

# The Havana on the other side of the Harbor

SCENES OF REGLA

Ugit, officium fugiatem iur? Tatin evellup  
tatenit ibusam sit est odicae veni aligna-  
tio. Sanihillupta debit voloris arionsedi

By Julienne Gage

There are many corners of the old colonial world where a sunset can invoke awe as it bounces off a glistening body of water and illuminates a historic skyline from every angle. But not all of them are as safe and as easy to access as the other side of the Havana Harbor. For those who want to see Cuba “before it changes,” now’s the time because the Cuban government has a massive plan to turn the harbor into a high-end commercial district for yachting and tourism.

Over the past two years, I’ve made several short expeditions across the harbor learning about Afro-Cuban culture in the village of Regla and small-scale tourism in the neighboring village of Casablanca.

I first crossed the harbor in March of 2016 with Aimee Ortiz, a Miami-based Cuban émigré and fellow anthropologist who explained that Regla’s deep African roots make it a popular place for Santería. The term refers to a set of spiritual practices derived from West Africa’s Yoruba culture, and they are closely related to Haitian Vodoo and Brazilian Candomblé.

In fact, the centerpiece of this colonial village, which can be accessed by a 15-minute ferry ride, is a small chapel where a black Virgin has spent centuries watching over ships – especially ones arriving with slaves.

“Don’t look,” warned Aimee, as we stepped off the ferry and spotted several santeras clothed in white cotton headscarves and peasant dresses with multicolored beads draped around their necks. It was hard not to. In a park outside the shrine to the Virgin of Regla, they laid out a tantalizing array of dolls, conch shells, and fortune-telling cards. As soon as their eyes met ours, they were reading our hearts and minds with alarming precision, and smacking us with long-stemmed white flowers – an act they swore would cleanse bad juju.

“There! Now go throw these nasty dead flowers in that dumpster!” commanded one of the santeras. Awkwardly, but obediently, I walked to the dumpster, contemplating how much American pop culture promotes meditation and yoga retreats, while labeling Caribbean religions “superstitious.” Suddenly I found myself slam dunking those tattered flowers into the dumpster, and down with them my recent life stresses. The ladies hung a string of golden beads around our necks and we paid a \$40 USD fee.

Regla and Casablanca have charms that might get lost after Havana Harbor is refurbished



## SCENES OF CASABLANCA

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The money was worth it. Temporarily released from the problems of this world, we practically floated down Regla's pastel-painted colonial streets, taking photos of children playing tag and riding bikes, and old men playing dominoes.

Regla is just the place to get back to the basics. Void of the touristy paladares common in Old Havana, you'll be hard-pressed to find mojitos, daiquiris, and giant plates of ropa vieja (shredded beef). More prevalent are living room storefronts selling fried cinnamon strips, donuts, and mantecas, Cuba's version of shortbread cookies -- comfort foods that made life sweeter as Cuba recovered from economic collapse in the 1990s.

After a visit to local artist César Leal's art school and gallery, we walked back to the ferry, our golden beads sparkling in the sun. Locals smiled as they proclaimed "Ochun," the Santería goddess of love that the beads represent. On the ride home, the late afternoon sun illuminated the golden domes of Old Havana's Russian Orthodox Church.

In October 2017, I had another chance to cross the harbor, this time for Cuba Trade. The rickety old ferry terminal on the Havana side had been replaced with a modern, two-story glass structure, marking the first step in the harbor enhancement initiative. On its decks, dozens of locals and foreigners ate ice cream, talked business, or waited for the next ferry. I chose the one bound for Casablanca.

Located about a half-mile from Havana's emblematic Morro Castle, Casablanca earned its name for a white general store

that used to serve customers in the narrow flatland between its steep hill and the rocky shore. But that was a few centuries ago. Today, it's best known as the place where Che Guevara had his government office, a science observatory, and a massive Christ statue that the wife of former Cuban President Fulgencio Batista erected about two weeks before the 1959 Revolution. From the seawall along the Malecón Boulevard, the statue and the observatory draw the eye's attention, but Casablanca's charm lies in the labyrinth of homes climbing up its steep slope.

I paid one Cuban peso to board the 15-minute ferry to Casablanca as the late afternoon sun cast a golden light. I figured there'd be time to hike to the top of the hill and down by sunset. I didn't consider the likelihood of becoming enraptured with the town's winding colonial architecture, stunning hilltop views, and warm, inviting residents.

"Where are you going?" locals asked.

"Just up there," I responded, determined to see the glistening bay laid out between the main city and this tiny town. Each pause offered another amazing view and friendly character.

"In any other country there might be some trouble, but this here is a free country," Orlando de los Rios, a staunch supporter of the Cuban Revolution told me as he repaired a horse buggy and showed off the steeds he uses to transport tourists around the castle.

It might have been wise to turn back as the last strong sunbeams disappeared behind Havana and a few drops of rain turned

into just a few more, but who wants to cross the bay in drenched clothes? Two young mechanics repairing an old car in a shed offered temporary shelter from the storm, and just as I was asking what they knew of neighborhood development plans, a German man walked up to check on the car's progress. It turns out he was the one to ask.

During a business trip a few years ago, Jo Bruns met a young Cuban woman from Casablanca, fell in love, and married her. They now spend part of their year in Germany and part of it in Casablanca, where they're helping several family members renovate homes to rent to visitors.

Together, they've invested about \$250,000 in renovations, and they're committed to seeing the community thrive. Excited by the opportunity to show visitors what they were doing, he took me on a tour of the homes.

"Little by little," Bruns said, as members of his extended family unlocked doors and opened windows to photograph the views. Bruns paused as he noticed freshly placed bed linens in a room he thought was empty.

"That's Cuba. Sometimes you don't even know who all has been staying at your place," he said with a chuckle. He's hardly worried, for he knows they're likely members of his extended family.

His bigger concern is how to attract the right kind of tourists, complaining that he and his wife want to rent to families, not drunken revelers looking to pick up prostitutes.

He wishes other Cubans in the community had the seed

money to open paladares, or even a language school. He knows those businesses will become more valuable once the Cuban government starts gentrifying the harbor.

For now, he's grateful for the tranquility. We walked up the path for a soda at one of Casablanca's few and humble venues: a thatched roof shack and a couple of wooden tables amid a clearing amidst the overgrowth. His wife Yiyi then joined us for a hike up countless hillside stairs until we reached the Christ statue, as the night fell and the moon illuminated its 320 tons of white marble against an indigo sky.

"Cuba is a present to me. On my first day here, I was a total capitalist," said Bruns, as he considered how he could help bring German investment to the island without ruining the slow pace and quiet he's come to love in Casablanca.

Staring up at Jesus, it's hard to know what neighborhood outcome to pray for, but it's easy to feel thankful for a short expedition like this. In some other place, a single traveler might be scolded for wandering around after dark, but street crime has never been prevalent in Cuba.

Illuminating the path with an iPhone, we began our descent, now accompanied by a crowd of locals gingerly climbing down the labyrinth of steps and paths back to the village, and offering me a friendly sendoff at the ferry.

I climbed aboard and stuck my head out the window just as the rain began falling again. This time I allowed it to refresh body and soul while getting a better view of both sides of the harbor. ★