

FEATURE

Deliverance To The Promised Land

By Samuel Spurr

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We were waiting anxiously. Being stuck in a snail paced town for what is the biggest night of the year was not our top priority. The hands of my watch cheekily jumped forward to two o'clock every second I looked down. We were waiting to be delivered back to Havana by our man Israel.

Our first encounter with Israel was on our journey from the bustling Capital to the sleepy village of Vinales. Rather than pay a meager \$12 each for a Viazul bus to get us there, we opted to pay the same amount to Israel to transport us there in the relative comfort of a private vehicle. Upon arriving at our 'Rancho' in Vinales, he quite happily and readily agreed to pick us up again after our three day stay to return us to La Habana. We were quite skeptical as to whether or not this cheery man who appeared to be hiding a beach ball under his shirt was actually going to show up to deliver us back to the Capital as he had promised three days earlier. "Si, si, dos de la tarde, Miércoles."



It hadn't gone 1 minute past 2pm and Israel arrived to take us to the 'Promised Land,' La Habana for New Year's Eve. The mind wondered at the spectacle we were about to witness in a few hours; crowded Vieja bars spilling their sweaty bodies, sultry music and tobacco, sex and rum laden aromas into the street. Avenues lined with revelers, eagerly partying the night away in a trance towards 2004. Having spent every 24 of my previous New Year's Eves in the English speaking world, I couldn't wait to celebrate with a puro and a couple million Cubans!

Our journey back along the highway was filled with eagerness, anticipation and a nose that dared not stop running. My eyes were scratchy and with handkerchief in hand, I continually wiped away tears induced by hay fever. December 31st was starting to become quite uncomfortable, however, our smooth ride northeast was quick, a few trucks and horse drawn carts were the only obstacles, quickly overtaken in reaching Havana in two hours. Pulling up to our hotel, I paid Israel, tipping him the hundreds of pesos I had left over. I wasn't going to be using them as we were back in the land of Havana, where greenbacks talked faster than a corner Jinetera. Israel wished us a 'Feliz Ano Nuevo' and we thanked him for a great trip and restoring our faith in someone's commitment despite not being able to check up on it via email, phone or pager.



Entering our hotel I headed straight for the bathroom where I attempted to clear my languishing eyes and nose. The medication brought half way around the world specifically for any such attack were no match for this beast wreaking havoc on my sinuses. The concierge recommended visiting the hotel across the street where a full time nurse operated. Crossing the busy Paseo with limited vision was not the safest option, but a risk I was willing to take. The nurse was surprisingly easily found and was more than willing to help. Within five minutes, my nose was drying up and I could begin to look forward to the grand festivities of the night.

A hot shower and fresh clothes later, my fiancée and I were ready to celebrate our first Cuban New Year's Eve. As we had been out of Havana and expecting the party to be everywhere, I had not pre-booked any

packages, thus we headed upstairs to the open air bar on top of our hotel overlooking La Habana Vieja to begin our revelry. We ordered Mojitos and grabbed a table just off the dance-floor. Taking advantage of our position we had a look over the edge. What we saw stunned us completely and left me without words for a few seconds. Empty streets greeted us, gone were the crowds, cars and street hustlers that I had previously faced no less than an hour ago in attempting to relieve my sinuses. The only sounds were coming from a German sounding group of men walking across the street. The few people visible were all walking swiftly and silently as if they had somewhere very important to go. Gone were the sounds that had pervaded our time in Havana previously. Only conversation and music whispering to us from blocks away floated to the rooftop, which didn't arouse our ears enough to warrant a search party for the long lost fiesta. Utter disbelief engulfed us. Don't they know it's New Year's Eve?? What are they doing? Or more importantly what aren't we doing??

Deciding to stay atop our hotel with easy access to alcohol, rather than chance not being able to find the event everyone else in Havana seemed to be at, we sat and ordered another round of Mojitos. The rooftop began to slowly fill with guests of the hotel who had the same awe-inspiring idea as us. Our lobster meal for the evening was so delicious I ordered

another before finishing the first and for ten bucks I wasn't about to let the opportunity pass. Surrounding us were tourists from every corner of the globe. We began drinking the night away with Americans and an Australian backpacker who provided us with a familiar accent. An American duo decided to try their luck and pass into the unknown, attempting to find the event everyone else hadn't invited us to. They eventually returned an hour later bringing with them a Cuban national, sneaking him into our 'five star hotel'. Well at least we saved one from the nightmare that must be engulfing the rest of the city. Through our shared understanding of Spanenglish, the Cuban National explained to us that welcoming the 'Año Nuevo' was traditionally a quiet event shared with family, friends and a home cooked meal in preparation for what Fidel has also called New Year's Day: Liberation Day.

The house band 'La Guarida de Monte Rey' fired up and began oozing Latin rhythms from their instruments, the night was slowly becoming similar to the one we imagined. The dancing began and although the seductive show displayed by the professional dancers was some indication, our mojito induced moves didn't measure up when we took the floor. A group of British girls in what appeared to be their late twenties demanded the band churn out 'Guantanamera' for an exhaustive fifth time. Their alcohol infused laughter and conversation rebounded off the night sky, which was dotted with floating clouds that seemed as happy as they were to go with the flow.

Midnight struck, champagne and rum was poured, and cigars were lit to celebrate the New Year while below us the streets remained empty, the passing of another year not acknowledged by the cold pavement usually warmed by hundreds of pedestrians. Foreigners and a handful of Cubans wished each other a happy New Year whilst overlooking an inconceivable Havana night.



New Years Eve Dancers