

*SLAN conference, Havana, Cuba*



**Viva la evolución!**



*Havana. Scenes of the city now. These are not nutrition scientists. News of maybe the best SLAN conference ever, and of for sure the best party ever*

*Havana, Cuba. Our news team reports.* An energetic smash hit. This was the general verdict on the 16th conference of the association of Latin American Nutrition Societies (SLAN) held in Cuba last month between 11-16 November. The venue was superb, the organisation was enthusiastic, many of the presentations were innovative and committed to public health nutrition. A total of 1,600 people participated, most of whom were early in their careers, and most of these women. Pictured top – and *on last month's WN cover* – are Havana 2012 SLAN president Manuel Hernández Triana of Cuba (left) and the 2009 SLAN president Eduardo Atalah of Chile.

**[Access the continuation of this story here](#)**

**[GC1] Comentário:**  
December HP23

**[GC2] Comentário:**  
November WN1

**[GC3] Comentário:**  
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***Havana. Scenes of the city now. These are not nutrition scientists. News of maybe the best SLAN conference ever, and of for sure the best party ever***

*Havana, Cuba. Our news team reports.* The 16th conference of the association of Latin American Nutrition Societies (SLAN) held in Cuba last month between 11-16 November, was wonderful. Havana 2012 SLAN president Manuel Hernández Triana of Cuba, pictured top left (with the 2009 SLAN president Eduardo Atalah of Chile), and his very hard-pressed dedicated colleagues headed by Santa Jiménez who organised the conference, have good reason to be proud. SLAN 2012 turned out to be an always-to-be-remembered occasion.

### ***Maybe we'll meet Fidel...***

Please excuse us if we start by celebrating the country and the city of Havana. For many of the participants this was their first visit to the country. 'Maybe we'll meet Fidel?' was one of the whispers. But the time when Fidel Castro might walk into a hotel in the early hours of the morning and spend the **night** discussing the sugar harvest, or Cuba's astounding record for education and health (which began before the revolutionary regime, to be fair to all), or whether history would absolve JFK, are long gone. We were told that he lives close to the Palace for Conventions where the SLAN conference was held, but these days he is in seclusion.

Sensible conference participants like 'I get around' contributor [Jean-Claude Moubarac](#) spent time with friends or partners in Havana's old city, which dates back 500 years and is now visited by over a million tourists a year. (Jean-Claude took the pictures above).

**[GC4] Comentário:**  
Nov HP6



*A scene in Trinidad, Cuba (left), and (right) David Calzado and Charanga Habanera, the 16-piece band with six singers that wowed the closing party*

Even more sensible colleagues arrived early or stayed on to tour the island, a favourite location being the carefully preserved colonial city of Trinidad (above left), which like Havana is a living vibrant museum of US automobiles dating back even up to 50 years, lovingly cared for by their owners.

Overworked, disorganised or workaholic colleagues visiting from outside Cuba had the compensation of a four-hour party in the afternoon of the final day, starring the astounding David Calzado and Charanga Habanera, a 16-piece band (some above, right) including six singers and awesome brass and percussion. A grizzled veteran of London's rock scene was awestruck. He was heard to observe in an interval between numbers that the last time his diaphragm had vibrated like that, as if a big live bird under his ribs, was when he'd been jammed up against the loudspeakers in Ronnie Scott's club the evening The Who launched their rock opera *Tommy*.

[GC5] Comentário:  
Wiki

### Box 1

#### Tips for tourists



*Cuban 1 and 3 peso banknotes, showing Jose Marti and (back) Fidel Castro's first triumphal entry into Havana, and Che Guevara and (back) sugar cane-cutting*

Some tips for readers who intend to visit Cuba. Breakfasts in all the hotels we stayed in were good to superb, tourism now being Cuba's biggest single foreign currency earner; but eat hearty, skip lunch, and in the evening find small restaurants that use Cuba's own currency.

It would take an essay to explain the money system. Get used to the fact that your money gets converted into tourist-price money which is sort-of pegged to the \$US and is 25 times the price of the same denomination money most Cubans use. Don't complain, the people need the money! If you sensibly shop and eat at local places, exchange some tourist money for national money, whose banknotes feature Cuban heroes like the hero-martyrs José Martí and Che Guevara.

You need an entry visa and health insurance to get into Cuba. Pay no attention to internet entries that say this isn't so. It is so. There's a story that both can be obtained at the airport in Panama City if your plane stops there, which if so may save you searching for your 'local' Cuban consulate, but check first! Forget about internet access when in Cuba, the system is occasional and expensive. This is a good time to go cold turkey from emailing. Visit soon, though: while government is far, far more devolved than US-influenced media insinuate, there are signs that some time maybe not so long off, politically and economically Cuba may go the way of China.

You get an idea from Jean-Claude Moubarac's photographs here, of street-life in old Havana. It's a good idea to research for the best bars with music before you take off. Tour the island, visit Trinidad, take the opportunity to visit the Sierra Mestre. All the Cubans we met were proud of the history of the last half century.

[GC6] Comentário:  
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### *Terrific organisation*

Yes yes, but what about the science? We will get to that. First here is praise of the venue, its layout, and a glimpse of the deals that are done in conferences. The Palace of Conventions was an almost perfect venue. It was spacious inside with plenty of places to talk over espressos. The conference rooms were obviously designed to accommodate top-level international political discussions, with grand chairs, personal microphones, and smaller seats behind for advisors. The plenary chamber was packed with participants for the opening speeches and was almost full for the closing ceremony, which was impressive and innovative, giving time for people attending to say what they thought – good idea. The whole five – well, six really – days, were impressive and auspicious. There were few dud presentations, the system of having five sessions in parallel throughout the week worked very well. Some of the smaller rooms were standing and sitting room only for presentations, but this gave a sense of occasion and excitement. Plus – super-important – the air conditioning and the lighting worked well.

Even better, the Palace was linked by a covered walkway to the Palco, apparently the nicest hotel. This had an enormous foyer area with secluded areas for business to be done, not to mention planning and plotting.



**Lluís Serra Majem, María Jose Soto-Mendez and Ben Caballero are at left; Manuel Triana addressing the closing ceremony; Noel Solomons at right**

The attractive young lady is Maria Jose Soto-Mendez, Guatemalan nutritionist, with a MSc from the University of Granada, who is now working on her PhD dissertation, still at UCr under the supervision of a thesis committee including Klaus Schuemann, Noel Solomons, and the gentleman seated to my left. **Shame on you, Geoffrey!!!** That is Prof. Angel Gil, of the University of Granada, who is the host and president of the XX International Nutrition Congress in Granada, next September. We are not signing your arrest warrant for crimes against industrial thought, but rather a covenant of cooperation between his Foundation in Spain and CeSSIAM in Guatemala.

Luminaries from the US included Ben Caballero from Johns Hopkins (on the right in the left-hand picture above), Irv Rosenberg from Tufts, and Association founder member Walter Willett (see Box 2). From Latin America other than the Caribbean, the strongest presences were as ever from Mexico, starring [Juan Rivera](#), Simon Barquera, Alejandro Calvillo of [El Poder Consumidor](#), and many colleagues; and from Brazil, starring [Carlos Monteiro](#) and the team from the University of Sao Paulo ([see World Nutrition this month](#)), Patricia Constante Jaime from the federal government, Helio Vannucci, Elizabete Wenzel de Menezes, and many others. President of IUNS [Ibrahim Elmadsfa](#) presented, as did [Enrique Jacoby](#) and Chessa Lutter from PAHO, Ruth Charrondiere from FAO, and Nadia Slimani from the International Agency for Research on Cancer. Spanish presenters included Ángel Gil Hernández, president of the ICN next year in Granada, Lluís Serra Majem (in the picture with Ben Caballero, above), and Javier Aranceta. And from Central America: many, including the ubiquitous Noel Solomons (right hand picture above), of whom... well, see Box 2.

Box 2

### Some talk of Noel Solomons

**[GC7] Comentário:**  
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**[GC8] Comentário:**  
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Noel Solomons at the 2009 ICN in Bangkok; becoming a member of the Spanish Nutrition Academy; and with a colleague at a SLAN 2009 party in Santiago, Chile.

Geoffrey Cannon reminisces. Anybody who thinks nutrition scientists are dull folk is instantly refuted with two words: Noel, together with [Solomons](#). Here he is, above and below.

Noel is a senior nutrition scientist with a distinguished international reputation, one of the still very active generation mentored by [Nevin Scrimshaw](#), and who is a director of Nevin's International Nutrition Foundation (1). Also, as founder-director of CESSIAM in Guatemala, which I won't explain but simply cite (2), he is obviously a devoted and inspiring mentor himself, to young staff and colleagues.

The third thing to say is that folks who assume that Noel is off the wall are right, but probably misled. He is a formidable organiser whose footwork is fancy. With [Lluís Serra Majem](#), he masterminded much of the 2010 International Public Health Nutrition conference in Porto, Portugal, and in particular its series of hot topic debates which are still discussed. No doubt he takes some of the credit for the sessions at SLAN 2012. He is immersed in many aspects of nutrition and of public health, as an academic and teacher. As a planner and plotter, he is consummate, even if his style makes his moves more obvious than is the case with colleagues who wear suits and ties. He is up-front about his work with industry sectors, as suggested by the picture at left, above.

*Those were the days*

I first encountered Noel at the 1985 ICN in Brighton. He was presenting on his special topic of zinc metabolism. He was awesome. In those days he looked like Miles Davis, except more than a head taller. My recollection is that he had a holster for his hand-mike, and that he presented on two screens simultaneously, spoke from front stage, and did not look back. Chatting with Noel recently he said my memory was at fault, but I am not so sure. You never know, with Noel, and that's part of his point.

The next occasion was at 1997 SLAN in Guatemala City. He took me out to a great local place for supper. Lots of people laugh at their own jokes, but what impressed me is that Noel is able to tell a story within a story within a story while at the same laughing within each layer of narrative and self-appreciation. Once he gets going it isn't the first Noel, there are up to six Noels in action. I sense still that

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I disappointed him by occasionally getting a phrase in, and then appraising his style, which I still enjoy.

On a later occasion I asked Noel why he had left a promising career as a physician specialising in nutrition in Boston Mass. He told me he got sick of being thrown on sidewalks by cops and being clubbed on the head and other vital parts. Nevin Scrimshaw had ceased being founder-director of INCAP (the Institute of Nutrition for Central America and Panama) by that time, but Noel decided that Guatemala was a safer place for him, which at that time must alone make him unique in history, so that's where he went and where he is still located.

Take a tip from me. Next time you are at a big nutrition conference, approach Noel. You can't miss him, he is close to 2 metres in height, he keeps snacks in his beard, and he takes pictures at key moments. Get to know him. That's mission impossible, because he is while utterly sane, on his own planet. But you may learn a lot. This is written with much due respect.



Havana, SLAN 2012. Noel Solomons (left) with Maria Jose Soto-Mendez and Walter Willett, then with Che Guevara, then signing an agreement with Angel Gil

#### References

- 1 Noel and CESSIAM: [http://www.sightandlife.org/fileadmin/data/Magazine/2012/26\\_2\\_2012/profile\\_a\\_day\\_in\\_the\\_life\\_of\\_noel\\_solomons.pdf](http://www.sightandlife.org/fileadmin/data/Magazine/2012/26_2_2012/profile_a_day_in_the_life_of_noel_solomons.pdf)
- 2 Noel and the International Nutrition Foundation: <http://www.inffoundation.org/about/officers.htm>

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**Respond below please**