

Wednesday July 1st

Wednesday morning was our last morning of classes in Matanzas. Some of us may have unfortunately slept in and had to eat breakfast while we ran to class. After a last Afro Cuban and drumming class we said our goodbyes to our teachers and musicians and headed back to our casas. We packed up all of our things, had lunch and said goodbye to our hosts. Then our luggage was picked up and we walked to Roberto's to meet up with the rest of the group. After last goodbyes at Roberto's we hopped on a bus and drove 2 hours to Havana.

When we arrived in Havana at Hotel Nacional, we got checked in and sorted out the rooms. We hit the pool at once and soaked up some Havana sun. We decided to go to the Tropicana show that evening, so we had a quick dinner by the pool before we all dressed up to go out.

When we arrived at Tropicana, we were each handed red carnations, and then seated at long tables. We were provided with buckets of ice (thank goodness, because we were so thirsty and hot!!), rum, coke and some "appetizers". The dancers' costumes were incredible and quite risqué. Tropicana is where many of the Las Vegas shows originated from, so you can imagine sparkles, feathers, bright colors, headpieces and a lot of leg. There were some amazing numbers, including a really cool drumming piece, and some entertaining balancing acts. We may have been slightly critical of the ballet dancers; however, we absolutely loved the entire show! Some of the girls were asked to come up on stage for a part of the finale. The show was definitely an experience to remember!

Thursday July 2nd

Thursday morning we got up early and went down to Old Havana for our dance classes.

We were sweating by the time we arrived at the dance studio, and we hadn't even started dancing yet! The studio was a beautiful open studio, with mosaics on the floor and brightly painted walls. There was a beautiful old chair on the one side of the studio and the musicians sat on the other side. We worked with great teachers; they could speak English better than the dancers in Matanzas, so it was a lot easier to understand. We worked on some Afro-Cuban dance and some Rhumba with Lourdes and Ivan #1, and then Ivan #2 taught us some Salsa!!

We then walked across Old Havana to a prestigious art studio, and then walked all the way back across Old Havana for lunch. We all ordered the kid's menu and got fried chicken, with a fruit cup. We were serenaded by some local musicians. We then walked back across Old Havana to catch cabs to take us back to our hotel. (There was A LOT of walking this day, and we won't pretend that there wasn't tons of complaining to go along with it!)

We spent a couple hours at the pool/getting ready and then half of us went out for a fancy dinner at the Royal Floridita, while the other half hung out on the Malecon.

Friday July 3rd

We had an early morning again today, with our last dance classes in Havana. We tried some pretty confusing group dances in Salsa, complete with some "patty cake" which had many of us laughing.

After our last class of the trip we walked across Old Havana (again!) and caught cabs. That was quite an adventure, ending with a lost cell phone. Luckily Ivan found the cab driver and found the missing cell phone. We needed a quick bite to eat before we went to the dance

museum so we went to Hotel Presidente for pizza lunch. I think everyone will agree it was the best pizza in Cuba! (I tried tuna pizza, and absolutely loved it!).

Then we went to the dance museum, which was great inside. They had histories of great Cuban dancers, and also stories of dancers from across the world that came to dance with Cuban companies. It really showcased the history of ballet and modern around the world. There were real costumes and shoes in display cases and sketches of other costumes.

We also went to the market this afternoon and spent over an hour shopping. It was ridiculously crowded and many of us ended up being very cranky. The market was squished into a small plaza and had tons of little carts set up. It got extremely hot, even though they had covered the area with cloths to shade it. There were tons of trinkets at the market, including many wooden dancers, musical instruments, fans, clothing and jewelry.

We then quickly went back to the hotel to change before going to a local Rhumba show. A couple of our Cuban friends were in the Rhumba show and it was great to see them in action! There was a lot of audience participation and some of us got up on stage to do a little bit of Rhumba that we had learnt. The real Rhumba dancers were tons better than us!

Then we quickly went back to the hotel to change before going to Paladar Los Cactus for dinner. This was actually a restaurant in a lady's house, and she ran the whole operation.

Then we headed to 1830, a local outdoor club to test out or new dance moves! The evening was great; we spent it on an outdoor dance floor with tons of people. Beside the dance floor there were a couple tables and then it opened up into a huge rock garden maze. There were tons of paths and the whole area opened up onto the water. There were towers to climb up with all sorts of places to sit, and many great places to take group photos! We explored the entire area and it was a nice place to cool down after being on the dance floor!

Getting home was an adventure, leaving some of us stranded at the club for a bit while the others got stopped by the police for having too many people in a car. I'm not sure what the laws are in Cuba, but apparently 7 is too many for a little beetle car!! We all got home safe and sound though and slept well that night in the air conditioned rooms.

Saturday July 4th

Saturday was a late morning, and by the time we got up and had lunch we were all ready to go to the beach for the afternoon. We drove to a beach in Santa Maria del Mar, a 30 minute drive from Havana. Some of us rented a paddle boat and we went out on the water for an hour. This beach was not a tourist beach so we were a sight to see amongst all the Cubans. We definitely attracted a lot of attention walking down the beach.

That evening we all split up, hanging out in and around the hotel. Some of us went and spent an evening down on the Malecon, which is similar to a boardwalk. It was a giant wall that went along the ocean and provided a perfect place to sit and have a good time.

Sunday July 5th

Sunday morning was spent packing, last minute souvenir shopping, and spending the last few hours that we could soaking up the Cuban sun at the pool. Then we had a long drive ahead of us back past Matanzas to the airport in Varadero.

When we arrived in Varadero a storm was rolling in so we got into the terminal quickly. We did some last minute shopping at the terminal and then we were told that because of the huge storm, our flight would be delayed. We started to grab lunch/dinner when all of a sudden they decided that they were actually going to board us early and try and leave before the storm hit. We quickly got on the plane and watched as the thunderstorm got closer. Unfortunately, we couldn't leave though, so we sat on the plane for an hour and watched the storm. It was a sad last look at Cuba; however, it was a nice way to leave. It is much harder to leave in the sunshine than it is in the rain!!

Overall, we had a great experience in Cuba, thanks to all our friends in Cuba, and to Hannah Stilwell for the opportunity!