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Sasha Gillies-Lekakis

COVID-19 – A CARIBBEAN ODYSSEY

The news of rapidly deteriorating conditions around the world caused by the Covid-19 pandemic first reached me on the tropical island of Cuba, where I was half-way through a 15-week exchange course. I had been given the opportunity and great privilege to study at two of the most prestigious Latin American research institutions in the world – the University of Havana, and the Casa de Las Americas, both cultural and academic powerhouses in the region. The Cubans approached the news of daily increases in global coronavirus cases with a healthy dose of optimism. My host family constantly assured us that we would be safe in Cuba – not only does warm weather slow the spread of the virus (apparently), but Cuba's healthcare system is truly world-class, with an emphasis on people, not profit. In one of my very own classes, on Cuban public health, I had learnt of Cuba's preventative primary healthcare that had created such a healthy, long-lived population in a continent where disease, poor hygiene and inadequately-funded healthcare systems had all taken their toll. So comprehensive was the Cuban response to coronavirus, before it had even reached the island, that I was bombarded with daily updates on Cuban preparative measures and the regional situation. My teachers, host family and friends had all received up-to-date information regarding hygiene practices, mask use and social distancing even before the arrival of three Italian tourists to the rural town of Trinidad in mid-March. I was very impressed, to say the least. Even the Cuban president Miguel Diaz-Canel went on national television to speak with a range of experts and explained in great detail what was being done to halt the spread of the virus. I felt incredibly safe in Havana, particularly considering what I had read of recent events in Australia and Cuba's northern neighbour, the United States – where cases had skyrocketed and the responses were far from coordinated or effective. And not only was Cuba preparing its own citizens well for the storm to come, but they had selflessly put themselves out to help others, a show of the internationalism that has defined Cuban foreign policy. A cruise ship from the UK, the MS Braemar, with known coronavirus cases aboard, had been desperately searching for a port at which to dock for fuel, food and other

necessities. Not a single Caribbean country offered the vessel sanctuary – except Cuba. The vessel was allowed to dock at the port of Mariel, in Havana’s west, a neighbourhood I had visited just days earlier! The vessel was allowed to recover the necessary materials and all passengers were sent back to the UK in a well-coordinated aerial operation. This decision polarised the Cubans – while many lauded the government’s response, others saw it as endangering the island. I tend to stand with the former. It was inspirational, particularly being so close to the event itself. The total coronavirus case count in Cuba had barely reached 10 when our program directors announced that our studies in Cuba had been suspended, and that we were to return home within two days following a global escalation in the coronavirus situation. Finding a last-minute flight back from Havana to Melbourne was incredibly stressful, and difficult given the fact that many international flights had already been cancelled. Eventually, I was able to get home – passing through, Havana, Miami, San Francisco, Brisbane and finally Melbourne. It was an odyssey to say the least! I arrived back in Australia on Saturday, March 21, after this gruelling series of flights. I was happy to be among family again, but immensely disappointed that I could not stay in Cuba – in large part because the US and Australia were imposing new border restrictions, and cancelling flights because they could not adequately address the situation. I returned to quiet streets, news of total lockdowns and continued Coalition government inaction in the face of the coronavirus. Meanwhile, just days later Cuba was sending doctors to fight coronavirus in Italy, Argentina and a number of Caribbean islands, so prepared was the nation for what was to come. While I would never consider being without family in these uncertain times, I still know that I would have been safer had I stayed in Cuba, the little socialist island that put the rest of the world to shame in the age of Covid-19.