

WHAT THE CAMERA DID NOT SEE (No 2 Cuba)

I have always had a fascination with and desire to visit former communist countries. Maybe my curiosity springs from the cold war years when nobody saw through the impenetrable iron curtain to what lay beyond.

I also wanted to visit Cuba before the passing of Fidel and Raul Castro and maybe I was looking for some sort of living communist time capsule.

I travelled to Cuba on a package holiday in 2011. The words "package holiday" did not quite support the self-image of an aging Indiana Jones seeking out the hidden camps of Castro's revolutionaries, but the company did a very good job to meet my expectations.

The group itinerary was to start in Havana and travel the length of the island by coach, then flying back to Havana prior to departure some 14 days later. My camera had been busy but, I was ever mindful not to cause an international incident by photographing any military sites, equipment or personnel. I was playing this trip very safe.

On arrival in Santiago de Cuba, we learnt that this is the second largest city in Cuba and the place where on January 1st 1959 Fidel Castro proclaimed the victory of the Cuban Revolution from a balcony on the City Hall. Our guide was equally excited to remind us that we would be visiting the Santa Ifigenia Cemetery and this would not disappoint. How right he was.

The Santa Ifigenia Cemetery is the burial place of Jose Marti 1853-1895 (a Cuban poet, writer, and national hero) whose tomb is guarded by a continuous military presence of at least three soldiers.

The ashes of Frank Pais 1934-1957 (Cuban revolutionary) were interred in the cemetery in 1957 and since my visit Fidel Castro's ashes were also interred within the cemetery.

Many of the tombs and memorials are magnificent works of art. Some of the memorials had photographic images of the deceased or fallen. One such memorial caught my eye as it contained a row of photographs. These images could have been a memorial to family members or a group of young revolutionaries who had perished at the hands of General Batista.

I could not read the names or see the photographs very clearly so I edged closer with my camera to capture a picture to assist my later research. Now at this point if I had been a character in a pantomime the audience would have been shouting at the top of their voices, "It's Behind You". I had no such audience.....or so I thought.

Did I hear a cough maybe it was another member of the group, probably that guy with who had been smoking Cuban cigars throughout the trip?

Then I hear it again, I turn and there is a soldier standing a couple of metres away with a very large gun pointing at me. Having now gained my attention he lowers the gun and points to a space beside him. He wants me over there. It is not the time to protest my innocence, ignorance or general stupidity....it is the time to move.

Like a young gazelle I leap away from the memorial and am now standing beside this gun toting member of the militia. Have I made things easier for him....he can't miss from this range. Looking on the bright side.....he is not holding a spade. I've seen that scene in the movies, where some innocent, in the wrong place at the wrong time, has to dig their own grave.

I hold my breath whilst he points to the ground. There are a row of flat coloured bricks edging the path. It would seem I have crossed some invisible barrier (well invisible to me). I nodded and thanked him in as many languages as I could and made a hasty retreat to the tour bus, with my camera but no photograph.

Getting shot in a cemetery is not a good epitaph.

Links

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santiago_de_Cuba

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Ifigenia_Cemetery