

Getting a Glimpse of Cuba

By

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For a long time I've wanted to visit Cuba, mostly, I think because for years there has been a certain mystery to this semi-forbidden country. So when I told friends that I was planning a visit, a frequent response was, "Oh, I didn't think Americans were allowed to go there." That's true primarily for individuals, but if you are willing to go with a group, there are plenty of opportunities. Most of these programs are the so-called People-to-People cultural exchanges sponsored by established travel organizations, universities, or professional groups, which obtain a license from the Office of Foreign Assets Control at the U.S. Treasury Department.

I responded to an ad from the Grand Circle Foundation headquartered in Boston, which has been taking groups to Cuba since last spring. The brochure billed the trip as a chance to meet and talk with a variety of Cuban citizens and learn about their culture. For the most part, this promise was fulfilled. But my wish to learn what life was really like under the repressive regime that Fidel Castro engineered following his revolution in 1959 was only partially satisfied.

Our travel group of 16 from around the United States gathered in Miami, where we met our Grand Circle representative Ruby, who gave us our visas, final travel documents and a brief orientation. She would be with us for the entire 11 days. Outgoing and upbeat, she contributed a great deal to the success of our trip. In addition, we had a Cuban guide, Raúl, who we would meet in Havana the next day. He turned out to be a walking encyclopedia and seemed to know almost everything about everything.

Cuba lies only 90 miles off the southern coast of Florida, so the flight took less than an hour. The other passengers were Spanish speakers, most likely Cubans visiting from the States. A common thread that runs throughout Cuban society is the disruption of families as a result of emigration over the decades. Current U.S. policy permits Cubans living in the States to visit relatives once a year for up to 30 days. These exiles send back over two billion dollars a year to their relatives, making it a major source of income for the country.

It is estimated that 20 percent of the population have left since 1959. In spite of the exodus, the overall population has grown from 7 million to about 12 million, with an increase in average life expectancy from 58 years to 77, a bit longer than in this country.

The Cuban passengers seemed in a festive mood, and when the plane landed they all applauded, and we along with them.

One of the first things I noticed when we arrived in Havana under an oppressively hot September sun was how little traffic flowed along the city's palm tree-lined boulevards. This made sense when we later learned that 90 percent of Cubans don't own an automobile. Nevertheless, the iconic 1950s American cars, called Yank Tanks, are still an essential mode of transportation in addition to bicycle taxis and public busses. Some new cars are seen on the street, but these belong to foreign companies and can't be sold to Cubans.

Havana may be one of the least congested major cities on the planet. As a result, there is little pollution and a minimum of the usual city sounds. One evening when I commented to the hotel bartender that I was enjoying my visit to Cuba, he smiled and said, "Welcome to the quiet country."

The lack of traffic is just one indication that Havana, like the rest of Cuba, is struggling economically. Though you see a city with litter-free streets, leafy parks, and handsome government edifices, it is soon evident that many grand old Spanish-style homes and other buildings are in disrepair and look forlorn and sadly decrepit under peeling white paint. Some are empty, but

most are lived in, having been divided up into small apartments. Cubans can now own property, so many extended families occupy these modest living quarters. This arrangement of sharing the cost helps Cubans to get by on their meager incomes.

The average Cuban, including professionals, earns only \$30 to \$50 a month and survives by working an extra job or two. Income from a second job is pretty much kept secret and not stashed in a bank account to avoid being taxed like official income.

While Cuba is economically disadvantaged, I saw no outward signs of extreme poverty, no homeless people on the streets, and very little begging.

We spent three days in Havana before moving on to the cities of Cienfuegos and Trinidad, and then returned to Havana for our last two days. We checked in our hotel, had lunch, and before setting out to do some sightseeing in Old Havana, changed some of our dollars into the local currency. This is conveniently done at any hotel, avoiding having to go to a bank. (ATMs in Cuba don't accept American debit or charge cards.) Dollars are exchanged for the Cuban convertible pesos, called CUCs (pronounced Kooks) which are pegged to the dollar, but 15 percent is taken off the top. The CUCs are primarily for foreigners and tourists, while Cubans do most of their business in regular pesos, each worth about four cents. They can also

use the CUCs paid to them by tourists in the form of tips or purchases in the markets.

At the Iglesia Merced (Church of Mercy) we chatted with an American Catholic priest in jeans who had lived in Havana for 15 years doing mostly social work. It was partly through his efforts that this church supported a senior center around the corner where we went next.

Our hosts seemed delighted to have us stop by and were most hospitable. Whether members of our group spoke Spanish or not, we were soon engaged in lively interaction. Before we left a small group serenaded us with a few Cuban songs.

Raúl told us that in this communist country only about eight percent of Cubans are Catholic and that most of them don't attend mass. (An Internet site puts the percentage much higher, but also states that only a small number attends services.)

On the other hand, many Cubans are drawn to a religion called Santería, which combines Catholicism with African and Caribbean rituals and beliefs. We visited one of their temples of worship and heard a brief talk by a priest dressed all in white.

We also visited a synagogue, one of two conservative congregations in the city; there is also an orthodox congregation. We learned that about 1,200 Jews still live in Cuba. Most left the country years ago, primarily for economic reasons and not because of persecution.

After wandering through the dungeon-like historic old fortress at the harbor's edge, we spent time at the Museum of the Revolution, located in the former presidential palace. Many fascinating artifacts and documents were on display. One of the Revolution's most public statements is a massive obelisk in the center of a huge paved open space that you see when entering Havana.

Restaurants, like hotels, are owned by the state, but in recent years some citizens have been given permission to establish small restaurants, called Paladars, in their homes. This usually amounts to five or six tables squeezed into the family's living room that faces onto the street. We ate at several of these home restaurants throughout our stay when on our own for lunch. Overall, I found the food in Cuba quite tasty, not at all too spicy.

Unfortunately, Cubans suffer from food shortages like they do in many other goods because much of the produce and fish are sold to hotels and restaurants for the tourist industry. Raúl took us to a store where only

rationed basic foods were sold, showing us a ration booklet that everyone is required to use.

Alongside baseball, music, dance and art have an integral place in Cuban culture. Their origins stem not only from their Hispanic roots, but also from a strong African influence as a result of three hundred years of slavery.

Our introduction to music came the second evening in Havana. Raúl said that the well-known group, the Buena Vista Social Club, might be performing that evening, so after dinner some of us set off down dimly lit side streets in search of the place. To our dismay it was closed that night. But on the way back we heard music coming from a rundown-looking nightspot and inside we found several musicians and a charming flamenco-style dancer sending up amazing foot-tapping music. For the price of a glass or two of Cuban beer, we enjoyed an unforgettable evening's entertainment.

Small musical ensembles performed background music at almost every restaurant and bar, and they always had a CD to sell. I came home with two.

More than 60 percent of Cubans work for the state and most have to supplement their incomes to get by. An article I read after getting home

quotes a government worker who says, “They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work.”

According to Raúl, there are about 75,000 physicians in Cuba, 30 percent of whom work abroad, mostly in Central and South America. Many work in Venezuela with whom Cuba has worked out an exchange of doctors for oil. (60 percent of energy in Cuba comes from oil; the rest comes from wind and hydro power. A nuclear plant stands abandoned and half finished.)

We learned too that while health care is provided by the government, the system also suffers from shortages. Often patients have to provide some of their own supplies, such as sutures, bandages and meals.

I asked Raúl what would happen if I got sick or were injured. He said that he would take me to one of the special medical clinics just for tourists, but if necessary I would be taken to a hospital.

There are also shortages of basics such as soap, shampoo, toothpaste, medicines, cosmetics and clothes. A man stopped me on the street one day and asked if I had some aspirin I could give him. Another time two teenage boys approached me and asked if I had any extra T-shirts. As part of this trip we were asked to bring a selection of these items which were distributed to people whom Ruby selected.

Access to the Internet is limited in Cuba, and even though it is available at hotels it is often unreliable. I never bothered to try it out. I did try out a bit of television in my hotel room but I couldn't understand very much of the local Spanish channels; those from the States are strictly limited, though CNN is available. Almost everyone seems to have a mobile phone, but phones from outside the country don't work.

Cuba is a beautiful country, discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492. Early explorers reported that they could walk from one end of the island to the other in the shade. Over the centuries, most of the original forests have been cut down for fuel, building materials and making room for plantations. But forestation has been rebounding steadily.

The island is 780 miles long and is only 119 miles across at its widest point. Sugarcane plantations are pretty much a thing of the past due to competition from abroad, but coffee is widely grown in the higher elevations. (The three things we were told you can't bring home are Cuban coffee, rum and cigars.)

On the fourth day we set off by bus to Cienfuegos (100 fires), just a few hours in our comfortable Chinese-built bus on the southern coast. It is one of the newest cities in Cuba, having been founded in the early 1800s by a

Frenchman and several Americans from New Orleans. It was named after a former governor.

While we had heard a lecture in Havana at an arts foundation, it was in Cienfuegos where we were able to talk with artists personally. Three different artists and a photographer invited us into their homes where they had their studios and galleries. Their personal stories and descriptions of their work were unique yet representative of modern Cuban art. All belonged to a union which had over 190 members. We were told that the government does not put restrictions on artists.

With these artists, as with other Cubans we met, Ruby was usually the one to translate when necessary. Tall, blond and fluent in English with no accent, you wouldn't have guessed that she was a native of Mexico where she and her American husband live. One morning at breakfast I said, "Ruby, you look more Scandinavian or Polish than Mexican." She laughed and said that in fact her great grandfather came to Mexico from Poland and that she looks more like him than others in her family.

We also had another unforgettable musical experience, this time a concert given by the Chorus of Cienfuegos, an a cappella group of twenty, one of the best singing groups in Cuba. They performed both Cuban and traditional pieces, and then sang for us the American folksong, "Shenandoah." Their

stunning rendition almost brought tears to my eyes. Financially supported by the government, the chorus meets everyday for three hours of rehearsal.

The following evening we missed out on a concert by a well-known instrumental group due to a blackout. These outages apparently occur frequently, but this was the only one we experienced.

Our next destination was Trinidad (Spanish for trinity), one of the oldest cities in Cuba. The main sites we visited here included a botanical garden, an organic farm, a sugar mill, and a basket weaving workshop. I chatted briefly with a couple of the women, one of whom told me that she had worked there for over twenty years. We saw beautiful baskets like these for sale on the street for what seemed like a mere pittance.

We also spent several hours at a coffee plantation, located at over two thousand feet in one of Cuba's three low mountain ranges. Here we heard a talk in English followed by a brief tour that included the home of one of the families who ran the plantation.

The next day I had a delightful encounter on my own at an outdoor artisan market where I met Rosa from whom I bought a small tablecloth. This was my only significant purchase of the trip and, as it turned out, my conversation with Rosa and her vendor colleagues was the most extensive I

had in Spanish. I have several photos showing Rosa with her friends and one of me with her. She was a perky woman in her forties with a flair for color in her outfit. Rosa's pleasure in having made a sale was clearly evident as the photos show.

The most significant event in earlier Cuban-American relations occurred in 1898, when Cuba was in the midst of its second war of independence from Spain. Concerned about the safety of U.S. citizens living there, our government sent the battleship *Maine* into Havana harbor, where it inexplicably exploded, killing 266 sailors. The U.S. then declared war on Spain and sent in troops. Among them were Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders who famously stormed up San Juan Hill near the city of Santiago de Cuba with the rallying cry, "Remember the Maine!"

Spain soon surrendered, and as a result of the 1898 Treaty of Paris, ceded Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines to the U.S. Cuba was soon given partial independence, which led to, among other things, the permanent establishment in 1901 of the Guantanamo Naval Base. Cuba became fully independent in 1902.

Travel to Cuba for U.S. citizens has been restricted since 1960, when President Eisenhower initiated the first economic embargo in response to Fidel Castro and his fellow revolutionaries toppling the corrupt regime of General Fulgencio Batista. A Marxist-communist government was established, which expropriated private American property and nationalized American businesses. Castro allied Cuba with the Soviet Union, which subsidized Cuba's economy until 1991, when the Soviet Union fell apart.

There followed in 1961 the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, both under President Kennedy. The embargo (referred to by the Cubans as *el bloqueo*, the blockade) has been extended by every U.S. president since, though some administrations have pressed harder than others to relax trade restrictions. Friends have told me that they visited Cuba on their own during a brief period in the 1980s.

Though Presidents Clinton and Obama relaxed restrictions on People-to-People trips, it was under Clinton that in 1996 the Helms-Burton Act was passed, which essentially punishes other countries for doing business with Cuba. For example, if a cruise ship visits Cuba, it isn't allowed to enter a U.S. port for six months.

Many people, including myself, believe that our embargo and travel restrictions are no longer justified and only serve to keep the Castros in

power. I also agree with those who say that Cuba's poor human rights record doesn't justify the embargo given the fact that the U.S. does business with other repressive regimes such as Russia and China. Last November the United Nations General Assembly voted again, as it has for the past 20 years, to urge the United States to end the embargo.

In the discussion that followed a talk by one Cuban official in which the subject of the embargo came up, one member of our group commented that at least Cuba doesn't have a MacDonald's or a Star bucks on every street corner. An opportunity to discuss matters of human rights didn't present itself during this trip. I regret not pursuing this with Raúl.

The Cuban exiles in Florida make up a powerful and conservative lobby in Washington that has hindered efforts to normalize relations with Cuba. However, the younger generation is less conservative.

We headed back to Havana for our last two days. On the way into the city we stopped at Ernest Hemingway's home, now a museum. Visitors are not allowed inside, so one has to be content with looking through open windows and paying a guide a tip to take photos. I have several of his study, including shots of his bookshelf and typewriter. Hemingway entertained many well-

known guests, including Ava Gardner, who, as the story goes, unsettled the neighborhood by swimming nude in the pool.

We checked in at the Hotel Nacional de Cuba, a mammoth structure built in 1930. Designed by the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White of New York in an eclectic style, it has been host to the famous and infamous from around the world, including the mafia from New York which was in cahoots with General Batista prior to his overthrow in 1959. The hotel is so large that our group was given rooms on the sixth floor equipped with facilities to serve us breakfast.

Included in our last two days in Havana was a visit to a dance studio, the national cemetery and a school for special needs children where we talked with several teachers. Raúl told us that the government doesn't like photographs taken in schools because some are in a run-down condition. Though a couple classrooms could have used a fresh coat of paint, they were neat and tidy, and the children looked well cared for.

By contrast, we were able to take pictures at a pre-school run by Catholic nuns (with special permission from the state). Some of my favorite images are of these four-year-olds sitting at their tables, crayons and paper in hand, happily chattering away. Afterwards the head teacher told us about the nuns' work in the city, particularly with children.

We also visited a maternity clinic where young women come for monthly checkups. We talked with the head nurse and several of the mothers-to-be waiting for the doctor who was due to arrive any minute. It looked to me like two of the patients were due any minute as well.

Raúl said that abortions are legal and that it is up to the mother to decide. Sex education begins in middle school. He also said that many couples don't marry to avoid the bureaucratic hassle of getting divorced.

I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to Cuba but I wasn't there either long enough or fluent enough in Spanish to determine how average Cubans really feel about their lives. They seem genuinely friendly to foreigners, are affectionate in greeting one another, and overall give the impression that they are making the best of it under a regime that controls many aspects of their lives.

Cuba has been called the Prison Paradise, referring to the tight restrictions on traveling abroad. But according to recent news reports, the Cuban government has announced that beginning in 2013 its citizens will have more freedom to travel outside the country. This is another sign of change under Raúl Castro, who has been in charge for several years since the onset of his elder brother Fidel's poor health.

The big question is what will happen when the Castros pass on? The answer? Nobody knows.

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