

Cuban Cigar, Anyone?



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon

CUBA was on my list of “must see” places for many years before I finally had the chance to set foot on its soil on March 26 last year. Those who have been holding a Malaysian passport for the past 40 years or so may recall that Cuba was once one of the few countries Malaysians were not allowed to visit. Today, only Israel remains out of bounds to ordinary Malaysians.

There is a piece of good news though: Malaysians can visit Cuba and remain in that country for up to 90 days without a visa. In addition, accommodation in Cuba is not expensive. For example, a decent double room with en-suite facilities in a private house (known as “casa particular” locally) will only set you back by about 30CUC (approximately RM100).

The tourism industry in Cuba is not very well developed, principally as a result of the economic sanction imposed by the United States since the revolutionary Fidel Castro came to power in 1959 after overthrowing the US-backed despotic leader Fulgencio Batista. The US government officially forbids its citizens from visiting Cuba, and there are not many tourists from other countries either. Most independent travellers (commonly known as backpackers) stay at “casa particular”.

Cuba has two currencies in circulation concurrently. One is the Cuban convertible peso, denoted as CUC, which is used for tourism and on luxury items. The other, the Cuban peso and denoted as CUP, is what Cuban citizens are paid in and is used for staples and non-luxury items. Tourists can buy CUC in Cuba with US dollars, but all money changers will charge a commission of 10% on all US dollar-based exchanges.

This is a government requirement, presumably as a retaliatory measure targeted at the US government. So if you are contemplating a visit to Cuba soon, DO NOT bring US dollars there. Bring euros or sterling pounds instead as you will get more CUC with these currencies. And there is no need to hop from one money changers to another just to compare the exchange rate. You will find that they are all the same as the rate is probably fixed by the government.

Cuba is one of the major sugar producers of the world. But it is even better known for its cigars. During our 16-day stay in Cuba, my wife and I made it a point to visit a famous cigar factory in Havana, Cuba’s capital city.

Behind the magnificent Capitolio Nacional building, Cuba’s parliament house before the Revolution which resembles the Capitol in Washington D.C., stands the

Fabrica de Tabacos Partagas, founded in 1845. When we got there at 9.30 a.m. on our third day in Havana, we found that it costs 10CUC each to join the conducted tour of the cigar factory and that tickets for the ½-hourly tours were only sold at Hotel Saratogas, located diagonally opposite Capitolio Nacional.



This factory is state-owned and employs 640 workers producing 21 brands of cigar. The daily production is 25,000 cigars. The workers work eight hours from 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. with a one-hour lunch break, five days a week. In the morning, a man reads the news for the workers over the P.A. system. In the afternoon, he reads stories from books.

Every worker has to achieve a minimum production output. He or she is rewarded with more pay for exceeding the threshold, and is penalised with a pay cut for falling short of the threshold.

The factory runs a school to train cigar makers. The course lasts for nine months and the failure rate is as high as 50%. The cigars made by the trainees are only sold at the local market.

The body of each cigar is made up of three tobacco leaves from three different plants. The leaf used for wrapping comes from yet another plant. The production is entirely manual and only natural materials are used. The cigars are subject to very strict quality control.

I am not a cigar smoker. In fact, I do not smoke at all. Although I enjoyed the visit very much, it was unfortunate that photography was not allowed within the factory. ■