

SABBATICAL REPORT

RICHARD DORMANDY

Overview

My Sabbatical took place between 1st July and 1st October 2009. The nine weeks between 11th July and 11th September were spent travelling through Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. The aim of my journey was to experience local music in a community context, along with something of church life and the opportunity to reflect on other cultures from within. I also took the opportunity to visit some places of natural wonder such as Iguacu Falls, the Amazon Jungle, and Mexico's Copper Canyon. During the entire journey I kept a blog, totalling 100 posts. This includes photos, film clips, reflections, and descriptions of various parts of the trip – some amusing, some serious. It can be viewed at www.dormandy.co.uk/blog. My journey was fully planned before leaving, and I stayed in a variety of accommodation from hostels, as a guest of personal or church contacts, bed & breakfasts, and hotels. In Brazil and the USA I was essentially on my own, in Cuba I was joined by my wife, Ruth, and in Mexico I was joined by my youngest son, Woodie.

Highlights

Rio de Janeiro: being mugged and losing my wallet – and subsequent reflections; visiting City of God with Priest-Missioner Rev. Nicholas Wheeler; 2 hr pandeiro lesson at Maracatu percussion centre; football match at Maracana; bossa nova at the historic Vinicius club; walking through Rio streets due to lack of funds.

Iguacu: surviving with depleted cash; taking a boat under the Iguacu falls on the Argentinian side.

Recife: staying with a wonderful host from the local church; visiting various diocesan projects; two-hour interview with Bishop Sebastiao; going to two live forro gigs (north-east Brazil dance music). Receiving cash sent by Ruth!

Amazon: three day jungle trip, including camping out overnight.

Trinidad: meeting Ruth at Havana airport; negotiating very dark Havana streets in the early hours of the morning; staying in a seaside village overtaken by Cuban farm workers on their annual holidays; live Salsa at the Casa de la Musica, and Son at the Casa de Trova. Being given replacement credit card and driving licence.

Santiago de Cuba: Salsa lessons and maraca lessons from the maraca maker; meeting a historic monument guide who turned out to be a Christian – and visiting his church: First Baptist; beginning to find the measure of how much to pay taxi drivers; using Cuban pesos to buy street pizza; elderly woman singing in the Casa de Trova.

Havana: staying in a very upmarket Casa Particular (private house) and experiencing the vagaries of the Cuban dual economy; buying a print and meeting the artist, Roman Catholic Mercy Rivadula, at her home – we also met her father who is a distinguished graphic artist, having produced the first poster of the Revolution; seeing legendary band, Los Van Van in concert at the small venue, Casa de la Musica – they are the band who first turned me on to latin music back in 1988.

Mexico City: meeting Woodie at the airport – and getting through the border the other end in time for our departing planes from El Paso; entering Mexican magical realism in the midst of everyday life: the lucha libre (wrestling), the extraordinary murals of Diego Rivera and others, fabulous mango with chilli and salt, transporting mariachi music in Plaza Garibaldi; pyramids.

North Mexico: train journey through the Copper Canyon; nine hours touring on scooters; staying slightly bizarre guest house; seeing a little of the church's mission work among Raramuri indigenous people; extraordinary Banda music in the drive in pub in Chihuahua; evocative Ranchero music at a cafe; touring some 15-20 cowboy boot shops – buying a bright red pair, worn on my final Sunday at St James the Less, Pimlico.

Louisiana: the Acadian Cultural Centre in Lafayette, which tells the moving story of Acadian people; getting live music recommendations from two Rangers; staying at the Blue Moon Guest House, which is also one of the best

live music venues in the region; writing a song "Sketchy Kind of Place"; performing at a songwriters night and participating in a Cajun jam session; meeting accordian maker Mr Martin; going to the Gueydon Duck Festival for two nights' amazing Cajun and Zydeco dance music, and lovely jambalaya; being pulled over by the highway police twice – for driving too fast and driving too slow; going to Zydeco Breakfast at Breaux Bridge and KBON radio station in Eunice; going to La Poussiere Dance Hall in Breaux Bridge for an evening of Zydeco music – the first ever performance by a creole (black) band at this locally famous venue – racial history in the making. New Orleans – was ok.

Memphis & Mississippi: staying at the Shack Up Inn in the heart of the Blues delta; playing the Steinway grand at the Tucina Museum; staying at Pilgrim House Hostel, run by First Congregational church and using one of the hire bikes for transport; being moved by the stature of protestors recorded at the Civil Rights Museum, Memphis; being inspired by the story of Stax Records in the Stax museum; worshipping at First Congregational Church – a beautiful space with uninspiring spirituality it felt to me;

Nashville: jamming with a traveller in the Nashville Visitor Centre; recording another new song at the Ryman Auditorium; visiting the Country Music Hall of Fame; playing at the Open Mic night at Douglas Corner Cafe; going to Family Wash on my last night – a corner bar off the beaten track – for fabulous music and the best food in the USA.

Insights & Going Forward

Things that seemed significant to me included: (1) THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNAL MUSIC & DANCING IN THE MAKING AND PRESERVATION OF COMMUNITY STORY; (2) THE SPIRITUAL & EVANGELICAL PASSION OF ('LIBERAL') BRAZILIAN CHRISTIANS IN RECIFE DIOCESE; (3) THE CIVIL RIGHTS CONTEXT OF US LIBERAL ("GAY-FRIENDLY") CHURCHES;

Going forward I would want to: (1) PROMOTE LOCAL SONG-WRITING & MUSIC MAKING IN MY NEW PARISH; (2) EXPLORE MUSICAL WAYS TO MAKE WORSHIP MORE DANCEABLE; (3) BE A MORE CONSISTENT ADVOCATE, IN EVANGELICAL CIRCLES, FOR THE INTEGRITY OF LIBERAL CHURCHES WHICH HOLD DIFFERING OPINIONS ON SEXUALITY.

Richard Dormandy
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