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## Meeting the real Cuba, face to face

Farm and food tours graciously invite visitors to glimpse a proud culture

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Freelance

*Wednesday, August 13, 2008*

HAVANA - Cuba is famous for its beaches, but there is much more to this little country than all inclusive hotels and sand in your shoes. On Cuba's farm or food tours, you get to beach it and meet the real Cuba in a way that thousands of other tourists will never have the privilege to do.

There is little better than leaving Edmonton in the dead of winter at - 25 C and landing in Havana at 25 C above.

On the Canada-to-Cuba farm tours, the first three days are downtime at the Melia Varadero. What better way to start a farm tour than with Cuban music in the evenings, midnight walks on the beach and dancing, all washed down with mojitos? Cuba's national drink is made with white Cuban rum and a sprig of fresh mint.

Staff in Cuba's tourism trade is congenial and highly educated; people work hard for tips from foreigners, mostly Canadian and European. You may find yourself discussing Cuban economics in English with your server.

Agriculture is subsidized by tourist revenue, so tip well and spend your CUCs (foreign currency) guilt-free, knowing that you are helping to build the local agriculture economy.

Most food grown in Cuba is grown to feed Cubans, not for export. In order to visit farms you must be on an organized farm tour. A guide will conduct information in English and you will meet farmers and learn how they grow their food with little or no use of chemical inputs.

Some farms are privately or collectively owned, but products are marketed co-operatively. Farm co-ops supply food and milk to the state, schools, hospitals and communities.

There is great incentive for high production because product that is produced over and above fixed contracts is sold on the open market for private profit at the many farmers markets around Cuba. The extra income means that many farmers are quite highly paid by Cuban standards. Many young people are returning to farm after getting their free higher education in the cities.

Though education is free, food supply can be tight or scarce. Cubans buy 40 to 50 per cent of their food with ration cards at a subsidized rate; however, the black market in necessities like food flourishes.

Yet at every farm operation, you will likely be treated to a formal welcome and delicious and liberal spread of food of local fruits, like mangoes and guavas, and dairy products, like water buffalo cheese, which tastes similar to a delicate feta cheese, and whole pork roasted on the spit -- accompanied by plenty of pure water, beer or rum to drink. The generosity of spirit is overwhelming.

A must stop is one of Cuba's organiponicos -- organic gardens built on urban wasteland to feed the local population. El Rabanito organiponico is nationally referenced as a standard for organiponicos across Cuba. A produce garden with 30 kilograms of soil per square metre, the garden spans 5,000 square metres, employs 14 people and is in production year-round, supplying the local city of Ciego de Avila with spinach, chard, carrots, lettuce, beets, broccoli, parley, onion garlic and cilantro.

The immaculate gardens are all managed organically using strategies like companion planting of bug fighters like marigolds. Vermiculture is being introduced for compost and the gardens are irrigated through a drip system.

The produce is sold through a small retail stall at the garden and by bicycle carts throughout the nearby neighbourhoods for a low-carbon home delivery service.

Organiponicos dot the Cuban landscape like oases of abundance. With all this focus on farming and food, Cuba's cooks are making local cuisine a highly desirable specialty, offering delicacies made from local ingredients with evocative names like Cayacuca a la Mirepoix or the Gran Plato de Hemingway.

Please your palate, tantalize your taste buds and get ready for Caribbean cuisine with international influences and flair.

These are just a few of the highlights on one of Cuba's farm or food tours. Just when you think you need a day at the beach, you will get one. Cayo Coco is a remote spit of white sand and warm water with horseback riding available and local musicians in the cantina.

While ordering a cerveza under the palapas, ask the bartender what he was trained in. He may tell you he's an agriculture engineer, but makes more money serving Canadians and enjoys the people and the tips.

#### IF YOU GO

In February 2009, Edmonton's own urban farmer, Ron Berezan, will lead a special and intimate tour of Cuba's organiponicos, gardens, farms, food and culture events. Special discounts are available for those who register before Aug. 31.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION GO TO:

[http://www.theurbanfarmer.ca/GoCubaBroch\(Lo\).pdf](http://www.theurbanfarmer.ca/GoCubaBroch(Lo).pdf)

For information about the third cooks' tour of Cuba Nov. 24 to Dec. 8. go to <http://www.farmertofarmer.ca/Brochure.Cooks.Tour.pdf>

#### WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CUBA

1. LANGUAGE: English-speaking staff at the hotels, mostly Spanish in the

countryside. Try a few words; the smiles you get in return are worth it.

2. Currency to be used by foreigners in Cuba is called CUC and can be purchased with Canadian money or credit cards at the large hotels or banks. American money and American credit cards are not accepted. \$3 will usually buy you two cervezas (beer) at the markets, \$10 will buy an unusually large and delicious meal in a good restaurant, and \$20 will buy you an original oil painting in Havana's old- town market.

3. Be prepared to find e-mail service at hotels and in the Internet cafes spotty or non-existent, and your international phone card expensive. A BlackBerry Telus connect card will likely not work in Cuba. Find out before you go.

4. Cubans are proud of their education, economy, and excellent health care. Talk to people and find out for yourself. You will learn more through one conversation than in many a guidebook.

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