

POSTCARDS FROM CUBA



SOPHIA RENEE



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I recently fulfilled a lifelong dream of mine, which was to visit the island of Cuba, the birthplace of my grandmother. To many Americans and to many of my Cuban-American friends whose families either fled or were exiled during the revolution, Cuba is a place steeped in controversy and heartache. I grew up hearing stories about Cuba; the people, the energy, the beauty and decadence of Havana. These stories are as much a part of my cultural upbringing and familial history as any of my childhood experiences. And yet, only recently was I able to ascertain for myself what makes this place unique and so incredibly special, despite the monumental challenges its people have endured.

This essay is not meant to endorse Cuba as a travelers' destination, nor is it meant to gloss over the oppressive and painful consequences of the Castro regime, a dictatorship that decimated the freedom and opportunities that should have been the birthright of generations of Cubans. It's simply a travelogue of my experiences — the places I saw, the people I met, the stories I heard.



MY TRAVELING COMPANIONS

The people you share your journey with are often as important as the destination itself. I traveled to Cuba with one of my oldest friends, Beth-Eden (left), and with one of my newest friends, Amy (right).

Beth is an adventurer, a free spirit. Amy is bright and well-traveled, a deep-thinking planner. I knew both ladies would bring an extraordinary energy to our shared experiences and they did not disappoint me. From the dusty streets and heady nightclubs of Havana to the tropical beach town of Santa Maria and deep into the Pinar del Río region of Cuba, these beautiful, soulful women were with me every step of the way.



The world famous **Floridita**, birthplace of the daiquiri. Once a legendary haunt of 1950s gangsters, Ernest Hemingway, and the iconic movie queen Ava Gardner, the bar's historical significance makes it a must-see. Havana, Cuba.
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EXHILARATING HAVANA

One of the most famous and intoxicating cities in the world, Havana is a place of unmitigated allure. Like a faded beauty from long ago, she beguiles us with her timeworn elegance and venerable charm. We rent an apartment in a colorful neighborhood in Old Havana. We spend our days and nights wandering instinctively, eager to absorb the culture and the people of our neighborhood and beyond. We explore the city's bustling tourist areas, open air markets, and ancient churches. Charming waiters and hosts beckon us into smoky bars and restaurants with promises of ice-cold mojitos, good food, and music. It is a vibrant city. It is **ALIVE**.



The colossal **Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña**, a place of infamous renown built in 1763 and reputedly used as a torture prison by the Castro regime.
Havana, Cuba. Postcards from Cuba.
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A Room with a View. We choose not to secure a hotel, opting instead to rent an apartment in an old building on Calle Merced. By doing this, we successfully avoid the feeling of being tourists and become very much a part of our neighborhood. The apartment is nothing fancy and there is literally no water pressure, but it's clean and the sprawling rooftop terrace offers me this surprising view of Havana. I am delighted by the unobstructed opportunities to photograph the city's decaying splendor.

Capitol Building. Havana, Cuba.

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From the terrace of our apartment on Calle Merced, we can almost reach out and touch this astonishing building. Each afternoon, the elderly woman in the second floor apartment comes out onto her balcony to hang her laundry and towels. She waves excitedly if she sees me watching or playing with my camera. I wonder how long she has called this edifice her home. I envision her long ago, a much younger woman, calling out to her husband or down to her small children playing on the street. If what they say is true — that all buildings have a memory — surely this one must be bursting with tales of love and loss. There are many hauntingly beautiful buildings in Havana, but this one has truly captured my imagination,

Apartment Building, Calle Merced. Havana, Cuba. *Postcards from Cuba.*

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The heavily ornate **Gran Teatro de La Habana Alicia Alonso** is a beautiful, dramatic theater located in the Paseo del Prado section of Havana, right near the Capitol building. It's named in honor of Cuba's greatest Prima Ballerina and is the home of the Cuban National Ballet. I am traveling light and without the proper camera equipment to capture the overwhelming scale of the building. I focus on the belvedere, using the limited focal length of my lens to study its epic intensity. *Postcards from Cuba*. Havana, Cuba.

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I am enamored with the people I meet in Havana. There are sincere smiles, gracious acknowledgments, and thoughtful exchanges with many. Each day, the teenage boys who live in the building across the street wait for us to make our appearance. As we exit our apartment, dressed in our fine American fashion, they applaud excitedly. It is a gesture meant to charm and flatter us. And it does. Ancient cabs and cars wait on the street, ready to take us to the places we want to see. The men who drive these cars are generally kind and trustworthy. Others try to exploit our naiveté but meet with little success. We are a part of this place now. We understand its veracity, the hustle of its people.

There is no shortage of faces to photograph in Havana and I find a multitude of willing subjects — a statuesque boxer training at a portentous outdoor arena, a captivating Santeria priestess holding court on the Plaza de Armas, a gentle homeless man living in an abandoned building off Calle de Cuba. These are the faces I will remember. They will live on in my work for years to come. I will continue to share them with others long after I leave Cuba.



Not far from our apartment, I stumble upon a stalwart heavyweight fighter training at the Rafael Trejo Gym, an outdoor boxing ring sandwiched between two timeworn apartment buildings. I study him closely through my lens. He moves gracefully, proudly, and swiftly. The athletes here work hard, making do with archaic equipment in less than ideal conditions. Although Cuban boxers have long managed to dominate the international amateur boxing circuit, many boxers choose not to defect to pursue professional opportunities, choosing country and tradition over financial security.

Postcards from Cuba. **TheBoxer**. Havana, Cuba.

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Santería is an Afro-American religion of Caribbean origin that developed in the Spanish Empire among West African descendants. Santería is a Spanish word that means the "worship of saints". It is a spiritual cornerstone of Cuban culture. Practitioners dressed in honor of their chosen saint are a common sight in Cuba. This Santera is vivacious and striking, and she welcomes my artistic scrutiny with delicious fervor.

Postcards from Cuba. **La Santería Cubana. Plaza de Armas.** Havana, Cuba.
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The people whose faces intrigue me are kind and open. They are curious. And the vast majority of them seem happy, despite the hardships and challenges they face living in a country where even the most basic comforts can be hard to come by. This gentleman is weary. Years of going without show on his face and in his eyes. He is living in an abandoned building in Old Havana. He motions us inside, eager to share his story with three American women. As I stand in the ancient sunlit portico off Calle de Cuba, listening to him talk about the historical significance of his "home," I suddenly feel grateful for every little thing in my life. As I am leaving, I ask to take his photo. He is happy to oblige.

Postcards from Cuba. El Cansado Cubano (The Weary Cuban). Calle de Cuba. Havana, Cuba.

PINAR DEL RIO & VIÑALES



Viñales Valley is a karstic depression in the Pinar del Rio province of Cuba. Various crops are cultivated here, but the tobacco grown in this part of the country is legendary and widely considered to be the finest in the world. These large limestone cliffs are known as **Mogotes**. Viñales/Pinar del Rio, Cuba.

Postcards from Cuba. ©sophiareneephotography.com 2017

Anxious to see other parts of the country, we have decided to leave the commotion of Havana behind us and travel the road to Viñales in the Pinar del Rio province of Cuba. It is a bright and beautiful morning. We are excited to explore this agricultural elysium, famous for its rustic charm, celebrated tobacco fields, and delicious farm-to-table fare. The road out of Havana seems long to us, but we are eventually greeted by the expansive, mountainous terrain that signals we are close. Instead of run-down, classic American cars, we now share the road with farmers on horseback. The air no longer reeks of petroleum; it is fresh and unpolluted. It is a different world here. Our driver takes a small dirt road off the main thoroughfare. The smell of tobacco and livestock is strong. We are in farm country now, a way of life far removed from our experiences in decadent Havana.



Havana seems like a distant world as we make our way through Viñales. We leave our car behind and take horses deep into the valley. I am awed by the beauty of the region and I pause to admire this picturesque landscape of golden green. We are not far from our destination, a working tobacco farm and drying house where the legendary Cuban cigars are cultivated.

La Palma Solitaria. Viñales/Pinar del Río, Cuba.

Postcards from Cuba. ©sophiareneephoto.com 2017



Tobacco leaves hang out to dry at a small, working farm in Pinar del Rio. Most Cuban farmers must sell a portion of their harvest to the state (at whatever price it dictates); the government then sells the tobacco to other sources, which then resell it under a distinctive label. Whatever is left can't be branded but the farmers are allowed to roll and sell cigars to tourists who visit their land.

Tobacco Leaves. Viñales/Pinar del Rio, Cuba.

Postcards from Cuba. ©sophiareneephoto.com 2017



We meet the people who work the land. They are a delightful family. Their jovial little boy is fascinating to watch and he holds my attention. He spends much of his time sharpening a little machete. He uses it to cut through small plants and sugarcane in imitation of the older men around him. He isn't really working but he thinks he is and his father cheerfully encourages his spurious labor. I study him with my camera. He is all energy, but he takes a moment to pause thoughtfully against the dramatic landscape when he notices me watching him. It is a fleeting, abstruse exchange of photographic power, something I rarely experience with children.

Cuban Boy. Viñales/Pinar del Rio, Cuba.

Postcards from Cuba. ©sophiareneephography.com 2017

We spend a full day in the region, exploring the tobacco farms and sugarcane fields and passing through the small villages that surround them. We stop for lunch at a picturesque mountainside cafe deep in the valley, finding respite at an outdoor picnic table shaded from the Caribbean sun by a cluster of enormous royal palms. I am ecstatic to learn the cafe serves the authentic "country" food I have been craving, food that has been completely unavailable to us at the restaurants and paladares in Havana where this type of cuisine is often regarded as "common." We order platters of freshly smoked lechon (pig) and chicharrón, heaping bowls of arroz congrí, fresh yucca smothered in garlic and oil, and ripe heirloom tomatoe escabèche. This is the food of my childhood and the familiar flavors come upon me like an old friend. There are a couple of musicians not far from our table with a guitar and maracas and they begin to sing the familiar strains of "Quimbara." It is a moment I savor.



Music is an integral part of the Cuban culture. Musicians such as these wander the countryside performing for tourists and travelers. They dress in traditional guayabera shirts and fedora hats. The music they play is a mix of old and new. "Quimbara" is an Afro-Cuban song made famous by the late Celia Cruz in the 1970s. It's a song I heard a lot growing up. It's a song that makes me **happy!** Suddenly, fond memories of dancing with my mother in our living room to its infectious beat come flooding back to me. I am barely a teenager, young and carefree. My mother is radiant, a still youthful and healthy woman unburdened by the illnesses that would eventually take her from me. We are laughing and singing. She is teaching me to salsa. It is a bittersweet moment, but my melancholy passes quickly as the music builds. The version of "Quimbara" these musicians play is much more subdued than the original, but it nearly tempts me to my feet nonetheless. I resist the urge to make the cafe's wooden deck my dance floor, even though I know the musicians would welcome it. As we leave the cafe, I look back over my shoulder to catch one final glimpse of this exemplary moment.

Musicians. Viñales/Pinar del Rio, Cuba.

Postcards from Cuba.

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Before returning to Havana, we explore the area's vast cave system. Toward the end of our trek, we come upon a radiant Cubana near the Santeria worship area known as Palenque de los Cimarrones. Her all-white attire is an indication of Iyawó. It is a time of purification and rejuvenation for new initiates in the Santeria religion.

Woman at Palenque de los Cimarrones. Viñales/Pinar del Rio, Cuba.

Postcards from Cuba.

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Our journey through Viñales has been extraordinary. We have enjoyed the natural beauty of the region, but it is time to return to the dusty streets of Havana. Time is not on our side. Our moments in Cuba are coming to an end. We are only one day away from departing for America. Soon, we will be back in the land of milk and honey, where life is fast and easy and everything we need is right at our fingertips.

The long drive back to Havana gives me time to think about the days I have spent here – this place with the arduous history and haunting appeal. A few hours later, as we approach the building that has served as our temporary residence during our stay, I am still lost in thought – lost in my ideas, in the vision of what I expected and what I found, and lost in the indelible impression this complicated, beautiful country and its people have left upon my heart.

As I pull back the ancient iron door of our building and climb the battered steps to our apartment, I suddenly recall a quote I always loved by Antoine de Saint-Exupery. It seems the ideal proclamation of what I have learned here and what I am feeling. ***"Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."***

Farewell, indefinable Cuba! The mystery of your appeal endures...



Me at the **Plaza de San Francisco**.
Old Havana, Cuba. *Postcards from Cuba*.
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Photograph by Beth-Eden Wright.

LIST OF MISCELLANEOUS WORKS



The Castillo de los Tres Reyes Magos del Morro (Castle of the 3 Kings) is an architectural symbol of Cuba known to people around the world. It "guards" the entrance to Havana Bay and has a storied history. It took 30 years to construct and was completed in 1630.
 Postcards from Cuba. Havana, Cuba.
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Tobacco Farm.
 Postcards from Cuba. Viñales/Pinar del Rio, Cuba.
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Tobacco Farm II.
 Postcards from Cuba. Viñales/Pinar del Rio, Cuba.
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Artist's Studio.
 Postcards from Cuba. Centro Habana, Cuba.
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Havana Bay.
 Postcards from Cuba. Havana, Cuba.
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Grandmother's childhood home, Havana, Cuba. Before returning to America, I found the building where my grandmother grew up. I stood there for a long moment, photographing her childhood home, aware that I was documenting not just a place, but the origin of my own story.

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SOPHIA RENEE

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