

Havana's Hershey Train a reminder of the true spirit of Christmas

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The Hershey Train was created by Milton Hershey, who launched the iconic treat brand. He founded a model town in northern Cuba, and in addition to a huge chocolate factory, built schools, hospitals and affordable housing for his workers and, to get them to work, an electric railway.

PHOTOS BY MATT WHELAN

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'No electronica!' she shouted, pointing at a large sign on the wall that read: 'NO ELECTRONICA!'

That's crazy, I thought. "*Por que?*" I asked.

"No electronica!!" she screamed again, louder.

It was Christmas Eve in Havana, the city was full and I was trying to board a ferry from Habana Vieja to Casablanca. There was a special train waiting on the other side, but the laptop in my backpack was creating a problem. In the meantime, people with cellphones and digital cameras were boarding by the dozen.

"*Por que?!*" I asked again, wondering how to end this bizarre standoff, when an old man in a limp fedora and a bright red necktie leaned in from a cloud of cigar smoke, like a Cuban genie, and said simply: "It's okay."

And just like that, it was.

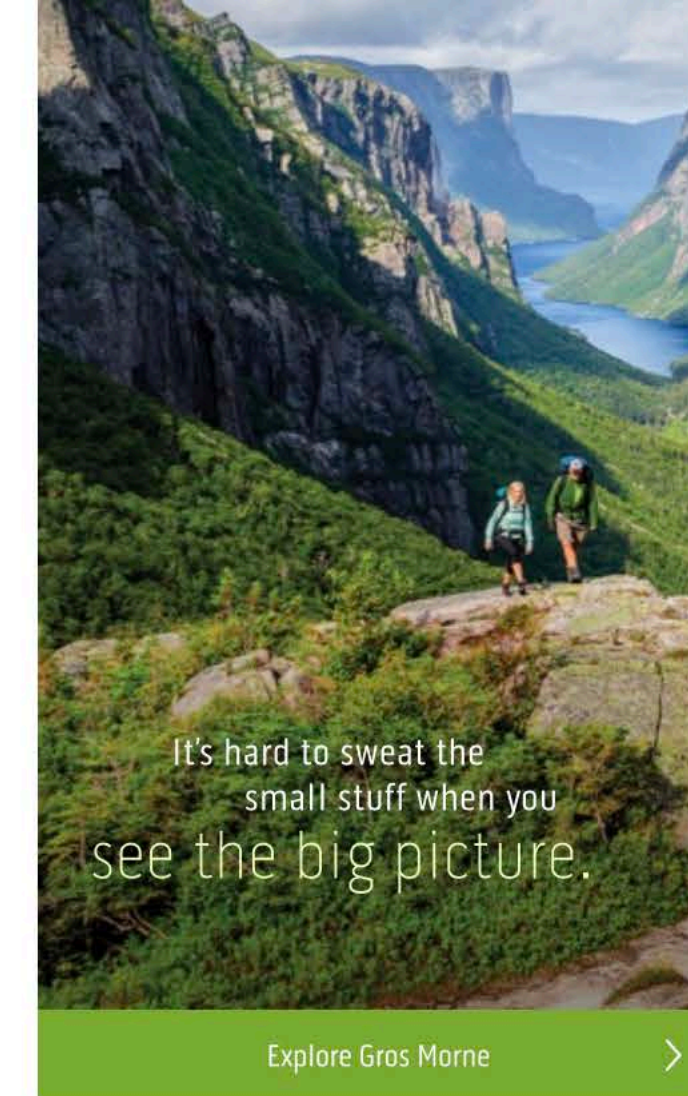
I spent the 20-minute crossing trying to think of a way one might sink or sabotage a 50-foot ferry with a laptop computer, or a good reason why one would.

On the other side, nestled in the shade of a dilapidated station, was the Hershey Train.

Milton Hershey grew up in Lancaster, Pa. By the age of 18, he'd set up his first candy shop, by 26 had founded the successful Lancaster Caramel Company and 10 years later launched the Hershey brand whose wrappers adorn so many a festive treat today.

A philanthropist with a passion for community, Hershey had founded the thriving model town of his namesake in southern Pennsylvania in 1903, before turning his attention to Cuba's cheap land and vast swaths of sugar cane. By 1916, another model town of the same name would flourish in the tropical countryside of northern Cuba. In addition to a huge chocolate factory, Hershey built schools, hospitals and affordable housing for his workers and, to get them to work, an electric railway.

We were due to leave at 9 a.m., but schedules in Cuba are as rigid as a politician's promise, and it wasn't until noon that the old machine groaned into action and crawled away from the station.

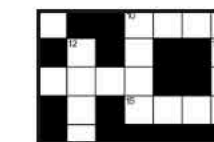


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From there, it never really broke an idle lope, stopping every half mile or so to pick up people and their possessions, be they at a station or not. Entire Cuban lives embarked and disembarked – men, women and schoolkids, bales of tobacco, furniture sets, fridges and fans, burlap bags of fruit and vegetables, boxes of cigars, auto parts and small animals. There were signs here, too, of a Cuba in transition. Elderly ladies in floral dresses and head scarves sat on benches next to teenagers with cellphones, baseball caps and handgun belt buckles.

It's no secret that the locomotive rarely makes the journey in whole, and sure enough, about a mile short of the factory, its towering triangular roof just visible on a rise in the distance, the train ground to a halt, and wouldn't move again for the day, and possibly the week. But the town is there, all but abandoned today, a lurking legacy of a man interested in much more than the profit of private enterprise – something to consider, perhaps, as you unwrap your Hershey's Kisses this Christmas, in an age in which the holidays seem sometimes to have missed their meaning.

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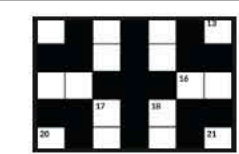
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