

# EXPLORING CUBA

*On and Off the Court*



## Polo Tennis Enthusiasts Gloria Supran and Caryl Fein Bring Boca to Havana

BY MICHELE BROWN

Once an island country that was so close (90 miles from Florida) – yet so far away in terms of politics and accessibility – Cuba has now become a destination for the curious, adventurous and culture-seeking traveler. Polo members Les Corwin and Jessie Bard celebrated their 25th anniversary with a transformational Cuban vacation in 2016.

When members Gloria Supran and Caryl Fein recently ventured to Havana, they took a different route – to a tennis court.

### A MIX OF SPORTS, PHILANTHROPY & FUN

Longtime players at the Club, Gloria and Caryl booked a tennis-centric trip to Havana from October 5-8, 2018, using Elite Tennis Travel, a boutique travel company specializing in combining the sport with spectacular destinations. Gloria was especially curious about Cuba, which was beyond the reach of many American travelers for more than six decades. In 2014, travel regulations were changed to allow for greater interaction between the two

countries, although in 2017 new travel restrictions and rules were put in place by the U.S. government.

Traveling for “public performances, clinics, workshops, athletic and other competitions, and exhibitions” is one of 12 authorized categories for journeying to Cuba, according to Forbes magazine, and interacting with locals is key. Through Elite Tennis Travel, Gloria and Caryl joined a group of 15 American tennis enthusiasts, hailing from New York, Texas, Washington D.C. and Maryland, among others. The two women were also joined by a third South Florida friend who lives at nearby Seasons of Boca Raton.

“The three of us have played together for many years, ever since we lived in New Jersey,” Gloria said. On this trip, Caryl didn’t play due to a back injury, but her daughter, Nikki, did. “We chose to go to Cuba because we wanted to go to Havana. Our group got to play in a round robin tournament with Swiss and French diplomats and ex-pats at Club Havana, which sits right on the ocean. We also had an opportunity to play with a Cuban national team at Hotel Memories Miramar la Habana.”

### SUPPORTING A LONG-NEGLECTED GAME

In playing, the Polo members were also helping to resurrect interest in tennis, which had been neglected by the Cuban government.



“For many years, there were only two usable tennis courts for the teams because tennis was looked upon as an elitist sport. The Cuban government supported team sports that it didn’t consider elitist, and it shut down golf after the 1959 revolution; money for tennis also dried up,” Gloria shared, reading from an April 2017 New York Times article. “Tennis didn’t have

the recreational history of sports like baseball. It challenged the values of Cuban government.”

Recently, with more open relations being developed with the U.S., the American nonprofit Kids on the Ball refurbished 10 courts of the Cuban National Tennis Center. As part of Elite Tennis Travel’s trip, each American was asked to bring two cans of tennis balls and any used or new clothing to help support the sport. Elite Tennis Travel consistently donates to the Cuban tennis community, including racquets, strings, balls, grips and apparel.

According to Gloria, the Cuban players were in special need of tennis shoes, and Jean Mills, director of tennis at Polo Club, was happy to help.

“I thought it was a worthy cause. Gloria wanted to know if I had any tennis clothes and shoes from Polo. When members leave Polo and/or they can’t play anymore, we donate their gear and equipment to inner-city kids in Delray Beach,” Jean said. “We donated a full box for Gloria’s trip, and hope it gets used by an aspiring player.”

To raise the level of exposure for the game, Gloria was invited to play with Yusleydis Smith Diaz, who is considered the top women’s player





**POLO TENNIS**

in Cuba, and representatives from the Cuban Federation and INDER, the governing sports body in Cuba, watched their play. Some players are hopeful to gain a sponsor by playing in front of larger audiences, while others seek more benefactors to improve local, playing conditions.

“There are still cracks in some of the courts. To shower, we had to bring our own towels, soaps – it is the bare minimum there,” Gloria said. Yet, it was an experience like no other.



**OFF THE COURT, MOJITOS, LOBSTER AND SALSA!**

When they weren't playing tennis, the trio got to explore Havana and experience all the interesting and unique features of the city. Riding in vintage cars, dining on fresh seafood and taking salsa lessons left Gloria and Caryl with wonderful memories.

“We had lobster for lunch and dinner every night, and lots of mojitos. There were complimentary mojitos everywhere we went,” Gloria said. The most excitement, however, came from Hurricane Michael, as it prepared to make landfall right before their departure. Because Cuba has limited internet, Gloria and her group were not bombarded with weather reports, but instead were told by the locals, “tropical storm, no worries, no worries...” The storm hit the western part of Cuba the day after they left.

Gloria, Caryl and the other members of the October group will gather again in March 2019 at the Miami Open, held at the Hard Rock Seminole Resort in Fort Lauderdale. They plan to relive memories, enjoy tennis on an international stage again and possibly enjoy a few South-Florida-style mojitos.



**TRAVELING THROUGH SPORTS WITH ELITE TENNIS TRAVEL**

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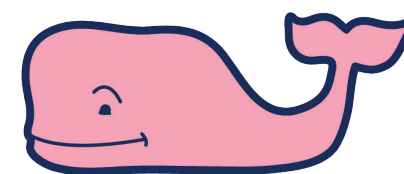
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