

CUBA

IN TRANSITION

Snapshot of a moving target

Sylvia Hart Wright is a longtime Eugene activist, author and retired professor. She visited Cuba to observe a country on the verge of diplomatic and economic change.

At first glance, Cuba doesn't quite seem like a developed nation but it's not exactly Third World either. In Havana, even off the tourist track, there tends to be air conditioning and indoor plumbing, and ordinary people in public places look healthy and reasonably well fed. True, most of the cars whizzing past are battered relics of the 1950s but, thanks to Cuban resourcefulness, they're still running — often powered by a newer Toyota or Soviet-era engine hidden under the hood.

Cuba is fun. There's plenty of music, sometimes in unexpected places — usually featuring guitars playing the sensual dance music called salsa — plus lots of local rum, inviting beaches and an abundance of cultural events and nightspots. Shopping is limited by American restrictions on what tourists can bring back to the states. At last report, most goods brought back, limited to no more than \$400 worth, have to be primarily “educational materials” like posters, books, postcards and paintings. A hundred dollars' worth of rum and cigars is permitted but many apparently innocent things like T-shirts are forbidden. For years, tourists from other countries, mostly Canada, have gotten to buy things that Americans could not.

You rarely see beggars. If you've rambled around the Third World as I have, you're only too familiar with the sight of skinny, raggedly dressed, barefoot kids, stunted by malnutrition and endemic disease, begging from any American who passes by. But when I visited Cuba on a recent trip, I never saw anything like that. In Kenya, when I traveled there years ago with a friend in the Peace Corps, he wouldn't let me wear my backpack on my back. “Hang it in front and hold onto it,” he advised me. “Thieves slit them open and help themselves to the contents.” I've gotten similar advice from old hands in more desperate parts of Latin America. But before I visited Cuba this past September, everyone assured me that Cuba was safe, safer than Miami.

At that time American credit cards couldn't be used in Cuba so, like many of my companions on this “people-to-people” delegation authorized by the U.S. government and organized by a nonprofit organization active in Latin America called Witness for Peace, I turned over much of my cash to our group leader for safekeeping. Then I stashed my walking-around money in my fanny pack, confident that no street criminal would contrive to snatch it off me.

Still money dealings, like many other aspects of life in this sunny country, are complicated — maybe uniquely so. “*No es facil*” (it's not easy) is a local byword. Tourists and local people use two different types of currency. Tourists use CUCs, short for Cuban Convertible Pesos, while Cubans use the “general peso.”

A CUC costs a little more than \$1. But there's no plausible exchange rate between the CUC and the peso. For instance, a ration book issued by the Castro regime to subsidize its citizens entitles a Cuban shopping at a government store to buy a month's allotment of staple foods for a family of four for the supposed peso equivalent of two CUCs — less than \$3 U.S. This includes a moderate supply of rice, beans, cooking oil, sugar, coffee, some meat, vegetables and fruit. (Shoppers can use additional pesos to buy more at other stores or directly from the farmers who produce them.) Meanwhile, one pound of unremarkable cheese from Poland — dairy products are in short supply — cost me two CUCs at a privately run store.

Since many products are unaffordable prices with general pesos, many Cubans are eager to obtain American dollars or CUCs by dealing directly with tourists — driving a cab or working in a fashionable restaurant or hotel. The government provides some (reportedly dreary) hotels and restaurants, but Airbnb accommodations in people's homes

and privately run and owned restaurants called *paladares* are growing in number, often run by local women. But odd problems trouble Cuba's Communist government with its concern for equality and basic services for all.

Before Fidel Castro took over, all blacks were barred from the University of Havana. Today education is free for all Cubans from pre-school to trade school or university, and the nation has one of the highest literacy rates in the world. High quality, free medical care is available to all, but limited by shortages of supplies caused by the 55-year-old U.S. embargo on exports to Cuba and, indirectly, through an American system of high fines and prohibitions imposed on other nations, international banks and corporations which did business with Cuba.

Before I left the states, Witness for Peace sent me a list of “suggested donations” we might bring with us: simple school supplies, personal care products, first aid and over-the-counter meds, and more specialized medicines and medical supplies. We were also advised to bring along flashlights, extension cords or similar low-tech items which we might have use for on this trip.

In spite of the embargo, life expectancy in Cuba is about as high as that in the U.S.: roughly 78 for men and 80 for women. Since “the triumph of the revolution” in 1959, life for Cuba's least privileged citizens has greatly improved. But Cuba's racial mix has changed drastically and, despite the nation's egalitarian policies, darker-skinned people of color are still particularly likely to be poor. Recent history helps account for this.

In 1959, when Fidel and his guerilla army liberated the nation from its hated dictator, Fulgencio Batista, there were 6.9 million Cubans. Sixty percent of the land was owned by American corporations and another 20 percent of its economy was dependent on American money, primarily arriving via the tourist trade. Cuban beaches and *joie de vivre*, expressed by popular Afro-Cuban music and dance, were strong lures. But so were gambling in Mafia-run casinos and prostitution — virtually the only career, aside from work as a domestic, then open to poor girls aiming to leave the countryside.

At that time the population was about two-thirds white. Since then, despite its much-publicized out-migration, Cuba's population has risen to well over 11 million, and the ethnic balance has tipped from majority-white to majority-brown. Reports from nationsonline.org and factover.com, among others, say Cubans today are 51 percent mulatto or mestizo, 37 percent white, 11 percent black and 1 percent Chinese. So what happened?

From the start, a whopping 96 percent of all Cubans who emigrated to the U.S. after Castro took over were white. They tended to be more prosperous and privileged. Much of their wealth had been invested in land and real estate — but one of the first things the revolutionaries did was expropriate great tracts of land and limit each household to no more than two homes. This infuriated the wealthy while it made lots of *other* Cubans happy. Today, 85 percent of the population own their own homes (some are apartments). No doubt millions of renters who suddenly became owners were delighted and their gratitude strengthened their support of the new government. But other, unintended consequences flowed from this transformation.

The Cubans who moved to the U.S. after being shorn of assets turned their bitterness against the Castro administration into a secular religion. They became a significant force in Florida politics and the Republican Party.

Beneficiaries of the emigrés' land and residences started having more children. A population explosion on the island ensued — but only for a while. Now the birth rate in this country where contraceptives and abortion are readily available is one of the lowest in the world.

As years turned into decades, the condition of the housing stock deteriorated. Given the