

Cuba: Going While the Going is Good

LuAnn and I returned last Saturday from a long-anticipated weeklong tour of Cuba. If you have ever thought of visiting it someday, stop reading right now and get it booked. Really, I'll wait.

Done? Good, you won't regret it.

There are several reasons for urgency; the most pressing of which is that every good hotel room in Cuba (about 35,000 total) is already booked for the next two years, largely by tour companies. There just aren't that many available.

The second reason is that relations with Cuba are pretty good right now, since the Obama administration announced its intent to ease sanctions a few months ago. But there's no telling how long that might last or what future administrations might do.

Finally, if good relations do endure, the country will rapidly lose its innocent charm after the infrastructure is in place for it to be overwhelmed by American tourists. But that won't happen any time soon because there are a lot of hoops to be jumped first.

Cuba is very close and easy to visit; once the infrastructure is in place to handle throngs of cruise ships and American visitors, I expect it will rival major Mexican destination resorts. For years it has been part of the "Canadian Caribbean," and those darn Canadians are literally eating our lunch(es) there. They comprise over 80% of the tourists with more than 730,000 visits last year – no other country had more than 100,000.

America is limping along at fewer than 50,000 visitors annually. Even that paltry total is only because in 2011 the Obama administration resumed allowing "people-to-people" cultural visits, which can be offered only by travel companies that have obtained a license from the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control.

These certified tour agencies focus almost exclusively on cultural interfaces. Although Cuba evidently has wonderful coastal resorts, beaches, and coral reefs, we didn't see any of those. In fact, the only article of clothing I didn't wear during the week we were there was my swimsuit (despite perfect weather and a nice hotel swimming pool) – there was always something better to do.

What we *did* visit were historical sites, schools and universities, gardens, art studios, galleries, churches, museums, housing projects, community centers, farms and public markets, all of which involved conversations (often through an interpreter) with locals.

English is common anywhere tourists typically go, probably thanks to the Canadians as well as our own distant history there. Dollars roughly equal the Cuban convertible pesos, minus an exchange fee that is not applied to Canadian dollars. Almost all American appliances can work in the electrical outlets, occasionally needing a cheap adapter. The people are genuinely friendly, not Cancun-fake-friendly. There are the usual hucksters and panhandlers, but not hordes.

If the U.S. ever gets to the point that its citizens can go to Cuba on their own, it's convenient that bed and breakfasts actually outnumber hotel rooms in the smaller cities. We visited a charming one in Trinidad I'd have stayed at in a minute.

We attended a seminar given by a world-renowned Cuban economist, who has difficulty flying anywhere due to all Cubans' current technical U.S. status as terrorists (soon to be rescinded). He gave a PowerPoint talk he said he had altered three times in the previous week due to how quickly the changes are happening. He told us that because of our agenda, after our week was up, we'd have a better understanding of the Cuban situation than almost every member of Congress.

One of our tour guides – a muscular man in his 50's – said he wept when he heard the news of the U.S. negotiating to lift the embargo, which he has lived under his entire life. I am oddly encouraged by the fact that the heads of both countries' negotiation teams are women.

None of the locals we met can understand why their closest neighbor with which they have so much in common can overlook the political “deficiencies” (my word) in other countries it trades with but not its own.

Cuba seems to be getting along just fine without us, although it would much rather be getting along better *with* us. Many commodities are scarce because of it, but Cubans are experts at scrounging and improvising. Modern (including some American) luxury goods are available, but usually overpriced and out of reach of most Cubans.

Last October, the 193-nation U.N. General Assembly voted for the 23rd consecutive year to condemn the decades-long U.S. economic embargo against Cuba with only the U.S. and Israel dissenting. It is one of very few issues where all of Washington's Western allies part ways with the United States.

I defy anyone who believes that the embargo should be retained to actually go there. Oddly, a slim majority of ex-Cubans in the U.S. who arguably know Cuba the best (but harbor a grudge?) still support the embargo, but that percentage is falling. The rest of the world figured it out long ago - it's a fascinating country with remarkable history, culture, and people. The streets are cluttered with Chinese tour buses and Korean rental cars, as visitors come from all over the globe.

Which brings up another point – everywhere you look in Cuba, you see opportunities for American goods and services. They are currently being provided (usually haphazardly) by dozens of other nations. I wouldn't mind access to their Havana Club rum and Bucanero beer in the states, either.

An example of a chronic shortage would be toilet paper, which was found only at hotels and upscale restaurants. When using a public restroom, a few squares could be purchased from the attendant for the equivalent of 25 or 50 cents. Kleenex was not to be found anywhere – we were forewarned about this and stole a roll of toilet paper from our Miami hotel before arriving in Cuba that lasted almost the entire week.

Particularly vexing for the women on our tour was an inexplicable and almost total lack of toilet seats in bathrooms outside of our hotels – we didn't find one in

place until the fourth day we were there. At one restaurant we found toilet paper, a toilet seat, running water and a sliver of soap, so there were high fives all around. No way to dry your hands, though.

Cuba is a land of bizarre contrasts. The last thing I expected to hear and see upon first entering the Havana airport was a Taylor Swift video blasting from two large flat panel TVs above the immigration lines. This is the same airport that has no toilet seats, paper, or soap in its restrooms.

For some reason it's necessary to fill out a medical form to enter Cuba, and the wording is such that anyone with a common cold would be denied. Our guide said, "If you want to go to Cuba you will answer "No" to all the questions and be sure not to cough or sneeze when you hand your form to the nurse at Immigration."

Another contrast was the availability of food for tourists versus what could be found in local markets and stores. Our Havana hotel, the Parque Central, had a breakfast buffet that would rival most large cruise ships. There were even open bottles of sparkling wine at the juice bar. The stores we saw that were for locals – especially those that took rationing cards – looked like general stores out of Mayberry or Green Acres.

There are a number of public squares in Old Havana, and in the middle of one of them was a ten-foot-tall bronze sculpture of a bald naked woman wearing high heels, holding a huge fork and riding a rooster. Our Cuban guide said, "I can't explain this."

We also visited the Che Guevara mausoleum and museum in Santa Clara, Cuba. Che has the same (or greater) reverence in Cuba that Abe Lincoln has in the U.S. I had always assumed that Che and Fidel were a couple of marginally-educated guerilla fighters hiding out in the mountain ranges, but it turns out that Che received a medical degree from the University of Buenos Aires and Fidel had a law degree from the University of Havana.

Havana, at first glance, looks like a run-down city. About 80% of its buildings need a fresh coat of paint, if not serious structural repairs. There are indeed a number of 40s and 50's era U.S. vehicles still in service. It wasn't uncommon for us to see

a late 50's Chevy that somehow now has a Diesel engine. But we estimated their proportion at less than 25% of the total, with most barely in running condition but many fully restored. Older foreign cars comprised about 50% and cars under 5 years old (mostly taxis) about 25%.

Due largely to harsh penalties for wrongdoing, there is little crime in Cuba and the streets are relatively safe for tourists. One day LuAnn and I walked by a woman seated in front of the main elevators at our Havana hotel. She was carefully counting the three stacks of currency on the table in front of her, completely oblivious to the dozens of people passing by.

Surprisingly, we saw very few uniformed law enforcement or military presence of any kind, and no rifles at all. I honestly believe you'll see more uniformed law-enforcement officials in Iowa than in Cuba during a typical week.

But remember, almost everything we were exposed to was approved by the Cuban government, which meant the tour encompassed the best and brightest. Even so, we had a fair amount of free time to spend walking the streets of Havana, and locals were not hesitant to express their opinions.

Contrary to what I assumed, the average Cuban didn't seem to feel particularly oppressed by their government. They receive free education, health care and food (although rationed). One of our guides confessed that he was content and grateful for the additional freedoms Cubans were receiving under Raul Castro, although (after glancing over both shoulders) he said he also looks forward to the time when leadership will have "new blood."

As you might expect, rum is everywhere and very inexpensive – we could buy a 375ml bottle for less than \$3US. "Vitamin R" our tour guide called it. All lunches and dinners at the state-owned restaurants began with the "national drink," usually a mojito, and was often accompanied by a "welcome drink," usually beer, rum and cola, wine or sangria. Good luck if you're a teetotaler.

Normally, by the time dinner was over and it was time to go to a club or jazz café for more intense "cultural immersion" most of us had already had at least five drinks in us. After dinner our final evening in Havana, some of us went to the Tropicana to experience their floor show. Our seats cost \$80US and included a

cigar, a glass of champagne, cans of the local cola and two 750ml bottles of rum to be split between the five at our table.

Despite a valiant effort to finish the rum, there was a half-bottle remaining that we used to tip the taxi driver on the return trip to our hotel. It was a long flight home the next day.