

Valuable Life lessons learned in Cuba

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You'd think after spending two months in a foreign country, one would come back with story after story, accounts of newness and astounding adventures rolling off the tongue as easily as the accent they went there to acquire.

Nothing is worse, however, than the blank slate that follows "So how was it?!" The frustration of being unable to pull one highlight out of a million, the overwhelming whirl of too many beautiful images and the tightening of the heart remembering how much it hurt to leave loved ones, all just to render the traveler stammering to describe an experience words couldn't depict.

I, Phoebe, No. 3 in the lineup of Hommel-Mangi and a 21-year-old national security and Spanish student at Anderson University, lived as a student for two months on the beautiful island of Cuba. Courses in Afro-Cuban culture and Cuban history and relations were taught in Spanish, and lessons of life were taught in the streets.

The lessons I was shown over and over again had similar themes: stop, slow down, appreciate what's around you. One problem I ran into early on was too many new things at once; my brain was overwhelmed not only from class, but

from taking in so much sensory information at once. When this happened, I'd focus on one thing in order to put my brain at ease. This coincidentally gave me a mental journal of sorts, filling my brain — eventually my memories — with paintings of the most beloved parts of my new home. It's only fair that I share a few.

Sight: A Cuban sunset on the Malecón is uniquely beautiful for two reasons. A Cuban sunset is already twice as gorgeous as any I've seen for the reflection of brilliant hues on the ocean. The Malecón, or the seawall along the coast of Havana, is what makes the view special. This seawall is the most common place to hang out, and in the evening everyone — from groups of 16-year-olds to 70-year-old best friends — are laughing, dancing and enjoying the music being played.

The Malecón is considered one of the best views in Havana for the curved line of beautiful and unique buildings that is visible for 5 miles, always accented by the bright blues, reds and greens of 1950s era cars driving along the stretch. At any hour of the day, old men are silhouetted against the sky as they fish, teens are running atop the wall, and people are falling in love. If you're feeling lonely, a sweet woman can always be found selling peanuts, a band or two will always be offering to play a song, and you can always count on striking up a conversation with a fisherman.

Taste: Walking in the house at 7 p.m. meant running straight to the table for dinner with a watering mouth. Marinated and smoked meats, homemade fries, a bowl of rice and beans, plantains cooked every way you could imagine and freshly squeezed juices graced the table. My Cuban dad, Kiki, knew how to cook. But it wasn't just the food that filled me, it was the conversations I got with every meal. I still smile at the jokes made at each other, the recaps of the day's work and the shared annoyance of the forecast for tomorrow (hot — always). The community shared over an amazing plate made food into meals and hosts into family.

Hearing: Walking down the streets of Havana, I never had to use my phone as an iPod. My ears were always filled with exciting sounds and upbeat songs. Having always loved reggaeton and salsa, being placed in an environment of those two genres being played live was paradise — and my inability to stop dancing was what gave me the label among family and friends of “Cubana.”

Another familiar sound that put a smile on my face was the greeting of a 75-year-old man every morning on my way to class. Clad in denim overalls and a bucket hat, this man would shoot up from his seat at the auto shop he worked at and wave animatedly, yelling “buenos días!” He stopped me one day, not knowing it was my last day. He stretched out my hand, placed on my wrist a bracelet he had handmade of palm fibers and some metal pieces he had forged into a clasp. I can't help but smile when I look down and see that reminder: the simplest of relationships can have the greatest impact.

As one of the countries least connected to internet in the world, it was a much needed break for this millennial. Not only did it break some old habits (the old Twitter/Instagram/Facebook surf before bed, distractedness in conversations and dependency on my phone to find out information and get around), it built a lot of positive habits I'm not sure I could have done without the forceful influence.

I found new bookshops, I chatted with friends I had just made for hours, and I started writing again.

Most importantly, I realized how simultaneously easy and important it is to appreciate those around me, to make people feel special by greeting them excitedly and to make an effort to hear people's stories.
