

# Farmers without borders.

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Sometimes, the process of change is dramatic. Earthquake. Revolution. The struggle of Canada's pioneer families to birth new settlements in the west. Other times, the inevitable process of transition is a quiet one – an almost imperceptible gathering amongst themselves of the elements that evoke change.

On a sunny Thursday morning, 25 cattle, grain, hog, crop and fruit farmers from BC, Alberta and Saskatchewan leave the sunny, five-star beaches of Varadero with anticipation. Three days of all-inclusive down time offered a welcome break from the Canadian winter, but “the real Cuba” awaits – and they are anxious to experience it.

Our first stop is in the province of Ciego de Avila. Over two days, we visit three farm cooperatives: a greenhouse project, Cuba's top producing organoponico (raised-bed urban agriculture; 59 kilos of production per square metre) and a large tobacco plantation where we see the harvesting and drying of hi-valued 'copa' leaves – grown under shade cloth to preserve the quality necessary to create the final outer wrap on Cuba's finest cigars. We return to the hotel for a game of pool hockey before dinner then depart for a local farm community for a reception in our honour. The local television, radio and press are there to mark the occasion. Cuban children grab the hands of Canadian farmers and entreat them to dance – of course no one can refuse. Arriving with bottles of rum, we leave filled to the brim with the hugs and smiles of this tiny community.

The next day, we are off to the pristine beaches of Cayo Coco for a few hours of swimming and a feast of Cuban lobster – made all the more succulent by the addition of melted butter and garlic, which we have brought with us for them to prepare.

The next three days are spent in Camaguay. On Sunday morning, we pile into 13 bicycle taxis that snake us through the twisty streets of this colonial city to visit farmers' markets - one of which rivals Vancouver's Granville Island Public Market in its bustle of colours and variety of offerings. In the afternoon, a special event is put on for us by Cuban school children. The next morning, we visit a provincial plant protection lab and a soils lab to see the process by which Cuba's advances in the development and use of biological controls have replaced the use of farm chemicals and fertilizers for many crops. In the afternoon, we meet with the board of a large cattle cooperative to understand how the Cuban farmers meet the challenges of Cuba's Special Period.

The next morning, before leaving Camaguay for Holguin province, we visit a 97 hectare school where grade 11 and 12 students intent on pursuing careers in agriculture receive their training. A Canadian textbook on organic chemistry donated by a previous group is proudly displayed in their humble library.

In Holguin province, the experiences the farmers are gathering finally begin to gel. We visit three large cooperatives. The female president of the first co-op is delighted to see so many women in our group. We return the sentiment. A cattle cooperative, they are also experimenting with the production of water buffalo – following a reception of fruits, rum, cheeses and (surprisingly!) an exquisite fish cerviche, they proudly show off their first 5 calves – the herd is in fine condition.

But it is the next day – our last day of farm visits – that turns out to be most significant. In the northeastern municipality of Gibara, we visit two large cooperatives. In both, we are loaded into an open wagon and hauled by tractor out to the fields.

As we stand on the edge of beautiful fields of potatoes, beans and bananas and listen to the Cuban farmers discuss the crops, the pride in their eyes builds bridges of respect. We look over their cattle – gathered in a coral for our visit – and spend an hour or so exchanging ideas with the Cuban ranchers.

Seeing the way they handle them tells us a lot about their attitude towards their animals, which mirrors our own.

Afterwards, we are treated to a farm lunch – a roast pig with all the trimmings – and spontaneously we find ourselves exchanging national anthems, they singing theirs to us, we treating them to a bilingual version of ours. The afternoon visit repeats the mornings experience – again we travel by wagon to the fields and are impressed with what we see.

Looking into the proud eyes and shy smiles of the Cuban farmers in these two cooperatives, we see reflected back the dedication, hard work, respect for the land and pride in a good crop. We finally 'get it'.

That evening, in our nightly Room Rum, a farmer from the Prairies makes a bold proposal: Why not formalize the organization of the farmers who have come to Cuba through the Canada-Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project to lend support to this work, the purpose of which is to help strengthen farmers and farm communities in both countries. There is enthusiastic agreement that transcends the rum. The next day, a vote is held and FARMERS WITHOUT BORDERS - AGRICULTORES SIN FRONTERAS is born.

Stay tuned. This change is happening....

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NOTE: There are a few sets left from Edmonton and Vancouver for the Feb 23<sup>rd</sup> trip – but act fast!

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