

Known for its cigars and Che, there is more to Cuba than the stereotype.

**Thomas E. Muller** explores Cuba: a nation undiscovered by many tourists.

## A Cuban odyssey

I was just a gangling teenager when Ernesto "Che" Guevara was setting fire to Cuba's political stage. Fifty years later, this Cuban icon is as alive and vibrant as the musical spirit which permeates every corner of today's Cuban soul. And, 50 years later, this impressionable, travel-minded senior from halfway around the world, who scarcely knew then about the Cuban Revolution, is visiting Che's adopted country and heeding his call: *Hasta la victoria siempre* – onward to victory, always.

It is 50 years since Che and his alter ego, Fidel Castro, marched into Havana in January 1959, declared victory over imperialism and dictatorship, and handed that victory to the people. Che Guevara, the dashing handsome Argentine doctor and adventurer, through a series of improbable events, came to be inextricably tied to the Cuban Revolution. He later renounced his Cuban citizenship and redirected his revolutionary fervour and guerrilla activities toward Bolivia. There, in 1967, he was captured in the jungle by Bolivian troops and his execution, the next day, forever elevated him to martyrdom.

As I arrived into Cuba's capital, Havana (La Habana is the Cuban name), from Panama City, and made my way to my two-star hotel, I wondered how my 23-day Cuban journey would impress, or even change me. It didn't take long for me to realise that I was travelling through an utterly different era in modern history, a country fixated on the 1950s and remaining an enigma to the outside world. How does one capture the traits of a nation descended from West African slaves and Spanish settlers and shaped by a socialist, agrarian system?

Barely 12 hours later, I am on the road out of Havana, riding in a minibus with my nine travelling companions (Irish, British, Aussies, a Kiwi and a Spaniard). There isn't an American among us; except for Cuban Americans, since citizens of The Land of the Free and The Home of the Brave are forbidden by US law to cross the Straits of Florida and set foot in Cuba. It is one of many reminders of the economically harsh, 48-year trade embargo imposed on Cuba by her overbearing neighbour to the north.

It is April, and subtropical Cuba is nearing the end of her dry season. We are heading toward Santa Clara, Che Guevara's adopted city and the place where his remains, and those of other martyrs of the Cuban Revolution, lie today. I tour the museum next to his mausoleum and spot an exhibit displaying a report card from his high school days: every one of his marks was in the four to seven bracket (out of a maximum 10), except one: he got a nine for the subject of history. It figures, I think to myself. History had already sought him out, and he it.

As I walked away from the museum, toward the waiting van, I could hear the imagined, cascading chants getting progressively louder in my head ... che, Che, CHE, CHE! CHE!! CHE!!! It is impossible to get this man out of my, and Cuba's, mind.

Next stop was Cuba's historic town of Trinidad. Throughout much of this journey, I was sampling a delightful accommodation option, *casas particulares*, which are private rooms rented to visitors by families who have officially registered their homes for this purpose. It's a great way of getting to know how Cubans live, eat, play, chat, and go about their daily chores.

Trinidad is a microcosm of Cuban culture, nature and pride. Founded in 1514 as La Villa de la Santísima Trinidad (Town of the Holy Trinity), it carries the extra weight on its shoulders of being a UNESCO World Heritage site. Yet, it pulses with rhythm, late night salsa dancing, and live music bars that would put Dublin to shame.

Just as there isn't a town or village in Cuba that doesn't somewhere portray the bereted and bearded image of Che Guevara, you cannot sit in a restaurant or café anywhere in Cuba and not encounter a live band rendering that quintessential Cuban rhythm and medley of harmonic voices, willing your foot to tap and your hips to gyrate. The lilting Spanish lyrics are everywhere you dine. A motley band of musicians will show up off the street and set their guitar and bass strings and vocal chords reverberating to the lead singer's soulful arrangement.

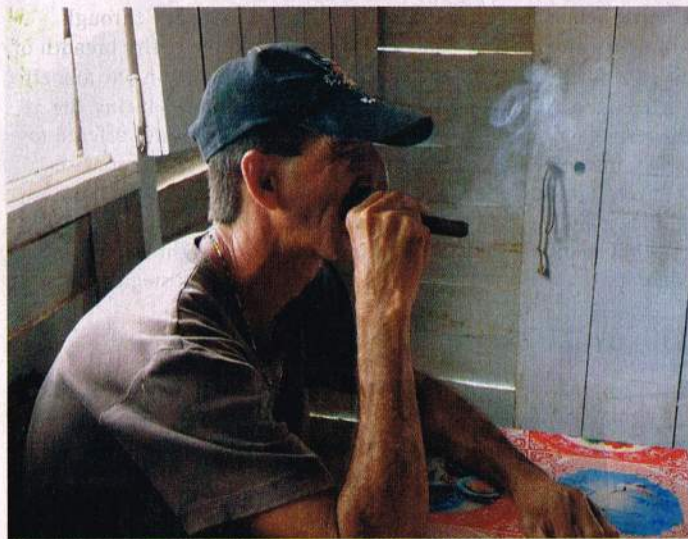
On the second night, we headed out to Playa María Aguilar, where firewood collected from the beach was turned into a brilliant pyre, while we barbecued fish and chicken, and provided our local guitarist with some rum-fuelled vocal accompaniment to his Cuban repertoire of songs.



The next day, we wound our way into the Alturas de Trinidad Mountains, boarded a rowboat for the ride through the Cueva La Batata limestone cave and took a 2.5 kilometre hike through a subtropical forest to the 62 metre Salto del Caburní waterfall. There, some of us took the plunge into a cold swimming hole beneath the falls, complete with underwater stalactite cave, and paused for a liquid massage under the cascading water.

A day later, it was onward to Camagüey, near the geographic centre of Cuba. Cuba's third largest city is a labyrinth of twisting, narrow streets running in almost every direction but north-south, east-west. After checking into my assigned *casa particular*, I decided to inspect some of the stores on the main shopping street of Calle Maceo. Entering a general store, I was confronted with a most amazing case of scrambled merchandising. All sharing the same floor space were motor scooters, baby cots, toilet bowls, farmers' pitch forks, iron horseshoes, TV sets, kitchen sieves, refrigerators, automotive oil filters and pipe fittings. Retail floor space is scarce and expensive in Cuba and this is the jumbled result.





After a two-night stop in Santiago de Cuba, we continued eastward, passing Guantánamo Bay, with its infamous US naval base, then crossing the Sierra del Purial mountains we entered the coastal town of Baracoa, at the eastern tip of the island, on the Atlantic Ocean side of Cuba. Baracoa teems with history. It is the first city founded in Cuba. Christopher Columbus (Cristóbal Colón, in Spanish) landed here in 1492; the Spanish founded a

colony here in 1511, then captured Cuba's very first rebel fighter, Hatuey, leader of the Taino Indians resisting the Spanish conquerors, and publicly burned him at the stake. Almost 500 years on, Che Guevara came to Baracoa in the early 1960s and set up a chocolate factory, given the availability of the cacao bean plant. Baracoa gets plenty of rainfall and the mountains and countryside are lush with coconut plantations and citrus groves.

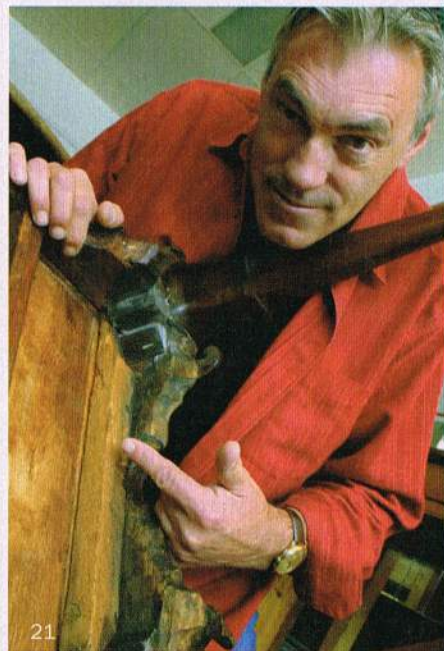
A few days later, we journeyed to Cuba's western province of Pinar del Río. Our two-night stay at a casa particular in the town of Viñales put us into Cuba's tobacco country. The tobacco harvest was now over and, at a tobacco farm of the Coöperativa Frank Pais, inside large thatched-roof sheds filled with the heady scent of tobacco, I saw how the leaves were hung to be dried. Later, I watched tobacco farmer Geraldo Gonzalez Rico deftly roll a perfect cigar out of the flattened leaves on his kitchen table and light it up. When we got to our final destination, Pinar del Río, I decided to do the same, in the smoking lounge of the city's famous cigar factory. My inept puffing on a \$12 Romeo y Julieta cigar appeared quite amusing to my travelling companions.

From experience, I know that socialist countries have bad service, but here in Cuba, you can overlook it. What they lack in promptness and efficiency, and availability of modern amenities, they more than make up for in friendliness, good humour, graciousness and a genteel, open nature. Only once, during my stay, did I encounter anything resembling aggression: two men having a loud argument in the street, a safe distance of



12 feet separating them, while bemused bystanders drew entertainment value from this almost theatrical spectacle. I found Cuba remarkably crime free. And Cubans seem to take their responsibilities seriously; a tourist stealing a towel from a hotel room would cause unmitigated distress to the miserably underpaid chambermaid in charge of that room, and responsible for its contents.

As I look back on my journey through Cuba, having covered the entire breadth of the island by road, I reflect on one amazing twist of history. Four times, during the 19th century, the United States offered to buy Cuba from her Spanish colonialists, and four times Spain rejected the bid. Thank goodness for that; Cuba retains its fascinating uniqueness right into the 21st century – Hasta la victoria siempre! ●



## contents

- 18 Free** The story of Li Cunxin is one of hope and inspiration that traverses China, America and Australia. Abby Campbell discovers what drives this successful man.
- 21 Collecting memories** From teapots to toy cars, Australians are a bunch of collectors. Learn more about this hobby with advice from expert Gordon Brown.
- 24 Can we live together?** Take a tip from the share house days of youth and explore the concept of senior co-housing with Kaye Healey.
- 28 Changing career after 50** Upskilling, entrepreneurship and starting a business are ways to achieve career aspirations. Casey-Ann Seaniger shares the stories of three people who have gone down these paths and made a successful career change.
- 38 Introducing Sri Lankan cuisine** Matt Preston reckons there are many cultures' cuisines we've been missing out on. Indulge in some exotic Sri Lankan dishes.
- 43 A Cuban odyssey** Thomas E. Muller dives into Cuban life, appreciating the warmth of the people and the beautiful soul of Cuba.
- 54 It's never too early to start estate planning** These days a will may not be enough. Stephen Hardy gives an introductory view into estate planning and what you need to consider before you begin.

## every issue

Executive Diary .....	9
Letters .....	11
First Up .....	14
World Watch .....	16
Working For You	
Policy .....	31
Foundation .....	33
Member Benefits .....	34
Health .....	35
Events .....	49
Garden .....	50
Books .....	51
Movies .....	52
Brain Training .....	56
Compton's Comment.....	58

## editor



This issue has an international flavour. Our cover story on Li Cunxin takes us on a journey from China to America

(then Australia) in the life of one amazing person. Read about his extraordinary life on page 18.

Famous food critic Matt Preston is talking all things international, encouraging Aussies to try new cuisines. Get a glimpse of Sri Lankan cooking with the exceptional Melbourne restaurant Araliya showcasing two recipes. Flick to page 38.

We focus on an emerging style of housing that Australia is yet to embrace: co-housing. The United States and Denmark are leaders in this field, and Kaye Healey gives an insight into how they do things on page 24.

Take a journey to Cuba on page 43. Thomas E. Muller puffs on a Cuban cigar, enjoys the ubiquitous music and explores the lasting legacy of Che Guevara in today's Cuba.

To top it off, our books and movies pages are filled with adventures from around the globe. So sit down and enjoy a trip around the world in 60 pages!

Abby Campbell  
Acting Editor

## contributors



Stephen Hardy joined Slater & Gordon in 2008 as a principal lawyer in the wills, probate and estate litigation group. He was attracted to estate planning, wills, probate and estates due to the individuality of each of his clients, their requirements and the growing demand for his services from different generations.



Kaye Healey is an author and retired counsellor. She lives in a solar passive mud brick house that she designed and helped build in a permaculture garden. She is working on her next book about women and ageing.



Thomas E. Muller was born to travel and, 69 years later, he is still doing exactly that. He now focuses on exploring the Earth's remote and less-visited places and writing about his encounters with people and their own corners of the planet. He is a National Seniors life member and before retirement was a professor researching and writing about the travel psychology of seniors and retirees.



Casey-Ann Seaniger, a member of the National Seniors public affairs team, hails from Mackay in North Queensland. Casey-Ann has a Bachelor of Journalism (Hons) from James Cook University in Townsville, a background in print media and a passion for community volunteering.

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**Acting Editor** Abby Campbell a.campbell@nationalseniors.com.au

**Editor** Sarah Saunders

**Advertising Manager** Mark Smith m.smith@nationalseniors.com.au

### National Office

Level 6, 243 Edward Street, Brisbane

**Phone:** 07 3221 2977

**Fax:** 07 3211 9339

www.nationalseniors.com.au

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