

Impressions from Cuba

Cuba and Road Scholar

In early 2013 we were fortunate to stumble on to the fact that Road Scholar was running week-long trips to Cuba. The prospect of going to Cuba was intriguing because we believe the U.S. embargo that has been in place for 50 years will be lifted soon, which will result in a flood of American tourists. This was an opportunity to see the island before the flood. We knew something of Road Scholar, formerly called Elder Hostel, because of a language camp we attended some years ago in Bemidji, Minnesota.

As we understand it, last year the U.S. began issuing annual licenses for educational trips to American tour operators. Apparently, the government discovered that many of the operations were running conventional sightseeing tours with an educational element tacked on. As a result, many of the licenses were not renewed for this year. Road Scholar's license was renewed because all of their tours, regardless of destination, have a strong educational element.

Over the winter and early spring, Road Scholar has been running two trips to Cuba per week, one starting in Havana and going to Cienfuegos, a city on the south coast, and the other starting in Cienfuegos and heading to Havana. We were fortunate to get a place in one of the tours after a couple of weeks on a waiting list. We flew from Miami to Cienfuegos where we spent three days taking day trips in the southern coastal area before heading to Havana for another three days. Our group members agreed we liked the idea of starting in the smaller city and countryside before heading to Havana.

Our group, which stayed together for the entire time, consisted of 22 people plus Martin Crossland, our Road Scholar group leader, a relatively new Chinese bus with driver and Magaley, our guide from Havana Tours, the government tour monopoly. Married couples made up half the group and women traveling with a friend the other half. Ages ranged from the 50s to 94.

The program was very well planned and organized. Martin did an outstanding job. Magaley was good but seemed to be a little constrained as to what she could say. Overall, everything about the program was better than we expected including the two hotels, the food, the bus and the educational stops. Road Scholar's literature indicated tips would be included in the fee we paid. We were pleasantly surprised to learn that even tips for the housekeeping maid were included as Martin passed out cash on the evening before we were to leave each hotel.



The Cuban People

All of the Cubans we met were friendly and had no animosity toward Americans, although they do not like the American embargo, which they call a blockade. The people all appeared to be well fed and some could even use a few weeks on Weight Watchers. Almost all seemed to be uniformly poor; there didn't appear to be an upper class to envy.

Each family has a ration book with which they can buy certain basic items at very low prices. Rice and eggs were two of the items I recall from the rather short list of things available. The amounts allowed are not enough to sustain a person for a whole month so they have to get more food from other sources at higher prices.

Crime

While we were in a group most of the time, we had no concerns for safety. Magaly pointed out a street we should avoid at night on just one occasion. We were told there are no gangs in Cuba and graffiti was refreshingly absent,

The Food

We were fed very well throughout the trip. Menu selections for lunch and dinner were mainly pork, chicken or fish. The chicken was always dark meat. I have a feeling the chicken was imported, with the legs and thighs coming to Cuba and the breasts going to someone willing to pay more. For some reason, beef was seldom served. Rice was included with most meals.

While fish was often a choice, it was almost always a single species. For a country surrounded by the sea, one would think that fish would be their main meat. However, someone suggested that most of those who had access to a fishing boat had taken it to Miami. In our travels we did see very few boats and no fishing boats.

The Cars

One of our first impressions was of the vintage cars we see in magazines. After Castro came to power in 1959, the importation of American cars ended. The Cubans have done an excellent job of keeping the Fords, Chevys and other models from about 1950 through 1958 looking good and running, some being used every day as taxis. The old cars amount to about a quarter of the cars on the road. Many of the rest are drab Russian models from the 1960s, 70s and 80s. We saw just a handful of late model cars at the Havana airport that were available as rentals.



We took a ride in the '56 Chevy taxi.

Public Transportation

Most Cubans do not own a car so traffic is light even in Havana during rush hour. We saw a few older variegated buses in Havana filled to standing room capacity. In other towns and the countryside people get around by hitchhiking, taking a horse-drawn taxi or riding in old trucks that have been converted to buses.

In the countryside, the view from our bus was mostly of paved but very bumpy two lane roads. We saw a lot of brush-covered land indicating it hadn't been farmed for years. There were a few pastures with a couple dozen cattle and very few fields that were clearly being farmed.



Three modes of public transportation: An old Russian taxi, a bicycle with two seats for passengers, and a horse-drawn wagon

Housing

Every one of Cuba's 11 million people have a place to live since being homeless is illegal. Houses in the small towns are small, mostly made of cement block and shoddy looking. Almost all were in need of some repair and a paint job, something that isn't likely to happen until the economy improves since a gallon of paint costs about half the average person's monthly income.

We saw a number of apartment buildings outside Havana built in the ugly Russian box style. Most homes and every apartment building has a way to store water since they get water only every other day.

Our group toured two homes, a typical one in which most Cubans live and one of a middle class family.

The typical home was located in the middle of Trinidad, a town of about 1,000 near Cienfuegos. There were neighbors just a few feet away on both sides. The house was small, maybe 400 square feet, with two bedrooms, a small kitchen and living room with a porch along the back. The furniture was sparse. For example, the living room had two straight-back chairs and an old TV. The cooking stove in the kitchen was a one-burner hotplate. A green Russian made clothes washer was on the back porch. A wringer washer like mom used to have would have been a huge improvement over this contraption. The 76-year old lady of the house said the best Russian product she had gotten was a clothes iron which was a big improvement over the charcoal iron it replaced.



Shown here: One of two bedrooms, the lady of the house with her Russian-made clothes washer, and the pig being raised in a backyard shed. We were told the pig is a pregnant sow and when the litter is weaned all but one of the piglets will be sold and she will be butchered. The family will then start over with the remaining piglet.

The middle class home was in a suburb of Havana. The current occupants were a couple and their 29-year old daughter who was the spokesperson for the family. The daughter's English was excellent; she majored in English and French at the university. After graduating from a university, students are required to work for three years in any job the government assigns. This girl was given six choices of jobs, none of which was attractive. She took a job with the railroad where she was to teach English to workers who had no interest in the subject. It sounded as though her pay in this job was really low, about \$15 per month! Happily, after three years and working through several bureaucratic hurdles, she landed a job with Havana Tours. Here the work is more interesting and the pay is a little better plus she earns tips in foreign currencies.

The family got the house from the girl's grandfather, a pediatrician who was given the house by the government in the 1970s as encouragement to move from central Havana to this suburb. The house was also his clinic.

The girl's father owns a automobile wheel alignment business with his brother, a business they got from their father. You can imagine that with all the old cars and the bumpy roads, this would be a very good business. The family has a car, a 1970s Russian model handed down from the doctor. Since the car is not dependable, the father rides his bicycle to work, which is 20 miles away. This is actually exercise for him since he does bicycle racing as a hobby.





The middle class house was clean but small and sparsely furnished by American standards. The kitchen had a small refrigerator and stove. The living room had two chairs and a TV. There was a second floor which the daughter said she was remodeling into an apartment for herself. The highlight was a very nice patio out back shown here.

Communist Cuba

Shortly after the successful revolution in 1959, almost all property and industry was nationalized. Today, the government owns 80% of all businesses from hotels and restaurants, to whatever industrial plants they have, to Havana Tours.

Farmland was also nationalized but the government appears to have done a very poor job of managing it. We heard that half the arable land in Cuba is idle and overgrown in brush, and that coffee and rice, which used to be export products are now being imported. While sugar could be an export product, most of the sugar mills were dismantled in the 1960s.



The farm equipment we did see appeared to be old and worn out. The Russian tractors were particularly pathetic.

Russia was undoubtedly gleeful to have a communist country so close to the U.S. and they gave Cuba foreign aid priority over their other satellite countries. The economic collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s was devastating for Cuba. With the loss of Russian subsidies, Cuba's GDP fell by 30% overnight. The Cubans call the 1990s "The Special Period" and universally agree life was very hard. There were food shortages and electrical blackouts for 12 to 14 hours at a time.

The Special Period might have been a blessing in disguise since the government could no longer support the people and was forced to allow some private enterprise. Today, average income from the government is just \$25 per month but it seems most people find various ways to supplement that. We saw roadside stands of various kinds and tiny shops in private homes, all of which were illegal prior to the Special Period. After a couple of false starts doomed by too many taxes and too much regulation, paladars, privately-operated restaurants, are now springing up everywhere. We were told more paladars opened in the last six months than had opened in the previous six years.

On the last day of our tour, our group experienced an interesting comparison between a paladar and a government-run restaurant. Lunch was at a 50-seat paladar outside Havana. The food was good and the service was excellent. The owner spent his time with us, taking our orders, answering our questions and directing his staff. Then, in the evening, we went to a government-run restaurant in Havana. This was to be our special farewell dinner. The place was nice with linen table cloths, the wait staff wore jackets and ties and there was a jazz trio playing nearby. However, the food was only o.k. – most people who ordered fish did not finish it – and the service was inattentive. In this case, private enterprise was the clear winner.

The Money

Cuba's currency situation is complicated and confusing. Citizens use the Cuban peso which has a value of about 24 to the dollar. To avoid having to deal in dollars, the government created another currency referred to as the CUC (pronounced *cook*) and set the value roughly equal to the dollar. Foreigners are required to convert their currency into CUCs. The Euro and Canadian dollar are converted at face value. For the American dollar, the Cuban government charges 13% to convert to CUCs and another charge, I think 3%, to convert excess CUCs back to dollars. Shops and stores accept either pesos or CUCs but not both. Stores with the best merchandise, such as TVs, washers and dryers, accept only CUCs. The best jobs in Cuba are those in which tips can be earned in CUCs, such as taxi driver or tour guide.



Elegant dining on the porch of a paladar.

The prices we paid in CUCs were approximately equal to American prices. For example, we took a 15 minute taxi ride for six CUCs. The one dinner we bought on our own was about 40 CUCs per person.

Health Care and Education

Nothing is free for the Cuban people except basic health care, basic medicines and education, from elementary school through university. To sustain these free services, the government spends almost nothing in other areas, such as road repair.

Basic health care is available everywhere through small clinics staffed by one doctor and, maybe, one nurse. Basic medicines are available in small, sparsely-stocked pharmacies. While the basics are free, we heard nothing about advanced health care, such as cancer treatment or surgeries, and wonder if it is available at all. The government pay for doctors is very low. We heard of one doctor who supplements his income by driving a taxi for CUCs and of other doctors who go to Venezuela to earn more.



Basic medicines are free at Pharmacies like this.

As all governments know, if you subsidize something, you get more of it. With subsidized university education, it appears Cuba has plenty of university graduates but is lacking meaningful jobs for them while the country appears to be short of plumbers and other tradesmen.

Buildings in Havana

Buildings in Havana, a city of 2.2 million people, have stood as-is since the revolution in 1959. This means there has been no urban renewal so the old buildings are still there, waiting to be restored. The bad news is they are in such bad repair that an average of three per day collapse, sometimes on top of the occupants. There is some restoration being done but at such a slow rate it would take decades to get to all the buildings in need of attention. Buildings in the rest of the country are in equally bad repair.



This is the only construction crane we saw during our time in Cuba.

Politics

Cuba's one political party is the communist party. It appears that, as with other communist countries, dissent is not permitted and there is no free press.

It was interesting that we saw about 20 images of Edwardo Che Guevara for each one of Castro. Che was an Argentinean doctor who fought with Castro during the revolution and held several key government positions before leaving for Bolivia in 1967. He was killed there, allegedly by CIA-backed Bolivians. It sounds as though Che was very charismatic and popular in Cuba and probably could have won an election against Castro had he tried. Apparently, Che was opposed to Castro's plan to throw in with the Russians. Someone said that when Che told Castro of his plan to go to Bolivia, Castro offered to drive him to the airport.



The other image we saw a lot was of five men being held in an American prison. Cubans call them heroes. We call them spies.



The Future

In their dealings with the U.S., both countries have made mistakes. For Cuba, throwing in with the Russians was a mistake as was poking Uncle Sam in the eye at every opportunity. For the U.S., keeping Cuba on the list of terrorist countries seems unnecessary as does maintaining the embargo.

The embargo will undoubtedly be lifted in the next few years, perhaps after Castro dies and his brother Raul turns the presidency over to a successor. While the country has been open to Canadians and Europeans since 1959, they have not spent enough in Cuba to make a difference. When the Americans start coming in numbers, Cuba will have a chance to revitalize itself, although according to one American I spoke with who is married to a Cuban, it will take them 20 years to get their infrastructure up to date.

For more information, there was a very good article in National Geographic Magazine recently. It can be found at <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/11/new-cuba/gorney-text>

Our Recommendation

We wholeheartedly recommend Road Scholar for any touring-type travel, both domestic and international. We also recommend going to Cuba if you can. You will undoubtedly find it as interesting as we did.

John & Sandra O'Reilly

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