

Making connections in Cuba.

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Varadero Beach, January 17 Lounging in the sun on the balcony of my hotel room in Varadero Beach, Cuba, sipping seven-year-old rum and gazing out through the branches of Royal Palms onto an azure sea, I ponder the complexities of this hauntingly beautiful land.

Another group of farmers - B.C. and Saskatchewan this time - are all topped up with the five star luxury and eager to depart on tomorrow's bus that will take them into the heartland of Cuba's farming regions - the "real" Cuba.

Today, as we spend an hour in my room - men on the balcony swapping stories, women in production mode inside making up 20 "goody bags" of soap, razors, work gloves, thread, farm caps, pencils, pens, crayons, supplies and pocket sets to leave with the cooperatives we will visit - the anticipation is palpable.

Those have read their information packets have some idea of what to expect. But my efforts notwithstanding, I suspect they are fully unprepared for what they will experience over the next nine days.

The Royal Palms rustle their assent as if on cue, a flock of pelicans wings by, smiling knowingly.

Like a beautiful street child, Cuba is shunned by those who fear her fierce independence, passion, confidence and potential. Punishing economic conditions imposed by the 40-year-old U.S. blockade have caused shortages so profound they would send Canadians scattering to the United States were we to experience them in our own country. Yet, less 5% of Cubans have applied to leave.

Despite crippling economic hardships, Cuba's literacy rate is well above Canada's; her medical system is world-class, accessible and free, as is university education. Cubans are well fed, well-dressed and educated. Farmers are respected members of society.

What is happening here?

The Canadian farmers here in Varadero are about to experience first hand this enigmatic, complex and compelling land.

Camaguay, January 22

Fresh from the tobacco, potato, banana, vegetable and cattle cooperatives of Ciego de Avica province, a procession of 20 farmers in bicycle-taxis snake through the twisty streets of Camaguay City, visiting farmers markets selling sweet potatoes, lettuce, cucumber, radishes, organs, pineapples and papayas.

That night we visit Casa de la Trova, where a "Buena Vista Social Club"-style group of Cuban musicians plays for us in an open-air courtyard. A five-minute misting of rain so fine you can barely feel it on bare arms blankets us with the intoxicating scent of Jasmine. Cuban men and women pull the Canadian farmers to their feet and entice them to dance. Above, the fronds of the Royal Palms sway their encouragement.

The next day, a glitch . notification and permissions have somehow not come from Havana and so the farm visits are not possible. The local Cuban organizing team springs into action and a visit and lunch at a crocodile breeding farms is arranged - the first meal of crocodile these farmers have tasted! Somewhere between fish and chicken, it is pronounced delicious.

Holguin, January 24

What was missed from the program in Camaguiay is more than made up for in our two-day visit to Holguin province. After a presentation on Cuba's legume crops and a wagon ride into the tidy, cactus-fence-defined fields of the local co-operatives, we visit Velasco's agricultural college and tour a large farm co-operative, where lunch awaits (suckling pig on a spit.)

A visit to the co-op's school to deliver a goody bag of supplies brings big smiles from all.

That afternoon, the provincial agricultural minister has arranged for us to see further experiments in intensive pasture management systems at dairy enterprise El Vapor.

Tomorrow we are off to Santiago de Cuba for the last days of our tour before three days of R&R in Havana.

In all, our Cuban colleagues give us the royal treatment. Our group is touched by the warmth, openness of the Cuban people and impressed by their farming practices.

Linkages are made. Hank explains cauterizing dehorning and promised to send down an iron with a neighbour going on the March tour for them to try.

Edna, a senior member of our delegation, jumps atop the broad back of a bull she has known for less than five minutes, winning the heart of "Losada," the 74-year-young head of Cuba's top producing organoponica.

Cuba and Canada are very different in many ways - different styles of government and different challenges, each with its strong and weak points - but farmers are farmers are farmers. And the connections made through these tours are laying the seedbed for future co-operation . co-operation essential if we are to achieve our potential as a sustainable global community.

Call me to reserve your spot on next winter's visits. You'll experience the trip of a lifetime: 604/947-2893 or holm@pinc.com