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IFLA in Havana 1994: Comments on the Country

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By Ralph Swinburne

After enjoying attendance at the IFLA meeting in Cuba last summer, it occurred to me that readers of Sci-Tech News might be interested in my observations about the country and the people. Reports about formal activities at the sixtieth General Conference of Library Associations and Institutions have appeared in Sci-Tech News and elsewhere, but my comments are confined to personal reactions.

These remarks go beyond the confines of the Palacio de las Convenciones which, by the way, was a well run modern facility. A full service food and bar complex at all times and scattered coffee servers dispensed Cuban coffee (espresso). Telex, telephone, mail counters and a gift shop provided the usual goods, including an unexpected assortment of lingerie. This gift shop, one of the few places where Cubans could spend dollars, had lengthy lines and a doorman to control capacity. Foreigners were allowed to budge the line to no one’s discomfort but their own.

Our adventure began with a 5:30 a.m. hotel departure to Miami International Airport to board the charter AirFlorida flight to Havana. By and large it was an orderly, albeit apprehensive, crowd—IFLA registrants, returning Cubans and other travelers, all trying to sort the single function queues. One for credentials check, one for boarding numbers and departure tax, etc. Will there be enough seats?, was a common thought for many of us.

Many of the travellers had prearranged to carry 10 kg of medical supplies to families in Cuba. These containers with large transparent windows were carefully checked by customs personnel before being clear wrapped for boarding. This is one of the guaranteed methods for Cubans to obtain medicine. The government supposedly provides free medical care, but the pharmacy shelves are bare and the hospitals’ supply is pathetic.

Arrival in Havana and negotiating immigration and customs was without trauma; departure was much the same. Waiting doesn’t count. The airport scene was rather peaceful, no armed presence or obviously military types to be seen.

Outside of customs were the IFLA volunteers pointing out the proper buses for various hotels. They were a welcome sight to behold. More waiting, but the buses were warm and all was well.

On to the Hotel Copacabana. It was very nice, and everything worked most
of the time. We had to watch out for wake-up calls though—some early, some late, some never. In fact the whole tourist infrastructure worked quite well. The taxi service was inexpensive and consistent (metered); haggling was not necessary. Tours were abundant and mostly reliable. Let the folks whose bus broke down on the way to the cigar factory tell their own story.

Local travel, bicycles with rear fender seats, sometimes one on front as well, were the most common sight. Automobiles, (all the remaining US cars from the 40's through 50's) are here. They ranged from a pristine 1956 Plymouth Belvedere to Chevies and Fords which would never pass inspection anywhere. Motorcycles with side cars, often containing small families were frequently seen. Public buses were like buses in a lot of other places—cracked windows, split upholstery, bumpers askew and usually overcrowded. Tour buses were a step up, a small step.

Our Hotel the Copacabana, was in a neighborhood called Mirimar, which is where most of the embassies are located. They were on lovely tree-lined streets with large residences, functioning and some not functioning. The Russian embassy, still occupied and well-tended, stood like a futuristic lighthouse not far from the hotel. After dark, dim lights could be seen coming from inside the some of the abandoned properties, squatters or caretakers? Evening strolls were not a fearful experience, even while passing small groups and other hangers on. This trip took place at the height of the small boat migration towards the US. On the bus to the opening session we passed a group of ten or so young men carrying a raft lashed with provisions and a wrapped sail headed for the water's edge. Other boats, made from plywood and pipes, tanks and other materials, were seen waiting for a favorable departure window.

Our first day in Havana was a Saturday, market day in the old city. The square by the church was filled with small tables of wooden trinkets, musical instruments, art works, clothing, carved coconuts and the like. Good spirits prevailed. Joking and negotiating with the sellers was all in good fun, even to receiving a lesson how to play the claves, the rhythm sticks ubiquitous to any Cuban musical group. These kinds of souvenirs were to be found all over the city. Tour buses stopped at shops selling their clones a couple of times during every trip.

The numerous beggars, mostly young men, made persistent offers to obtain taxis, cigars, and more. One in a wheel chair with a maimed foot finally got a coin from me. We were stopped several times by adult women asking for soap.

The Malecon, a grand wide drive curving along the harborside, is rimmed with still stately residences. Now needing paint and window repair, they are homes for the poor, who sit on plastic milk crates and makeshift furniture. It was not difficult to visualize this once elegant boulevard.

Along the sea wall the young and not so young gather nightly. Some singing, some caressing, and some discussing has led to larger groups and was the scene of rioting during the summer.
Impressive and imposing is the Hotel Nacional. Perched on a knoll overlooking the Malecon, it still attracts monied travellers. Courtyard tables and seating, which once held the rich and famous, is a pleasant place to relax and converse. It is the rooftop which must be visited. There's a bar which overlooks the city on one side and the harbor on the other. The soft lights from anchored boats was a sight to remember. For the adventurous, find the spiral staircase which leads to the tower above and view the city from its small balcony.

About a two hour drive east of the city is Varadero Beach. On the way to this white sandy beach we passed cattle farms, oil pumping stations and through a lot of green country. Along the seaside are several new and still under construction resort hotels. One of the hotel locator boards indicated a gambling location still to be built. A change in the wind??

The water was warm and calm, no surfing here. "Please bring us another Mojito," supposedly Hemingway's favorite drink made with crushed mint leaves, raw sugar, lemon and rum. A short nap on the returning bus was luxury.

Another day we travelled to Valle de Vinales, about two hours west from Havana. The bus took us down a four lane highway with completed bridge overpasses but no connecting on or off ramps. Hitchhikers stood under the bridges waiting for rides. Government vehicles are not supposed to travel with empty seats if there are people looking for rides. Military and other agency cars and trucks were stopped at staging areas to be filled to capacity.

One stop was at a "typical Cuban farm," here we found more souvenirs, fresh coconut milk, crushed sugar cane and other things to buy. The farmer's accommodations were clean, spartan and obviously prepared. There were farm animals, a small garden and tobacco drying sheds. Leaving the "typical" farm, on to the cigar factory. I don't know how they produce a thing. A constant stream of visitors asking questions and taking pictures. We saw tobacco leaves being separated, graded, trimmed and rolled. Some of us bought cigars, a range of prices, two to ten dollars apiece maybe even higher. Someone told me you can spend sixty dollars for a single smoke. Secondhand smoke a problem here?

One of the taxi drivers told us a little about how the state's food allocation plan is supposed to work. Farmers are required to sell all their products to the state. Since returning, our Press has reported that the farmers may keep a portion of their output for personal use—a recent and needed change. Distribution of food is somehow based upon caloric "need." For the laborer 2400 calories a day, the less strenuous occupations 1600 calories per day and for the retired or no longer productive 800. It is easy to see why the hotel and restaurant jobs are so eagerly sought. Food availability is a severe problem; much of the food at receptions was carried off in a variety of common containers.

Eating out had some interesting moments, hamburgers were made from ham, so why not? Lots of chicken, the pork was good, vegetables, salads all ok. The desserts were too sweet for my
tooth, but the coffee was spectacular—it helped if you like espresso. One of the entries at “La Bodeguita del Medio” looked familiar. After receiving my order, I wondered how many of the registrants knew they had eaten horsemeat at the previous evening’s reception. Prices were similar to the US. The service was spotty and the check was often wrapped in a napkin when presented.

Departure day and the by now old refrain, what time does the bus leave for the airport? What time does the plane leave? Do we know what airline we are on? Look at the schedule you say. Things finally all worked out even if the bus driver could not find the international terminal. It was a little dicey for him as well. I heard him on the radio trying to get directions and saying that if he made us miss the plane he would lose his job. Little did he know that we had about a three hour wait in the terminal. As I said, waiting doesn’t count. Our carrier of record to Miami was Lloyd Aereo Boliviano.

Customs at Miami was unconcerned about returning from Cuba. “Sir, how many bottles of rum are you carrying?” “I have two, how many am I allowed?” “Well, really only one is allowed, but two is OK, go on have a good day.”

The luggage was waiting and a scooting porter took us through parking lots and up and down elevators on a shortcut to Continental’s gate. A quick trip to Newark, on time and my pickup was there. Home to find that the paper had actually been stopped, wonder of wonders.

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