

How Safe Are Hotel Buildings in Cuba?

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HAVANA, Cuba. - The explosion at the Saratoga Hotel could bring the Cuban government to begin changing certain things regarding the safety of its hotel facilities for foreign tourism, precisely because it revealed just how vulnerable and dangerous these can be even when they are promoted as keeping high standards and a visitors' registry that includes world-famous celebrities, as is the case of the Saratoga, where Mick Jagger, Madonna, Beyonce, Quentin Tarantino, Clint Eastwood and Stanley Kubrick once stayed.

Located where the famous and centrally-located avenue known as Paseo del Prado begins, just feet away from the Capitol building, the seat of the Cuban parliament, the Saratoga Hotel was news headline all over the world this past May 6th when a gas leak occurred while a gas tanker carrying more than 3,170 gallons of combustible liquid was supplying the hotel's reservoir, making the building explode in shatters and causing the death of 46 people, plus numerous damage in nearby buildings.

Although the results of an investigation -which would tell us finally if the explosion was accidental or intentional- have not been published, and although the Cuban government immediately called it an accident to quell rumors of a

possible sabotage, the evidence so far has made clear that the explosion was the result of a gas leak. Gas was used for kitchens and boilers at the Saratoga Hotel, and it was kept in two reservoirs located in the basement and on the roof of the building, in spite of the risks that the use and handling of the highly volatile fuel entail, especially in a densely populated and crowded area.



Hotel Saratoga antes de la tragedia
(Foto de los autores)

Of the witness testimonies published by several news outlets during the early hours of the tragedy, some speak of various negligent incidents which together resulted in, or caused, the tragedy. Examples of negligence are: the wrong location of the gas reservoirs - where aesthetics trumped safety- in the basements of a 19th Century building; the frequent smell of gas that workers reported regularly prior to the explosion; the absence of a security cordon and danger signs during the supplying process; the fissure of the feeding hose that was detected by a hotel cook and not by the persons in charge of those matters, this, according to statements made to the official press by Alexis Acosta, mayor of Old Havana

Another reason that signals to the possibility that the explosion was not caused by external factors but by internal flaws that propitiated it, whether as accident or on purpose, is that established regulations regarding the handling of fuel are constantly violated, as well as not keeping up with optimum technical conditions of the buildings, nor their safety in general. We can reach that conclusion from statements made by several officers of the state companies Unión Cuba Petróleo and a Gas Licuado subdivision. Both confirm that the tanker truck that “was supplying” the liquid gas when the explosion occurred “was in technical operating condition” and that both the equipment and the hotel had passed the required

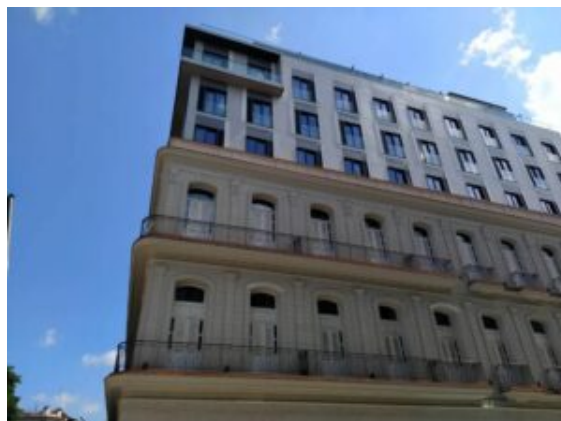
inspections recently in accordance with current safety norms in the island.

In fact, during the extraction of the tanker truck, while debris was being removed, it was corroborated just by looking at it that the truck had not been in use for long and that it suffered almost no damages in spite of its proximity to the epicenter of the explosion. Visible damages indicate that the explosion occurred in an area close to the service areas and basements, where one of the reservoirs was located, about 55 yards from the main kitchen, as several hotel workers have confirmed to *CubaNet*.

As far as safety at this facility and at other similar ones, with practically the same liquid gas storage and handling systems in almost all hotels in the island, CubaNet obtained information at the hotel facilities -by speaking with several Cuban and foreign workers, administrators and officers- as well as from the few publications available and in academic research papers mainly from the tourism schools, and in the Internet, where the subject is seldom broached.

From neglect to “unfortunate accidents”

On September 12, 2020, a falling elevator at the Meliá Habana Hotel, resulted in the death of one hotel guest. Although administrators of the hotel chain described the event as “an unfortunate accident” and the subject has not been mentioned again nor have the findings of a forensic investigation made public. We’ve learnt from sources close to the forensic reporting that the truth is the “accident” was the result of “prolonged neglect” with respect to “a simple and routine operation” as is “adjusting the configuration of the equipment’s speed” which was programmed for a building with more floors where an elevator’s speed must be greater.



El hotel Bristol recién inaugurado, a

unos pasos del Saratoga (Foto de los autores)

“The only explanation is that the required inspections were not done. That was the normal state of things not just in GAESA hotels, until the event at Meliá Habana,” states a source close to the Ministry of Tourism, adding: “Don’t think that things are stricter now than they were before, they’ve only set elevator speeds to the minimum, even in the tallest hotel buildings like the Cohiba. But the shortage of spare parts is the same as with transportation and aviation and everything else in this country. As for me, when I have to visit any of those hotels, I walk up the stairs even if it kills me, no elevators for me: I know it’s a miracle that any of them are working.”

Even so, Meliá and the military at GAESA, owners of the hotel, avoided responsibility by shielding themselves behind technical evaluations of alleged “optimum working conditions” they have scored after safety inspections conducted by a state company (COMETAL) which is handled by the very same owners of the Meliá Habana, a facility promoted as a 5-star hotel and regarded as one of the best hotels in the island.

However, judging from the negative comments posted on TripAdvisor by several clients after their visit to Cuba’s hotels, neglect is neither coincidental nor rare, and even some recently-inaugurated, high-standard facilities, like the Manzana Kempinski, the Paseo del Prado, Iberostar’s Grand Packard, and even the emblematic Hotel Nacional, are not spared negative criticism regarding bad service, but also the hotel conditions -often described as deplorable- to the extent that some guests have seen their safety and tranquility threatened. That is the reality that recent criticism on TripAdvisor indicates (especially from 2018 and 2019, before hotel closings due to the pandemic) regarding the Habana Libre and even the Saratoga, where many clients have experienced “bad odors”, “unbearable noises” and even the “smell of gas.”



Una opinión sobre el Saratoga de febrero de 2020 (Captura de pantalla)

That was the opinion, in October 2018, of Spanish user XusaS. She described the service from staff who assisted her as “very good” and she praised the comfort of the guest rooms/ However, she wrote about “very strong smell of something like gas” as well as noises coming from one of the bars at the Saratoga.

A similar opinion was expressed by Jackie L, from Miami, Florida, who, in 2015, gave the worst ratings to the Saratoga and stated she was “disappointed.” Same goes for user Mike B, also from the U.S., who felt “bad odors” in his room which he blamed on poor sanitation in the hotel’s surroundings.

Complaints are few, undoubtedly, but they are constant since the hotel’s inauguration, and they reflect that things were not going as well as they should have for a hotel aimed at VIP clients.



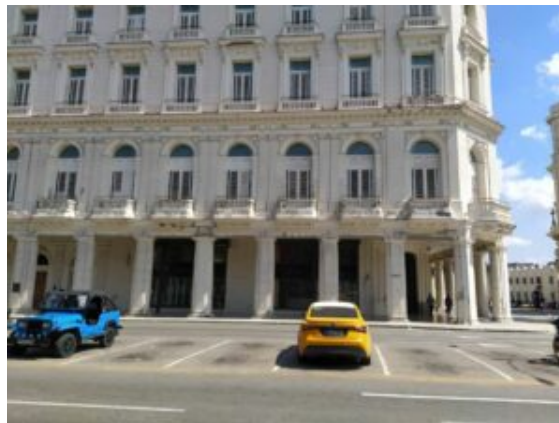
Opinión de agosto de 2016 en TripAdvisor (Captura de pantalla)

Regarding “strong odors” either from spoiled foods or from gas, and also about other internal matters in the hotel that affected services and caused faulty operations, we spoke to two Saratoga workers, who were interviewed by *CubaNet* under strict condition of anonymity because, following the explosion, both Gaviota S.A. and officials from the Ministry of the Interior in charge of the forensic investigation have threatened with harsh sanctions anyone who gives information to any news medium, official or independent.

“We always joked about the smell of gas, but we never thought something like this would happen,” states one of the workers. “It happened all the time, even when there was no (liquid gas) tanker, it was normal, because they told us it was normal (...) when we called CUPET [Unión Cuba Petróleo] or the fire department and they would come and check out the place but they never found anything wrong (...). We always worried about that. (...) Whenever a tanker truck came, the perimeter was never cordoned, no safety personnel was stationed to tell pedestrians to walk across the street instead, at the very least (...) people walked by while smoking. Nothing was done, the area was not under security watch or anything. The (tanker truck) drivers would get out and walk into the kitchen to ask for food to take with them, as happens in ever hotel. This was normal.”

“There were (client) complaints about the odors (gas and garbage), so then they spoke to CUPET so that they brought gas with less mercaptan, which is what stinks (...), the liquid gad that is brought to hotels has little odor, precisely so that

hotel guests do not complain (...) they never said that there was a gas leak, only that the reservoir was too close to the kitchen and that when it came time to refill the reservoirs, there would always be some odor that was not dangerous because it was almost undetectable (...). With the garbage, we reached an agreement for the daily pick-up and air-tight containers were bought. However, at times three days would pass, even a week, and the pick-up truck would not show up, so we would place the garbage that spoiled in the refrigerators or find a truck and take it ourselves to the landfill,” stated another source.



Hotel Manzana, en el mismo circuito de lujo que el Saratoga y con un sistema de seguridad similar (Foto de los autores)

When danger becomes habit

Although hotel safety is one of the weakest areas that foreign management points out when they assume control of any hotel facility in Cuba, very few investigations have been conducted or made public in the island about it. The few investigations that have been made mainly focus on general administrative affairs or on the implementation of service-related technologies, but only superficially do they touch upon, if at all, on problems related to waste, garbage, fuel and substance handling and treatment that could pose a threat to hotel guests as well as hotel personnel.

Some tangential references can be found in several diploma theses at the Tourism schools, but they only address quality-of-service issues. There are also manuals on internal management for use in the classroom, or Luis Benavides' manuals, from the University of Matanzas, about a study conducted at the Villa Trópico Hotel in

Varadero, in 2008. Although it barely covers the problems, this manual is also available on the Internet.

In a private conversation with *CubaNet* journalists during the conduct of this report, the executive director of an important European hotel chain established in Cuba explained some of the difficulties they face on a daily basis regarding the general safety of the hotel facilities that they manage.

“We cannot make joint decisions with the personnel we work with, and there are many subjects about which we cannot even give an opinion, among them those related to maintenance and to the companies we contract; those are negotiated by the Cubans,” our source explains. “It’s not possible for us to hire anyone, even when paying all the expenses, just to certify the hotel’s safety, that is not allowed; negotiation has to be with the entity that they have for that purpose, which is their own entity, with their own regulations adapted to Cuban reality, which has nothing to do with our norms as a foreign company. We are limited to the essential aspects of management, to sales and customer service, but regarding other areas, even when we know that things are not doing well, all we can do is complain and wait to see if they are moved.”

Our source continues: “At first, we invited several friends, including very experienced Cubans, to work on the results of the investigations, but that didn’t work (...). It dealt with the installation of solar panels in some areas, transforming some facilities and introducing safety-enhancing technologies. We were told that it couldn’t be done, that we would not be authorized to do such things, that those were tasks for the Cuban side to perform. It seems they didn’t like the word ‘budget’, or when we said: ‘We’ll pay for that.’ They wanted to continue selling us those services, the certifications, everything that revolves around it. That is their business.”

In general, it could be said that, based on what various academic sources from the Tourism schools have said, the safety that the Cuban side should guarantee is not only a business that offers what they cannot provide, but also a forbidden topic, a censored subject, even though it’s an area where more deficiencies exist that should be pointed out and that becomes indispensable in the wake of the Saratoga explosion, even when no one still knows the true causes of that tragedy.



Más dinero para construir nuevos hoteles que para su mantenimiento. Construcción de un nuevo hotel en La Habana (Foto de autores)

“The military doesn’t want anyone digging into their affairs,” a student about to graduate from Tourism school that we spoke to told us.

“That’s so they can avoid being blamed when something happens, like with the Meliá Habana elevator, or smaller things like food poisonings, burns, miscellaneous accidents, all because safety norms are not observed. Try to find one investigation where the subject of safety is broached. There aren’t any. However, the complaints from hotel guests indicate that problems keep piling up: from simple things like objects getting lost in a luxury hotel, water treatment, the handling of food, storing substances and waste products, to bigger things like the explosion caused by a gas leak. (...) When someone, be it a student or a faculty member, requests permission to conduct an investigation in specific hotel facilities, you get an outright no. Yet, it is in those areas where they have the most serious problems; everyone knows that nothing is done by the book here, many things are done only because a plan has to be updated, or because someone, having absolutely no knowledge about these things, decides that it must be done, and that’s that. What happened at the Saratoga with the gas leak can happen in any other hotel, because they all have maintenance problems, and because everyone wipes their ass with the regulations,” states the student, based on his experiences and those of his classmates when they were preparing their graduation theses.

A staff at the Ministry of Tourism also tells us that the event at the Saratoga will change some safety practices, but only until “those who give orders” forget about

the explosion. "It's as if we have gotten used to living with danger, with the notion that 'it won't happen here.'"

"They have ordered inspections at every hotel; now, when the tanker truck arrives, there have to be two guards watching it and no one can stay in the servicing area," according to our source.

"That used to be the practice, but then things got lax. 'Nothing ever happens.' 'Such things don't happen here because this is Cuba, and that's why.' 'You only see that happening in foreign news.' When the Meliá Habana elevator accident occurred, it was the same, all elevators were stopped. And what was the result? More than half of the elevators have to be replaced, but when it comes to money, everything stays the same, it's not mentioned again. (...). The same thing will happen with the gas leak. There are hotels, like the Manzana [Kempinski], that have the same system; at the recently-inaugurated Bristol, very close to the Saratoga, the system is very similar (...), yes, it's a new hotel, but a few years from now and without getting the maintenance it requires, we will see it go through the same thing. I hope nothing like the Saratoga happens again. It's not that a culture of maintenance is lacking in Cuba, well, it is lacking, but it's more about the word 'maintenance' because that means spending money they don't have because they haven't saved as they should have. They build and build and build because the money comes from the state budget, or from the funds that somebody gifted us or lent us, but then nothing gets the required maintenance, or it's done when it's too late, or it's done wrong. A clear example is the Habana Libre Hotel is in such condition it should be demolished. There are guest rooms where the humidity inside the walls is such that if you just touch them, you electrocute yourself. Now they are scared with what happened at the Saratoga, but as soon as their fears subside, they'll start cutting down the budget," stated our source.



Un nuevo hotel en construcción
mientras otros se caen a pedazos
(Foto de los autores)

The Cuban government has set a goal for 2030 of raising the number of hotel guests to 100,000, according to official statements from 2019, which would add 18,000 guest rooms to the existing number, distributed among some 40 new hotels that are presently under construction. An enormous and pretentious investment when compared to the short list of hotel facilities in need of repair and maintenance at present, less than 50 in the entire island from a total of 350, and where Havana could be considered lucky in having only 12 hotels undergoing serious repairs.

With the delays and adversities that the pandemic brought, as well as the political crises worldwide and the imbalances caused by the “Ordering Task” -the government’s measures, which have had negative repercussions in the Cuban economy- the plans projected for tourism in 2030 will be greatly modified, even though the government is bent on fulfilling them if only to prove that it can overcome problems. This stance will cause new, and worsen other greater ills, for the national tourism industry where, with the Saratoga Hotel tragedy, it has shown that some things that seemed to be the paradigm of perfection are actually working badly.

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