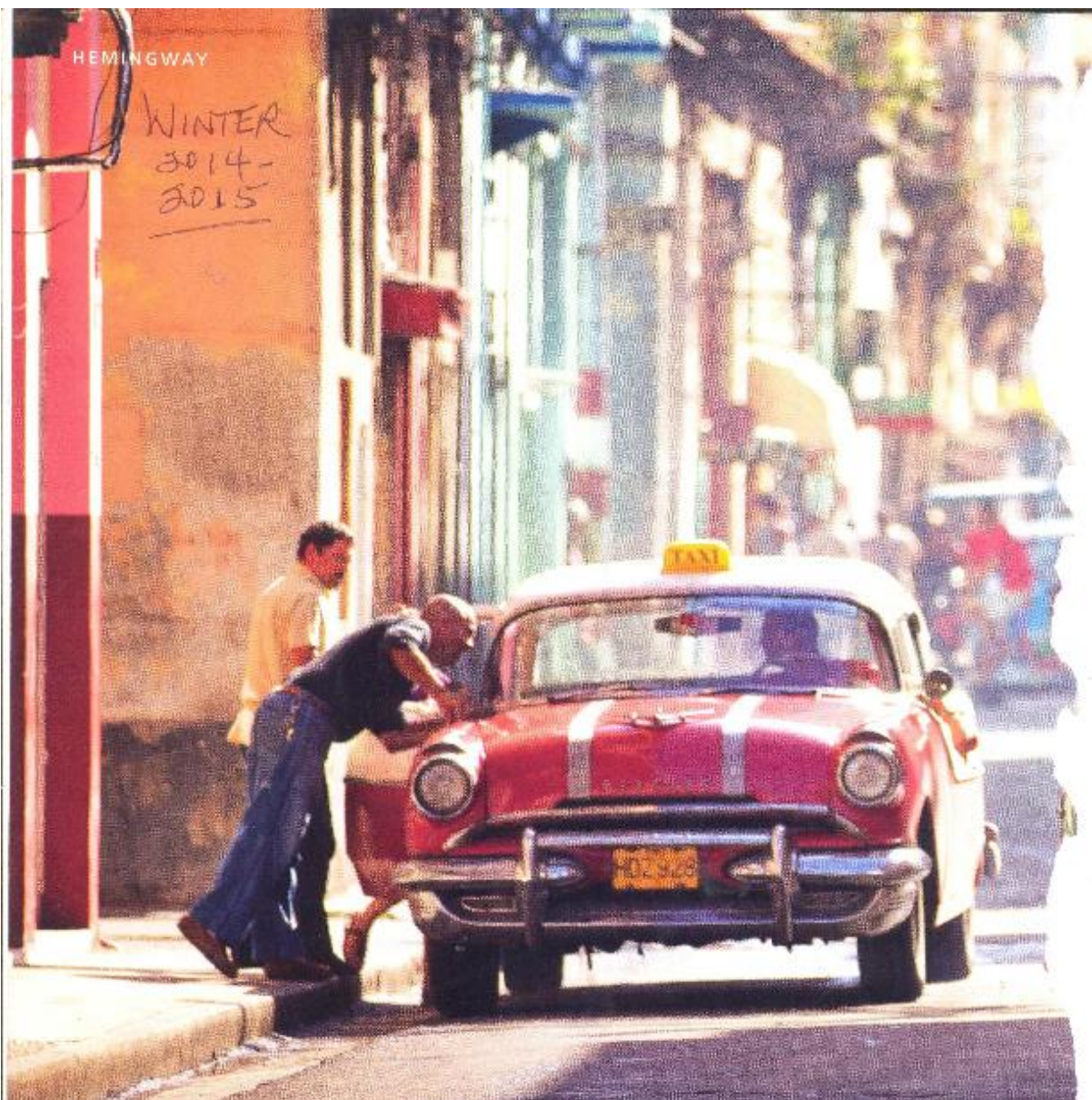


HEMINGWAY

WINTER
2014-
2015



Cuba had been tugging on my line like one of Ernest Hemingway's marlins for a long time. I grew up with a father who, like the famous novelist, could gauge a good fishing day by the wind's direction. As a writer and a fan of Hemingway's writing, I wanted to grasp at what was left—if anything—of the author in the island nation that had been off-limits to most Americans for more than half a century and to witness what life was like there since the Obama administration loosened travel restrictions.

My cab driver to Miami International Airport turned out to be a young Cuban-American with a mustachioed grin as wide and friendly as that of Hemingway's in his photos as a young man. But when I asked him about Cuba's most famous American resident, his response was brief: "Oh, yeah, *The Old Man and the Sea*—everybody has to read it in school. Santiago [the aging angler who is the central character], very sympathetic character." The driver didn't know anything about how the author benefited



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Hemingway's Havana

BY MARTHA STEGER

A TOUR THROUGH THE ONCE FORBIDDEN HOMES AND HAUNTS OF THE FAMOUS EXPATRIATE AUTHOR

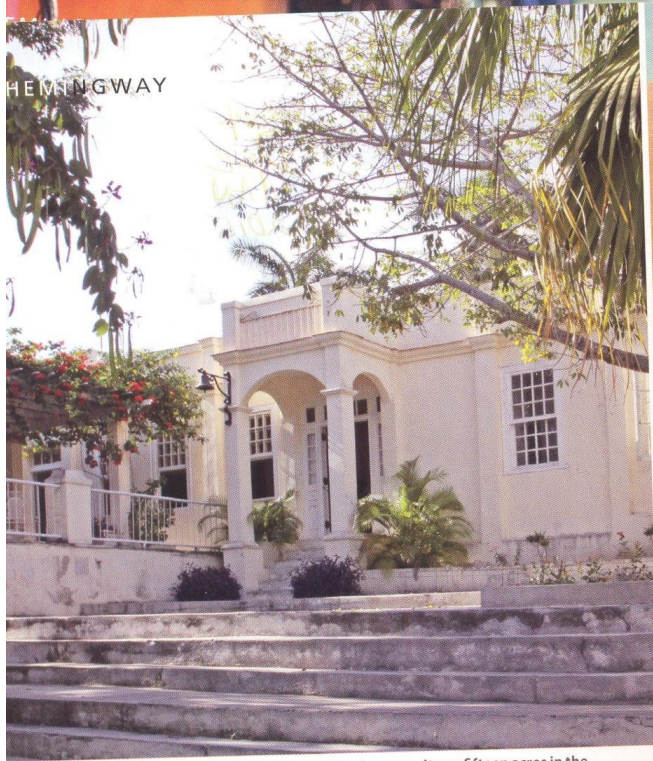
Cuba beyond making it the setting for a novel that won the 1953 Pulitzer Prize. I made small talk by mentioning Hemingway's two conditions for the novel's publication: that the book be translated into Spanish by Cuban writer Lino Novás Calvo and that \$5,000 of Hemingway's payment for the book be used to purchase television sets for lepers at El Rincón Hospital in the outskirts of Havana. My driver, who revealed that his mother in Miami had paid \$10,000 to get him out of Cuba seven years ago, had

worked all night and either wasn't interested in these literary tidbits or was too tired to follow it.

"Hemingway—good for Cuban tourism," he commented.

What did he miss most about Cuba, I asked, to which he, a divorced dad from the province of Matanzas, immediately responded, "My ten-year-old daughter." Second to her, he said he missed the Cuban people. "Their life is very hard, but they know how to enjoy life. I miss the

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Finca Vigía, also known as Museo Hemingway, sits on fifteen acres in the hillside village of San Francisco de Paula near Havana.



Hemingway's original Corona 3 typewriter resurfaced in 2013 and is on view in his writing tower at Finca Vigía.

streets always so full of everything—music, laughter, dancing, wonderful food smells. There's no place like it."

After my early morning arrival in Havana, capital city, province, port, and major commercial center with 2.1 million inhabitants, I could see what he meant. A colorfully dressed woman sold cones of peanuts for one CUC (convertible peso, presently valued at twenty-four times more than the local Cuban peso). Other street vendors yelled up to residents living in apartments above the streets. Some children got a jump on the day's heat by licking *paletas*, frozen fruit pops, while others gathered in a schoolroom set in the middle of the shopping district on Obispo Street, a major pedestrian thoroughfare. A hole-in-the-wall eatery, El Chino, sold pizza for breakfast with "a side of cigars." The sweet, pungent smell of tobacco was everywhere (cigar factory tours are popular with tourists). Another vendor, Lisette, got my attention with her announcement that the Pope had blessed her on his 2012 visit—anything to get attention and make a sale in a country where my tour guide's state wage was about \$8 a week (when she's booked, that is). Free housing, health care, and a food-rationing system for staples such as rice, eggs, sugar, and milk supplement the low wages.

I couldn't get to the beach at Cojimar, where Hemingway frequented the restaurant, La Terraza, so lunch at Julio's on the water at nearby Baracoa beach in Havana province was my choice. Julio's is a seaside *palador*, the name for a home serving meals to paying guests. The proud owners-entrepreneurs served calamari, shrimp, and

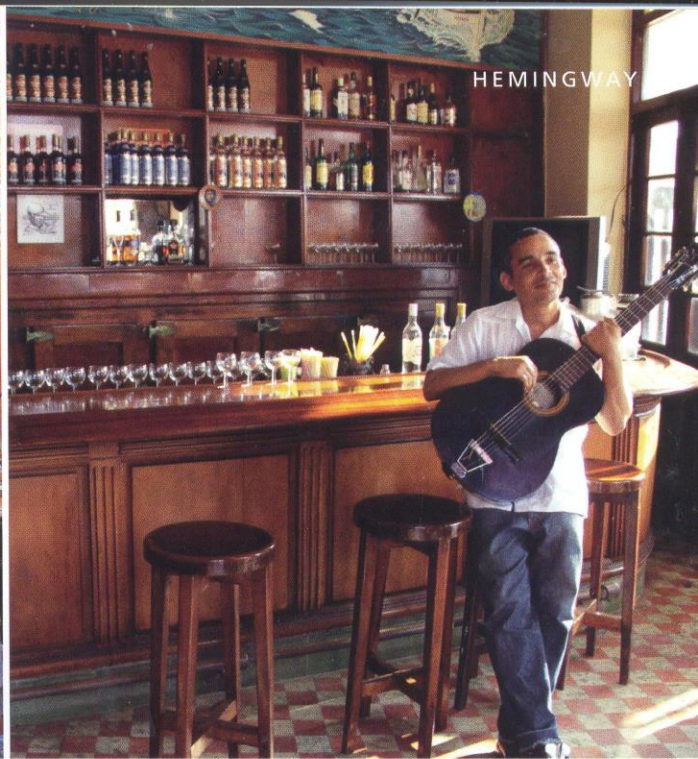
langoustines with fried plantain slices and rice and beans washed down with Cristal and Bucanero beers. After the meal they showed me, next door, their *casa particular*, a bed-and-breakfast establishment. The cottage, which rents for about \$25 a night, sits directly over the water, with a step-ladder down to Baracoa's clear, turquoise waters inches below—prompting a recollection of Hemingway's having once bragged about Ava Gardner's early-morning, nude swim in his Cuban swimming pool.

Wherever I parsed my steps in La Habana Vieja (Old Havana) to consider views of the sea from where I stood or which street to duck into next, I envisioned Hemingway returning from a fishing trip to the sounds of loud street music and raucous laughter and then retreating to write at the salmon-colored, Roaring Twenties-style Hotel Ambos Mundos, room No. 511. The hotel, at the top of the popular Obispo Street, popped up a block before Plaza de Armas, the oldest of Havana's four central plazas. I had walked the length of Obispo Street running from Central Park (with its dominant statue of national hero José Martí) to the plaza. The hotel was Hemingway's home in Cuba from 1932 until mid-1939.

A corner of the hotel's lobby showcases two walls of framed Hemingway photographs. I took the two-person elevator up to his room. It was easy to see why Hemingway chose a fifth-floor, corner room, which rented at the time for \$1.50 a night: its privileged view of the city includes sixteenth-century buildings, many of whose long-neglected neo-baroque and neoclassical structures are now being



Hotel Ambos Mundos, room no. 511, was Hemingway's home in Cuba from 1932 until mid-1939.



Hemingway frequented the restaurant, La Terraza, in Cojimar.

restored partially with profits from state-owned hotels, bars, and restaurants. A delightful rooftop bar above the fifth floor offers good city views too.

I envisioned Hemingway leaving Old Havana's natural harbor on his yacht, *Pilar*, for one of many fishing trips in the sea just beyond the shelter of the shore. I noted the fishing rods and reels mounted on the wall near his bed and remembered my father saying in the early 1950s that Hemingway "put sport fishing on the map." Guides say his hotel room is presented as the author might have left it; the typewriter on which he wrote several articles for *Esquire* magazine and much of his novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, based on the Spanish Civil War, still awaits him. The magazines in Spanish as well as English scattered about testify to the writer's love of magazine journalism. Most striking to restless writers is a standing desk, which he used, some surmise, because he couldn't sit for long periods due to a war wound, or because, as he told his friend and biographer, A.E. Hotchner, a writer has more vitality on his feet.

I could see why Martha Gelhorn, who had covered the Spanish Civil War with him and came to Cuba to be with him, didn't want to live in the cramped room at Ambos Mundos. It was she, his third wife, who found Finca Vigía (Lookout Farm), the one-storey, Spanish-style farmhouse on fifteen acres in the hillside village of San Francisco de Paula near Havana. After renting it for a while, Hemingway paid about \$12,500 in cash to purchase it—part of the royalties from his recent, bestselling novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The estate became his and

Gelhorn's residence in late 1940, when he transferred his winter residence from Key West, Florida. It remained his residence through his marriage to his fourth and final wife, Mary Welsh, until his suicide in 1960, after which, Welsh wrote, she had limited time to move a few items—papers, books, paintings (a Paul Klee and two by Juan Gris)—to the U.S. when Castro's regime expropriated the estate. (The Cuban government's statement said she bequeathed the estate to Cuba as a museum.)

Climbing the steps to the farmhouse, I stopped with another visitor to ring the bell on a tall pole, the kind used to call farmhands to dinner, which was there when Hemingway purchased the estate. Even though the interiors are prohibited to tourists, the open windows and doors offer cross-views of rooms. I saw partially full bottles for cocktail making—gin, bourbon, rum, tonic, and mineral water—on the small table between easy chairs in the living room. The guide spoke of Hemingway's library of more than 9,000 books, magazines, and brochures, accumulated during twenty-two years in Cuba, which remained here after he left. I wished I could spot the titles of the books on the shelves or the records in his collection. A pottery dish made by his Paris contemporary, Pablo Picasso, sits on a library table.

The bedroom shelves stacked with boots and shoes give the appearance that the writer just stepped out—perhaps to the second floor of the tower on the property, which was built to provide more privacy for his writing. Here he hammered out his post-1939 works, including *The Old Man*

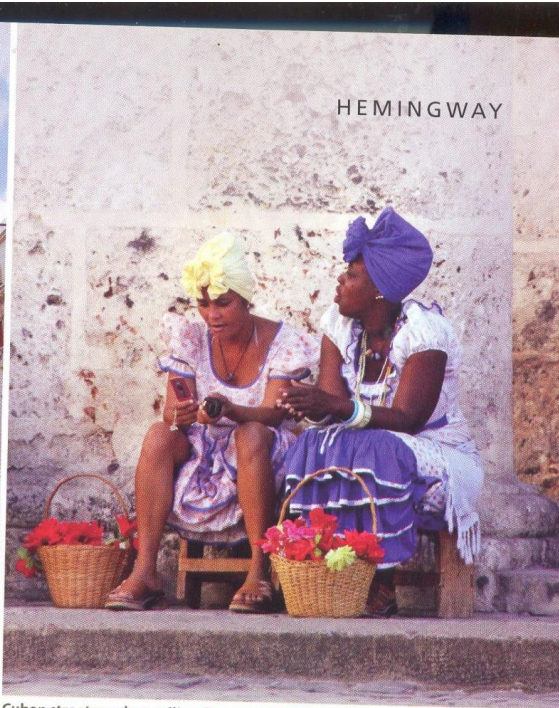
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Half-full bottles of gin, bourbon, rum, tonic, and mineral water are set up in Hemingway's living room at Finca Vigia as if Papa might drop in for a cocktail at any moment.



Old Havana's Plaza de la Catedral is an architectural landmark.



Cuban street vendors selling flowers to tourists.

and the Sea, *Across the River and into the Trees*, *A Moveable Feast*, and his most autobiographical book, *Islands in the Stream*, the last two published posthumously.

What is referred to as the matrimonial bedroom, with its very large bed, has bookshelves stretching across its head and extending outward onto both sides of the wall. His personal bedroom was a workroom, displaying on a wall the skin of a lesser kudu, killed by the writer in Africa. A typewriter sits on his desk, where he accumulated large numbers of photos, drawings, maps, insignia captured from German troops in France, and carvings purchased in Africa. A rubber stamp carries the inscription, "I Never Write Letters." The connecting bathroom has its own three shelves of books, a medical scale, and Hemingway's notes on an adjacent wall of his weight, as frequently recorded by him, which ranged from 242 pounds in 1955 to 190.5 pounds five years later.

Besides the main house and the tower, the property includes the bungalow garage and a pergola in addition to the pavilion sheltering his thirty-eight-foot yacht. The estate deteriorated badly over the years until a million-dollar restoration project was completed in 2009. The National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States still lists it as an endangered site. Preservationists have succeeded in leaving the impression that Finca Vigía is not only the Museo Hemingway (Hemingway Museum) but also a living place, the secluded home Hemingway enjoyed, which still feels very livable. Paintings in the main house reveal a taste for his contemporaries' artwork—Impressionism and Cubism—along with mementos of Spain, such as the painting of a bullfight in the living room, which also con-

tains his magazine rack and easy chair. The dining room is the one room Hemingway insisted accommodate no bookshelves. The head of a pronghorn, which he hunted in the mountains of Idaho, surveys the room from its wall mounting.

Despite his love for the farmhouse, Hemingway found his tower lonely. The upside was its grand view of Havana, a forty-minute drive away, where he often enjoyed his favorite bar, El Floridita. The watering hole still memorializes him, with his signature on its marquee and his favorite drink—a double frozen daiquiri without sugar—on its menu. Visitors enjoy getting their pictures taken with José Villa Soberón's bronze statue of Hemingway leaning on his left elbow in a corner of the bar. Outside, the intersection on Obispo Street hums with activity in the late afternoon.

I saved the Morro Castle, designed by an Italian engineer in the late sixteenth century to guard the bay's entrance to Havana, for last. If it disappointed me, it couldn't spoil the rest of my visit, I reasoned. Perched two hundred feet high on a hill opposite Old Havana's harbor, El Morro (The Rock), the castle exudes the seaside nostalgia of Hemingway's nonfiction on fishing, as well as the adventures of fishing boat Captain Harry Morgan in *To Have and Have Not*. It was still afternoon as I watched a wizened but agile man out on the rocks cast with his homemade pole. I had seen no dilapidated fishing boats on my visit, but here at least was an old man and the sea. 📷

Martha Steger, a Midlothian, Virginia, freelance journalist, traveled to Cuba with Creative Travel Inc., a full-service, Delaware-based travel agency offering themed tours to Cuba, www.creativetravelinc.com. Steger's article, "Film Fakes," in *FB&C's* Winter 2014 issue received honorable mention in the features category of the National Federation of Press Women's 2014 Communications Contest.