

POSTCARDS FROM CUBA

A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY



SOPHIA RENEE



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WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY SOPHIA RENEE

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. *Postcards from Cuba.* ©sophiareneephography.com 2017.



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.* ©sophiareneephography.com 2017.

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**.



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. The Boxer. 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.

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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. ©sophiareneephography.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.

This is an original photographic essay created by

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