

Art and music highlight trek across hilly Cuban countryside

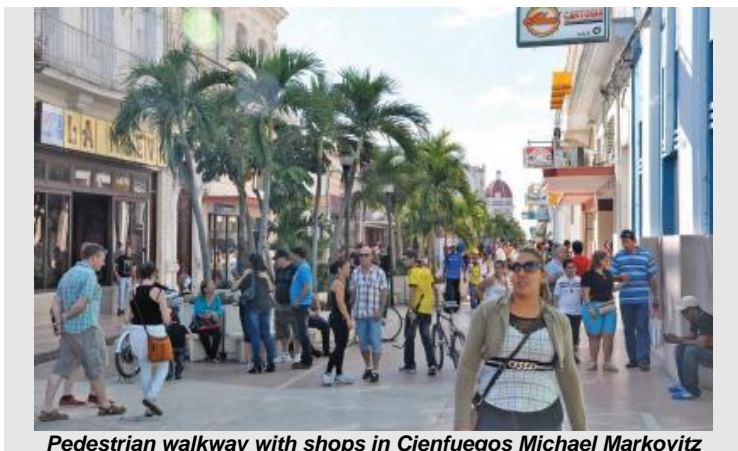


The Cuban artist Jose Fuster's ceramic and mosaic art in the Cuban town of Jaimanitas Michael Markovitz

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Reprinted from www.bonitaspotlight.com
April 2016

Cienfuegos, about 120 miles southeast of Havana, is a bayside city of 150,000 people. To reach it from Havana, our tour bus needed to cross the hilly Cuban countryside – but first we took a short detour to the small seaside town of Jaimanitas. This is where the Gaudi-inspired Cuban artist Jose Fuster has covered his home with ceramic shards and colored glass pieces, creating a wonderland of fanciful figures and whimsical mosaics.

After lunch at the artist's home, we stopped at a dusty highway rest stop with a bookstore, food counter and a few wooden stands selling inexpensive souvenirs. We then passed through the town of Australia, named, our Cuban guide told us, because its shape resembles the Australian continent. Nestled among once flourishing sugar cane fields, it is now a tourist spot.



Pedestrian walkway with shops in Cienfuegos Michael Markovitz

In the center of Cienfuegos is a pedestrian promenade with numerous shops. Scores of families strolled along it, some going into the state-owned stores, which carry lower quality, lower priced products, while others went into the more fashionable, privately operated and higher priced stores. In the one store selling home appliances, all were made by the large Chinese manufacturer Haier.

At its end was the city square, with shade trees, a gazebo, benches and children playing. A WiFi hot spot, I had no trouble logging on using my pre-purchased Internet card.

At one side of the square is the police station; we were told that Cubans cannot legally own guns and the penalties for violent crimes are severe, so there is little crime. Next door was a restored building that had once housed a social club, where we were entertained that evening by the Cienfuegos Chamber Music ensemble. Each member was classically trained, having attended music schools from a young age. The spokesperson told us that they had been invited to play in the United States in 2017.



Trinidad street vendors Michael Markovitz

At the Hotel Jagua we saw the first filled pool – all of the fountains we saw in Havana were dry. This pool, though, was dirty, with leaves floating on the surface and edges. The hotel looked modern and the lobby nicely decorated, boasting artwork and polished tile floors, but the rooms were old, the bedcovers stained, and the doors askew or latches broken.

The next day we traveled to Trinidad, a beautifully preserved 16th century city. It has narrow cobblestone streets and a tiny city square with a large Catholic church at one end. Street vendors selling wooden souvenirs were in the alleyways next to the square. My wife and I ventured away to have a snack in a rooftop restaurant several floors above the square, with a view of the Caribbean in the distance and the picturesque town below. The menu was good, featuring fish – a welcome departure from the beef, rice and beans we had in Havana.



Che Guevara mausoleum Michael Markovitz

The next morning we stopped at the Museo Giron (the Bay of Pigs Memorial) in Matanzas, and then we visited a memorial to Che Guevara. Images of Che are everywhere in Cuba – here his 22-foot-high bronze statue overlooks the outdoor mausoleum housing his remains, exhumed and brought to Cuba from Bolivia, where he was killed in an armed uprising.

Cuba has a very long way to go to enter the 21st century – but does seem intent on doing so through controlled change and improved relations.

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