



Canadians answer Cuba's call

Tourists flock to island to bask in sun, sand and social history

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Canadian tourists are flocking to Cuba with digital cameras and a strong loonie in tow. Of the two million visitors to Cuba last year, more than 600,000 were Canadians. And, with the U.S. trade embargo, they practically have the island to themselves.

Traditionally, the snowbirds landed at Varadero, the so-called Cuban Riviera. But, now, they have a tempting, new resort area: Cayo Ensenachos and Cayo Santa Maria.

Development of these two gorgeous little islands was made possible by the building of a 48-km causeway connecting the cayos to the mainland and the historic city of Santa Clara.

The causeway, which took 10 years to build, boasts more than 40 little bridges and a taller span that allows the fish to pass through the area with the water's natural currents. This environmentally friendly project was given an international engineering award.

On my one-week tropical getaway with Transat Holidays -- a six and a half-hour direct flight, Vancouver to Santa Clara in north central Cuba -- I stayed at two all-inclusive resorts (Royal Hideaway Ensenachos and Melia Santa Maria) on two different islands, and sampled two others (Melia Sol and Las Dunas). A third, a Barcelo property, is slated for completion by December.

PAMPERED PACE

As soon as you enter one of these all-inclusives, you quickly settle into the pampered pace of resort life. The Latin beat emanating from strategically placed hidden speakers puts you in a relaxed state of mind. Exotic drinks ease inhibitions and you easily strike up conversations with your fellow traveller.

The Royal Hideaway at Ensenachos compared favourably with any of the five-stars I've had the privilege to stay at, such as the Allegro Papagayo in Costa Rica, the Intercontinental in Ixtapa and the Riu Palace in Los Cabos (the latter two in Mexico).

But the cluster of luxury villas at Ensenachos -- at 27 hectares, the only concept resort of its kind in Cuba -- blew me away. I had my own private butler at my call to pick me up in her golf cart or to take me to one of two beaches, one of several specialty restaurants or to the main hub on this far-flung tropical retreat for an evening of top-quality entertainment.

My villa, with its marble and earth-tone tiles, boasted two TVs, DVD player, a dining/living area, spacious bedroom, two bathrooms, a kitchenette and a

private Jacuzzi hot tub on the oceanside.

Unlike your average Cuban, I got to choose from a number of TV channels, including CNN, Britain's Sky TV and even one in Russian. My radio brought in stations from Miami, that capitalist hotbed of Cuban exiles. How does all-day reggae sound?

Life's good here at Megano beach. The sand is as soft as talcum powder, the skies blue, a soft breeze fans us, and the warm waters of the south Atlantic draw us like a magnet.

Melia Santa Maria and the two sister resorts of Melia Sol and Las Dunas are much more intimate than Ensenachos and compact enough that you can walk around with ease. The beaches, offering sporting activities such as snorkelling, Hobie Cat catamaran sailing, sea kayaking and beach volleyball, are within easy reach by elevated boardwalks through the thick coastal vegetation.

To get a feel of the real Cuba, however, sign up for the many excursions. The most popular is the tour of nearby historic Santa Clara.

On our trip, we visited a cigar factory (forget automation, everything is done by hand). A shrine to the revolution reminds workers -- and visitors -- this is still a communist country.

A tour of Santa Clara is a real eye-opener. It's like stepping back to the 1940s and '50s. Our modern, air-conditioned, Chinese-built bus wove delicately around '52 Pontiacs, '55 Chevies and Soviet-era automobiles such as Ladas and Moskvitches. But the most fun part was trying to avoid the horse-drawn buggies, pedicabs, scooters, motorbikes and bicycles of all shapes and sizes.

SWEET-TOOTH CRAVINGS

As part of our Santa Clara tour, we also stopped at Remedios and boarded a steam train that once hauled cane to the sugar factories that satisfied the sweet-tooth cravings of the Soviet Union until it collapsed and brought down the Cuban economy with it.

If you have ever dreamed of driving in the Dakar car rally, our next excursion is for you.

The self-drive Jeep safari took us into a UNESCO-designated biosphere reserve area.

Getting there via country roads was like taking an Indiana Jones ride at Disneyland: Potholes that would swallow a Lada, bull-headed oxen that wouldn't get out of the way, wide-eyed kids darting into traffic to offer us flowers. You get the picture.

Our first pit-stop was for lunch at a hacienda overlooking a verdant valley punctuated by royal palms. The estate was once owned by an American entrepreneur who ran a sugar mill. After the industry was nationalized, he fled to the U.S., and his ranch-style house became a holiday getaway for workers and tourists.

The best part of the biosphere/Jeep safari experience was a hike into the hills, where we learned the health properties of various plants and were fortunate to have the national bird of Cuba (the Toco-ro-ro) alight on a branch beside us.

The combination of colours in its plumage -- red, white and blue (the same as in the Cuban flag), is a rarity in nature, I was told.

Our hike culminated in a visit to a cave, which is the source of a river that creates pools allowing for a cooling dip after a hot hike up the mountain.

STATUE DOMINATES SQUARE

A gigantic bronze statue of Che Guevara in military fatigues, a carbine in hand, dominates the revolutionary square.

It is here that we were quietly ushered into his mausoleum that contains his, as well as his comrades' earthly remains after the debacle in Bolivia where, on another of his revolutionary escapades, he was captured in battle and, later, executed -- some say by orders of the CIA.

Next door to the mausoleum is a museum focusing on all things Che -- a history buff's dream destination in itself.

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