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**THE TRAVEL BOOK**  
*(excerpts)*

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*(indicative)*

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## Valle de Viñales in Cuba

*Where the world's best cigars come from*

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### Journey to Viñales

'*Fatale!*' exclaims José as soon as his vintage Chevrolet draws up in front of our homestay. (we find out why after we enter the 8'x8' bedroom that is going to hold four full grown adults plus their luggage for the next three days).

But then it is the New Year and *Puppi* and *Emilio* are the only ones we have found ready to lay open their home and hearth to us.

**Come morning** we had booked a vintage taxi, (in Cuba almost all taxis are vintage and you kind of bounce along in them) and set out for **Viñales** or **Valle de Viñales** or **the Valley of Vineyards**.

This little township in **Western Cuba** in the *Pinar del Rio* province with its pungent scent of tobacco and bald outcrops of *mogotes* has beckoned us over all the way from Hindustan...

The loud Spanish music, the wind in the hair, the alluring countryside, are all right out of the 60's Hollywood movies. And some of their Bollywood copies as well.

### On Viñales

The Viñales (spoken win-ya-lays) valley is a world heritage site containing the most amazing *Karst* features and is home to the tobacco farms famed all over, with a countryside to beat all countrysides. The land of miles and miles of verdant, aromatic tobacco and handsome hunks on horsebacks (tobacco farmers sporting six packs and abandon and no shirts), all breeze and blinding greenery - it is dotted with quaint thatched barns where tobacco leaves are handpicked, graded and expertly hand rolled into cigars. Horses graze by the waysides and leisurely farmers on carts drawn by bulls that are right out of Spanish bull fights whistle their way along.

### Tobacco Rolling

Skirting the villages we set out on our own into the warm evening air guided by our homestay friend Emilio...

'Podemos ir sin guia?

'Si, si, podemos!'

'No hay problema?'

'No hay problema!'

Having been thus assured that we're not breaking any rules we walk into Renier's plantation.

Large swathes of squat tobacco crop bathed in subtle orange of the setting sun stretch to the horizon merging with the surrounding hillsides. The hills that Renier calls the 'Renier hills'. After himself. We get a first hand introduction to tobacco farming, harvesting and their hand rolling into aromatic pungent cigars, through a live demonstration. (The Spanish pronunciation of tobacco is *tavaco* and sounds similar to the Hindi *tumbaku*)

Planted in the month of September and harvested leaf by leaf in February, the tobacco leaves, broad and mildly sand papery to the touch, are dried and then fermented to remove the nicotine. Fifty kgs. of the leaf in one lot is fermented with vanilla, rum, honey and lemon. The vein is then removed where the nicotine is concentrated. It is then hand rolled and hand pressed. The first layer of leaf forms the 'filler' or the 'capa' the second the 'binder', the 'capote'. The 'wrapper', 'cedros' comes the last. The 'chaveta' is the crescent shaped tool used for cutting/trimming the cigar. As we listen Renier goes through the process of hand rolling the cigar and hands it to us to try...

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## From Myanmar to Mexico: the gustatory delights of travel

### *Street Food from across the world*

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The endless possibilities of travel must have something to do with the fact that they are as much place specific as they are person specific. Travel to continents...countries, cities, towns, villages Valleys, vineyards, mountains, et al that from a spot on the map translate into peoples, cultures, costumes, cuisines, adventures, languages and friendships.

Experiences that money alone cannot buy!

Cuisines. The tastes, subtle nuances of the ingredients, the flavours, the mode of preparation and presentation...

I feel the food, like the tipple, to get its authentic feel and taste, should be had in the land of its origin.

#### **Delicacies of Mexico**

Want to taste the *tamales*? The divine sweet corn sprinkled generously with raisin and wrapped in its own skin? Well, you have to sit in a local Mexican eatery and eat with the morning chatter in Spanish surround you. The taste is special, I can vouch for it.

And it should follow a *frijole* gravy...

And that can follow a local *pan* served with a freshly made tangy *guacamole* with a teasing mix of finely chopped onions tomatoes and chillies and a squeeze of lime...

And all of these can be rounded off with fresh fried *churros* dipped in powdered sugar and steaming hot pots of *cafe olla!*

The *Tlayudas*? Get it from one of the food carts that do the morning rounds in the streets of **Mexico City**. They are unbeatable.

Every street corner of Mexico City and Oaxaca, of every evening, will have basketfuls of spicy chilli peanut mixes with *chapulines*. Or just plain roasted spicy *chapulines*. These are the local grasshoppers roasted along with garlic and chilli peppers and the *gusano* worm larvae salt. It's a local delicacy.

#### **Street food in Myanmar**

Talk of street food and I am besieged with 'taste memories' of the street food of **Yangon**. As we walk down to the **Bogyoke Aung San Market** we pass through on the right with snack vendors seated on squat stools with small stoves in front of them, dispensing freshly-prepared short eats.

There are the small plump pieces of rice noodles sprinkled with crushed groundnuts and roasted crushed spicy sesame seeds.

There is the Burmese equivalent of the *samosa*, cut and served with onions and chickpeas and a thin spicy gravy. Much like in India. With a slight variation.

There is the fermented tea leaf salad, *Laphet Thote*, mildly sour, served with nuts and cut tomatoes and onion and sweet-sour *chutney*. ( I am reminded of the fermented tea leaves pickle served to us in **Majuli**, the riverine island off Jorhat, Assam...)

Then there are the quail eggs sunny side up with chickpea and herbs garnish, the *Mont Lin Ma yar*.

There are the sweet rice jaggery coconut *appams* freshly fried.

There is the *dosa* - open sandwich, crisp and lacy, sprinkled hot with cut onions, tomatoes and an egg fried atop that. It is perfect.

With varied influences from Indian, Chinese and Thai cuisines the Burmese street food is perhaps one of the most eclectic and abundant in the region.

And street food as always helps define the culture of a country.

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## The Konyak Nagas and Anghs of Mon, Nagaland

### *The passing generation of headhunters*

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'**Kelhoukevira**' or 'the land where life is good' is the Angami (one of the 64 Naga tribes) name for Nagaland.

Nagaland lives in its villages and its festivals, of which there are not a few. Each tribe boasts of several, with its own specific tribal wear and unique rituals that identify it from the rest. However, there are some that stand out. The **Purification Festival or the Sekrenyi** of the **Angami** tribe celebrated in the month of February, the **Harvest Festival of Yemshe** by the **Pochury** tribe around end Sep-Oct 1st week, bringing in the harvest season, **Moatsu** of the **Ao** tribe etc. These are marked by singing, dancing, feasting on freshly slaughtered pigs and **Mithun**, the indigenous wild buffalo and a magnificent creature, with much sharing and merry making. Rice beer called **zutho** prepared from boiled, fermented rice, flows freely.

Each Naga tribe and subtribe has its own dialect which is Dutch to the rest. They have overcome the dilemma of communication therefore by coining a common language, a creole, the **Nagamese**. I find I am able to follow most of it due to its resemblance to Assamese which is a close cousin to Bengali...

I find that the eagerness to integrate with the mainstream and be a part of the new globalised world is strong among the youth, though not so among the Naga elders...combined with the renewed perception of the benefits afforded by the special status given by Govt. of India to the state.

The Naga is fond of his 'paan' and there is not a moment that our guide(s) across tribes and region is not chewing his paan or speaking with it tucked into his cheek. The narrative is therefore interestingly garbled, demanding keen focus...

As **Thepfulhouvi Solo**, an IFS and Principal Secretary to the govt. of Nagaland, says 'a Naga cannot observe the saying of grace before the chewing of Paan'...

### **The Mon District in Eastern Nagaland**

The **ENPO**, the **Eastern Naga Peoples Organisation** comprises the six tribes living in the Indo-Myanmar border in the districts of **Tuensang, Mon, Longleng and Kiphire** together forming **Eastern Nagaland**.

The tribes of the North-Eastern Nagaland, with many of them on the Burmese side and the **NSCN K (Khaplang)** faction that forms their rebel insurgent arm, operates from Myanmar (Burma) and can cross over as and when they want to create trouble. The AFSPA empowers the Indian Army to shoot at sight in this area in case of such incidents...

When we reach the lofty arch welcoming us to the district of **Mon** on the Nagaland-Assam border, after a 12-hour 350-km road trip from Kohima via State Highway 1 running through Assam (by all means the highlight of our Nagaland travel and one that we have been waiting impatiently for) and further down to the entry gate, it is way beyond evening.

It is heartening to find the army men on watch. The Word of caution and the questioning look they give our traveling alone, puts just that little twinge of fear in us... an often-essential ingredient for adventurous forays...

**As the evening advances and our SUV cuts through the pitch dark and extremely bad roads, with each wheel taking a tilt and a dip of its own every inch of the way for nothing less than 3 hours, the surrounding ominously quiet hillsides and the absence of any other vehicle for almost the whole distance is a little unnerving.**

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### About the Author

Sudha Madhavan is a Freelance Travel & Children's Writer and Artist based in Bangalore, India. Her travel pieces focus on history, culture, environment and local communities. She writes travelogues for Livemint.com, The Hindu, Deccan Herald and Times of India. She has traveled widely across India, Mexico, Cuba, USA, Europe, Myanmar, Bhutan etc and continues to add to her list of unique destinations. Her writings are backed by in-depth research - both primary and secondary.

Sudha is also a talented artist specializing in the classical school of art through her oil-on-canvas paintings based on her travels. She has been widely exhibited in Bangalore and Mumbai at Alliance Francaise, National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA) in Mumbai, PL Deshpande Art Gallery in Mumbai and Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath (Bangalore), under her exhibit title 'The Traveler's Eye'.



Sudha has been an Educator and Consultant with leading NGO's like MAYA, a livelihood development initiative in Bangalore, involved in developing a network of artisans, workers and micro-entrepreneurs and Shishu Mandir, a children's welfare institution founded by Hella Mundhra. Sudha attended St. Thomas School, Shimla and studied English Literature and Education at Isabella Thoburn College and Lucknow University respectively.