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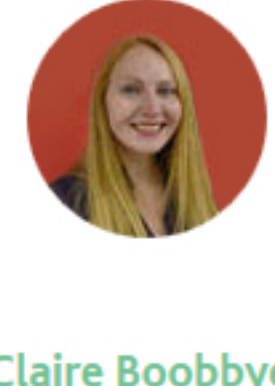
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The Burial of Pachencho in Cuba

TRAVEL STORY THERE IS ANOTHER WORLD OUT THERE

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Claire Boobbyer CULTURAL EXPLORER

A self-confessed wanderlust and devoted culture lover, Claire writes about her frequent travels...

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Watching the burial of a live man in Cuba is one of the most bizarre events that I have ever seen. Every year on February 5th, the townsfolk of Santiago de las Vegas - just south of Havana - come together to re-enact this peculiar event played out with local characters who play the part of the corpse, the widow and the priest. It being Cuba, huge amounts of rum are drunk, and the whole event is carried by the free flow of alcohol and a conga that is roused in the morning and continues throughout the afternoon round the town.



I got to the source of the action early so I could see everything that took place as part of the event. At 7:30 in the morning I was invited to climb to the roof of the town's Liceo building where a trumpeter sounded the beginning of the ceremony. A Cuban flag was unveiled and Alvaro Hernandez Reza, in charge of the Liceo and the annual event, announced the opening - known as "El velorio de Pachencho" (the wake of Pachencho) before turning around and looking for the "dead man", a local guy called Divaldo Aguilar.

"Ah, here he is, he's ugly but nonetheless still alive."

Alvaro chuckled to peals of laughter from the gathered crowd. We were then all invited to toast the proceedings with white rum, crackers and ham up on the rooftop. Then at 8am, Divaldo aka Pachencho clambered into a grey coffin, garlanded with a wreath of flowers, and pretended to act dead with his eyes fixed staring at the ceiling. His widow, dressed in red, who would not tell me her name as she feared I was going to place a curse on her, started to wail and weep and mourn, leaning over her dead "beloved" and saying:

"How could you leave me alone? Why have you left me alone? Ay... Pachencho... What have you done?"

At around 9am, a conga clattered into life in the Liceo with drummers and a trumpeter. The grieving widow started dancing and twirling the wreath around while Pachencho flung himself to the floor in mock dead mode.



Shortly afterwards the conga usually processes out into the road behind the tractor and trailer that pulls the coffin through the streets of Santiago de las Vegas to the cemetery. However, because of the threat of rain when I was there, the conga quartet boarded a bus and we set off behind the coffin, with the band playing, and the widow and her friends dancing in the back of the bus.



The trailer carrying Pachencho's coffin was covered in a couple of handmade posters with the words: "Que en paz descanse" (rest in peace) and "A Pachencho Te Deseamos Feliz Viaje" (we wish you a good trip Pachencho) and was accompanied on the journey to the cemetery by a "priest" dressed in blue. When I asked Alvaro what the Roman Catholic Church thought of the burial, he confided:

"They don't mind, but they did ask at the beginning that our priest not wear the same colours as a real priest."

When we got to the town cemetery, both the "priest" and the "dead" Divaldo swigged on rum before processing through the main arch to Pachencho's tomb. As Pachencho's coffin was laid on top of the tomb the priest, standing on the grave's edge, gave a "eulogy" about how Pachencho was a robber and no-gooder and deserved all that came to him, much to the amusement of the gathered "mourners".



Then the band kicked off again and Pachencho was lowered in his coffin five foot underground where he lay dead for a short while before he was revived with cascades of rum that the revellers - I mean funeral goers - could spare. After being splattered with cheap rum, he got out of the coffin and clambered out of the grave!



The resurrected, but worse-for-wear Pachencho then got back into his coffin and was paraded around town, followed by the shaking boogie bus, before heading back to the Liceo for err... more rum. Later in the afternoon a rumba kicked off followed by a conga that trailed Pachencho's coffin all around town with the whole town dancing behind.



During the rum "recess", I talked to Alvaro about the festival, which launched in 1984 after a Liceo in the city of Havana invited the Santiago de las Vegas Circulo Social for an event. They returned the invitation and thought up the idea of the Burial of Pachencho as a host activity.

"How do you choose who will play Pachencho?"

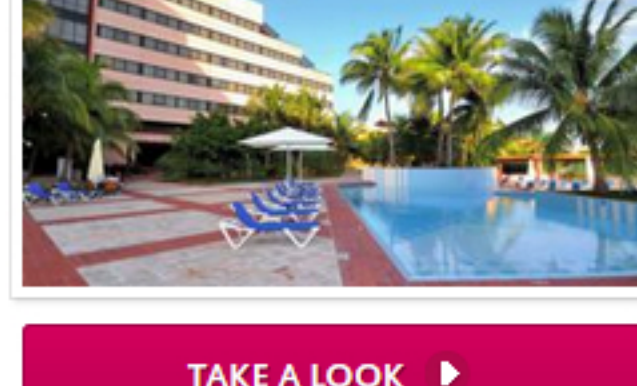
I asked Alvaro. He looked at me and replied:

"There's a whole line of people who want to be him. They've got to be local and involved in village life... To be honest, though, would anyone with their five senses intact get into a coffin and be buried?"

I giggled at how Alvaro had nailed (no pun intended!) the madness of the day.

Claire Boobbyer

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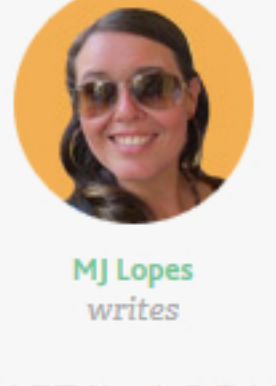
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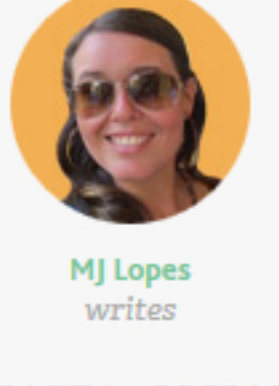
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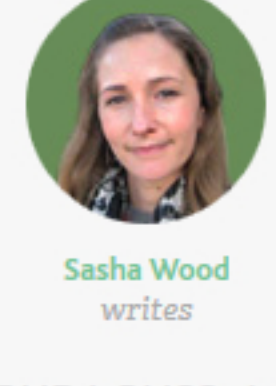
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