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## The Exploratory Group Tour to the Fortifications of Cuba

Glen Williford

Eight adventurous CDSG members and spouses journeyed on a specially-designed tour to the fortifications and military sites of Cuba in August 2017. Visas for U.S. citizens are still restricted to only a few authorized categories, but using Valor Tours and their Cuban tour associate Essential History Expeditions, we were able to assemble an itinerary under the guidelines of “people-to-people” visits to qualify for the necessary paperwork.



The stories about old American cars in Cuba are true!

On August 10 we gathered in Tampa, met our American guide, Brian DeToy, and had a walking tour of the Cuban section of the city and the headquarters of the 1898 American expeditionary force. An early flight the next morning took us to Havana where we immediately began touring. The morning was spent on a walking tour of old Havana. In the afternoon we saw the major forts on the western side of the harbor entrance—Fuerta de Real (with its rifled Rodman cannon) and the Castillo de San Salvador de la Punta, with its Punta Annex Battery for two modern, Spanish 15 cm breech-loading guns. We also saw the Museum of the Revolution with weaponry from the War of 1898 and subsequent Cuban revolutions.



Fureta Real



La Punta Annex 15 cm guns

On the 12<sup>th</sup> we went by coach to Matanzas, and saw the three Spanish works of Castillo de San Severino, El Morillo Castillo, and the Cojimar Tower—all with a selection of older weapons. To the west of the tower were the only existing remnants of the series of earthwork forts with protective, loop-holed walls, Battery No. 1 from the immediate pre-war period. For some reason a single 15 cm, breech-loading Ordenez gun on barbette carriage persists in an open field adjacent to the coastal highway.

The real highlight of this day was the magnificent El Morro on the eastern side of the harbor entrance, complete with several existing Krupp 28 cm guns, one still on its carriage in the Velasco Battery. Three American 8-inch Parrott rifles, made at West



Matanzas Castillo de San Severino



Cojimar Tower





Matanzas Marillo Castle



Cokimar Battery 15 cm Spanish Ordenez gun



Doce Apostles Battery 16 cm gun



El Morro 28 cm M1879 Krupp Velasco Battery



La Cabana

Point Foundry in 1866, are also present. In front of El Morro at water level is the Doze Apostles Battery with its transitional 16 cm MLRs. To the south of El Morro is the very large El Cabana Fortress, reportedly the largest single Spanish work in the New World. Dating from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, it had both a strong harbor front with barbette gun positions and extensive Vauban-type landward defenses. We ate dinner at the restaurant adjacent to the Divina Pastore Battery (nine 21-cm MLR howitzers) and enjoyed the 9:00 p.m. evening gun firing representing the traditional signal closing the city gates.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> we renewed our city military tour with a stop at the Castillo Atares (under restoration, but we were allowed a visit by special permission) on the southern extremity of the city. Then we were on to visit the small San Lazaro Tower built to protect a small inlet from pirate raids. After that we visited the memorial to the USS *Maine* with its two 10-inch guns from that famous vessel. Finally, we went to the Nacional Hotel, with the remains of the Spanish-American War Santa Clara Battery to its seaward front, with surviving 28 and 30.5 cm guns on their carriages.

On August 14, we left Havana by coach to journey to Cienfuegos. Along the way we stopped at Playa Giron and the museum for the Bay of Pigs Battle, with Cuban artifacts from both sides of the conflict. In Cienfuegos we visited the nice Spanish Castillo de Jagua. The next day was spent on the lengthy road trip to the Santiago environs.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> we began touring the major surviving memorials and sites from the combat of the American expeditionary force in 1898. That included a visit to Siboney Beach (the site for the logistical support of the force), and the small, but well-equipped Spanish-American War museum nearby. That was followed with stops at both the El Caney and San Juan Hill battle memorials at their respective hill sites. Both are well-maintained, and the latter has a nice selection of ordnance on display (including four American 3.2-inch field guns). We then paid our respects to Castro's tomb at the Sta Ifigenia Cemetery, and concluded at the Santiago El Morro (that's right, this makes three "El Morro's" visited!). It is an imposing structure on the highlands overlooking the harbor and a good location to retrace the steps of the sinking of the collier USS *Merrimack* and the naval battle of Santiago.

By the 17<sup>th</sup> things were winding down. We did make the trip to the overview of Guantanamo Bay, but the distance is too great to





Divina Pastore Battery 21 cm Howitzers Converted Trubia



Castillo Atares



USS Maine Monument

make out any of the American base, much less the Taft-era batteries. Travel between the mainland and Gitmo is still not possible; I fear we will have to wait many more years before a visit to the American property is possible. Later in the afternoon we visited the defensive Moncado Barracks (now a school), an important element in the revolution against Batista. That evening we had a final cocktail and dinner. It seemed appropriate to have Daiquiris as we were as near to Daiquiri Beach as facilities would allow. On the 18<sup>th</sup> we returned on a direct flight to Miami.



Santa Clara Battery 28 cm Krupp Gun



Santa Clara Battery 30.5 cm Ordonez Gun





Bay of Pigs Museum – Cuban Sea Fury



Chaney Hill



Castillo Jagua in Cienfuegos



San Juan Hill



Siboney SAW Museum: part of the Spanish Destroyer Pluton



Santiago El Morro

Both the fortification sites and the general military history locations were well maintained. We encountered no problem in arranging visits to all, except for the occasional closing due to renovation, which one can encounter anywhere. There was no overt government presence on any phase of our tour. The people are friendly and the service at restaurants and hotels acceptable for a nation where the tourist infrastructure is very limited. The tour cost was quite high, but that is unavoidable when dealing with government ownership and pricing at most of the hotels and many of the restaurants. Also it was necessary as foreigners to use the separate “convertible peso” for expenditures, and that

exchange rate is fixed by the government. Even with more tourist development, it does not appear that the cost will substantially be reduced in the future. Also, August was not the right month for such a tour. It was very hot on the island, and the risk of hurricanes (luckily, we did not encounter any adverse weather) not acceptable for such a tour.

Still, the military architecture in the Spanish forts of the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century is most impressive, as are the number and diversity of original armament. It is well worth the effort and expense to see these sites at some point in your fort-viewing lifetime.