Cuba—last hope of socialism or a prospective banana republic that even runs out of bananas? Ray Moynihan was his own man in Havana.

José is in his late 20s. He comes up to us on the street, the day we arrive in Cuba, before we even find a hotel. The Lido. It’s cheapish, there’s hot water most of the time, and a fifth floor view of crumbling old Havana. You can smell the sea from the balcony.

José sniffs out a couple of sympathetic foreigners. He tells us he is very keen to meet and talk. He breaks through our first night nerves, and we end up sharing a meal at one of Havana’s celebrated eating spots, the Bodeguita del Medio. Lots of photos of Hemingway. We eat rice, black beans, chicken and pork. Often they are out of bananas. The beer’s good, though, and always available. It comes in brown unlabelled bottles.

Anna is 50. We meet in her home in Cerro. It’s comfortable, but small, in the better part of Cerro, a big suburb in central Havana. We have a letter of introduction from an Australian friend of her husband. He is a senior bureaucrat; she is a senior academic.

Anita is passionate about the revolution, and makes us a wonderful meal. A few friends drop in and we chat about the new petrol restrictions and the reductions in the working week. We drink warm flat beer and Cuban rum, and overhear Fidel on the neighbour’s TV. It’s a speech about everything, the third this week. It runs for maybe two hours, prime time, no ads.

José is trained in one profession, works in another and is actively involved in the music scene in his spare time. Sooner or later he confesses to us that his sympathies lie with the Cuban dissidents. Perhaps he boasts it. I don’t quite know how to react to a Cuban dissident.
José wants to leave Cuba. But he won’t be jumping into the sea; some of his friends have died doing it. In any case, he doesn’t want to go to the States. He’s thinking about Australia’s economic migration program. His English is good, but I'm not sure if he'll pass the points test.

Anna is telling us about her trip to the southern shores of Cuba, to that special place where Fidel and his comrades landed from Mexico in 1957. She tells me how they struggled ashore through the mud and mangroves and walked many miles before reaching the mountains and waging their war. It is religious awe; her visit is a pilgrimage. Anna has wanted to join the party for many years, but can’t; it already has its quota of intellectuals.

José and his friends talk bitterly about what they see as the dreadful repression of Cuba. They are young professionals, underemployed in what they say are inefficient state bureaucracies. They want real jobs and opportunities to make money. They want to drive a car to work, not a Chinese push bike. But there are no cars for them, and at the moment there’s no petrol either. They rail against restrictions on the media, against Castro’s antidiluvian rhetoric and cult of personality. They say they want us to tell them about Australia, about western democracy and all it promises. More than anything they want to tell us about Cuba, passionately.

Anna is lamenting the racial make-up of her university undergraduate class. She’s worried that there aren’t enough Afro-Cubans. It’s a big problem. Every money-changer on the street who has approached us is black. They want to buy my US dollars with their local currency, and they are the most visible manifestation of Cuba’s burgeoning black economy. Tourism is one of the grand dreams that Cuba’s political elite, and its people, are pinning their hopes on.

José invites us for New Year’s Eve. We eat and dance with him and his family, and we throw water on passers-by at midnight. He lives with his mother, brother and sister-in-law in two small rooms in one of the many decaying tenements in Old Havana. The meal is the best of our trip to Cuba: rice, beans, chicken, pork and banana. Much of it was purchased the previous afternoon when José and I rode about 10 kilometres to the ‘Diplo-tienda’, the store open only to diplomats and other foreigners. José bought the rum the day before; he waited in a queue for six hours.

The night is a celebration infused with sadness. The songs tell a political story of Cuba, now and before. José’s mother sings along to some magnificent old Caribbean rhythms from the 30s and 40s. We hear poor-quality cassette copies of banned pop songs from Cuban dissidents recorded in the States in the 70s and 80s. Later, our hosts cynically talk us through some contemporary official rock on the radio. And of course we hear The General, the most popular song in Havana. The sensual rhythms of this Puerto Rican rapper pound from every ghetto blaster in every apartment in every street. The sexual, apolitical lyrics excite a generation of young Cubans as their parents feign outrage.

Like a lot of Cubans we meet, Anna tells us of the great successes of the revolution in health, welfare, education, housing and human rights. This is not empty rhetoric. We didn’t see one homeless person in Cuba. We must have seen a dozen in a day in LA.

José is frustrated and angry about the restrictions on political freedoms in Cuba. He is angry about Cuba’s isolation, and sick and tired of the same old speeches from the same old man in a military uniform. Anna and José, were they ever to meet, would no doubt feel that, at least in part, the other’s view was a product of “manipulation”—in one instance manipulation by “the party”; in the other, manipulation by “outside influences”.

Outside Havana, in a sea-side town, we spend an afternoon with a young teacher and her journalist partner. We laugh and joke about US sitcoms which can be picked up on Cuban TV, and with much hilarity we eat homemade ‘Egg-Donalds’ for lunch. As dusk comes, we take a bath in the Caribbean, which is warm in mid-winter. While we don’t meet any, we’re reliably informed that people are still jumping into rubber tyres and making for Miami, just 100 kilometres away.

We leave Cuba soon after the huge New Year’s Eve celebrations. Since 1959, New Year has replaced Christmas as the time of festivity, and it coincides with the anniversary of the revolution. A few days later we are in a cab in Mexico City, and we pull up at the lights. On the pavement half a dozen kids sell chocolate and lollies. Some are as young as five. My friend remarks that in Havana, the kids ask the tourists for chewing gum; in Mexico City they sell it to stay alive.

RAY MOYNIHAN is a producer for ABC TV’s Four Corners.