

Report on Winter Brigade 2000 – 2001

By Toby Steele

There were thirty five people from Britain who took part in the Nordic Brigade to Cuba, spending three weeks over Christmas working alongside brigadistas from Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, France, Spain, Switzerland and, of course, Cuba, picking oranges on a local co-operative farm and learning about Cuba, its culture and its society. The brigadistas were a very diverse group of individuals of all age groups – the youngest being about 10 and the oldest 79! Although they came from many different walks of life nearly all of them came on the brigade to contribute their labour to help Cuba in its economic struggle, and to find out what Cuba was really like behind the confusing image portrayed by the western media. Whether it was because of shared ideologies or simply the Cuban people and their culture infecting everyone with its warmth, most people got on well with each other, and the atmosphere in the camp was one of friendship and solidarity.

The basic structure of our days was to get up to the sound of a cock crowing over the Tannoy at 5:45 am, swiftly followed by the song 'Guantanamera' and then other Cuban classics. After breakfast everyone walked the mile or so out to the fields where we spent the next few hours picking oranges and tangerines. Any reservations people had about such an early start were more than compensated for by the opportunity to watch the sun rise over the countryside, and as much freshly squeezed orange juice (squeezed straight from just-picked oranges) as you could drink.

After lunch a series of visits and conferences were held for us, covering many aspects of Cuban life. These included conferences on the economic situation in Cuba, Cuban culture and foreign policy. We also had the opportunity to meet with representatives of the Association of Veterans of the Cuban Revolution, deputies and delegates of the People's Power who explained the Cuban democratic process, representatives from the Young Communist League, The Federation of University Students, The Confederation of Trade Unions, the Federation of Cuban Women and Cuban internationalist workers.

After dinner we sometimes had another conference, but more often than not our Cuban hosts laid on some form of visit or cultural activity. The cultural activities mainly revolved around the ubiquitous music and dancing that pervades Cuban life. The camp had an open air stage and dance floor and we were given a number of wonderful demonstrations of live Cuban music and dancing, followed by the opportunity to take part ourselves. The visits on which we were taken ranged from sightseeing trips to Havana, Varadero and Viñales (a beautiful and unique geographical region formed when underground lakes and rivers collapsed to form breathtaking barrel-shaped mountains), to educational visits to schools and hospitals. It was very moving and thought provoking to see how a relatively poor county is able to provide first rate education and healthcare, in many ways far better than our own. People were almost disbelieving when told by doctor during a hospital tour that waiting times in casualty and at doctor's surgeries were normally five to ten minutes. However, one Spanish-speaking member of the brigade dropped behind and quietly asked one of the hospital patients, who confirmed this was totally accurate. One of the highlights of these visits was an evening spent celebrating the 40th anniversary of ICAP, the Cuban organisation that ran the brigade. As well as all taking part in the lighting of a 'bonfire of friendship between peoples', many embassies from around the world participated by providing food that was typical of their country. The food was fantastic, but it was sad to note that there were no embassies from Europe or the rest of the Americas taking part. After dinner we were treated to some excellent live Cuban music, apparently including the piano playing of Ruben Gonzalez, although I didn't witness this personally. For the final three nights we stayed in a hotel in the Escambray mountains near Santa Clara, the site of Ché

Guevara's decisive victory against the Batista regime. The scenery surrounding the hotel was absolutely breathtaking, and a lovely place to end the brigade. Whilst there we went on a number of other visits, notably a visit to the Ché Guevara memorial in Santa Clara, and to a meeting of the local CDR, the Committee for the Defence of the Revolution. This was a marvellous opportunity to meet with normal Cubans in their homes, and to ask them about the way the ideas and aims behind the revolution have been kept alive, and passed on to younger generations.

All in all, the brigade was enlightening and thought provoking, and succeeded completely in its aim of building friendship with people from around the world. It showed them that what Cuba has been struggling to do, and is still doing, to give its population the opportunity of a fair and caring society in what is unfortunately a hostile and uncaring world. The brigade was not a 'holiday', and the realisation that the food and facilities were a lot more basic than those we are used to, and that we were expected to get up early and work came as a bit of a shock to some brigadistas. However, the rewards of seeing a country, and especially a country as unique as Cuba, in a way unattainable through tourism was more than adequate compensation for a limited diet, water shortages and cold showers. All of the hardships we faced were still less than those faced by many Cubans, and in their way helped show us what life in Cuba, under its struggle against the US blockade, was really like. Before during and after the brigade our Cuban hosts, ICAP, did their absolute best to make us feel welcome, and the itinerary laid on far surpassed the preconceptions of most brigadistas. I think that there will be very few brigadistas who haven't returned home without a very special place in their hearts for Cuba, and who don't feel a determination to stand up for Cuba to make sure that it is accepted and treated fairly by the rest of the world.