
CUBA – a Great Place to Visit

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Recently, I was invited to join a group of friends on a legal visit to America's closest island nation to the South – Cuba. I was very excited about going to a country that had been off limits to me for all of my life. I remember discussions from my high school history class about socialism, and the relationship between Cuba and the Soviet Union after America placed its embargo on Cuba. With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, I, like most American's, lost touch with what was happening in Cuba, until now. I can tell you, that Cuba has survived and is working toward a brighter future for its people.

Anticipation

As I packed for the summer temperatures in Cuba, I had visions of a country with a large military presence, armed guards on the street corners and, perhaps like Egypt, a tourist police, whose presence would be felt constantly during my stay. I also anticipated a society where the citizens have restricted movement within the country and limited opportunities for employment or advancement. What I found, when I arrived in Cuba, was a literate and friendly culture, whose citizens eagerly work to live well.

Cuba

The largest island of the Caribbean Islands, Cuba is the Gateway between the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico. Like the United States, Cuba was discovered by Columbus in the 15th Century and colonized by Spain, from which the language has endured. The remainder of the population is composed of immigrants from surrounding islands and Africa. The economy continues to struggle due to the US embargo, but it is beginning to see growth in its sugar cane production, exports of rum and cigars, and—especially—tourism. Cuba draws vacationers from around the world to its all-inclusive beach resorts on its northern shore.

When I arrived in Santiago, what I had pictured in my mind about a country “trapped in the 1950's” seemed to be true. I saw a 1956 Chevrolet in a pale blue color park between a beige colored 1959 Chevrolet and a red and black

1957 Ford. At the end of the parking lot was a meek-looking man with a donkey surveying the comings-and-goings of these classic looking cars to retrieve the passengers from our chartered flight. The exception to this picture was the occasional modern yellow taxi or a new black Mercedes, and, of course, our modern (Chinese-made Yutong coach) sitting by the curb, ensuring a cool reception for us to escape the heat of this summer's day. Over the next 10 days, I observed many signs of a growing free enterprise filling the needs of the population as well as visitors like me.



The Cuban People

In general, the Cuban people are poor in relation to Americans, yet they are neat and clean and care for themselves and their families. As a socialistic country, the Cuban government provides education and health care for all of its citizens. Most everyone works for the government operated businesses, which includes the educators and the health care providers. Wages are low, and so is the cost of living. The government operates stations in each community (called a “Bodega”) which provides the basics for living. Everyone receives rationing stamps which allow them to purchase beans, ham, coffee, powdered milk, eggs, sugar, salt, flour, rice, cooking oil, etc. for extremely cheap prices. The availability of most products is inconsistent. Because of the US embargo, certain products that we take for granted are very limited or unobtainable—like milk, toothpaste, soaps, shampoos, and body lotions.

At the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Cuban people suffered when their only trading partners disappeared. In 1995, the first joint venture in Havana to build a Melia Hotel started Cuba on the road to a more tourism-oriented, free-enterprise system. Today, many nice hotels and resorts operate on the island and provide more employment opportunities for the Cuban people. Not all restaurants are now owned by the government; locals are now permitted to operate restaurants in their homes (called paladares). In addition to the infrequent public bus services (call Gua-Gua), owners of cars or trucks can now provide transportation (taxi or bus) services using their own vehicles. Some have modified their truck beds to be able to seat up to 20 people (many with canvas or metal covers) to provide transportation between the 15 different Provinces on the Island. Of course, the horse-drawn carts can make the shorter trips more affordable. Straw markets are very popular around the town squares and at entrances to main attractions. They are selling locally made shirts, shoes, hats and trinkets. Many pieces of canvas

art, carvings, and jewelry are readily available.



Cubans are a proud and respectful people with a history of survival. I cherish the opportunity to experience this culture, meet the people, learn the history, see the cities, and enjoy the Cuban experience.
