TRAVEL SPEECH

FOR

REGINA TUCKER

Saint Augustine said, “The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page.” For those of us who have had the privilege to set off and see beyond our respective neighborhood, the experience adds texture and wisdom to the books of our lives. There are many reasons and methods for travel. We can travel to relax and unwind, we can travel to heal, we can travel to sightsee and shop… **THAT’s** a popular reason!! (**Wait for the laugh**), we travel to experience new cultures and rituals, and we travel in search of hidden, forbidden, mysterious treasures. Travel can take us anywhere, and whether we go just an hour from our home or halfway around the world, if we keep open minds and open hearts, it can provide some of the richest and most rewarding experiences of our lives. We learn more about the world, but ultimately we discover ourselves.

Sometimes choices find us in faraway places geographically and culturally, but rarely do we get an opportunity to visit a land that time may have forgotten… there’s one place that stays in my mind. It’s exotic yet simple, it’s rich in culture while existing in gorgeous isolated ruins, it’s colorful, vibrant, exciting and mysterious… especially to Americans. There’s one place that I can think of that has been forbidden fruit to Americans for just about two generations. It’s a culture and a way of life in which the clocks all seem to have stopped at one time. It’s had its share of political unrest and acrimony with the United States for the past fifty years, but the veil is slowly lifting and soon if not now, we will be able to discover the Mystique of Havana, Cuba.

Over recent years we have had glimpses of what life is like there and although there is still a strong socialist presence, nothing can suppress the joy and enthusiasm of the Cuban people and the Habaneras in particular. Let’s face it; this is the country that brought us the Buena Vista Social Club, the mojito, and also known worldwide for its cigars, just the thought of the mystique of a Cohiba can send aficionados into fits of rapture. It was forbidden to bring them into the US before… with embargos being lifted Americans will soon have access… if they don’t already. The Cuban people are warm and friendly… or so I have read, and they are resourceful… their trove of vintage automobiles is almost like a national treasure borne out of necessity- up until last year the Cuban government required a permit to be obtained to buy a new car and prices were outrageous, making it only viable to the upper echelons like doctors, diplomats and professionals to purchase and the prices were outrageously expensive…. how do the people keep those old cars working without having access to fresh parts? They demonstrated their ingenuity in constructing parts to keep their cars running… for antique car buffs, being in Havana is like a visit to the candy shop! The cars tell the story of the people… of what they had, the choices lost, and the spirit to make their lives work, no matter what they do or don’t have.

As you tour the streets of Havana in one of those extraordinary vintage cars, as long as it’s still running (**Wait for the laugh**) …. yes-breakdowns are an ever present risk, it is recommended that you take a tour down the back streets of Havana. The tour guides might suggest the typical points of note on the “scenic route,” but step or ride off the beaten path and be prepared to color your world. To visit Habana Vieja, the Old Town, is to go back in time. Walk around at your own pace, stop for a drink, absorb the sun and the scenery, and be seduced by the music of the street musicians. Thanks to the documentary by the same name, the Buena Vista Social Club may no longer exist in its original form, but music that oozed from the club is alive and well in Cuba thanks to the glimpse we got of the country, the people and the sounds that fill the air.

The Hotel Nacional de Cuba is something of a treasure in itself. Opened in 1930 and designed and built by the famous American architectural firm of Mc Kim, Mead and White, the hotel is a mix of many styles and holds more history than I can even begin to tell. It has over 450 rooms, can boast guests from Winston Churchill to Frank Sinatra and just about everyone of note in between, and with its large garden, two pools, cannons and a nuclear bunker, this UNESCO designated national landmark is the place to visit to capture the essence of the charm of Havana.

Confucius is believed to have said, “Wherever you go, go with all of your heart,” I think if I went to Havana, a large part of my heart would remain there…. and if your curiosity is piqued and you want to explore making the trip too… don’t forget me!! Thank you all!