
Cuba across borders: Interview with tour leader Berit Engstrom

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InsightCuba caught up with Berit Engstrom, an insightCuba tour leader hailing from Minnesota that has been traveling to Cuba, on and off, since 2007. Berit discusses how her love for Cuba started while on a semester abroad in Havana, her experience in being in a cross-cultural relationship with a Cuban, as well as her thoughts on the current changes in Cuba.

InsightCuba: Who is Berit?

Berit Engstrom: I grew up in the Twin Cities, Minnesota and despite of my love for Cuba and the tropical fruits you can get year round, I also love winter! I am currently working on a Masters degree in Sociology, focused on international migration for which I hope to work with immigrants and refugees, on issues related to social services and education.

Why Cuba?

I came to Cuba for the first time in 2007, for a study abroad semester through Lewis & Clark College. I knew that I wanted to go to a Spanish speaking country and my options were Spain, Chile or Cuba. Of those three countries, Cuba was the place I knew the least about. I had never been to the Caribbean; therefore it was an easy choice. *After that first semester living in Havana, I was hooked. To this day, whenever I am in Cuba, I am pushed to see life in new ways – from the rhythm of the day-to-day, to larger questions about social structures and society.*

What do you like most about Cuba?

I love big cities for their diversity of food, people, the arts, and all that a big city provides, but even more than cities, I love camping and being near big bodies of water and wilderness — something Cuba provides in a way few other countries in the world have been able to maintain.

What propelled you to become a tour leader for insightCuba?

I found the job posting for insightCuba on Idealist.org in 2012. Ever since studying abroad in Cuba in 2007, I had been interested in going back. InsightCuba provided a perfect opportunity because it meant combining education, travel, and sharing my love for Cuba with new people.

Favorite insightCuba tours that you lead?

My favorite insightCuba tour is Jazz in Havana. The tour combines incredible music, with a nice mixture of cultural and historical sites on a five-day tour in Havana. The trip also includes a day in Matanzas, a town about 1.5 hours from the capital, so you have the chance to see a smaller city and the beautiful coastline, East of Havana.

You've received countless positive comments from the insightCuba travelers. What has been your greatest reward?

My greatest reward working with insightCuba guests is having the chance to share a country and culture I love, with people who are experiencing it for the first time. *I believe that it is through personal experiences between Americans and Cubans that we will be able to overcome the embargo.* It is through the questions and observations that guests make during their trips here in Cuba that I am always compelled to see the island in a new way.

Best and worst day as a tour leader in Cuba?

My best day as a tour leader was getting to see one of the participants, a professional musician, jam with the performers we were watching. There is something truly amazing in watching musicians play together — even though they were not able to communicate using words (since neither one knew the other's language), they spoke to one another through music. *There is nothing like music to cross borders between people and to bring understanding and joy!*

What has your experience been to be in a cross-cultural relationship with a Cuban?

Being in a cross-cultural relationship with my boyfriend Ariel, who is Cuban, has taught me a great deal. I have had the chance to get to know Cuba and Cuban culture on a more intimate level through his family, and I have come to understand more deeply Cuban day-to-day life and struggles — from getting food on the table, to accessing healthcare for elderly people. My eyes have been opened to challenges I have never faced as an American, like being denied tourist visas to travel abroad (Ariel's visa was denied to Europe twice, even though he fulfilled all the official requirements), and realizing that most Cubans haven't had the chance to travel very much even in their own country. *There are many stereotypes that both Cubans and Americans have about cross-cultural relationships, as many people assume that Cubans are only with Americans to get a visa or money.* Confronting those stereotypes has been something Ariel and I have worked through and in the end has made our relationship even stronger. Our language skills — my Spanish and his English have improved a lot to — a nice bonus!

What are your thoughts on the current changes in Cuba?

My impression, from having spent a lot of time in Cuba on and off since 2007, is that across the board, Cubans of different ages and different political perspectives are supportive of the negotiations. There is a sense of hope and excitement in the air. Even my boyfriend's father who very much supported and continues to support the Revolution, and even fought in Angola on Cuba's behalf, is supportive of the talks between the U.S. and Cuba. Still, I have talked with many Cubans who are doubtful that change will actually come, pointing out that neither Obama nor Raul will be willing to make the concessions necessary to move forward. Despite these views, the excitement comes through in everything from discussions amongst family to people on the street discussing the changes.

Advice for prospective travelers to Cuba?

Come with an open mind! Cuba will surely be in part what you imagined it to be, from the photos and stories you have heard, but it will also be a place where you are pushed to experience new perspectives if you let yourself do that.
