

'Worms' Haven't Turned to Fidel

But a 3-Week Tour of Island Finds Most of the People in His Camp

By Dan Kurzman
Staff Reporter

Dan Kurzman, Latin-American specialist for The Washington Post, is one of the American correspondents invited to Cuba by Fidel Castro. He is one of the few who traveled extensively throughout the country, a trip from which he has just returned. The following is the first of a series of articles on his experiences and observations.

"HOW IN HELL did you get here?" the startled young man in olive-drab fatigues, muddy combat boots and peaked knit cap asked me.

"Well," I replied, "Fidel said I could travel anywhere I wanted in Cuba. So here I am."

So there I was—in the majestic, military-controlled heart of the Sierra Maestre mountain from which Fidel Castro launched his struggle for power.

I was rather startled myself. With blue canvas bag in one hand, a typewriter in the other and a camera case slung over my shoulder, I made my way alone, as if I were in some bourgeois democracy, from village to village, town to town, farm to farm in whatever transportation was at hand—broken-down taxis, army jeeps, supply trucks, local buses and, when necessary, airplanes.

Only once was I even asked for identification — when I requested mountain transportation from an army officer at the foot of the Sierra Maestre.

"Oh, you're one of the American reporters Fidel invited to Cuba," he said. "Of course, I'll help you."

Eager to Please

FROM THE MOMENT that about 25 American reporters arrived in Havana more than three weeks ago, the Cubans were determined to win our sympathy, or at least reduce our antipathy, for the Castro regime. Cuba regards the American press as an essential instrument for paving the path toward "peaceful coexistence" with the United States, a goal Castro now eagerly seeks.

Landing after a 4-hour flight from Mexico on an airfield dominated by several Russian TU-114 transports, we were welcomed in the stifling evening

air by a smiling, neatly dressed young man representing the Cuban tourist agency. We were taken to a small, well-furnished reception room reserved at the huge modern airport for VIPs, then led through customs without having to open our bags.

As we emerged from the terminal building and climbed into a new Czech-made bus, our guide assured us that the long, sleek vehicle was every bit as good as, if not better than, the British buses Cuba recently purchased to the horrified gasps of the United States State Department.

"Under socialism, life is good in Cuba," he said flatly and mechanically.

And before we reached our hotel, this reminder was to be monotonously hammered home in the form of slogans exploding forth endlessly from billboards, fence posters and building walls: "Vive Marxism-Leninism!"; "We will follow you, Fidel!"; "Socialism means happiness."

Invariably Big Brother's bearded figure illustrated the point, his robust image sometimes benevolently gazing across Cuba from the Sierra Maestre, sometimes caught in an ecstatic spasm of finger-shaking oratory, sometimes grimacing with open-mouthed ferocity, rifle raised aloft.

At the Havana-Libre

AS WE PULLED into the entrance-way of the Havana-Libre Hotel, once the luxurious Havana-Hilton, porters dressed in shabby, misfitting uniforms met us and unloaded the baggage while we arranged for rooms at the reception desk. All of us were assigned to the same floor, leading to speculation that this particular floor was "bugged."

The enormous lobby was alive with laughter and conversation emanating from heavy patches of humanity: young men dressed in slacks and sport shorts and young women wearing unstylish cotton print frocks and cooling themselves with brilliantly colored fans.

Some were visitors from other Communist countries, and many were

Negroes basking in their new sense of equality generated by the Revolution. Negroes, especially if they were not well dressed, were often turned away from the Hilton and other first-class hotels under previous regimes. Almost no one—except the American reporters—wore jackets and ties.

Part of the milling crowd—visiting bureaucrats, students or government organization delegates—lived in the hotel. And part were on their way to or from the large, dimly lit second-floor bar or the even darker cocktail lounge on the roof, where, I discovered later, only gin, rum and daiquiris, and virtually flavorless soft drinks, were available. Scotch, I soon found, was unobtainable, except from some private sources for \$90 a bottle.

Once registered, it was no simple matter getting to our rooms. Only two of the eight elevators were running, and they were packed more solidly with human flesh than the New York City subway at rush hour.

Nor could we use the stairway, which was closed, apparently to prevent guests from sneaking friends of



By George P. Koshollek Jr., the Milwaukee Journal

Premier Fidel Castro leans into his work as he addresses a huge crowd at Santiago during the 26th of July celebration.

the opposite sex up to their rooms in violation of the government's new puritanical moral code—a code that astonished reporters who had known Havana's sinful ways in the past.

At 'Trader Vic's'

ONCE IN MY ROOM, which was comfortable enough except that the air conditioner barely worked, I telephoned the local Associated Press office to ask for the latest news. I learned the limited use of the telephone in today's Cuba when the AP reporter said it was against government regulations to give news via that medium, even if it didn't involve Cuba, and that our conversation was probably being recorded.

Later that night, I went to the hotel dining room, a Trader Vic's restaurant called the Polynesian Room. It still retained the old Trader Vic's exotic atmosphere, with softly glowing oriental lanterns hanging from the ceil-

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ing and South Seas guitar strains flowing soothingly from a loud-speaker.

But instead of the pretty oriental waitresses in native costume for which Trader Vic's is famous, impassive Chinese men in blue, threadworn Mao Tse-tung-style tunics waited on the tables. And while the old menu for mixed Polynesian drinks was still available, including enticing pictures, all but the simplest selections were crossed out. Nor were there any coconuts from which to drink.

The food was good—if you paid the price. A hamburger steak cost \$3, fried chicken \$5, and a filet mignon \$7. Fresh vegetables were available only for VIPs—and visiting correspondents.

Oddly enough, despite the exorbitant prices, about par for a good Cuban restaurant, the place was overflowing with customers, almost all in the inevitable shirtsleeves.

As I was to discover later, there was little for bureaucrats and the remnants of the middle class to spend money on other than relatively good food in expensive restaurants, which represent one of the few pleasures left in life in Cuba.

The VIP Treatment

THE NEXT MORNING, we were awakened at dawn because a plane was scheduled to take us to Santiago de Cuba to watch the 26th of July celebration. We were served breakfast in a special dining room reserved for foreign guests. We had watermelon juice, ham and eggs, bread, butter and jam, and coffee.

Government officials attending us were highly embarrassed when, in error, I at first entered the Cuban dining room and found there was nothing to eat but thin powdered-egg sandwiches and watery hot chocolate.

On leaving the hotel, I asked for my bill, only to be told by the hotel clerk that the government was picking up the tab, and that I could leave my baggage in my room because it would be reserved for me until I returned from Santiago several days later. When I insisted on paying—and giving up my room during my absence—he reluctantly agreed.

On arriving at the airport in one of the Foreign Ministry's black 1959 Cadillacs, I also had to insist on paying the fare to Santiago.

In the VIP room, we joined dozens of other people waiting to board the plane — mainly bureaucrats, East

German technicians and army officers, and young militia girls dressed — smartly somehow — in blue denim shirts, tightly belted khaki trousers and beret, and heavy army shoes. They carried small holstered pistols.

"I volunteered for the militia because I believe in Fidel and the Revolution," said an attractive 19-year-old girl with long blond page-boy-style hair, who would have looked more believable in bobby socks. She added, magnanimously: "I love humanity, including you Americans. You can't help what kind of government you have."

The Masses Perform

WE ARRIVED in Santiago and found ourselves enveloped in a festive holiday atmosphere, with Cuban flags and banners shouting the praises of the Revolution hanging from every

telephone pole and, adorning every shop and wall along the way from the airport to the stadium, where festivities were already in progress.

The special cars that had met us had to worm their way through huge throngs of flag-waving merrymakers caught up in the gay fiesta mood.

At the stadium entrance, we piled out and were led by a Foreign Ministry official to an open, grassy, fenced-off area between grandstands, which were apparently too full to accommodate us.

Standing under a relentless noon sun, saved from heat prostration only by the timely distribution of broad-rimmed, crudely woven straw hats, we watched the performances of massed groups of young men and women, who, stretched across the stadium floor, did calisthenic exercises in perfect unison to the rhythm of a blaring band.

In one performance, men dressed in baseball uniforms and brandishing bats went through playing motions flawlessly, strangely incorporating a thoroughly American tradition into an exercise clearly symbolic, in the Cuban context, of a social pattern of mechanical conformity.

When the show was over, ending with the distribution of awards to Cuba's hardest workers, we returned to our cars, which snaked their way through the rollicking crowds to the ancient, colonial-style Casa Grande Hotel, where we were to stay.

Lunch Conversation

PUT UP TWO to a room because of the massive influx of visitors, we found our new quarters austere, airless,

and shoddily furnished.

The air conditioner would not work and the toilet would not flush. But compensating for these shortcomings was the richly colorful and historic vintage of the hotel's atmosphere.

In the large, crowded dining room, almost any dish could be had at relatively moderate prices; a steak cost only \$4. For Oriente Province, of which Santiago is the capital, had been combed for extra food supplies to make sure that holiday visitors to Santiago, particularly from abroad, would not go home hungry.

The big celebration made for strange table partners. Correspondents of the Wall Street Journal and The Worker discussed their considerable ideological differences; I engaged in long arguments with the Tass correspondent over Soviet cold war policy; a U.S. News & World Report correspondent brawled verbally with a French fellow-traveler over the definition of a "free press."

The Campesinos

AFTER LUNCH, Foreign Ministry cars took reporters on what was described as a "tour of the city."

However, we headed straight for the outskirts of town where, in a large open field, a caravan of Russian-made trucks, lined up in four long rows, was waiting to greet us. These trucks were among those that were carrying about 100,000 campesinos from all over Oriente Province to participate in the July 26th celebration. It was not clear whether some came because they wanted to, or because they would not risk the consequences of refusing.

The trucks, together with tents being set up on the field, were being used as temporary living quarters for the visi-

tors. Decorated with flags and banners, the vehicles, covered with dirty canvas, resembled a line of sideshow stalls. And the campesinos, led by union leaders well versed in the party line, put on a good show.

They surrounded our cars cheering and waving Cuban flags as if we were the leaders of the Castro revolution. On emerging with difficulty from our cars, the campesinos formed around us in several tight knots of humanity while a union leader, in the center of each knot, lustily explained to us how socialism had benefited the peasant.

The leader with whom I was trapped by the friendly crowd, a fat, bare-chested man with a stubbly beard and large moustache, shouted, trembling with conviction: "We are living better. We are eating better. We are earning more. Communism is wonderful."

"What is communism?" I asked.

"Communism," he answered simply, and repetitively, "is when we live better, eat better, and earn more."

The crowd mechanically shouted and applauded with approval. Everybody then posed for pictures, and we finally pulled out to the resounding cries of "Vive Fidel! Vive socialism!"

Castro, Castro, Castro

THAT NIGHT and the next morning, thousands of people, many of them dressed in colorful masquerade costumes and smeared with heavy makeup—even children wore lipstick and rouge—paraded through the narrow streets of the town, dancing to native rhythms and singing the praises of Fidel.

"It's hard to say whether those people are really politically minded or whether they just love a fiesta—any fiesta," one diplomat commented.

But it was clear that whatever they thought or knew about communism, Fidel, forever Fidel, was their hero.

On the afternoon of July 26, crowds converged on the banner-plastered stadium where Fidel was to address them, extending almost to the horizon in a massive blanket of humanity.

I and the other reporters, wearing our straw hats against the hot sun, were led to seats directly under the speaker's stand and flanked by sections for foreign dignitaries. Castro and other Cuban leaders arrived about two hours after the crowd. He delivered forcefully, for more than three hours, his much publicized speech condemning the United States, but nevertheless holding out an olive branch.

When the speech ended, everyone but the American reporters gave Castro a standing ovation. Among the most enthusiastic listeners were the American students who were visiting Cuba in violation of United States travel restrictions to that country.

One pretty student from New York told me she agreed with everything Castro had said, though she didn't understand a word of Spanish. "If necessary," she said, "the American people must overthrow their government by force."

Another student, sporting a beard and dressed like a beatnik, offered similar sentiments and then asked if I wanted to know his name.

"Not particularly," I replied.

"But I'm news," he insisted in a rather hurt tone. "I have defied the United States Government."

With Castro Permission

THE NEXT DAY, Castro held a 3-hour press conference in which he answered questions with his usual aplomb—and endless verbiage. In a conversation afterward, he told me that I could travel freely wherever I wanted to in Cuba. I thanked him and decided to do so.

I embarked alone on a stopover tour across Cuba, buying a ticket for a flight to the Oriente town of Manzanillo. The airport salesclerk raised his eyebrows in surprise when I told him my nationality, then, apparently as a gesture of politeness, rushed the ticket-issuing process.

On arriving at the Manzanillo airport, where a tiny one-room structure served as a terminal, I got into a taxi with several other passengers. When the others had been discharged, the driver asked, referring to a remark about my nationality and profession I had made earlier:

"Do you really mean you're a North American reporter?"

"Yes," I replied.

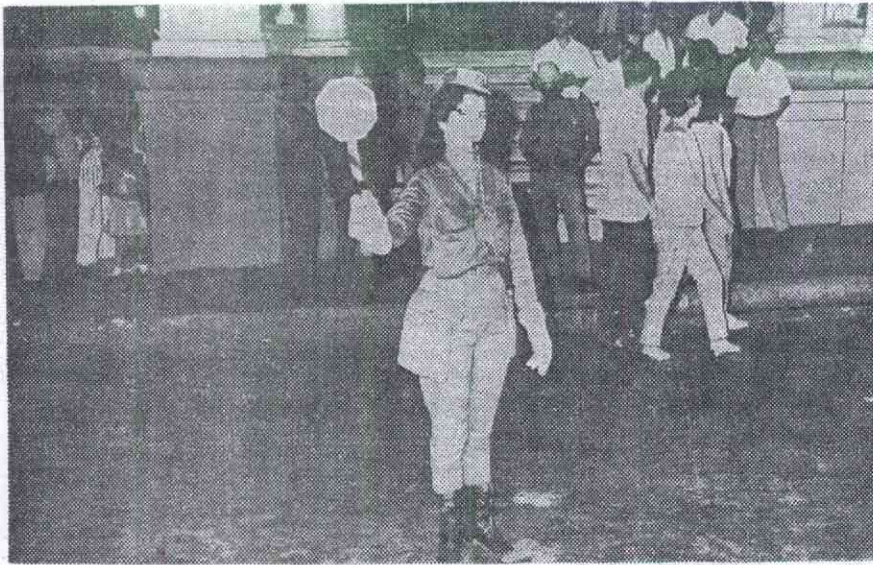
"I'm a North American, too," he said.

"Aren't you a Cuban?"

"Yes, but I want North America to send troops here. I am a *gusano*," he said proudly.

Gusano, meaning "worm" in Spanish, is the description Castro has given those who oppose his regime, and has been converted into an expression of honor by these oppositionists. Every taxi driver I was to meet in Cuba claimed to be a *gusano*, though only after being convinced that I really was an American.

"I have a short-wave radio at home."



A militiawoman directing traffic in Santiago.

said the cabbie. "I listen to Miami every night. That's where I'll go someday when this pile of junk finally falls apart. Do you know that I must pay 200 pesos (\$200) for a single tire on the black market?"

The care with which he drove whenever he came to an unpaved street lent stress to this point.

Special Gesture

OUR CONVERSATION ended on our arrival at the Casa Blanca Hotel, named for its glaring white-painted exterior. The pudgy, double-chinned hotel manager gave me the now standard startled look when I registered.

Though the finest in this sleepy, sun-baked town, the hotel resembled a third-class rooming house. And adding to the depressing atmosphere was the sight of Castro, Khrushchev and Lenin staring from almost every wall in the lobby. My room was adequate, though there was no running water.

Having run out of pesos, I found myself in a predicament when the hotel manager said only the national bank could change my dollars and that the bank had already closed. However, when I knocked on the door of the bank, officials let me in after hours "as a special gesture of friendship toward the United States."

When the transaction was finally completed, one bank employe offered to be my guide—and he proved to be a good salesman for his government. He took me to a fishing cooperative that had recently been formed—a showcase Castro achievement. Fishermen lived in attractive new homes and claimed to

be earning about \$300 to \$400 a month as compared to less than \$100 before the Revolution.

More Gusanos

THAT EVENING, I ate in the hotel restaurant, my first meal intended for Cubans and not foreigners. Considering the food shortages I had heard so much about, it wasn't bad. No steak was available, but I had a choice between ham and calves' liver, supplemented by rice and potatoes, and was served coffee, which other guests had to do without. Prices were much lower than in the big cities. I also saved money on breakfast the next morning. The hotel simply didn't serve any.

I could have had some, however, if I had been willing to share the skimpy rations of a taxi driver I hired to take me to the foothills of the Sierra Maestre, about 50 miles away. Before we started out, the cabbie offered to take me to his home for breakfast, but I politely refused.

"It isn't often," he said, "that I get a chance to meet an American. I wasn't always a taxi driver, I used to own a store and did business with many Americans. My wife and I would be only too glad to share with you the food we have."

The driver, a shabbily dressed, good-looking man of about 35 with uncut locks hanging over his ears, stopped off, at my request, at a number of dilapidated wooden farmhouses along the road, all of them belonging to individual peasants rather than to the state. (About 30 per cent of Cuban farmland is still privately owned.)

We found, understandably enough, only *gusanos* among this category of peasants. Some would not criticize the

government openly, but simply reflected on the "good old days." Others, however, bitterly condemned the regime.

"Practically all we have to feed our children today is rice," said one raggedly dressed housewife who had to restrain her tears. "We can't even get what rations are due us. And the Russian canned food gives us all dysentery."

"Not so loud," her thin, balding husband cautioned. "Arturo may be listening."

Arturo, I learned, was a handyman on the farm who was suspected of spying for the local Committee for Revolutionary Defense.

Nevertheless, as we departed, the whole family, which included five children, cried after us in a spasm of uncontrollable emotion: "Vive Johnson! Vive Johnson!"

To Sierra Maestre

THE ANCIENT, 3-fendered taxi finally hissed and coughed to a halt in a village at the foothills of the Sierra Maestre. Local military and Castro party officials agreed to help me get to Minas del Frio, the village where Fidel had once set up rebel headquarters. The area was now the site of a school designed to train teachers for service among peasants isolated in the mountains.

It had been, until recently, an army training center, and was still considered a strategic military region since counter-revolutionary bands have apparently not been wiped out yet.

I climbed in the front of a Russian-made truck loaded with supplies for the school, feeling rather guilty about the presence in the rear of several

young militia girls, who had to sit on the freight.

"Perhaps," I suggested to the Negro driver, "I should change places with one of the girls."

"That is unnecessary," he replied impassively. "They are trained to live a hard, rugged life. You are used to a comfortable, bourgeois life. We don't expect you to make the same sacrifices."

I remained sheepishly silent.

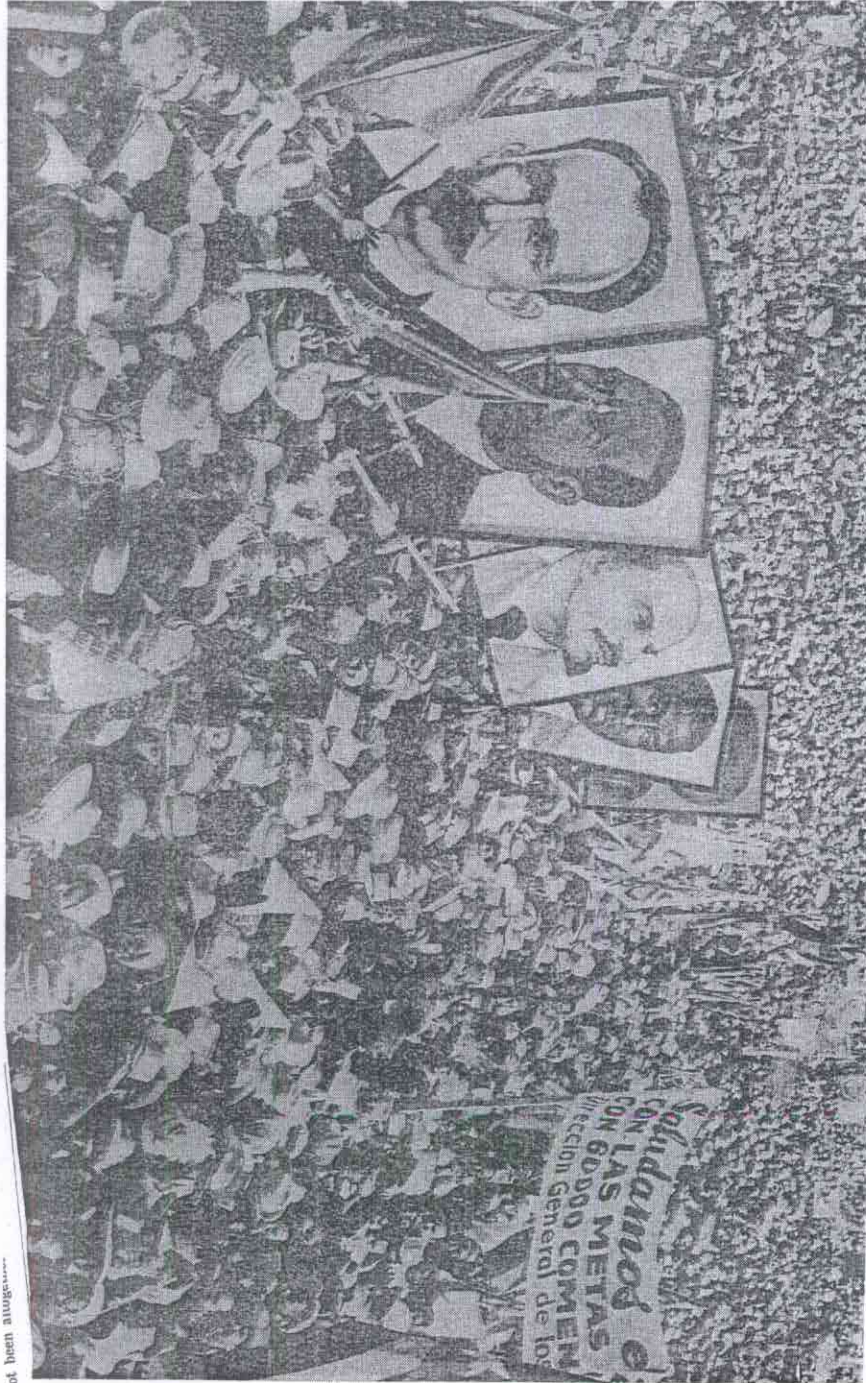
Within a few minutes, we had started our steep ascent into the magnificent brown and purple wilderness that reached gently toward the clear summer sky.

The road was a winding pitted path that severely tested the durability of the lurching vehicle. Thick brush and some trees blanketed the more level areas, and often we had to plow across swiftly flowing streams of muddy mountain water. An occasional mud and thatch hut poked from the rocky mountainsides.

At one point, the narrow, precarious road was completely cut off by tons of dirt and rock deposited by an avalanche. It took an hour before a Soviet bulldozer crawled to the area from a village ahead and cleared the way for us.

Considering everything, I was not at all surprised on our arrival in Minas del Frio when the young man greeting us asked "how in hell" I, a flabby "Yankee imperialist," had gotten there.

MONDAY: The Russian truck drops reporter Kurzman at what was once Castro's mountain headquarters and into the midst of a strange assortment of "guests," including a North Vietnamese general and three people claiming to be Americans.



free world... Still, it has not been altogether...

Other Outlook

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