

Sunday, July 17. 2011

Reflections on Cuba

Sitting in the plane to Cuba I wondered what to expect. I hadn't had much time to think about the trip beforehand, because I was occupied with the boat and two movie projects I had stumbled into in Santa Marta. One was a documentary about a young couple, the other was a film school for kids who were enthusiastic about movies. Having left all three behind with take-off, my mind became free to think about Cuba. View over Havana Thinking of Cuba, many images passed through my mind. The faces of Che and Fidel. Posters of shiny 50s cars. Catalog pages of exquisite beach resorts. Photographs of indifferent Soviet and Czech architecture. Romantic colonial-style buildings. Poor people working on tobacco fields and smoking cigars. Elegant men and gorgeous women singing and dancing salsa. I wondered if I would encounter all that, and how it could possibly fit together to form a uniform impression of Cuba. 9 am No work team Public transportation For three weeks we traveled through Cuba. Starting in Havana we visited the national park of Vinales in the west, then flew to the coastal town of Baracoa in the very east. From there we made our way by bus, taxi, and rental car back to Havana, visiting many small towns as well as tourist attractions. On the way we encountered all the images that I had associated with Cuba, although there are a lot more rusty cars than pristine ones, and they all smell horribly. But try as I might, I couldn't fit the pieces together. I talked to our hosts in casa particulares, locals and tourists we met in cafes, and tour guides we hired, with the intention to fill the gaps and clarify questions that had come up. Like why there are so many people on the street, when the unemployment rate is only 1,6%? Preparing a hot chocolate Meat vendor People were very friendly, and with the exception of some state-employed personnel very forthcoming with information. For example, the mystery of permanently busy streets is explained by the practice that workers register at their workplace in the morning, then go out on the street to talk and look for private work until checking back in to their official work before lunch-break. Reason being, that with the exception of cigar-rollers it doesn't affect your salary how much you work, and the salary is not enough to pay for the daily needs. This Cuban practicality, and a mentality of accommodating oneself with the circumstances, we found everywhere. Which doesn't surprise that much, when you consider that between the US-imposed trade embargo and a socialist government that allows little entrepreneurial freedom people have very limited ways to get by. Our landlady Marilyn Children playing with audio tape. Lesson: words hurt. Cuban porta potty Careful criticism towards the government in the fields of economic and personal liberties (property ownership, wags, travel-restrictions) was voiced often, but matter-of-factly: "This is the way it is, there is a historical reason why it is this way, and all we can do is hope that it changes in the future." And change is coming to Cuba. Since April the Communist Party Congress sanctioned reforms related the ownership and trade of houses and cars, as well as traveling and setting up small businesses. While Cubans await those changes eagerly, there are other areas that they don't want to change. Most prominently the free and very good health service and education system. Where many developed countries are developing a rift in the population between people than can afford it, and people that can't, Cubans trust that their government will continue to protect the interests of the whole population against a ruthless greed that often accompanies the privatization of public services. Still, the impression that I left Cuba with is that, at the moment, it all doesn't fit together very well, and the Government as well as the population has a lot on it's slate if it wants to improve the situation sustainably. On the morning of our departure Julio, our last host said to me: "I am not surprised that you are confused. I don't understand how this country works either." More pictures here

Posted by Axel Busch in Gudrun V at 14:00