

David L. Biller

JOURNALIST



Cuban Bed & Breakfasts

Looming above the Habana esplanade known as the Malecón, the Hotel Nacional is nothing if not conspicuous. As the sun goes down, patrons on their perch sip pricey mojitos while Cubans at street-level lounge along the cement seawall. The sunset view from the hotel is somewhat better, but one cannot mingle with locals, watch boys dive into the sea, nor hear the crash of the waves.

Rather than stay in such a hotel, tourists can live in close quarters with Cubans in their *casas particulares*, privately-run B&B's permitted by the government in the mid-1990s. They remain one of the few ways in which Cubans can access hard currency, and rent for a fraction of hotel rates. They also provide an often-elusive glimpse into "authentic" Cuba. Indeed, blending into the background - the colorful colonial facades, the tropical sea breeze, the ubiquitous *click-clack* of domino fichas - can seem impossible, and the country's social reality only dimly visible in the periphery.

To start, tourists are relegated to the CUC currency, while locals use Cuban pesos. Therefore the picturesque local taxis - pre-revolution American gems that have endured the decades through the sheer wonder of Cuban ingenuity - are off-limits, as are local restaurants and bars. *Casa* owners, though, may trade pesos for your CUC then point you toward local hangouts. Cubans are also wary about publicly voicing opinions on what most intrigues or baffles the culturally curious: communism and Fidel Castro. Staying in a *casa* can facilitate the intimacy to broach taboo subjects.

My travel companion and I first stayed in Habana's quiet Vedado neighborhood, just downhill from Universidad de la Habana's wide-stepped entrance, in the home of Isidro and Julia. Their daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter occupied the next room, and had taken advantage of the apartment's high ceiling to loft an improvised second floor. I initially kept to myself on the neat front patio with its view over colonial rooftops, but quickly came to feel welcome inside, like a relative visiting from out of town.

One humid night I played dominos with a shirtless Isidro, who had assured me he had no strategy; humility notwithstanding, he gave me a fatherly trouncing. And, come to think of it, I don't believe he put on a shirt even once during my entire stay. Both he and Julia were always eager to chat about my day's activities, while their granddaughter, a toddler, was thrilled to flaunt her own newly-discovered ability to

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speak. We weren't the only ones carrying on; the family and I crowded onto the tile in front of the TV to watch Castro address the national assembly for the first time in four years.

The familiar atmosphere of the house was complemented by the comfort of air conditioning and an electric showerhead for hot water, as was the case in almost all other *casas* I saw. Also like other *casas*, breakfast (optional) was bland, but I appreciated sampling home-style meals. The coffee, though, required no justification; it was short, strong and delicious.

The busier, historic downtown of Habana Vieja, much of which has been beautifully restored, may be more attractive to adventurers. Casa Wilfredo's well-preserved interior complete with chandeliers conjures the muted spirit of pre-revolution grandeur. Its long balcony offers a clear view of ships passing beneath the El Morro castle and lighthouse that once protected the entrance to Habana's harbor. Wilfredo and I smoked cigars, and he pulled another from his humidor as a gift.

I had found Wilfredo's *casa* by chance, wandering while keeping an eye peeled for the telltale blue and white "Arrendador Divisa" signs. Though searching for *casas* is possible, reservations are strongly suggested. Worth noting is that reservations are not always respected if a better offer strolls through the door before you. Don't stress; owners always have several friends nearby who also rent their homes.

You likewise do not need reservations in the other more-frequented cities, such as the ecotourism hotspot Viñales that is located amid the characteristic *mogote* hills in Cuba's premier tobacco region. *Casa* owners line up at the bus terminal waiting to bombard new arrivals with photos and descriptions of their accommodations. It can try one's patience, but provides an option if you prefer to play your agenda by ear.

The same is true of Trinidad, a colorful little city (and UNESCO world heritage site) with cobblestone streets and more than 400 *casas*. The large colonial residence of a former Trinidad mayor, Casa Font, is filled with antiques, among them an actual flag from 1902 when Cuba gained its independence. A well still functions at the center of the peaceful back patio, where I dined on one of the largest, tastiest lobster tails of my life; it was only part of a savory 13CUC, four-course meal. With the help of a post-dinner bottle of rum, a game of dominos again provided an entrée to friendship, and our hosts took us dancing in a disco hidden in the depths of a cave.

At another *casa*, a fierce tempest knocked out power one night. I sat in an exquisite wooden chair "from before," as the pre-revolution days are called, with our married

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hosts, their father and young daughter in the pitch-dark living room. The little girl, with whom my friend had been playing earlier, was scared; we assured her everything would be alright. And it would, of course, so sitting together wasn't necessary. That's just what a family does when the power goes out.

Casa stays not only grant access to authentic Cuba; living together inevitably generates a sense of closeness. Both are enriching in a country so deeply cultural. Like the boys next to the sea along the Malecón, you have to dive in and let it wash over you.

Information on casas particulares can be found at websites such as www.casaparticularcuba.org, though below are a few suggestions:

Casa Isidro y Julia
San Lázaro #1208, e/ M y N, La Habana
7-878-2987
Yoannis2001@yahoo.com
25CUC

Casa Carvajal
Calle K #254 e/ 15 y 17, La Habana
7-831-1764
alecarvajalgarcia@gmail.com
30CUC

Casa Wilfredo
Carcel 59, (al lado de la embajada española), La Habana
7-860-2515
30CUC

Villa Pitin y Juana
Km 25 Carretera a Pinar del Río # 2, Viñales
20-25CUC

Casa Font, Gustavo izquierdo #105, Trinidad
41-993-683
25CUC