The thought of applying for the CASA Cuba program, organised and directed by the prestigious Consortium for Advanced Studies Abroad, was immediately enticing. Not only did this program promise the privilege of studying at two of Latin America’s foremost educational and cultural institutions, the University of Havana and Casa de Las Americas, but the location itself was also irresistible – Cuba, a country steeped in fascinating history, pulsating rhythms and stunning tropical scenery.

Having already visited Cuba twice, my chief motivation for travelling once again to Havana was to deepen my understanding of an island that is often misrepresented and misunderstood around the world. To that end, I immersed myself as much as possible with the wonderful Cubans I met. A prime example was my incredible host family, who represented a true gamut of Cuban history and contemporary life, with no less than 4 generations living under the one roof. The eldest, Anibal, had fought with Fidel Castro in the famous Cuban Revolution. I was often engrossed in conversation with him, where he would regale me with stories of his meetings with Fidel, Che, Raul and Celia Sanchez, all Cuban icons. Our host grandmother, Nina, was from the ex-Soviet Union, and had come to Cuba in the 1980s to teach Russian at the University of Havana. And her daughter, Ana, ran the house as a casa particular homestay, one of the small business options available to Cubans on the island. There was truly no better family with which to immerse myself in Cuban life and learn about the diverse influences that have shaped the Cuban reality.

Just as impressive were the classes I took while there. My Cuban history class was taken by the president of the Cuban Office of the Historian, responsible for a range of prestigious academic publications and the restoration of Havana’s historic district. Another class was taken by a Cuban health professor with an esteemed position in the Ministry of Public Health. During his classes, we were given the privilege of visiting Cuban healthcare institutions. We visited a Cuban hospital and mental health clinic, both of which count on and incorporate group therapy and personalised
family doctor visits. Additionally, I visited a maternity residence supporting pregnant women, and a centre where the elderly can come for the day to socialise, enjoy three full meals and go on excursions.

We were also immersed in a variety of cultural activities during our time in Cuba – ranging from Havana’s annual International book fair, to salsa festivals and trips to the countryside to learn about the harrowing history of slavery in colonial Cuba. All these opportunities only served to reinforce our understanding and cultural conception of Cuba, and how it has become the unique nation it is today.

Although my time was cut short by the unprecedented escalation of coronavirus globally, I am incredibly grateful that I was able to take advantage of this opportunity. I am already looking forward to planning and preparing my next trip to Cuba, so wonderful was my experience with the CASA Cuba program. I strongly encourage anyone interested in Spanish studies or Cuba more specifically to apply for this program when it next becomes available – you won’t be disappointed!

The CASA Cuba History class at the Museum of the Revolution
My CASA Cuba host family and room mates
CASA Cuba group cycling activity
Havana
Cienfuegos, a 3-hour drive from Havana
Cienfuegos
City streets, Havana
City streets, Havana
City streets, Havana