



## My Family Fled Communist Cuba. Last Week I Took a Cruise There.

With memories of torture and misery imprinted on their minds, my grandparents can't understand why I'd ever want to visit Castro country. But when the first U.S. cruise to Cuba in fifty years set sail, I just had to be on board.

I am about to step foot on the *Fathom Adonia*, the first passenger ship to leave the United States for Cuba in over fifty years. The bustling Americans lined up in front of me are ready to get their cruise cards and board this historic journey, sunblock and sunhats in tow. There's excitement in the air; media everywhere, taking pictures, asking questions: How does it feel to finally be going to Cuba?

For me it feels like a hurricane is making its way through my gut. The ghosts of my family's stories are bumping up against my skin, from the inside out. I've been like this for weeks, from the minute I reserved my ticket.



The cruise ship, Fathom Adonia. (All photos by Vanessa Garcia)

I'm an ABC, you see, an American-Born Cuban, and going to Cuba, for me, is a very different ordeal than it is for other American tourists.

From the time I was born, I have been told about a monster that lived a little over two hundred miles from Miami, a green gargoyle that ate adults and used children as propaganda, tying red bows around their necks and giving them names like Elian, The Great.

Ever since I can remember, I've heard about my family's escape from this monster, Fidel, in the early '60s. My maternal grandmother, Maman, left on a Spanish ship called *El Marques de Comillas*; it was in such bad shape it burnt to a crisp after it delivered her, my aunt, and

mother to Bilbao.

My grandfather, Papan, meanwhile, had to survive on the rooftop of the Venezuelan embassy in Cuba for two days before breaking through a window of that embassy, and into freedom. Both he and his brother worked for the bakers' union in Havana and they were being chased by Castro's police. Papan's brother, Pedro, didn't want to leave the island and was ultimately imprisoned. From Spain, and then later Miami, Papan fought to get his brother out. When Papan finally managed to get the Spanish government to help him free his brother, family lore has it that Pedro didn't speak a single word to anyone for a year. He'd been tortured in prison and had to spend time in a mental institution after his release, sorting out his internal demons.

My stepfather's father was a political prisoner for fifteen years. Day in and day out, the prison guards told him he would die. As a form of torture, they'd place sacks over his head and tell him to prepare for his death, only to let him live. Today, at nearly ninety, he's living in Miami and considers himself one of the "forgotten ones," someone whose story very few people know. My father's family also had to flee, but theirs is a story I don't know as well – my father is no longer alive and the paternal line is estranged, so I've lost that thread of the narrative.

Cuba was always a place to be feared. For a very long time, it was a place my family refused to go to, and begged me not to enter. "How could you go back there?" Maman would say, "A place that was so hard to leave." In my house, like in the house of so many Cuban-Americans, there was what I like to call a Familial Embargo (<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/feb/03/opinion/la-oe-garcia-cuba-20130203>) on the island. To enter this land without respect, ready to sit on Varadero Beach and order a mojito without understanding its history, was to know nothing of its past, its present, and the stone interior beneath its green fatigues.

And yet, I wanted so badly to go to Cuba. I needed to go. I managed to ease the familial embargo and take my mother with me in 2014 – it took me fifteen years to convince her, but it finally happened. By that point, President Obama had made it easier for ABCs like myself to travel to the island to visit family. My mother finally believed me when I told her: "things are changing."

Now, I want to continue to learn about the island for myself. I want Cuba to be my reality, not just the stories passed on from generations, not just the past. I want to be part of the change.

On December 17, 2014, Obama stood before the world and said: "Today, the United States is changing its relationship with the people of Cuba." His administration reopened the U.S. embassy that had been closed since 1961. Among other changes, Carnival, which planned



educational on-shore activities with its passengers, was permitted to send a U.S. cruise ship here for the first time in decades.

So here I am, along with seven hundred other passengers, heading to the top deck and about to receive my glass of complimentary embarkation Champagne. It's in some ways a typical cruiser – gold trimmings on the walls, wooden bars, an abundant buffet. There is no casino, no lavish theatre, but compared to life in the country for which we are setting sail, all of this is big-time luxury.

“I feel sort of guilty,” a passenger from Key West tells me, pointing to his Champagne. He and his wife have seen rafters washing up on the shore of the Florida Keys, people who had thrown themselves to the open sea in Cuba, longing for a better life ninety miles to the north.



Passengers aboard the ship as they depart Miami.

I have also seen these rafters, *balseros*, reach the shore in Miami; they made an imprint on my young psyche. Cuba was a place you fled, not a place you willingly went to.

From the ship, we can see another reminder of this mantra – a boat filled with protestors waving Cuban and American flags. This vessel is a remnant of the older, hardline Cuban-American mindset that is slowly fading away. Initially, when the ship signed its contracts, Cuban-born Cubans were not to be allowed on board. A longstanding Cuban law held tight that Cubans were not permitted to enter the island by sea. Cuban-Americans in Miami protested. They claimed that an American corporation could not allow such unfairness. Secretary of State John Kerry agreed: “Carnival needs to not discriminate,” he said publically. Ultimately, Cuba altered its law and another bit of history changed.

A tumultuous overnight sleep and we are there. Havana is in view. Suddenly, my jitters turn to hope and a surge of emotion starts to rise within me. I can’t help it: tears. This was the place my father longed to come back to. A boy from *Sagua la Grande*, he fled with his family in the ‘60s and never got to see home again, because he died too soon – of causes due to obesity at the age of fifty. The doctors couldn’t tell if he’d died of an aneurysm or a heart attack, because he was too big to fit inside the imaging machines. It was hard to tell if he’d been eaten up by America, or if he’d tried to take her all in, whole, choking on her excesses.

I run up to the top deck and the camera crews are everywhere, still I sneak in and lean against the banner, looking down at the water as a pilot boat approaches. The sailors wave to us with glee, vigorously, smiling, and we wave back. Here I begin to lose my composure. *Mi gente*, are the words that keep ringing in my head as I see the sailors on the pilot boat extend their greetings. *My people* – so long cordoned off from the world, isolated and embargoed. I see a Cuban mother and daughter on board in front of me, tears rolling down their cheeks. From the age of the mother, I know she’s a Cuban-born Cuban. I approach them, needing to share this moment with people who understand.

“*Son Cubanas?*” I ask. The daughter nods because the mother cannot contain her emotion, cannot even nod. I know they are feeling what I am feeling. We are literally in the same boat.

“Is this your first time back?” I ask the daughter.

“In fifteen years,” she says.

A couple nearby, originally from Warsaw, empathizes: “We know what empty shelves are like,” the husband says. “We know...”

Most of the passengers have no idea about empty shelves. I got to know some of them last night; mostly, they are retirees from the States – New Jersey, Florida, New York, Massachusetts, California, Texas, Washington, Nevada, Iowa – who have done well enough to afford the price tag (from \$2,300 to \$9,000). They are largely “just curious about Cuba.” One Iowan brought his granddaughter to “witness history.” There is at least one older woman, however, who had no idea the cruise was in any way “historic,” she told me, punctuating air quotes with a grimace, as if the whole thing is just a big inconvenience to her regular vacation.

Before getting off the boat, I take a selfie and send it to my parents. *Cuban backdrop*, I write. *This is very emotional*. My heart is fluttering and swelling like the waves I’ve been riding on, and my eyes in the picture are proof. As I press send, I realize that Cuba is not just my backdrop anymore, it is about to become my foreground.



A selfie the author sent to her family upon arriving in Cuba.





Pulling into Havana, Cuba.

As soon as we make it through immigration, we are greeted with dancers, singers, and *Cuba libre* cocktails, the typical touristic welcome. I notice two things that others are not seeing. I see that one of the dancers has a broken shoe buckle, still she finds a way to grip her sole to the silver shoe. This is Cuba, I think, that broken buckle that no one sees underneath all the costuming.

The second thing I see is when one of the Cubans, singing *Guantanamera*, grabs an American. She takes the man's hands just as she reaches the lyric:

*Cultivo una rosa blanca, en julio como en enero*

*Para el amigo sincero, que me da su mano franca*



The woman, as she holds the American's hands is saying: "I cultivate a white rose, in July just as in January, for a sincere friend, who extends his honest hand." The woman's expression is passionate, true. But it falls flat on her American partner, who does not understand the subtext because he does not understand the language.

Outside, we huddle together in our groups. As per the affidavit we signed on board, we are not allowed to venture far from these groups during our time ashore. This is part of the "people to people" agreement, part of the deal of traveling to Cuba right now.

Soon, our swarm meets a swarm of Cubans waiting for us in one of the squares of Old Havana. They too want to shake hands, touch us, reach out. All I can feel is an overwhelming gratitude that this is happening, that I am literally touching the hands of my fellow Cubans, that we are no longer as barred from each other as we once were. I can see it in their eyes, in the way they grasp my hands over theirs, that this is earnest, "an honest hand." I tell them I, too, will cultivate white roses for them, for this.



Walking the streets of Havana.

“So what’s the *Guantanamera* all about?” one of the tourists in my group asks. I explain that it’s a song comprised of a poem, written by the national hero of Cuba, José Martí, who fought for liberation from Spanish colonial rule. “Oh,” she says, “so it’s not about a guy name Juan?” She’s not kidding. All this time, while I was feeling white roses, thorns and all, at the base of my chest, she was hearing “Juan-tanamera.”

Part of me wants to crawl back on the boat and go home at the sound of this, but the other part says: No, this is part of the process. Explain it to her.

I translate the lyrics, and the woman listens attentively.

The absolute sense of familiarity as I walk down the streets of Havana surprises me. I recognize this place, and not only because I’ve been here once before. No, Havana existed before I ever saw it for myself – in my bones, my collective unconscious, my DNA. I know the city’s turquoise and yellow cracked walls, peeling like they are about to give birth to the past. Her cobbled streets, patched together. The passersby who walk through her, used to her tricky turns. The women in their short shorts, their curly hair, their tight pink, outdated American t-shirts.

My fellow tour-mates are immediately taken by a couple of things. They can’t believe how many “tall buildings” Havana has. They also want to take a ride in those American cars, which the Cubans call *almendrones*, or big almonds. They’re just so cool, they say.

What I see when I look at those old Fords and Buicks, the Plymouths and Cadillacs and Studebakers and Chevys is not cool or quaint or nostalgic. It isn’t the stamp of a bygone era, a moment frozen in time on a hot island. What I see is survival. These cars are life rafts. In fact, they have been used as such by *balseros* to make it to Florida – cars made buoyant by Cuban resourcefulness, made to straddle the sea and ride all the way to Miami.

These cars make me both proud and sad. Those who are lucky enough to have access to these hunks of metallic grace use them as taxis to make money, live, work and eat. Without an influx of foreign car parts, and with a ban on the importation of new automobiles in place since 1959 (it was only recently eased), Cubans have been forced to get creative in order to keep their motors revving. They use old boat engines they pull from the ocean floor to propel their cars forward. They even use detergent and rubbing alcohol for brake fluid. They hobble and cobble to make things work, and in so doing, they make these cars among the most valuable possessions a person can own in Cuba, while, paradoxically, diminishing their value on the



U.S. vintage market. Funny how that works – how value is, indeed, relative. Who cares about the U.S. vintage market and its rules on original parts, when there are mouths to feed and places to get to?

What these cars have done is ride out history.

I share this with my fellow tour-mates. “A boat engine, really?” asks one of the passengers.

As for the big buildings, our Cuban tour guide tells them in broken English that Havana has always been a beautiful city, from colonial times, to later, in the '40s and '50s, when the gangsters owned it – Meyer Lansky and his crew. It wasn't called the Pearl of the Antilles for nothing. I find it terribly sad that so many Americans don't have a reference point. They've seen pictures of the cars and cigars, but very few people on this trip have, apparently, seen a picture of the Havana skyline, the image of Cuba as a once-cosmopolitan center.

At some point, we end up in a cigar shop, of course. As Americans can now bring back one hundred dollars worth of rum and cigars this is inevitable. Even I am buying a *Cohiba* for my stepdad, when an old Cuban man standing on the corner calls me over.

“*Tu eres Cubana*,” he says, not asking, but stating.

“Yes,” I tell him, “well, my parents are Cuban. I was born over there.”

“Give a kiss to your parents for me,” he responds.

I laugh.

“No really, do,” he says. “They saved you from this. From all of this. Really, be grateful.”

The woman selling the cigars starts to get uncomfortable, afraid there will be trouble if the man continues to voice his unhappiness. She looks over her shoulder. But I just smile and say I understand.

“You're gonna help me,” our Cuban tour guide tells me as I exit the shop – he's just realized I speak fluent Spanish and English. So when he tells the group they will be eating “napkin soup” for lunch, I correct him immediately with a wink: “pumpkin soup.” I make a joke: “*Vamos hermano*, napkin soup? We're not in the Special Period anymore.”

“The Special Period” was the time during the 1990s, after Communism fell throughout most of the world, and Cubans lost the Soviet life-support they'd been surviving on. Their shelves were suddenly empty. They found themselves eating rubber and fried grapefruit peel – anything they could get their hands on. Cubans like to say it's because of the Special Period

that there aren't many cats around Havana. How true that is, I'm not sure, but I've heard plenty of Cubans say it. People here lost an average of eleven to twenty pounds – depending on the source – during that time.

I heard these stories throughout my entire childhood, straight from the mouths of *balseros*. But for the tourists listening to me now, “the Special Period,” was new information. Many of them hadn't really understood why so many Cubans had thrown themselves to sea on “chugs.”

I find myself facilitating and expanding on the views of the Cuban tour guide. He can only say so much. He is, after all, hired by a government agency.

Despite the fact that people on the trip continuously mistake me for a guide of some sort, I have not quite eased into my role. I'm not even really sure what my role is, but I start to filter through it when we are back on the boat. We have a day at sea between Havana and the next city, Cienfuegos, on the southern underbelly of the island. I take the time to reflect, trying to unpack it all. But it's not until I'm on land again that I really begin to get what I'm supposed to do here.

An old Cuban woman has come out to the Cienfuegos city square to talk to the Americans, dressed in her best clothes: white pressed Bermuda shorts, a tucked-in blouse, gold earrings, make-up and perfume that smells like powder. She is trying to communicate with two American women in their seventies; they are trying their hardest to understand her, but getting nowhere.







The Cienfuegos market in Havana.

The Cuban woman asks me: “You’re Cuban?” I nod. “Are you from Cienfuegos? Is anyone on your ship from Cienfuegos?” She is grasping for connection. I don’t know if anyone from Cienfuegos is on the ship. She says, with watery eyes, that she has lost her life here. “My entire life disappeared, just like that.” People left, everyone left, except she didn’t because she still had sons here and how could she leave and live without her children? Her brother left a note that said he’d be back in six months, then never returned. He died of diabetes in the States in 2011. “That man [Fidel, though she does not name him] has separated families for sixty years,” she tells me. “You can’t hold out a hand with a closed fist. I don’t care, I don’t care if they come and they get me and take me to jail for saying these things, it doesn’t matter anymore...

“I have an American flag in my house,” she continues, “tell them that. I am so happy. I’ve been waiting for this all my life. I didn’t think I’d see it, and I’m seeing it today.”

When I turn around, a group of tourists has gathered, begging for a translation. I tell them everything. One of the American women responds: “There are so many stories here, aren’t there? You know, we roam around and we see all this beauty and we say the people are so great, but there’s a real sadness under all of it, isn’t there?”



The Cianguogues market in Havana.





A streetside salesman in Santiago de Cuba sporting an Obama shirt.

The next time someone asks me if I am their guide, I respond with: “What do you need?” Because Cuba is no longer in the background of my life. I am part of this transition; I am, as an ABC, an important part of this process toward aperture. I am the B between the American and the Cuban – a bridge.

After a short stop in a third city, Santiago de Cuba, we sail back home to the United States, and only then do my shoulders start to release their great tension. The night before we get home, I can’t sleep. My eagerness to see Miami is so great that the butterflies are back, but for opposite reasons. I want my feet on U.S. soil, free land. A place where I don’t have to fear that if I say the wrong thing, I’ll be taken away. This is a microscopic version of what those *balseros* must feel when they throw themselves to sea. I hope that I can, one day, travel in the opposite direction, to Cuba, without fear. But, for now, that fear is necessary – a part of traveling responsibly, with knowledge.



It's the fear that fills us, the undercurrents of sadness, the overlays of joy, the hands extended to honest friends, the laws in flux, the translations that hit home – all of this, it's how we build a path, and walk on water, alphabetize ourselves toward what it means to connect with Cuba again.



Pulling back into Miami at sunrise.