



PILGRIMAGE

A journey to Cuba for cigar smokers could be comparable to a archaeologist visiting Egypt, a baseball fan watching a game at Yankee stadium, or of a Real Madrid fan visiting Estadio Santiago Bernabeu. By Samuel Spurr ►

Although I only had seven days in Cuba with my fiancée, I was able to visit some of the major landmarks associated with such a pilgrimage as well as visit some locations that although not in every tourist map gave me an insight into the importance of puros in Cuban society.

My visit began with a visit to the Partagas Cigar Factory less than an hour after we had stepped off the plane. (remember I only had seven days!) The factory has a very impressive retail outlet (La Casa Del Habano) in the front section which carries every brand imaginable. Disappointingly though a tour was out of the question as the skilled rollers were on annual leave, as I was visiting over the new year period. Walking along streets such as Obispo and O'Reilly in Old Havana, the terrible decay affecting the buildings is quite sad and you can only wonder and marvel at how they would have looked before the passage of time had affected them.

After two days in Havana exploring the old city and lighting up every chance I had, we spent three days in Vinales. For those wishing to visit the real Cuba, time spent outside of resorts such as those in Varadero is a must. The sleepy village of Vinales, two and a half hours southwest of Havana, would have to be the starting point of any tour to the Vuelta Abajo region. Driving through the magote hills and past tobacco farms gave this aficionado goosebumps. A tour of the Francisco Donatien factory in Pinar Del Rio was intriguing. The whole process from the selection of leaves to the rolling process and finally sorting into boxes was on display. Francisco Donatien is a much smaller factory than Partagas in Havana and we therefore got a more personalised tour and insight into cigar production. Unfortunately there were no

virgins rolling leaves between their thighs!

Our hotel in Vinales, Rancho San Vincente, was actually 8 kilometers out of town, therefore on one afternoon we laced up our walking shoes and hiked from Vinales to our hotel. This journey was the most awe-inspiring, eye opening part of our trip. With trucks filled with locals rumbling past and old men on bicycles waving as we went, the rural, mostly tobacco farming area of Cuba opened up to us. Everywhere we turned were fields and fields of tobacco, corn, and smaller plantations of seasonal vegetables. We managed in our broken Spanish to visit a tobacco farm, where two men tiring in the afternoon sun were selecting leaves. Both men were more than willing to say hello and share a smile with us gringos! Around the corner, an old man enjoyed a puro in his rocking chair in front of his house. Each wrinkle on his face told a thousand stories of Cuba. Further on we bought some tangerines for fifteen Cuban Pesos. The sweet, juicy flesh got us home to a hot shower and a Vegas Robaina Unico!

The Cuba we enjoyed will one day change, whether it is for better or worse depends on your opinion of Fidel and his government. One thing that will change however will be the quality of cigars being produced. I believe that if the American market opens up, production will surely go up, and those chasing quick dollars (as many are already, hustling tourists in Havana) will surely lower their quality significantly. Visit Cuba for her people, visit Cuba for her fantastic flora and fauna, visit Cuba for her music and dancing, visit Cuba to make up your own mind about the politics involved, but for those who love a good smoke, visit Cuba now. ■