

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Postcards from Cuba

I visited Cuba in March 2014. This was my first visit to a country that I had long admired for its political courage, feisty independence, and determination to maintain its national autonomy despite the unbridled push for American domination.

The images taken in March 2014 depict Cuba before the impact of recent major events - the lifting of the 50-year American embargo in December 2014, the election of Donald Trump on November 8, 2016, and the death of Fidel Castro on November 25, 2016. These three events will likely contribute to the evolution of this extraordinary nation island, which was inhabited by Amerindian tribes for centuries prior to European contact, colonized by Spain in the late 15th century, achieved nominal independence as a US protectorate in 1902, overthrew the US-supported Batista dictatorship in 1959, and has successfully developed an exceptionally strong performance record in human capacity.

During a family vacation to Cuba's beach and resort area, I seized the opportunity to explore the capital city of Havana, as well as two small coastal cities, Remedios and Caibarien. Visiting an unfamiliar locale is a stimulating experience for most people, and certainly for me. But unfamiliarity can breed misunderstanding and miscommunication too. This is always the challenge for visitors.

It would have been obvious to most Cubans that I was a gringa who was sufficiently privileged to be able to fly to their beautiful, but cash-and-commodity-starved, country, likely from a northern clime whose response to the warm Cuban sun was unrestrained enjoyment, and probably blissfully uninformed about the vicissitudes and uncertainties of daily life in Cuba. These assumptions were not misplaced, but I was also eager to observe, learn, and share.

My interactions with Cubans were limited by language and cultural barriers. But the camera helped to open pathways of communication. A young girl dressed in her school uniform and lingering at the entranceway of what was probably her family's café, watched me with interest. When I asked through wordless gestures if I could take her picture, she struck a pose, proudly displaying the keys that dangled from her hand. A group of children and teens in front of a pizza-stand kibitzed for attention. A woman asked me – through the same universal sign language – to take a picture of her three small daughters. I obliged and then indicated that I wanted a picture of the four of them. She reluctantly acquiesced.

Cuba is vibrant, dynamic, and diverse. I saw - and photographed - brightly coloured clothes, lively conversations, diverse and integrated racial ethnicities, and complicated social exchanges set against the background of a crumbling infrastructure. The can-do attitude that is evident throughout the Cuban culture and sensibility is counter-balanced by a feeling of anticipation of, and indeed a hunger for, change.

Thanks to my friend and sister-in-law Baye Hunter for organizing the trip to Cuba, my adult children Jonah Flanagan and Halley Roback for participating in the adventure, and my partner David Roback, for his companionship in this and all my journeys.

*Kathleen Flanagan
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