

FROM JAPAN TO CUBA, VIA OTTAWA

...When I left Tokyo Jan. 26th last, I thought I would be in for the commencement of a peaceful two years in Ottawa, so I took the opportunity to fly the long way home via Europe. It gave me some new perspectives of old haunts. I was struck with the provincialism of Taiwan and I remember a superb week in Hong Kong made so by the company of the Globe's Charles Taylor and of a little princess named Yurika. India seemed unchanged, except for a somewhat ersatz 'emergency' atmosphere, I got in my first visit to Israel (although for three years I had worked all around it) and found it the world's most hospitable of countries, especially its kibbutzes and an old Tokyo friend Eli Tabori. Paris was definitely changed: its face looks more prosperous, its militia more numerous. For a while I thought it seemed sadder and more serious, until I heard the lambasting le Grand Charles got in a night club. I also paid my first visit to quiet old Dublin, made memorable by a colleen named O'Connell, the Abbey Players and the soft voluptuousness of the Irish countryside, even with or perhaps because of a foot of snow in many places. I spent a week in London, full of admiration for my sister, who has by now become somewhat of a mogul in BBC television, and for the superb London stage. If only they could find something to cut through the smog of London, the way "Beyond the Fringe" has cut through London complacency.

The longer your airticket is, the larger the detours you can take at no extra fee. Flying Tokyo-London-Ottawa is long enough to get as far south as Bermuda and the Bahamas, it seems. In Bermuda I looked up an old friend, Kit Mainguy, who can still turn out with professional bravouira the best *crêpes suzette* in Christendom, and, to make matters better, is co-manager of a hotel called 'The Briton'. Not satisfied with putting on ten pounds there, I accepted a generous introduction from Charles Taylor and headed for his father's Caribbean empire at Lyford Cay in the Bahamas. It had been well aired since Kennedy and MacMillan were there, and so was ready for more ruffraff like me. "Now look here, Edsel", I said to one of the other minor guests, "I don't like the way my model T is running..."

I also was lucky enough to get in some deep-sea fishing in Nassau with a very pleasant couple called the Lavelles. We just missed a whale, but I single-handedly landed a deadly bifurcated black-eyed purple-ended pollywog, to the amazement and cheers of all aboard.

It was 95° in Nassau and when I stepped off the plane in Ottawa it was 15° below. I had nothing with me but the suitcase full mostly of tropical gear that I'd left Tokyo with: the rest of my chattels were on their way by sea. Far

Eastern Division welcomed me warmly, though, and ushered me into my own office with my name on the door and tatamis on the floor: I was all set to take over the 'Japan desk'. Then one of those coups d'esprit for which life in a foreign service is famous exploded: someone was needed in a hurry in Cuba, and my old friend Ray Robinson, who'd been billed for the role, unfortunately fell ill. How would I like to be Our Man? "You should at least give it a night's thought", said the head of personnel as I arrived at his office five minutes later in white ducks, topee and false beard...

When I left for Cuba in mid-March, the only way in from the West was via Mexico City, which still let the Cuban airline land twice a week if the wind were right. I suppose the Cuban atmosphere starts right at the line-up for the plane to Havana. The same Mexicans who welcomed you so casually and hospitably when you got off the plane from Canada now took photographs and even sometimes fingerprints of everyone bound for Cuba. Even passports are photographed and stamped with an ominous "DEPARTED FOR CUBA", which would certainly make it a bit trickier for some nationalities to go home again. But even the most serious of Latin-Americans can't be straight-faced all the time: as well as the official photographer there was a second flashbulber, who looked as if he were working freelance, and accidently took some people several times and missed others altogether. Finally he started taking a suspiciously large number of the pretty airline stewardesses; the Cuban stewards complained and the Mexicans hustled him off the tarmac.

Our course skirted way round the north of Cuba,... and then dipped south into Havana after dark. It was a hot and sultry tropical night, almost identical, I was to discover, with every night during the four months I was to spend there. Tom Hammond pried me through customs and immigration like a shoehorn manipulating an old heel, and took me to the Hotel Capri, which still, at least from the outside, looks like a model tropical luxury hotel, 18 svelte storeys with a pool on the roof.

I did notice, however, a few differences from the picture-book Palm Beach hotel one is used to. Firstly, of course, a rather sullen-looking negress, looking a bit like a Russian lady wrestler, in her shapeless gunny-sack mufti and toting a very modern Czech 'burp' semi-machine gun, was alternately guarding the entrance and bantering with the usual hotel-front procurers. Inside, the lobby