

## Report on Winter Brigade 2007 – 2008

By Nick Ellis

**I had always wished to visit Cuba – but not in a hotel and beaches type way. I then heard about the brigades run by the Cuban Solidarity Campaign and thought this could be what I had been looking to do. I applied, arranged the necessary time off work at relatively short notice, (so my thanks to management!), and after a brief get together with the other eight members of our contingent, Gladys, the ICAP Manager at the camp, and Dean, the brigade organiser, set about readying myself for my time in Cuba.**

On the 15th December 2007, I flew to Cuba to participate in the 48th Nordic Brigade, which consisted of contingents from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Russia, Finland, Ireland and the UK.

We arrive at Jose Marti and are met by Lenia and Raul, (who becomes the person delegated to look after our contingent, poor man), their humour is immediately evident, but Raul is quick to remind us that we are now in a third world country, and to expect differences. We arrive at camp at midnight and after a welcome drink and snack are shown to our dorms.

**Saturday 16th December:** The camp officially begins tomorrow, so today we spend getting to know each other a little better, and meeting some of the other groups that have arrived. (Lazy but true – everything is being done in English as it is the common second language throughout the camp). When we learn that there are 65 Swedish on site, our group seems very small.

**Monday 17th:** We are welcomed to the camp by a delegation which included Ramon Castro, whom we join on a procession to lay a wreath at a memorial to Julio A Mella, to whom the camp is dedicated.

In the afternoon we travel to Havana, which is about 30 minutes from the camp, and visit the Museum of the Revolution after which we have a mojito, and chat to some extremely friendly locals.

**Tuesday 18th:** Our first day at work. The Brits and Irish are separated from the rest of the Brigade and put into Ernesto's Machete Brigade hacking away anything Ernesto tells us to. Although the working day lasted only 3 hours, this one was hard, but we wore our blisters like badges of honour when we returned to camp.

**Wednesday 19th:** Another day at work, We are singled out for praise for our efforts the previous day, at the pre-work meeting, we far exceeded our target and are in the camp good books. Today I went bean picking, and got to chat to Lenia and Monica, two of our translators and discover that they are English teachers who are looking to move into translation work, and that their work at the camp is assessed and their abilities evaluated. What makes the work of the translators particularly impressive is that 'everything' is live, nothing is read from pre-prepared texts.

Salsa lessons during the evening – fortunately I am not the only one whose body looked

as though it was being pulled by strings. Help is at hand in the form of the translators who make it their mission to try and teach me.

**Thursday 20th:** Today we begin by watching 'The Trial', a documentary about the Cuban Five, and the incredible injustice brought upon them by holding their trial in Miami, thus denying them any opportunity of an impartial hearing. Later we meet relatives of the Five, who explain how they are denied visas to visit them by the U.S. Authorities

We also learn that despite having their sentences revoked by the court of appeals in 2005, they are still imprisoned, awaiting a new trial.

Nothing I saw in Cuba galvanises the population as much as the injustice perpetrated on these five men. It would seem the travesty that is the embargo is a shared experience and something everyone has no alternative but to endure – but when individuals are victimised, (and it has to be said for trying to prevent terrorism in a non-violent manner), the country is united.

**Friday 21st:** Today I went to a rehabilitation centre for people who have lost their eyesight as adults, and am amazed. I am shown how they are taught to live independently, not only learning skills like cooking and cleaning, but these incredible teachers were teaching their students Braille, Pottery, Weaving, Basic Carpentry, Plumbing and Household Electrics. It is all about giving the students the confidence to return to society with dignity. I also heard from a prosthetic maker about how the embargo affects the Health System in Cuba, by denying them materials, and increasing the cost of the materials they can source.

**Saturday 22nd:** We start the day watching a musical performed by a Children's Theatre Group 'La Colmentia'. I was not expecting this to be my cup of tea, but it was very good, some great songs and dancing, which obviously ended with the kids grabbing everyone up from the audience to join in.

We spend the evening at the teatro nationale watching the Cuban National Ballet, who are fantastic, but perhaps the only Cubans I don't see salsa.

**Sunday 23rd:** We go on an excursion to Cayo Levisa, which was a Private Beach Island, and although this wasn't really my kind of thing I'm glad I went as I glimpsed the Cuba a tourist sees: good hotels, beautiful beaches, but no Cubans, and for me the real beauty of Cuba is its people.

**Monday 24th:** Back to work, and today we prune the orange groves. This is simply removing the dead wood and I get to spend my time working alongside Arlene and Lenia who insist on teaching me some Spanish.

I then joined a trip to an art project in a suburb of Havana and saw how, through involving the whole neighbourhood, it had come alive with art. We also watched as Walter mounted the 1st Brigade tile on a new display.

Back in Havana for some freetime, I joined some Swedes from the Brigade on a quest to find the 'bar with the brewery', which was a bar containing it's own copper brewery. Emilia insists on trying the dark beer which comes in a six pint chilled dispenser and I get to pour (at last something I'm good at – thank you Workers Beer Company!). We then have a meal and get to be amused by the two hours of complex mathematical calculations they go through splitting the bill. A classic culture clash. We then go back to the camp, buy some rum and see in Christmas with the Irish and Cubans at the camp.

**Tuesday 25th:** Christmas Day is not celebrated nationally in Cuba, but driving about we have seen many houses with lights up. Rice and beans as a Christmas dinner was unusual, but I was not about to let an excuse for celebrating and kissing slip by 'Feliz Navidad!'

Tonight we go to Friendship House in Havana and enjoy a great meal, great rum and the, by now, obligatory dancing.

**Wednesday 26th:** Due to some illness, I get to join the construction detail, and become the wheelbarrow king. Later I go to a talk about the Cuban Confederation of Trades Unions and hear how they get to influence government policy. In the evening a group of us travel to Club Tropicana to watch the 'Show Under the Stars' – unfortunately didn't have time to do the Cuban Conga as the coach was leaving "Right Now!".

**Thursday 27th:** Final day at work and it's back to the orange groves to de-vine the trees, on our return from work we are treated to a display of dancing from our salsa professors troupe, as I would have expected, they are brilliant. But tonight is the night we as a group have been fearing: the 'Nordic Cultural Evening' for which we have a ten minute slot. However, fortunately, the Swedes are struggling to fit all of their acts into their slot, and as a gesture of international solidarity we invite their choir to 'accompany' us in singing the Red Flag – we also rope in Marina (the entire Russian Contingent). I wish I could remember more about this but fear the rum required to get me on stage stole my memories – I don't even remember looking at the audience, but we got to do the full slot, and I spent the rest of the evening clapping everyone as loudly as I could.

**Friday 28th:** Today we, (in fact Kirsty), make our group banner. Afterwards we attend a talk by Cuban doctors discussing the International Humanitarian missions they carry out. Also find out more about Operation Miracle which is an amazing undertaking. The meeting puts into perspective that it is not just the First World countries that help in times of disaster and many nations should measure their aid to that of Cuba.

**Saturday 29th:** Free time in Havana, unfortunately Kirsty and Marina find the market, and I watch my hopes of visiting the rum museum disappear over the afternoon. We do meet up with Fredrika and Sylvia at the Hemingway bar and have the obligatory daiquiri. In the evening we travel to Lenin Park where, after an inspiring talk, a bonfire is lit and we are all invited to throw in a burning torch and make a wish. After this it transpired that every embassy in Cuba had laid on a stall serving foods native to its country, followed of course by lots more dancing.

**Sunday 30th:** Travel to Holguin. This journey took all day and most of the evening but we stop off on route at the Che Guevara memorial in Santa Clara. It is a very impressive site and we also walk through the mausoleum that houses the remains of the Bolivian revolutionaries including Che. At the hotel I got to the room and had a warm shower – luxury – and then we join our Cuban friends at the nightclub next door.

**Monday 31st:** New Years' Eve. We begin by taking a tour of Holguin, visiting Revolution Square, loma de la Cruz, Marqueta Square, Periquera Museum and Calixto Garcia's House. I can see the preparations taking place for the evenings festivities. Holguin is where the Cuban Cervasa's Buccanero and Cristal are brewed and there are tankers in the park dispensing into any container the locals take forward. There is also a big stage being primed. New Year is the big celebration in Cuba and it is also the date by which the years of the Revolution are counted – the excitement is palpable.

I end up seeing in the New Year at the hotel with all the Cubans from ICAP who have

come down from the camp with us. I am becoming shocked at how little rum it takes to get me on the dance floor now! Feliz anno neuabo – the Revolution is now 49 years old.

**Tuesday 1st:** Swap New Years' stories with the rest of the group over breakfast and then we travel to Barlay which is the site where Christopher Columbus landed in 1492, thereby 'discovering' the Americas. This area is a very beautiful park which I am fairly certain was opened just for us as today and tomorrow are national holidays in Cuba. We then have a great lunch and trek off to Guardalavaca beach.

**Wednesday 2nd:** I had a bit of a mix up today as I missed the trip to Biran which is where Fidel Castro was born and grew up. Everybody who did go said it was an amazing trip. I do, however, manage to visit a Special Needs school, and am very impressed by the staff and the way they carry out their work. It was also great to see the children stealing the limelight whenever they could.

In the evening we travel to a CDR, (this is a Committee for the Defence of the Revolution), which acts as a type of neighbourhood watch, recycling unit, localised mediators and social care unit. Each CDR looks after its immediate area and as there are so many, we break down into small groups. Izzy and I join the Irish and listen to the youngsters explain the story of the Cuban 5. We then speak to the whole group, and enjoy some local rum. I know what's coming next and sure enough on comes the music and I get to make some more Cubans laugh with my dancing. Soon enough they've got us all in the streets outside doing the Cuban Conga! A truly fantastic evening.

**Thursday 3rd:** We travel back to the camp leaving a lot of the group behind including our 'Jefe' Linda, and Alison from our group – the sadness of saying goodbye starts here. Back at the Camp the ANZAC Brigade has arrived and I'm excited as I am three weeks in front on the Salsa stakes.

**Friday 4th:** Our last day begins with the much hyped football match between the provincial team of Caimito and the Nordic Brigade, apparently we lost this fixture 14-1 last time around. We took an early 2 goal lead but could not hold out as wave after wave of their players poured forward. (I think Diego Maradona must have spent time here when he came to Cuba). We lose by a respectable 5-2.

I also learn that we will not be going into Havana with the rest of the Brigade as we have to leave for the airport shortly after they go. It is a very sad time as first we say goodbye to the friends we have made throughout the Brigade and then our Cuban Comrades. I have spent so much time with these people working, dancing, but mostly laughing, that I cannot picture them not being around me. Then the Irish go (thanks for bringing the craic lads!) and finally we say goodbye to the Brits, who got to stay on for longer, and our friends who wanted to make sure we went.

There is so much I have found out about myself, my nationality, and those of others, about Cuba, its people, about life and aspiration, whilst at the same time truly having the time of my life. I hope that by reading this some more of you might wish to find out more about the brigade and to any that go – I shall very much hope to be celebrating the 50th year of the Revolution with you.

*This report also appeared in 'Getting Organised' - the newsletter for the South of England GPM Sector of Unite the Union.*