

THE MARABANA

by

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*There is a land where palm trees grow
A place I've always longed to go
For many years my government said no
But now this is no longer so*

Havana, Cuba -- On November 20, 2011, about 2600 athletes from many nations assembled to celebrate the 25th Marabana, a celebration of running with simultaneous races at distances of 5K, 10K, 15K, half marathon, and full marathon. The half marathon drew the most participants, and was won by Richer Perez in 1:04:52, while Milena Perez took women's top spot in 1:28:19. Alexeis Machado took the men's marathon in 2:28:04, and Yadira Gonzales topped the women's field in 3:14:40. All events were chip timed, and complete results for all are given at <http://www.inder.cu/marabana/Resultados.html>.

The marathon course consists of two loops through the city. The initial 8K proceeds along the Malecon, a well-know esplanade and seawall along Havana's scenic waterfront, and it is flat. From there, it turns up into the city over a series of five rolling hills past many historic and tourist sites. Overall, the course was very well manned and marked, and police provided very good traffic control to protect the runners.

Water and sports drinks were provided every 3K in beanbag-like plastic pouches which needed to be torn open with one's teeth. Given doubts about the safety of Havana's tap water, this seemed like a good solution, at least until the supply of pouches was depleted, thus leaving the slower marathoners without much-needed water.

Another issue was the complete absence of port-a-pots, or equivalent, at the start or anywhere along the route. A few of us were lucky enough to have our guide locate a toilet in a nearby basketball stadium, but even that could be best described as primitive.

Given the hills, a full sun with temperatures in the upper 70's, and pollution from Havana's antique vehicles, this is not an easy course. Case in point -- although I registered for the full marathon, the thought of second loop led me to bail out at the halfway mark. Since there is no apparent way to change the registered distance at the race, my advice to future participants is to preregister for one of the shorter events, thus optimizing enjoyment of the other parts of the trip without either pre-marathon anxiety or post-marathon stiffness.

Something that completely caught me off guard is the custom among Cuban runners to expect foreigners to give them their shoes, shirts, and even watches upon finishing the race. Some of the locals were downright aggressive in their quest for my stuff, making me very uncomfortable since I travel very lightly, and was unable to contribute much. This was unfortunate, since there were many shirts and shoes back home that could have been brought had I understood the situation in advance.

Traveling to Cuba

For many years, Cuba had been one of my highest priority travel destinations. Learning about a marathon in Havana made it sound even better. Unfortunately, travel to Cuba by US citizens has been restricted by the US Government. Unless one has relatives in Cuba, it appears there are but three options. One is to charter a fishing boat in Key West. I have heard of people doing this, but besides being illegal, there are other possible dangers in traveling the ocean in a small craft. Another way is to fly to and from Cuba from someplace like Canada, Mexico, or the Bahamas. While this also is illegal, few people are caught because passports are not stamped in Cuba. But who wants to break the law and risk some unknown future consequences?

Fortunately, there is now a legal way for average US citizens to travel to Cuba under a program aimed at promoting people-to-people interaction for cultural, religious, and professional exchanges. Originated during the Clinton years, the program was suspended by the Bush administration. Now restored under Obama, savvy travel agencies are again offering tour packages that include the required licenses from the US government. One agency, Insight Cuba, is the first to put together a tour specifically for runners to travel to the Marabana, and our tour group was probably the first US team to compete in Cuba in the last 50 years.

Our pioneering tour group/team was an interesting and eclectic collection of athletes, extreme adventure seekers, descendants of cuba exiles, writers for running publications, and retired bucket-listers like myself, ranging in ages up to 80. It included people who have traveled widely to place like Antarctica, My Kilimanjaro. Among us was Udon Beidler, an accomplished 64-year-old, who won her age group in the marathon, but was given second place in the male age group owing to an unfortunate name/gender confusion. There was also Carol Montgomery, who at age 76 would have been the second woman overall in the 5K, except for the fact that she didn't see the finish line, and ran an extra 2K before getting back to the finish only to be credited with a last-place age-group finish.

Speaking Spanish in Cuba

I took four years of Spanish in high school, plus two semesters in college. Despite this, and diligently brushing up on conversational Spanish before this trip, it quickly became abundantly clear that speaking a language is actually a two-way street. No matter how carefully I would construct an opening sentence in Spanish, paying close attention to tense, person, gender, and

pronunciation, the Cuban recipient, even if he or she happened to understand me, would generally respond with something I was unable to comprehend. End of conversation!

Cuba Impressions

Fidel Castro's revolution overthrowing the dictator Fulgencio Batista led to the formation of a socialist state in Cuba that aligned itself with the Soviet Union during the cold-war era. With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Cuba lost the economic support that the Soviets had provided. This loss, coupled with the US embargo, have devastated the Cuban economy.

It may be unreasonable to assess a country based on five days as a tourist .in a single city. Nevertheless, here are some impressions of a country that is very different from the US. Different because it is based on a socialist economic model, and because there appears to be very little material wealth to go around.

Prior to coming to Cuba, a Google search turned up some interesting facts, much of it from the US CIA website. For example, education through high school is free to all Cubans. As a result, Cuba has one of the world's highest literacy rates (98.9%). College and graduate school are also free to those who can meet competitive standards.

Cubans receive free health care. While often lacking in modern equipment and certain drugs, Cuban doctors are said to be highly skilled. Many students from the Caribbean and Latin America come to Cuba for medical training. Cuba's infant mortality rate (4.90 per 1000) is the lowest in all of Latin America, lower even than that of the US (6.06 per 1000).

According to an article published in the October 2007 of the *New Scientist*, a study of the living conditions and ecological footprints of 93 nations, Cuba was the only country exhibiting sustainable development. It found Cuba provided its citizens with a decent standard of living for its people without consuming more than its fair share of the world's resources.

Such achievements are remarkable considering that for 50 years, US policy has been aimed at strangling Cuba by various means which included assassination attempts, invasions, and economic embargo. As an example, our guide informed us that the US refuses to allow any ship to dock at its ports if it had docked in Cuba during the preceding 6 months, thus effectively shutting Cuba out of the lucrative cruise travel business.

None of this prepared me for the harsh reality of a poor country. As our guide pointed out immediately upon arrival, housing and transportation are "issues." This turned out to be an understatement. Sadly, most of the buildings in Havana are rundown, and covered with grime. Restoration of many is ongoing, but at glacial speed.

Even our nominally 5-star, high-end tourist hotel exhibited a well-worn shabbiness and lack of maintenance, featuring bathroom bowls that wouldn't drain, bathroom mirrors that were losing reflectivity from the edges, elevators that sometimes ceased operating, internet services that crashed.

Transportation consisted largely of run-down pre-1960 US cars, Russian-built cars from the 1980's that seem to be every bit as good as an old Yugo, and a few motorcycles. Pollution from the old vehicles is evident through the city. Roads and sidewalks are in need of repair. In general, signs of poverty and decay abound.

As depressing as this may be, recent policy modifications by the Cuban government are enabling self-employment and private ownership of cars and housing. These moves signal that fundamental changes to the socialist economic model are occurring. Such a trend, and the inevitable passing of Cuba's current leadership, may lead to improvement of relations with the US. When that occurs, Cuba with its well-educated population, could once again become the Pearl of the Antilles. There can be little doubt that current US policies cause much harm to the Cuban economy without producing any tangible benefit to the US, except for those US politicians who pander to Cuban-exile voters.



Havana's Malecon, the famed seawall and esplanade along Havana's waterfront



Our team at the Marabana start with our Cuban guide at front row center.
(Photo by Marvin Phillips)



One of many antique US cars on the streets of Havana, this one a 1955 Pontiac.

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