

The doctor told me that I wasn't going to die. His exact words were "your life is not in danger, but you could be in a lot of discomfort". Such was his assessment 5 days before I was scheduled to fly Ottawa to Cuba in the midst of my most recent kidney stone episode. I won't call it an attack because I have known a kidney stone attack. And even attack is too gentle a word for the stabbing, knife-twisting agony I had under my left kidney 6 months earlier when I first experienced a kidney stone exiting my kidney and attempting to squeeze an uninvited trip through my urinary tract. On an emergency room bed I didn't care if I lived or died so long as someone present could make that decision quickly and end the pain. An I-V and strong drugs kept me with the living. Several stones have since passed and I haven't died, I haven't even experienced anything close to that first pain. This time I was peeing a little blood and felt like someone had grabbed my left love handle and was holding on (not really as romantic as it sounds), but otherwise I felt fine. Fine to travel, right Doc? He wasn't so sure. So I went.

Tour flights are not glamorous. Leg room does not exist. But the flight was on time and as we exited the Veradero airport the night air was 35 degrees warmer than when we left, and that's not even cold for Ottawa (the biggest swing while we were away was 50 degrees, +30 in Havana and -20 in Ottawa). A mini-van taxi drove us to the Melia Cohiba in the Vedado section of Havana where we were to spend 3 nights followed by 4 at the Melia Marina at the end of the Veradero strip. We arrived after midnight but went for a short walk along the Melacón (sea wall) and then had a drink in the bar.

While walking along the Melacón that first night, even on the drive in from the airport and for that matter most any other time we saw the local youth, they were hanging out in gangs. But not menacing gangs, just people gangs, friends. Throngs of teenagers, groups 4 or 8 or more hanging out in the parks, hanging by the side of the road, sometimes right on the road, sometimes with bikes (often 2 kids per bike), or playfully kicking something or someone around, or listening to music. It reminded me of when I was a teenager, of when Canadian youth hung together, got to know each other, sometimes got in a bit of trouble together. That was way we ran before electronics led teenagers willingly from the outdoors to the damp dirty confinement of bedrooms and basements and then placed in their hands the controls, the console, the phones that enticed them to play in solitary until their game thumbs throbbed. They have yet to put their flutes down.

Havana is perfect for walking, the core is not that big and you can cover one neighbourhood to another in a reasonable time and effort, and there is just so much to see on every street. La Habana Vieja, Old Havana, is compact and busy and gets your attention. Every taxi driver asks if you want to hire them, young men with menus try to steer you into restaurants where they will get a commission, hustlers want to know where you're from (Where 'ju from? Canada? Toronto! Vancouver! Montreal! they recite hoping to get you to stop and engage) before trying to chat you up in a conversation destined for a request for a little cash. But they are harmless and "no, gracias" and a wave of the hand was all we needed. The polite ones say, "maybe tomorrow". Taxis shaped like the Orange Julius stand from the Carp Fair and cars and other wheeled contraptions honk and jostle whether on narrow alleys or on boulevards four lanes wide. Some buildings are crumbling and others are restored and majestic, and then there are those representing the government and they are grand and impressive. It matches most

anything Europe can offer and having just celebrated it's 500th birthday, Havana is old. Not Europe old but after 500 years, who cares?

Old Havana is very Spanish as well. You hear many languages but Spanish dominates. The music that is played in the streets or spills out into it from the curbside restaurants is Latino or salsa or such. Beautiful courtyards and plazas are centred with fountains or gardens and rimmed with battlements or cathedrals or other things pleasing to see and admire. Bars and food establishments are small and authentic and busy, especially the bar Hemingway apparently frequented just down an alley from Plaza de la Catedral. The streets are a grid pattern so easy to follow, so naturally I got lost over and over (is there anything better, *anything*, than having the time to get continually lost on foreign streets and just fall into the character and vibe of a place? It can reveal so much) as I meander down San Ignacio to Tejadillo to Aguillar to Empedrado to O'Reilly ... O'Reilly? Okay, mostly Spanish.

I didn't see any pets until the third day when I crossed paths with a woman walking two Pekingese dogs on a leash. Oh, I had seen lots of *animals* before then, just no pets. Dogs lay prone on the street looking as dead as can be, but they were willing to move if not moving might mean their actual death. But not quickly. There are so many dogs wandering slowly and without purpose through the dirty streets, looking hungry but without the energy to do anything about it. Security claps their hands to shoo dogs from courtyards but they don't rush them out, they know that the very slight up-clip to their step is as fast as they can go. Cats too, usually in groups of 3 or 4, thin and sad looking. There were others in Veradero that were better at begging for scraps at the outdoor tables, but the Old Havana cats looked like they had mostly given up. There were lots of birds elsewhere but in Old Havana just some doves, maybe a smaller breed, or maybe just thinner like the dogs and cats.

Every 20 or 30 paces there is dog shit on the road but it is different here than what spoils the streets of France. It doesn't come from the pampered and entitled asses of the Parisian pets. These dogs aren't pets. The shit is different here.

For all the vehicles and people and dogs and general movement there seems to be a coordination that keeps one from bumping into the other. Two men on a moped almost hit a distracted local elder crossing the road. The moped men let out a satirical howl to get his attention and now I'm expecting cross words from all three but instead the moped driver breaks the tension with some laughter and they slap and chuckle together while the traffic behind the moped waits helplessly.

Arran has visited a shop of an artist while I was walking elsewhere, and she wants me to see it. It is called Cinco Gatos because, well, the artist has five cats and they are the subject of many of her paintings. As I wander from room to room I acknowledge that it is interesting, the artist is talented and the paintings are certainly not boring, but there's nothing that excites me very much. Until I see HER. Bless me lord, it's the Mona Lisa, the one and only woman who sat before Michelangelo. No, not *that* painting, but HER. The woman. Mona Lisa. But in this painting she has aged 20 years or more, holds a bottle of Havana Club to her chest and with her other hand is raising a full glass and has the look of a woman on at least her third bottle of the good stuff. Oh my, Mona Lisa, time and the drink have taken their toll on you. The painting was 45 pesos, not unreasonable for good art but I couldn't think of anywhere it would hang in my house let alone how I would get it back especially on a flight where we were jammed so tight in our seats that intimacy with your neighbour was not a question of if, but for how long one would have to endure cuddling afterward. Maybe on the next visit I will bring her home, if she still hangs on a Havana wall among the five cats.

There is poverty, and despite the tourist dollars in Old Havana, much of it is there. Glimpses through open doors of people sitting in sparse, hot rooms are on every street. An old man who looked to be 70 moved slowly along the street wearing a t-shirt that read "ripped for your pleasure" across the chest but he was neither ripped nor do I think his grandchildren got it for him as a gift. A man sitting with his young son chatted us up for some money, his son barely noticing as I'm sure he's listened to his father try the same thing dozens of times a day (or hour). Finally, he just asked me for my ball cap. It was late in the afternoon, so I wasn't worried about getting a burn on my bald head anymore, so I handed it over. If you visit Havana and someone asking you for money is wearing a CARHA hat, you'll know where it likely came from. I have a half dozen other CARHA hats, he has one.

Other parts of the city are not immune to the poverty either of course, but the buildings and streets are less dense and it doesn't seem as concentrated. Our hotel, the Melia Cohiba, has the most gorgeous pool area and places to lounge and relax and a poolside restaurant. To one side is the hotel itself, rising 21 stories of modern architecture, and to the other side is a 10 foot wall that only partially obscures a run down apartment building right next door. It's 10 stories or so, windows are broken, railings are missing, holes where bricks should be are evident; and it's also clear that people live there, that is their home, that is their reality.

There is little negative to say about the Cohiba other than they wouldn't let me live there for the rest of my earthly days. The room was clean and comfortable and the view from the 17th floor windows was spectacular and dizzying. Okay that was a small negative for me, but Arran loved it. I decided that I loved that hotel so much that I left a part of me behind, as in I passed small kidney stones on day two, lots of them. My gift to you, Melia Cohiba, I bet not a lot of guests have done that for you. And I hoped that would be the last of them and I would be able to return to Ottawa without a claim on the medical insurance and march triumphantly into my doctor's office and announce how I conquered my kidney and spit out my stones and laughed in the face of ... well you get the picture. I felt better.

The Cohiba offered free shuttle busses to Old Havana that left every hour or so which meant we had a comfortable air conditioned 10 minute drive to and from the heart of the city. On day 2 I decided to walk the Melacón instead and it took an hour in the heat, but it was a fun walk, I passed a number of monuments and the hospital and more interesting buildings than I could count. One had pock marks in the plaster of its walls and columns and each was filled with a piece of rolled up paper. There must be a story behind it but I didn't discover what it was. Arran meanwhile went to a museum, not my favourite activity, and we met up at the Hotel Sevilla where we had stayed 17 years before. The Sevilla was in a perfect location but back then was rough around the edges. Come to think of it, it was rough at the core too. Elevators didn't always work, screens were missing from windows, service was spotty. We found that time hadn't improved it much, but the atmosphere was still as unique and we sat down on sofas in the lobby. They were as uncomfortable as they were dirty. It was hard to stay balanced as you sunk back into the shaky frames. But it was still a rest.

The day before we had sat in the Sevilla courtyard, an open-air location in the middle of the hotel, for a drink and a snack and a salsa band set up and began playing. Two older gentlemen were on guitar, another on drums, younger girls on violin and bass, another woman on various percussion items, then a big woman with a big voice belted out some Latin songs with the rest of the band on backup vocals. It was entertaining. They even did a Beatles tune, the Beatles are revered in Cuba. Someone in the audience was trying to join in on harmonica and the singer chastised him a few times and eventually

security came and took him away, hopefully just to the street and not somewhere worse! After 8-10 songs they wrapped up and the lead singer started at tables and loomed over the first young couple with her hat in his face until they donated the sufficient amount. I had more time to get my penance out and it met with a nod, so I had done well. What a relief.

Closer to the Cohiba were two restaurants that had been recommended. Our meal plan at the hotel included breakfast only (which was really good, lots of fresh choices and we stocked up our bellies so that only a light lunch was needed) so we were on our own in the city for lunch and supper. I inquired with the concierge and found that the restaurants were really close, Atelier was just two blocks away on Avenida Paseo and Decamerón was six. Atelier has antique typewriters and sewing machines scattered about and old toilets used as planters and other eccentric accompaniments to its décor. We went there the first night and were seated on a rooftop terrace lit beautifully in the night. I had the Ropa Vieja, a traditional dish which is beef shredded with spices and peppers and onions, and it was excellent. I pointed out to Arran the number of tables where older Caucasian men were seated with younger Latin women, at least 3 couples, and they did look and act like couples. It's a common occurrence in Havana.

Decamerón was our destination at the end of day two and it has clocks, lots and lots of antique clocks. Not all were displaying the same time but they were close. The staff were really kind, helpful with their recommendations and we really enjoyed the meal. The dessert of lemon pie was memorable.

In 2010 the Cuban government allowed some measures of private enterprise to begin including non-government operated restaurants, so locals began opening Paladars in their homes. That's essentially what Atelier and Decameron are, restaurants in big old homes, and the guide-books make it clear that the private restaurants have excellent quality and are more adventurous in what they prepare compared with the bland offerings of the government run establishments.

Following the meal at Decamerón we waited for a taxi to take us to the Tropicana, the dancing and music show that our Air Transat rep at the hotel had assured us was the thing to see. It wasn't but that's okay. The spending money we went through all week was the equivalent of \$1000 and \$400 of it was for this show alone! Tickets were \$95US each then there was the cab and some drinks and the compulsory pass to take pictures after the show which it turned out everyone had equal access to anyway. Lester picked us up at the hotel at 8:30 which was in lots of time for the show, scheduled to run 10 through to midnight. It was a twenty-minute drive and Lester was quite talkative, commenting on other drivers and buildings we passed and his family and his son's education and wherever else the conversation led. He was a super guy and the chat was good. He dropped us near the door, told us where he would pick us up, and said that he would wait for us despite the fact we found out later that he lived quite close to the club.

There were three categories of tickets and we bought the best just in case, but when seated we clearly were not in the best seats. I inquired and was told by more than one person that we were at the back of the best seats but really, those poor people up close would have neck strain looking at the stage and we were in the best possible location. They lied. I had to shift in my chair to face the stage and could never fully get around such that my torso was twisted uncomfortably for two hours. The dancing and singing were okay but it was all Spanish so we lost somewhat of the meaning. The costumes for the ladies were at times almost non-existent; Arran noticed that when that happened one enthusiastic fellow with a video camera got very busy with the zoom option. For my taste the dancing got monotonous as did the costume changes but twice during the performance there was an interlude that included two people

doing feats of balance and strength. It was impressive and the only time I sat forward and took real notice. At our table were a couple from the Netherlands and a woman from Egypt who were all very nice and the conversation before the show was interesting. Lester was where he promised he would be, and we were back at the hotel and in bed by 1.

Aside from the shuttle bus and the taxis there was a hop-on-hop-off bus that would have taken us to other places we wanted to visit but on day three we elected to go by classic car. The concierge desk ordered one for us and a short time later our driver Fernando met us in the lobby and led us outside to the 1960 Chevy Impala he was driving. It was bright pink. Lots of the cars are pink and other bright colours like red, blue and green. There's not a lot of grey or black, that just wouldn't do. We hopped in the back and he took us through familiar territory along the Melacón and into Old Havana but this time we learned more about the buildings and the monuments and the history. When we passed the American Embassy along the Melacón I asked if the Cuban people were hoping someone other than Trump won the next election so that Americans tourists would be permitted to return but he didn't understand. Suddenly his English was lacking. Anything remotely political was off limits. Later as we stood beside the car after a stop at the Plaza de la Revolución to see the Memorial a Jose Marti, I asked Fernando if he had always liked cars. He responded quickly that no, he could never afford this car, it was owned by a company. I tried to rephrase my question, but we really did feel that his near-perfect English was restricted to the script of the tour and wasn't able to handle much else. Lester on the other hand was really good and talked about whatever we threw at him.

As requested, Fernando did not return us to the hotel but instead dropped us at the entrance to the Necrópolis Cristóbal Colón (Christopher Columbus Cemetery). We were there 17 years before and found it fascinating so wanted to see it again. Fernando not only dropped us at the gate but arranged a tour guide (which we soon realized was going to cost us 10 bucks) but that's okay, and out strolled Octavio who said in a soft, high voice, "wait for me!"

Octavio was in his fifties, plump and didn't walk very quickly. But he spoke fervently, lovingly about everything in the graveyard, a place he had been giving tours for 34 years. There are two and a half million bodies buried within the expanse and Octavio explained that they were divided black and white and then further by rich and poor, plus a place just for babies. The best stone was imported from various places in Europe and beyond as families tried to out-do each other in death. Bodies decompose quickly in the heat and high-water table so they tend to be removed after a time and then just the bones are re-buried in small boxes in order to save space. We inspected a monument which immortalizes 28 firemen who died in an 1890 fire. Octavio explained how certain aspects of the tomb were symbolic such as ornaments on the gates that were shaped like tears but when he showed us bats that apparently represented the fact the fireman rushed into the building "blind as bats" we began to wonder what was factual and what were 'Octavio-isms'. But he was reverent and serious about those whose lives were represented by the tombs, especially the fact that they were Catholic. He would tell a story about a life and it would often end with the phrase "and they were Catholic" which to him gave them a special place in the pecking order of the next world.

But he saved his most earnest faith for the tomb of La Milagrosa, the Miracle Worker, a woman and child who died in 1910 as she was giving birth and were buried, the child at her feet. When they were exhumed a year later now the child was in her arms and a legend began. Seventeen years before we had approached to see a number of local women at the tomb and soon realized they were crying as they

touched the tomb and prayed. We felt like we were intruding. This time there were no locals, but we had Octavio and he made up for the faith display and then some. He insisted several times "it's real" and that faith can move mountains and then told of miracles he had witnessed first hand such as a boy from Mexico who couldn't walk but his grandmother prayed to La Milagrosa and the son's ability to walk was restored and he showed up to let his grandmother (and presumably Octavio) see. Following one story he reminded us again that it was real and followed with resounding "yes, yes!, YES!!!" (jes, jes!, JES!!!) which made a few distant heads turn and was as convincing as the best of the southern Baptist TV preachers. Octavio even had misty eyes.

He said sometimes miracles happen too fast. I asked what he meant and he said his daughter had called him one morning to say she had a problem with her husband and so Octavio had gone to the tomb and prayed and by 2pm that very afternoon the problem was solved. Remarkable, truly impressive. Arran agreed that was amazing and she said that you must have been happy that your son-in-law was better, but Octavio only gave her a confused look. So did I, after all in Octavio's story his daughter said she had a problem with her husband, not that her husband had a problem. I assumed that the problem was solved by way of a collision with a bus or some other decisive means and La Milagrosa be praised. But I didn't press for an explanation.

After bidding farewell to Octavio we started our walk through Vedado back to the hotel. We wound through the local streets, preferring the smaller and more residential ones, admiring the houses and pretty courtyards, and passing several schools and groups of children in uniform. The streets were busy but we didn't see anyone else that was obviously a tourist. As planned we came to Parque John Lennon, and typical park one square block with some grass and benches and a small monument in the centre. But seated on one of the benches was John Lennon, or at least a sculpture of the man, leaning back, legs crossed, lifelike and realistic. As we approached there were some others taking his picture and it looked just like him right down to his round shaped spectacles. They moved on and we were about to take our turn when a couple from the Isle of Man also arrived and we chatted for a moment; he advised that the Beatles tour in Liverpool was well worth taking should we ever get to Liverpool. I said I had been there once and had seen a football match but when I revealed it was the Reds and not his beloved Everton I was somewhat lesser in his eyes. But we had a nice chat and learned a thing or two about the Isle of Man and offered to take each other's picture with John. That's when we noticed he wasn't wearing his glasses. I could have sworn I saw them when the others were snapping pictures. We stepped closer to do our picture when a man in uniform standing just a few feet away (though I had barely noticed him he stood so quietly) stepped forward and placed the glasses on John's face. I had read that there had been a problem with the glasses being stolen frequently and so here was the solution, a security guard whose sole purpose was to hold John's specs.

We continued from the park and made our way downhill to the sea and the Melia Cohiba and retrieved our bags in time to catch the bus for the 3 hour drive to Veradero. So long Havana, time for the all-inclusive resort, the beach and all the pampered privilege that comes with it.

Or so we thought.

Check-in was quick enough. The four young couples checking in at the same time all received welcome drinks but girl with the drink tray missed us. The four guys were onto the free beers in no time and for the rest of our stay the guys were almost always two-fisting. They were loud-ish and reminded me of a guy that was the same on all of our Malone golf trips, brash and loud and half-drunk and making certain

that everyone in the room noticed him; but that's okay because he was sure that he was just so funny and lovable. So, any time I saw them or one of the other groups of similar sounding folks I'd say, look Arran, Dave so and so is in the pool, or in our restaurant, or in the lobby. The first couple of times she turned expecting to see Dave there (no I said, you'd *hear* him first). But they were harmless and if I was there in a larger group, I might have behaved the same way when I was younger. Na.

We were escorted to our room by a friendly bellhop. It had seen better days, but it was okay. The toilet paper holder fell off the bathroom wall. The patio door wouldn't lock but we were 4 stories up, so it was fine. We put our feet up and had a drink looking out over the pool.

The beach is the best part of Veradero (some other guests suggested it was the *ONLY* good part of Veradero but that's too harsh). The colours of the beach and water are striking, and the water was warmish and perfect for swimming as it stays shallow for a long stretch. Every day we tipped a fellow to get us a good shaded spot along with a couple of the few unbroken lounge chairs and we relaxed in the 28-30 degree warmth, the glorious warmth. Kayaks and paddle boats were available to take out though you had to stay close to the hotel beach. A large hut just off the beach served lunch with chicken, ribs and fish on the barbeque and it was decent though the lines could be 20 deep and not moving when they didn't have enough meat going. We could always supplement at the buffet before it closed later in the afternoon. The snack bar closer to the pool also had beef (I question this description but still ate it) burgers and hot dogs and pizza but we were told that several items on the short menu were not available, things like French fries and onion rings. So we'd eat what we could and wander back to chairs on the beach and be forced to sunscreen up and go for another swim and wonder if the boys were getting the shovelling done back home.

While on the beach I noticed some people in the distance and the 5 or 6 of them seemed to be in a line and holding hands. Red Rover!!! I loved that game! Sign me up! But upon watching them moments longer I saw them arching up toward the sky, lowering, arching again. Then they dropped hands and started another stretch or pose. Yoga. I hate that game. Not all of me, my mind has always thought it is a great idea. It's my body that disagrees, often for days after and my mind gives up the argument.

It was the first morning at the Melia Marina and I thought I was 4th in line for the prepare-to-order omelette. But when friends joined friends (or perhaps just joined someone that they had once nodded at from across a room) I discovered that I was 8th. And given the inefficiencies of the chef in not managing to keep more than one omelette at a time on the go, those 7 spots moved very slowly. I had so much time to practice repeating my order in my head that I say it in my sleep to this day. Not because it was that good. It wasn't bad either. It was relief food, as in I'm finally relieved to get my omelette and be done with this friggin line.

Next, I saw that there was so little jam left in its large bowl that people were scraping the bits from the side. I think I saw a child lick the bottom of the bowl. No matter because the bread and rolls were also used up. Not one bun or slice remained. The automatic toaster rolled on as empty as the promise I once had for this breakfast. Mind you when we left, sated just enough to get us through to when we would join the lunch line, the bowl was re-filled with jam and 5 platters of bread and rolls had been restored. Clearly it's all or nothing.

The food wasn't really a positive, it was really about battling the lines and finding the passable and leaving behind the rest, the unrecognizable or worse. The stacks of pizza squares were always depleted

but I'm certain that it was yesterday's tomato sauce along with the ham and cheese slices left from the previous buffet meal slapped on top of yesterday's bread. But I ate some too.

The à la carte restaurants are wildly inconsistent. We had a reservation for 6:30 on our first full day and despite being third at the door it took close to 10 minutes to seat us and as they were doing so we were told that we would have to wait for menus as they didn't have enough. No matter, we were given one to share a few minutes later and we ordered our drinks, appetizers, soup, main course and dessert all in one shot. They managed to serve and clear away an appetizer and main course in an hour but miss our soup, and while other tables got rolls, we got none. All we needed now was our dessert. We waited. And waited. Others got up and left in disgust but it became a challenge, who would blink first, who would flinch; would they finally bring us our dessert or would we grow old and die or at least rush up to the buffet for an ice cream and some finger cakes? Eventually they caved, we won. After another 75 (only 75!) minutes of us not letting that table turn over while exhausting every conversation topic that Arran and I could think of, interspersed with moments of silence and possibly one short nap, dessert was finally presented to us. They were not even what we ordered of course, but we had something, anything, and we dug in and enjoyed the sugars of victory.

The next night and the one after that we were at two other of the specialty restaurants and we were in and out in an hour, I got EXTRA rolls, soup was remembered, mashed potatoes looked and tasted a lot like a bowl of rice (it WAS a bowl of rice!) but the food was generally tasty and the servers were really nice and attentive and we were happy to leave extra pesos behind.

And you make the best of it too; after having a chicken thigh and a pork rib put on my plate at the barbeque the first day, I spotted a table with bottle full of sauces. The only one I recognized was A1 and while I wanted to try the others, I was worried they might not agree with my discerning (read: fussy) tastes so I mixed several together and called it my own. I tasted it with my finger and it wasn't awful, a huge selling point given where I was currently located. The marketing plan began right then and there when a teenaged Canadian asked me what I was doing with the sauces and I showed him. He didn't compliment me on my genius or do backflips, so the marketing plan ended with him as well.

There are 2 hand towels for the bathroom sink, but we required both for all the water that doesn't stay in the intended target of the sink. The tap stream is not full and straight but an unexpected spray. Some goes in the bowl but with such force that it goes all over the front of my shorts (why don't I just turn it down? Ah reader, by this point are you still so naïve??). So towel #1 is to catch some of the mess out the far lip of the bowl. Another stream goes backward on an angle hence towel #2 is to catch the water as it runs down the wall to the backsplash (an apt name!) to the counter. Now there are no towels left to dry my hands so I use my shorts since they're damp already.

After a few days of this the hand towels were pretty wet and not a pleasant smell. On our second last day we called housekeeping and requested fresh hand towels. Nothing happened. Then later we returned to the room and housekeeping had taken the hand towels but left no replacements. We called again. Soon after, when we were out again, they returned but replaced our bath towels instead, and left no hand towels. Oh well.

Speaking of the maid service: Twice we returned to our room and our key cards wouldn't work which meant walking down to the front desk with arms full of beach paraphernalia, waiting my turn, then getting the front desk person to re-program the card. Once back at the room I opened the door only to

see another card in the light switch where we would normally put our card to keep the lights and a/c running. But it wasn't our card. We thought someone was in our room! But after seeing the bed was made etc, we realized the maid had left her card behind which locked us out. Then it happened again the next day and the front desk smiled and chuckled as if to say, oh those silly housekeepers! as they reprogrammed my card again.

Oh and speaking of the front desk: lovely people, happy to give an answer to my questions, but often not one that was true or helpful. We arrived on a Tuesday and on the check-in countertop was a printout of the weather forecast each day Tuesday to Friday, which was helpful since internet was essentially non-existent. The same printout was there on Wednesday and again on Thursday. When it hadn't been updated by Friday morning, we asked what the forecast was expected for the day and they politely pointed to the printout. I said that maybe it could have changed since it had been printed earlier in the week and they smiled and said no and pointed again at the sheet, which called for a dip in temperature and a 40% chance of rain. It was hot and sunny again so that was a happy mistake. As we checked out Saturday late afternoon the forecast sheet still hadn't been replaced.

When we first arrived the front desk gave us a welcome pamphlet that had a map of the premises and a description of many of the facilities and food and drink locations. Unfortunately, it was in Spanish and we couldn't decipher enough so I decided to go back for an English copy. The folks at the desk were busy checking in other guests so I asked a bellman who didn't seem to be busy. He understood what I was looking for, agreed that such an item existed and went behind the counter to look. Not in that drawer. Not in that one either. Oh, here are some, a whole stack in fact ... just read this side, read the other, check side one again, decide they aren't the intended prize and put them back. Not on that desk. Ask each of the staff in turn, get a wave that could mean yes, but they could be anywhere, or it could also mean to get lost. Check under the counter. Eventually he pulls out one single pamphlet and inspects it for twice as long as he checked out the others. I'm waiting. He hasn't made eye contact with me the entire time he has been looking, more than 5 minutes but from 5 feet away. He looks to me now and holds it up. This is it! He steps forward. He handed it over like it was a collector's item, like it was the last one they were ever, ever going to print. I brought it home with me. I think I might frame it.

The front desk also helpfully answered my questions regarding a bar that apparently served a variety of beer. Beer was plentiful at the lobby bar, at the pool bar, and the snack house, at the beach and even in the bar fridge of our room but sadly the choice was either Cristal or Cristal so when my prized map of the premises showed something called Bar Cojimar that specialized in beers I had hope (faint realistic hope but, you know, a little is better than none) that other beer was available since Cristal, to my tastes, is a bit bland. Oh yes, the folks at the front desk told me, Bar Cojimar has many beers. It is on the marina promenade. My map said it opens at 11am. No, they corrected, it is open in the evening. But nothing that looked like a beer bar was open in the evening. I asked at several places ... are you the beer bar? I felt like that baby bird from Dr Seuss asking, "Are you my mother?" No little one, I am a cigar bar. No little one, I am a daiquiri bar. No little one, I am a wine bar (which only served white wine, no red wine was to be found!). The staff cleaning the promenade had no idea what bar I was asking about and the front desk kept pointing us back to the promenade. Finally, on our last night, when someone opened the daiquiri bar again, I asked the gentleman at the counter where oh where was Bar Cojimar. He pointed to another hut not 100 feet away that was boarded up.

"Will it be open tonight?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "There is no chow (as he pronounced "show", there had been shows on the promenade every other night).

"Oh, so it was open last night?"

"No."

"But there was a show last night."

"Si."

"But it wasn't open?"

"No."

"But the front desk said it will open."

"Si, when there is a chow."

"But there was a show last night."

"Si."

"But Bar Cojimar was closed."

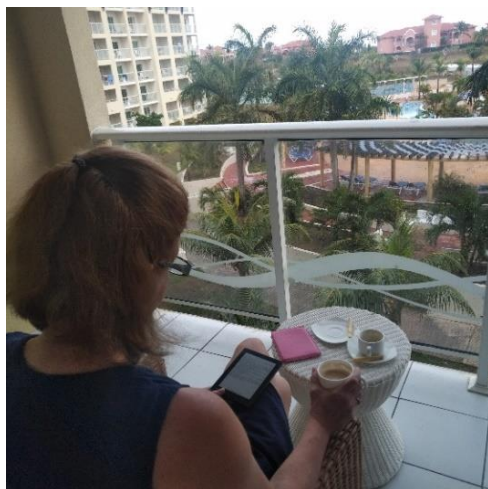
"Si."

"When was the last time Bar Cojimar was open?"

His smile faltered and he seemed confused at this and I fully appreciate that we are speaking in my familiar language that is not familiar or easy for him, so I repeated "When was Bar Cojimar open?"

"Been long time."

There we go, finally the honest truth. I thanked him for that. Now I can stop my quest for a different beer and continue drinking white wine, strawberry daiquiris, many, many mojitos and then a few Amarettos on our balcony relaxing and looking out on a warm evening which all in all isn't so bad.



Ah, the balcony at the Melia Marina



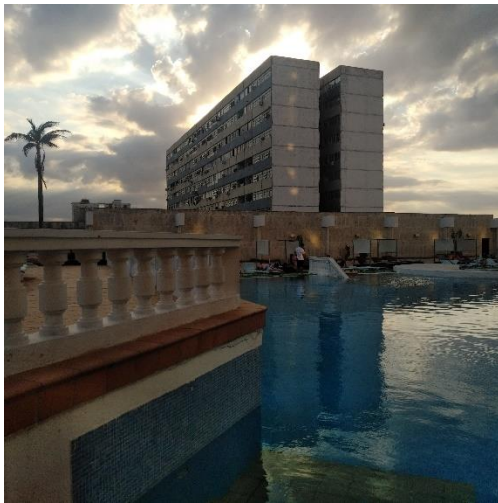
Bar Cojimar!! (yes, it's closed)



Arran and Octavio



Driving with Fernando



The Cohiba pool, the poverty beyond



The Capitalia Nacional in Old Havana



With John



Mona Lisa, hiding behind a lamp