

Sisters merchant goes Havana daydreamin'

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

If given the opportunity to make a return visit to Havana, Mackenzie Creek Mercantile owner Sue Leek would do it "in a heartbeat — to see more. Two days wasn't enough."

Following her participation in an international ballroom dance competition in Miami in October, Leek joined a small group of competitors from Central Oregon on a short cruise to Havana and back. The ship moored at the Havana dock and the visitors went ashore to see the sights.

The vintage automobiles — classic Chevys, Fords, and Pontiacs — that cruise the streets of Havana took Leek right back to her teenage years when lots of chrome and whitewall tires on large vehicles were the standard of the day.

"Because of the era I grew up in, they blew my mind," Leek said.

Due to the years-long U.S.

embargo of Cuba, the maintenance of the existing vehicles was out of necessity, so they have been meticulously cared for — many of them serving as taxis. Leek was able to take a ride in a vintage Chevy convertible. There weren't many bicycles on the streets but lots of motorized scooters and many pedestrians, according to Leek.

One highlight of her visit was dinner and a show by the world-famous Buena Vista Social Club, which is an ensemble of Cuban musicians established in 1996 to revive the music of pre-revolutionary Cuba. Many of the original musicians, who were featured in a 1999 documentary film of the same title, still play as part of the ensemble. The visitors' Cuban cab driver, Ewilder, was invited by the group to join them for dinner and the show.

"He was taken aback by our invitation," Leek recalled.

With the reinstatement of free enterprise, Ewilder has

owned his own cab for the last year; formerly he drove as an employee of the government.

Leek was impressed by how clean Havana was, with its many open plazas and lovely Spanish, Italian, and Greek architecture. She particularly enjoyed the beautiful churches with their ornate stained-glass windows. She walked 12 miles while sight-seeing her first day in Havana. Leek found the Cubans to be very friendly, with a good percentage of them speaking English.

The Paladar los Mercaderes restaurant, with its leather-bound menus featuring fresh farm-to-table dining options, and its live Afro-Cuban music, provided a memorable lunchtime excursion. The Central Oregonians were the only Americans having lunch that day and there were other diners from the Netherlands, Russia, France, and Italy.

Besides the restaurants and churches, visits were made to beautiful beaches, bookstores with a few English titles, a cigar factory, a fresh spice shop, and a chocolate factory where Leek sampled the Cuban hot chocolate spiked with peppers, which she deemed delicious.

Leek came home with a first-place award for her solo dance with her instructor Travis Kokkler, owner of the Dance With Travis Studio in Bend. In order for the students to enter the competition, they must have an instructor who is credentialed. Kokkler was originally taught and trained through the Fred Astaire System. In addition, he has also studied and achieved his Associates Dance Director Certification with High Honors.

All six of the Central Oregon dance competitors and their instructor did very well in the competition, with three of the women ranked in the top 20 out of 85 female



PHOTO PROVIDED

Sue Leek and her instructor Travis Kokkler took first place in an international dance competition.

competitors. Kokkler placed third among the teachers.

Leek pointed out that competitive dancing is considered a sport that requires hours of training, even learning things like music theory. The competitions are expensive with travel costs and entry fees, so Leek participates in about one a year.

As a young person, Leek loved to dance in the era of swing. Children and other responsibilities crowded out

dancing, but when she found herself free to pursue new interests, dancing was a natural choice. She began taking professional lessons in Bend at Dance With Travis, and 15 years later is receiving awards in international competitive ballroom dancing.

Most days, Leek can be found at her business on West Cascade Avenue — Mackenzie Creek Mercantile — where she happens to carry dance shoes.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Havana's streets feature vintage automobiles that are still in service. Sue Leek of Sisters said the cars "blew her mind."

25-50% off storewide! *Hurry! Limited to in-store stock!*

Dept. 56 Xmas Villages • Designer Purses
Jewelry • Kitchen • Home Decor & More
Excludes OTC & Rx

SISTERS DRUG & GIFT
211 E. Cascade Ave., Sisters | 541-549-6221

Nelson Horse Waterers

Are your waterers freezing up?
We can fix them!

Install • Repair
Year-round
Parts & Service

miller IRRIGATION **541-388-0190**
LCB#8234

YOUR YEAR-ROUND IRRIGATION EXPERT

EverSewn

Love At First Stitch

Computerized || 80 stitches || 7 mm stitch width ||
7 presser feet || Hand start/stop || Adjustable speed

EverSewn Sparrow 20 ... \$325

The Sparrow machines are all metal on the inside and sew like a dream. These entry-level machines are very affordable; great for travel machine or a granddaughter.

All The Bells & Whistles

Computerized || LCD Display || Needle
Threader || Automatic thread cutter
Needle stop up/down || 310 stitch patterns,
including 84 decorative stitches

EverSewn Sparrow 30 ... \$399

These machines are set up in our
classroom — come try them out!

Stitchin' Post

541.549.6061 | 311 W. CASCADE AVE., SISTERS