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Educational Travel Learning for the Fun of It

JANET MENDELSON writer



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“i’m bored with the Caribbean,” a friend told me recently. I know, poor baby. But she’s not alone in wishing for a different kind of vacation.

What have *you* always wanted to do? Work beside archeologists at a dig? Learn to build a wooden boat? Discuss the composer’s work with performers at a classical music festival? Do you long to master techniques of French or Asian cooking? Or study birds at a remote field station in Maine? Well, you can. Learning experiences for adults ranging from weeklong workshops to small-group travel are not hard to arrange. Choose an adventure that speaks to you.

Want to go somewhere that used to be off-limits, just because now you can? That’s how I ended up in Havana hearing a former Cuban diplomat give his no-holds-barred, sometimes anti-American, perspective on the history of US-Cuba relations.

When the United States recently lifted its restrictions on travel to Cuba, it was my chance to taste previously forbidden fruit while learning about a country that’s close to our shore

Cuban musicians and dancers perform stories of the Santeria religion.



excursions “a different kind of vacation”

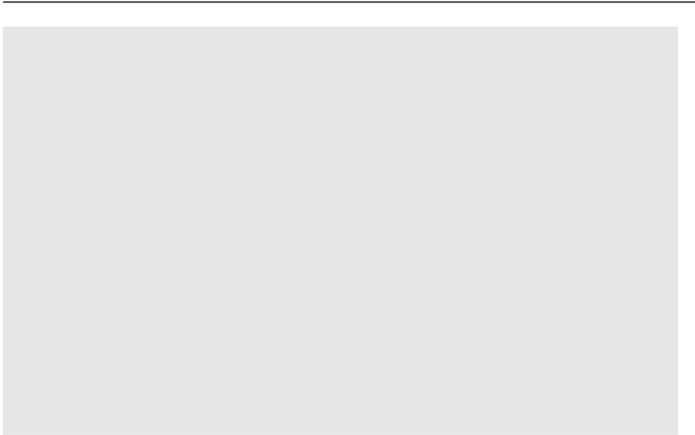
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and locked a half century back in time. To travel there legally, Americans no longer have to be affiliated with an academic, arts, or government group. But, as average citizens, we are restricted to so-called “People-to-People” tours that are not classified as tourism. That means unlike the Canadians, Italians, and French who flock to the island’s (reportedly) gorgeous beaches, those sand and surf resorts are off-limits to us. But as I discovered last June, our ability to learn about Cuba is more rewarding because tour operators are required to weave conversations and Q&A sessions with Cubans throughout our daily schedule of cultural and educational visits.

Writer Janet Mendelsohn captured this photo along the Malécon in Havana during her trip to Cuba

The trip was fascinating. On a hot day this past June, Camilo Garcia López-Trigo, a 20-year diplomat, spoke to our diverse group of 12 Americans from all walks of life. We were intrigued, irritated, and puzzled by his frank views. He recounted “many lies and misrepresentation by the US Department of State,” as well as chapters we remembered from news accounts and from school, adding yet another dimension to what in preceding days we had heard from Cuban artists, musicians, botanists, private business owners, educators, an athlete, and chefs about the realities of their lives under communism. Our tour operator, Gate 1 Travel Discovery Tours (www.gate1travel.com or 800.682.3333), had designed an itinerary that fulfilled the US government’s “People-to-People” mandate by arranging some fifteen of these exchanges in seven days. His mix of history and politics was not the only time we heard a less-than-friendly view of our country. It stimulated great conversations.

No book or news coverage beforehand fully prepared us for a country that looks and feels stuck in a time warp, circa 1959, but is simulta-



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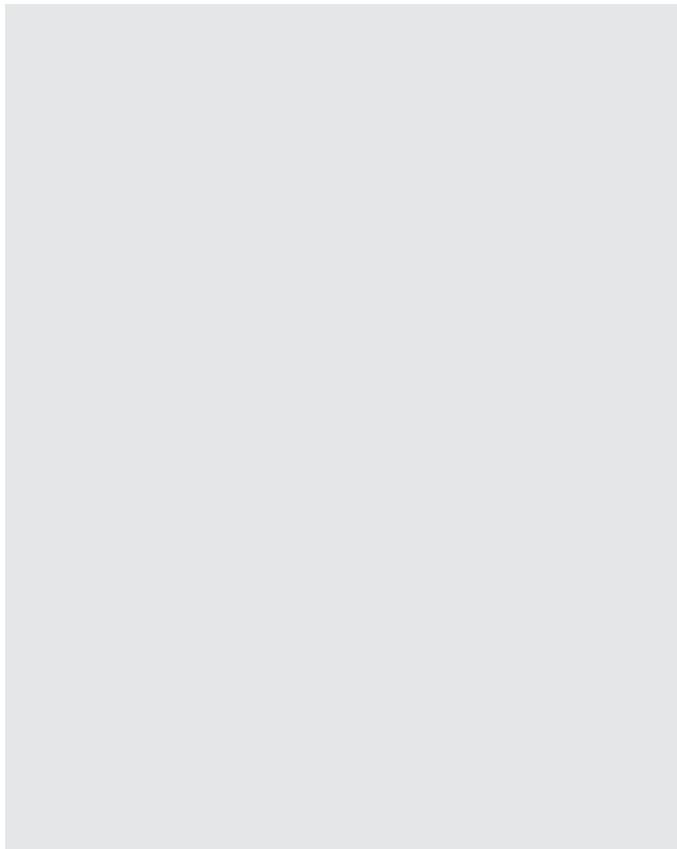
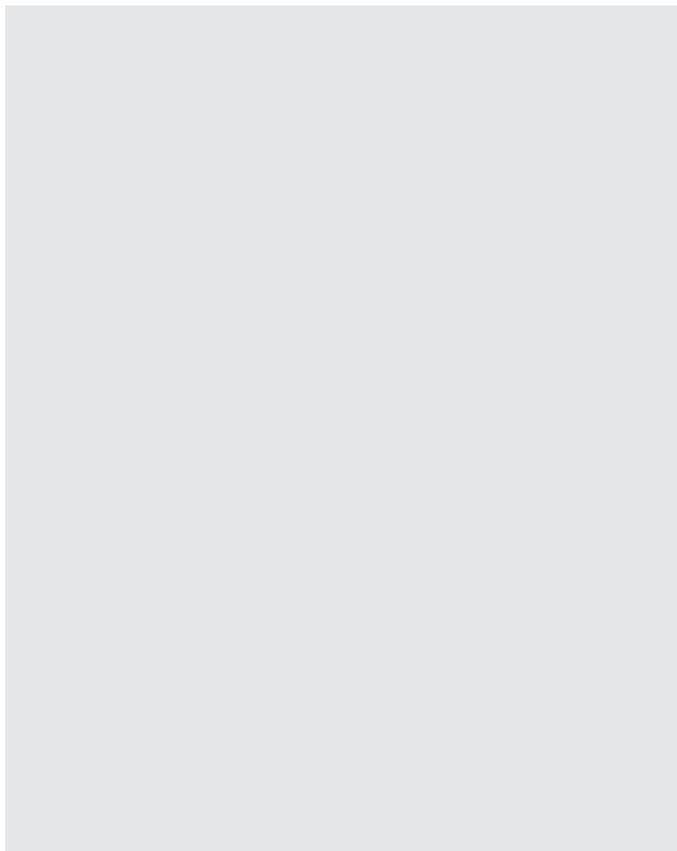
neously on the cusp of change. To appreciate the political climate and what it means to do with limited or none of today’s basic necessities (cell phones, Internet access, toilet paper...) you have to be there. It was better than any semester-long political science course.

“People-to-People” tours to Cuba are also available from a growing number of nonprofit and for-profit licensees, some with a special focus such as art or historic preservation. Search online for options.

“People who are well-traveled have done the sitting-on-the-beach and great-cities-of-Europe vacations and now they want something more meaningful,” says Donna Bruno, president and co-founder of uVisualize Travel in Needham (www.uvisualize.com or 781.898.2014). Among her clients are some who want to use their time off to serve others; they help rebuild communities devastated by hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, or repair schools in Guatemala. Others want to expand their knowledge in particular ways. She advises them, “Think about what brings you joy and we can help translate that interest into a trip. If your passion is ballroom dancing, it can shape a visit to Russia, where all forms of dance are celebrated.”

Consider these possibilities for learning

■ **COOK LIKE A PRO:** If your typical week is like mine, squeezing cooking or wine classes into the mix can be tough. Savor the experience without distractions at a Culinary Institute of America Boot Camp. Full-immersion programs, at three CIA locations—in St. Helena, California; Hyde Park, New York; or San Antonio, Texas—include more than a dozen courses in baking, cooking, or wine. You could devote two days to hors d’oeuvres or skills development, or five days focused on Mediterranean, French, or Asian cuisine. You’ll learn proper technique from chef-instructors and wine faculty, dine on the dishes you prepare, and sit down to meals in the renowned CIA



excursions “this kind of insight is golden”



Travelers looking to expand their horizons and learn about a new part of the world can custom design a trip catering to their specific interests

COURTESY OF UVISUALIZE TRAVEL

restaurants. A nice souvenir: you'll receive two chef coats, pants, neckerchief, and toque to underscore your new expertise.

Culinary Institute of America: Call 800.888.7850 or visit <http://enthusiasts.ciachef.edu/boot-camps>

■ **HEAR THE GENIUS:** Because Tedd Martin and his wife love classical music, every year they travel on expert-led tours to festivals held in Europe's finest concert venues featuring world-class performers. "They will usually have a group leader who has a certain amount of musical expertise and will give pre-concert lectures or lead discussions about the music we just heard," he said. "On our last trip to the Schubertiade in Schwarzenburg, Austria, our leader was the music director of Atlanta's leading chamber music venue. When I asked him if Schubert's piano sonatas were the logical continuation of Beethoven's,

he explained how Maurizio Pollini (a famous pianist) explained to him that while Beethoven created tension using the interval of the fifth, Schubert did it with fourths. To a music lover, this kind of insight is golden...information that sheds light on why the music sounds the way it does and adds to an appreciation of the genius that went into making it."

There's more. "On our Kirker trip to Aldeburgh, England," he continued, "we toured the home of Benjamin Britten, one of the 20th century's leading composers. We learned about his life, viewed some of his original manuscripts, and gained an appreciation for his creative process just before hearing his music performed." Additionally, tour leaders often have special relationships with the music festival or some of the performers. In a couple of cases, the Martins met performers, and one time a prominent Russian pianist joined them for dinner.

excursions “launch your next adventure”

He recommends these two London-based companies that also offer architecture, art, geology, garden, and other specialized travel:

Martin Randall Tours (www.martinrandall.com/tour-theme)

Kirker Holidays (www.kirkerholidays.com/cultural-tours-and-music-holidays)

■ **DIG INTO THE PAST:** Since 1928, the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine, has conducted research on Native American history and culture, particularly that of the four Wabanaki tribes. Once a year, in August, their one-week Archaeology Field School welcomes 12 non-professionals, age 17 and older, to work beside archaeologists excavating and recovering artifacts at a field site in Maine. No experience is necessary but you must be physically able to do moderate work, such as lifting and digging.

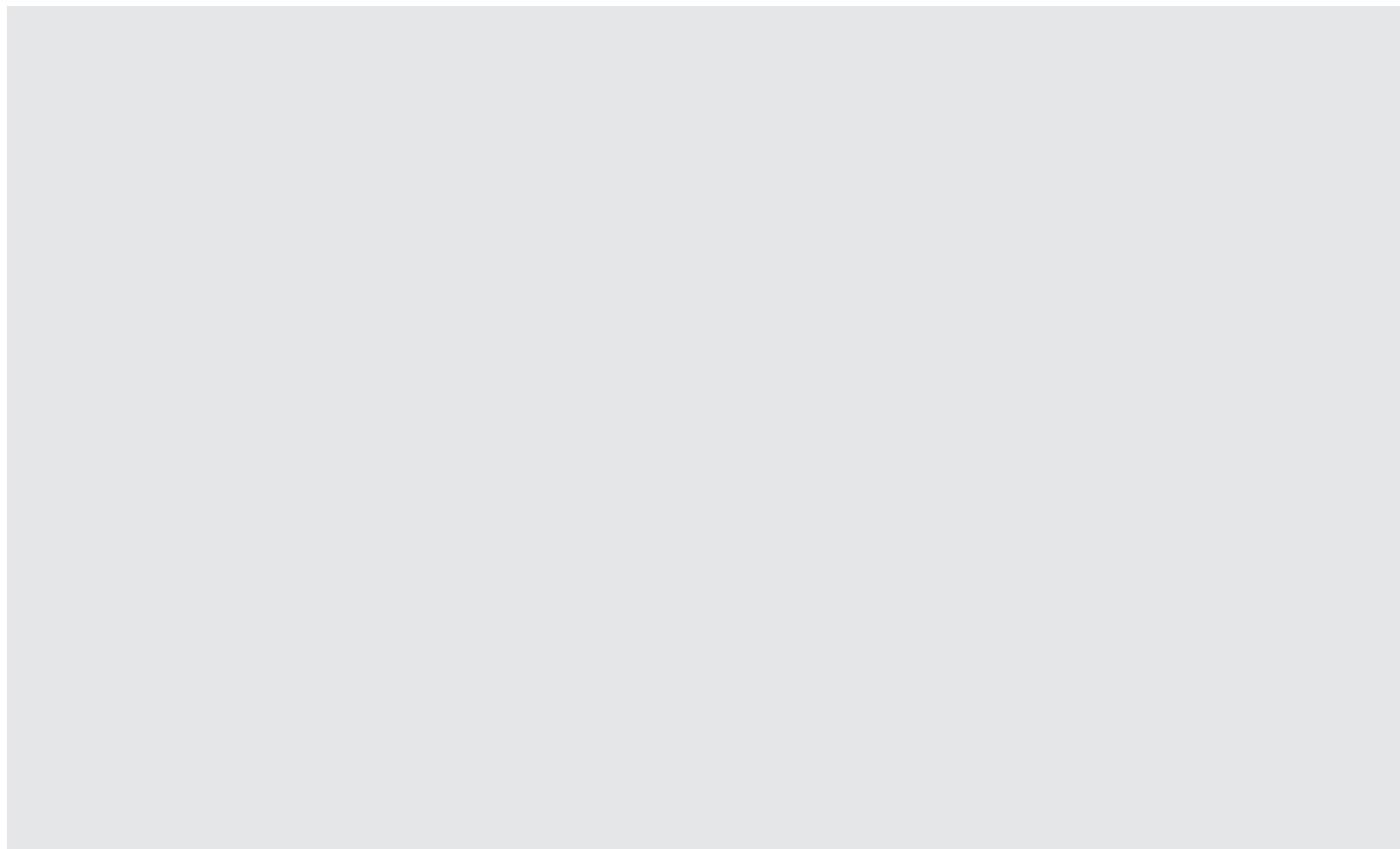
“What’s most special about the Field School is you get to do archaeology and also learn how it relates to contemporary Wabanaki life,” says

Julia Clark, curator of collections, who runs the program. “We have lunchtime speakers. This year, George Neptune (Passamaquoddy) sang songs for us that are 2,000 years old and relate to the artifacts we’re finding at the site, Tranquility Farm, which was occupied from 2,500 years ago through the arrival of Europeans.” Enrollment often fills early. The next session is August 4 through 8, 2014.

Abbe Museum: Call 207.288.3519 or visit www.abbemuseum.org/research/archaeology/field-school.html

Programs farther afield: Call 978.461.0081 or visit www.earthwatch.org

■ **BUILD YOUR OWN BOAT:** If your heart swells at the sight of a classic wooden hull, a one- or two-week course offered by WoodenBoat School in Brooklin, Maine, or their affiliate, Chesapeake Light Craft in Annapolis, Maryland, may launch your next adventure. Choose from a boatyard of options including fundamentals or advanced boatbuilding,



small boat repairs, or start-to-finish workshops. After a “Build Your Own” course, you’ll have a Northeaster dory, shearwater sport kayak, Penobscot 13 lapstrake daysailer, or other fine craft to proudly add to your fleet.

WoodenBoat School: Call 207.359.8920 or visit www.thewoodenboatschool.com

■ **GAIN SPECIAL MUSEUM ACCESS TO STUDY**

FINE ART: The Art Institute of Chicago, which rivals our Museum of Fine Arts, now partners with Road Scholar, the lifelong learning program formerly called ElderHostel, to offer five-day seminars at the museum. Explore galleries with curators on private tours and learn from art historians. Dine and stay downtown at the historic Palmer House, steps from the museum, where each day from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm experts will guide you to insights on treasures of the Art Institute or Ancient Worlds and Empires. Conversations will delve into artists’ ideas, techniques, and accomplishments. An evening on your own in Chicago is a chance to enjoy the city’s great restaurants.

Art Institute of Chicago: Call 800.454.5768 or visit www.artic.edu/learn/adults/lifelong-learning/road-scholar

We’ve just scratched the surface. There are learning vacations worldwide for birders, photographers, writers, dancers, violinists, and letterpress printers, you name it. Do your homework and see what you find. 

