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*Inspiring Escorted Journeys*



Hi Everyone,

I've just arrived back from the Byroads tours in Mexico and Cuba. Not only were they the first tours for 2018 but they were both new destinations for Byroads and I am thrilled to say that both tours were a great success with everyone returning home with some wonderful impressions and memories of these two quite different and fascinating Latin countries. The photo above is of the Byroads group in Baracoa located at the easternmost end of Cuba where Columbus landed in 1492 on his voyage of discovery to the New World.

In this newsletter Tracy West who travelled on the Cuba trip gives her impressions of her holiday in Cuba. I've also included a country profile on Oman where Byroads will run its first tour in 2019 and some of my own thoughts of my recent research trip to the South Caucasus.

Best wishes,  
Steve

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## **The Rhythms of Cuba - by Tracy West**

This was our first trip with Byroads and along with our Cuban guide it was great to have Steve Mortimer from Byroads along with us as our Tour Escort. Steve has been a regular visitor to Cuba over many years.

Cuba is a fascinating country to travel through. It's like stepping back in time to the 1960's. Due to the impact of decades of economic sanctions, the country has an overall air of elegant deterioration. Not everything works quite as it should, many grand buildings are crumbling and many structures are not quite finished. Despite this Cubans are a resilient and positive people, things happen all in good 'Cuban Time', and lively music is literally happening everywhere you go. Cubans do not like silence and there are many excellent musicians here.



We started and ended our tour in Havana, a charming, vibrant and colourful city. The old town is a delightful maze of cobbled streets, lovely to just wander about in. Classic cars abound and many are beautifully restored. Our 'first day excitement' at photographing them never wore off. It's amazing that Cubans can keep so many of these ancient cars running and our drive along Havana's Malecon seafront in a 1957 Chevrolet convertible was one of many highlights.

We travelled by comfortable coach with a great driver and our excellent local Guide Abel who regaled us throughout the trip with interesting stories about Cuban history, society and culture. We learnt of the Cuban perspective on the key moments in their recent history, including the Revolution and the consequences of the current USA-led embargo – always good to have a local's perspective to challenge your preconceptions.



We traversed the country from Havana across to Baracoa in the far east. The countryside is often lush and beautiful and the coastlines spectacular. Green, rolling mountains meet productive fields, meet a turquoise and blue sparkling sea and always spotted here and there are the distinctive shapes of Queen Palms. Throughout we stayed in comfortable, clean hotels or Casa Particulares (a Cuban B&B) which were always well located. Memorable moments include snorkelling in the infamous Bay of Pigs, sipping cocktails every evening, lobster lunches and dinners (so cheap here), the cobbled streets and colourful buildings of colonial towns such as Trinidad, watching cigars being hand-made, enjoying the rare quiet and an excellent lunch on the island of Cayo Granma, being amazed at the number of horses and carts being used for transportation and visiting a local family for a roast suckling pig dinner in Baracoa.

We thoroughly enjoyed the Byroads style of travel. Accommodation is carefully selected but this is Cuba, so be aware that while luxury may not be on offer you are always comfortable. We had great lunch and dinner venues that were personally sourced by Steve and our guide and a variety of activities planned. All together a wonderful time!

The next Byroads 'Rhythms of Cuba' trip starts in Havana on the 1st of February 2019 and can be linked in with Mexico & the Yucatan. [Click here](#) for details.

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### **Country Profile - The Sultanate of Oman**

The small Arabian country of Oman is strategically situated at the mouth of the Persian Gulf on the south-eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. The desert nation shares its borders with the United Arab Emirates (a 7 hour drive away) to the northwest, Saudi Arabia to the west, and Yemen to the southwest. The country is an absolute monarchy with Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said the enlightened hereditary leader since 1970.



Oman has only modest oil reserves unlike its largely oil-dependent neighbours however in 2010 the UN ranked the country as the most improved nation in the world in terms of development during the preceding 40 years. A significant portion of its economy involves tourism and the trade of fish, dates, and various agricultural produce.

The Sultanate is still one of the best places in the Gulf to experience traditional Arabia. Outside the capital of Muscat you will find mud brick villages surrounded by enormous date plantations. Traditional souks are busy with shoppers bargaining for jewellery, frankincense and other commodities. The country is rugged and beautiful with its towering mountains, rugged canyons and wadis, and its seemingly endless dunes - home to the nomadic Bedouin people. Crumbling forts stand guard over ancient towns and watch over long coastal stretches where, as in centuries past, colourful fishing boats bob around in the blue waters of the Arabian Sea.



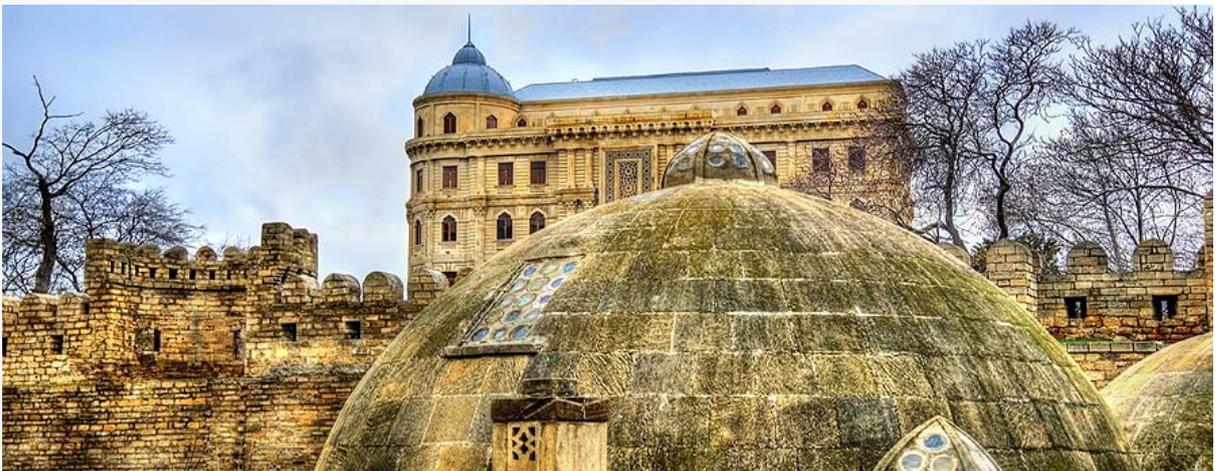
The Byroads 8 days '**Sultanate of Oman**' tour starts in Muscat on the 21st Oct, 2019. [Click here](#) for details. The tour can also be combined with our tour of Jordan to provide a comprehensive look at two of the regions most peaceful and interesting desert nations. [Click here](#) for details of our 15 days '**Oman & Jordan**' tour

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### **THE SOUTH CAUCASUS - Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia**

In October last year I ventured to the South Caucasus to research a new Byroads tour which will get underway in May 2019. We already have our first bookings. This will be another new trip for Byroads and adds to some interesting new destinations introduced over the past two years. One of the great attractions of this trip is the diversity and contrasts that can be found in these three lesser known countries of Europe.

Through ancient and medieval periods, Azerbaijan straddled the Silk Road between Europe and the East and was at the crossroads of three civilizations – the old Christian Mediterranean, Zoroastrian Iranian and Muslim Turkic. As you travel through Azerbaijan you can see ancient caravanserai, centuries old mosques as well as Zoroastrian fire temples. These ancient buildings contrast with the stunning new architecture that dominate the skyline of modern Baku, all made possible by the wealth that Caspian sea oil has brought to this tiny country.



In predominantly Christian Orthodox Georgia it feels like Europe. The country has quickly cast off its Soviet shackles and with its stunning mountain scenery, ancient towns and compelling history it presents as a unique holiday destination. From its mountain-top monasteries to its valley-floor vineyards, and from its warm hospitality and tasty Turkish-style food Georgia presents itself as a very special haven in the Caucasus.



Armenia is an ancient land and considered to be the first Christian nation. It has a complex historical legacy that has sometimes been laced with great tragedy including the 1915-17 genocide at the hands of the Ottoman Empire. The Armenians are however a resilient, practical and friendly people. The beautiful and dramatic countryside is dotted with medieval monasteries whilst the capital of Yerevan, back dropped by Mt Ararat, is the centre of cultural activity and progressive thought with a lively modern arts scene.



The Byroads 16 days **'South Caucasus'** tour starts in Baku on the 13th of May, 2019 and offers a great insight into this increasingly popular travel destination. [Click here](#) for details.



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