

First Impressions

HAVANA, DECEMBER 2011

Clad in t-shirts, spandex, neon colors and spangled jeans, with stylishly gelled hair and occasionally driving late-model vehicles like Kias and Russian Ladas, the inhabitants of Havana were clearly very much of this century.

However, the aging American cars, sometimes patched together with little more than love and chewing gum, wheezing down the street and belching diesel fumes, conspired with the street criers hawking vegetables and the *son* musicians, whose gentle yet lively acoustic melodies drifted from the bars, to give the casual observer the distinct impression of somehow having walked through a time warp. Recently washed clothes hung above from a variety of ingeniously devised lines and racks, attached to the outside walls of second- and third-story façades so that they could be reached from the ubiquitous balconies. The balconies were also the improbable focus of a bustling business. In general, the ground floors of buildings in Habana Vieja, when they aren't vacant, are occupied by businesses of varying sorts, from barbershops and manicurists to shoe repair and trinket shops—though people certainly live in ground floor apartments as well, sometimes jerry-rigged to stack two levels into the formerly grand, high-ceilinged first-floor spaces. As vendors pushed flatbed dollies through the streets hawking one or two of the items among the usual limited array of available produce—things like tomatoes, onions, garlic, parsley, bell peppers, plantains, cucumbers, and mild green leaf lettuce—ladies would emerge from shadowy interiors returning their calls. Once the transaction had been established, a long piece of rope or twine tied around a can or a jar would be lowered from a balcony to the street, sometimes with a bag inside, but always with pesos, so that the purchase could be made without necessitating a trip up and down stairs by either party: an ingenious solution and an act of faith all rolled into one.

