

# In Search of the Cuban Experience

By Amei Wallach

Newsday

Cuban President Fidel Castro wants 100,000 tourists in his country by next year, and says he'll attract them by selling "climate and recreation" instead of the gambling and prostitution that earned Havana the label of "Sin City" in the 1950s.

"Climate and recreation" is indeed what was offered the first shipload of visitors from America to reach their shores in 16 years when the MTS Daphne steamed into Havana earlier this month with 320 passengers—the first of what was intended to be a series of four cruises by the Daphne through the end of this month, to be followed by another series in January. (Bomb threats later caused the Carras Cruise Lines, a Greek-owned company with offices in New York, to cancel further stops at Havana, at least for this year.)

But that first group of cruise passengers wasn't looking for climate and recreation, any more than they wanted gambling and prostitution. Because in the end, the lure of Cuba—expected to draw some 10,000 Americans mostly by air charters this year—can't be found in the simple pleasures of the island's 137 beaches, with bars selling Czechoslovakian beer, souvenir stands touting Havana cigars and three-piece bands playing "Guantanamera."

It isn't the 1930s-style luxury of the Hotel Nacional or the Spartan modernity of the Hotel Mar Azul that Americans talk about on the way home. It isn't the air-conditioned buses or the extravagance of flowers floating in a kidney-shaped pool.

It's the experience of the new so-

ciety that Cuba has become. "I think you have to want more than a beach to go to Cuba," said San Francisco travel agent Michael Bosch. "It's a cultural, educational, historical adventure."

That means accepting the fact that true hotel luxury is better found in other parts of the Caribbean, that telephones don't work quite right, that Havana—one of the world's most beautiful cities—lacks the hustle and bustle that private enterprise like tiny shops and street vendors would give it.

Most of all, as the passengers aboard the Daphne's pioneering cruise discovered, it means spending a lot of time meeting Cubans. Encounters with taxi drivers, guides, musicians and passerby on the street were what the excited chatter was about as the Daphne left Havana 36 hours after its arrival.

Thirty-six hours was just about time enough for many visitors to confirm the impressions they had brought with them; only a few did an about-face. Yet much of the information they started out with was faulty, leading to suspicion on the part of both Americans and Cubans—and some "ugly American" incidents, as well. Just a few hours after the first cluster of passengers had rushed to the starboard side of the Daphne crying, "There it is, there it is," the first misunderstanding began.

Flying the red, white and blue Cuban flag as a seafaring courtesy, the Daphne began to curve slowly toward the smokestacks and haze polluting the green Cuban countryside. As a turquoise blue arc of spray spread out behind, a sailor suddenly straightened up.

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