

FOOD & DRINK



ANTHONY BOURDAIN HEADS TO CUBA ON CNN

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In yet another example that all points now lead to Cuba, Emmy award winning Anthony

Bourdain and his CNN Parts Unknown TV crew recently invaded the island to shoot their season premiere. And I have to hand it to him; he certainly knows how to get to the crux of the matter!

Bourdain kicks off the episode quickly rehashing why the Americans and Cubans have not talked for over 50 years (at least according to his view) with a quick fast forward to the current drive towards normalized relations. What Bourdain wants to know (and certainly what is on everyone's mind both in the U.S. and in Cuba) is what will be the impact of a mass influx of American tourists in the coming years? To get an informed view of what this might mean Bourdain interviews (and eats with) an impressive cross section of Cuban nationals and ex-pats.



Havana, Cuba – APRIL 15: Anthony Bourdain visits Havana, Cuba on April 15, 2015. (photo by David S. Holloway) Anthony Bourdain Parts Unknown



Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown – 311 – Cuba Sushi, yes, that's right, with Hugo Cancio

Bourdain begins with Hugo Cancio, a Cuban ex-pat, who apparently was exiled as a student for an ill-timed Fidel Castro joke way back when. Now a resident of Miami, Cancio has become the go-to guy for celebrities and businessmen considering a visit or business in Havana. By all accounts, he had something to do with Paris Hilton and Conan O'Brien's recent trips and has a burgeoning contact list of others wanting a piece of his time.

Together Bourdain and Cancio dine at local hidden treasure, Casa de Santy, in Jaimanitas, a tiny fishing village just west of the Habana Club in Signorney (a section of Havana). Bourdain remarks " There are not many places in the world that look like this" as they are seated on a tiny balcony overlooking a fleet of sail and fishing boats. But wait, is that a platter of freshly cooked fish they are about to dig into? Nope! It's sushi! " Last time I was in Havana It would be

rice and beans" states Bourdain. The sushi is an example of "outside influences" that are beginning to permeate Cuba, observes his guide Cancio.

Next up Bourdain tracks down the two impresarios cum art curators of the Havana hot spot, Fabrica de Arte Cubano on Calle 26. This art gallery, restaurant and performance space is the epitome of the New Cuba that would not look out of place in New York City or L.A. Here locals and tourists alike line up to get a coveted entry to either a art exhibit opening, rock concert or night of dancing and dining depending on what's on the agenda that week. Here Bourdain is treated to a meal of dogfish ceviche and seared pork loin that both are perfectly prepared and to the American chef's delight. When Bourdain tells the Fabrica's duo that they are going to be millionaires very soon due to the onslaught of Americanos, they look at each other as if the thought never ever occurred to them. Then they conclude "it means we will be able to open more Fabrica's throughout Cuba" is their humble takeaway from the soon to be realized flow of riches.

And how do the real ex-pats see the situation? For this Bourdain seeks out John Lee Anderson a reporter who has made his home in Havana for several decades. Unfortunately for Bourdain he finds himself in front of plate of chow mein that is "about as Chinese as I am". Out of all of his meals in Cuba, this one, in Havana's Chinatown, is probably his biggest disappointment which is the same that can said of many who's have preceded him there as well. According to Anderson the change in the island will not be as fast as many fear and that U.S. commercialism will be carefully moderated. However, new found wealth is already being experienced as state employees can rent out rooms in their homes for \$30-40 per night " which is more than they make in three months" in their regular jobs.

Bourdain then takes a walk around a local neighbourhood with Leonard Padura, the world-renowned Cuban author of the wildly successful Mario Conde detective novels. Padura's novels usually include an unfettered tinge of social criticism that adds to his novels' mood. Bourdain is surprised that the author has chosen to continue living in Cuba when he could surely choose to live anywhere due to his success. "Why stay in Cuba?" asks Bourdain? "Because I like it" replies Padura. "I like to live in Cuba to be near the Cuban language and the Cuban people" he continues over a dessert of flan cooked in a beer can at a corner barbecue.

And so it goes. Before Bourdain exits Havana for other Cuban Parts Unkown, he also interviews a journalist who shares some rather surprisingly frank views on life in Cuba particularly as it applies to race relations. In this case, Bourdain finds himself treated to an authentic home cooked meal as the mother of the journalist fusses about in their modest kitchen and delivers a meal that you can tell Bourdain is not only impressed with but touched by.

Other Havana activities for Bourdain in Havana include a street drag race with vintage but souped up "Detroit's finest" and a barbecue held at an internationally successful artist's home who is clearly bringing in the pesos.

Just to prove that there is more to Cuba than Havana alone, Bourdain has the courage to brave a twelve hour drive to Santiago, which is the island's second largest city. Here he finds a city that is dirtier and dustier than Havana but one that is also preparing for the tourism boom.


Bourdain tells the owner of a beachside bar here that he will be serving a lot of pina coladas very soon and that he is going to need to get himself " a blender" because grinding them by hand simply is not going to cut it anymore. The bartender looks at him thoughtfully as if he is slowly waking up to the realization that a tsunami is headed his way.


And this does seem to be Bourdain ultimate conclusion. This is the "lull before it all hits". But by watching Bourdain's season premiere potential visitors will see what all of the potential fuss is all about. In Cuba there awaits an island rich with culture, music, food and entertainment that will satisfy a decades' old pent up demand that is gathering at the departure gates as we speak.

Anthony Bourdain's sixth season of Parts Unknown debuts Sunday September 27th on CNN.

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