

Visiting Cuba is an eye-opener

By Craig F. Eisenbeis
Columnist

International relations are always something of a puzzle, but none seems so peculiar as the relationship between the United States and Cuba. These two close neighbor nations, with quite a bit in common, have been awkwardly estranged for more than 60 years.

When the Trump Administration announced that the Obama-era easing of Cuba restrictions was about to end, my wife, Kathi, and I decided that if we wanted to see Cuba, we had better do something about it. So, before the changes could go into effect, we arrived in Havana.

Under the rules of our visit, U.S. citizens were permitted entry to Cuba only for certain activities. In our case, the trip was contingent on participating in at least one "educational" activity. To comply with that requirement, on our first day we selected a promising excursion to Las Terrazas, a kibbutz-like eco-community about 50 miles west of Havana.

Cuba has a tropical climate, with similar vegetation to what might be expected in Hawaii. What we encountered at La Terrazas was a small, scenic, bucolic community surrounded by a beautiful, lush, tropical forest. To explain what happened there, however, requires a little historical context.

Prior to the Communist takeover in 1959, Cuba was under the dictatorial Batista regime. Fulgencio Batista had variously controlled or manipulated the Cuban government since the 1930s; but, faced with certain election defeat in 1952, he negated the election by simply seizing power in a military coup.

With the support of the U.S. government, U.S. businesses, and the Mafia, Batista's principal goal was increasing his own wealth; and the gap between Cuba's poor and the wealthy became ever greater. In the process of lining his own

pockets in a quagmire of corruption, Batista horribly exploited Cuba's natural resources, including the logging of vast forests, like those in what would become Las Terrazas.

Batista's exploitation left thousands of acres of completely denuded, clearcut landscape. Photos that we saw of the desolation resembled lunar landscapes. In 1968, the Cubans launched a reforestation project, which began with the establishment of a small commune in the area.

The first phase of the forest rehabilitation was completed in 1971. The terraces (las terrazas), for which the community was named, were cut into the hills to limit erosion and speed reforestation. Today, this dense, diverse tropical forest is part of a designated UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, artist community, and tourist destination.

Generally, the people of Cuba are quite poor. Housing that we saw in Havana and elsewhere is often barely habitable, and many buildings are literally crumbling. Façades are falling away, with bare, broken concrete and rebar showing. People often live in apartments built deeper into the disintegrating structures.

The average wage here is about \$30 per month, and food rations are likely to last for only half of each month; so extra income is necessary, with the tourist trade being the brightest option. On the plus side, all medical care and education are provided.

Cubans blame the extreme poverty and lack of an economy on the U.S. embargo of the island. Cuba's people desperately want better relations with the U.S., not only for economic reasons; but it is estimated that 90% of Cubans have relatives in the U.S.

The people we encountered were very friendly. Gender and race appear not to be issues in this nation, and 55 percent of the current National Assembly is female.

The Communist government drastically altered the country's for-profit health care system, eventually creating free health care for all its citizens. Life expectancy in Cuba is actually slightly higher than in the U.S., as is the literacy rate.

The Cuban government touts its health care as among the best in the world. Because of the trade embargoes, a primary export is health care. Tens of thousands of Cuban-educated physicians now work abroad, with their salaries reciprocated by host countries in the form of cash and trade goods for the Cuban government.

Cuba's economy is dominated by state-owned



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN EISENBEIS

Although clean and hospitable, downtown Havana has an infrastructure that is literally crumbling.

enterprises, which employ most of the work force. Prices, wages, and rations are regulated by the government. Cuba's human rights record is not good; but, as recent events have shown us, they are not alone.

Casinos and the Mafia were eliminated after the revolution, U.S. owned

businesses were nationalized, and the corruption-based economy was ended. Those factors, coupled with the adoption of a communist economy, led to the sweeping economic restrictions the U.S. placed on Cuba. Upon examination, the

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Food Cart Garden at Eurosports Trivia Night 5:30 to 6:15 p.m. Family-friendly trivia. Socially-distant. Free. For additional information call Eurosports at 541-549-2471.

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JUL 29 WED **Black Butte Ranch Live Music with Julie Southwell and Friends** 6 to 8 p.m. Socially distant on the lawn near The Lakeside Bistro. For information call 541-595-1282 or go online to www.blackbutteranch.com.

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Paulina Springs Books Virtual Event Books In Common Regional Literary Event Series with Steve Olson and Sharma Shields 6:30 p.m. A conversation about their new books. For more info call 541-549-0866 or go to BooksInCommonNW.com.

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