



Testimonials

Dear Charles,

I have to confess I began our trip to Cuba with you with some trepidation; I thought the cost was pricey, I worried about plane connections, the harassment of jinteros, and the near certainty of returning home with dengue fever. I'm now happy to say that I find every one of these concerns laughable. The trip was worth every penny, the planes flew on time, the Cubans we met were to a man and woman courteous, and I feel bronzed, fit, and in love with Cuba. You are a magician. You were our Virgil in Purgatorio, en route to Paradiso, as we dearly hope, for Cuba.

You do deserve a hat's-off, chapeau, well done. Your plan was so imaginatively thought through and done with such efficiency that it all now seems a bit of a miracle. The events you designed were fascinating without a single lowering of intensity or charm. If I begin to single out occasions, I would have to reproduce our entire itinerary. Still, some stand out from the others just a little (with no discourtesy intended to those I don't mention): the lecture about Cuba by Marc Frank was wonderfully illuminating and engaging, and the lecture by the architect Pedro Vazquez equally fine. The music at the Café Madrigal with Frank Delgado was brilliant; even more brilliant (can this be?) was the performance unrolling the history of music by Alberto Faya (what a voice!). I loved our visit to the home of the two young women of Reina y Real determined to be hip-hop stars (what an original idea to visit them!), and we loved staying at the elegant casa particular in Trinidad with Deborah and José. (We had a marvelous time driving in a 1957 Fairline Ford with the very amiable Jorge Palmiero to the beach at Ancón and into the Valley of the Sugar Mills.)

All throughout we found the Cubans to be friendly and courteous as if they grew up with the morality of a different planet: you will not be greeted with such smiles and the suggestion of friendship and respect in our madly wired urban centers at home. Since I am writing this report to honor you, Charles, the mastermind of the excursion, I must conclude with your finest achievement: on the strength of your many friendships in Cuba, you brought us Christopher our guide; he was a master of clear information (about everything!) and a diplomatic way of presenting Cuban history, specially its tormented relations with the US, that respected the complexity of the matter but without polemical drama. The trip was memorable, and Regine, my wife, and I thank you for your brilliant administration.

Best wishes,
Stanley

Stanley Corngold
Professor of German and Comparative Literature, Emeritus
Princeton University

This trip to Cuba was extraordinary, will remain with me for a long time, and has inspired in me a desire to maintain ties with some of the scholars we met, and to introduce my students to Cuba through my own teaching.

The most important feature of the trip is the extraordinary set of human relationships that Charles Bittner has established and maintains throughout the city of Havana. He is clearly respected and beloved everywhere he goes, and with reason. He has a classically New York personal style, a tough-minded and wide-ranging knowledge of the culture and the history, an absolute willingness to help manage awkward intercultural exchanges (helping negotiate between an artist and a prospective buyer--me!), and a gentle consideration and kindness, that combined to make the trip a joy from beginning to end. He was throughout thoughtful and obliging (creating a last-minute trip to the Buena Vista Social Club for those who wanted it). I did not envy his job; I literally couldn't do it. But I am so grateful that he created this trip and cannot imagine anyone else having the combination of characteristics that he brings to it.

The specific experiences that were set up for us--ranging from scholarly lectures from a wide range of brilliant and generous academics (on architecture, art, music, economics, gender--an interdisciplinary education in a week!), to musical performances of three completely different genres of Cuban music, to meetings with artists and dancers--not to mention visits to an organic vegetable farm and restaurant and a tobacco farm! I cannot recall a week in my adult life when I learned more faster--or so enjoyably. Moreover, it has awakened in me a desire to learn more, and to go back.

Finally, there was in addition all kinds of attention to our comfort and first-world needs in a poor country. He has a great sense of humor and projects great calm, courtesy and genuine enjoyment of the range of human beings in the world.

Charles is a treasure and made this trip a joy from beginning to end.

Abby Stewart

Sandra Schwartz Tangri Distinguished University Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies
University of Michigan

Cuba is a complicated place and without a well organized, knowledgeable, well connected, savvy, and sensitive guide, it would be easy to have small blips become major problems. For example, assuring that every venue was ready to receive us before loading the bus. Additionally, we saw people from other tours wearing "Make America Great Again" caps and t-shirts in Havana. Charles was able to negotiate our way through Havana and Vinales without leaving an "ugly American" footprint. For that alone, we have recommended this trip to our friends and through social media.

This was our best trip ever!

Thanks for what you do, Harvey

Dear Charles,

I wanted to drop a further note of thanks for the extraordinary trip to Cuba. As someone who has written and taught about the intersections of politics and culture in U.S. foreign relations for nearly twenty-five years, I found the quality of the programming to be truly stellar, consistently exceeding any reasonable expectation. It is impossible to single out highlights in such a uniformly excellent program, but I perhaps can say that I especially loved the talk by Jose Viera, the discussion with Edel Bordón, the talk/discussion with Miguel Coyula, the talk and performance by Alberto Faya and the amazing younger musicians, seeing the Cuban collection at the art museum with a brilliant professor and curator, and meeting the members of Obsesión and hearing from the anti-racist activists. I am delighted to have had the chance to meet Sujatha and her presence added to the trip greatly. As I had hoped, the trip fit the needs of my current book project on U.S. triumphalism and nostalgia perfectly; an excellent introduction that will allow me to follow up directly with Viera, Bordón, and others by email and on future trips. Although stretching the research and family budget, the trip was completely worth it as it would have taken me months of prep and at least three weeks on the ground to even begin to approximate what we were able to do in a week. Hopefully, some of my colleagues and friends will be joining you in the future.

Thanks again and all best, Penny

Penny Von Eschen L. Sanford and Jo Mills Reis
Professor of Humanities, Professor of History
Department of History, Cornell University

Dear Charles,

I am writing to thank you for making our recent trip to Cuba the best, most interesting, and most rewarding trip my wife and I have ever taken. (In my case, that includes travel in more than 38 countries, over 57 years!) In so many different ways you were the key to this rich and rewarding experience. From our first message asking about the trip, you communicated helpful information and answered every question. In making adjustments to the final schedule, you took account of people's interests and constraints. And on the ground in Cuba, you were always willing to make suggestions and give advice.

At every stage of the trip, it was clear that you had developed smooth and friendly relations with the Cuban speakers, guides, and other personnel.

Overall, we enjoyed this trip immensely, and look back on it as a truly wonderful experience. We wish you continued success in organizing such an interesting and stimulating travel experience, and are glad to recommend you to other people and groups.

Thanks!

Sincerely yours,

David G. Winter, Professor Emeritus of Psychology
University of Michigan

Dear Charles,

Pardon the delay- but a visiting Grandson and holiday preparations have gotten in the way of a timely response. Cuba has long been on my bucket list and I am so glad I could experience it under your watch. It was a wonderful trip-a great introduction to the country and its people. We were introduced to kind and generous people everywhere and I found the lectures to be most informative and varied-and never boring. An added bonus was near perfect weather and no whining (at least that I heard!) Thanks so much for all your efforts and Happy Thanksgiving!

Janice

Charles,

I can't stop talking about the trip! Most people are surprised that I have only glowing reports--no negatives! That almost never happens with any trip. I find myself bombarding friends and family with glowing details of my experience in Cuba. One of my young friends embarked on a hiking trip to Cuba just this week--he'll be there until early December. He's a photographer doing this on his own. His parents were worried until I told them he had nothing to worry about. Prepared Thanksgiving dinner in my "I Love Cuba" apron. Thanks for all you did to make the trip a memorable one.

Nancy

Dear Charles,

Trudy and I would like to thank you for leading us on the excellent tour of Cuba. The selection of activities was outstanding. Especially worthwhile were the lectures/presentations, which were without exception extremely informative and enlightening. I especially liked those by Portia Siegelbaum, Miguel Coyula, and Marc Frank, but they were all good. They marked the difference between a mere look-around tour and one that provides genuine understanding and insight. I am sure that a lot of thought and hard work by you, Peter, and others went into it. I also appreciate the concern you expressed after I fell and at other times during the trip, and your good cheer and sense of humor throughout. I hope we have a chance to meet again.

Best wishes, Julius

Hi Charles,

I'm sure you're deluged with wildly enthusiastic letters about our fantastic voyage of last week, including breathless praise for your obviously prodigious work in making it so terrific. I just want to add my note to the pile. The programs and events of our amazing itinerary were both inspired and inspiring and, tho they undoubtedly involved myriad details, you always seemed to have everything under control. Peter and I felt that the entire program on the whole was extraordinary not to mention enjoyable, enlightening and just plain fun.

You were always helpful and cheery in a charmingly contagious way that always brightened the day. We have already told you how much we appreciated Abel who did so much to make everyone comfortable, went out of his way to do a million little extras, from responding to every question and suggestion, to his informative details about everything that came up, to his wizardry at the airport. He added an entire dimension to the trip. As for you, we can all be thankful that you came to your senses and returned to New York after years of delinquency because that's obviously where you belong! Mil gracias. Maybe we'll see you in New York later this week.

Best, Jeannette

Dear Charles,

Just a short note to thank you for putting together such a superb excursion to Cuba. I'm not just being flattering when I say that this has been the most amazing and informative trip I've ever taken in my life. The high level of discourse and knowledge, and the sheer amount of updated cultural and social content, plus the superb dance, music, and art—they all have made for an entire lifelong learning in itself. The presenters were without exception top intellects with superb communications skills, as well as clarity, grace, and wit. In sum, an enriching learning experience. Great meals, too! You've managed to tap into the best of Cuban cuisine!

The group of participants itself was an exceptionally good one, with not a single obnoxious person among them and all sorts of interesting individuals in the mix.

OK, Charles, thanks once again.

Saludos, Gene

Dear Charles:

Thanks for your mail with the info BUT thank you most of all for that wonderful week in Cuba which will take months to digest! The program was terrific - informative (Nunez, Frank) and diverse, the music of Faya and Delgado at once virtuoso and soul-building.

And although we could not escape the protective bubble of hotel and bus, we got an inkling of how people (some at least) live and what they are via our extremely open and communicative hosts in Vinales. Again thanks - also for the pleasure of your company.

Best, Heinz

Good evening Charles,

We had a great time in Cuba, and we'd both like to thank you again for organizing our revelatory travels around that fascinating island. We learned a great deal from the excellent speakers you arranged, enjoyed fantastic music, ate far too much, made lots of new friends among our fellow travelers, and got to know much more about the Cuban people. Cuba appears to be one of the most humane places we've visited in over forty years of bouncing around the globe.

Please keep us apprised of your upcoming tours, and we'll hope to travel with you again.

All the best,

Bill and Janet

Hola Charles,

Extraordinary, indeed! Thank you for putting it all together and getting us through it so smoothly.

I truly enjoyed the whole experience and I will keep the people of Cuba in my thoughts and lend my voice to the call for normalization going forward.

Best Regards, Tagore

Hi Charles.

Thank you for a trip of a lifetime. You curated an amazing journey that was educational, emotional, fun and so interesting. It would be nice to get together for a meal or drink in NYC.

Best Regards, Susan

Good Evening Charles,

We had a great time in Cuba, and we'd both like to thank you again for organizing our revelatory travels around that fascinating island. We learned a great deal from the excellent speakers you arranged, enjoyed fantastic music, ate far too much, made lots of new friends among our fellow travelers, and got to know much more about the Cuban people. Cuba appears to be one of the most humane places we've visited in over forty years of bouncing around the globe. Please keep us apprised of your upcoming tours, and we'll hope to travel with you again.

All the best, Bill and Janet

Dear Charles,

Before the trip recedes even further temporally, I wanted to add my personal thanks. As we sift through our photos and memories, this trip becomes even more important to me. Besides providing a current events bubble post-election, it reminded me of the world outside New York, outside my daily world, a different perspective. Many things reminded me of East Berlin - the street lights, the rusted fences, the general air of decay (yes, much of East Berlin is still that way). What was such a contrast was the spirit of the people we met, not dogged - a nice change. The music and the dance were inspiring. All the lectures and discussions were very helpful. You did a grand job!

Thank You - All the Best, Leanore

Dear Charles,

When people say, "I wouldn't have missed it for the world," they must be talking about Iran. Who could forget the musicians under the bridge that night in Isfahan, or the women who welcomed us into their wedding celebration and pulled us into their dance, or the poetry of Hafez in half-whispered Farsi.....

Thanks to you, I often forgot I was on a tour. Of course, when steering our group through Tehran traffic it was "follow the leader," but you were eager to give us advice when we wanted to explore ancient Shiraz on our own.

Where to next, Charles? I'm going!

Pat Shure

Senior Lecturer of Mathematics

The University of Michigan



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