Following in the footsteps of Dr. Carlos J. Finlay - 95 years after his Death
A Tour of Cuba

In January-February 2010, Gail Finlay and I traveled through Cuba in an effort to learn something about Dr. Carlos J. Finlay, a very famous and highly respected Cuban Physician-Scientist. (It is unclear to me how closely the Cuban Dr. Finlay and I are related although his father and my great-grandfather were both born in Glasgow). In the late 19th century Dr. Finlay claimed to have demonstrated that Yellow Fever was transmitted by the bite of the female *Aedes aegypti* mosquito. Subsequently, he tirelessly campaigned to drain the swamps and wetlands from around Havana to prevent the disease. Finlay was relatively unknown outside of Cuba and the Americans who just had “liberated” Cuba from Spain doubted his scientific expertise. However, because the American losses in the Spanish-American War due to yellow fever were thirteen fold higher than the losses due to military operations, the US sent a team, led by Dr Walter Reed, to test Finlay’s “Mosquito Hypothesis”. It was shown by Dr. Reed to be correct.

A second US Army physician, William Gorgas, (later Surgeon General of the Army), then applied these insights to eradicate yellow fever first from Havana and then from the swamps in the Isthmus of Panama. The later essentially permitted construction of the Panama Canal – after a French effort to build the canal had failed due, among other reasons, to the high incidence of yellow fever. Vaccines are now available to immunize against Yellow Fever (now known to be caused by an RNA virus found in mosquito saliva).

Our trip to Cuba was organized by “ElderTreks” a small Canadian tour group specializing in small group “adventures for travelers 50 plus”. Our group of sixteen American and Canadian “senior citizens” traveled by bus beginning in Havana, first west to Vinales and then East to Cienfuegos and Trinidad and then finally West again to Havana via Santa Clara. The entire trip took 13 days. Our tour leader, Claudio was an Argentine ably assisted by Alex, a native Cuban (both were very knowledgeable and spoke near perfect English). Renee, our driver and major domo, made everything go smoothly.

Left: Map of our trip through Cuba. Eastern Cuba including Guantanamo (off the map lower right) is not shown.

On day 1, we arrived in Havana after a short flight from Cancun on an Air Cubana Jet and were transferred to Havana’s famous Hotel Palacio O’Farrill, a terrifically grand neoclassical mansion dating from the first years of the 20th century. That evening we explored Old Havana on our own. The next morning, Claudio and Alex led us on a walking tour of Habana Vieja (Old Havana) partly along the famous Malecon, a broad promenade, roadway and seawall which stretches for 8 km along the Havana Harbor. The old city came alive as we explored it on foot. We then walked through the open-air San Francisco Plaza, Plaza de Armas, Plaza Vieja and Plaza de la Cathedral.

Our tour leaders Claudio on left (short chap with half-closed eyes). Alex on right (tall fellow with open eyes and pale blue hat).
In the afternoon we visited the old Palaces of Palacio de los Capitanes Generales, Palacio del Segundo Cabo and Castillo de la Real Fuerza. This area of Old Havana has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is now in the process of a magnificent restoration project, bringing back to life the graceful and elegant colonial architecture of days gone by. Everywhere we looked there were vintage 1950 Chevrolets, Buicks and Oldsmobiles, many in near perfect condition. Later that afternoon, we explored the outer parts of the city, and visited a “private” farmers market and the Plaza de la Revolucion where we saw monuments to two heroes of the revolution Che Guevara and Jose Marti. In the evening we had dinner on the rooftop of a local restaurant followed by an introduction to Cuban rhythms and dance. We tried to learn how to dance Salsa, Son, Rumba, and other popular Cuban rhythms. Gail did well, I was barely successful.

Above: Displays in Cuban Military Museum. The tank and airplane were involved in defeating the exiles at the Bay of Pigs.

Monuments in the Plaza de la Revolucion

Preparing for an Evening Out-Door Concert
Musicians serenading at Dinner and later for Dancing  
Dinner with Mohitos (the Cuban National Cocktail)

Menu choices lunch and dinner in Cuba, even in the better restaurants, were usually restricted to pollo, pecado or cerdo (chicken, fish or pork). Chicken fish and pork appeared to have been prepared using the same recipe in every restaurant.

Left: “Private Farmer’s Market” in Old Havana where produce, meats and flowers must be paid for in “CUC” Pesos (these can only be bought with hard currency such as Euros, Pounds Sterling or Canadian Dollars) and have a value about 10 times that of the ordinary Cuban Peso.

On the morning of Day 3, we headed for western Cuba to the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve of Sierra del Rosario, a bird watching paradise. This area is famed for the diversity of its natural beauty, lush woods, waterfalls, rare orchids and ferns. We learned about environmental problems and the role of the community in a lecture offered to our group in the Biological Station. We also visited the ruins of the Buena Vista coffee plantation where hundreds of slaves worked for the French land owners.

After lunch at a local restaurant, we continued on to Viñales in Pinar del Rio province, where we stayed the next two nights.

On day 4, we visited the Valley of Viñales, a picturesque, peaceful, lush area of Cuba, known for its fine tobacco fields and for its mogotes, the boulder-like hills that cover the valley floor. We stopped in the small town of Vinales, where we visited a state-run supply store to learn about the supply and distribution of goods in Cuba. We also visited the Botanical Gardens of Caridad – a mini paradise nurtured lovingly by two widows who have created an Eden of tropical plants such as tamarinds, oranges, grapefruits, guava, star fruit, bananas, cocoa, lemons, cinnamon trees and a variety of decorative plants and ferns. The area is riddled with caves and subterranean rivers.
We begin our day by hiking through this impressive landscape, while seeing how tobacco, cassava and taro are grown. We toured a farm where we had a chance to see how rural Cuban families live and work, as well as having an informal question and answer session with the farmer.

In the afternoon, we explored part of the Cueva de Santo Tomas, the second largest cave system in the Americas by boat. We saw unique geological formations and galleries decorated with stalagmites, stalactites and many other forms.

This morning of day 5 we drove east four hours to visit another Biosphere Reserve, the Zapata National Park. This is the largest and best preserved wetlands in the Caribbean islands. Located in the peninsula of the same name, the Zapata Park covers an area of over 1,930 square miles. The area is outstanding for the great diversity of its ecosystems, in which more than 1,000 species of plants and 37 species of reptiles, including the Cuban Crocodile inhabit. The diversity of bird life is also outstanding: a full 170 species of the 354 bird species reported in Cuba can be found here. The park is considered one of the premier bird watching destinations in the world.

We then took a 2 hour river cruise on the Rio Hatiguanico. This remote and wild river meanders through prime bird watching terrain and crocodile habitat. Seeing the Cuban crocodiles in a natural setting is difficult. However, we were able to see these rather ferocious animals up close at a fenced-in Crocodile farm. Our guide gave an interesting talk about the environmental-education community-program implemented by the local authorities. After dinner, we attended a performance of the Korimacao Cultural Project. This group, founded some 15 years ago, is involved with different kinds of cultural expressions existing in the community including theatre, dance, poetry, music and art.

On day six, we drove to Cienfuegos, founded in 1819; it is one of Cuba’s youngest cities. It has a vibrant youthful population and a diverse architecture of neo-classical buildings. We visited several of the city’s highlights, including the Plaza Marti, the Cathedral, the Tomas Terry theatre, and the Palacio de Valle – an architectural jewel which was originally a private residence of a wealthy sugar baron. We ate lunch at a local restaurant, and then visited a local institution of higher education where we learned a bit about the Cuban Educational System. The Cuban government places the highest priority on education; its educational system is one of the best in the Third World.

The educational system is competitive and the best students matriculate to prized vocational and specialist schools. We had the opportunity to visit a primary school and speak with the children and their teachers. Gail and I were both very impressed by a kindergarten class that was using Microsoft Windows to do their writing. Afterwards, we had an opportunity to visit a Casa de Abuelos (senior’s center) where members organize around cultural activities, eco-excursions, and are provided with medical attention and nutritious meals. We had a wonderful time. These retirees apparently live in the local neighborhood and spend their days in the senior’s center making crafts etc. It is really a wonderful place for a wonderful group of senior citizens. While on the way to the small town of Trinidad, we visited the Cienfuegos Botanical Garden which was established in 1899. Up until the revolution it had a close association with Harvard University Department of Botany. The Botanical garden is hoping to reestablish this association in the near future. We continued on to the charming town of Trinidad, Cuba’s best-preserved colonial architecture and also an UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In the early 19th century, French settlers fleeing a slave revolt in Haiti arrived and began the cultivation of sugar cane, bringing wealth to the region. The town has changed very little over the last 150 years and UNESCO has restored many of its French colonial buildings. Trinidad is a small, relaxed place where we saw Cuban cowboys riding their horses in the streets.

We strolled around the beautiful Plaza Mayor, visited Museo Romantico, and spent time at a local artisan street market, where splendid woodcarvings, fabric art, crochet pieces, and straw work were for sale. After lunch we met a local family who had passed down the tradition of pottery making for generations. Before dinner we took a Catamaran trip at sunset. I found it interesting that there were very stringent regulations regarding how far the Catamaran was allowed to sail from shore.
The next morning we visited the Valle de los Ingenios (valley of the sugar mills.) We had to take a 100 old steam powered train to get there. For a while I sat in the engine compartment where I was permitted to blow the whistle and ring the bell to my heart’s content. In colonial times the valley was the most important sugar producing region in Cuba if not the entire world. We had time to stroll around the former Manaca Ignaza Estate (founded in 1819) and climb to the top of a tall stone tower, the original function of which was to watch for runaway slaves. XVIII century Trinidad produced one third of the world’s sugar supply thanks to among other things, the thousands of African slaves. This ethnographic fact had a huge social and cultural impact over the centuries, creating an important legacy in Afro-Cuban religion and music. We will also had an opportunity to learn Cuban Percussion in a class taught by David Lopez Garabito who has toured with the group Hecho en Cuba (Made in Cuba). We returned to the hotel for lunch and spent the afternoon exploring the beach. In the evening we dined at the home of Senorita Estela, a lifelong resident of Trinidad and a fabulous chef, who created a number of delicious Cuban specialties.

On day 9, we departed for Santa Clara, a city located right in the center of Cuba. The city was founded in 1689 and was the battlefield for one of the most important victories of Fidel Castro’s guerrilla war against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. Commander ‘Che’ Guevara was the undisputed leader and hero of the so-called ‘Batalla de Santa Clara.’ Our bus made its way through the Escambray Mountains, Cuba’s second highest mountain range, reaching 3,700 ft. The mountains are home to small mountain villages and are a delight for birders and walkers alike. The slopes were swathed in Caribbean pines, ancient tree-ferns, bamboo and eucalyptus. We took a 40 minute mountain truck ride (a 1950’s soviet troop transport) into the forest to La Codina, an old Spanish Hacienda, once part of a large Spanish coffee plantation. We began our hike with a talk on various plants and their medicinal uses, originally used to treat the plantation’s slaves.

We hiked along the “Orchid Loop” which has over 25 endemic orchid species. We then passed through a cave en-route to La Cueva del Altar which had stunning views of the mountains and the Caribbean Sea. We finished up back at the Hacienda where a traditional Cuban lunch awaited us. We continued on to Santa Clara City, where we stayed for the next two nights.

On day 10, we explored the lively university town of Santa Clara, where the main square (Parque Vidal), bursting with local spirit, is one of Santa Clara’s highlights. We also visited the Ernesto Che Guevara monument which commemorates the man and the important role he played in the struggle against the Batista dictatorship. We tried to visit the “Armed Train Park Museum” to learn how this was one of the turning points in the revolution, unfortunately the Museum was closed for repairs. We also tried to visit a ‘Polyclinic’ (medical facility) to learn about Cuba’s medical system and meet with doctors and nurses. However, the fear of our infecting the patients with H1N1 prevented us from visiting the facility. After lunch we visited a Cuban Cigar Factory where we saw firsthand the sweat shop that was the Cigar factory. All I could think of was the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in New York City.

On day 11 we drove back to Havana through a very picturesque part of Cuba. Arriving in Havana we visited the former Centro Gallego, built in 1915 by Belgian architect Paul Belau. The buildings façades have rich decorations derived from Baroque and Renaissance styles. Today, the center houses the Gran Teatro de la Habana, home of Alicia Alonso’s Ballet Nacional de Cuba. We took a walking tour along the Paseo del Prado; a pedestrian promenade remodeled in 1929 with the inauguration of Havana’s Capitol building and Casino Español. In the evening, we had dinner and saw a performance at the Tropicana Cabaret, one of the most historical open-air nightclub shows in the world. Here we got a glimpse of the Havana entertainment scene as it was in the 1950’s. We had intended to spend the afternoon visiting the Carlos J. Finlay Historical Museum of Science in Old Havana. The building constructed in 1678, was the former Royal Academy of Medicine, Physics and Natural Sciences of Havana. In May of 1874, it became the first museum in Cuba. Unfortunately, like much of Havana it was closed for “reconstruction”.

In the morning of day 12, we visited a rum factory to learn about the process of making rum. Eh... We then walked in the footsteps of Ernest Hemingway with a visit to the American writer’s former home, Finca La Vigía, an old colonial estate
bought by the author in the ‘40s, where he lived for over 20 years. The house is exactly as Hemingway left it just prior to the Revolution. We were able to walk around the house exterior but could only view the interior through the windows.

We had a chance to see (but not touch) Hemingway’s boat the Pilar which was in an open shed. In front of the boat are the graves of his five dogs. We next visited Cojimar, the little seaside town that inspired him to write “The Old Man and the Sea.” It is here that ‘Papa’ kept Pilar docked during his years in Cuba. We enjoyed a “blue” daiquiri (one of Hemingway’s preferred cocktails) at Las Terrazas de Cojimar Bar. After our farewell dinner we closed our Cuban adventure by attending the traditional night cannon ceremony at Castillo de la Fuerza; one of the magnificent fortresses that made Havana the most fortified city in the Americas in the XVIII century. We spent our last two nights in Havana in the Saratoga Hotel, a truly magnificent place just across the street from the Cuban Capitol (which like much of Cuba) is in serious need of repairs.

On our last morning in Havana as we had several hours before we had to leave for the Airport, we asked the Saratoga concierge whether or not there might be some smaller memorial to Dr. Carlos Finlay in Havana. He said he thought there might be one in “New Havana” on the south side of the city. He found us a Taxi whose driver knew where the memorial might be and we hired him to take us to it. After a 20 minute ride we were there. On the Avenida Carlos Finlay we found a stone monument with a bronze plaque dedicated to Carlos J. Finlay on one side and a brief description of his work on the other.

We left for the airport and home with a small sense of accomplishment, knowing of course that we would return to finish the job.