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‘Cuba calls you back,’ says arts impresaria Emilia Menocal



The first time Emilia Menocal spent real time in Cuba, the experience was so dicey, so emotionally wrought, that for the next decade she tried to distance herself from the island.

“But Cuba calls you back,” says Menocal, a creative consultant and marketing specialist who has traveled there eight times since early 2015. She has gone for work projects, such as handling media and logistics for the historic Diplo/Major Lazer concert in Havana March 6 — and to usher several Cuban-American friends through the homeland that had been off-limits for so long.

“It’s so important for the younger Cuban-American generation here to start building bridges to the younger generation on the island. That’s where the future is. And I do hope to be a bit of a vehicle to help the connections happen,” says Menocal, who was born in New York and raised in Paris and is a great-niece of Cuban president Mario Garcia Menocal, in office 1913-1921.

Menocal, 40, first visited the island in 2002 to attend an international hip-hop festival. She was so moved by the underground hip-hop scene there, which was fighting government censorship and endless other limitations, that she returned in 2004, permits in hand, to film a documentary about it.

She and co-director Jauretsi Saizarbitoria (whose family founded Havana's famed Centro Vasco restaurant, and after Castro's government appropriated it, fled to Miami and established a new Centro Vasco on Calle Ocho), spent three months filming *East of Havana*, for which Charlize Theron served as a producer.

"We definitely took some risks," says Menocal, who is creative director for Brickell's **El Tucán**, the glam cabaret where dinner-and-a-show invokes sultry, 1940s Havana. "What intrigued me was that these young Cubans were using this form of music as a way to protest. They had questions: 'Why are Cubans not allowed to travel? Why are we not allowed to be on the Internet? Why can't we be part of modern society?' There was definitely more apartheid in Cuba then. We couldn't walk into certain hotels with Cubans, we couldn't go to certain beaches with Cubans. We couldn't really be on the streets with Cubans. One of the rappers got arrested after we lent him a video camera so that he could shoot at home."

Those three months in Havana took a toll, she says.

"You can't help but become close to your subjects. We felt the scarcity and the repression they were living through. I started thinking, I can leave here and you can't. Psychologically, Cuba just became a very tough reality to swallow."

So she stayed away. But a couple of years ago, seeing that more and more dissidents were demanding to be heard, and believing there was momentum building that could lead to real change, Menocal decided it was time to return to Cuba and see if there was a role for her to play as those changes started unfolding.

She had worked in production and marketing for the fashion industry, traipsing through Paris, Milan and New York, and she had worked in hospitality, including several years in the marketing department of André Balazs' group of hip hotels (among them, the Mercer, the Chateau Marmont, the Standard). She had a unique set of skills that made her a natural to help open **El Tucán** with its French owners, who wanted the place to have a certain Old Cuba vibe even while being cutting-edge.

"I went back to Havana with the design team. We went to the Tropicana and other clubs. We went to abandoned theaters. We looked at details like chairs, how things were set on tables. We landed on a Sunday and on Tuesday, President Obama announced the normalization of relations with Cuba. But from

the moment we got there, I could feel something was different. There was just an electricity.”

Not long after that trip, she returned aboard Francis Ford Coppola’s private jet. They had met through a mutual friend, and the director, who had a longtime relationship with Cuba’s film school but hadn’t been to the island in several years, wanted to take his family, including two babies, and needed help dealing with logistics. He brought with him cases of pasta and of his own wines so that he could host a dinner for the film students.

“He needed permission to land the plane in Cuba, and he needed someone who knew their way around the island. I helped work some of that stuff out,” Menocal says. “But airport officials wouldn’t let the wine off the plane for four days. It looked like they were never going to, but after dealing with a bunch of people, we got permission to unload the wine just in time for the dinner.”

More recently, she was in Havana with a couple of friends, brothers who like Menoca, weren’t born on the island but felt the pull of their Cuban legacy just the same. Randy and Brian Alonso, grandsons of Diego Alonso, who founded La Epoca, one of Cuba’s largest department stores, wanted to see the place their family still pined for.

“It was the first time anyone in my family had been back since the early 1960s,” says Randy, 32, vice president of downtown Miami’s version of La Epoca, which the family opened in 1965. “After Castro’s government nationalized the business, the family left to the United States. My dad was 15. He was always against going back with Castro still in power. He passed away three years ago, but before that, there was a conversation about how maybe my brother and I *should* go, just to see our old house and the store — all of that family history they had to leave behind.”

The Alonso brothers were nervous about setting foot in La Epoca. Especially since they didn’t get such a warm reception when they knocked on the door of their family’s old house.

“The woman who lived there was afraid, I think, that we were the kind of Miami Cubans who might try to reclaim the property that was stolen from us. We’re not. We moved on. I just wanted to see it. She made it clear she didn’t want us near there,” Alonso says. “I thought we might have the same problem at the store. There was a line down the block and a lot of tight security.”

But Menocal talked to someone at the store and told them who the young men were.

“A door opens and a woman with tears in her eyes takes us back to our grandfather’s old office. They even had an old photo album that they kept all

these years. It had historical photos of the store, and of my grandfather at his wedding, with the whole family around him. It was one of the most meaningful moments in my life. I do see myself as open to the possibility of playing a role in Cuba's future now. It only takes one generation to forgive. Since the day I left, I've been wanting to go back."

Menocal credits her maternal grandfather, the late Julio Cesar Fernandez, who was a newspaper publisher in Cuba, for instilling her deep love for the island.

"He explained to me from the time I was very young that the place where he was born was a very beautiful island but that there was a big bad wolf there now, so we couldn't go. That remained with me. Which is why one day I realized I couldn't just sit here. I need to go there, try to understand it, try to figure out how I could help with the moving forward."

She says she hopes to keep taking friends to the island, and keep facilitating connections between Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits.

"There's a lot I don't understand in terms of how the system works in Cuba. You'll go to a new place like Rio Mar, a very chic restaurant on the water that is half tourists, half Cubans," she says. "I don't know who the Cubans are, or how they can afford to be there. There are many economic mysteries in Cuba. But for me it's about connecting with the real people of the island, listening to them."

Her last trip was in early May, when she handled international media and logistics for the four-day music fest Musicabana.

"After Obama's visit and the Rolling Stones concert, there is just a new optimism," she says. "And you see all these little flourishes of entrepreneurship everywhere. But I think the people have a lot of new questions. They see the exponential tourism and they want to know where all the money is going. They want their rightful piece of the pie. More than ever, it's so important for Cuban-Americans of my generation to be there, to be open-minded and to help Cubans on the island figure out how to make a real transition."

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