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TRAVEL

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EDITOR: LISA MONFORTON 403-235-7428 LMONFORTON@THEHERALD.CANWEST.COM SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2009

TRAVEL NOTES

Hotel will be out of this world

WHAT'S NEXT • A company behind plans to open the first hotel in space says it is on target to accept its first paying guests in 2012 despite critics questioning the investment and time frame for the multibillion dollar project.

The Barcelona-based architects of The Galactic Suite Space Resort say it will cost $4.4 million US for a three-night stay at the hotel, with this price including an eight-week training course on a tropical island.

During their stay, guests would see the sun rise 15 times a day and travel around the world every 80 minutes. They would wear Velcro suits so they can crawl around their pod rooms by sticking themselves to the walls like Spider-Man.

Galactic Suite Ltd's CEO Xavier Claramunt, a former aerospace engineer, said the project will put his company (http://www.galacticsuite.com) at the forefront of an infant industry with a huge future, and he forecast that space travel will become common in the future.

"It's very normal to think that your children, possibly within 15 years, could spend a weekend in space," he told Reuters Television.

British tycoon Richard Branson's space tours firm, Virgin Galactic, will use the facility to propel tourists into suborbital space at a cost of $200,000 a ride.

— Reuters

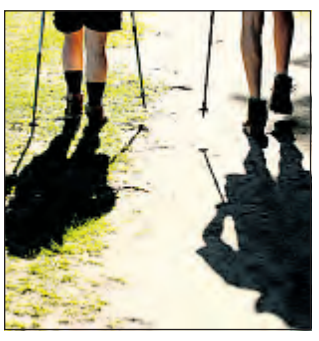
Go take a hike

ONLINE • You could use Twitter or Facebook to ask friends for hiking and biking recommendations — but then you'd have to wait for a response. Check in with Trails.SierraClub.org to find a trail or share a favourite of your own.

Here's how it works: '"Find a Trail" does just what it says, but I found it much easier to browse this site (which is still being developed and focuses on the United States, for now) by states instead of getting specific in a keyword search. For example, rather than look for easy hikes in Los Angeles, search California trails. You'll get 195 results, including Aliso Creek Trail and Bikeway in south Orange County, Big Bend Trail in Laguna Beach and Bridge to Nowhere in Angeles National Forest.

The Trails website takes you to the Sierra Club website, which offers plenty of outdoors-related content and activity options.

— Jen Leo
special to the Los Angeles Times



Herald Archive

Michael Gottschalk, AFP-Getty Images

Participants in the so-called "Trabi-Safari" drive vintage East German Trabant cars past a piece of the Berlin Wall, much of which came down in 1989. The Trabi-Safari offers a tour called "the wall ride," to Berlin's historic sites.

20 YEARS AFTER

Nostalgia for Communism lingers in Berlin

GARY A. WARNER
McCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

Twenty years ago, I was a bearded little Dorothy going through a Wizard of Oz moment, only in reverse.

In October 1989 I passed through Checkpoint Charlie and stepped from the Technicolor world of West Berlin, with its blue neon theatre signs, bright shop windows and teens with spiky blue hair, into East Berlin.

After running the gauntlet in the East German border station where my copy of Newsweek was confiscated, I walked into a world that seemed to have suddenly gone black and white.

Wide but nearly empty streets were hung with banners celebrating 40 years of the German Democratic Republic. The few shops that weren't shuttered sold metallic-tasting beer or stale, soapy chocolate. Everyone I met was testy or glum. A post-Second World War-era treaty required that westerners be allowed to visit East Berlin, but the government didn't like it. The citizens knew that with 91,000 agents and countless informers, the Stasi secret police were likely watching all interactions. After five hours, I was glad to get back to the West.

I took the Cold War for granted. I was born in 1958, with the confrontation more than a decade old.

ALSO SEE

■ Best sites in Berlin to see vestiges of Communism. **F4**

Now here I was, 30 years later, a reporter on patrol with the Berlin brigade, the U.S. army unit that roared along the length of the Berlin Wall each day in full combat gear, M-60 machine-guns mounted atop their Humvees. We'd stop at aging wooden platforms to scamper up for a look across the Wall. Our guys with binoculars looking at their guys with binoculars. The Wall was slathered along its western side with brilliant swirls of abstract artwork amid the copious graffiti.

SEE BERLIN, PAGE F2

Andreas Rentz, Getty Images

A souvenir photo display at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, popular with tourists.

> All in all today is much better because now it can get better. Someday.
> GUIDO WEISS

Gerard Malie, AFP-Getty Images

East German border guards relax on Nov. 11, 1989, after demolishing a section of the Berlin Wall to open a new crossing point, near the Potsdamer Square. Some portions of the wall still stand, covered in works of art and graffiti.

LISA MONFORTON
DEPARTURES

Foreign flings: a tale of caution

For any woman who fantasizes about meeting her soulmate on holiday, you might want to first talk to Wanda St. Hilaire.

She's something of an expert on the subject — only because she's been burned on more than one occasion. Her weak spot? Latin men — especially smooth-talking Cuban men who can dance.

The Calgary author's CV traverses the minefield of love-gone-wrong in foreign countries. It's all there in her first travel memoir, The Cuban Chronicles: A True Tale of Rascals, Rogues and Romance. She calls it a cautionary tale for women around the world.

The Cuban Chronicles is a departure for St. Hilaire, 48, whose previous published works have been mainly gift books and poetry. A self-confessed romantic, she prefers solo trips because she doesn't want to "follow anyone else's agenda." That allows her to enjoy what she loves most — absorbing a new culture through cooking or language classes, and getting to know the locals. Sometimes intimately.

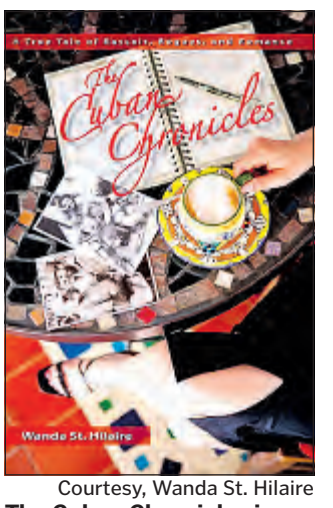
But her romantic impulses have gotten her into some tense situations.

"I've always wanted to write a travel memoir," says St. Hilaire, who has travelled alone almost exclusively. She has visited Mexico 25 times and lived there for two winters, among her other travels.

Two back-to-back trips to Cuba in late 2006 and early 2007, which led to an entanglement with a Cuban man, stirred her to write this very personal and meaty — sometimes messy — tale.

"I wanted to tell the whole truth. It took me a while to get up the courage."

SEE FLINGS, PAGE F2



Courtesy, Wanda St. Hilaire

The Cuban Chronicles is an adventure in finding love.

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David Gannon, AFP-Getty Images

A performing artist dressed as a U.S. military police officer takes a photo of a group of tourists at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin earlier this summer.

FROM PAGE F1

BERLIN: Symbols of past souvenirs

From the platform, I could see the other side of the Wall.

It was grey white, followed by a strip of pointed rocks, then barbed wire, guard towers, floodlights and another wall. The army guys on patrol called it the Death Strip.

The Iron Curtain that stretched across Europe had its thickest, tallest, razor-wire-strewn stretch cutting through the heart of Berlin.

Weeks later, it all crumbled.

Alexanderplatz (a large public square in the city centre) filled with protesters. The Wall came down. East Berliners spilled into West Berlin. Demonstrators stormed the headquarters of the Stasi, the once-dreaded secret police. The empty husk of the Communist government teetered, then signed on to a humiliating reunification plan. Soviet troops withdrew.

A dark, nasty but thankfully short period of Berlin's history was over.

Unfortunately, I was back in southern California when the Wall was breached. I've returned many times in the past 20 years, watched as the bulldozers swept away nearly all traces of the Wall, cranes built mirror-clad skyscrapers around Potsdamer Platz, and Starbucks opened just up the street from the Russian Embassy.

First there was exuberance, a desire to dump anything remotely connected with East Berlin. But as the promise of the early years gave way to cold realities, a backlash developed against the clean, corporate capital being thrown up by civic boosters.

The disappointment has taken the odd form of "Ostalgia," a nostalgia for the Communist days of East Berlin (ost means east in German).

Not a longing for the Wall, the Soviet occupiers, the secret police, the shootings of demonstrators, the decades of lost promise. But a reaction to the unravelling of the world East Berliners had known. They painted in their minds a memory of a more stable and egalitarian past, where everyone had a job and everyone was poor (except for the party elite).

Where families stayed close because travel wasn't an option. A time where clubs — chess, sports, youth, even nudist — were the places to make friends. Where every smart kid who didn't mouth off against the government could go to college. Before the raw competition of capitalism swelled the unemployment rolls, split marriages, sent children to work in distant countries, and western products pushed out familiar if inferior brands.

For North Americans, the Ostalgia bent is hard to understand. It would be unthinkable — actually against the law — to have Nazi symbols and artifacts sold as sweatshirts and coffee mugs. Yet hats with red stars and T-shirts emblazoned with the hammer and compass of the old DDR, are sold everywhere.

The Nazis had been defeated, while East Germany simply faded away.

East Berliners wanted the dictators and occupiers gone, but they didn't figure on the political, cultural and social submersion of the East by the West. Many Germans are uncomfortable with it — Der Spiegel, a top magazine, tried to declare Ostalgia as "dead" in 2006, before the worldwide recession rekindled the old sore points.

Most of all, Ostalgia is a cult of symbols — many of which have become heavily marketed kitsch for sale to tourists. Tops is the Ampelmannchen — "little traffic light man" — the jaunty green man with a hat that was the "walk" sign at East German intersections. Along with his red brother signifying "don't walk," they were among the first symbols of the regime learned by children. Early attempts to convert intersections to western-style walk and don't walk symbols were met with stiff resistance. Ampelmann, a string of boutiques, shops and restaurants, has opened across Berlin, and the symbols are highly sought souvenirs now on T-shirts, refrigerator magnets and coasters.

The smoke-belching Trabant sedan, with its noisy, two-cylinder engine, has become a collector's item, spawning car clubs that gather with their Cold War clunkers by the scores, and used by the likes of rock band U2 as a symbol of cool.

Former East Berliners have battled to save Communist statues and street names (Germans yes, Soviets no) in parks and neighbourhoods throughout the city.

One statue of Marx and Engels, briefly endangered with eviction from its spot near the Berliner Dom cathedral, is now a national heritage site.

These are all tiny victories against a tide of change that has swept away familiar neighbourhoods. Downtrodden Mitte is once again the city's government centre. The workers districts of Prenzlauer Berg and Wedding, which only a decade ago still had buildings marked by shell holes from the war, have been gentrified.

Berlin has always been a chameleon city, taking on whatever role history wanted of it. Prussian citadel, imperial seat, Weimar's sensual playground, Hitler's Germania, target for American bombers and Red Army troops, capital of the German Democratic Republic.

While holding tight to some of its symbols and ready to label anyone wessie or ossie (meaning originally from western or eastern Berlin), many former citizens of East Berlin say looking backward has its limits.

Guido Weiss, 38, grew up in Communist East Berlin. But he has lived more than half his life in the "new" Germany. For his parents' generation there is some regret, lingering Ostalgia, for the old days.

They are the ones, as commentators have noted, who have replaced the Wall in the streets with one in their heads.

But for Weiss, it is different. A delivery driver, he's angry over 14 per cent unemployment, westerners buying up eastern properties, and the failure of the post-unification boom to materialize. But he has no desire to turn the clock back.

"All in all, today is much better," he said, "because now it can get better. Someday."

Berlin comes to Calgary

Check out a commemorative photo exhibit of compelling images from the fall of the Berlin Wall at the University of Calgary. From the Peaceful Revolution to German Unity is an exhibition of the significant event that reunited East and West Germany. It runs from Monday until Dec. 8, 8:30 to 4:30 p.m. daily. The exhibit is in Craigie Hall D100 (The Fine Arts Deanery at the U of C.)

An opening reception will be held at 7 p.m. on Monday.

From Tuesday to Nov. 24, a series of postwar German films will also be shown in the Language Resource Centre, Craigie Hall.

FLINGS: Use intuition

FROM F1

St. Hillaire is frank about her passionate side and her vulnerabilities, especially when Latin men are concerned.

"Cubans don't think of age. In Cuba, women date young men and vice versa. It makes it very appealing for a single woman," she says at a coffee shop on Calgary's 4th Street, where everyone knows her because that's where she does a lot of her writing.

The Cuban Chronicles is an uncensored, caper-filled journey, and at times a lusty read, as St. Hilaire navigates her ill-fated relationship with Paulo (not his real name), a smart and charming Cuban journalist who is bent on marrying her. Though she repeatedly tells him she's only interested in a just a fling, he has other ideas, like wanting her to meet his mother and sister, among other demands, long-term and financial.

Before this most recent trip, on which the book is based, St. Hilaire had imposed a 20-year travel ban to Cuba on herself, after having gone to the island during its nascent days of tourism. The reason for the prohibition, she boils down to four words: "I love Latin men." She warily lifted her Cuban prohibition after a trip to Oaxaca, Mexico, got cancelled because of political problems there. And so, St. Hillaire waded back into the Cuban lair.

This, despite the fact that she'd seen first-hand a number of her friends who'd fallen for Cuban men, brought them to Canada and married them, only to see all the relationships — except one — fail.

"You get caught up in the climate, the music the sensuality. It makes it all very appealing for a single woman."

Woven throughout the story of the relationship, St. Hillaire tries gracefully to extricate herself from, are her frank and sometimes raw everyday insights into the lives of Cubans and the hardships and poverty they endure.

St. Hilaire's story has some tense moments that include having to be rescued by the owners of an inn from her would-be lover's tenacious pursuit. There's also plenty of humour, but mostly self-discovery.

At the same time, her story is about a woman interested in the romance, not a long-term financial obligation.

As she so boldly proclaims in the book: "Love me for my body, no problem. Love me as an escape from Alcatraz, no thanks."

It wasn't until she was writing the memoir in Oaxaca, where she was falling for a "sexy" artist, that she had what she calls her "a-ha moment." She realized she was falling not only in love, but also into a pattern.

She switched gears from writing about a previous imbroglio in France to writing about her Cuban caper, observing that she had devoted her life to romantic adventure when what she really craved is enduring love.

From a woman who's been there, here are rules — in her own words — for conducting a foreign fling.

■ Most women are wired to want more. A foreign fling is a lot of fun.

■ Enjoy the moment (carpe diem), but be emotionally prepared to let it go.

■ Educate yourself. Know the lay of land and find out about culture mores and rules. For example, in many countries, guests are not allowed in hotel rooms. Be sure to respect the local customs and etiquette.

■ Finding yourself showered with the attentions of an exotic foreign man can be very heady. Be aware there may be a hidden agenda or motive (like an escape from dire circumstances). Also, know what your own underlying agenda is.

■ Trust your intuition. If you feel uncomfortable or any red flags come up, pay attention. Use tact to extricate yourself from the situation.

■ Take precautions and ask questions to avoid issues later on, be it of the heart or your health. Read between the lines.

■ Let someone at home know where you are. Leave an itinerary with contact information or if you don't have one, stay in touch with your whereabouts.

■ If you set the precedent of paying a man's way, you may set yourself up for a "gigolo" situation. Be sure you're not settling for crumbs for the sake of a companion.

■ If you want to carry on a long-distance relationship once you return home, ask yourself first: What are you prepared to do, change (i.e. lifestyle, location), spend, give up. If you are an adventurous soul and open to a new life, go for it.

■ If there is a language barrier, be sure to buy a dictionary to minimize misunderstandings. It's great fun to learn a new language and it will enrich your vacation experience.

■ Be sure to take heed when you hear or read cautionary tales of where you are going — like The Cuban Chronicles

LMONFORTON@THEHERALD.CANWEST.COM

Wanda St. Hilaire is the author of The Cuban Chronicles: A True Tale of Rascals, Rogues and Romance.

Want to meet the author?

The Cuban Chronicles is available at Calgary's Owl's Nest and Garden's Grace plus several Chapters and Indigo stores.

St. Hilaire is holding book signings at several areas in the city over the next couple of weeks.

■ Signing, today, Chapters, Macleod Trail Plaza, 1 to 4 p.m.

■ Signing, Sunday, Chapters, Spectrum Plaza, 2 to 6:30 p.m.

■ Signing, Nov. 15, Chapters, Shawnessey, 1 to 5 p.m.

■ Reading, signing wine and cheese night, Terra Cotta Gallery, Black Diamond, Nov. 20, 7 p.m.

■ Signing, Nov. 21, Indigo, CrossIron Mills store, 1 to 6 p.m.

■ Signing, Indigo, WestHills, Nov. 22, 1 to 5 p.m.

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