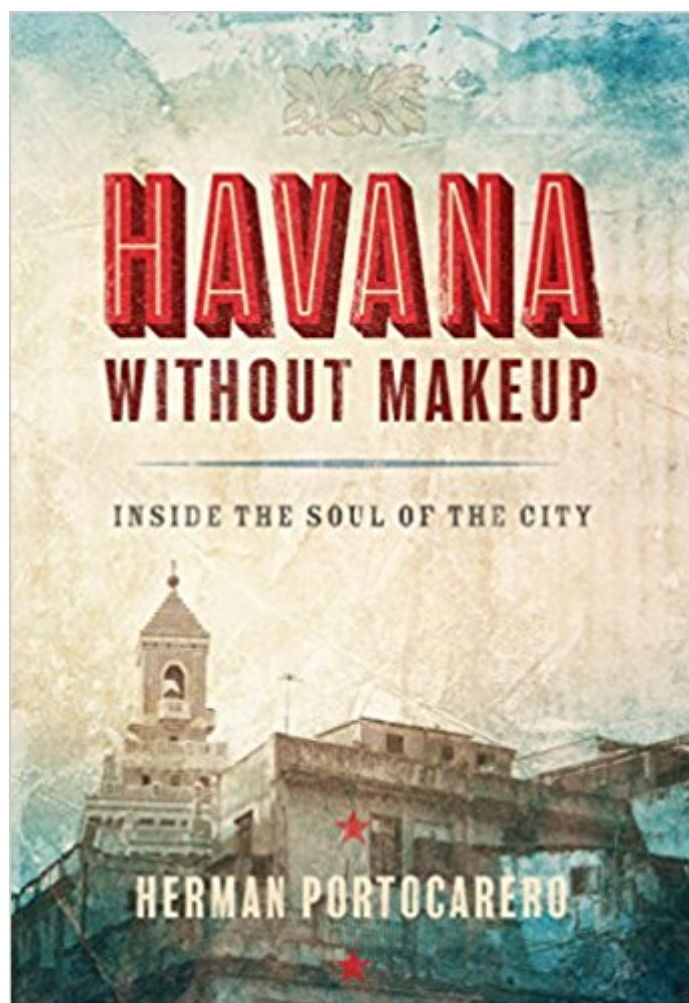


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# Havana Without Makeup: Inside The Soul Of The City



## Synopsis

"The story Portocarero weaves here is rich and fascinating, and vital to understanding an often mysterious place." Patrick Oppmann, CNN Havana Correspondent and Bureau Chief Havana without Makeup is the ultimate insider's view of Havana, a wide-ranging exploration of its complex facets as seen by few. Its aim is to capture the soul of a city and a society that have evolved on their own terms at the moment before they face inevitable transformations. Opening on the eve of the announcement of reconciliation between the U.S. and Cuba, the book then looks back at the cultural, political, economic, and religious influences that led up to this historic moment and beyond. Readers are led by a brilliant renaissance man and writer who has been at the vanguard of the city's struggles for more than twenty years. Portocarero's anti-tourist guide to Havana examines the built environment of the most sensual ruin on the planet: why are large parts of the city so neglected, and what changes may we see over the coming years? Examining all things Cubania--racial issues, la revoluci3n, baseball, Hemingway, communism, synagogues, Santeria, Cimarron culture, and much more--Portocarero overturns every stone in his endeavor to bring us inside the city he loves. Illustrated with original photographs, this is a unique and essential account of Havana's history, its present, and what its future may hold. Herman Portocarero is a Belgian-born writer and diplomat of Spanish and Portuguese descent. He has published more than twenty works of fiction and nonfiction, including the Hercule Poirot Prize-winning crime novel New Yorkse Nachten (New York Nights). He is presently the European Union ambassador to Cuba.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

[Portocarero is] an ardent advocate for a city electrified with life and passion. Havana emerges as a city like no other: a place where humans, in many ways, are at their most vibrantly human."#151;Kirkus Reviews" There are many writers who think they know the city of Havana. But there are few who feel its pulse like their own heartbeat. Herman Portocarero is one of those rare writers. Unable to sleep at night worrying about Havana's future, he offers us a book brimming with love for his adopted city, chronicling its shifting moods of hope and despair. Fluidly moving between past and present, culture and politics, memoir and travelogue, Portocarero's Havana Without Makeup is a stunning homage to a city that casts a spell on all who experience it."#151;Ruth Behar, author of *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba* and *Lucky Broken Girl* "Passionate and provocative, *Havana Without Makeup* provides an uncommonly insightful and empathetic portrait of a city, country, and people steeped in eroticism, eccentricity and enigma."#151;Christopher P. Baker, author of *Mi Moto Fidel: Motorcycling Through Castro's Cuba* and the *National Geographic Traveler Cuba* and *Moon Cuba* guidebooks

Herman Portocarero is a European diplomat and writer, born in Antwerp, Belgium, of Spanish ancestry. He is currently the ambassador of the European Union in Havana, after a career spent between New York and the Caribbean. He was previously ambassador of his native country in Cuba and Jamaica, where he also lived and worked as a much younger diplomat. Thanks to his professional trajectory, he has been familiar with the region since the 1980s and with Cuba since 1995. He has unparalleled knowledge and understanding of Cuban history, politics, and society, and of the relationship between Cuba, the Caribbean, and the United States. Portocarero has published over twenty works of fiction and nonfiction in Europe. He authored the libretto for the oratorio *Flamma Flamma* by composer Nicholas Lens (available on Sony Masterworks), a monumental work popular with audiences of neo-classical music. He is also a gifted public speaker, and was one of the pioneers to launch TED talks in Havana in 2014. His *Havana without Makeup* is the crowning achievement of a career in writing pursued in parallel with his diplomatic activities. He mixes narrative skills and a novelist's feeling for people and places, with tireless searches for the truth behind the façade. Applied to Havana, a city he acknowledges to be in love with, this results in a kaleidoscopic visit full of unexpected angles and insights.

This book is a history, a memoir, a travel guide, an homage, a work of sociology, and an insightful

piece of political reporting. It is deeply personal and, I suspect, not necessarily definitive or beyond dispute in some of the conclusions drawn or arguments made. But for readers who know as little about Cuba as I did, (Batista, Castro, Che, cigars and baseball), it is a revelation. As you might expect from an armchair traveler with an interest in Cuba, I was most drawn to the social and cultural aspects of the story, (and less invested in topics like black market currency manipulation). Portocarero is particularly adept at sketching in the big picture - the African roots of Cuban society, the reality behind Santeria, the modern history of the revolucion. He is at his most personal as he guides us from neighborhood to neighborhood, charting the ups and downs of each, and the triumphs and failures of their various residents. If nothing else this is a most thorough travel guide. Of course, there's a great deal of romantic projection. Many times we find Portocarero assigning thoughts and desires to groups of people, (say, those young men on the Malecon), that may or may not be valid. But, to me, Cuba invites and maybe even requires that it be interpreted through a romantic lens. That said, this is not all gauzy memories and pretty sunsets. Our author is willing to point out and address failings and weaknesses as well as successes, and one ends up with the impression that one has gotten a fairly balanced, if forgiving, picture of modern Cuba. The book is wildly disorganized. If you just look at the Table of Contents you'll see that it reads like it's been shuffled. Part of this seems due to the author's desire to give us a little bit of the history of everything. Part feels like the result of thoughts that might occur to one as one wandered about and came upon various historical and political reminders. This approach might not work for, say, a history of the Roman Empire. For Cuba, though, the author makes this approach feel charming and inviting. It's as though the author wants to tell you everything, all at once, and the effect is oddly breathless and yet measured at the same time. The writing is slightly formal, but generally light and engaging. The tone is amiable and confiding, and it feels a bit like what you might hear over a rum and Coke from an experienced campaigner and diplomat with a flair for the telling anecdote, (which, apparently, is exactly who Portocarero is). The result is quite satisfying and remarkably entertaining. A very nice find. (Please note that I received a free advance copy of this book without a review requirement, or any influence regarding review content should I choose to post a review. Apart from that I have no connection at all to either the author or the publisher of this book.)

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