

Report on Winter Solidarity Brigade 2009

By Sarah Harding

I had always wanted to go to Cuba and when I heard about the Cuba Solidarity Campaign in a brochure that I picked up from a travel show some years ago I thought the brigade was the perfect opportunity to visit Cuba and see a different side of Cuba to the average tourist and at the same time show solidarity to Cubans. This report will give a brief overview as life as a brigadista on the winter 2009 brigade.

29/11/2009

After being metted and greeted at the airport in Havana we had a one hour bus journey to the camp. We were welcomed with a salami sandwich and orange juice and then shown to our dorm. As a result of the small size of this brigade there are four of us sharing and the brigadistas are allocated dorm beds with others from their country. The shared toilets and showers, whilst basic, are not too far from the dorm. I sampled Cuban beer and mojito from the bar for the first time, sitting by the bar under the stars getting to know each other.

30/11/2009

Began the day with a cold shower. After the initial screaming it was not that bad. One of the girls had the privilege of showering with a frog. Had breakfast (boiled egg, roll and warm milk.) We were then driven into Havana where I saw for the first time the colourful buildings with washing hanging on balconies and lots of 1950s style cars.

Returned to the camp for a lunch of beans, fish and rice. We then had a welcome meeting in the conference room before going for a walk outside the camp with two other brigadistas and admiring the sky gradually change colour across the fields as the sun went down.

In the evening dinner was served outside. I think it was pork and my plastic fork broke twice trying to cut it. Drank some mojitos and had a bit of a dance. There was a circle of people and we were taking it in turns dancing in the middle. I did not feel like doing this with all the amazing salsa dancers around and so snuck off to bed.

1/12/2009

Our first day at work. Was awoken to the sound of a cockerel and music blaring out of speakers – no need to set an alarm! This is the daily sound to get used to and I actually miss it since returning to the UK! After a morning meeting we were taken to the fields on the back of a truck. Some were dropped off at a primary school on the way. We were greeted at the fields by a slightly overweight Cuban lady in shorts and boots and were paired up and either weeded mango trees or stuffed mud into carrier bags. I was weeding mango trees. Was a really pretty sight with people working amongst the many leaves of the mango trees under the blue sky. After a hard mornings work we were taken back to the camp and had a shower. Was amazing to wash the mud that appeared to be ingrained in my skin off. In the afternoon there was a conference on democracy in Cuba. After dinner, which is now served in the indoor dining hall, there were Spanish lessons and dance lessons. I couldn't quite get the hang of the salsa steps but was fun watching and there were some amazing dancers there.

2/12/2009

Today's work was in the fields again. I was stuffing mud into black bags so that mango trees could be planted in them. This afternoon I sat in the sun and then decided to have a 10 minute nap. This turned into a 2 hour sleep and it was 4pm when I woke up and had unfortunately missed the conference on foreign policy of the Cuban revolution. Walked into the local village with one of the brigadistas. There were constantly 1950s cars driving past us and some goats grazing amongst the trees. Walking back the sun was setting and the clouds were a beautiful pink colour. Returned to the camp in time for dinner and then drank cocktails. There was an 8pm documentary viewing. After this played cards with the other brigadistas.

3/12/2009

This morning there was a lecture on healthcare in Cuba and then we went into the fields to some more weeding. This evening some local children put on a show of singing and dancing.

After this stayed up drinking mojitos, daiquiris and other rum drinks with some of the other brigadistas.

4/12/2009

Set off for work in the fields again and the time went really quickly because I was singing with another brigadista (although I hope this didn't make the time go slowly for the others). This afternoon there was a meeting with youth leaders at the camp. A Finnish brigadista gave us some dancing lessons this evening. I had had a cough since I arrived and so asked the camp nurse for some medicine as it is getting progressively worse. He stated that as I had been drinking alcohol I would have to come back to him tomorrow, but I should stay away from the moon and drink lots of water in the meantime!

5/12/2009

This morning some Cuban children put on a Beatles themed Cinderella for us. This was done excellently and would have been worth paying to see at the theatre. This afternoon we were taken on the coaches into central Havana and taken to the Museum of the Revolution before having some free time. Wandered around the sights with two other brigadistas. After a drink in the Plaza Vieja square we went to Friendship house for a meal provided to the brigadistas by ICAP. This was a makeshift roast dinner and there were bottles of rum on the table. I happily poured this into my cup until I realised that the nurse that I had been back to this morning and given paracetamol for my cough with the premise that I don't consume alcohol was sitting opposite me.

6/12/2009

We were taken to the Eastern Havana beaches. The sand is a whitey yellow and there are a few palm trees scattered back from the sea. Paradise. The sea was too rough to swim in but we paddled and sampled the swimming pool at a beachside hotel. A few of us decided to take a taxi into Havana after this and we had some free time exploring the city again. Had a meal in a restaurant where live music was playing and then took a pre-booked taxi back to the camp.

7/12/2009

I decided not to go to the planned agricultural work today due to my cough being at its peak. This afternoon, after a morning of sleep I was feeling refreshed and accompanied the rest of the brigadistas into Havana where we had a choice of visits and I chose to go to a Woman's Project. We were given more free time which we used to buy me some cough mixture, eat ice-cream and sit in the old square. We also found Chinatown.

8/12/2009

Our final day on a work placement and today we were driven in the coach instead of on the back of a truck. We were weeding garlic today and my hands kept the smell of garlic in them for some time. After only an hour of this we were presented with a feast of food as a thanks and this included a pineapple that had had a face carved into it. This afternoon there was a meeting with the Federation of Cuban Women and me and another brigadista walked into the local village and found a local shop that sold ice-cream. After dinner there was a conference about the national hero Jose Marti and then we sat up talking under the stars.

9/12/2009

This morning there was a conference with the combatants of the Cuban revolution. This afternoon there was a meeting with the head of Department for International Affairs. However, some of us decided to go to the beach (which is a 20 minute taxi journey away). Swam in the Caribbean Sea and played backgammon on the beach. We then found a Chinese restaurant (which only sold Cuban food) with an amazing view of the sea and so watched the sun go down from there. Took a taxi back to the camp and had another night of socialising under the stars.

10/12/2009

Had a visit to the Pioneers Palace in Lenin Park which is where children go to learn various skills that can be applied later in their lives potentially at work. For example they were making milk bottles of milk. Had lunch in the park and then I went on a visit to the International School

for Medical Sciences. Learnt about how the Cuban government pays for the living expenses and course fees of those training to be medical doctors. This evening, back at the camp, we socialised and I went for a walk under the stars outside the camp with another brigadista. The sound of the insects and dogs barking was more prominent here than at the camp and the stars shone brighter the further we went away.

11/12/2009

After breakfast and some clothes washing there was a documentary on the Cuban 5 and then families of them came to visit us. After lunch there was a football tournament between the camp and members of the village. I observed the village lose. This was more exciting than watching a FA match for me as I actually knew who the players were. This evening we were taken into Havana to watch a contemporary dance show.

12/12/2009

There was a friendship race from the camp into the village which owing to my low level of fitness I did not partake in. For the unfit like me, there was a coach into the village and we watched the end of the race. Took a slow walk back to the camp via a farm with some pigs on it. This afternoon we prepared for the cultural evening – where each country puts on a display for each other and provides food. We made a trifle and the UK brigade between us put on a dance, a poem and a song. We all got a bit tipsy – probably due to the nervousness of performing and after the cultural shows were over we danced until the early hours.

13/12/2009 – 15/12/2009

We were taken to Cienfuegos for three nights and greeted by the laying of a flower wreath. We stayed in a three star hotel with a swimming pool in ensuite twin rooms with hot water. This was a real luxury after our last few days of cold showers and dorms. Various visits were arranged during the time here including to a school of art where we watched young children perform musical instruments to an exceptional, moving standard, to a primary school, to a beach and a dolphin show. We also had free time in the city where some of us ate at a fast food joint – El Rapido (the Cuban equivalent to McDonalds) and looked round the shops and purchased some cigars. A few of us also went to a nightclub and danced in the open air to a variety of Western and Cuban music.

16/12/2009

Today we were driven back to the camp via Santa Clara, where we had lunch. Returned to the camp this evening which, after staying in a hotel I had not entirely been looking forward to. However, it was nice to return and be reminded of all of the happy memories that have been made there.

17/12/2009

Our last full day at the camp and we went to the beach, El Salado. We had not yet been to this beach and whilst there was only a small bit of sand there was a restaurant serving delicious lobster. Snorkelled here with snorkels borrowed from another brigadista. This evening was our last night together before the brigade ended and so we sat and danced under the stars.

18/12/2009

We were driven into Havana where some of the UK brigade are spending the last 2 days and get to see Havana from a tourist perspective for the last weekend. Overall the brigade has been a wonderful experience, both in terms of meeting other travellers, Cubans and seeing Cuba from a way that a tourist wouldn't have the opportunity to see. This is an experience that I will remember for the rest of my life.