



By Andrea Sachs, February 3, 2012 - The Washington Post

Ludwig and I had the kind of relationship where I could ask him anything without fear of reproach. I questioned him about the rebellious rumblings of his youth, his wishes for the future and the state of his bathroom.

“Ludwig,” I shouted from the third-to-the-last row of the tour bus, “why don’t the public restrooms here have toilet seats? Do you have a toilet seat at home?”

His frank responses — it’s “cultural” to the first query, “yes” to the second — were surprising, not for the content but for the context. Ludwig Diaz Monte-negro was a Cuban guide and government employee; I was an American tourist in the communist country.

To preempt your interrogation: No, I didn’t sneak in through Canada or Cancun. Nor did I have to pose as a soprano to join a touring choral group or stock up on socks to distribute on a humanitarian mission.

All I had to do was sign up for a tour with Friendly Planet. Because regular folks — see me, over here, U.S. girl waving at you from the Malecon — can now visit Cuba, thanks to the Obama administration’s decision last year to reinstate licenses allowing U.S. tour operators to lead “people-to-people” trips to the island nation we’ve boycotted for more than 50 years. Prior to this move, the U.S. government limited travel to those with family members on the island and to groups with an academic, religious, cultural or do-gooder bent.

Since April, the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control has issued more than 100 people-to-people licenses to organizations both specialized (Wisconsin Alumni Association, National Trust for Historic Preservation) and mainstream (Insight Cuba and Friendly Planet).

The groups must submit itineraries that uphold — deep breath — “a full-time schedule of educational exchange activities that will result in meaningful interaction between the travelers and individuals in Cuba.” In other words, learn the Spanish phrase “mucho gusto.” You’ll be saying it to everyone you meet.

During my five days in Havana last month, I was pleased to meet Ludwig plus other denizens of Senor Rogers’ Neighborhood: a farmer, a cigarmaker, a waiter, a school director, an economics professor, a muralist, a con artist and many communists, active and lapsed. They were the people to my people.

Cuba is a poorly kept secret. As the largest island in the Caribbean, it sits like a fat mustache on the face of the Caribbean Sea. I’ve sailed by it many times on cruise ships, often accompanied at the rail by Cuban Americans with long, sentimental faces. The country’s hip-swinging music and lip-smacking cuisine have traversed the 90 miles to U.S. shores, defying an embargo that bans rum and cigars but can’t restrain the more abstract keepsake of culture.

Much as I tried to purge any preconceived notions, I arrived with stereotypes dancing in my head. And in many regards, they were confirmed. At the airport, classic American cars from the Eisenhower era idled curbside, awaiting passengers. En route to Havana, billboards splashed propagandist slogans, some pro-revolution and others anti-us (a.k.a. U.S.). (The half-century-old “blockade” is an incendiary topic. One sign stated that more than 70 percent of the population was born under the embargo.) Che Guevara’s face was as ubiquitous as McDonald’s golden arches are here. His mustachioed mien and disheveled locks appeared on roadside signs and posters, a reassuring fist pump of perseverance.

Within minutes of meeting Ludwig, our group started peppering the 37-year-old father of two daughters (see, no secrets) with questions. How much does a teacher earn? (About 450 pesos a month, or \$17.) How many Cubans own homes? (Eighty-five percent.) Can we go to a baseball game? (Not likely; the Havana team is playing 14 hours away near Guantanamo Bay.) We were like a school bus full of second-graders whose play button was stuck on “Why?” and “How come?”

Whenever we flirted with a delicate topic, Ludwig would remain poised but preface his response with “according to the government.” For example, a dissection of the two types of currencies (the peso, or CUP, used only by Cubans; and the convertible peso, or CUC, the hard currency) ended with, “Of course, I’m explaining how things should work in theory.”

Eventually, Ludwig let Havana take over the conversation. With eyes and ears wide open, we walked through the UNESCO World Heritage site, a restoration-plan-in-progress. In the Plaza de Armas, we stood among Spanish colonial buildings with romantic arches and balconies inhabited by the phantom bodies of windblown laundry. Shops and restaurants occupied the lower levels, the names recognizable to any global mall shopper: Benetton and Pepe Jeans. In the center of the square, vendors sold books and souvenirs celebrating Che and the revolution. Freelance artists tailed tourists, drawing caricatures for a tip or performing the popular (and brain-burrowing) ditty “Guantanamera.” Occasionally an old woman with a craggy face and a bent back would hold out an empty palm.

The city stayed mute on the subject of homelessness, so Isabel Leon Candelario, of the Historian’s Office of the City of Havana, answered for it. “Mainly, they don’t want to work,” she said. “There is plenty of work to be done, construction and agriculture. It is hard to find homeless. Maybe one or two people in the evenings, a drunk person.”

The government — socialist in its politics, communist in its ideals — guarantees housing and jobs, plus provides free health care and education. Despite ration cards, the Cubans’ biggest expenditure is food. Yet according to Ludwig’s footnote on the topic, most people can’t support themselves on federal wages and must work a second job to acquire hard currency. He, for example, receives extra funds through gratuities. Other secondary sources include tutoring, translating or performing in the streets with a pair of costumed dachshunds. Whatever it takes.

Old Havana was thick with Europeans and Americans. Tourists streamed in and out of stores selling kitschy souvenirs (Che, the Face of Cuba) and drinking establishments touting their Hemingway connection. (The tippling author apparently drank as much in Cuba as George Washington slept in the mid-Atlantic.) Thankfully, we fell into the welcoming custody of locals.

At an elementary school on a chewed-up street with flaking facades and chipped doorways — the “before” to the restoration project’s “after” — the director, a young woman with a glowing moon face, invited us inside. She ushered us toward the back of the courtyard, past a bust of national hero Jose Marti. A girl band of second-graders, dressed in maroon jumpers, sang verses written by the father of the Cuban revolution. The lead singer performed little dance moves in her pink sneakers. A trio of fifth-graders followed with a poem by Marti. They recited the written word by heart and from the heart.

After the show, the director escorted us into a classroom of first-graders. The children sat

politely at their desks, as if they'd been glued to their seats. No wiggling or giggling or note-passing. Only one student shattered the picture of perfection, falling asleep on his outstretched arm.

"Do you have any questions about the United States?" Ludwig translated for us.

A boy near the back raised his hand and shouted, "Is your country dangerous?" Another youngster threw out, "How did you come by plane?" (We think that one was either lost in translation or a trick question.) When we asked what the children wanted to be when they grew up, they responded with such kid-certified occupations as teacher, engineer, nurse, police officer, firefighter and soldier.

Before departing, we tossed out one final query: "What do you like most about your country?" The answers were revealing in their omissions. We heard "everything," "traveling," "transportation," "school" and "the whole island." The Castro brothers, Fidel and Raul, did not make the list.

Cubans young, old and in between are open to talking about whatever is on their minds, whether it's Spider-Man or the current regime. Our first afternoon, we stopped by Callejon de Hamel, a vibrant Havana community steeped in Afro-Cuban traditions.

"There are four religions with African roots," said Elias, our local guide. "We use them as a weapon against our shortages."

The practitioners employ art and dance to shoo away the bad spirits and attract the positive forces. Electrifying murals by local artist Salvador Gonzalez Escalona cover the concrete walls, a blinding storm of colors and images that at the very least discourage aesthetic monotony. Every Sunday, dancers perform rumba here in a "Fame"-style block party. We were an early-bird audience, but they agreed to hold a preview for us.

The plein-air show featured an emotional release of drums, percussion and singing. The music seemed to foil a sinister character with a pirate bandanna who slithered around like a snake.

During the event, young men hawked their CDs, standing this close as they waved their wares in my face.

To escape the hard sell, I wandered over to the entryway of El Barracon restaurant, where a lone waiter smoked a cigarette in the twilight. In perfect English, he told me that the eatery had opened four days earlier, benefiting from a revised law that encourages private enterprise. He said that he'd quit his job at a government-owned dining spot, where he'd worked the graveyard shift from 8 p.m. to 6:30 a.m.

"I made 12,000 pesos a month" — about \$500, he said. "I was rich, but I was tired."

He stamped out the glowing stub and resumed work mode, inviting me in for a meal of lobster, rice, vegetables and a mojito. At \$20, a bargain for an American tourist.

Usually by the end of the first day of an organized tour, I start to paw at the windows like a puppy trapped in a vehicle. Scratch, scratch — let me out. Despite the fun times on the bus, this was no different.

The Friendly Planet itinerary, packed with homegrown and institutionalized goodies, kept us busy from breakfast till dinner. The company never issued a statement requiring our participation, yet I sensed a tacit obligation to board the bus every day.

To clear up any ambiguities, I asked Ruby Goldman, the American representative of Friendly Planet, whether I could duck out to the beach. I had a plan in mind, involving a \$3 public bus ride that left from Parque Centrale. I just awaited permission. "You can do anything you want," she said inside the Havana Club's rum museum, "as long as you do the people-to-people. I'm not the police."

Despite her consent, I felt like a truant for skipping out on the planned activities. Guilt squelched my independent streak. Resolved to behave, I pulled out the day's events and started underlining.

What was on the list? A cigarmaker who rolled stogies (when not smoking his four a day) in a closet-size space heavy with smoke, and an organic farm outside Havana. Among bright green fields of mint, avocado and cabbage, I took away lessons on cooperative farming, plus a giant radish for an afternoon snack. Also: the Museum of the Revolution, whose collection of decrepit newspaper clippings, bullet-pocked tanks and display of the Granma, the fishing boat Fidel Castro sailed from Mexico to Cuba in 1956, converged in the former palace of fallen dictator Fulgencio Batista. And finally, for a sharp pinch of reality, a house call to an apartment complex (what HUD would call a project) on the outskirts of town (what we'd label the suburbs).

A family let us roam around the ground-level unit they'd recently moved into. The government had relocated them to the two-bedroom after their colonial domicile in Havana collapsed like a dollhouse made of dry crackers. The daughter's boyfriend admitted that it was hard to live outside the city. The commute to the hospital where he worked was a drag, he said from his perch on the couch, but at least they didn't have to pay rent.

Despite my fascination with the country, my enthusiasm did wane at times. And according to my diagnosis, it wasn't a post-mojito sugar crash.

At the Museum of the City, which followed visits to Revolution Square, the Museum of the Revolution and the Christopher Columbus Cemetery, I swept glazed eyes over the Spanish armaments and the porcelain figurines of pudgy cupids and their victims. Beneath a portrait of Spain's Queen Isabella, I was in a half-conscious state when a security guard approached me with a handful of U.S. currency. I shook my head, telling her that no, thank you, I didn't need any cash. Then comprehension dawned. I was her black market.

The government exacts a 10 percent tax on currency exchanges from U.S. dollars to CUC, which Cubans need to purchase supplemental sundries at supermarkets and other stores that trade in the hard currency. By comparison, my unpublished rate was one-to-one, no commission. I emptied out the Cuban portion of my wallet and replenished the U.S. side.

"You can't get more people-to-people than this," Ludwig said to me outside the supermarket.

He was referring to the skinny man with a bruise-colored front tooth who had handed me a silver coin. He called it a "souvenir." Suspicious of a gift of money, I returned the token. The

stranger gave it back to me; I returned it to him; back to me; then I gave it to a woman with a baby who didn't want it either. The man told me that he had a child who needed leche. I told him to take the coin and buy her milk. We were playing a game of hot potato with no clear goal in mind.

I was being scammed in a scheme that was so convoluted and misguided, I wondered whether I was being punked — if American reality TV programmers were allowed here. The idea was that the man would give me a coin and I would feel so touched by his generosity that I would repay him with high-value gratitude. Instead, I lost patience and flipped the evidence to the biggest guy on our trip, a kindly refrigerator from Charlotte named Dan. He made the coin, and the con man, disappear.

I added the hustler to the expanding party of people I'd met in Cuba. My list of characters had grown from a few individuals to a substantial group and now a sizable crowd. On my final night in Havana, I finally heard from the community.

In my hotel room at the Nacional, I flung open the windows that faced the Malecon, the broad esplanade that runs for more than four miles through Havana. It was Saturday night and packs of friends and sweethearts congregated on the seawall. They played guitar, swilled rum and kissed under the star-speckled sky.

I turned off the lights so that I could see the moon and listen without distraction to the voices of Cuba that drifted through the curtains and lulled me to sleep.