



Once Upon this Island!

NAS CONCERT TOUR 2010 – CUBA!

First, many and very special thanks to Nate Mickelson, James Crowell, and Donna Zalichin for doing all the literal and figurative heavy lifting required to make this unusual adventure possible.

Only one week, but what a week it was. And as all tropical adventures, it was hot, fascinating, and exhilarating.

The tour of 41 (29 singers and 12 “staff”) was a sanctioned cultural exchange of four concerts in venues in and around Havana where we would sing with six professional Cuban adult and children choruses. These superb choruses were a joy to hear and challenged NAS to reach for its best. (One impromptu mini-concert was also a great success. More later.) As usual, Clara put together an eclectic program combining classical, theatre, spirituals, and Latin American music. What was happening on the way to, in between, as well as at the concerts made this adventure truly special.

Here then is the NAS Cuba Tour as experienced by the eyes, ears, and hearts of those who made the journey.

“Experiencing the ‘real Cuba’ wasn’t difficult to do; merely going to lunch at a local restaurant with its house band and people dancing during lunch was a touch of the true spirit of the city.”

“It took me two or three days to get over a general sadness when looking at the beautiful baroque and art deco buildings slowly decaying even when serving as housing for so many.”

“Alicia, our guide, showed us some aspects of Cuban life many Americans would never imagine: a Communist society with ration books, monthly trips to markets to buy government-sanctioned groceries, lack of luxuries like disposable diapers.”

As “visiting artists” NAS enjoyed breakfasts amply supplied with fresh omelets, fruit – especially truly tangy mangos -- in the flesh and in juice. Avoiding heat stroke and “Raúl’s Revenge” required frequent infusions of bottled water and, when available, that magnificent mango juice. Food?

“I think roast pork is the national dish.”

“Didn’t see many cows; maybe a few horses and one goat.”

“Lamb? Sheep would pass out in this heat!”

The ubiquitous pork was often accompanied by rice and beans, deep-fried and spiced root vegetables, or mashed sweet potatoes. Sometimes prepared to savory perfection, other times not. But in sum, another voice professed:

“I didn’t think I would like Cuban food until I tasted Cuban food in Cuba!”

Sunday, July 4th

The first concert led off with three children's choruses, including one from Mexico, followed by the Coro Nacional de Cuba, NAS, and then the 210-voice Yale Alumni Chorus. Air conditioning failure required moving from the modern (1979) Teatro Nacional de Cuba to another venue. The concert was very well received, particularly when Yale, Coro Nacional, and NAS joined voices to sing "Juramento," a traditional Cuban song.

Our post-concert dinner was set in a restaurant which had a previous life as a mansion and very likely was the home of a wealthy Cuban who fled the revolution planning to return when the uprising failed. But it was outside the dining room where local life was being lived large. Through the picture windows we could see an extremely busy bar with exuberant Cubans dancing in evening temperatures not much lower than daytime.

"To some of us it felt like we were imprisoned in a special zoo, there to be observed by the dancers outside at the ironically named 'Colonial Club.' What we saw was a rainbow of skin colors, all glistening glossy from the sweat of life being lived full out. Who among us at that moment didn't wish to be Cuban?"

An observer adds: "And one tall, slim, unnamed American could not resist joining the Cubans in their frantic anti-rain dance." Who, is one of those unsolved tropical mysteries.

Monday, July 5th

The day began with a Master Class with Maestra Digna Guerra, conductor of the Coro Nacional; a musical and multi-lingual experience made smoother by Spanish-speakers Tim Sachs, Barbara Zucker-Pinchoff, and Emmanuelle Gresse.

Then it was off to Club Habana and the beach and a



splash into the beautiful and warm Caribbean. The Club is another amenity available only to tourists, especially Canadians starved for sun, sand, and warm water.

Tuesday, July 6th

"Las Terrazas," a UNESCO Biosphere and agricultural development sited on a former coffee plantation – an effort to rebuild a viable agriculture. After another of the good lunches we mounted the bus and headed for Pinar del Rio for our second concert. Scheduled to perform in a jewel of an old-world style theatre we were moved because the jewel is apparently under eternal repolishing. The new venue resembled nothing more than a WWII Quonset hut, a metal-roofed container designed to amplify temperatures hot or cold. Clara, in her adapt-to-conditions wisdom said we didn't have to change into the concert clothes we brought along. So we sat in relative shorts-comfort to listen to the Pinar del Rio Children's Choir, which sang beautifully.

"As I passed a group of children I smiled and said several 'holas!' One handsome boy in a blue shirt replied, 'Hello, my friend!' Who could not be thrilled? And the 'Boy in the Blue Shirt' revealed himself the next Julio Iglesias, complete with the talent to bring the whole room together in one wonderful singing, swaying, and clapping delight. I had tears in my eyes."

Then word came that the concert with the Coro Polifonico was being taped for broadcast on Cuban national television. Back into Concert Costume. Ever try pulling dry clothes over a wet body – in a hurry?

Wednesday, July 7th

Off to the Seminary in Matanzas, an hour or so east of



Havana. Sharing three denominations of belief, the seven decade old Seminary still sits on land it owns. Lunch was provided from its robust garden, and post-lunch options were siesta or dance lessons. This first-hand verbal snapshot of the latter:

"The 95 year old international folk dance teacher was a bit slow-moving in his teaching style but utterly charming. He must have hundreds of dances in his memory bank and taught us somewhere between 12-20 of them. My favorite was the 'Yemeni' featuring a very cool pivot. All in a magical setting – a thatched roof pavilion, open on the sides to the breezes, surrounded by huge broad plantain bushes."

Also notable and much appreciated: the ice cold fresh mango juice served mid-morning and mid-afternoon.

The concert in the Chapel that evening was shared with the Coro de Camara de Matanzas. Audience response couldn't have been more enthusiastic, especially for Diana Solomon Glover singing "The Real Slow Drag" – with Diana and husband John Crandall adding a dash of sultry body-English to sweeten.

"It should be noted that Clara managed to conduct in a long-sleeved dress without any noticeable rivulets of sweat – a most remarkable feat!"

Thursday, July 8th

One cannot go to Cuba and not see the creation of the Cuban product famed the world over. Rum? Close, but the cigar goes to the Partagás Cigar Factory which twenty-five of us visited. All is done by hands skillfully pressing the leaves, trimming, stacking, rolling the tobacco and trimming again until each aromatic cylinder is approved by

the experienced eyes in charge of quality control. Sadly, the fable of each Cuban cigar being rolled to perfection on the tawny thigh of a beautiful señorita proved a myth, but the skill of the artisans was no less fascinating to watch. Because the work is exacting and repetitive, a unique tradition has grown over the years. As the tobacco is being worked from leaf into cigars, a Reader perched on a platform keeps minds occupied and illuminated by reading aloud.

"In the morning he reads to them for an hour from the newspaper. And in the afternoon, an hour from a novel, which the workers select by vote. When I asked him what books have been read, two titles I managed to fish out of the rapid flood of Spanish coming at me were 'The DaVinci Code' and 'Papillon'."

Someone (anonymous) spoke up and let it be known that their visitors were members of a chorus from the U.S. offering to sing for them. Some of the workers banged enthusiastically on their tables while others were less enthusiastic. But there was no turning back.

"We rose to the platform, took a collective gulp and let go a rousing rendition of 'Ride the Chariot.' No sooner had we hit the final note when we watched all the workers rise to their feet, cheering and enthusiastically banging on their tables."

It wasn't the humidity responsible for the wetness of eyes among the 25 NASers.

Following the literary theme we moved on to visit Finca Villa Vigia the former residence of Ernest Hemingway, a



revered figure in Cuba. For five pesos we could take photos of a relatively modest home, now a tourist attraction, complete with Papa's swimming pool and private yacht, "Pilar."

The final concert was held at the Basilica del Convento de San Francisco de Asis – a lovely space with very good acoustics. Coro de Camara Entrevoces, another splendid professional adult chorus opened the evening. Perhaps the reception seemed a bit less warm, but then we had just brought a cigar factory to its feet.

Post-concert dinner was at the Café del Oriente where we climbed to the second floor private room and stepped back in time to pre-Revolutionary Havana. An excellent dinner – some of us had steak (those were cows seen earlier) – and entertainment by a jazz trio with a repertory reminiscent of the 50s. Dancing, of course, highlighted by some smooth Latin moves by bus driver Tony and our Classical Movements rep Allesandra D'Ovidio. A joyful conga line topped off the evening.

Friday, July 9th

This morning, surprises of an eye-filling kind. Estudio Tally Fuster, home of the Cuban painter José Fuster is a magical land of multi-colored off-beat shapes, reminiscent of works in Barcelona's Park Guell by Antoni Gaudi. Not smiling at the wit and charm of the work was near impossible.

A "Master Class" that afternoon with the Casa de la Cultura Children's Choir was part of our artistic exchange obligation happily fulfilled. But sadness had begun to seep into this last day of a week full of surprises, discoveries, and new feelings about an old country.

Final Night at the world-famous Hotel Nacional: Pina Coladas on the lawn – delicious. Dinner – trying too hard



not to be Cuban. Groupie Song Parody by Carol and Ellen – unprecedented. The free show at the night club in the hotel – a sad relic. Us – getting enthusiastic about going home and telling our stories to friends and loved ones. Here's some of what you might hear....

"There is almost no homelessness or begging; they all looked pretty healthy and well-fed – but not fat. Their revolution seems to have pretty much equalized everyone economically."

"The fabled 50s American cars are abundant, in good working order and can be found in fin-flaunting display throughout Havana. A ride in one however suggested shock absorbers were not as readily available."

"As we walked the streets we could see into the lives of Cubans through open windows and doors, at their dining room tables; three or four generations of families seated not three feet from the curb."

"Faces poked out of windows with grins and waves. We were literally walking through conversations passing between opposing windows on the street. None of us was the same person who'd left the hotel earlier that evening. Our eyes have changed forever."

"Every Cuban has music and dance in his DNA. So fluid! So vital! So sexy and fun!"

"It was probably the most unusual trip I've ever been on. And no jet lag!"

"A fabulous tour – my favorite. The heat was brutal, the food undistinguished, but I wouldn't have traded it for anywhere else. Let's go back and spend more time at the beach – and go dancing!"

– Ed Schultz, Stateside Anchor.

