by David Thorstad

"Why write about gays in Cuba?" asked a friend with whom I twice traveled there. "People have OD'd on it. They're more interested in Nicaragua, which is avoiding the anti-gay policies of the Cubans."

Maybe so, but for me Cuba still looms larger. It was a radicalizing influence for me during the 1960s. It may be one of the great revolutions of the century.

It was only after the Reagan administration had tightened restrictions on travel to Cuba that I finally made it there. I went twice—in December 1984 and December 1986. Writers are one of the categories excluded in Reagan's ban on unauthorized travel to Cuba (which could bring five years in jail and a $50,000 fine), but I went unofficially.

In Havana, everyone—from the person in the street to the woman who heads the local CDR (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, an extension of the police as well as a community watchdog and mobilizing group)—is hoping that a Democratic Administration might overcome Reagan's hostility to Cuba and relax restrictions. My advice: Hope is fine, but don't overestimate the Democratic Party; it's as imperialist as the Republican. Democrats launched the war against Vietnam, and it was John F. Kennedy who approved the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. And don't forget Grenada, I persisted. The majority of Americans, including blacks, supported that sledgehammer-against-fla operation. Why? That's easy: because it succeeded. Americans approach world affairs as if it were a football game. They want success, and don't care much how it is achieved. If the U.S. invaded Nicaragua or Cuba, most Americans would probably support it, as long as it succeeded. Opinion polls may show a majority against invasion of Nicaragua, but the difference between opinion polls and reality is the measure of success. Had the arms-for-hostage deal with Iran succeeded, there wouldn't be such a fuss about it.

I spent only two weeks in Cuba. The first time, I stayed at the Havana Libre, and spent two days at Varadero Beach. The second time, I stayed at the less elegant Vedado Hotel. Both are in the Vedado section, near the university. Besides visiting relatives of New York friends, my main purpose was to learn about being gay in Cuba, more than six years after the Mariel exodus. I also had a progressive's desire to see the "first liberated territory of the Americas." My experiences may not have been special, but they weren't predictable or routine, either.

Love and Money

Cuban males, even in the company of their wives, exude eroticism. But it may not be easy to find a place to make love, especially if your friend is young and lives with his family. If your hotel has Cuban guests, the management may not stop you from bringing a friend into your room. Two Cuban men, however, would find it difficult to take a room together in a hotel.

It requires ingenuity to smuggle a friend past the eagle-eyed women who run the elevators in the Havana Libre. Their attitude seems to be, "If I'm not getting any, you're not getting any." Throw words and questions at the elevator operator to distract her, and talk away in English to your companion, who responds only with, "Yes, yes," so his Cuban accent won't give him away. It helps if your friend is not too young, not black, and looks more Greek or Argentinian than Cuban. This policy may have been enforced more strictly against heterosexual couples, who were not as discreet as gay men. I saw one elevator operator, who seemed to relish her job, deny entry to a tipsy guest who had just left the cabaret, but couldn't produce a hotel card for his female companion.

An attendant sits outside all hotel men's rooms, reducing to a minimum the potential for encounters. At the popular Coppelia toilet, two years ago, an attendant walked in and out every so often; this time one was sitting outside. Men are the same everywhere, I thought: always looking to meet other men. I found it strangely reassuring that Cuban authorities felt they had to go to such lengths to prevent men from getting it on. Did the straight men who saw the attendants outside the johns realize what they were there for?

One evening two prostitutes were loitering outside the glass door entrance at the Havana Libre. They looked garish in their miniskirts and ankle bracelets, and hardly seemed good public relations for the government; but no one asked them to leave, and they were allowed in, one at a time, to use the ladies' room. Was this tolerance? Curiosity won out and my friend asked a hotel guard what prostitutes were doing hanging out in front of the hotel. "Cuba abolished prostitution in 1963," the guard said matter-of-factly. "It could be they're waiting for their novio, or for somebody to come along." The understatement of the week.

I decided they must be working with the police.

One afternoon, a young money-changer on the street, who looked like the mosquito (lowlife), zeroed in on me: "Ch mooi, ch mooi!" No, I did not want change money, and found him irritating. He was about the hundredth to approach me that day: "You people are worse than the capitalists," I said, cantankerous. "All you seem to think about is money. What is there to buy with it anyway?" "Prostitutes," came the answer, like reflex. So, prostitution hadn't been eradicated after all. I neither searched nor heard of homosexual prostitution; may that was the type of prostitution they had abolished.

Illegal money-changers come up to you all over Havana, and in fact anywhere they see a tourist. Almost all are you black males. A Cuban friend says this a lingering legacy of racism, an acceptance of lower horizons, not unlike bla bla bla...
As we took the bus to the apartment building on the outskirts of Havana, I could tell that something was on their mind, and wondered when they would bring it up. I hoped they were planning an orgy or something and suspected the were gay. They said it was because the night we met, Eduardo and Maria suggested I might like to go dancing with muchachas, and I had made a point of saying I would like to, but with muchachos.

"Of course I'm gay," I replied. They got up to shut the door to the back stairs of the apartment building, even though it was 1 a.m. and we were on the eighth floor, with no one nearby. A friend of theirs, whose apartment we had come to with bottles of Havana Club purchased at the Havana Libre Intur shop, is a member of the Communist Youth, though he did not seem very committed. A portrait of Fidel Guevara hangs on his wall. His television set was not working.

"It's Russian," he explained.

"Which one of us would you like?" Eduardo asked. I would have preferred a group scene to having to choose between them, and wondered why the choice had to be mine. I soon discovered a tension between José and Eduardo, José, who first had sex with a man at the age of 12, would not have sex with Eduardo because, he explained, "You don't like me." It didn't make any sense to me, but I knew I couldn't let myself get caught in a flare-up of Cuban jealousy. So instead, we stayed up talking about homosexuality, gay history, and the gay movement. Like other gays, they expressed keen interest in a subject on which you cannot find any books in the bookstores, and on which no sensible public discussion exists. They were fascinated to hear about the early struggles for gay rights in Germany, and the reversal of the Soviet Union's policy of tolerance toward homosexuality under Stalin, a subject about which they knew nothing.

Another gay friend, Raúl, an artist who supports the revolution, says a friend of his, who is a hard worker and cheerfully volunteers for extra tasks, was denied membership in the Communist Party for no other reason than that she is a lesbian. He lives across the hall from the head of the local CDR, whose gay son lives with her. She is simpática, friendly

A Demonstration
On Sunday, December 7, 1986, the entire island was roused by sirens at 8 a.m. A mass rehearsal of civil defense procedures in case of a U.S. invasion was under way. It felt a bit strange, as an American, to be witnessing this mobilization, dubbed Bastió '86, which was to last for three days. An invasion might be remote, but still, the U.S. government is menacing people in Latin America and even maintains a base at Guantánamo, a lingering affront to Cubans.

The CDRs put up signs for Bastió '86 in neighborhoods all over town: Death of the Invader! Some included a photo of white American soldier. I wonder how many U.S. invaders would be black, Puerto Rican.

At the beginning of Bastión '86, all services stopped for an hour, and foreign tourists were told to stay in their hotels, although a bus taking Russian tourists to Varadero Beach was seen leaving its hotel during it. Jeebs swopped down on the city, simulated bombs and gunfire went off all over town. Militiamen seemed to be checking everything. It looked like street theatre on a grand scale.

The next day, it was reported that the United States had sent an SR-71 "Blackbird" spy plane over the entire length of the island during the mobilization. The sense of outrage was palpable. The day after, a huge demonstration was staged outside the U.S. Interests Section on the Malecón. Thousands of workers and students began arriving at 10 a.m. and people continued to make their way there in small groups well into the night. Inside the Interests Section, someone with a video camera was filming everyone in sight, to the annoyance of the crowd. It occurred to me that they did not run the same risks in being videotaped as an American.

The posters were generally apt and the point: "Gringo, remember Vietnam!"; "Reagan, you puppet, your flag was a failure"; "Nobody will surrender Cuba"; "Cuba will win." One, in English, said "Miss Reagan, we're not afraid of your Machismo, it seems, is inevitable Cuban demonstrations."

The chant slogans were something else. The most popular ones, spurred by loudspeakers mounted on v's throughout the crowd, were anti-Reagan: "Reagan, you're like a mariachi"; "Reagan, maricon, we'll hit you, jodidos, with Bastión!"; "Reagan, queen, AIDS is driving you nuts (Reagan, loco, el SIDA te ahorcó)"

The most enthusiastic voices, both on loudspeakers and in the crowd, were from the female, mostly schoolgirls who gathered right at the center of the demonstration and reached a frenzy, jabbing their fingers into the air on cue from a photographs on a bannister in front of them. I told a Cuban companion that I was saddened and angered to hear such low-

io homosexuality, sensu, and outgoing toward American visitors. Like most Cubans, she sees U.S. hostility toward Cuba as the product of a crazed President, not as a component of American policy.

Another artist asserts that an occasional film with a lesbian theme has been shown at film festivals in Havana, but so far none with male homosexual themes. Midnight Cowboy was shown on television, with the title Los cailes de la noche, and heavily cut (the scenes they cut when they show it on U.S. television?). So has The Damned, an example of bourgeois propaganda about homosexuality under the Third Reich.

A documentary about AIDS was also shown on television. Judging from reports I received, it sounded accurate, but not detailed. It focused on homosexual behavior as the main means of transmission, but did not discuss any sexual acts nor assess their various risks. Cuba has no drug problem (I was surprised at the single individual who offered to sell me Cuban marijuana on the Paseo del Prado), I wondered if the presence of Cuban soldiers in Africa might one day prove to be a source of AIDS in Cuba. In April, the Cuban government issued its first extensive report on AIDS in Cuba, and said that those Cubans had died from it. Tests of about 677,000 Cubans—nearly 7% of the population—showed that 108 have been infected by the so-called "AIDS virus," though none had yet developed AIDS or shown symptoms of the disease. The New York Times reported April 18 that the government has set up a "special isolation unit" for people who test positive for the virus.

Varadero Beach, a couple of hours north of Havana, is one of the most beautiful beaches I've seen. I met a bearded, blue-shirted bodybuilder there. He said he had spent nine months in jail for running a private bodybuilding center (in contrast to the Soviet Union, bodybuilding is discouraged in Cuba). He seemed nervous to be seen with foreigners on the beach, and claimed that "they" spied on you from a big house nearby. Another hunk hung out on the beach looking for tourists who would change money or sell their and targets. A Mexican I met sold $50 worth of clothes that way.

The beach is deserted after 6 a.m. Wide and long, with endless secluded spots, it seemed a perfect place for nocturnal fun. None of the guys I met had even thought of using it for sex, and didn't expect to see that in their lifetime. Anywhere else in the world, gay men surely would have


taken advantage of the possibilities.
The second night of the mobilization, we had dinner at the home of
the mother of a Cuban friend in
New York, who left in the 1960 exodus.
The men ate before the women, but the
mother said this was because there
wasn't room for everyone at the table.
As we sat down to eat all the lights went out,
not just in the house but all over town.
The blackout was part of the war exer-
dises and lasted 20 minutes. We ate by
kandlelight. The dinner was lavish
-roast pork, tomato salad, cold yucca with
olive oil and garlic, black beans, rice cold
pasta with mayonnaise, and dulces (marmalade,
and cheese). The
Americans brought wine and Scotch.
As I watched the TV news report on
Nestor '66, a large part of which was
devoted to showing Fidel charting with
enthusiastic participants (mostly milita-
desmen), I noticed that all the Cubans
present had tuned out. I was the only
one watching the news. The rest were
talking or had left the room for the
terrace or the kitchen. One, a supporter of
the revolution, read a book through-
out.
During the festivities, the mother
made a cassette recording for her son that
included conversation and the
sounds of the dinner. The cassette
was confiscated by Cuban customs officers
as we left the country.

Unofficial Repression

Officially, homosexuality is not
repressed in Cuba. The age of consent
is 16, so homosexuality above that age is
legal. (That's more than can be said for
most American states, which have
higher ages of consent or still criminalize
homosexual acts, regardless of age.)
A few openly gay artists—Pablo Milanés,
the great late Bola de Nieve—are
popular. Milanés was featured in an
artists' protest of the U.S. spy flight.

One boyfriend—an important reason
for my second trip, but with whom I
broke up while there—said that a couple
of months earlier the police had raided
the Salón de Te de 323 Street.
The teahouse was a gay gathering place
during the evening. He claimed that every-
one was arrested and held for three days.
They were released only after they
signed a paper stating that they had fre-
quented a homosexual hangout and
would not do so again. (There is no law
against being in a homosexual hangout,
though Article 359 of the penal code does
provide for three to nine months in jail
and/or a fine for anyone who "offends
modesty or healthy customs" through
any act of "public scandal," a vaguely
worded statute that can easily be used to
harass homosexuals.)

I dropped into the Salón de Te one
afternoon for iced tea, and struck up a
conversation with several gay youths.

One was making lavender cord
in glasses, a bad these days among gay
men in both Cuba and Mexico. They
were surprised to learn that lavender is
a color of gay liberation in the Un-
ited States.

A medical student says that a cor-
ner word for "gay" in Cuba is "diabetic"
finds it amusing, but I feel like I've
been thrown back to the late nineteenth
century, when the medical profession
was asserting its role in defining homo-

city as a disease or a perversion. I
student, gay and contemptuous of
the revolution, did not understand my re-

diction that gays would use a term
sickens to disguise homosexuality for
potential bodies on public buses.

Better to proclaim it openly. I sugges-
that this was an example of
oppression that could not be blamed
the government. "Things may not
perfect here—far from it—but at le-
ast you've got socialized medicine." I do
think anything I said got through to him.

I sensed a stifling surveillance
at Havana. One night, two friends
walked me back to the hotel. My traveling
card was not paid for. I was 
the blocks to their apartment building,
stuck in for a minute or so, then
the Malecón. As soon as he
three plainclothes cops rushed into
building did an identity check, and quin
them. Who were the foreigners
Why did one go into the hotel, the ot-
not? Perhaps they suspected that
friends were illegal money-changers.

That night, our friends professed no con
over this incident, but that night on
them said good-bye to me a block fi
hotel, rather than risk walking in
the street.

A highly visible middle-aged bl
man in fatigues was always keeping
eye on things at Coppelia, one of
world's great ice-cream stands. He
known to the youths who hung out th
the Black Shadow and the Satélite
groups; they hang around "rifraf," in
who were probably illegal money-


The night I met José and Edurdo
entrance to Copello, an unmar
"special police" screeched to a
and did an identity check on them
cops suspected them of changing m
The identity check turned up noth-
and, in fact, we had not discussed ch
money, we continued our conv
as though nothing had happened
Edurado claimed the police stop yo
guys every chance they get. "Someti
get so mad I could throw a bomb
them." But he said he respected
special police because "they're intel
Still, I didn't find the police
Havana as menacing as they are in La
ico City, where you are more likely
robbed or raped by a cop than a cr
nals out of uniform. In Cu
nobody's afraid of being mugged in
One evening there was a soiree at Raul's place—a lovely, spacious pad for a single man, with one room functioning as a studio. Several people showed up unminted, including a small-time delinquent, who offered to rent his apartment for sexual trysts. Raul said the presence of a person like that at his party looked suspicious, and could create problems. (I was surprised to run into this guy later at the protest demonstration against the U.S. spying plane.) Another man had seen moments earlier in the hotel lobby; we wondered if he had come to spy on us. I believe these were paranoid reactions to innocuous situations, but they reflected the pervasive sense of surveillance in Havana.

A few days later, my traveling companion prepared an Italian dinner in Raul's apartment. The grapevine must have been working because several unminted people again showed up, including a boring Swiss man who was taking a break from the film festival which, along with the Second Bienal of Art, was the major cultural event in Havana. Not one of them brought even a symbolic offering. This must be normal because Raul didn't object.

"Tovarich, Chiclets!"

Cuban children are outgoing and spontaneous toward foreigners. They repeatedly came up and cheerfully asked, "Tovarich, Chiclets?" I concluded that they felt friendly toward Russians too, because they assumed I was Russian, and Americans are unexpected. Did Russian tourists actually give them Chiclets? Maybe Russian tourist books don't warn against bringing in Chiclets. "Have you ever seen a Russian man wearing an earring?" I would say. They are surprised, even delighted, to find out you're an American, despite the ugly American image Washington has created for us. Several young women expressed pleasant surprise at seeing a man with an earring.

I stepped into the Iglesia de las Mercedes, a Carmelite church on Infanta Street with a big Virgin and Child statue atop a tower. I talked to a tourist who was not wearing a hat, for about 20 minutes. "There is complete freedom of religion in Cuba," he volunteered. He was sorry to hear that I was an atheist. There were eight members of his order in that particular church, he said, and five churches run by the order in the country. Many new young members were joining.

After I broke up with my Novio, I went to the Malecón to recover by watching the waves break over the wall. Within minutes, I was joined by an ebullient 17-year-old. I was not in the mood to talk and even less to hear an offer to change money, which I assumed he would bring up. He didn't. It turned out he was a jazz musician, a trumpet player, and a fanatical for Maynard Ferguson. He insisted on playing his horn like a trumpet and mimicking riffs from Ferguson hits over the sound of the crashing waves. He supports the revolution and virtually worships Fidel. "What do you think of Fidel's oratorical style?" he wanted to know. We spent an hour talking about jazz and blues, but mostly about trumpet players such as Ferguson, Dizzie Gillespie, Miles Davis, and Wynton Marsalis. He had only a few jazz records—apparently it's not easy to find Maynard Ferguson records in Cuba. His dream is to put together a jazz group that will allow him to travel to other countries some day. His optimism and enthusiasm restored me.

On the way back to the hotel, I passed by a Communist Party headquarters not far from the Havana Libre, and saw a crate of ripe tomatoes being delivered. I felt like running over and expropriating a couple of them; I knew I wouldn't be able to enjoy tomatoes once I got to Mexico. No fear of getting amoebas in Cuba, at least. Two days before, there were only green tomatoes in the market. But with garbage and vine olive oil from Argentina, the greens made a delicious salad.

Many of Old Havana's lovely buildings are being spiced up and given a fresh coat of paint. They are welcome islands of color in a sea of drabness. But paint is hard to come by, and is said not to hold up well to the heat, humidity, and salt air.

Havana has no idea where it will be able to get enough to paint their apartments. Still, a trip to Miramar, Havana's most elegant neighborhood, was like night and day. It looked like an upper-middle-class neighborhood, well kept up, with fresh coats of paint on many of its spacious homes. Once the abode of Havana's wealthy, today Miramar is home to embassies. Near the modern Hotel Triton, facing the ocean, stands the huge Russian Embassy and compound. It was built a few years ago by the Russians themselves, a young woman told me. "They didn't want Cubans to work on it. I guess they thought it would take Cubans too long to do the job." Maybe they prefer to build their own embassies, I suggested. Gossip has it, she said, chuckling, that inside the caspian-like tower that dominates the embassy is a missile. Electronic equipment seemed more likely.
Havana's most posh restaurant, Las Ruinas (called La Ruina by some), is built on the ruins of old slave quarters in what is now the Lenin Park, about an hour from downtown by bus. It is elegant, and the food excellent. Even the service is good. When four of us arrived, the maître d' told us we'd have to wait for two hours to be seated, and mumbled something about diplomat being served. When we mentioned in passing that two of us were Americans, his face lit up and he immediately started telling us about his associations with American diplomats. He told us about his friends in the U.S. and how he would like to return someday.

Dinner at El Cohinolito, a pork restaurant on 23rd Street, was as pleasant. Maitre d', waiter, waitresses—all emphasized that our Cuban friends would not treat us to dinner, as they had wanted. Foreigners would have to pay in dollars. Once we were seated, we discovered there were no napkins on the table. The waiter explained that they were reserved for guests who request them. He said it was an American custom.

Cocktails are one of Cuba's pleasures. At Varadero they serve a rosa roja, a delightful drink made with rum, banana liqueur, grenadine, and yerba buena. For some reason, you can't get it in Havana. But you can get a cubanito, made with tomato juice, white rum, salt, hot sauce, olive oil, and lime juice. The best are in the León y Leon, where they were served. One was there, we were served cubanitos by the creator of the drink. The chef said, "You're working-class, many of them look alike, even the waiters. The cocktails were covered with poems praising the cubanito: Pida el cubanito, pero hable bilingue, ("Ask for the cubanito, but not too loud please").

Un bistec de palomilla o "A caballo" (beef steak or "on horseback") no pasa nada! ("Eat a palomilla steak or kidneys, then you have yourself a cubanito and nothing can touch you!"). It was a place you could spend hours in—unless it rained or for the monotony of mechanical bird singing in the background. Cubanitos in the nearby Café la Mina, in the Old Town, were a pale imitation.

You might never find out about the cubanito if you just went to La Bodeguita del Medio or La Floridita, favorite watering holes of novelist Ernest Hemingway ("My majorka at La Bodeguita. My daiquiri at La Floridita"—his words are prominently displayed on the wall behind the bar in the Bodeguita).

One Sunday, a block from the Floridita, a shop specializing in drinks made with sugar cane was closed because the sugar cane delivery hadn't arrived. This in a country where sugar cane is the major crop and the economy is based on sugar.

As we left Cuba, a true tourist faltered with the realization that he was returning to a country in the midst of a revolution, with a new government in power. The task of re-building Cuba was immense, and the people were determined to make it work. The future looked promising.