

# CUBICLE LAND

Life in South Florida was copasetic. I was healthy and loved. I was gainfully employed. My daily commute of fifteen minutes to my Fort Lauderdale office wasn't bad. The job for this start-up company to which I'd lend my marketing and public relations panache even paid well.

However, I felt stuck in Cubicle Land. I wasn't even a worker bee; I was one of the head honchos directing a team of cubicle workers. Although my title was in communications, I dabbled in everything: budgeting, business development, human resources, web design, and coffee-making.

Was status quo what I wanted?

If you've worked for a start-up, you know it's hard work mixed with a grand probability for failure. Depending on the day of the week, the mood of the president, or the attitudes of the investors, the company's course could drastically change at a moment's notice.

I had worked at the start-up only about two months before my New Year's Resolution in Cuba. When I returned to Cubicle Land after driving straight into the office from the Miami Airport, it was one of those days where the investors and VP of Operations had an epiphany. They wanted to do an about-face and scrap our marketing messaging, branding, and direction for sales. Needless to say, I felt like I lived in a Dilbert comic. You know the one. The manager holds a meeting to keep himself busy and then delegates more work for the entire team causing them to head in the wrong direction.

The VP of Operations—whom I and a few others nicknamed Retardiendo because he was Italian and a box of rocks—led this restructuring much like a Dilbert manager would. What kept me sane during the lengthy and subsequent meetings? The daydreams of returning to Cuba and escaping this hell on earth: Cubicle Land.

I didn't know it at the time, but Cuba also has something similar to Dilbert. It's called Lindoro Incapaz, or Lindoro, the incapable. Unlike the typical Dilbert comic Americans see, *Lindoro Incapaz* is a TV show featuring the manager of a government store, Lindoro. A perk of his position is having a government-owned car to be used only for store-related purposes. Of course, Lindoro drives the car and picks up pretty ladies in it. His lack of responsibility leads to imagining a similar lack of the store's success coupled with the antics of employees making peanuts every month. Like in Dilbert, Lindoro isn't a caricature of just one manager but the sum of many. I'm sure you can relate!

Whether it's a Retardiendo or another incapable in charge, to heck with Cubicle Land.

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## CHPTR 02

# THE MANNA CALL

While dealing with spreadsheets, editorial calendars, and marketing budgets in Cubicle Land, I received a late-morning call. No, it wasn't from Publishers Clearing House saying I had won millions of dollars. This call involved working in Cuba, which meant I could quit then and there.

The call came from a friend and former colleague. Jacqui and I had worked at the same travel company several years before. She and her husband, Rene, originally from Quebec, lived in Fort Lauderdale. They were sailors, travel lovers, and fun people to hang around with especially when it was wine-thirty.

I answered the phone with "Hey! Long time no see." With a slight French accent, Jacqui said, "I've been watching you and your travels. I have an opportunity for you."

From our conversations as well as on LinkedIn and Facebook, I knew Jacqui worked for another travel agency outside of Florida.

Perhaps she heard of another position through the grapevine for me?

She started, “The last time we had dinner, you said you wanted to work on the other side of travel, with feet on the street leading tours.”

“That’s right. I’m suffocating in Cubicle Land. What do you have in mind?”

“My agency just got a license to lead educational, people-to-people tours in Cuba. You speak Spanish. You live in South Florida. You’ve been to Cuba. We start in two weeks with our inaugural trip. It could be your training tour.”

The unexpected three-sixty-degree turn of events caused me to stall. I couldn’t say a thing. My mind ran the scenario loaded with umpteen questions and uncertain outcomes. Was I ballsy enough to quit my job, knowing the money wasn’t the same—but nor was the lifestyle.

After a moment of silence, Jacqui said, “What do you think? Don’t you believe you’d be perfect? This is *you*.”

“Honestly, I’m blown away. Two weeks is soon. Can I think about it overnight?”

“*Absolutment!* Call me tomorrow.”

I hung up the phone and immediately texted my PIC (Partner In Crime), Brian.

*H: would i b stupid to take a job in cuba?*

*B: no go for it! :)*

The remainder of the day, I was the epitome of a Dilbert manager. My mind absent, I got little if anything done. I spent time going to the bathroom, drinking coffee, and rearranging my Post-its®. All I needed was a smoking habit to boot. That would make me the least efficient worker of the day.

That evening at home, I wrote down my thoughts on typical “pros and cons” columns. Seeking advice from my parents wouldn’t do, knowing everything *logical* would point to status quo: salary, insurance, and an easy commute to work in the U.S.

However, something was pulling me to the *illogical* route. Yep, my gut!

After a call with Brian, a sleepless night, and a morning spin class, I called Jacqui from my black Honda Accord (aka Honda Limo) on my way to the office. “Jacqui, I’ll take your offer to go to Cuba. It’s perfect. What do I need to do?”

“Bravo! Most important is doing our paperwork.”

“Our paperwork?”

“*Oui, oui.* I’m going with you on the first trip. You get training from our tour manager, Enrique, while I evaluate the hotels and program. Both of you will be sharing the remaining trips of the year.”

Jacqui needed to call headquarters, so we hung up without getting all of the logistics. I had some reorganizing to do on my end, and I needed an exit strategy that was more graceful than just quitting. So I quickly put together a plan to have my assistant take my position with a salary increase to mirror more responsibilities. I’d take unpaid leave for a week and a half in

Cuba. Then I'd continue to work for another two weeks to make a smooth transition. I wouldn't leave anyone high or dry. Great!

Before the end of day, I stopped the company's president, Ted, in the conference room. Could I bug him a moment? Most likely, he thought I'd be presenting another campaign or giving him updates on the video production, but nope. I didn't dance around.

I said, "Ted, I was presented with another job I will take, and it's not with a competitor. I'll be leading tours to Cuba with free time to write. I leave for training in two weeks, but after my return, I'd be happy to smooth the transition over to my assistant."

Shocked that anyone would leave a good salary for day wages and tips, he said, "You continue to surprise me, but you're a nomad. Take care of the paperwork with my secretary and your assistant. Sorry to see you go."

That manna call certainly was unexpected, but the benefits would continue to unfold. I didn't realize it then, but Cuba was always there for me.

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## CHPTR 03

# A HAIL MARY FROM CUBA

My first impression of Cuba? I wanted to know more about this country. The manna call would allow me to transform the sensory overload from that first trip into making sense of it all over the next months (which turned into years).

As on all of my travels, I wrote down my immediate observations and feelings about Cuba in my journal and took hundreds of photos. However, I wanted to share at least *un poco* (a small piece) of it with my clan. As someone who's always glued to her iPhone, I wrote *uno*—yes, only one—Hail Mary email. It came through an archaic PC at Havana's airport.

Subject line: *Hail Mary from Cuba*

Message: *Finally at a place with Internet, I wanted to let you know I have had a wonderful time. My quick snippet/review . . .*

*If you thought last summer in Alaska was different as far as subsistence living and on "Island Time," Alaska is like Manhattan in comparison to Cuba.*

*Without Spanish, this trip wouldn't have been possible.*

*The weather was incredible. I did some hiking, some salsa dancing, lots of eating, some beaching, lots of picture taking, and just gawking at the cars; all the pictures of Havana are spot-on. There are so many 1950s Chevys and Buicks, but here they're pimped out.*

*I certainly learned a lot. It hasn't even sunk in yet.*

*Happy New Year from Habana/Havana!*

*Love you! Heidi*

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## CHPTR 04

# MY SPECIAL PERIOD

I think everyone has a point in life when everything goes wrong—just one blow after another. If you read my previous books, you know I'm lucky to even be alive to share this story with you. In 2009 and 2010, I had a special period in which I suffered a freak tree accident that broke my neck. That blow sparked a sequence of other losses including my career, financial security, and most devastating of all—the deterioration of my marriage. I called this my *When All Balls Drop* moment.

Yes, I had lost everything simultaneously: health, marriage, career. However, I turned my losses into a springboard for a life change. I've become a living example of Post-Traumatic Growth. Its opposite effect—Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—gets all the press, but great things can be created from life's toughest obstacles. Mine was architecting a new life, what I call Life 2.0.

## CUBA'S SPECIAL PERIOD

Unlike *my* Special Period, Cuba's Special Period wasn't a nine-month hardship but a near-decade of economic depression. Because of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its financial withdrawal from Cuba, the Cuban people suffered grave hardships. *El Periodo Especial* was marked by rolling power outages of eight hours or more, severe gas and diesel shortages, food rationing, and even famine. Cubans would say there was *nada* special about this Special Period. The era is deeply etched into all who lived it as a time when every Cuban lost twenty pounds and rode a Chinese bicycle. Due to the shortage of oil or electricity, many wouldn't know if they actually acquired something to eat whether they could cook it or not.

However, the upside from Cuba's Special Period (including the worst phase from 1989 to the mid-1990s) came with governmental changes that opened the country to tourism. In turn, tourism brought necessary revenue into the country that continues today. In fact, the idea of *paladares* (private restaurants) and *casa particulares* (B&Bs) started in the 1990s. Cubans could sell delicious guava pastries and even full meals of roasted pork and *malanga* (taro) in their homes. They could rent out rooms to travelers as well. However, at the beginning, all private businesses had to be attached to one's home and employees could only be family members.

In present-day Cuba, private businesses have grown tremendously. Since 2012, President Raul Castro has allowed business owners to operate nail salons, flower shops, and enterprises in many more categories. Today, these private businesses can be housed

in separate buildings and run by employees who aren't family members.

For example, on my first trip to Cuba I stayed with a couple, Alexis and Angi, at a *casa particular* in Miramar, a wealthy neighborhood just outside of Havana. They had only one room with a bathroom available. The nightly rent was thirty CUC (Cuban Convertible Pesos—roughly \$35) and it included a breakfast with fresh fruit from their backyard as well as bread, cheese, and ham. Over breakfast, Alexis and Angi shared with me their dreams of expanding to three rental rooms, but they had to save a lot and gradually acquire the right materials, as not all supplies or hardware were available. When I left, they gave me their business card to share with other travelers.

Not unlike my gained perspective from my Special Period and Post-Traumatic Growth, the PR spin of Cuba's Special Period foreshadowed what would come from private businesses and tourism in Cuba.

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# SLEEPING BENEATH A TREE

No sleeping experience can top my first trip to Cuba.

After touring Havana, I left to get a dose of nature in an area called Las Terrazas, about an hour's drive to the West of the city. With my small-town roots, Las Terrazas and its nature reserve were a needed change of pace from busy, crowded Havana. Nestled in the Sierra del Rosario mountains, this area was at one time deforested but replanted in terraces, thus the name *terrazas*. Rich in lakes, rivers, waterfalls, flora, and fauna, there I could enjoy adventure hiking, swimming in natural pools (*Los Baños del San Juan*), visiting coffee plantations, and experiencing rural cooking, music, and lifestyle.

It was on my first hike in Las Terrazas that I spotted my first *tocororo*—the national bird of Cuba that's red, white, and blue like the Cuban flag. Even though I've spent more than a hundred

and fifty days in Cuba since, I haven't seen another *tocororo*.

This trip was also the first time a Cuban man made a pass at me, but I can't say it was the last time. Cuban men are famous for being *mujeriegos* (womanizers). It just would have been better if the man were not my local guide and driver with whom I had to spend the next two days. Persistent as Roberto was, I left my first trip (and every other trip) to Cuba without a Cuban husband or boyfriend. After my first marriage to a Brazilian, I learned that "Once you go Latin, you do NOT go back."

Although being in nature in Las Terrazas was refreshing, the constant *piropos* (pickup lines) were entertaining but a tad exhausting. So when evening fell, I happily retired to my own room at a *casa particular* (private home). A nearly eighty-year-old man, Margarito, his daughter China, her husband, and their two little girls lived in a small two-bedroom home on a hill overlooking the fertile valley below. This was my first encounter with Cuba's housing shortage. It has been and continues to be common to have multiple generations in the same home and far more people per home than what would be normal in most countries. I didn't know it at the time, but I would be sleeping in the parents' and kids' room. They would house me for a night and sleep elsewhere to make money for the family.

As Margarito showed me my room and bathroom, I stopped in my tracks. Right above my bed running through the bedroom was a large branch of a mango tree. Instead of removing the tree when Margarito expanded his house to accommodate his growing family, he built the room *around* the tree.

Knowing my history with trees, many think I'm afraid of them. Yes, shortly after my accident, I was highly observant of trees and

their low-lying branches as well as wind and weather conditions. However, I quickly adapted and put those worries behind me. That evening I had a peaceful sleep—a memorable sleep as well. Still on my bucket list is a desire to sleep in a tree house. It hasn't happened yet, but sleeping beneath a mango tree that's part of a house almost counts, right?

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# DOS CURRENCIES

In my travels—whether across Europe (before the Euro) to modern-day travel in South America—I’ve never needed to understand more than what the exchange rate was for the dollar in the one currency of my locale. I’d exchange U.S. dollars as I needed them; however, I’d prefer to take cash directly out of the ATM or use my credit card. As a seasoned traveler, I’d also have emergency cash squirreled away in my money belt, under my hiking boots’ insert, or scattered through my bags. When the shit hits the fan, I knew I’d have to have cash.

Being used to First World banking and technology plus simple math, it was hard to wrap my head around Cuba’s two national currencies: the Cuban Peso (CUP) and the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC). If that seems complicated, just wait. The two types of currencies aren’t created equal; they’re like comparing apples to oranges.

The CUP is the currency with which citizens are paid from their government jobs. It's also the currency used to purchase staples and domestically produced products. The government instilled the CUC in 1994 during the Special Period to eliminate the use of the U.S. dollar. The CUC is used by tourists for hotels, rental cars, meals, souvenirs, and cigars. It's also used by Cubans to purchase high-ticket items such as refrigerators, washing machines, and imported goods including Spanish olive oils and wines.

The CUC was created to be 1:1 with the U.S. dollar. But over the years I've been traveling to Cuba, the exchange rate has been 1:0.87 or one U.S. dollar to 0.87 CUC. Why? Cuba imposes a ten percent surcharge for converting U.S. dollars plus another three percent surcharge because the transaction involves foreign currency.

There are roughly twenty-five CUPs for every one CUC. For ease, let's say one CUP is approximately a nickel in the U.S. In essence, CUPs are worth peanuts. The mojito that costs anywhere from three to six CUCs in a restaurant or hotel is between seventy-five and one-hundred-fifty CUPs. This doesn't seem like a problem until you know this: the average Cuban (nearly eighty-five percent of the country's population) works for a state school, hospital, manufacturer, hotel, or other business and makes three to five hundred CUPs a month. That's between twelve and twenty CUCs a month. So my high-end mojito at Havana's Nacional Hotel costs anywhere from one third to one half of a Cuban's monthly salary.

How can someone who's employed by the state survive? This is what I ask and so do all of the guests I tour with.

What has happened? Many Cubans have migrated from state employment to private businesses (primarily working with tourists) so they get access to CUCs. Perhaps there are one or two breadwinners in a Cuban multigenerational home. They earn CUCs while the rest of the family earns CUPs and works for peanuts. Without families and neighbors helping each other, most Cubans wouldn't have survived the Special Period, nor would they get by even today.

## **MEETING RAIMUNDO**

In 2013, Jacqui and I treated ourselves to a convertible car ride in Havana. That's when we met Raimundo. In his early fifties, Raimundo used his father's classic, hot pink, Chevrolet 1957 convertible a couple of nights a week to supplement his daytime state income as a paramedic. His story is quite common. In fact, many Cubans rent classic cars from their owners (including Raimundo's father) to earn extra income. Many of today's Cuban youth are pursuing tourism-related careers as waiters, tour guides, musicians, or something in the arts. Many bypass the free college and postgraduate education in lieu of making money in hospitality immediately. What will happen? It will bring about a "brain drain" in the Cuban society. This contrasts sharply with the success marks of the Revolution: free education, world-renowned healthcare, and high literacy rate.

## **ONE CURRENCY ONLY**

In late 2013, the Cuban government announced it would revert to one currency only. Which one will it be—the CUC or CUP? I'm no economist, but either would seem difficult. However, Plan A is to have only CUP and eliminate CUC.

Over the years since this announcement, though, both CUP and CUC have been circulating. However, increasingly more of my Cuban contacts prefer U.S. dollars for purchases and tips. Many fear the CUC will disappear and devalue completely. Abroad, the CUC is useless, so people stockpile U.S. dollars in hopes of leaving the country for a brighter future. As of 2017, both CUP and CUC are still in use, with Cuban businesses increasingly accepting U.S. dollars.

Regardless, most Cubans seem to have a built-in calculator “CUP to CUC to *fulá*” (Cuban slang for U.S. dollar). They astonish me, like Dustin Hoffman’s autistic savant character in the 1988 movie *Rain Man*. But I’m no *Rain Man*. I struggle with numbers. That’s why I travel with my iPhone calculator, count my guests twice, and always have a buddy system for my guests, which I call the *compay* system. (See My *Compay* System)

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# PACKING LIST FOR CUBA

Packing for a trip can be difficult. What's the weather like? What type of activities will you be doing? Will you have laundry available? All these questions would run through my head—and yours, too. However, if you're going to Cuba anytime soon, I suggest packing my top three essentials for traveling there.

## **AMERICANS NEED CASH**

First, you will need cash if you're an American. If you are from another country, you can disregard this and use your credit and debit cards in Cuba. Mind you, this would be true only at select locations, primarily large hotels, as not all establishments have the phone lines nor infrastructure to process credit or debit cards. Because of more than sixty years of embargo or blockade, American banks don't do business with Cuba and thus you won't

find any U.S. banks in Cuba. That reality requires you to bring all the cash you need for expenses, souvenirs, shows, meals, and mojitos.

Back in the States, it has been years since I carried cash except for maybe a twenty in my wallet to cover a rare occasion when a credit or debit card or PayPal isn't accepted. Because most Americans have relied on cards so frequently, budgeting cash isn't their strong suit. More times than I can count, guests confess they've run out of money. Good thing that accommodations and almost every meal are included on the tours I lead. But when you are on a YOLO (You Only Live Once) trip, why skimp on the mojitos or extra souvenirs because you didn't bring enough cash?

How much is enough? It depends on your travel style and if you like art or want to drink wine, beer, or mojitos. However, the quick and dirty is this: *Touring Cuba is not cheap*. You may think this Third World country will be like going to Mexico in the '80s and '90s, but nope. Everything in Cuba is hard to come by and more expensive than you might expect. Why? The U.S. embargo prohibits trade between U.S. and Cuba as well as severely limits the commerce between third-party countries and Cuba. At its beginning in 1962, Cuba had the economic support of the USSR with abundant supplies, including food, medicines, machinery, cars, and more. Since the Soviets pulled out, the economic result of the U.S. embargo can be witnessed in stores. Materials of all sorts from home repair, common foods, and other items are scarce. Contrary to popular opinion, the U.S. embargo cannot be lifted by a president but only by a vote in the U.S. Congress. Thus, until further notice or a vote in the U.S. Congress, Cuba depends on allies that ship goods halfway around the globe. Getting rice from Vietnam or building supplies from China costs

money. So getting back to how much money is enough: Gauge at least \$100 per person per day in spending money—and that’s separate from accommodations and transportation.

Also factor in the ten percent surcharge for U.S. dollars plus three percent for any international currency conversion. As mentioned, one hundred U.S. dollars converts to eighty-seven CUCs. With this unfavorable surcharge rate, many American tourists began traveling with Canadian dollars or Euros. At some point along this multiple-decade dual-currency journey, that has been a favorable solution—until the markets changed. It’s a gamble. For example, in early 2016, various guests changed U.S. dollars to Canadian dollars to get a favorable exchange rate. Then the Canadian dollar tanked in value, leaving them short of money they needed. No U.S. credit or debit cards could bail them out.

Cash is still “king” in Cuba. I forecast this to be true for a long time even after the embargo is lifted and/or American banks loosen their restrictions. To use credit cards, of course, phone lines or Internet are needed, which is infrastructure available only in the large cities and hotels. Also, converting into CUCs must be done in Cuba; there are no kiosks in Miami or New York that convert to CUCs.

## **CAMPING IN CUBA**

Also, be sure to pack toilet paper and hand sanitizer. Yes, going to Cuba is like camping. The women especially will be challenged because, for some reason, the country lacks toilet seats. A trip to Cuba will be like the Suzanne Somers’ thigh master routine complete with squatting, hovering, and a good leg workout. You’d find toilet seats, soap, and toilet paper in most hotels, but

in standard public bathrooms, an attendant gives you a small amount of paper and probably a heavily used bar of soap you'd prefer to skip.

To prepare for this kind of camping, bring your own hand sanitizer. Hint: a pretty scent covers up times you don't smell fresh after a day of melting in the Cuban heat and humidity.

## **PACK YOUR PATIENCE**

This is an essential packing item regardless of where you travel, but Cuba in particular. You've heard the expression "island time" when everything runs at a slow, relaxed, no-rush pace. In Cuba, "island time" stretches to another level. So if you're an anal clock watcher, take a deep breath and a chill pill (aka mojito). Simply embrace the slower service and long waits for activities as increasingly more tourists and cruise ships flock to the island of Cuba.

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CHPTR 08

# MY COMPAY SYSTEM

Most authors admit to waiting tables or bartending while writing their novels, but not many can say they took my route of leading tours to Cuba and beyond. It requires being away from home, long eighteen-hour days, and the patience of a saint, but my “office” always changes.

When on tour, my number one goal is to bring everyone back from a fun-filled adventure healthy and happy. However, on my training tour, I made a big boo-boo. In the midst of a small accident where an elderly woman stumbled out of the tub and sprained her finger, my mentor, Enrique, went to the international clinic with the guest. In the meantime, I was to escort the group to the local botanical garden and back. I counted the group with what I thought was the amended number of correct guests. Then, we left. Ten minutes down the road, our local guide, Yislaine

(who later became my good friend and work partner for a year) received a call saying a female guest was left behind. I felt stupid. After a slight change, in a rush, and due to little sleep, I had counted *wrong*. I failed. If I'm to bring everyone back to the U.S., I need to at least count everybody *right*.

Knowing this was a simple thing that could interrupt my most basic duties—to not leave anyone behind—I needed a solution. So I piggybacked on the buddy system used in the military, in SCUBA diving, and even in kindergarten. However, this idea needed a Cuban flair.

Most people know that *amigo* is friend in Spanish, but saying “*amigo* system” was far too boring. I chose *compay* (COM-pie), which is primarily used in Cuba to mean friend or *compadre* (similar to comrade in Russian). Perhaps you've heard of Compay Segundo, a famous musician from the Buena Vista Social Club. So on my second tour and every tour after, I explained the word *compay* and picked a *compay* for each traveler. The requisites were that: 1) No two *compays* could be roommates and 2) It was better if they didn't know one another. This provides more security and certainty that all guests received the asked-for wake-up calls or that the night owls came back from the disco. It also sparks getting to know more people on the tour, which is a big benefit of the whole experience.

Although many thought this system childish at first, they realized it made every stop or meeting point more efficient. If a *compay* went missing, instead of going down the list name by name, I'd know exactly who to look for in the market, square, or theatre. Although it started out as a CYA (Cover Your Ass) for me, the *compay* system morphed into appreciated group bonding. By

being accountable for another person for eight days or more, friendships were sparked and lots of photos with *compays* resulted, too.

The *compay* system works. Albeit at times, some guests I'd like to lose.

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CHPTR 09

PEEPEE COIN-  
SOCIALISM IN  
CUBA DOESN'T  
COVER TOILETS!

Regardless of your politics—red, blue, indie, or other—I learned that socialism (whether in Cuba or elsewhere) has its benefits. For example, everyone gets free education and healthcare. However, the buck stops (at least in Cuba) at the *baño*.

In Cuba, bathroom quality is questionable at best. As mentioned earlier, it's wise to bring your own toilet paper and hand sanitizer. Don't be shocked, ladies, when you see that somewhere along the line, toilet seats are gone. Most of the toilets, except in the hotels and nicer *paladares*, don't have them. Think about it. At Home Depot, which doesn't exist in Cuba, when you buy a commode, you have to buy a toilet seat separately. In places where home

repair goods are in limited supply, toilet seats don't make the cut!

With all of the minuses of the *baños*, it's hard to believe that in a country with free education and healthcare, you pay a twenty-five *centavos* fee to use the *baño*. Yes, you must pay to use the restroom. At most *baños* across Cuba stands an attendant with a small table and a basket outside the lavatory stalls. This person, male or female, offers you entrance to the restroom along with one or two squares of Cuban toilet paper in exchange for a twenty-five *centavos* coin. If you want more squares, you bring your own TP packs. You can also employ the technique used by *Seinfeld* character Elaine and ask for a square from a *company*, but sometimes a person can't spare a square!

Keep in mind that every *baño* is different except for needing twenty-five *centavos*, which I renamed the peepee coin circa 2013. Some have liquid hand soap and others an antique bar of soap. Some are hooked up to running water, others not. If there's no running water, the attendant follows with a bucket to fill the tank and flush down your peepee and/or doodoo.

Remember, don't throw your paper in the toilet. Place all tissues as well as sanitary napkins, tampons, or other items in the wastebasket next to the commode. The plumbing is weak on its best days, so do yourself (and the next person) a favor by using the trash can.

I've never been fond of paying for a bathroom attendant, but let's face it, when you really have to go—whether it's traveler's diarrhea or one beer in, one beer out—you'd gladly pay more than twenty-five *centavos* to go.

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CHPTR 10

SAVE WATER,  
DRINK RUM, AND  
SHOWER WITH A  
FRIEND

No doubt you've seen a T-shirt from Mexico that says "Save Water, Drink Cerveza" to promote Corona beer drinking as well as bring humor to those who get Montezuma's revenge. Through traveling to Cuba, I have taken that message to a whole new level.

"Save Water, Drink Rum, and Shower with a Friend" defines my way to let people know the water is unsafe to drink and in extreme shortage, even at the hotels where we stay. On several occasions, I've had unexpected water issues.

After the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, began in 2014, I found myself in Cienfuegos, a beautiful city of one hundred-fifty-thousand people on the south-central coast of Cuba. The first

morning after our late-night arrival at the hotel, I noticed that the water coming out of the tap ranged in color from yellow to brown. I immediately reported it to the reception and maintenance people. (Confession: I had noticed a little discoloration as I showered that morning after my run, but I didn't want to skip a shower because of yellow, brown, or cold water. Growing up on a Wisconsin farm with its own well and cistern, I was used to this.)

The hotel people explained they'd recently received a water truck delivery, as they weren't connected to city water. Perhaps the water tank on the roof had rust in it that got stirred up with the delivery. While some guests showered, others opted to wait it out. As an apologetic gesture, the hotel manager gave all the guests extra bottles of water for drinking and brushing their teeth. Management predicted that, after running the water for the remainder of the day, it would clear up. Indeed, by day two, it finally cleared up—another example of patience and island time.

## **NOT EVEN A DROP**

After one of my morning runs along the Cienfuegos seawall, dripping in sweat, I entered my room, peeled off my drenched spandex, and finagled my way out of my sports bra. There I stood before the shower, naked and smelly. I turned the two knobs and—nothing. Only a slight sound of pipes creaking. Unbelievable. I turned them again off and on, off and on. Still nothing, *nada*, not even a drop of water.

Faced with a half-hour before breakfast, I reviewed my options: skip the shower, use bottles of water from the mini-bar, or turn to my disposable facecloths for removing make-up. I opted for the last one, a somewhat French bath with bug repellent and

sunscreen as my perfume. Then I quickly went down to the lobby to report the issue and find a solution for my guests who would shortly discover the same thing—only two bottles of water for each guest to brush teeth, wash face, and flush toilet. Thankfully after a full day of touring, we returned to the hotel not only to have running water but *hot* water that wasn't yellow. Victory!

A good rule of thumb: save water, drink rum, AND shower with a friend.

More on rum to come.

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CHPTR 11

WHEN LIFE  
GIVES YOU  
LEMONS, MAKE  
CANCHANCHARAS

You've heard it time and time again whether from your mother, your friends, or a pop culture TV host: When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.

It's healthy to live in a manner of spinning negatives into positives. Like you, I've been dealt both good and bad hands of cards. It comes down to what you do with any situation that makes the difference.

After nearly twenty trips to Cuba, I have witnessed the spirit of the entire island as turning lemons into lemonade. It's a Cuban way of life. The Cubans I've met are passionate and kind with a stoic essence of the Midwest or Scandinavia. However, it's their zest

for life and living in the moment that makes Cuban culture rich and distinct. If life deals them a bad hand of dominos or worse, they move on, perhaps laughing about it. They enjoy the simple things in life such as smoking a good Cuban cigar, drinking a Cuban coffee, sipping Havana Club Reserve, or just watching the world go by with a friend, neighbor, or family member.

I thought that this play on words—combined with a Cuban cocktail recipe for a *canchánchara*—would be a way to make the lesson sink in. Who doesn't like a good cocktail now and again? A *canchánchara*, the signature drink of Trinidad, Cuba, is easy to make and turns those bitter lemons into a sweet libation.

So, make no excuses for ignoring your duty and your health. When life gives you lemons, make *cancháncharas*!

## CANCHÁNCHARA RECIPE

Ingredients:

- 2 oz. Cuban rum (*ron cubano*) or *aguardiente*
- 1 tbsp. honey (*miel*)
- 1 tbsp. lime juice (*limón*)
- 1½ oz. soda water (*agua gaseada*)
- Ice (*hielo*)
- Ceramic cup or lowball glass (*taza o vaso*)
- Straw or stirring stick (*absorbente o palito*)

Instructions:

1. Pour honey and rum into your desired cup or glass.
2. Stir with a straw or stirring stick until the honey dissolves.
3. Add lime juice, sparkling water, and ice.
4. Serve with a toast. *Salud!*

Most think that a *canchánchara* is easy to make but difficult to pronounce. I can attest it is rather *fácil* to make AND, after one *canchánchara*, pronouncing it gets easier. Don't believe me? Try it! Can-CHAN-cha-ra with the stress on the second syllable.