

Wheels of Change in Cuba

Wheels in Cuba are impressive. Many are large with polished chrome eyes that proudly spin along gorgeous American 1950s Chevrolets, Buicks and Cadillacs, while others belong to slightly smaller, tarted-up Ladas trying to be Cadillacs. There are multi-wheeled yellow bus-lorries, newer sleeker-wheeled Chinese buses, and the monstrous wheels of the old Soviet truck-buses. Then there are the possibly not-quite-spherical wheels of bicycles, rickshaws and various other pedalable contraptions. There are the large slow wheels of tractors, and the wheels of carts pulled by oxen, horses or humans. There are gleaming spokes of MZ motorbikes and sidecars. And, finally, there are the small rubber wheels of wagon-buses pulled by small horses.

But even with all these wheels, once outside of Havana, everywhere we go we see hundreds of Cubans, immaculately dressed, standing on the empty rutted roads, hands out, pleading for a lift. Some have children and luggage in tow, many are just lone workers trying to get home – or to work. Most of them hold Peso notes in their hands in the hope of convincing some of the wheels to stop. Few do as all vehicles are spilling over with people.

‘What shall we do?’ my friend, Paul, asks me.

We have a car – not a sexy vintage American car, or even a Lada, but a Geely (made in China) and there are only two of us so it feels like a crime to drive without picking up at least six people. But there are a few potential drawbacks. For one, I know it is illegal for Cubans to take us (foreigners) in their cars and I suspect the same is true for us. Then again, Cuba does not evoke the same levels of fear as the old Soviet Union. The children of this Revolution smoked cigars, drank rum and lived in the mountains. They were freedom fighters who, fifty-two years ago, wanted rid of the rich who abused the country, they wanted to redistribute wealth, and they wanted equality and, er, democracy. Sure, there are slogans everywhere – *Viva la Revolucion! Patria o muerte! Venceremos! Hasta La Victoria Siempre! Revolucion es Libertad! Igualdad! Humanidad! Justicia!* – but the slogans soon fade to the sounds of salsa and rumba. After all, this is the country of Buena Vista Social Club and even the smallest villages and most dilapidated Soviet blocks ripple to ‘*El Carretero...*’ At least, I cannot imagine being shot for giving Cubans a lift. But you never know.

Language is also a slight problem as our Spanish only goes as far as Portuguese, but we decide to give it a go. And, to begin with, we are in luck. Our first passenger is a young female researcher at a university who happens to be far more dexterous in Portuguese than we are in Spanish. We learn that the tall skinny chimneys poking out of the fields belong to abandoned sugar factories that Fidel ordered to close a few years ago – because of the embargoes. We learn that everyone has access to free health and education, everyone has somewhere to live, and that each Cuban family gets a ration book of staples such as rice, beans, cooking oil, salt, sugar, bread, toothbrush and toothpaste.

Gaining in confidence the car begins to fill up. We learn that doctors are on the higher scale but there is not so much difference in salary between a brain surgeon and a rubbish collector. We learn that people earn between 300-500 pesos a month (12-15 US dollars). Cubans also need CUCs (the foreign currency tied to the dollar) to buy anything other than the basics. A taxi driver earns more than a dentist as he has access to foreigners and Foreigners equate to CUCs. We learn that Cubans cannot buy or sell

houses. But they can swap. Likewise, cars cannot be bought or sold. In the good old days of Soviet support a Lada could be earned by working hard. We learn that all jobs are distributed by the State. Everything, in fact, is distributed by the State. There are no newspapers other than the catchy Granma (named after the famous boat that Fidel used in the Revolution) – an 8-page state-controlled page turner. We learn lots of things. Mostly, we learn that life is not easy.

Things start to go wrong when certain people begin to pick us up. On our way to Pinar del Rio we stop to buy a drink, near a bus-station and we are immediately herded to a table by a young man, offered drinks, escorted to a typical Cuban toilet (without paper on running water).

While Paul is in the toilet the young man comes to me and holds the adjacent chair. 'Can I sit? My name is Oswaldo.' His hands shake as he lights a cigarette.

Then it comes: would we give him a lift to Viñales? It's Sunday and there's no public transport and he desperately needs to get home. He puts his hand to his heart.

This makes me suspicious and I shake my head and say that we want to visit many other places on the way, eat lunch....

He says that's fine – only he needs to get back before the evening. I say we will ask Paul. Paul says yes.

For the next three hours, Oswaldo tries to persuade us to stay in his mother's *casa particular* (a room in a private house), eat at his aunt's *paladar* (a meal in a private house), go riding on his cousin's horses. He will take us to Cayo Jutius, the most beautiful beach in Cuba. He becomes more and more sullen when we won't commit to his offers but perks up when we say we are hungry and want to stop to eat – he knows just the place. In the meantime, we see a sign to 'Restaurante' and turn off, much to his indignation and cries of 'the food is not good here!' but as soon as we go inside, he is off talking to the owner. We order *Moros y cristianos* (Moors and Christians – black bean rice), salad for us all and he asks for a beer. The bill comes to about the average monthly salary (15 CUC) and then Oswaldo quickly talks to the owner to negotiate his cut. When we finally reach our destination he gets out the car without even thanking us.

Another time we are on our way from Santa Clara to Trinidad and we come to a junction with no sign (not unusual) and slow down wondering which way to go. Before we know two men are getting in the car. Their names are Manuel and Yunier. They are fishermen who had to go to Cienfuegos to renew their licence. They have been waiting for five hours. Offers of Manuel's mother's *casa particular*, dinner at his house and riding on the beach begin almost immediately. Several offers later we get a puncture. Paul and Yunier swiftly change the tyre – amazingly there is a spare. But we need to repair the punctured tyre and it is getting late. They take us to a cousin's who lives along a dirt track just outside of Trinidad. The sun is setting, goats, dogs, chickens and children wander around the shacks, a woman gathers in washing from a line between a tree and a post which could be an electricity pole if it weren't for the wire hanging off. The place stinks of rubbish and sewage, made bearable only by the sound of music that rumbles out of at least three habitations. A large shirtless man comes to meet us. Paul disappears with the guys to get the spare tyre repaired.

The three of them come back some ten minutes later.

'I don't believe it,' Paul says, getting into the car.

The other two creep into the back.

'Incredible,' Yunier says.

'I'm very sorry,' Manuel says.

'What?' I say.

'Forty CUC!'

‘What do you mean?’

‘Forty CUC to repair the tyre. It took him ten minutes.’

‘You’re joking.’ I know he’s not. Almost three months’ wage,

There are no more offers of *casas particulares*, horserides or dinners. The fishermen get out in Trinidad – again without even saying thank you.

Everyone wants money in Cuba. Who can blame them? Life is not easy. The wheels of change are ready to roll forward. The Revolution achieved many things: got rid of the rich, redistributed wealth and achieved equality (more or less). The people are educated, they live long lives and, most incredibly, there is no black-white racism between Cubans: like their national dish, the *Moros y christianos*, the people are all mixed up together. Thanks to Castro and a succession of US governments, Cuba has been saved from mass globalization and is unique with its vintage American cars on empty roads, galloping horses across tobacco plantations, rocking chairs on patios, houses that exhale music from both old colonial Spanish buildings and dilapidated Soviet blocks, cigars, mojitos, stunning white-sand beaches, green ragged banana palms and purple husky mountains. But to live on fifteen euros a month, be without electricity or newspapers, and wait hours and hours for a lift to get somewhere? It would seem the time has come for ‘*Viva El Coche!*’

Lisa Selvidge 22 January 2011

(Cuba, 23 December 2010 - 5 January 2011)