My cousin’s neighborhood remains a kind of time capsule of the Cuba that I have come to love.

By MARIANE PEARL

My cousin Julita’s porch in Havana is bare, except for three plastic chairs and a beach, but her front yard is a local hot spot where everyday life unfolds. On my last visit there, our gaze fell on a skinny man with green eyes and thin lips and the color of dark chocolate succumbing to an avocado seed as he swallowed it on a stool with a fork between a couple of cheese rolls. Another man, gnawed on a baseball bat, came along and bodily rolled them all. This joyous and endless cacophony is the incomparable Cuban soundtrack of music and the frantic crowing of a rooster and the honking of a loud horn. I can laugh at music too.

A satisfying journey to Cuba for me involves dedicating time to going in to my surroundings. So I settled in by the porch, to the magic realism that is Julita’s life.

When I saw my cousin two summers ago, we lounged on her cinder-block porch and I envied what it felt like to stay at her home - less concerned than ever before about Cuba’s ailing economy. Havana’s President Raúl Castro was already opening up the country, allowing small private businesses, easing some restrictions between Cubans and foreigners. These changes would culminate in the historic surprise announcement in December 2014 that Cuba and the United States planned to resume diplomatic relations for the first time in a half century. President Obama acknowledged that “50 years of isolation” didn’t work.

From where we sat, Julia and I couldn’t have agreed more.

My cousin lives in Naos de Vedado, a neighborhood near the town center of Havana, with its derelict and majestic colonial buildings and the Malecón, the broad seawall esplanade, roadway and sea wall, broken by waves of white foam at high tide. In their aging splendor, these landmarks are reminders of a time when Havana, with its glittering waterfront, was the regional capital of gambling, sex and large entertainments. In Fidel Castro’s Communist Cuba, the glitter is long gone, replaced by an absent-mindedness of multicolored weathered facades, which, taken together, have the beauty of an impressionist painting. The colonies and other elegant mansions have been replaced by a multitude of bars and restaurants...
Havana on My Mind

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carries with its trio of elderly musicians, playing the same tired repertoire of traditional country wails, like broken records.

The government for so long has allowed visitors to feast their eyes on what it has wanted them to see. But Cuba is changing fast. I hate that rich foreigners, among them Cubans and Russians, are buying the grand Cuban mansions. My country's neighborhood remains a kind of time capsule of the Cuba that I have come to love. Before too long, though, visitors may pine for a glimpse of the everyday Cuba that spills forth from rough-hewed porches like the one that fronts Julio's modest-size home.

I breathed in Cuba, the mesmerizing vitality, sensuality and ready sense of humor that make up the identity of the people of this island nation. The culture runs in my blood. My mother was an Afro-Cuban who fell in love with my Dutch-French father, one of the first foreign professionals to join Fidel Castro's revolution, teaching mathematics at Havana University. They met at the famous Hotel Habana Libre, formerly the Habana Hilton, Mr. Castro's stronghold during the early years of the Cuban Revolution. This is where my father invited my mother and her two cousins over to his table for a drink. By the end of the evening, he gave the cousins each a rose, my mother, a kiss. My parents' love affair blossomed, but not their relations with Mr. Castro's revolution, and they left Cuba in 1966 after the birth of my older brother.

The laws regulating foreign interaction with Cuban people including my family members have been as unpredictable as the weather. I have been visiting Cuba since I was 6 and I have seen it through rough and good times. During the early 1990s, when Cuba's social system plummeted after the fall of the Berlin Wall, my mother would prepare for our trips from Paris to Cuba by packing bras, soap and food. The toilet paper she took for her own mother was prominently displayed on the empty
called "My cousin's neighborhood, previously ignored by tourists, is now a treasure trove of guesthouses."

"Florida-style houses with small patios. Today, Julia's narrow street has deeply peaked sidewalks reminiscent of a banana landscape. The kids of banana and acacia trees create the uneven concrete like overripe fruit. Yet the neighborhood feels welcoming and pretty with resident's chairs lined up on the sidewalks. When the temperature cools, people settle outside to watch the great show of daily life as if it were a television series.

The number of residents for decades the available accommodation as the street serves as a live-in extension with neighbors enjoying the shade and the aromatic fragrance of tropical flowers. Behind Julia's house are intricate pathways and courts where smaller houses have been built, inhabited by families of eight or nine people. Yet even in such crowded quarters, it is unusually quiet that permeates all things, from the drop of water on copper sink to the beauty of the scarlet papayas to the Cuban women, who move their bodies, scuttled or not, with an unnoticeable confidence.

On this day, Julia gave me the lowdown on Nuevo Vedado. With one hand taming her helmet of wavy hair, she pointed to the woman who lives directly across the street. Dalia is a single mother, part rural epiderm and the local president of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. Fidel Castro had promised her a "collective system of revolutionary vigilance," established "so that everyboday knows who lives on every block, what they do on every block, what revolutions they're part of with the tyranny, in what activities are they involved, and with whom they meet!" But nobody goes to the committee meetings anymore. Julia said, two or three years before, that same weary, disdained woman would have reported me to the authorities as a foreigner standing on the block. My family in Cuba would then be questioned and questioned more by authorities. Now, I looked at Dalia, ignoring me. Standing at her window in her Cinderella bank, she seemed lost in thought, her gaze following a snowy young man who cheerfully threw a bean over his shoulder.

"Market economy," Julia said with a chuckle a bit later, nodding toward an old man who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, his哇哇 spreading like sun rays around his tiny beady eyes. He held a large plastic bag filled with empty cans. The government began laying off a half-million employees in 2009, saying the state payroll was bloated with inefficiency, and subsequently expanded permits for small private businesses in an attempt to allow former civil servants to build a private sector from scratch. Republic, the old man, said that he makes a dollar a day recycling cans and that he pays a modest rent to the state. Grabbing my arm with his skinny fingers he gave me the biggest tambo smile: "We recycle everything we buy, everything, but the government," and cracking up at his own recorded joke he moved on to find the next can.

During my monthlong stay with Julia in August 2013, I met José, who drives people around for a living. He told me he painted inside his house for an exercise for an hour every day at twilight. "I close all the windows," he said, "so the neighbors don't think I am crazy.

At the local market, Julia introduced me to Silvio, the shoemaker who lives down the street and jut together his metal capital "with whatever disgracej from the leather factory where he used to work, it vehicle rallies in the petty theft in a country that for the longest time lacked basic goods such as toothpaste and toilet paper.

A few hundred meters away, a rural working train station double as a family's house. Thought that the residents could enjoy the sight of a dangling set of handles underwear drying on the cinder line outside.
city of empty stomachs.

I sensed that hunger is perhaps a defensive mechanism, along with national pride and the fine nation pride, for Cubans in Cuba who have not on their porch all these years.

As I talked in the palacio of my cousin's neighborhood, I would see Julia often turn to smile for her own, knowing, silent grin. Even in the summer of death, change seemed somehow on the horizon. I felt as if Julia and I had run a marathon through time and history, to stand there together on her porch of broken plastic chairs. There had been years when Julia wasn't allowed to enter the government-owned hotels where I was required to stay (I was a French citizen, and would acquire an American citizenship later). Sometimes, she could come to the room but the police would knock on my door and ask peaking questions. They wanted to know who I was and why I looked Cuban but not quite. We would play at converting them when they asked questions, letting them assume that we were both Cubans. When I started speaking, they would realize I was a foreigner. We felt a small triumph at their shame and confusion.

Then there was the time in 2009, when I took Julia to one of these state-run restaurants for foreigners only, set inside an old colonial house, enveloped by bright flowered plants with large, sprawling leaves. It was like being in the middle of a jungle. Cuba experts know that Julia had never called them on the border she would. But there we were, I had foreign currency, she had Cuban pesos. I was a privileged one, she was a local who didn't mean anything. The menu, though under the table, left a bit of money for both of us. We felt segregated from each other.

Julia and I are the same age. She is thin, back arched, gray eyes, her makeup on the face of a woman in her 50s, dressed in a thin dress, gray slacks, and a gray jacket. She is also an expert at operating the Cuban system. When I first saw her in 1997, she was living in a sewing machine room, in Havana, inconceivably living in a room full of mirrors, in a small room on the same floor in her building. She was eventually pronounced not guilty. She has tried her hand at selling handmade dresses. She has worked in factories and was sent many times to a rural camp to do so-called voluntary work for which she was given no choice, as to what she didn't let herself, but it was all good. As we walked the neighborhood, Julia explains that we were on a meal-delivery tour reserved for special clients. Along the way, we encountered a gorgeous woman with green eyes and curly hair who was about to undergo open-heart surgery this afternoon and confessed that he couldn't wait to have sex again.

At the end of a dirt road, Julia showed me the old monastery, entirely hand-built. Out came Silvio, a breeder, handsome man in his 60s with chiseled features and in the ramshackle range of Cuban sizes, the color of mahogany. Covered in plaster and dust, he was a construction worker though he trained as a military engineer specializing in weaponry, a field where thankfully there isn't enough work. We ended our tour by hiring a young woman, who lives two doors down from Julia's. She still works as a part-time fortune teller, from 10 am to 3 pm. She said that spirits and dead souls come through her to talk to the living. In my session with her, I said her face when she was "vivente." The trembling stopped immediately afterward, and it all looked pretty genuine. As she read her tarot cards and held my hands, the old woman became glassy-eyed. She told me that I was going to be well and that I should not cut my hair. It was an important part of my charm.

That night, Julia and I took some friends to the mahogany 3D movie theater nestled in the bushes right by a garage with a car case of a 1957 Mercedes. Hidden by banana trees, the little house with a metal sign had been decked out, its windows darkened. A large-screen plasma TV and three rows of wooden benches were waiting for the customers. The theater offered mostly horror films, but we chose to see "Men in Black 3." The family that ran the operation charged us one U.S. dollar each, and a little boy distributed tickets made of toilet paper folded many times over. I was around to look at the other moviegoers: they were all wearing 3D dark glasses, in line to see the same film. The theater is closed now, and Julia's peripheral com- plexes say it's because the authorities got wind of its popularity — and profitability. After the movie, as we walked back to Ju- lia's house in the pitch-black darkness, dis- cussing the changes in Cuba, we en- countered a group of young people dancing in the street, and playing conga. They seemed happy and having fun, making jokes about the cause for celebration, but of course there was none. Living life as it comes is just what Cubans do.