

# Four weeks in Cuba.

- Bruce E. More

## Part I - November 7:

If one considers the “well, that’s Cuba” factor, things have gone amazingly smoothly. We arrived at 11:15 am at the airport and were in our house by shortly after noon. Ilka, our "landlady" is an absolute darling, she just can't do enough for us. The colonial style house is magnificent, well kept up (by Cuban standards). Lighting is the circular energy saving type, so somewhat stark feeling at night. The appointments and decorations are relatively sparse and most of 30 - 50's's vintage since virtually nothing of more recent style has been imported since the revolution. Our room is large with 10 ft. doorways and 16 foot ceiling. We have an efficient air conditioner, but we hardly use it as the breezes are blowing fairly constantly. It is also INCREDIBLY noisy here - people yelling, cars honking and dogs barking outside our window. It doesn't bother us that much because they are the sounds of Havana: people calling to each other, children playing, radios playing, car alarms going off, but for the most part, the sounds are happy sounds.

At night, we close the huge shutters/windows which are on three sides of the room and turn on the air-conditioner (fan only) and this blots out all sounds, so we sleep comfortably.

WE HAVE OUR OWN KITCHEN - I'm currently exploring the many “gourmet” preparations of rice and beans. There is a produce market across the street. Produce is Che-ee--ee--eap! I got a papaya the size of a small watermelon, and other produce including huge green onions, eggplant, bananas, guavas, a pineapple, monstrous avocado, tomatoes, green peppers, long beans, kidney beans and rice for about \$3.80. The marketplace (Cuban pesos only) is open air (with cover) and very funky, loud and like everything Cuban, full of life! The supermarkets (US\$) only



*\$3 worth of produce from the agromercado*

are yet another story. They are more inline with Safeway prices in Canada - Expensive!!!! but with very little variety of foods (mostly packaged, canned or frozen) - much like Russia was in 1991 when we were there. So the chef is supremely challenged. It is HOT here! 26-30 humid degrees at the heat of the day, but a comfortable 18-20 at night.. and with the exception of the first (cloudy) day - always sunny!

The Cuban economy is amazing. People actually live on incredibly small amounts (between \$5 and \$10 per week). The difference between salaries of various workers and professionals is quite small. An engineer or doctor might earn up to \$500 per year. A professional singer could earn up to \$450. The people appear well-dressed, very clean and happy. The kids are all well dressed in attractive school uniforms and everyone seems to be polite and very pleasant. In Vedado, where we are living,

there are virtually no tourists and we get stared at walking down the street, which we do a lot! I suspect we are averaging 10-15 k per day.

Havana is:

- Magnificent awe-inspiring buildings from the late 18th c. to early 50's in vintage (neoclassical, colonial and some exquisite Art Nouveau). Most are unkept and many falling apart, but this is where "the people" live. Up-keep just isn't a value (or frankly an option) to them.

- Happy, well mannered and delightful people - What does seem to be important is personal grooming and dress, a system which enables them to minimize racial and economic differences between people; which guarantees at least 2 meals a day; provides a state of the art health care and an education system, which would seem to be the envy (particularly in the arts) of any western democracy.



*A Camello*

- A city in which food can be extremely cheap (to Norteamericanos) and a two-tiered transportation system - one which costs mere pesos for "the people" but for which one must stand in long lines for long periods of time (and is virtually unavailable to non-Cubans). There are regular old buses and "camellos", an old style which you won't see anywhere else in the world.

They seem to be buses whose engines have long gone and are now towed around by large diesel trucks. The other tier - for the tourist- are the taxis. One pays US dollars, but the fares are not all that bad. \$3 or \$4 per ride (e.g. Esquimault to UVic). Although these are reasonable by our standards, they are financially out of the question for Cubans.

- A city of propaganda - billboards which seem to change postings regularly proclaim the new revolution, a newspaper headline on the day of the US election: "FRAUDE ELECTORAL EN LA FLORIDA" and an editorial headline about the US: UNA REPUBLIC BANANERA" - but these can be offset by a charming billboard such as a cartoon of a child riding on a rocket in outer space proclaiming: "I want to learn everything!" and in smaller print proclaiming the beginning of the new school year. When is the last time you saw a billboard in Canada for such a lofty purpose?

- A shock, I suspect, to most Americans or Canadians. It is an exhilarating mix of fascinating architectural styles, lush foliage, ancient trees on the one hand and a supremely annoying laid back bureaucratic style which would put many of our Canadian public servants to shame. 30 minute waits at the bread counter of the supermarket, long waits at any number of offices while clerks stand around doing nothing, arriving at a concert and finding out it's not happening or at a different time than advertised or at a different place, or a different day. But from the moment you see your first grandly deteriorating building, your first '58 Chevy in mint condition, your first happy group of students or your first "cubana music" band rehearsing in a garage, the heat, the noise, and the bureaucracy all fades away.



*"You can't blockade solidarity"*

Part II - Nov. 15

Life here just gets better and better, but also busier and busier. We are now visiting rehearsals and classes on a regular basis. We have linked up with 4 professional choirs and 2 children's choirs, and three of the national music schools: Instituto Superior del Arte (University level), ENA (High School level) and Caturla (Primary through Secondary). We have made many good friends, the top of the list of which is Ilka, our wonderful house-momma who insists on doing everything from reserving hotel rooms and car rentals to helping us connect with conductors and even doing our laundry. She is an absolute dear (reminds me a lot of my mom). Our two main conductor friends have been very helpful to us and most generous in inviting us to rehearsals and classes. Carmen Collado is head of the Choral Department at ISA and conductor of a new professional choir named Coro Polofonico de la Habana. Maria Felicia Perez teaches at ISA also and is conductor of "Exaudi", the Cuban choir that is so well-known in the US and Canada. All the choirs have a much straighter tone that we are used to and tend to do much more traditional and Spanish repertoire (duh!!) than the Chamber Singers. The musicianship and blend are truly phenomenal. Factor in that these choirs are professional and rehearse 3-4 hours a day, five days a week..... The musical preparation of the singers and conductors are among the best I've seen anywhere. One of our best new friends is one of Carmen's singers, a young man of 21-ish He's a percussionist who graduated from ENA and won an audition into Coro Polofonico de la Habana, where we met him - mainly because he was the stand out English speaker of the group and has become our translator and friend. He has a sister who is a nurse in Jamaica, who from a young age taught him English. He is ravenous to practice. Of course, our best friend of all has been Mark Beaty. We really think the world of him and so little of what we are now doing would have been possible without his efforts.



*A music class at Benny More School in Cienfuegos*

The Cuban music education system is as fascinating as we thought it would be and extremely innovative. We saw a grade 6/7ish class today, first choir, then movement. The choir was good, but creating a spiffy choral programme seems to be secondary to providing an excellent all-round creative environment. I'm not talking about the la-dee-da "straight out of the 60's" crap that is so often flogged in our part of the world, but rather a multifaceted skill building, discipline based training which includes rhythmic movement and creative expression. I'll talk more about it later but it was really fascinating. Other innovations of note are: groups of professional instructors in a variety of disciplines who go out from the Ministry of Education and spend an entire term in a given school upgrading the teaching skills of the teachers in that institution, moving on to another school in the next term or year; a "University for All" TV programme 2 nights a week between 6 and 7pm on various subjects most prominent of which is English language study, (surprisingly to me, very few people here speak English, considering Cuba is only 80 miles from North America) but also music and the other arts; and most impressive for me, they have a large, country-wide continuing education programme in which adults can continue the study of music (or any discipline) later in life (Cervantes School).

Yesterday we visited ISA for the first time. It is on a multi-acred site with lots of beautiful land, the site of a former golf and country club (me-thinks the Cubans have found a better use for such land

than separating the rich from the poor, eh?) The Music School therefore is quite lavish in appearance in the main offices and lobbies and concert salon, but very utilitarian (and a bit depressing) in the teaching studios and practice rooms. But as I pointed out earlier, this is just the Cuban way, upkeep and what we would consider aesthetic construction and design are secondary values. ENA (Escuela Nacional de Arte), which is in the same estate, is even more run-down looking. A good illustration of such contrasts would be a description of the residence which Mark took us through. The upper floor of one block is the international student's residence. Two beds to a room, very nice, with comfortable chairs, TV etc. The other floors for the Cuban students are stark, hard seats and up to 5 beds to a room (same size). Again this reflects two things: the housing which the Cubans are used to and the fact that the Cuban government is encouraging foreign students in order to get more foreign dollars. Like any music school, the students practice everywhere and being in the tropics, practice largely outside. We heard fantastic brass and sax players, virtually no singers, few pianists and a few fine string players - and of course PERCUSSION EVERYWHERE!



A mural at ENA



The most astounding feature of ISA is its modern (1970s?) Visual Arts building. I can't begin to describe it, but I'll bring pictures. It seems to be something of a national treasure, although like so much of Havana, it's already seriously run-down.

A typical day for us is an observation or e-mail at the Capitolio in the morning, a "cajita" lunch (only a picture can explain, but it's a box of hot food for under \$1 and it's really very good!) an observation in the afternoon arriving home around 6, totally drenched in sweat since we insist on walking beaucoup de kilometres every day. Our Spanish is getting better. It is a constant source of frustration for Connie (the perfectionist) and of exhilaration for me (the neurotic who is amazed everytime he realizes he can really do something). I was totally delighted on Tuesday when Carmen handed me a piece of music and asked me to conduct the choir.

Happily it was "Ain-a That Good News" so I was able to conduct it pretty much without looking at it (therefore reflecting well upon Canadian musicians.) We spend almost every evening at home reading, and generally assimilating the incredible amount of information we take in every day. Usually I cook, but we found a super restaurant a few blocks away for last night's meal. (A huge gourmet of a meal with beer for under \$20 for the two of us.) We haven't been to any concerts, because they're rarely listed and when they are they many times just don't happen. E.g. Connie took a cab all the way over to Habana Vieja (past the Capitolio) to see a concert listed in the government

arts paper and it wasn't happening and no-one knew anything about it!! I won't begin to list the times we've had experiences like this. It's not so much that Cubans "just don't give a shit" as that they just don't seem to place a value on promptness, organization and dependability. Believe it or not, Connie and I are starting to get use to it!! Can you imagine, Bruce and Connie More getting used to lack of organization???

The tour organizing is going great. Mark Beaty has really been a big help. We've located and reserved buses, sponsor and a hotel for our 6 days in Havana and are now working on our 4 day "runout" to Cienfuegos and Trinidad. We've located the most likely hotel and Mark has found a very likely sponsor. It's become so busy that Connie and I have decided to take a bus up to Varadero Beach (the main Cuban resort) for 3 days of much needed rest (not to mention a bit of luxury for a change). We are very happy here!

### Part III, December 6

Here we are on our last day in Havana. I can only describe my feelings as a vast "approach-avoidance". I want to stay in this beautiful exciting country on the one hand, but on the other, I am gradually tiring of the few negative aspects. Even though the weather has cooled off over the last week, I long for a well-stocked North American food market, a tap that I can drink pure Canadian water out of, a newspaper or magazine which will give me some details about the U.S. or Canadian election, or an entertainment section which will accurately list coming events, a quiet night's sleep, a phone jack that I can hook my laptop into and for less than a dollar, dial-up my UVic server and since Christmas approaches, some snow!



*Our room at "Casa de Ilka"*

But for the moment, I reflect on the last 2 weeks of our stay. The overwhelming memory is that wherever we were in Cuba, the excitement never stopped. Interestingly the least stimulating was our 2 days in Varadero, the large Cuban resort to which the vast majority of North Americans come to "visit Cuba". There are two parts to Varadero - the "low end" resort hotels which are close together on city street grids. This is where we stayed. The rooms were large with a kitchen/sitting room and bedroom in each, but no cooking utensils and hard wooden furniture. The grounds were very nice in an "urban picnic site" sort of way and the pool was very large and of course there were the requisite poolside bars. The breakfast buffet was truly sumptuous by Cuban standards. From the fact that mostly European languages were overheard, one gets the impression that these hotels are the sort of place that Cubans and lower income European tourists come to. At \$40 per night, it's all any Cuban salary could afford (once per decade). The other half of Varadero are the high-end European and U.S. style hotels to which most Canadian and American tourists seem to come. They are completely self-contained "estates" with golf courses, shopping centers, exhaustive activity centers, plus high rise surroundings and gourmet restaurants. Starting at \$200 per day, not surprising. Everybody wears wrist-bands to identify them at meals and let them in and out of the hotel (sort of a gated community). These hotels have excursions to various activities such as snorkeling and diving and bus trips into Havana (3 hours there - 2 hours in Havana on an air-conditioned bus and 3 hours back - "there, dear, now we've really seen Cuba!") In short, we had a really nice relaxing time, but didn't always feel like we were in Cuba.



*Our hired car for the day in Artemisa*

So, Home to Havana and after another busy week of observations and meetings, we rented a car to drive down to Cienfuegos, Trinidad and Sanctii Spiritus to set up our out-of-Havana concerts. When one travels southeast on the island, one drives on the Cuban freeway called the "Autopista Nacional". It is somewhat of a marvel in Cuba, as wide, as fast, and as well surfaced as most North American freeways, but with a difference: in Cuba, one shares the Autopista with other cars, buses, incredibly black-smoky trucks, bicyclists (as opposed to cyclists), pedestrians, horse and



*A boat harbour in Cienfuegos*

carts, carts being pulled by four oxen and of course Cubans stepping out on the freeway in front of you, selling everything from soap to lobsters. In addition, at every intersection Cubans are waiting for rides. Other than flying, there is very little dependable transportation between cities in Cuba - renting a car for \$100 Cdn per day is about the only viable option for someone on a schedule. Cubans depend on the generosity of those who have cars, or trucks of any description to transport them to whatever their destination might be and so major highway intersections are crowded with people trying to find rides. Interestingly, government vehicles are required to stop and pick up passengers. For our own part, our rental car was so small, there was only room for our suitcases in the back, so we had to pass by hundreds of people needing rides during the course of our trip. Whereas living in Havana and walking most places, we had begun to feel a real closeness to people, driving a rental car really puts up a barrier and makes one feel like a tourist again.

Driving in rural Cuba, either on the highway, or particularly on a country road, one feels that they are truly in another century. From time to time there is a view of a rundown, uncompleted or abandoned high-rise residence or the modern, but stark Cuban water towers, but for the most part it is a view of tropical landscape, sugar cane fields, banana or coconut palms and intensely beautiful little farms and cottages. Parts of Cuba are quite flat, but there are enough hills and mountains to complete a picture-perfect landscape.

Our residence of choice was "Punta la Cueva", which is another Cuban style resort. It is off by itself on many acres of land, the basic design is very attractive and the grounds are well kept, but not sumptuous. The beach (pebbly shore, really) is very small and the pool is empty and being worked on by 5 workers who sit around most of the time. As everywhere, on arrival, a man comes up and says he will watch your parked car for you (for a small price - but at any amount, it's still extortion). Nevertheless it really is a lovely and friendly feeling place and the rooms are very nice although like most Cuban accommodations, no hot running water, only cold. But we are particularly pleased because, we had been hoping that it would be acceptable for housing the Chamber Singers for three days in May. At \$24 US per night for a double room with breakfast (\$12 per person), it is a very good "deal".

On arrival, we received a telephone call, informing us of a concert at a hotel in town that evening. This began our interaction with the cultural activities of the area. We heard another fine professional choir (Cantores de Cienfuegos), met their manager Julio Hernandez, and their gifted young conductor Mileidy Oropesa. The concert was a half-hour presentation in a hotel courtyard to a group of very appreciative American tourists, who appeared to be an a sort of "friends of Cuba" tour.

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## REPERTOIRE:

As the weeks progress, we increasingly get the picture of Cuban professional choirs as performing mostly for state (or municipal) functions of every description. Their repertoire usually includes a small number of traditional European selections (usually Renaissance sacred polyphony), but most of their repertoire is Latin American, very much "art" music, as opposed to "pop", but composed during the last 100 years. There are always some very attractive and challenging pieces with Cuban rhythms, based on Cuban folk music or the "son". The only criticism which I have is that much of this repertoire is written in a sort of American "show/barbershop/soft jazz" kind of voicing which wears thin after a while. There seems to be little activity in the area of more lengthy baroque/classical - cantata/oratorio works which is the "bread and butter" of so many North American and European choirs. The reasons for this seem to be that their schedule is largely taken up by fairly heavy demands by the "city fathers" (6 events per week in Cienfuegos) or preparations for participation in the many choral festivals and competitions in Cuba. Another reason might be that like opera, the large-scale oratorio or cantata has too many associations with traditional religion and therefore may not be compatible with a communist society. The one exception to this was presented by an amateur choir. We did hear excerpts from Messiah at the Basilica on our last weekend in Havana. It was pretty much like the standard community choir presentation which we would hear in larger centers of Canada: a competent orchestra and a choir of thousands (actually 120) made up of several church choirs. The style was generally loud and lugubrious and hearing it in Spanish was definitely a new experience. But this work is clearly as well known and meaningful to Cuban audiences as it is elsewhere in the western world. People all around us were singing along quietly during the choruses.

At least two of the top choirs in Havana also travel fairly frequently in Latin America (one conductor was in Colombia while we there and another choir left for a concert tour in Argentina). Because



*Bruce conducting Cantores de Cienfuegos*



*Messiah at the Basilica*

of the broad spectrum of audiences and the frequency of performances, there is evidence of much repetition in their repertoire also - even from year to year. This is unlike the North American university choirs which generally have a "scholarly" mandate to perform new works and rarely repeat, but bearing a real similarity to touring choirs like the Chamber Singers, who perform more frequently and to a much wider audience. Again, at least one of the "high level" Havana choirs, Exaudi, seems to have elements of the "scholarly" model in their repertoire, focusing upon baroque and classical works of Cuban and other Latin American composers. They have at least three CDs of this type in circulation.

Our first full day in Cienfuegos included a visit to the Superaccion music center (community education) and, as seems to be the custom, being paraded into the main office to meet the entire staff before observing anything in the school. This custom was particularly comical in the second week, when we



*Cantores de Cienfuegos*

visited the Caturla School (middle school - music focus) in Havana. We were trooped into a large room which contained about 30 teachers from all over Havana at some sort of meeting or short course. They were all watching a video, ostensibly pertinent to their meeting. When we entered we were ceremoniously introduced, but the video kept playing. Everybody stood up to "honour" us, but their

eyes and attention continued to focus on the video. (Weird!!)

The city of Cienfuegos, by comparison with Havana, is very clean, well kept and in a most beautiful setting on the Bay of Cienfuegos. This inland waterway has very historical associations, having been explored by Columbus in 1494 and the site of a major naval battle between Batista and the rebels during the revolution. Far in the distance is an incongruous view of cranes and the tops of gigantic buildings. This is a mega-project nuclear reactor, begun during the Russian years, but abandoned when they left. In another direction there are the tall flood-lighting towers of an immense and modern baseball stadium. The Castro government also supports sports in a very big way (remember the Cuban Pan American Games?). The streets of Cienfuegos are busy, not so much with cars or buses, but with horsecars. These conveyances, holding up to 10 people each, go up and down the Prado (the main street) and on other thoroughfares, every few minutes and are the main form of transportation in the city. The restaurants of Cienfuegos were truly an interesting experience. For \$1 I ate a deluxe hamburger: two huge patties of strangely flavoured beef with a slice of jamon (ham) in the middle and I'm here to tell the story. A dinner at an "Italian" restaurant (which had no Italian food) and a lovely sea-side restaurant which served "paella" which was more like rice porridge completed our culinary adventure. One can eat very cheaply and very nourishingly in Cuba, but don't expect "Chef Robert".

Completing a very successful series of rehearsals, institutional visits, and tour of possible concert sites, we left Cienfuegos and our generous hosts to drive to Trinidad. This town is somewhat of a Cuban treasure: it is a UNESCO Heritage designated site, one of Cuba's oldest (along with Habana Vieja). I found it somewhat of a disappointment in that the oldest part of the city, attractively placed on a hill, is small and partially restored, but surrounded by the run-down village buildings which lack any of the grandeur of Habana Vieja's buildings. To me, Cienfuegos and Sanctii Spiritus are more interesting. Trinidad has especially overbearing street hustlers, particularly in the old centre. Like all of Cuba, it was a relaxing, friendly and exciting place to be - it just didn't live up to its reputation.



*Slave tower near Trinidad*

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**THE CASA PARTICULAR (Cuban Bed and Breakfast)**

is a private home which rents a room or rooms. The rooms are usually sizeable with private bath. They are basic accommodation, however: a bed, some hang-up area, an air-conditioner and with luck a dresser and a window. The breakfasts and dinners are generally excellent with generous portions.



Dinners ordered at a Casa Particular typically cost around \$6. These rentals are registered with the government (i.e. have to pay large licensing fees) and the tourists who take a room in a non-registered house do so at their own risk. It is necessary on arrival in Cuba, to produce a reservation for a hotel or the registration number of a casa particular. Failure to do so can result in the immigration department requiring the tourist to register for at least 3 nights in a more expensive hotel. This, of course, is a reflection of the 2 tiered economic system which I described earlier under transportation and in the differences between the produce markets and the US\$ supermarkets. In my opinion, the tourist who risks using the peso taxi, the camello or the illegal residence is contributing to the devaluation of the Cuban people. A non-Cuban can live extremely cheaply in Cuba by abiding by the rules. The \$15-\$30 US per night which the registered houses charge is not unreasonable, nor is the \$3-\$5 cab fare within the city.



*A rural farm cottage*

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In Trinidad, we lucked out and got a whole upper floor with 2 bedrooms and kitchen in between for \$15.

In Sanctii Spiritus our room was dark and windowless, although the house, which had several rooms, was very pleasant with an inner courtyard.

Sanctii Spiritus is a very clean and well kept city, reminiscent of many in Europe which I've visited. The most striking aspect was the complete lack of tourists. As we walked down the streets, there seemed to be no awareness of us as "not belonging" - no hustlers or cigar sellers.

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**STREET HUSTLERS**

In Cuba, one encounters what one could politely call vendors everywhere in public places. As soon as you're recognized as an outsider (which is usually immediately - Cubans have an uncanny sense of who is a "visitor"), you become a target. Considering the huge gap between the two economies, and



*A street photographer being photographed*

therefore the immense significance of the American dollar, this is not at all surprising. These people are simply trying to gain such dollars in every legitimate way that they can. They tend to be very friendly and much more subtle than what we would normally call hustlers. Styles range from someone simply walking up to you on the street and starting a conversation which ultimately leads to a suggestion that you eat at a particular restaurant or stay at a certain house, to the stereotypical "psst, hey amigo, you want a cigar?"; or just someone calling out to you "where you from?". (Canadians were always welcomed.) The persistent "vendor" is relatively rare and it is really pointless to become hostile - just smile and say no and you'll usually get a smile back. Cubans are particularly nice people. For my own part I found a tendency for young teenage boys to be a bit smart-alecky at times, but hey, where aren't they? Expectably, hustlers are the worst near the most touristy places.

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Shortly after our return to Havana, we went for the second time to a bi-weekly gathering at the Canadian Embassy. We wanted to find out about the Canadian election results from the beginning of the week, about which until that time, we had no idea. We also enjoyed meeting Canadians who were living in Cuba and came to this event on a fairly regular basis. It has a nice pool, bar and hamburger/hotdog offerings. I found the attitudes towards the Cubans to be very similar to my own, very constructive and un-patronizing. The big surprise was that the majority of the people which we met here were Americans from the American Interests



*Amphitheatre with American Interests building*

Section (to most intents and purposes the US Embassy - which doesn't exist - of course). Here the political views were a little different, but still reasonable and generally not sympathetic to the US blockade of Cuba. One wag suggested that the American Constitution guarantees Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness, but in Cuba it seems that Castro stopped at "Life". A cute sentiment, but one which ultimately defines liberty in a way which includes wide-spread poverty (not found in Cuba) and "pursuit of happiness" as pursuit of wealth.

The night before we left Cuba, I cooked a Chinese meal for Ilka, her daughter and son in law Yolanda and Barbaro with their children Alberto & Patricia. We also invited our 2 best Cuban friends: Ricardo (and his girl friend Yani) and Mark Beaty. Suffice it to say, cooking a Chinese meal with the limited food supplies of Cuba and without a pan that even resembled a wok was a real challenge for me, but I did it and all present said they had never had Chinese food like it before (I have no doubt of that) but it was probably a compliment, especially since some had never had ANY Chinese food before!) Mark has really taken on the Cubano persona: the slurred Cuban speech, general dress and between him and Ricardo, we had good translation during the meal and were able to say many things which would have otherwise been difficult. Ricardo, an accomplished percussionist, gave us a brief lecture-recital on the new conga drum which we had just bought. I have a lasting impression from every Cuban musician I have met, either instrumental or vocal: their innate rhythm is legendary, but even more astounding in person.



*"Coro Nacional de Cuba"*



My lasting impression of Cuba is not the grand buildings, the restored cars or even the energetic music, but the people! Early in our stay, we heard stories of the "special period" between 1990 and 1995, when the Russians left and the economy of Cuba all but collapsed. We heard about the incredible depravation which people had to live through with the cut-backs and the rationing. No-one can dispute the reality of this period. But to me the most lasting thought is the triumph of the Cuban people - the 90% who decided to stay and not flee to Miami. Here, 80 miles south, is a fully functioning society with a government, although seen as repressive, which puts medical and educational care (and the arts) as a top priority, and a society which although completely aware of its own financial limitations is as happy a society as one could find in the world today.



*A flamenco class*



*Habana Vieja (Old Havana)*



*a cigar maker*



*A street rehearsal in Habana Centro*



*Banyan tree overgrows sidewalk*



*Teatro nacional*



*The Basilica*



*Havana Chinatown*



*Violinist practicing at Instituto Superior del Arte*