Treasure City: Havana

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In the final years of the seventeenth century, an Italian adventurer going by the name of Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri became one of the first Europeans to complete a solo tour of the world using public transportation. This pioneer of global tourism traveled without any other apparent purpose than to hang around exotic places, chatting with strangers and checking out the views. In order to finance his extravagant lifestyle, Gemelli Careri bribed custom officials all over the world, smuggling valuable merchandise from one country to sell it in the next, while charging people for his services as an unlicensed healer. After returning to Europe, the adventurer published an account of his

voyage under the title *Giro del Mondo*. This book, which was translated into English and French, became an instant bestseller, and today constitutes an invaluable source for those interested in the cultural history of travel literature as a genre. Moreover, the fact that Gemelli Careri joined the Spanish treasure fleet for almost two thirds of his trip gives the modern historian an opportunity to see this transportation system at work through his detailed account.

The history of the treasure fleet is one of imperial crossroads. After obtaining from the Vatican some exclusive but questionable rights over most of the territories newly discovered on the other side of the Atlantic, Spain entered the sixteenth century as a nominal superpower challenged by the hemispheric scale of its ambitions. Fabulous mountains of gold and silver, the two pillars of the European monetary economy, were apparently up for grabs in America. For many a British, French, or Dutch open-minded entrepreneur, that proved to be too much of a temptation. Soon enough, the Spanish Crown would need an enormous amount of ingenuity and resources to keep such competitors out of the profitable pilfering operation mounted by a handful of conquistadors in the Indies.

At the time, crossing the Atlantic in small overloaded ships was still a tricky business that required both excellent navigation skills and favorable meteorological circumstances. With the additional threat of armadas and independent looters, keeping the American riches flowing into Spain became a very complex problem. An obvious solution was found in the form of larger vessels sailing in convoy, during the most favorable months of every year, under the supervision of nautical experts and the protection of powerful warships. By the end of the century this basic idea had evolved into a highly synchronized scheme involving several fleets, mule trains, and caravans of Indian porters linking dozens of mines, garrisons, shipyards, markets, taverns, and seaports from Manila to Seville or Cadiz. The Spanish *Flota de Indias* became more than just an imperial hauling service, spanning two wide oceans, an isthmus covered by nearly impenetrable rainforests and a labyrinth of pirate-infested islands. For almost three hundred years, this system allowed an unprecedented circulation of exotic products, ideas, and people between Asia, Europe, and America, in what could be considered the first global communication network.

Strategically situated in the northern coast of Cuba and facing the Gulf Stream, the port of Havana became a critical node in this web. It was the final meeting point for all the ships of the Spanish treasure fleet, right before the last and most dangerous leg of their long trip back to Europe. With an ample harbor, an excellent shipyard, and a fertile hinterland, Havana constituted the perfect place for refreshment and repairs. The fleet stayed there several months at a time, waiting for clear horizons, superior orders, or propitious winds. The idle crews of the galleons mingled with the locals. An exchange of forbidden merchandise, alternative ideologies, musical rhythms, and bodily fluids took place every year. Naval officials and illustrious passengers from

faraway lands visited with the most distinguished among the Creole elites, while humble sailors gambled their wages against the meager savings of some African slaves employed as harbor workers. Culinary innovations, creative architectural arrangements, and flexible forms of prostitution were developed to accommodate thousands of newcomers. Daily life in Havana was determined by the seasonal presence of the fleet, with commodity prices, moral standards, and levels of hygienic tolerance changing along the sharp fluctuations of a service oriented economy.

Gemelli Careri started his trip in 1693, with a visit to Egypt, Constantinople, and the Holy Land. At the time, this Middle Eastern routine was already becoming a standard ingredient of any excursion into foreign lands, a hike that was almost not worth writing home about. However, from there on our Italian "tourist" would take less traveled routes. After crossing Persia and Armenia, he visited Southern India and entered China, where the Jesuit missionaries assumed that such an unusual Italian visitor ought to be some sort of spy working for the pope. This fortuitous misunderstanding opened for Gemelli Careri many of the most tightly closed doors of the country. He got to visit the emperor at Beijing, attended the Lantern Festival celebrations and toured the Great Wall.

From Macao, our globetrotter sailed to the Philippines, where he stayed two months while waiting for the departure of the Manila galleon. As Gemelli Careri described it in his journal, the half-year-long transoceanic trip to Acapulco was a nightmare plagued with bad food, epidemic outbursts, and the occasional storm. In Mexico, our Italian traveler became a celebrity by the simple expedient of telling his anecdotes over and over to the local aristocrats. His insatiable curiosity would take him beyond the capital, visiting several mine towns and the ancient ruins of Teotihuacan. After five years of wandering around the world, Gemelli Careri was finally on his way back to Europe when he joined the treasure fleet in Cuba.

The ship that brought him from Mexico entered Havana in December 28, 1697, after two weeks of rough sailing. It took a couple of days for the passengers to disembark and find lodging. Apparently, that New Year's evening was not one of the most animated in the history of the town. The next morning, however, the governor threw a little party to celebrate the election of new city hall officials, with the bishop joining them right after mass. All through that first week, Gemelli Careri visited every possible convent, church, and chapel in the city, observing the holiday's liturgy with customary fervor. Soon, he would get to know the neighborhood very well. For such a seasoned traveler, to spend a couple of months in Havana doing nothing was obviously too much. That is why his account of this uneventful vacation starts with enthusiastic descriptions of nocturnal soirees and hunting excursions to the outskirts of the city but ends with an impatient countdown of the boring days that took the fleet to get ready for departure.

In the imagination of a Dutch engraver, seventeenth century Havana appears to be a city of stylized churches and oriental domes. All that naval action upfront contributes to the exotic atmosphere of the image. The chain at the entrance of the bay is clearly visible. From John Ogilby, America: Being the Latest, and More Accurate Description of the New World, (London, 1671), 332-33. Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

During the seventeenth century, Havana was little more than a fortified village with cosmopolitan pretenses. Founded in 1519, it didn't become the official capital of Cuba until 1607. From then on, its population started to grow faster and faster. Five hundred families were accounted for in 1608. Eighty years later, they amounted to three thousands, for an annual growth rate of more than 6 percent. Almost twenty-seven thousands people lived in Havana when Gemelli Careri visited the town, and they represented more than half of the total population of the island. One third of the urban dwellers were considered to be of African descent but only a handful of them were free from slavery.

Prejudices of the Spanish Crown against any foreign force (from Huguenots to hurricanes) had endowed the city with a cute lighthouse, three solid castles, and a walled perimeter. A floating wooden chain reinforced with iron hardware was extended across the narrow entrance to the harbor, while a formidable battery of cannons humorously nicknamed the Twelve Apostles covered the same channel. At the time, this integration of religious allegory and modern ballistics was not unusual. In fact, protection for Havana was provided by the best combination of heaven's favor and civil engineering that any system of sanctimonious prayers and imperial subsidies could buy. Of course, while churches and fortresses competed for a visual monopoly of the modest skyline, dark convents and overcrowded garrisons became active centers of political rivalry. Apparently, Havana was a town of petite intrigues; as famous for its cigars as for the inevitable gossiping that accompanied their consumption.

On the other hand, its role as a major port in the route of the treasure fleet contributed to inflate the city's defense budget. In order to pay for the maintenance of the fortifications and the salaries of the troops, Spain diverted considerable sums to Havana in the form of Mexican silver and gold.

This money fueled the city economy for many years, because it was spent mostly to cover the costs of local labor, supplies, and services. However, as often happens with subsidies, the Mexican *situados* had an ambiguous impact on the society as a whole by creating a dependence on easy financing for the development of public works. Private contractors got overpaid for second-rate jobs done with the inefficiency that is usual in such cases. This combination of paternalism and sloppiness signed by a track of unfinished buildings and chronic deficits would become an essential ingredient in the Cuban municipal culture.

The social center of Havana was in its harbor. Something interesting happened there almost every day. The movement of royal, private, and clandestine freight was equally heavy. Dozens of merchants from everywhere in the Caribbean converged in the city during the winter months, despite severe rules limiting the access to strategic information about the schedule of the treasure fleet. While the inflated cost of life in Havana brought many providers of basic staples, hundreds of travelers and sailors with an appetite for American souvenirs attracted to the city some other interesting characters trafficking in exotic items. According to Gemelli Careri, a handful of half-naked Indians with long braided hair came from the Florida Keys in a small vessel at the beginning of January. These people were allowed to trade with the galleons in exchange for welcoming fourteen Franciscan missionaries on their land. Every year they brought to Havana hundreds of caged cardinals that were immensely popular among the fleet's passengers. In the following weeks, several other boats loaded with cages came from Florida. At the moment of departure, our witness affirmed, more than eighteen thousand *pesos fuertes* in North American live birds were on board of the galleons.

Being a merchant himself, Gemelli Careri was impressed by the enormous value of the fleet's cargo. In a complicated operation that took several weeks, thirty million *pesos* in gold and silver were carried from *La Fuerza* castle to the galleons anchored nearby. In the mean time, a controversy ensued between some port functionaries and the captains of the ships. According to the local experts, the safety of the entire fleet would have been compromised had the galleons not been loaded all the way. Any combination of faster and slower ships would amount to a very inefficient convoy. After a weekend of intense negotiations involving all interested parties, the general in command of the fleet agreed to increase the cargo levels in the name of the king. Apparently, similar maneuvers were concocted in the harbor almost every year. They were part of a continuous strategy to play around standard regulations established by the Spanish *Consejo de Indias*, which limited the volume and nature of the commodities transported from Havana to Cadiz.

On February first, a ship with provisions for the fleet arrived from Spain. Six hundred sacks of flour and roughly the same amount of biscuits were distributed among the galleons. In a solemn procession, a blessed image of the Virgin Mary was carried from the cathedral to the general's ship, while cannons and muskets were discharged in its honor. Apparently, everything was ready for departure,

but nothing happened for weeks. Leaving Havana was a complicated decision to make. It involved the evaluation of nautical, meteorological, and geopolitical variables, becoming sort of a gambling move with too many careers and lives on the line. One Sunday in mid-February, a public announcer blowing the horn used in such official occasions made clear that the fleet would eventually leave Havana . . . in a month or so. Another ship loaded with wheat, fresh fruit, and wine came from the Canary Islands on February 17. From that day on, local authorities made sure that nobody was able to abandon the harbor until the final departure of the galleons. With so much money on board, it was important to keep a reasonable level of secrecy regarding the movements of the fleet.

At the beginning of March things started to move a bit faster. Sailors were paid their full salaries in order to encourage the general performance of the crews, but lots of them deserted right after that. This was another chronic problem faced by the high command of the convoy. Many young kids from the Spanish countryside joined the treasure fleet as a way of getting an easy ticket to America, and Cuba was already becoming a popular destination. Ship officials reacted to this phenomenon by recruiting locals lured with the prospect of European adventures. In some extreme cases, youngsters were practically kidnapped to complete the crews and slaves were “confiscated” in the name of the king to do most of the hard work on the ships.

On the evening of March 12, after enjoying his last dinner in town, Gemelli Careri embarked on the galleon *El Gobierno*. It was difficult for him to get any rest at all, because of the noise made by a hundred pigs that were accommodated in the ship that night as part of a living cargo that included also several cows and lambs. The laborious process of sailing out of the harbor started early next morning, but the first ship in the long convoy didn’t cross the entrance until sunset. Every galleon saluted each fortress with six or seven salvoes that were dutifully reciprocated. It was, all in all, another noisy night. Next day, a formidable storm hit the fleet offshore of Havana. One of the largest vessels was lost, and it took several days for the convoy to recover from the shock. In the meantime, a woman dressed as a man was found in one of the galleons. According to Gemelli Careri, the captain allowed her to stay with the rest of the female passengers only because it was already too late to take her back to Cuba. On its way to Europe, the fleet had passed the point of no return.

Every city is an urban palimpsest, a used parchment covered with the fragmentary scrawls of its own past. That is probably why some of the institutions and values generated by three centuries of providing services as a transatlantic center of commerce and entertainment are still visible in Havana today. It has the appearance of a colonial city falling apart under the rigors of tropical socialism, but an entire urban fabric of remarkable flexibility is still alive and well behind this mask. Almost every Atlantic trait has been waived into the local culture, and despite four decades of self-imposed isolation, Havana is still an open city. The chain at the entrance of the harbor is gone. In front of the Morro Castle, the little fortress of La Punta

is today a museum of maritime history. There, two old keys made of gold and silver are exhibited in a window as part of the treasure of historical information salvaged from a local shipwreck. Like any other key, these were designed to keep doors closed but also to open them again. In that sense, they are symbols of Havana's convulsed past and signs of hope for its future. In our story, however, these keys play a most modest role. Local archeologists found them in the sunken hull of a galleon named *Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes*, the very same ship lost in front of the harbor in 1698, when Gemelli Careri survived his last Cuban storm.

Further Reading: This piece is partially based on Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, *Voyage du Tour du Monde, Traduit de l'Italien…* vol. 6, (Paris, 1727). For further reading on Havana and Cuba in the seventeenth century see: Arrate y Acosta, José Martín Félix de, *Llave del Nuevo Mundo; Antemural de las Indias Occidentales. La Habana Descripta: Noticias de su Fundación, Aumentos y Estados* (Havana, 1964); *Leví Marrero, Cuba, Economía y Sociedad*, v. 3-5, (Madrid, 1975); Joseph L. Scarpaci et al, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis*, (Chapel Hill and London, 2002). Also relevant are: Timothy R. Walton, 1948- *The Spanish Treasure Fleets*, (Sarasota, 1994) and Fundación ICO, *El Oro y la Plata de las Indias en la Epoca de los Austrias*, (Madrid, 1999).

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