

# Cuban contrasts

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If we were trying to summarise Cuba in a word it would have to be 'contrast'.

While we celebrated the 60th IFLA General Conference in Havana, outside the hotels, just yards from luxury swimming pools, Cubans built rafts to escape from an economy which cannot support the necessities of life for all of its citizens. Most of the beautiful buildings in Havana are sadly in need of repair and restoration but there are areas, particularly around the Museum of the History of the City of Havana, where a most im-

pressive restoration program is having a marked impact.

from Central and Southern America, this conference marked IFLA's first visit to this region. Many delegates from Latin America and the Caribbean took the opportunity to attend and to build contacts which will help to create enhanced networking in the region.

Many aspects of Havana came as a pleasant surprise given the 'doom and gloom' attitude of some before to our visit. Conference facilities were excellent and the conference was run most efficiently. Many generous sponsors supported the conference including a Swedish firm that

Havana. Official functions were enlivened by wonderful displays of Latin-American dance and music which enticed delegates to join in.

The attitude to libraries was reflected in the speech of Minister of Culture Armando Hart Dávalos in his opening address: 'I have always greatly admired librarians. You carry out your work simply and modestly but with a passion that is reflected in your faces. It would be difficult to imagine a librarian devoted to preserving and promoting books and reading who was at the same time a dishonest person; in other words, who was a negation of his or her own humanistic profession.'

A number of Cuban libraries are moving into automated cataloguing using standardised software, although they are not yet linked together.

The biggest problem for Cuban librarians is the lack of hard currency and limited local funding for acquisitions. Some, such as the library of the Museo de Belles Artes, manage to supplement their budgets with exchange programs. Others, such as the National Science and Technology Library, have made a start in using full text CD-ROMs in place of hard copy subscriptions to scientific journals.

Many delegates brought gifts of books and other library materials and in return received gifts of Cuban publications to bring back to their home libraries.

Matters of general professional interest that emerged during the Conference were:

- Revised draft of the UNESCO manifesto on public libraries produced by the IFLA division of libraries serving the general public.
- Announcement by IFLA of plans to broaden membership communications capability by establishing an IFLA telecommunications network, IFLANET, by the end of the year.
- Proposal to establish a new core programme for IFLA on literacy.
- Report given by National Librarian of New Zealand Peter Scott on the strategic alliance between the National Libraries of Australia and New Zealand.



donated one million sheets of paper to cover printing needs.

A number of innovations were introduced such as the establishment of a discussion list, IFLA-L, for the conference some months before the event and the availability of all conference papers on floppy disk.

Given that there were over 100 professional papers and many full-day workshops, this service was a boon to the overloaded traveller.

Considerable effort also was made in the provision of translations, with virtually all papers being available in at least Spanish and English.

But the most impressive aspect was the obvious interest in libraries, education and culture throughout

In all, we found among our Cuban colleagues a level of enthusiasm for their country and their profession which puts the lie to broad political generalisations.

Despite what some perceived as difficulties in getting to Cuba, with one flight from Miami being turned back by a bomb threat, most of the 900 foreign delegates found the difficulties were no worse than for other distant locations.

For others, particularly those