

CUBA

La Primera Vista

By Joy Basdeo

Two weeks ago the National Gallery arranged a two-day charter to Cuba so that Cayman residents could attend the opening of the exhibition "Dos Visiones" at the Fototeca de Cuba. Twenty-two people took advantage of this opportunity. Here Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education, Human Resources & Culture, Joy Basdeo shares a personal trip report.

"The Cayman Islands and Cuba share a rich cultural heritage... our men fished and turtled together for over 300 years in the water that separate our land masses. The archipelago that makes up Grand Cayman, Cayman Brac and Little Cayman continues 140 miles to the Isle of Pines (Isle of Youth) in Cuba where many Caymanians settled.

The people from both of these island countries in the Caribbean Sea are unique. The national Gallery of the Cayman Islands challenged photographers Roberto

terday to get some disposable cameras, and the clerk said I should take water. Good idea, I'll stop at the supermarket on the way to the airport. Some distant memory says take soap, so a bar of that goes into my bag. I should have paid attention, this is an official trip. I'm not sure about getting an iron so I pack clothes that won't crease.

The charter has been arranged by the National Gallery. I have no idea who is going beside the Minister for Culture & myself. We will get a programme when we get there.

I try not to think about the plane, as this has been my chief deterrent all along. Now I have no excuse since Cayman Airways flies twice per week, but this time I am going on Aero Caribbean.

I hope I see some of my Cuban cousins. Most of them live in Isle of Pines, but the one I know best lives in Havana, working

"Most people say they learned about it from the newspaper and that they wanted to go with a



The group that made the trip to the opening of Dos Visiones.

been before, for others like me it is the first time. We listen to their stories while we wait to board the plane. Most of the stories are positive, like where to eat. Others are practical, like keep some tissues in your purse in case you have to go to a public restroom where you will find neither tissue or paper towels. There are no bad experiences, or nobody is talking about the plane.

Big item, travel with small US bills, and you have to have cash. I have taken

We go out to the plane. Thank goodness it's a jet, a YAK 40. I try not to imagine how old it might be. I think to myself that the Cubans are good mechanics, everybody says so, look at all those old cars! The flight is smooth, about 90 minutes. We get offered cola and beer, and a chocolate covered cookie that says Made in Italy on the package. We get offered duty-free Cuban rum in a softpack for \$5, and perfume made in Mexico.

In no time we are on the ground. We are at a satellite terminal, it looks a bit like the old Owen Roberts terminal. A bus waits to take us the few hundred yards from the apron to the terminal building. We queue for immigration, which is fine since we all

from G. Cayman to explore each other's homelands and help us each to better understand our neighbours. Our countries are so close, yet we know so little about each other...It's time!"

*Leslie Bigelman, MBE, Director,
National Gallery of the Cayman Islands*

Day One : Wednesday, 7th May, 2003

I am going to Cuba. I realise that I am completely unprepared for this. I have not asked anybody what to take. I went yes-

group to do more than party."

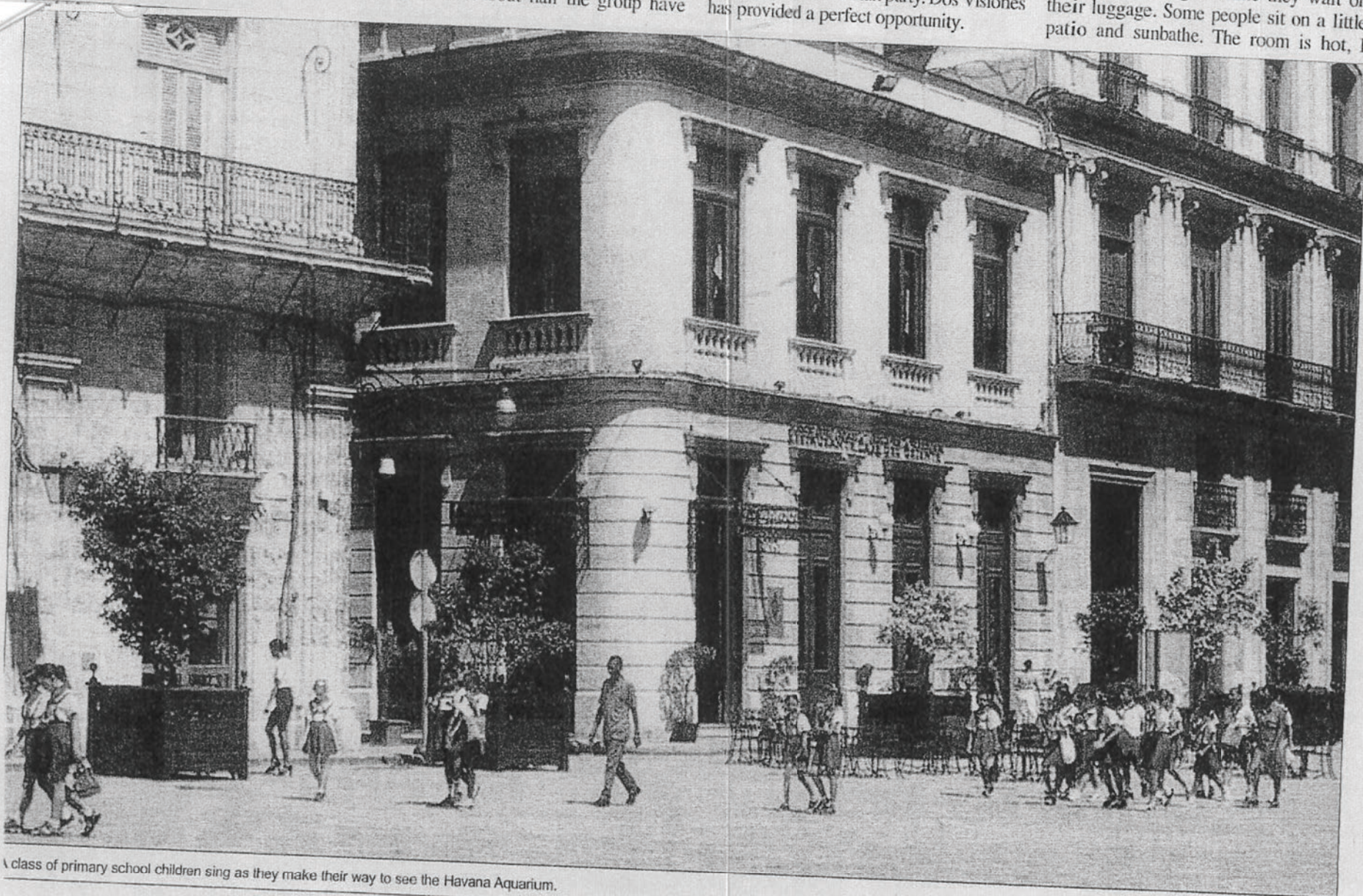
at an employment agency. I am amazed to find out I can contact her by email, through a friend, but so what. It had not occurred to me that email will be as routine to them as it is to us. Influenced by the stories of all these 1950's cars, I don't think of Havana as being modern. I will have a lot to learn.

7:00 am airport check-in. We are a group of 22. About half the group have

more US than I thought I would need, inadvertently. One of the group is kind enough to change a \$20 into \$1's.

Everybody is excited, it is a real adventure! I ask a few people why they're going and how they heard about it from the newspaper and that they wanted to go with a group to do more than party. Dos Visiones has provided a perfect opportunity.

have visas provided with our tickets. The officer looks at me very hard and asks me where I'm from. I think she expects me to say Mexico or Venezuela, but she can hear that I can't speak any Spanish. I go through the arch of the X-ray machine, everything goes off, watch, bracelet, rings, sunglasses the works. I take off everything I can, and sit and wait on the rest of the group. People are lighting up everywhere, cigarettes and cigars while they wait on their luggage. Some people sit on a little patio and sunbathe. The room is hot, I



A class of primary school children sing as they make their way to see the Havana Aquarium.