

# DAY BY DAY IN HAVANA

*Text:*  
Jessica Piersanti

*Sometimes life is just a series of coincidences. There I was preparing a surprise trip to Cuba for a week for Artus, my fiancé, when he came home and told me: "Someone just asked me if we would be interested in going to Havana to keep a diary of a film shoot and do some drawings."*

*— "Draw film crews in action?!? Hold on a minute. What's the film and who's the director?"*

*— "I'm not sure but I think there are seven different directors and each one is doing a short film on Havana and..."*

*Before he had finished his sentence, another coincidence struck me. My friend, Gaspar Noé, had spoken to me a few weeks ago about his project to make a short film in Cuba. Could it be the same film? When I called him, he confirmed that he was leaving soon to scout for locations. So Gaspar was one of the seven international directors who had been invited to participate in the film about Havana.*

*Several days later, Artus and I were at the headquarters of Havana Club International in Paris. This brand of rum sponsors the cultural project, Havana Cultura, which promotes and supports Cuban artists.*

*We were given a complete overview of the project: "Seven stories, seven different sensitivities and seven visions of this rapidly changing multicultural city that would soon be open to the world". Havana Club International would be co-financing the film, a first in the world of advertising and cinema.*

*During the week that we were to spend in Havana, the Cuban, Juan Carlos Tabío, "the Palestinian" Elia Suleiman, and the Frenchmen, Laurent Cantet and Gaspar Noé, would all be shooting their films.*

## DAY 1

*Just before takeoff, I text Gaspar Noé: "I'm in the plane heading for Cuba".*

**MY FIRST REAL  
VISION OF  
CUBA: OLD  
AMERICAN  
CARS ALONG  
THE ROADS  
LINED WITH  
PALM TREES.**

*He's already on location and answers me, "You're joking?" With that kind of answer, you don't know whether you're coming or going.*

*The TV screens on the plane don't work so I try to read a few pages of the best-selling novel, *Adios Hemingway*, by the Cuban writer, Leonardo Padura, who co-wrote a good part of the film screenplays.*

*An elderly Cuban man is sitting next to me in the plane. He is a pediatrician and works all over the world.*

*He's fascinated by geography and is extremely intrigued by the magazine I have with me, *Courrier International*. Pure coincidence — there is an article written by Leonardo Padura, which tells how fiber optics will soon connect Cuba to Venezuela and provide the country with high-speed Internet access, with download speeds 3,000 times faster than before! Jorge tells me that the sale of personal computers was outlawed on the island for a long time and that it wasn't until 2008 that the restriction was lifted.*

*— "Internet is a good thing," he adds "but people are too poor to buy a computer."*

*— "Could you give me three positive points and three negative points about Cuba?"*

*— "The negative points: dictatorship, lack of freedom and poverty.*

*The positive points: cultural diversity, access to education and to health care. Do you know that there are 60 doctors in Cuba for 1,000 people?" That seems to be just unbelievable compared to the figure of 17 computers for 1,000 people that I had read in the magazine.*

**END OF THE AFTERNOON.** *We finally land after a nine-hour flight. The sun is setting and it is already dark out when we leave the airport. "The air is hot and humid like in the United States," I say to Artus in the car. The taxi driver who is taking us to our hotel turns on the car radio to a station that is blasting American music. While my two travel companions are taking pictures out of the car window, I get my first real vision of Cuba: old American cars along the roads lined with palm trees. All we can see of our hotel, the Melia Cohiba, is an enormous building in the night, facing the ocean on Havana's world-famous esplanade, the Malecón.*

**10:00 PM.** *There is a reggaeton concert at a one-hour drive from the hotel. We meet Gaspar Noé and Elia Suleiman who are already there. Young girls and,*





## AM I IN A FILM?

often, older men, are dancing wildly on a packed patio. Gaspar joins in. The girls flirt for beers but that doesn't seem to have any effect on Elia who keeps a safe distance and observes what's going on. To keep from being accosted by the determined and aggressive young women who try to dance with him, he pretends that Didar, a film producer, is his wife. Funny. In the taxi that takes us back to the hotel, I talk to Elia for the first time. He asks me what I am doing in Cuba and, half dead with fatigue, I tell him that I don't really know.

— "You're like me. You don't know why you're here or what you're going to do," he says with a laugh. "For me, my aim is to concentrate on solitude. The story of my film is that of a foreigner who comes to a country in which he can have no real contact with the people."

— "So I guess it's no go for the girls at the club!"

— "Yes, I was very embarrassed! All these girls. It's crazy. I'd like to have fun with them but I really can't."

## DAY 2

**09:00 AM.** Breakfast. Am I in a film? Some Cuban musicians are playing

and singing traditional music on a little stage in the restaurant. They do that to amuse the tourists. When I think of the reggaeton concert the night before, I imagine that there are really two different Cubas, two different moneys and two different life styles. I am anxious to discover these two facets.

**9:30 AM.** First job: to go to where Juan Carlos Tabio is shooting his film. The film, *Dulce Amargo*, is being shot in the Vedado neighborhood, one of the most beautiful areas in the city, with its magnificent houses and mansions dating from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. After a tour in an old Lada, we arrive at Calle Crecherie. The little street is closed for the shooting and guarded by policemen. Artus shows them his camera. There's no longer any doubt. We are now part of the film crew.

**10:00 AM.** Each second of preparation seems important. And finally, after 15 minutes of unceasing commotion in the stifling heat, all becomes silent. — Action!

A bald man leaves his house on a bike. Several extras walk along the paved lane. Every gesture of every person is carefully orchestrated by a very energetic little woman.

— *Cut!*

*The scene breaks up, only to be shot several minutes later, again and again. It is impossible to make out the director from the rest of the crew. Maybe it's the man in the back who is exclusively concentrated on his feet as he walks back and forth? Something tells me that this is not the right time to talk to him...*

*My first walk around Havana. The trees are surely the biggest, the most varied and the most beautiful that I have ever seen in a city.*

**1:00 PM.** *Lunch. A friend has recommended a restaurant located between the Old Havana and the Centro Havana neighborhoods. Huron Azul, in Calle Humboldt, is a typical family-style restaurant, a paladar. The quality of the food is much better than we had imagined. After the octopus, ceviche and some delicious fish cooked with vegetables, we are completely satiated!*  
*Off to the Hotel Nacional de Cuba for coffee. The hotel is a historical landmark and one of the locations where Benicio del Toro shot his film. El Yuma is Benicio's first film as a director. "You just missed him. He finished shooting last week," we are told by the waiter. We sit down in a magnificent garden overlooking the Malecón and try to imagine what it meant to a Cuban to see the incarnation of Che Guevara (Benicio in Steven Soderbergh's Che) shooting a film in the hotel lobby.*

**5:00 PM.** *Off again for new adventures! Fabian now takes us to another of his favorite spots in Havana. He calls it Playa de la Puntilla, but it doesn't look anything like a beach. There's not even any sand. Only a little empty field surrounded by a row of houses and a tacky little snack bar.*  
— *"Behind us, there is a house full of history. Once upon a time, it was called the Tropical Club, one of the biggest American casinos before Las Vegas*

*was created. The bar was inaugurated by Nat King Cole," he says with amazement.*

*We take a closer look: it's almost as hard to believe as the run-down condition of this house.*

— *"I come to swim here every morning. Elia is going to shoot most of his scenes here. In fact, it is the ideal spot to portray solitude..."*

*The sun sets over the sea. "Hey, look who's here!" says Artus, looking over his shoulder. Elia Suleiman is sitting at one of the white plastic tables. He's working on his laptop and needs help. He can't figure out how to transfer the data from his digital camera to his computer. We exchange our help for a bit of conversation. I am really curious to know how his screenplay is coming along.*

— *"I'm a little short on time," he tells me. "This is only the second time I've been to Havana and so I can only depend on simple observations. I'm still trying to capture the atmosphere of the different sites."*

— *"Is it complicated?"*

— *"Well, I guess I should be a little less ambitious. I need to concentrate on specific places instead of wasting my time running around the city. You know, when you come here, you have an assistant and a driver who takes you all over the place, a little like a tourist, and I don't want to leave here with a tourist's impressions."*

— *"What attracted you to this spot?"*

— *"To me, this place is the perfect representation of solitude. It is the type of place that I am used to. There's nothing particular, it's just everyday life. You have to observe. It's a sort of meditation, as if you were part of the wind. You have to sit here for a long time to be close to each element, and to live as intensely as possible to be capable of transcribing these elements into a film.*

— *"What do you want to show with this short film?"*

— *"I want to show the opposite of the exotic side of Havana that I saw when I came here. The international hotels, that type of thing. I don't know if*



**SOME OLD  
CUBANS  
ARE SIPPING  
A RUM  
OR A BEER.**

*I will succeed. It is very difficult for me to feel something exotic. My first reaction was to take a step backwards. And then I saw the comical side.*

**7:00 PM.** Last stop of the day: Centro Havana, reputed to be the most dangerous neighborhood in Havana. The sun is amazing here as well, especially when it bounces off the washed out building fronts. Everyone seems to be taking advantage of this peaceful time of the day: children play in the ruins of a collapsed building while old people chew the fat on their doorsteps. We, on the other hand, have only one thing in mind: find the bar where Benicio shot the other scenes of his film.

*Its name is Silvia, an unbelievable place and extremely cinematic. It is exactly in the middle of two streets and entirely open on both sides. Some old Cubans are sipping a rum or a beer, and sometimes both at the same time.*

**DAY 3**

**NOON.** We discover the heart of historical Havana. Old Havana or Habana Vieja is a UNESCO World

*Heritage site. Havana itself is the biggest colonial city in Latin America. However, in contrast with Centro Havana, Old Havana is not run down and has been the target of major renovation projects over the past ten years. Time seems to stand still in the shadows of the Hispano-Andalusian architecture, made even more beautiful by the tropical sun and the luxuriant vegetation. After a quick lunch in what is known as Chinatown (we only saw one Chinese person), or Chino Barrio, we are invited by a member of the film crew to meet the French director, Laurent Cantet, on the Malecón where his actors are rehearsing for the first time.*

**2:00 PM.** On the first floor of a small apartment building, Laurent is standing in the middle of a very unusual living room with 20 Cubans of all ages who are silently awaiting his instructions. All eyes are on him and no one seems to be paying attention to the walls filled with religious objects. One woman stands out in the crowd. She speaks louder than the others. "When do we begin?" she asks Laurent. Didar, one of the producers, takes charge of the extras and I take advantage to speak to Laurent Cantet.

**“YOU EITHER  
TAKE EVERY-  
ONE IN THE  
BUILDING  
OR NO ONE  
AT ALL!”**

— “Where are we?”  
— “At Natalia’s (he points to a woman speaking animatedly with the crowd). She is the main character in my film.”  
— “How did you meet her?”  
— “A complete stroke of luck. I was being a perfect tourist. I had just come to Havana for the first time to think about the project and to try to understand the city. We spent hours talking together. She told me all about her religion, Santería, and about her life within her community. She was very talkative, and open as well. She took me back to her apartment and showed me her religious altars dedicated to Ochún, the Goddess of Sweet Waters. And there it was. I had my story.”  
— “Did you tell her the purpose of your trip?”  
— “Yes, I told her that I was making a film about Havana and that I was looking for a story. And I of course asked her if she would be interested in playing the main role in the film.”  
— “But she’s not an actress..., so what did she say?”  
— “She thought about it for a second and said yes right away!”  
— “How did you find so many people in such a short time?”

— “I didn’t have much choice (he laughs). I needed extras and I wanted them to be part of her community. Natalia had told me that it was important for her. When I called her yesterday, right after I got in, I told her how many people I needed and she answered: ‘You either take everyone in the building or no one at all!’ I obviously accepted.”  
— “Will the whole film take place here, in her apartment?”  
— “No. We actually plan to shoot the scenes in different houses near the Malecón. In the story, everyone in the building comes to help her repaint her apartment and install her altars. We therefore wanted to recreate her living room inside an altar.”  
— “Had you ever heard of Santería before meeting Natalia?”  
— “Not really, but I have read a lot about it since. It is a religious practice somewhere between Christianity with its figures imported from “Spain” and certain African beliefs.

**6:00 PM.** Back to Juan Carlos Tabío’s film shoot in the same street. Everyone is getting ready for the next scene, which takes hours! A beautiful Cuban woman is relaxing. She introduces





herself as Mirta Ibarra. When I ask her in English what role she plays, I realize that she speaks fluent French.

— “I am an actress and I have a role in Juan Carlos’ film.”

— “What is it like to work with him?”

— “I’ve already played in several of his films... I also played in Tabio’s famous film, *Strawberry and Chocolate*, 17 years ago, as well as in *Guantanamera*, two films that are now considered to be classics of Cuban cinema. I was even married to the co-director of the film at that time, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. I lived in France during the 1970s but it was difficult for me to be considered as anything more than a housewife. Very few South Americans were living in France at that time.”

Juan Carlos Tabio walks by but one of his assistants convinces me not to speak to him. He tells me that he is deep in concentration and that it is not the right time to approach him.

## DAY 4

**3:00 PM.** Artus, who is a skateboarder, had heard that Benicio del Toro had shot a few scenes in a skateboard park somewhere in the city. Knowing that,

he had packed his skateboard for the trip. After a quick search, we finally find the skateboard park. Some 20 Cubans are there, commenting on their friends’ prowess. It’s the first time that they have ever met a French person and they are very friendly. One of them who speaks very good English tells me: “A lot of Americans come here and some Germans too. They give us some equipment. All the skateboards we have are very old and it is difficult to get new ones because of the embargo.”

— “Why don’t you make them yourselves? After all, it’s just a piece of wood...”

— “If we find the wood, then we have to look for wheels and screws!”

**5:00 PM.** We decide to go back to Playa de le Puntilla. With some luck, maybe Elia will be there. And so he is! He’s walking back and forth on the little beach but doesn’t seem very happy to see us. We certainly don’t want to disturb him while he is concentrating on his film.

**7:00 PM.** Gaspar calls me to tell me that he is leaving immediately with his crew. He wants me to come with them. Luckily, I’m right next to the



**ARTUS HAD  
PACKED HIS  
SKATEBOARD  
FOR THE TRIP.**

hotel so I just jump into the van as they're leaving. "I have to take the producers, an assistant cameraman and some other assistants... I'm really sorry that I didn't tell you to come earlier, but I'm not used to bringing so many people with me."

— "How is it going with the location scouting?"

— "That part's finished, but I think I'm going to have some problems with the casting. In my story, two girls kiss, which seems to be a real problem here. If we were in Paris, no one would even think about it."

— "You think its going to be as difficult as that?"

— "Yes, it's really crazy. It's almost like there's a sort of lesbianophobia here. I interviewed several actresses yesterday, some of them who were perfect for the role and great dancers as well, but when I ask them if they would agree to kiss another girl, they disappeared."

— "Homosexuality has a heavy past in Cuban history."

— "Yes, historically, Cubans are known to be very intolerant of homosexuality. It's not like I plan to film any porno scenes with two women making love. It's only a kiss, no nudity... it will even be very sweet..."

— "Where are we going?"

— "To the woods. I want to film a girl who is exorcised by a palero, an Afro-Cuban priest. I want to see how the lights look at night."

**8:00 PM.** Gaspar walks around a kapok tree, which Fabian explains is his lucky tree. The whole crew is focused on lighting the scene. They have brought some torches and various types of flashlights with them.

The choice to use torches is unanimous. They all agree that they would create a more natural light. Near the river, Lazare, the assistant cameraman, is discussing the different lighting parameters with Gaspar. They take a long time to test all of the options and to film some images with the state-of-the-art Canon 5D camera that is increasingly used in the movie industry.

**10:00 PM.** Back to the hotel lobby with Gaspar's crew. I drink a little glass of rum before meeting Artus. We have heard about a famous singer, Juana Bacallao, who goes by the name of Juana la Cubana, and that we are dying to see. El Gato Tuerto is a club two blocks away from the Malecón and the Hotel Nacional. The club





**IT IS JUST  
INCREDIBLE  
TO WATCH  
THIS 90-  
YEAR-OLD  
WOMAN  
DANCING,  
SINGING  
AND  
SMOKING  
CIGARS.**

*is already packed when we get there and the famous singer that everyone seems to be waiting for shows up an hour late. It is just incredible to watch this 90-year-old woman dancing, singing and smoking cigars.*

*The atmosphere is wild. Her eccentric style - sequined dress, satin gloves, heavy make-up and high heel shoes - is already surprising enough for a woman her age. But the most shocking part is how she leaves the stage and makes her way through the crowd, musicians in tow, while taking off her beautiful blond wig to reveal her almost bald scalp underneath.*

## **DAY 5**

**9:00 AM.** *Gaspar asks me if I can help Gretel, the assistant Cuban costume designer who works with him. "Since you want to follow the film shoot, I thought you wouldn't have anything against helping with the costumes." Okay, it's a deal. After all, I have a story to write and it's difficult enough to get to the other directors. I accept.*

**10:00 AM.** *We go to see the casting director. She has found a bunch of young actresses for Gaspar. We are*

*all hoping that he will find the actress for the main role today. Some 20 girls are waiting on the patio - all different ages and styles. Gaspar wants to see them dance. Three by three, the girls dance to some reggaeton music.*

*As young as they are, they move like real women. Their steps are very explicit. Gaspar takes pictures. They all hold a name card so that he will be able to remember them more easily. While I am introduced to Gretel, Gaspar chooses his actress - her name is Cristela.*

**4:00 PM.** *Back at the hotel, we show Gaspar what we have found: some very simple underwear. "I'm afraid it's too white. It looks too new," he says. "You need to dye it to make it darker." Leaning over the sink in my hotel room, I ask myself how I am going to dye the underwear in hot water in which some tea bags are steeping...*

**8:00 PM.** *I am now part of the crew. We go back to Bosco de la Habana. Two assistants are carrying a load of torches in their arms. Gaspar is very serious. He knows that each detail counts and that there is not much time. Nobody has a hold over him.*



**I FINISHED  
BY DYING THE  
UNDERWEAR  
IN HOT  
WATER...**

*It's surely for that reason that he is such an incredible director.*

**10:00 PM.** *Gaspar, his production assistant and myself are very tired, but we have heard that there is a party to celebrate the end of Juan Carlos Tabio's film shoot. On the way, we make a quick stop at a very bad snack bar to eat some shrimp nuggets (with no shrimp!). The party is taking place at my very favorite spot in Havana, Playa de la Puntilla. Everyone's there: the actors, the technicians, the producers, as well as Elia, Laurent and Gaspar! It's one awesome beach party. Everyone dances, forgetting, for the time being, the days of work ahead.*

**DAY 6**

**10:00 AM.** *Some more scouting for locations. I meet up with Gaspar and his first assistant, Olivier. We have to find a room where he can shoot a scene where the leading actress sleeps next to her girlfriend. Outside of the apartment building, on the Malecón, Laurent Cantet's crew is getting ready at the spot where the scene with Nathalia was already shot earlier*

*this morning. The directors not only share technicians and actors, but shooting sites as well.*

*The person responsible for the sets has planned several visits. He takes us from apartment to apartment. The doors close as quickly as they are opened. The inhabitants don't seem to be bothered by our visit. In fact, they act like we're not even there. Gaspar goes into action mode. He knows exactly what he wants and is, unfortunately, not happy with what he sees. He will have to look for another location later.*

**NOON.** *We have just eaten our lunch next to the pool and are thinking about taking a swim. Not to be, since Gaspar asks to see the dyed underwear for the scene tonight. "It's still too light. It has to be dyed again," he says. I tell myself that I will never be a costume designer. I go back to my room and wash the underwear once again in some even stronger tea.*

**3:00 PM.** *Gaspar's crew steps up its efforts and gets busy in the house where an alternative version of the last scene in the film will soon be shot. The two priests, Mercedes and Pedro, who are a couple in real life, are going to play their own role in*

*their own house. They are supposed to exorcise the young actress, Cristela, during a ceremony. An entire bedroom is reserved for the scene. An assistant brings in some tree branches and candles. Another one covers the windows so that no natural light can enter the room. Two Spanish sound engineers check out the acoustics.*

**4:00 PM.** *Cristela arrives with her mother. I'm relieved: her hair looks really good. Gaspar looks her up and down. He wonders if she should wear braids, a ponytail or just leave her hair loose. After having tried out all the options and finally deciding on the braids, he realizes all of a sudden that the hairdresser has attached several swatches of red hair. "They have to be cut, one by one. That wouldn't be good in the film," he says.*

*and the actors are now in the bedroom, whereas the rest of the crew is milling around outside like groupies at a rock concert. I'm not allowed to see the scene being shot. We all wait in silence. I can hear the Santeria mother and Palo father singing and, after 15 minutes, the film crew leaves the room. They have their first scene. The clothes are all splattered with fake sacrificial blood and we have to quickly replace them for the next scene.*

**1:00 AM.** *The scene has just been shot for the third or fourth time. Gaspar shows me some shots on the 5D. They look fabulous! While everyone packs up, Gaspar invites me to have a drink with him and his first assistant. It is time to decompress. Yum, a little glass of rum. We go to a club where an incredible dance contest is taking*

**WE MAKE A QUICK STOP AT A VERY BAD SNACK BAR TO EAT SOME SHRIMP NUGGETS (WITH NO SHRIMP!)**



— "Are you sure? We can easily hide them."

— "Cut them."

*His decision is final. Cristela already misses the effect of those very stylish colored streaks while her mother watches her get a haircut.*

**10:00 PM.** *Gaspar finally gives the green light. Lazare, Olivier, the priests*

*place on a stage. In the bar, it's still the same thing, young girls looking for older men. One of them puts her finger in her mouth and gives my two companions a devastating glance.*

**2:00 AM.** *We decide to walk back to the hotel along the Malecón. A group of young people are drinking beers in a parking lot-cum-night bar.*

*Welcome to the other side of Cuba!  
A pimp stops us and tells us that  
he can get us anything we want.  
I'm embarrassed but not Gaspar  
who buys everyone a drink! He is  
totally at ease in the situation and  
nice to everyone, all characters  
straight out of a film! A very special  
moment.*

## **DAY 7**

**NOON.** *I meet Artus back at the hotel  
and he shows me the drawings he has  
just done. They are very funny.  
While I was pursuing my career as  
a costume designer, he was following  
the shootings of the other films...  
In the taxi that takes us to the airport,  
I tell him about my night on location  
at Gaspar Noé's film shoot. I would  
have liked to have had a camera to  
film what was, for me, my real Cuban  
experience. ■*



**I WOULD  
HAVE LIKED  
TO HAVE  
HAD A  
CAMERA.**

