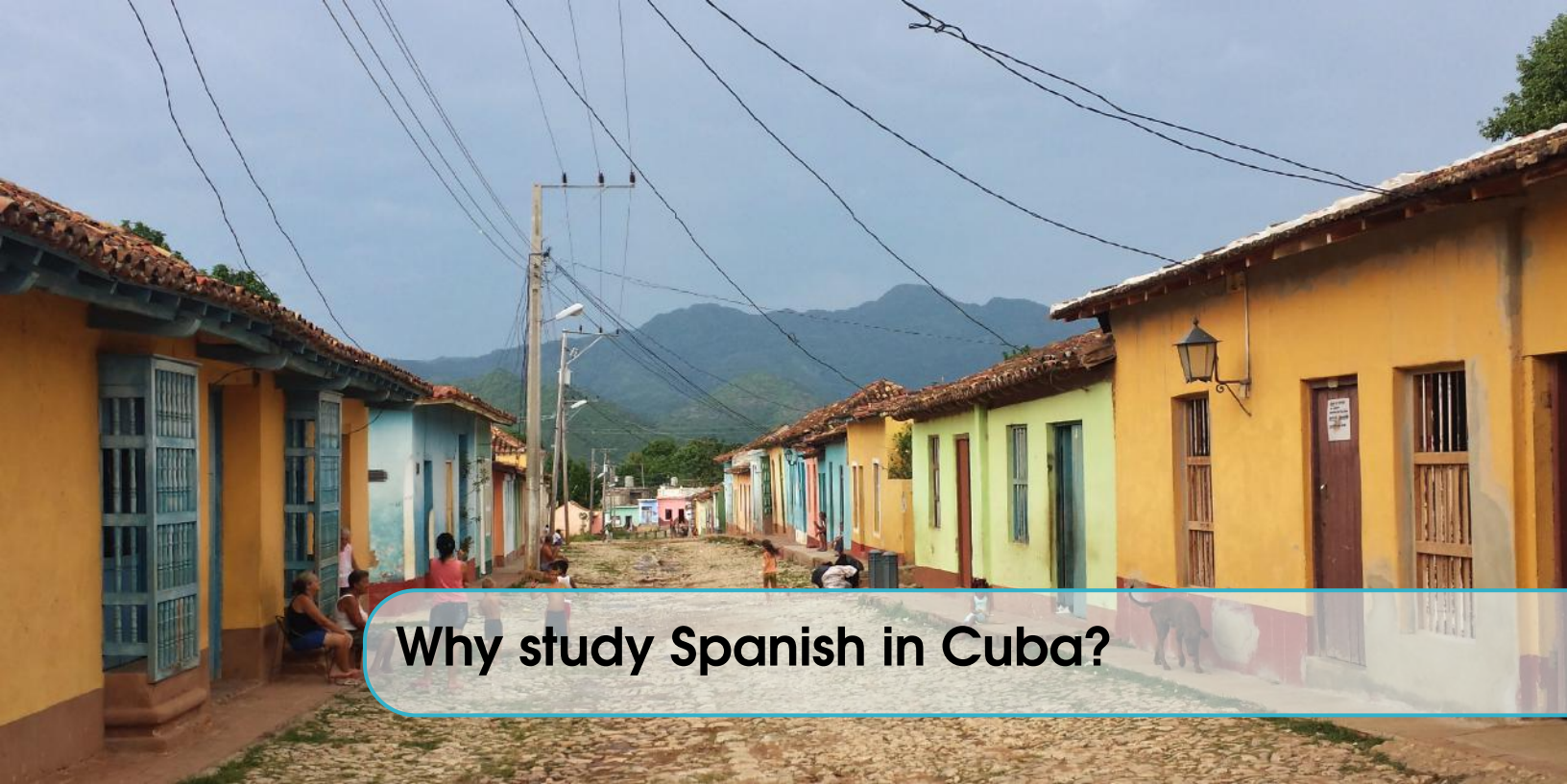




Cuba: un arroz con mango?

Report for the A. J. Pressland Fund

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Why study Spanish in Cuba?

Photo: The historical colonial city of Trinidad, one of the most photogenic places in Cuba and UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Why would an astrophysicist like myself want to learn Spanish? Simple: our telescope is based in the Atacama desert in Chile, where staff astronomers, engineers and contractors mainly speak Spanish. On my last visit, I realised how advantageous it is to communicate, work, and network in their native language. Moreover, most telescope sites are in Spanish-speaking locations like La Silla, Tenerife and La Palma. Becoming fluent was therefore important for my future academic career.

But why Cuba? Cuba has a remarkably rich history, which I was keen to explore: The island was conquered by the Spanish at the start of the 16th century and the native population became vastly extinct. Soon after, African slaves were brought to Cuba, and Chinese traders tried to establish businesses. In the early 19th century French slave masters fled from rebellions on other Caribbean islands and settled down in Cuba. Finally, being one of the last in the Americas, Cuba abolished slavery at the end of the 19th century. I was eager to witness how this amalgamation of cultures shaped the country.

As if all of this was not enough, Cuba was thrown from one political dependency into the next. The first and second revolution freed the country from Spanish oppression, only to see it replaced with a strong U.S. oversight. It was not until Fidel Castro's 'Cuban Revolution' won against the Batista regime in 1959 that the country became independent. The ongoing feud with the U.S., however, created another reliance: on the Soviet system. Being one of the last communist countries, Cuba has welcomed major changes in the past years. After recently improving its relations with the USA, the doors to the American economy and tourism have just started to open. If one wishes to get an impression of Cuba's cultural identity and communist structures, now is the time to visit.



My course at Universidad de La Habana

Photo: The University of Havana. The above photograph shows the matriculation ceremony, commencing the new academic year in Cuba in September. The new students climb up the stairs of the University, where they take their photograph with the Alma Mater statue at the top, and disperse into their respective departments on Campus. The campus of the University of Havana is a beautiful harmony of impressive colonial buildings, tall trees and tropical plants - as well as a tank once commanded by Ché Guevara during the revolution.

After searching thoroughly, I found that the University of Havana provided the best combination of language courses, cultural insight, and interaction with native speakers. I chose an intensive Spanish course running for three weeks, with a total of 60 lecture hours. During a previous language course in Barcelona, I found this time frame and intensity to suit my learning patterns best. Anything less than two weeks is definitely too short, as it takes time to settle in. On the other hand, commitments back home can make it difficult to stay for longer.

The University of Havana offers five levels of Spanish courses, suiting everyone from beginners to fluent speakers. On the first day, students take a brief exam, followed by a short face-to-face conversation with a language teacher. Personally, I found this system to be appropriate. I was placed into the advanced group, matching my previously obtained level at the Cambridge University Language Center. Other students, however, felt they were misplaced into an either too easy or too difficult level. In these cases the University advised and allowed students to change levels within the first days.

To my pleasant surprise, there were two advanced groups scheduled, and each group had only seven students in it. This enabled more interaction with the teacher, as each student was actively participating in class. Although there were four lectures (each 45 minutes long) per day, it was not too intense, as there were sufficient breaks.

Unfortunately, after the first week the two classes were combined. The change was undeniably noticeable, as one was not able to engage in the same way in the lectures. It was still a pleasant experience nonetheless.

The language school facilities at the University of Havana are very different from facilities at European Universities. Although the equipment was simple, it was sufficient. Only few lecture rooms had functioning air conditioning to battle the average 30°C of heat and pressing humidity outside. Most lecture rooms were limited to ventilators and open windows. This brought moderate ease from the heat, but also regularly blew papers away from the desks, or encouraged/forced short silent breaks whenever the street traffic became too noisy. I personally appreciated the special charm this had, but I understand that other students were not pleased with this.

The teachers generally prioritised conversation. Some students reported that for them it was challenging to understand certain teachers, as the Cuban accent is very distinct. However, most teachers limited their accent and spoke clearly. For grammar and written exercises, we were using the black board, books, or photocopies. Many teachers also employed digital media, audio and film using laptops and projectors.

Classes were interactive, which helped to keep students (and teachers) motivated. The classes also put an emphasise on understanding and learning about Cuban culture. Every second week each class went on a field-trip, to explore museums or parts of the city with their teachers. We also completed exercises around campus or in the street, exploring Cuban dialect and opinions on current topics. I found these to be very fruitful.

The afternoons after class were free and no program was organised or suggested by the University. We usually went to explore Havana and its surroundings in small self-organised groups, visiting museums and public places. Whenever possible, we tried to continue speaking Spanish among each other in our free time, although this was not suggested by the teachers. This was all in contrast to what I was used to from private language schools I visited in the past. These had also organised an afternoon program and encouraged students to speak only in Spanish in their free time.

All in all, the lectures helped me to strengthen my listening and speaking skills. It is now considerably easier for me to understand fast Spanish speakers, even with dialect. I also overcame inhibitions and over-thinking whilst speaking. Moreover, I strengthened my grammar skills through the exercises in class and the homework. I can highly recommend this course. Although, one should keep in mind that the facility standards and daily life in Cuba are different from those in Europe.



Living with Cubans: *casas particulares*

Photo: Paseo de Marti in Old Town Havana, after a tropical shower.

Casas particulares are by far the best accommodation choice for anyone who wants to explore Cuban culture at home. Initiated by the government in 1997, Cubans can nowadays host paying guests in their private homes. This encourages direct interaction, for example at the breakfast or dinner table; or while relaxing in a sillón (rocking chair) on the veranda, with a glass of Havana Club in one hand and a cigar in the other. For a language learner, this is remarkably advantageous, as one can directly employ new-learned skills, as well as enhance speaking and listening. In return, of course, one has to respect their hosts' quiet (and louder) hours, security, cleanliness, and private space.

My casa particular in Havana was recommended by the language course organisers. With £35 per night, it was among the most pricey ones, but considering it was my first visit to Cuba, I followed their recommendation. I was staying with Yanet and her mother Carmen, in their charming, spacious colonial house in Vedado. This well kept district of Havana houses not only the university, but also plenty of cinemas and embassies, the Copellia ice cream parlour, and the famous Hotel Habana Libre (former command point of Fidel Castro throughout the revolution) The university was within walking distance, circa 10-15 minutes from the casa.

My typical day in Yanet's house started with a hearty breakfast. Fresh fruit juices (with an unhealthy amount of additional sugar in it), toasts, eggs and fruits are the tasty standard assortment in casas particulares anywhere in Cuba. Yanet herself is a curator at the Museo de Bellas Artes, which lead to many interesting discussions about the art world, in Cuba as well as internationally. She and her family also were so nice to advise me in my travels, show me museums, and explain me some aspects of Spanish grammar.



Experiencing Cuba

Photo: Valle de Viñales, Cubas number one tobacco region.

My impressions

To my surprise, the former Spanish occupancy seems does not seem to be a reason for hard feelings anymore. Most Cubans I have met referred to Spain as patria, their homeland. On the contrary, the common mood towards the U.S. is just as one would expect it after decades of cold war. While the main social sector is following the communist system, the tourist branch became significantly privatised in the last years. Cubans are nowadays allowed to rent out rooms in their houses (see casas particulares), or to run private restaurants. This has led to a culinary revolution on the island. Restaurants started competing for tourist visitors, trying to offer an increasing variety of Cuban-styled dishes. The majority, however, still serve the classic combination: rice, beans, and meat.

The social life of many Cubans in Havana revolves around the famous Coppelia ice cream parlour. Coppelia was planned by the government as a central place for Cubans to socialise whilst enjoying strongly subsidised ice cream, and the idea soon became very successful. It is also the centrepiece of the first Cuban film ever to be nominated for the Academy Awards: *Fresa y Chocolate* (1994). Likewise, state-subsidised cinemas are hubs for Cubans, and especially for young people.

Havana's Malecón is often said to be the magical center of Cuban life. However, I must say, it did not live up to my expectation: during the day frequented by cars and brave fishermen, who face the dense traffic smog from the adjacent highway; at night frequented by Cuban youngsters and tourists, often approached by street musicians looking to earn money.

Cuba is known to be a country of live-music and salsa. I do not believe this to be entirely true. One can hear music all day and everywhere, but it is mostly not live. It is more likely to encounter the current Reggeaton hits from passing-by cars, or through open windows. Live-music is prominent in tourist restaurants or specific (and expensive) venues. In these cases, of course, salsa dancing goes hand-in-hand with the music. In any case, one should not miss a salsa course in Cuba. Therefore, I teamed up with fellow students to take lessons, and tried to practice at salsa night events.

My travels

I spend my weekends travelling with fellow students. We explored some of Cuba's most impressive places (besides its capital Havana): the eco-city Las Terrazas with its remarkable tropical forests and hidden waterfalls; the home of Cuban tobacco in El Valle de Viñales; the colonial old town of Trinidad; the so-called 'Pearl of the South', Cienfuegos; the historical city of Santa Clara, where Ché Guevara achieved the final victory for the revolutionists.

Challenges and Rewards

It can be difficult to understand the Cuban accent, full stop. It took me at least two weeks until I was able to decipher it. In the end, however, I was generally able to communicate with locals about daily life topics, and to share my own experiences fluently in Spanish. My greatest achievement was definitely to be mistaken for a Spanish tourist on three different occasions. All this was very enriching for my personal life and future career. I am looking forward to employing my language skills in upcoming visits to telescope sites.

Admittedly, daily life in Cuba can be quite challenging. The tropical heat and unforgiving sun, accompanied with surprising tropical rain (as I visited during rain season in September), can be exhaustive. Internet access is under development for the last two years. An increasing number of parks and hotels is equipped with Wifi. For £3 one can purchase an internet card, that allows access for one hour. If travelling to Cuba, be prepared to spend a long time in queues, to face unenthusiastic service, and to let go of consumerist ideas.

A photograph of a sunset over Havana, Cuba. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a bright orange glow across the sky. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of palm trees and other tropical vegetation. In the background, the city skyline of Havana is visible, including several tall buildings. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

Un arroz con mango

Photo: Sunset view onto Havana from the Fortaleza La Cabaña.

'Cuba makes you laugh one minute and cry the very next.'

- Unknown

I could not imagine a better way to describe Cuba. I came across variations of this quote in blogs and travel guides before my journey, and heard it from many travellers within Cuba. In the end, I must admit, it is the best summary of all my impressions of this fascinating puzzle called Cuba.

From the colonial age onwards, Cuba was already set to become the arroz con mango (rice with mango) that it is nowadays. This common expression among Cubans describes something that does not really mix or fit together. The fact that, somehow, one still finds recipes for it, builds a beautiful metaphor: an arroz con mango can taste delicious, albeit the ingredients seem to be as contradicting as it can get. Just like Cuba.

If you are reading this report as a prospective language student, just keep in mind that you should be open-minded and ready to face challenges, and you will have a most enriching journey. I hope I could convey my enthusiasm, and give a hint of all the wonderful and interesting experiences I had.

My time in Cuba was more than just language study. Gaining such an intense insight into Cuban life, into its positivity and joyfulness, as well as its struggles, was more than I could have hoped for. This is what made my journey so complete and beautiful. Cuba was not a country I visited; it was a place I lived in.

I warmly thank the A.J. Pressland Fund for granting me this unique and enriching opportunity. It has without doubt left a deep impression on me.