

Famous people's first impressions of Cuba: Jacinto de Salas



Spanish historian and poet Jacinto de Salas', in his journal *Travels or Viajes*, published in Madrid in 1841 and reprinted in 1964 by Consejo Nacional de Cultura in Havana, recorded his thoughts before going ashore in Havana in 1840.

"But is it really so, I was saying to myself, that this is the city of robbers and assassins? Is this, as we have been told so many times, the Sodom of the century, whose population harbours in its entrails corruption in all its forms? Is this the country where the lives of men have a market value and where you can purchase the murder of enemies? Where the word for virtue is at war with the force of temperament and the ardour of the climate? Where gambling and prostitution, venality and homicide holds secure sway? Where the sun burns like embers, blackens the skin and inflames the blood? Where terrible infirmities debilitate all Europeans and kill them in large numbers? Is this the terrible city that feeds on cadavers and gold? Is true that it is an act of courage to come to this fearful island. Although it may be exaggerated, the image conjured by these reflections is, notwithstanding, an enduring one."

But the Spanish poet de Salas also recorded how pleasantly surprised he was with what he found...

I cannot compare anything with the beauties of those nights in Havana. There was no oppression of heat and no discernment of cold; no type of disagreeable sensation spoiled the atmosphere. One lives, really, enjoying both indoors and outdoors, without the molestation, general in the world, of temperature and debility on the sweetness of our sensations. And for the rest, hardly had the sun kissed the waters of the sea when the beautiful *Habaneras*, reclining in the comfort and convenience of their elegant carriages leave their houses with no further object than to canter through the streets and enjoy the delicious night—in sum, the innocent plans of youth. Beautiful and enchanting *criollas* also are in circulation, both their arms and their heads uncovered, with their eyes of fire...

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