

q travel: with BARRIE MAHONEY

'Tweeters from the Atlantic'

Barrie Mahoney was a head teacher and school inspector in the UK, as well as a reporter in Spain, before moving to the Canary Islands to launch and edit a new English language newspaper. He enjoys life in the sun as a columnist and author, and continues to write a series of popular novels and books for expats.



Cuba, Castro and the Canary Islanders

The death of Cuba's former President and Prime Minister, Fidel Castro, has provoked much attention in the media this week. Reaction has covered the entire spectrum of emotion ranging from detestation of a man seen as a tyrant and persecutor of his people, to elaborate praise heaped upon a man seen as saving Cuba from potential ravages and exploitation by the United States. Whatever the truth, which as always depends upon which side of the political spectrum one is standing, most will agree that Fidel Castro was a controversial and divisive world figure, and someone that could not be ignored. As far as the Canary Islands are concerned, the story of Fidel Castro and his link to these islands has fascinated me for some time.

During the Seventeenth Century, overpopulation of the Canary Islands motivated Spain to 'export' Canarian families to its American colonies in a 'tribute of blood'. Five Canarian families were sent to a colony in Cuba for every ton of cargo sent, but the numbers of Canarian families emigrating were often much higher. Unemployment in the Canary Islands continued until the Nineteenth Century, when more islanders migrated to Cuba to find work, to avoid starvation and to avoid Spanish military service. The Twentieth Century was a time when Spain was in the midst of a civil war and firmly in the grip of its dictator, General Franco. History has been harsh for Canary Islanders who have had to cope with drought, attacks by pirates, locusts, harsh taxes, epidemics and even volcanic eruptions in 1730, so migration to Cuba and other destinations in Central and South America must have been appealing, despite the hardship of the voyage and starting a new life on an island that was so far away from home.

Over time, migrant workers from the Canary Islands, known as *Isleños*, had a strong influence on the language spoken by Cubans. Spanish spoken in the Canary Islands is different to mainland Spain, but is very similar to Cuban Spanish. The cigar industry in Cuba was mostly owned by Canarian immigrants, and this led to the cigar industry being established in the Canary Islands as well. The Spanish dialect spoken by Cubans is most closely associated with the current residents of the island of La Palma, and the influence of Cuba is very strong on this small Canary Island.

Canary Islands' residents currently refer to a bus as a 'guagua', but not 'autobus', which is the usual Spanish word for bus, and 'guagua' is also widely used in Cuba, as well as many other uniquely Canarian words that reflect the shared culture and traditions that link these islands with Cuba. Mojo sauce served with small wrinkly potatoes cooked in salt water is unique to the Canary Islands, and it is unusual to find this dish in tapas bars in Peninsular Spain, but it is widely served in Cuba, as is gofio and ropa vieja, which is served in many restaurants. The Cuban influence and links are still very strong on these islands.

In a small museum in Aguimes in Gran Canaria, there is a wide range of interesting artefacts about life in the Canary Islands over many years. These artefacts include a height measure, as there had been a minimum height for men planning to migrate to Cuba and other Spanish colonies, as well as a personal letter from President Fidel Castro written to the people of the Canary Islands, in which he recognises the contributions made by Canary Islanders or *Isleños* to the culture and society of Cuba. To further emphasise the close links between the Canary Islands and Cuba, as well as other former Spanish colonies in Central and South America, which have been established for hundreds of years, the Spanish Government introduced new legislation in recent years that states that residents of Cuba and other former colonies who are descended from Canary Islanders can apply for Spanish citizenship, and return to live in the Canary Islands or Spain, if they wish. This reparation of legal rights also recognises that many Canarian families were forced to leave their homes under duress.

Many people living in the Canary Islands had moved to Cuba many years ago to find work, so the culture and lifestyle of Cuba and the Canary Islands share many similarities, and a long history. Despite the many challenges faced by the Cuban people, and some specific groups like gay and lesbian Cubans who have faced persecution over many years, there will be many Canarians who will remember Fidel Castro's positive achievements with respect for a remarkable leader.

If you enjoyed this article, take a look at Barrie's websites: <http://barriemahoney.com> and <http://thecanaryislander.com> or read his latest book, 'Footprints in the Sand' (ISBN: 9780995602717). Available in paperback, as well as Kindle editions.