

Traveling with Jewish Taste®

Cuba!

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



A quick forty-five minute charter flight from Miami to Havana: we stepped off the plane, onto the tarmac, and, then ...into a time machine.

We were indeed back in the 1950s.

Cuba is a land of tremendous contrast. Clear blue skies, warm temperatures, pristine water, and swaying palm trees serve as background – to crumbling homes and office buildings, empty supermarket shelves, unreliable electricity, and not-so-running water.

Yet, despite the hardships, warm and friendly people greeted us everywhere we went; and in every town we heard music and saw dancing in the streets.

I suppose that one upside of being in such a poor country is that we never got stuck in rush hour traffic.

Cuba has few automobiles: a motley assortment of Eastern

European “boxes” and American Fifties vehicles operating on a wing and a prayer.

Alongside these, buses, horse-drawn carts, and bicycle taxis shared the road.

The government has recently begun attempts at rehabilitation directed at attracting tourists – and some of the results are outstanding. If you close your eyes, you can almost imagine walking the charming cobblestone streets with Graham Greene, or enjoying *mojitos* with Hemingway.

But, make no mistake: Cuba is a police state. We were told: “The walls have ears,” “No political talk,” “Be careful on the telephone.”

Even Cubans refer to Fidel Castro only by stroking their chins to indicate “the bearded one.”

As if to reinforce the message, dreary gray Soviet era buildings still dot the skyline, and propaganda slogans are everywhere. While in America we are used to seeing billboards advertising everything from satellite dishes to light beer, billboards throughout Cuba feature only the slogans of “the Revolution.”

However, tourist hotels offer lavish breakfast buffets, accompanied by live music, and visitors can order any kind of meat or fish at both government owned and private restaurants called *paladares*.

We had some particularly tasty dishes at two home-based restaurants, including soy-tinged *malanga* (“taro”) fritters and a creamy flan. Nevertheless, I found the abundance of food available to tourists embarrassing when contrasted with that of the Cuban citizenry.

Cubans are allowed four eggs per person per month. They are given ration tickets for three quarters of a pound of meat per person per month, but beef is strictly prohibited – it is a crime to kill a cow. That said: in reality, it’s worse – supermarket shelves were bare of any type of meat, fish, dairy products, or produce.



The “time machine” that is Cuba is exemplified by its 1950s autos



Castro’s communist revolution is still going strong in Havana book shops

But, we didn’t travel to Cuba to enjoy the relative pampering given to tourists. We went to visit our Jewish extended family and bring much-needed supplies. Because trade with Cuba is prohibited, one must travel there under a U.S. Treasury Department permit, thus my husband and I participated in a religious mission organized by Pittsfield’s Congregation Kneset Israel.

Our group of twenty-eight brought over six-hundred pounds of medicine, school supplies, clothing, books, and other goods to distribute among the Jewish communities of Havana, Santa Clara, and Cienfuegos – as well as to a maternity clinic in Trinidad.

During our first evening in the Cuban capital, we attended a lecture and learned of the history of Jewry and the remnant of Jewish community that is working hard to reclaim its identity.

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Arched entrance to the Patronato synagogue

Cuban Flan

This absolutely divine flan recipe comes from a friend whose family fled Cuba after the Revolution. Smooth as silk and lighter than some flans, it should be enjoyed with friends – otherwise, you’ll eat it all yourself!



For Flan
4 cups milk
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 1/3 cups sugar
8 eggs
2 teaspoons vanilla

For Sauce
1/2 cup white sugar for
caramel sauce

Directions:

Preheat oven to 325° F.

- 1) Mix flan ingredients together by hand in a large bowl.
- 2) In a medium saucepan over medium-low heat, melt sugar until it turns golden brown and runs smoothly, watching closely so that it doesn’t burn. Carefully pour hot syrup into a nine-inch by five and a quarter inch by two and three-quarter inch loaf pan. Coat bottom of pan evenly. Cool for 5 to 10 minutes.
- 3) Using a strainer, add milk mixture to loaf pan. Cooled caramel will crackle as you pour in mixture.
- 4) Place the loaf pan within a larger cake pan and add about 1-inch boiling water to the cake pan. Bake one and a half hours or until an inserted knife comes out clean, not wet. Refrigerate overnight.
- 5) Immediately before serving unmold onto platter.

FEATURES AND LOCAL NEWS

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Maritza Corrales Capestany, a history professor at the University of Havana, oriented us. A specialist in the history of Jews in Cuba (though not Jewish herself), she informed us that the first person ever to step foot on the island was a Jewish scout dispatched by Christopher Columbus.

anti-Israel, there is, ironically, no anti-Semitism in Cuba, according to several people we met. In fact, Jews are allowed to have their meat ration in kosher beef and one of the very few private jobs allowed on the island is that of the kosher butcher.

Aliyah to Israel is allowed, as the Cuban government believes that Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people – consequently, young Cuban Jews have left, and

ventory is depleted.

We attended Friday evening services at the Patronato, where we davened at the speed of light. About half way through the liturgy, the service stopped for the “Blessing of the Children.”

There wasn’t a dry eye in the house as parents kissed children and teens hugged each other. After the service, we joined the members and several other visiting Jewish groups for dinner.

But lest we forget the reality amidst the joy – we learned that for many of those in attendance the Shabbat evening meal provided by the synagogue was their only solid meal of the week.

Saturday morning found us at the Sephardic synagogue, where we found that Cuban *minhag* (“custom”) is very flexible. Both a man and a woman led the *davening* for a congregation of men and women seated separately. Again, we dined with the members after services, learning about their lives in this fascinating country.

Moving out of the city for a few days, we visited the town of Cienfuegos, a seaside city on the southern coast of Cuba named for a Revolutionary hero, and home to a Jewish community of forty.

A marble inlaid Star of David signals the entrance to the second floor home of Rebeca Langus Rodriquez that serves as the synagogue and learning center.

Community members come for services, and to study Hebrew and Jewish history. Religious texts and other books donated by American Jews fill a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf, and ritual objects adorn virtually every surface of the living room.

Rodriquez told us about the difficulties the community faces, as well as how good it is to be able to study and pray together.

Santa Clara, another stop



Havana street scene

on our tour, is the capital of the province of Villa Clara in the center of the country, there Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos defeated the forces of Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar in the last battle of the Cuban Revolution.

David Tacher Romano, a retired accountant and activist, has spearheaded the rebirth of the twenty-five family Santa Clara Jewish community. Under his passionate leadership, the abandoned and deteriorating cemetery is being repaired and enough money has been raised from American Jews to purchase a house that is now being converted into a synagogue and Jewish center. *B'nai B'rith's* “Cuban Jewish Relief Project” has donated a Torah to the effort.

Romano also led the campaign to build a Holocaust memorial in one corner of the cemetery. Believing that it was important to preserve in this small Cuban community the memory of the six million who perished under the Nazis, he directed the erection of a simple, yet stunning memorial. Cobblestones brought from the Warsaw Ghetto pave the area leading to

it from one direction, railroad tracks from another.

Congregation Knesset Israel’s Rabbi David Weiner led an emotional group in memorial prayers at the site, and then, in a signal to new life, we all watered a tree planted with sand from the Negev desert – the water came from Kinneret (“Sea of Galilee”) and the Jordan River.

Given that many young Cuban Jews today are leaving for Israel – further depleting the island nation’s already tiny Jewish population – one visitor asked Romano whether he believed that Jews would have a future in Santa Clara.

Romano replied philosophically, “Perhaps not a future, but we will have a present.”

It was a privilege to support the effort to revitalize the community of our extended Jewish family to the south.

I submit that it is well worth the red tape and long lines to get yourself onto a humanitarian, religious, or cultural exchange mission to Cuba.

It will change your life!

Carol Goodman Kaufman, an organizational psychologist and writer, is the author of *Sins of Omission: The Jewish Community’s Reaction to Domestic Violence* (Westview Press, 2003). She serves on the National Board of Hadassah and chairs the Jewish Community Relations Council of Central Massachusetts. Kaufman divides her time between Worcester, West Stockbridge, and the world.

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In Cienfuegos, a mother, son, and Seder plates

In the 20th Century two distinct groups – Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews – arrived and made many contributions to the development of the nation. In fact, some wealthy Jews helped finance Castro’s 1950s communist “Revolution,” and Jewish involvement in Cuba has continued through to today.

However, ninety percent of Cuba’s Jews fled the country at the time of “the Revolution,” leaving a tiny group that currently numbers only 1,500.

The government confiscated everything private – homes, businesses, money, and family heirlooms – and prohibited religious practice. When, in 1993, the Castro government allowed religion back into the country, so much time had passed that those Jews who remained had intermarried, assimilated, and forgotten most of what they ever knew about their heritage.

While the government is

many of those remaining have plans to leave Cuba for Israel.

The Conservative Patronato is one of three synagogues in Havana. The Orthodox and the Sephardic each have their own. Housed in a building reminiscent of 1950s-era synagogues in the United States, the Patronato also serves as a community center – equipped with a gym, library, Wii system, and computers on which students can do their homework. Many young Jews spend their afternoons there making the building “a home away from home.”

The Patronato also houses a free pharmacy run by Dr. Rosa Behar, a gastroenterologist and President of Hadassah Cuba. She distributes medications that may not be available at the regular pharmacy, or that patrons cannot afford. During the winter season, she receives deliveries from visiting Jewish groups but by summer her in-



David Romano describes the construction of the Santa Clara synagogue



The sculpture ‘Rescuing Moses from the Nile’ graces the Hotel Requel in Havana



Propaganda on the side of a building



The Santa Clara Holocaust Memorial