

THE STREETS OF

HAVANA

• BY MARK ZUREK •

Local photographer Mark Zurek's unique journey into Cuba is expressed in a collection of colorful, unforgettable images. He traveled to Cuba to photograph automobiles of a bygone era, finding them frozen in time on the streets of Havana. What he hadn't expected to capture on this trip was a love of the people who call this island nation home.



LAST FALL I WAS ONE OF THE FIRST AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHERS TO GAIN legal access to Cuba. My show theme was “Abandoned America” and my back road travels led me all over the American West. I adopted a central theme of the old cars and trucks that I found set back in the 40s, and came to understand why these relics were kept, rather than sold for scrap ... a long story.

Cuba was a chance to see four-wheeled machines from the 50s in real-time color, and I couldn't pass up the opportunity. The cars were there all right, in all their band-aids and glory. But I fell in love with the people, and this photography became the indelible memory for me.

I will probably choose not to sell the images of the people I met and photographed, it almost feels like a violation of a trust. Life is difficult there, but they possess a unique spirit, a cultural pride that can be seen in their eyes.

Americans are unique visitors right now, the novelty will quickly wear off, and our presence will change that country, and ultimately the people. For now, they seem at peace. They don't want for the basics – as food, clothing, and medical care all are part of the deal. Personal freedoms – another thing, entirely.



MARK ZUREK, OWNER OF DELTA RENOVATIONS, INC., HAS BEEN A BARRINGTON BUSINESSMAN FOR 25 YEARS.



We all pretty much know which end of the camera we belong on. I know I do. My relationship began 20 years ago when I bought a camera for my son's photography class. "Ace the class, it's yours. If not . . ." So I found myself with a Canon that I had no idea what to do with. I found the right button, loaded the film and my alternate life began. Attraction became obsession, and my focus honed in on the abandoned cars and trucks I would find in the fields and back roads of America.

I felt compelled to share my vision and chose the traveling circus of the juried art show, and in turn, was selected to display in some of the most prestigious shows in the country. What was shared was more than just imagery – it had a meaning. And people got it. They connected with something that represented a different time, an America of faith, of a willingness to sacrifice for the future. A time when entitlement didn't exist, and family values did.

I came for the cars. The Cuba rumored to be caught in time, the way-

back machine stuck in the 50s. I wasn't prepared for the cacophony of light, of colors colliding, and diesel smoke perfume. Of music and life, happening at light speed. It was like the first time you saw the Grand Canyon. Overwhelmed, it felt like someone hit the mute button. Then I saw the faces.

I knew that time had stopped in Cuba, that these beauties I found resting honorably in the fields of America were still working in Cuba, running on band-aids and borrowed time. I had to find them before Father Time came to collect his dues.

Through a "people-to-people exchange" between Cuba and the United States, I found myself standing in the streets of Havana. We had no idea of how it would be. If we would be accepted.

My "construction Spanish" served little purpose, the Cuban dialect so unique. Some with the group chose a candid style; I engaged the people with a smile. They showed themselves as they wished to be seen. The young



mother, child on her hip, for an instant revealing the incredible beauty she knew she still possessed despite a difficult existence. The father telling you with his eyes there are lines not to cross.

We had no idea how Americans would be accepted. There were the cautious smiles of course, and plenty of full-on Madonna posing once they saw the cameras. The people were curious, proud. A light in their eyes common to all I met. The repressive regime limits their freedoms, but not their hearts.

I wanted to see more – the Cuba beyond the city limits. So I asked. *“Mark, this is Cuba. It is a communist regime and you are here on a limited visa. You cannot just go where you choose.”* Persistence (whining) paid off in being allowed to leave for one day in the company of a young guide named Eduardo Javier Garcia, a marvelous photographer in his own right. He took me to the town of Hershey. (Yep. Hershey. Just like the chocolate bar.)

BELOW: Games of chess and backgammon are found on the sidewalks everywhere in Havana. Spirited play, the men exaggerate the movements with a flourish of bravado. There is usually a gallery, and here I found the watcher. He would not make eye contact, intentionally looking away. While others would smile, this gentleman maintained quiet dignity. His chiseled face and the lean to the door – classic. Tired. The graffiti nailed it for me, the image intentional in its short depth of field to see him. And know it's Cuba.



The town was once a sight to see. Streets laid out in wonderful symmetry. The company store, the company school. Rumor has it being the spitting image of the town in Pennsylvania. A sugarcane processing factory that covered acres of ground and dozens of railroad sidings. Now – the Cuban version of Detroit. A steel ghost town where cows and goats might outnumber the people, and seem equally curious about the Americans.

Life still exists here. The ancient electric train built in the '30s still runs. Occasionally, even on time. Here, I finally had time to kick back, meld into the scene and observe like a good shooter does, basking in the shade and quiet of the station. Then the promise of the train brings the people. Commerce happens as vendors bring their goods to sell to the travelers. Hamburgasas, fries. Some pretty darn amazing concoctions they were happy to share with us (I think just to see our expressions.)

The train rolls in, and more life happens. The watcher-me sees, manages to chonicle the drama of lives touching. For the briefest of moments eyes make contact. Thoughts exchanged through glances that last only milliseconds. Body language, communication so dramatic and nonverbal. What was it I just saw?

Once a bustling economy, a Levittown complete with the company store, the train. A factory that covers acres upon acres. Hershey died with the collapse of the Soviet Empire. Archaic sugarcane production propped up by price support crashed, and with it the town of Hershey. Dozens of abandoned railroad sidings lie glistening like steel snakes in the weeds. Cows and goats compete for attention, and what was Hershey, now waits as Mother Nature collects the unpaid rent on the elements she lent so chocolate could be made.



The streets of Havana are an open door into the lives of the people. There is limited access to the things we take for granted. TV, Internet. The woman quite bored by the procession, the 14 cameras in front of me all took their shots (as did I) of the woman and her doorway. I left, walked a bit, then stopped and turned around. I came to the door. Smiled a bit and raised the camera. In the moment, something came over her. A bit of melancholy. The young woman, now the young mother, became the young woman again. Her eyes lit, almost a smolder. A face with the proud confidence of a woman who knows the power of her beauty. Maybe for just a millisecond, she showed me. The child fades in the frame, still there but for the moment, it's just her.



ABOVE: The guides told us not to pay for photographs. Hard to do when you have a conscience and see how difficult it is for these people. The guide was a working photographer, afraid the Americans would set precedent. So we shook our heads and said no. *Gracia, no.* At the back end of the procession, I saw this old woman. She asked for a dollar (a "CUC") and I said no. Then I looked and saw the beauty in her face, the pride in her eyes and the history in her skin. "*Por favor mi amiga, una fotografica, one CUC, si?*" She stopped and allowed me to see, all mine for what was five seconds. Then she left. The image won an exhibition at the center for Fine Art Photography in Fort Collins, Col. Haunting. All for a dollar.

An alley near the harbor held the arena where boxers who hoped to one day be on the Cuban National Team fought for a distinguished group of judges. Here, the young boy showing a bit of the confidence necessary for the sport, posing like a New Yorker. The mother holding his bags, and dad, once a boxer himself, drawing the line. Telling me, *that's far enough*, the glare, his belt, the genetic connection all enhanced by the pastel of the peeling yellow and the chain link fence. Never did get the smile.





The train built to ferry workers to Hershey from Regla, Mantanzas, and Casablanca still rattles the tracks. A sight to behold. From the station, I sat for what may have been hours in the shade. The locals paid me no mind, but as the train arrived, the energy, and the anticipation became heightened. Here, life was happening at life speed. I saw dramas unfold, with no idea why. I found this woman, and in two frames I captured something that has me pondering to this day what life drama played out. One image of her with head in arms, the curl of the fingers, and the form of the body is extraordinary. For me, an unforgettable photograph. An image that allows the imagination to participate. This is the best a photographer can do.

The common question asked of me was not of politics (ours or theirs), or of life in America. I was always asked, “What do you think of the Cuban people?”

The cars, the architecture may bookmark the time, but there is something here we may have lost touch with, something to truly be envious of. Family remains all-important. Children are held as precious, and are revered. The streets are as safe as downtown Barrington, filled with the chorus of school children unencumbered by the over-stimulation of iPods and the Internet. Kids being kids, playing soccer, or *biesbol*, without adult interference. Kinda like the sandlots of my youth where you chose sides by throwing a bat and playing until the ball was lost over the crabby lady’s fence. We learned about life that way.

Time has stopped here, but not for long. The world is finding out what a truly unique place this is. Cuba is wary of what happens next; so much to look forward to and such a difficult past and present to deal with. At once open and so friendly, yet reserved and defensive. Stoic beauty, the resilience so bright in the eye.

We often think we know what we’re doing, that bold American confidence that seems to irritate the rest of the world. I went to Cuba for the cars, to add to my portfolio. What I discovered were the people. Unique, so welcoming. So wary.

I need to return, and finish finding what I found. U



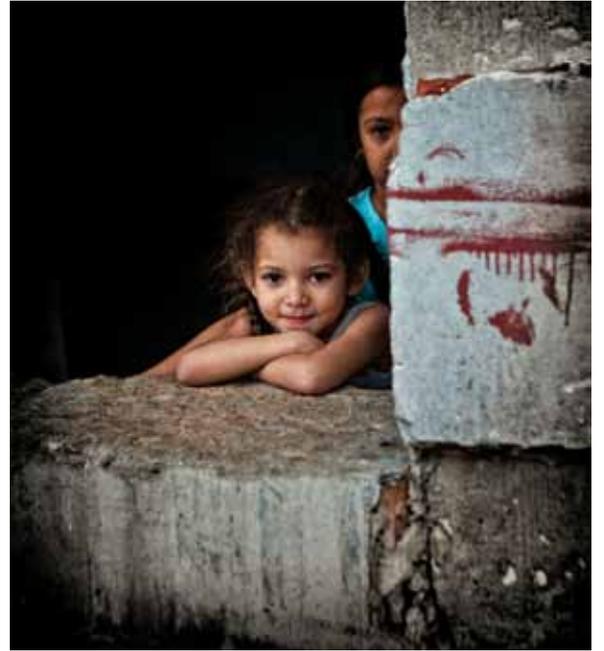
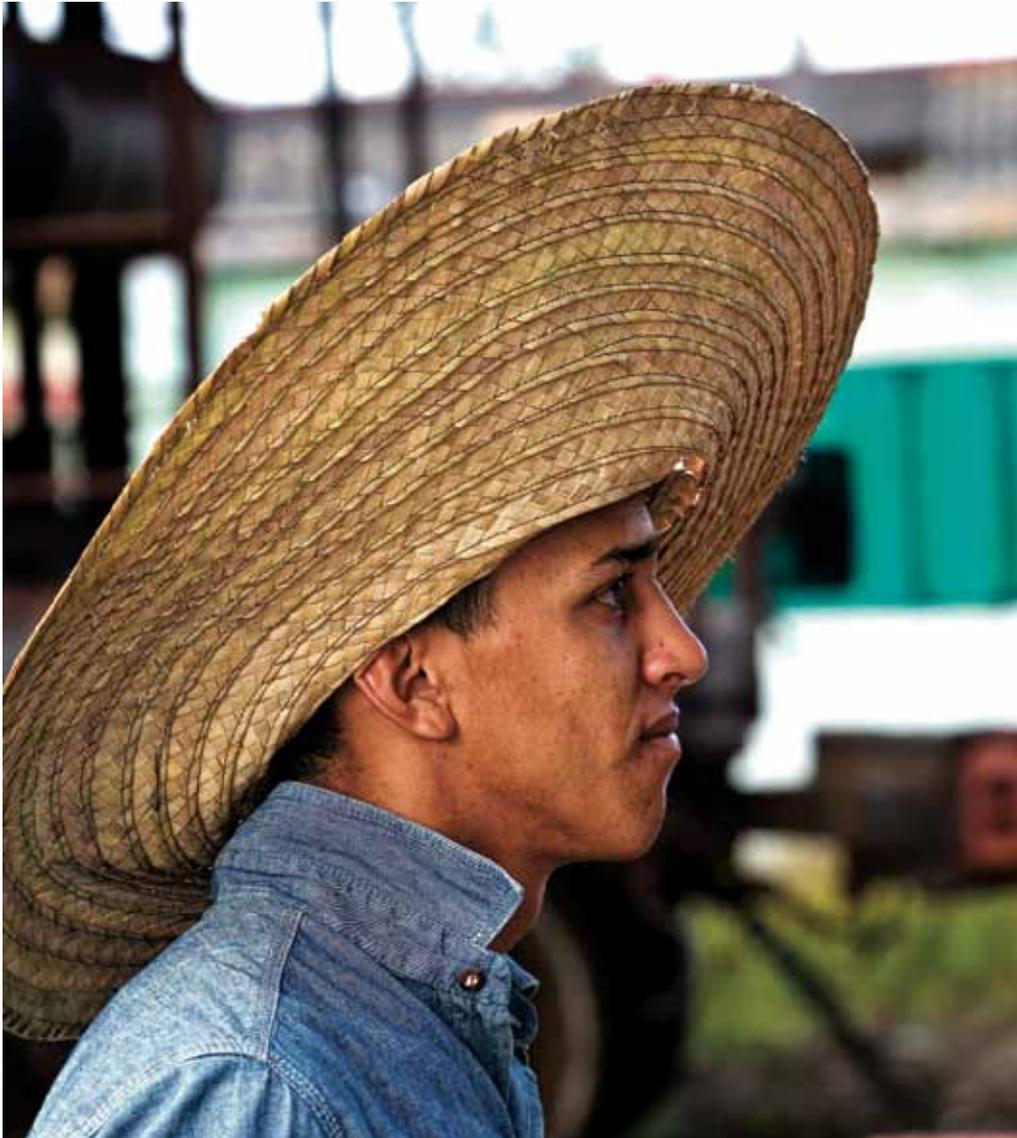
She saw us coming. And this was her time to shine. We were paparazzi; she was Madonna. I was across the street watching the Americans fall over themselves to photograph her. I stayed in my space, and as things settled down she turned to me. Thoughtful, maybe a bit quieter. Loved the pose, the huge turquoise door scales the young girl. The hint of graffiti, the worn pastels of the peeling plaster. Pure backstreet Cuba. For a moment, perhaps life was not so hard. She was quite the chatterbox.



The wariness often turns to a smile, but just as quickly turns back again. Found these two fellas messing around outside the restaurant where the tuxed dude was on break. Home boys we would call them. Horsing around, then the turn to see me. Checking me out; sorta intimidating. A split second later, all smiles and hugs. Left that shot for the others.

MARK ZUREK'S PHOTOGRAPHY, including many of these photos, will be on display from April 6 to June 3 at La Citadelle Art NFP (224-622-9578). La Citadelle Art NFP is an art gallery and exhibition space at The Arboretum of South Barrington. Zurek's show is named, "Backroad America: Knights in Rusting Armor". One of his Cuban portraits is currently on exhibition at the Center for Fine Art Photography in Fort Collins, Col. For more information, visit www.photoanarchy.com.

A worker on the railroad in Hershey, with a group of a dozen or so young men and doing the work of one fork lift, lifting 400-pound concrete ties from a trailer to the tracks. I saw him at a distance. Couldn't miss the hat. He knew he was on display, the hat like a peacock's feathers. I took this as the wind blew his crown back, and right after got the smile that told me he knew how silly he might have looked.



This image was taken atop an eight-story tenement building overlooking the city. The view takes in the capital, as well as structures falling in on themselves. People live their lives here, the roof deck the playground for the two hermanas. We were taken here for the farewell group shot. The walk up the flights of broken stairs about killed me. Gasping for air, I met the young coordinator whose brilliant idea it was to drag dog-tired, semi-senior citizens up, and told him if I had the big one, I am taking him over the side with me. Then, I saw these girls. The group shot could wait. These beautifully innocent, young girls knowing no other world but the one in which they live. Loved by the parents. Protected. Happy. The last image is so Cuba – open, yet wary. Waiting to see what might happen next.