

CUBA PEOPLE TO PEOPLE TOUR

February 16, 2017 – February 25, 2017
Naturalist Journeys (naturalistjourneys.com)

10-Day/9 night Cuban Birding & Cultural Tour with Greg Smith

We chose to go to Cuba as our winter get-a-way trip this year. Our goal was to see some of the countryside of Cuba and do some birding. I saw that Naturalist Journeys a nature and birding tour company was going to Cuba in February. We met our group of 15 in Miami, FL and our guide Greg Smith. Greg Smith has birded and searched out nature's wonders on all seven continents and has led natural history and birding tours in California, Alaska, Argentina, Chile, the Falkland Islands, South Georgia, and Antarctica. He is recently retired after a 27-year career with the California State Park System.

Before departing to the airport to check-in for our flight to Cuba our group had a good lunch at Versailles Cuban Cuisine restaurant in Miami. We checked in with American Airlines for our flight to Cuba. Once we cleared immigration we met our guide Gustavson "Gus" a local of Cuba.

Thurs. Feb. 16: SANTA CLARA – ISLAND OF CAYO COCO

Hotel Tryp Cayo Coco

Santa Clara is the capital city of the Cuban province of Villa Clara. It is located in the most central region of the province and almost in the most central region of the country, being the 5th largest Cuban city by population. Santa Clara was founded by 175 people on July 15, 1689.

Santa Clara was the site of the last battle in the Cuban Revolution in late 1958. There were two guerrilla columns that attacked the city, one led by Ernesto Che Guevara and the other led by Camilo Cienfuegos. On December 31, 1958, the combined forces of Guevara and Cienfuegos (along with other revolutionaries under William Alexander Morgan) attacked Santa Clara. The battle was chaotic, the defenders were demoralized, some fought, others surrendered without a shot. By the afternoon, the city was captured. This victory for Castro's troops is seen as the decisive moment in the Cuban Revolution as Batista fled Cuba less than 12 hours later.

We were suppose to visit the city of Santa Clara and stop at the Che Guevara memorial and then continue to the island of Cayo Coco. Because of our late flight from Miami we were unable to see Santa Clara. Instead we went straight to the island of Cayo Coco to check-in and get our rooms after dinner.

Fri. Feb. 17: CAYO COCO, CAYO PAREDON GRANDE & CAYO GULLERMO

Hotel Tryp Cayo Coco

Cayo Coco is a tropical island in the Jardines del Rey chain, off central Cuba. Known for its white-sand beaches and coral reefs, its northern coast is dotted with all-inclusive

resorts. Natural features include lagoons and marshes that are home to birds like the white ibis as well as a native colony of pink flamingos that's ranked among the largest in the Americas.

Our stay at Hotel Tryp Cayo Coco was nice, situated between a natural coastal lagoon and an extensive stretch of beach. After looking for birds in the morning we went back for lunch and a break till our next outing. Mike went for a swim in the North Atlantic and I walked the white sand beach for awhile. Next we went to look for birds at El Baga National Park and Cayo Paredon Grande where I got to see the Faro Paredon lighthouse. Faro Paredon is the name of the lighthouse located in the north sector of the island. It also has been named Faro Diego Velazquez, the first to explore these islands off Cuba's north coast in 1514. At a height of 40 meters (130 feet), its construction began in 1857 and ended in 1859, the year of the inauguration is exactly 100 years before the victory of the modern Cuban revolution. This lighthouse is still in use. We saw lots of birds and a group of flamingos.

El Baga National Park is located on Cayo Coco and is one of Cuba's 7 national parks. Named after the El Baga tree, known for its medicinal properties, the park measures 769-hectare (7.69 km² square kilometers). El Baga offers some interesting wildlife, including; turtles, 130 species of birds, iguanas, flamingos, alligators and crocodiles.

Cayo Paredon Grande: Faro Paredon is the name of the lighthouse located in the north sector of the island. Cayo Paredon Grande is a tiny island of only 8.7 km². The islands nearby are Cayo Roman, Cayo Coco and Cayo Guillermo. These islands are located in the King's Gardens archipelago (Jardines del Rey in Spanish). This little paradise is located north of the largest island of the archipelago, Cayo Romano, in the province of Camagüey in Cuba. Cayo Romano is not one island, but a group a many small islands gathered under the same name.

Sat. Feb. 18: CAYO COCO/TRINIDAD

Hotel Tryp Cayo Coco

This morning we drove southwest, crossing the island towards the Caribbean side and stopped at the historic city of Trinidad, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. With around 500 years of history in its stone built streets and colonial architecture the World Heritage Site of Trinidad is located close to the white sands and blue waters of Ancon and La Boca beaches. Our lunch was served in a paladar, a privately owned, family run restaurant. I had a combination plate of lobster, shrimp and chicken with rice and green beans. The food was very good. Then we had a little time to explore the city of Trinidad on our own. We walked down some of the cobble stone streets and peeked into the many restaurants and shops. One alley had people selling their handmade wares of wood, embroider cloths, cloth dolls, jewelry, handbags made out of recycled can tabs and many crochet articles. Lots of souvenir shops selling the usual t-shirts and postcards...mostly with a vintage car theme. Of course the shops sold cigars, rum, locally-produced honey, necklaces made from black watermelon seeds, red cornilla seeds and black jaboncilla seeds were popular. Anything to do with Ernest Hemingway and baseball. I purchased a

couple of handmade leather baseballs, a doll and a small table scarf. It was interesting to walk through town and take photos of the vintage cars and buildings. I liked peeking in the restaurants and bars and watching the bartenders make the delicious combination of white rum, sugar, fresh lime juice, soda water and mint "Mojito's". I took pictures of everything, buildings, colorful old doors, people, antiques, cars and a group of local men playing a game of dominos right on side of the street. As Mike and I were walking around I was on the lookout for a child that might like a stuffed teddy bear I had in my bag to give away. I saw a lady cradling three bottles of rum with one arm and holding the hand of her little boy with the other. I showed them the bear and asked if the boy wanted it. She seemed a little confused at first and then allowed me to give the boy the toy. His faced lit up and he smiled and they went on their way...that smile made my day! The streets were crowded with cars, motorcycles and people. On one street a very big truck was stationed in the middle of the street. The truck was all metal and only had two widows cut out in the back. We were curious as to what was in the truck. A man approached with a large can and gave a man stationed at the window some money. The man took the can and later gave it back. We figured it out it was a water truck with large tanks inside selling water to customers. We wished we would have had more time to explore Trinidad as there was much to see but had to get back to the rendezvous point to meet up with our group. We were leaving Trinidad for our hotel Los Helechos in the mountains of Topes de Collantes.

Trinidad (Spanish: "Trinity") is the larger and more populous of the two major islands and numerous landforms which make up the island nation of Trinidad and Tobago. The island lies 11 km (6.8 mi) off the northeastern coast of Venezuela and sits on the continental shelf of South America. Though geographically part of the South American continent, from a socio-economic standpoint it is often referred to as the southernmost island in the Caribbean. With an area of 4,768 km² (1,841 sq mi), it is also the sixth largest in the West Indies.

Many believe the original name for the island in the Arawaks' language was "*Iëre*" which meant "Land of the Hummingbird". Some believe that "Iere" was actually a mispronunciation or corruption by early colonists of the Arawak word "Kairi" which simply means "Island". Christopher Columbus renamed it "La Isla de la Trinidad" ("The Island of the Trinity"), fulfilling a vow he had made before setting out on his third voyage of exploration. The Spanish colonialists' unglazed bricks, roof and floor tiles are still visible in Cuba, and the influence of the Muslim Spain's pottery techniques.

Sun. Feb. 19: TOPES DE COLLANTES – TRINIDAD

Hotel Los Helechos in the mountains of Topes de Collantes.

Rising up to the northwest of Trinidad are the steep, pine-coated slopes of the Guamuhaya mountains, more popularly known as the **Sierra del Escambray**. This area is home to some of the most spectacular scenery in Cuba, though its highest peak – the Pico San Juan – a modest 1140m high. A large proportion of this mountain range sits within the borders of the neighboring provinces of Cienfuegos and Villa Clara but the heart of the visitor park and hiking area, the **Gran Parque Natural Topes de Collantes**, is in Sancti Spiritus province.

Topes de Collantes is a nature reserve park in the Escambray Mountains range in Cuba. It also refers to the third highest peak in the reserve, where a small settlement and tourist center is located, all sharing the same name.

Nature is the big attraction here. Caves, rivers, falls, grottos, canyons, natural pools with crystal clear water, mountain hills surrounded by mariposa (butterfly lily) Cuba's national flower announcing their presence with a soft unique fragrance from June to early September. More than 40 indigenous species of orchids and 100 species of ferns, of which 7 are 6 metres (20 ft) tall palm-like tree ferns, wild plantain and banana trees, jasmine, begonias, several representatives of the ginger family and around 40 species of coffee are growing under the shade of giant 40 meter tall pines, eucalyptus, West Indian mahogany and magnolias making the wonder of this tropical rainforest.

We went on a nature walk to find prolific birdlife, including Red-legged Thrush, Cuban Bulfinch, Cuban Trogon, West Indian Woodpecker as well as unique hummingbirds, and the tocororo (Cuban Trogon) which is Cuba's national bird.

Coffee growers were living in the area when president Fulgencio Batista ordered the construction of a massive battleship-like Art Deco sanatorium for tuberculosis patients in 1954. Rumor has it that his wife Martha was battling against this illness and once there she fell in love for the place. As a result she persuaded Batista to build her a cottage in the zone as well. After the Revolution the hospital was converted into a school, and in the mid-1970s it was returned to a similar use as a hotel specialized in rehabilitation and special therapies. As a result, a small worker's settlement was developed around the place. The *Universidad de Montaña* or Mountain Campus of Las Villas University was built here in the 1980s. Due to its connection with Trinidad city and the beaches of the Ancon peninsula a couple more hotels and a resort villa catering to tourist have been developed.

Our group went to visit a coffee producing farm and a local guide took us through the grounds and told us all about the plants whose seeds, called coffee beans, are used to make various coffee beverages. The short stroll took us past around 25 different varieties of coffee plants. Our group would get side-tracked most of the time because a species of bird was spotted.... Got my best look at the Cuban Trogon. After the walk we went to Jardin De Variedades De Café for a cup of coffee. The rustic café was quaint with wooden tables and antiques on display. Lots of antiques to do with the grinding of the beans, old hand coffee grinders, kettles and a variety of coffee pots and cups. A very large wooden mortar & pestle was in one corner. After a cup of Café Cubano a type of espresso that originated in Cuba after espresso machines were first imported there from Italy we went to the bus. On the side of the road was an old Russian Army truck (nickname "The Russian Massage"), painted with yellow, green and brown camouflage full of tourist. A vendor was nearby with his wheel barrel loaded with a couple of plastic tubs and a large cardboard box. Inside he was selling homemade ground peanut bars and whole peanut bars and sesame seed candy made with honey and then pressed into a bar. He also had bags of the pillow shaped hard candy that my grandmother always had in her candy dish. A small shop nearby had hand crafted items for sale. I purchased a

mahogany walking stick with a dolphin carved on top. We took a walk through the forest looking for birds. Little streams were flowing within and horses were grazing along the paths. It was a very beautiful and peaceful area. Time for lunch so we were taken to Restaurante Mi Retiro with the big chicken statue in the front by the road. The thing was instead of the restaurant serving chicken they specialized in pork...not sure why a pig statue was not in front instead of the chicken...guess that is Cuban humor. Our group had a nice open-aired table on a covered porch. The restaurant was on a hill that overlooked the valley. We had slices of pineapple with chunks of mango, black beans and rice, vegetables and a pork dish. Our next stop was to Museo De Arte Cubano. Topes de Collantes' monstrous sanatorium once harbored a veritable Louvre of Cuban art, containing works by Cuban masters such as Tomas Sanchez and Ruben Torres Llorca. Raiding the old collection in 2008 inspired provincial officials to open a more attractive museum, which displays over 70 works in six rooms spread over three floors at Museo De Arte Cubano. Photos were not allowed inside the museum only inside the vestibule lined with several large doors with stained glass tops, the tile floor was colorful with fire breathing dragons. Outside the garden was studded with Grecian statues and a large fountain with red flowering bushes.

Our last stop today was at a coffee farm. We were invited inside the home of a coffee farmer and his family. We were greeted by the family. A small flower garden was at the entrance with a kitten hiding in the bushes. The modest home was very clean and tidy. On the wall was a picture of Fidel Castro (1959), a picture of Che Guevara and a 2016 calendar with Fidel Castro and fellow revolutionary Camilo Cienfuegos entering Havana on January 8, 1959. Some family photos were in the small sitting room. The small kitchen had a large yellow painted cupboard and a table. The bedroom was bare except for a bed covered with a bright red bedspread with the words "The Best Beautiful Life printed on it. The mother and father of the man who greeted us lived in this house. Outside was a chicken coup with a few chickens running around. On the side of the house used luncheon beef cans were being used as pots for plants. The phrase "Use it Up, Wear it Out and Make it Do" seemed to be the guiding principal in Cuba. We then were led to another house on the property that belonged to the farmer and his family. Somewhat bigger than the last house. The first room you entered was the living room with two leather chairs and a leather couch. A young boy was watching a flat screen TV. Knickknacks and wall decorations reminded me of days gone on. Modest bedrooms with a beds and nice bedspreads. Next the dining room and then the kitchen that led to the back porch. I noticed a refrigerator but not a stove. They were using electric hot plates and a rice steamer to cook their food. Outside we sat on the covered porch and listened to our local guide translate what the farmer was telling us about growing coffee. He mentioned that climate change is affecting his crop, some years better but lately not as good. Their horse came up to the porch and wanted something. The lady of the house knew what that was so she came out with a banana that the horse quickly ate. The black and white pig must have seen what was happening as he ran over for a snack. Sensing he was not getting a banana he dropped to the ground and took a nap. As we left for the bus and walked back to the first house I met the man who lived there with his wife. He acted so happy to see us. I asked to take his picture and he seemed pleased as I posed for a photo with him. We learned a story from the wife that years ago Fidel Castro and his

army came through these parts and their jeep got stuck in the mud. The men brought Castro to the home of the farmer's parents to get out of the heat. The woman was pretty scared, not of Fidel Castro but she thought a fight might occur between Castro's men and the right-wing authoritarian government of Cuban President Fulgencio Batista. Fortunately that didn't happen.

Mon. Feb. 20: BAY OF PIGS – ZAPATA WETLANDS

Hotel Playa Larga

Today we traveled to the Bay of Pigs, which borders the Zapata Peninsula, A UNESCO Biosphere Reserve encompassing Cuba's most important wetland area. We met with a local farmer who took us for a walk to look for birds. On the path was a large Cuban Boa snake making his way into the woods. The guide took us to a small path and then told us to stand in a group. He went to a palm tree snag and started tapping on the side of it. Up popped a slightly pissed off nocturnal Cuban (Bare-legged) Screech Owl. The goggle-eyed Cuban screech owl gets its other common name, bare-legged owl, from its featherless lower appendages. While most of the world's more than 200 owl species wear feathers down to their toes, the Cuban screech owl's warm tropical habitat appears to have encouraged it to evolve permanent Bermuda shorts. We then walked to another area where the Bee Hummingbird a species of hummingbird regarded as the world's smallest bird endemic to the entire Cuban archipelago. I got a good look at the female but not the male. On the way back to the bus I did get a good photo of a horse pulling a wagon full of crops, quite common in Cuba. In Cuba even on the highway the buses, cars and motorcycles share the road with the horse drawn carts and wagons. The Cubans even spread their grain crop onto the paved highway for it to dry in the sun. They seemed oblivious to the fact that traffic had to stop and go around them.

Zapata Wetlands: The Zapata peninsula contains the largest and most important wetlands in the Caribbean. Covering 1.5 million acres (6,000 square km), the immense Zapata Biosphere Reserve includes marshes, peat bogs, mangroves, coral reefs, and forests that support a complex web of life, including frogs, turtles, fish, shellfish, crocodiles, birds, and countless plants and insects, making its conservation a top priority for the entire region. Cuba is home to two species of crocodiles—the Cuban crocodile and the American crocodile. All too often, wetlands and marshes are ignored, forgotten, or drained for development. But in Cuba's Zapata National Park, a vast wetland ecosystem supports many important species and diverse habitats. This unique setting is home to many plants and animals found nowhere else. The protected wetlands of the Zapata peninsula attract hundreds of thousands of migrating birds. Many birds winter in Cuba, and many more use the island as a stopover when migrating between North and South America. The Zapata Reserve is a haven for birds not just from Cuba but throughout the Caribbean and beyond. A whopping 372 bird species can be spotted on the island, including 24 species that live only in Cuba—and several of these live only in Zapata. Both the Cuban trogon and Cuban tody are endemic to the island nation. The trogon is also the country's national bird.

On our way to Hotel Playa Larga, located between the beach and the forest near Playa Larga we passed many billboards showing images and slogans that promote the blessings of the Cuban Revolution. The billboards tell the story of The Cuban Revolution, a revolution that has strong roots in Cuban history. The billboards show famous revolutionaries like Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos and tell the story of the attack on the Moncada Barracks, the Battle of Santa Clara, the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the US embargo ('El bloqueo').

The Bay of Pigs Invasion was a failed military invasion of Cuba undertaken by the CIA-sponsored paramilitary group Brigade 2506 on 17 April 1961. A counter-revolutionary military (made up of Cuban exiles who traveled to the United States after Castro's take over), trained and funded by the United States government's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Brigade 2506 fronted the armed wing of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (DRF) and intended to overthrow the increasingly communist government of Fidel Castro. Launched from Guatemala and Nicaragua, the invading force was defeated within three days by the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces, under the direct command of Prime Minister Fidel Castro.

Once settled in the hotel we changed into our swim suits and made our way to the beach. I found some chairs and Mike went to swim in the Bay of Pigs. I was told the current might be strong so I waited till Mike got back and we waded in the water for a distance and went back to the hotel. We passed a happy family group that had pulled chairs into the water and was drinking glasses of wine and having a good time.

Tues. Feb. 21 **BAY OF PIGS – BOCA DE GUAMA – SOROA**
Hotel Villa Soroa, Cuba

Today we went to visit the Korimacao Community Project we were met by Hilda Tamayo, one of the directors. She took us on a tour and we stopped at each area to see some art works by the students and then to watch students in perform dance routines for us. Next we listened to a group of talented musicians and singers.

The Korimacao Community Project in Playa Larga, Cuba is an attempt to provide community art, music, cultural training free of charge to young artists in Cuba. Founded 15 years ago it emphasizes theater, dance, poetry, and music and many other forms of art. The only requirement is talent. They are attempting to preserve Cuban cultural heritage of music, dance, culture and art.

Afterwards we went down the street to a ladies house. In her backyard she had a tree that birds especially hummingbirds just love the flowers on her tree. Our group was sitting on the cement patio on the ground trying to get a good look and photo of the female and male Bee Hummingbird. The Cuban Emerald Hummingbird would visit often and sometimes rest on a branch. I saw that the lady of the house had her daughter and son over to visit. I went back to the bus to get a teddy bear that I had to give away to a child. When I got back the daughter and son were gone. I saw the neighbors next door were washing their dishes in a set up in their backyard and the man and woman had a little boy

that was running around. I had also brought back some candy and canyons for the little boy. I gave the gifts to his parents. As I handed the candy package to the neighbor a male Bee Hummingbird appeared right in front of my face and was eyeing the pretty colors on the candy package. WOW I had been trying as the rest of the group to get a good look at the male. The male has the green pileum and fiery red throat, iridescent gorget with elongated lateral plumes, bluish upper-parts, and the rest of the underparts mostly greyish white. The male is smaller than the female. The female is green above, whitish below, with white tips to the outer tail feathers. I then handed the lady the teddy bear and she was so happy that she put it under her arm and then pulled a red flower from somewhere and as soon as she did the male Bee Hummingbird appeared again and was all over that flower. The group went nuts trying to get photos of that bird. When we left someone said, "Why didn't she bring out that flower earlier?" I thought maybe she was waiting for some money or gifts!! That sure worked when I gave her the teddy bear..HA!

Our next stop was lunch at a very nice restaurant with a beautiful garden. After welcome drinks we were seated at tables situated on the open-aired porch. You had your choice of Ropa Vieja, lobster in a red sauce, fish and other choices. All served with black beans and rice. For dessert either a pineapple dessert or ice cream frozen in a half coconut with a chocolate shell on top.

After lunch we went to Ernest Miller Hemingway's home in Finca Vigia. I liked Ernest Hemingway's home and the views from his home were spectacular. His fishing boat named "Pilar" was displayed in the back of the house. "Pilar" was a nickname for Hemingway's wife Pauline Pfeiffer and also the name of the woman leader of the partisan band in his 1940 novel of the Spanish Civil War, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Before you reached the boat you pass the empty swimming pool and then several tombstones with the names, Black, Negrita, Linda and Neron erected in memory of some of his many cats. In 1943, while living in Cuba, he wrote a letter to his first wife, Hadley Mowrer, describing the nearly dozen cats that lived with him and how he taught one, Friendless, "to drink with me (Whisky and milk)." When Mary (Welsh) Hemingway moved into the Finca in 1946, she had a writer's workshop tower constructed on the property, but Hemingway preferred to work in his bedroom, and the workshop was eventually assigned to the cats.

Ernest Hemingway home in Finca Vigia. Ten miles east of Havana is Hemingway's Cuba house - Finca Vigia, meaning "lookout house". Finca Vigia is located in the small, working-class town of San Francisco de Paula. The Cuban people have always respected the famous writer's choice to live in a modest town, amongst the people he fished with. Built in 1886 by a Spanish Architect Miguel Pascual y Baguer, Finca Vigia was purchased by Hemingway in 1940 for a cost of \$12,500. There, Hemingway wrote two of his most celebrated novels: *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Old Man and the Sea*. *A Movable Feast* was written there as well. After Hemingway's death in 1961, the Cuban government took ownership of the property - either with or without the approval of Mary Hemingway. After years of neglect, restoration and preservation work began. Finca Vigia has made both the World Monuments Fund list of 100 Most Endangered sites, and The National Trust for Historic Preservation's 11 Most Endangered Places.

Hemingway maintained permanent residences in Key West, Florida, (1930s) and Cuba (1940s and 1950s), and in 1959, he bought a house in Ketchum, Idaho, where he killed himself in mid-1961.

In the afternoon, we set off toward the western part of Cuba traveling to the mountains of Soroa in Pinar del Río Province.

Pinar del Río (formerly *Nuevas Filipinas*) is one of the provinces of Cuba. It is at the western end of the island of Cuba. The Pinar del Río province is Cuba's westernmost province and contains one of Cuba's three main mountain ranges, the Cordillera de Guaniguanico, divided into the easterly Sierra del Rosario and the westerly Sierra de los Órganos. These form a landscape characterized by steep sided limestone hills (called mogotes) and flat, fertile valleys. One such topographic feature, the Viñales Valley, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The northern coast opens to the great Gulf of Mexico, and is lined by the Colorados Archipelago, a string of cays and isles developed on a reef barrier. The westernmost point of Cuba, Cabo San Antonio, is located on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula, which is a National Park and a Biosphere Reserve.

Wed. Feb. 22: **SOROA & THE SPECTACULAR VINALES VALLEY**
Hotel Villa Soroa, Cuba

This morning we drove west to the scenic Vinales Valley for a boating excursion into one of the huge limestone caves running through a mogote-limestone karst outcroppings. Outside the cave we spotted the elusive Cuban Solitaire. In the town of Vinales we browsed a bodega “grocery store”, where locals shop with their ration books. We then went to visit a local tobacco farmer for the quality Cuban cigars.

Known appropriately as the 'rainbow of Cuba,' **Soroa**, a gorgeous natural area and tiny settlement 95km southwest of Havana, is the closest mountain resort to the capital. Located 8km north of Candelaria in the Sierra del Rosario, the easternmost and highest section of the Cordillera de Guaniguanico, the region's heavy rainfall (more than 1300mm annually) promotes the growth of tall trees and orchids. The area gets its name from Jean-Pierre Soroa, a Frenchman who owned a 19th-century coffee plantation in these hills. One of his descendants, Ignacio Soroa, created the park as a personal retreat in the 1920s, and only since the Revolution has this luxuriant region been developed for tourism.

We had a lot of fun at the tobacco farm. The man running the place took us for a tour inside the tobacco barn, an essential ingredient in the process of air-curing tobacco. Workers were busy processing the tobacco leaves. Each farmer has his favorite venting systems that are built not only for the winds but for efficiency. Right after the tobacco is hung, the vents are opened during the day in an effort to begin the important process of shedding water from the tobacco known as the curing of tobacco. After the tour of the grounds we were led to the house where a workshop is in the back of the house. The man showed us how to roll a Cuban cigar “Old World Style”. The bunch is created by the cigar maker taking three or four different leaves in the blend and pressing them together

in his or her hands, folding the leaves over on themselves to form cylinders, leaving a narrow passage through the center of the cigar that will ensure that the cigar draws properly. The binder is then applied, by hand-rolling it around the filler leaves. This man knew what he was doing. After he finished the cigar he handed it to me. One of the men in our group said, "He gave that to you as a gift." I said, "He did?, it's not for everyone to smoke?" He said, "No, he is passing another one around for that purpose, if you don't want it I will take it from you." "Hell no," I said, "I'll keep it." I then thanked the man for the cigar. There was a lady standing behind a desk with different sized piles of cigars packaged with a paper wrapper around them. I purchased a pile and as she was putting them in a bag along with a couple more cigars....I guess the more you buy you get (like a baker's dozen, some extras). I wanted to give her a gift so I gave her a key-chain made with beads and a nice antique button in the center that I had made. A big smile appeared on her face and she took my bag of cigars back from me and was getting something else for me when I thought wonder how big her wrist is. I then pulled out of my purse a handmade beaded and button bracelet that I had made and gave that to her also. As I put it on her wrist her smile got even bigger. Later as I looked in my cigar bag I saw that she had given me several more cigars. I was loaded with cigars and I don't even smoke them, but maybe Mike and I will smoke a few this summer outside with some friends and make a party out of it. The lady was probably really surprised when she discovered later that I had also given another older lady that was in the house a button bracelet. I met the woman as I was looking around the inside of the house. She really had a smile on her face after I fastened the bracelet on her wrist.

I brought lots of gifts to give away during my time in Cuba. Most I left in my room in the waste basket. My guide told me to put the articles in the waste basket and the maid would know that she could keep them. Otherwise if you just leave them in the room somewhere else the articles would be considered "lost and found" and given to the front desk. At other hotels I would see the maids outside and give them dresses and stuff personally. Even when I ran out of gifts I ended up giving one of my key chains to a girl at the art market, just had to get my luggage keys off first!

At lunch today we went to an organic farm and met the family responsible for the land and took us for a tour of the gardens. All the vegetables and herbs they grew were used in dishes served to us at lunch. There was so much food they was no room left on the table. To start off the meal we had a welcome drink and a bottle of rum was set in the middle of the table for you to enhance your drink.

Thurs. Feb. 23 – **SOROA – HAVANA**
Hotel Melia Cohiba

Today we visited the lush orchid gardens of Jardin Botanico Orquideario, Soroa with a local gardener. As usual our group got side-tracked with birding. We did see many interesting birds in the trees and bushes. Covering 35,000 square meters, this hillside botanical garden is a wild tangle of flowering vines, fragrant gingers, waist-high begonias and epiphyte-laden trees growing out of rocks. The centerpiece is a tidy greenhouse filled with blooming orchids. Back in the 1940s, a wealthy Havana lawyer and orchid fancier

hired a Japanese gardener to design this glorious garden in his daughter's memory. Stone pathways bordered by plant-covered rocky outcroppings wind uphill to a lookout. The footing is a little precarious and the garden is quite wild, but beautiful. Birds abound, so be we were sure to bring along our binoculars. The garden is also a study center for budding botanists.

Our next stop was at the school Centro Mixto Republica Oriental Del Uruguay (The Mixed Eastern Republic of Uruguay Center). Primary, secondary and technical-vocational courses with a general enrollment of 272 students are on campus. Since 1998, this educational institution belongs to the UNESCO-associated schools plan, which prioritizes different projects such as the Slave Route, Learning for the Future and others related to the care of the environment as they are located in the Sierra del Biosphere Reserve. The inhabitants refer that the work developed by students and teachers achieves the necessary interaction between the school, the community and the environment. Among the proposals they present include the integral preparation of the human being from a social, environmentalist, intercultural and integrationist perspective, with an emphasis on the formation of values. Our group had a nice visit seeing the classrooms and were given information about the school from a local guide. The buildings were of simple design painted white and green with murals of famous Revolutionary leaders. A group of children sang us a song and we walked to the library for a look inside. Outside the library several students on break were playing games of dominos. A group of small children were being given a snack by their teacher. I took a picture of the small group and a very cute little girl blew me a kiss. I brought lots of school supplies for the students and some others in our group did also. We gave the supplies to the principle.

We left and were on our way to check into our hotel in Havana.

Fri., Feb. 24: HAVANA OLD AND NEW (BLD)
Hotel Melia Cohiba

We all met in the hotel lobby to go out for dinner at the Bar-Restaurant El Rum Rum De La Habana a private paladar in Old Havana. The name of this private restaurant in Old Havana may evoke the delicious distillates produced on the island or maybe the sound of an old American car engine starting. But rum rum is also Cuban slang for gossip, and this excellent eatery on one of Havana's oldest streets, a block away from the famous Hemingway haunt La Bodeguita del Medio. It has several different dining areas: the room closest to the entrance resembles a Spanish tavern, with wine and rum barrels hanging from the walls and serving as bar shelves. Another more private area is decorated with Cuban paintings, and there is a small interior courtyard where you can also enjoy a cigar. I had a wonderful meal of shrimp, lobster and chicken and for dessert a combo of a mini caramel flan and a scoop of ice-cream with a cookie.

Sat. Feb 25: HAVANA OLD AND NEW (BLD)
Hotel Melia Cohiba

A full day of touring around Havana. First stop Flor De Tabacos De Partagas Habana to see a workshop factory that teaches and employs workers to hand roll cigars. Partagás is among the oldest extant brands of cigars, established in Havana in 1845. The name is used today by two independent and competing entities, one produced on the island of Cuba for Habanos SA, the Cuban state-owned tobacco company; the other, containing no Cuban tobacco, produced in the Dominican Republic for General Cigar Company, a division of Scandinavian Tobacco Group of Denmark. After tobacco was nationalized following the Cuban Revolution, the Cifuentes family's patriarch, Ramón, was initially offered the job of leading Cuba's tobacco industry, but refused and instead emigrated from the country. A newly formed government marketing agency, Cubatabaco took over the Partagás factory and the production of the brand there. In 1995 the 70,000-square-foot Santiago facility employed approximately 600 workers, who produced cigars bearing both the Partagas and Macanudo labels. Photos were not allowed in the area where the workers were rolling the cigars. You could not take cameras or purses, backpacks etc. for security reasons.... lets just say in case a worker tried to sell you some cigars on the side it would not be easy to do. It was therefore no surprise when a worker flashed a sign at me that read "5 for 20". I passed on the deal. It was interesting watching the workers diligently rolling the cigars at their work stations. The experienced workers were on one side of the floor and the learners on the other side of the floor. We had to laugh when some workers close to the viewing area for the tourist had small handwritten signs on their work stations advertising that they were available for contact to meet and greet. They would write on their notices that they were seeking people of a certain age group....like you would see in a dating ad.

We left and were taken to Romeo Y Julieta a cigar shop. Named after William Shakespeare's tragic lovers, the origins of Romeo y Julieta as a Habano date back to 1875. The brand rose to international fame during the early years of the 20th Century under the direction of Don 'Pepin' Fernandez, a talented promoter, who was among the first to recognize the power of the cigar band. During his hey day no less than 20,000 different bands were used in production. Winston Churchill became a devotee of Romeo y Julieta. Since his visit to Havana in 1946, his name has not only been commemorated on a band but it has also served to describe the brand's most famous size measuring 7 inches (178 mm) by 47 ring gauge, the Churchill. Romeo y Julieta's balanced and aromatic blend of selected leaves from the Vuelta Abajo region make it the classic medium bodied Habano. Today Romeo y Julieta is as well known around the world and offers the widest range of 'totalmente a mano, tripa larga', totally hand made, long filler - sizes available in any Habano brand. I purchased a small wooden humidor box with an old map of Cuba on the top lid at the Romeo Y Julieta shop. I later saw more humidor boxes at a art market. I could have gotten it cheaper at the market, as I saw the same humidor box but maybe the one I purchased was of better quality.

We then went to the Museo Nacional De Bellas Artes. A museum of Fine Arts that exhibits Cuban art collections from the colonial times up to contemporary generations. Photos were not allowed inside the gallery. While waiting for our group to finish looking around inside the museum we went outside to see if we could photo some more of Havana. We were lucky to stand on the corner of a busy intersection and lots of vintage

cars were cruising the streets. A group of school children crossed the street with their teacher. The girls were wearing school uniforms of rose colored skirts and white blouses and the boys had on matching rose colored shorts and white shirts. They wore red or blue scarves tied at the neck. I stopped taking pictures of the cars and started taking pictures of the children. They started having fun with me and I was soon in the middle of a big group of the children as Mike took my picture with them. Our group came out of the museum and we joined them. We were on our way to the historic old town of Havana. The city was founded by the Spanish in 1519. On our walking tour we passed the Terminal Sierra Maestra, Plaza de San Francisco, Plaza Vieja and many old buildings and churches. I had read about a bronze statue of Jose Maria Lopex Lledin by Jose Villa Soberon, (touching his beard is said to bring good luck. His beard has been polished bright by the hands of tourists seeking good luck). Must have been my lucky day because as we were walking outside Basilica Menor de San Francisco de Asis I saw the statue of José María López Lledín and ran over to touch his beard and take some photos. José María López Lledín, usually known as El Caballero de París (roughly, the "gentleman of Paris"), was a mentally ill resident of Havana, Cuba. He was a patient of the Psychiatric Hospital of Havana, and was diagnosed as suffering from confabulatory paraphrenia. He wandered the streets of Havana and became well-known and popular. Jose Villa Soberon is a Cuban artist, particularly known for his public sculptures around Havana. These include statues of Ernest Hemingway (sitting on a barstool in the Floridita bar and restaurant), Che Guevara (Palacio Central de Pioneros Ernesto Che Guevara, Parque Lenin), and John Lennon (John Lennon Park, Vedado, Havana). This street is known for street artist to paint themselves and clothes head to toe in metallic paint to appear as a bronze statue. It was very difficult to distinguish the real from the fake. Mike went to look at what he thought was a statue of a man leaning on a large bell (the bell was real) and realized it was a real man (after I told him, he didn't believe me till the man blinked).

We continued walking and passed other street artists, women dressed in brightly colored traditional dresses or all dressed in white with a red rose on their head and a cigar hanging out their mouth....all posed for tourist tips. My favorite was two dachshunds all dressed up as a man and a woman with doggie sized clothes, hats and glasses. The one dressed as a female even had her nails painted blue and wore a watch. The male had on a man's old watch. They were seated in a miniature 1918 Ford Model T. that had been attached to a bicycle. The dogs appeared to be pretty docile occasionally nodding off. I gave the man a coin and took some photos of the dogs, made me laugh all day. We saw on a building a cement mask on a building. We noticed a slot. We thought it was the Cuban version of "The Mouth of Truth" we saw in Rome. Mike and I posed with the mask and stuck our hands in the mouth while a person we befriended on the street took our photo. We found out later from our guide that the mask was actually a post box on the wall of Casa de Lombillo which was built in 1741 and once served as a post office..lol. We looked around Plaza Vieja and wondered what the monumental bronze statue of a bald naked lady (she did have shoes on) riding on the back of a rooster holding a fork was all about. The figure, made of bronze, the work of Roberta Fabelo. Plaza Vieja was the site of executions, processions, bullfights, and fiestas -- all witnessed by Havana's wealthiest citizens, who looked on from their balconies. We finally arrived at

the Plaza de la Catedral and took a look inside the Cathedral of Havana sometimes dubbed as Cathedral of Saint Christopher and then hurried over to La Moneda Cubana where our group was gathering for lunch. After a pleasant lunch with the effects of afternoon libations we went to a local art market. Driving along the oceanfront Malecon Avenue we passed on the hilltop overlooking the bay of Havana the large sculpture "Christ of Havana" representing Jesus of Nazareth by sculptor Gilma Madera. The statue was carved out of white Carrara marble, the same material used for many of the monuments of the Colon Cemetery. The statue is about 20 metres (66 ft) high including a 3-metre (10 ft) base. It weighs approximately 320 tons. Further down we passed the Morro Castle named after the three biblical Magi, is a fortress guarding the entrance to Havana bay. Inside the gates is an exhibition on the lighthouses of Cuba – El Morro once housed a school for lighthouse keepers. The Faro Castillo del Morro lighthouse was added in 1846.

We were having a very busy day as we continue to visit the Colon Cemetery, or more fully in the Spanish language Cementerio de Cristóbal Colón, founded in 1876 in the Vedado neighborhood of Havana on top of Espada Cemetery. Named for Christopher Columbus, the 140 acre (57 ha) cemetery is noted for its many elaborately sculpted memorials. It is estimated that today the cemetery has more than 500 major mausoleums, chapels, and family vaults. With more than 800,000 graves and 1 million interments, space in the Colon Cemetery is currently at a premium and as such after three years remains are removed from their tombs, boxed and placed in a storage building. Visitors can spend a lot of time amid the vast expanse of monuments and markers as stamina permits, traversing its endless streets and avenues.

Our group was met at the cemetery by a local guide who walked us down a few streets. He stopped to tell us about the 75-foot monument to the firefighters who lost their lives in the great fire of May 17, 1890, as he was speaking to us a lady approach me. She did not speak English but motioned for me to follow her. She led me to the grave of Ibrahim Ferrer a popular Afro-Cuban singer and musician in Cuba. He performed with many musical groups including the Conjunto Sorpresa, Orquesta Chepin-Choven and Afro-Cuban All Stars. Later in life, Ferrer became a member of the internationally successful Buena Vista Social Club. Later we stood in front of a much frequented spot, elevated almost to shrine status, the burial place of Amelia Goyri de Adot, who died in childbirth in 1901. The infant, who also died, was buried at his mother's feet. Her husband commissioned a sculpture to commemorate Amelia's death, featuring her likeness leaning on a cross, holding her child. According to legend, when the bodies were disinterred - after two years bodies are usually removed to make room for new corpses - the infant had allegedly moved from her feet to her chest. Skeptics say the shift might have occurred as a result of settling. Believers say it was a miracle. Somehow, this story has come to symbolize a mother's mystical gift for intercession on behalf of children. Some say you will have luck if you rub the baby's bottom; other's say if you touch her skirt. Still others are trying to figure out how the death of a mother and child can be interpreted as lucky. Mike and I thought of staying longer in this cemetery because it was a photographers dream...so many things to see....but got back on the bus.

We had a few more stops before going back to the hotel. We were off to see Plaza de la Revolución "Revolution Square". The square is notable as being where many political rallies take place and Fidel Castro and other political figures address Cubans. Fidel Castro addressed more than a million Cubans on many important occasions, such as 1 May and 26 July each year. Pope John Paul II, during his 1998 first visit by a Pope, and Pope Francis in 2015, held large Masses there during papal visits to Cuba. The square is dominated by the José Martí Memorial. Opposite the memorial are the offices of the Ministries of the Interior and Communications, whose facades feature matching steel memorials of the two most important deceased heroes of the Cuban Revolution: Che Guevara, with the quotation "Hasta la Victoria Siempre" (Until the Everlasting Victory, Always) and Camilo Cienfuegos (sometimes mistaken for Fidel Castro), with the quotation "Vas bien, Fidel" (You're doing fine, Fidel).

Last but not least (my request for a short stop) was to John Lennon Park or Parque John Lennon (formerly known as Parque Menocal) a public park, located in the Vedado district. On one of the benches in the park, nearer the corner of streets 17th and 6th, there is a sculpture of the former Beatles member John Lennon, sculpted by Cuban artist José Villa Soberón. Jose Villa Soberon is the same person who sculpted the bronze statue of Jose Maria Lope Lledin that I mentioned earlier in my story. On a marble tile at the foot of the bench there is an inscription reading: "Dirás que soy un soñador pero no soy el único" John Lennon, which is a Spanish translation of the English lyrics, "You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one," from the song "Imagine". The statue was unveiled on 8 December 2000, the 20th anniversary of Lennon's murder. One year later, Cuban author Ernesto Juan Castellanos wrote a book about the statue, *John Lennon en La Habana with a little help from my friends*, and about the ban that John Lennon and The Beatles suffered in Cuba during the 1960s and 1970s. At that time the Beatles' songs were considered "ideological diversionism" by Cuban authorities. Why a statue in Havana after the ban of the Beatles? "I share his dreams completely. I too am a dreamer who has seen his dreams turn into reality". –Fidel Castro. When Lennon was harassed by the US government in his later life, Cubans considered him a rebel, and therefore a victim, and therefore worthy of consideration. By odd chance as our group was walking in town the day before a tourist passed us. He had on a tank top and I saw he had a large tattoo of John Lennon with the words "You may say I'm a dreamer but I'm not the only one" on his arm. I asked to take his picture and then told him about John Lennon Park, he thanked me for the information. Mike and I are big Beatles fans and we go to places all over the world to see memorials to John Lennon....amazing how many there are. Mike and I sat with John on the bench for a brief moment and it's "back on the bus."

Back at the hotel Mike took me upstairs in the hotel to show me the fancy cigar store where things of luxury are sold to guests. Earlier on arrival to the hotel we saw a man dressed in a traditional flowing white robe and headdress. He had to be very important as he had his bodyguards surrounding him and several beautiful ladies were carrying oil portraits of him as they left the building. Mike had seen this man the day before in the cigar shop surrounded by his bodyguards. That night we were taken back to old town and had dinner at a place where we were entertained by a Cuban band. Mike and I wanted to leave before our group and caught a taxi. The taxi was an old black klunker

driven by a local. I loved my ride...not only because I was in a state of relaxation from the mojitos but the ride was an experience in its self. The driver had the radio full blast and was speeding down Malecon Avenue along the coast passing other vintage cars. It was a warm night and the city lights flashed as we sped by. Nice ride!

With an early departure the next morning it was back to the airport and back to Miami. Mike and I had plans to tour botanical gardens on the Florida's Gulf Coast. We found time to stop at several nature areas on our way to Orlando....that will be another slide show on my homepage.

Mike and I enjoyed our Cuba birding and "people to people" trip and are thinking about going back to Cuba sometime on our own.

Audrey & Mike Lambert
<http://www.mhlambert.com>