

Cuba: 'go see it now before it changes'

Continued from Page 1A

While many residents are too poor to maintain their homes, the buildings and streets are clean.

"It's clean, and there is absolutely no graffiti. No graffiti," Wheeler said. "Isn't that wonderful? They have their morals."

As ambassadors, people on the trip were asked to bring gifts for the people they visited in Cuba, Wheeler said.

"The average Cuban citizen makes between \$250 and \$300 per month, so out of that, they have to pay for their transportation, food and their clothing," Wheeler said. "They don't have freezers and they don't have refrigerators because they are too expensive for them to have, so they have to go to the market every day."

But so are the tourists, and here is one place that Wheeler sees an emerging conflict. She said the market owners see an opportunity to make more money off tourists and mark up prices. The tourists buy the best produce.

"What is left is inferior product, and who buys it? The local people," she ex-

plained. "And what happens to the price? The price goes up, so that is the problem that they have."

She added that government-run stores are often depleted or have just a few items for sale.

Cubans may be resource poor, but they are culture rich. Wheeler said she was impressed many times over with the art, music and food.

"Music is all around. People are whistling and singing. There's always music," she said.

She said Cubans seemingly can turn anything into art. People make art of recycled coffee pots, build sculptures covered in bright tile, and paint gigantic murals, Wheeler said.

Then there is the rum — Wheeler said it's referred to as "Vitamin R" — and she couldn't resist indulging in a daiquiri on occasion. On one of her free afternoons, she went to Ernest Hemingway's favorite bar, La Floridita, for lunch.

The American writer is something of a national hero to Cubans. His estate has been turned into a museum, at which visitors can get a glimpse of how he lived his life there, complete with his

library and typewriter.

The frosty U.S.-Cuban relationship reaching back decades didn't seem to influence how Wheeler and her travel companions were treated.

"One man came up to a woman in our group and grabbed her by the arm and started singing our national anthem, in English," Wheeler said. "That's their attitude towards America. They are very open to Americans. I didn't see hostility."

What she experienced instead was incredible kindness.

"I just truly love the Cubans. Their music is just unbelievable," Wheeler said. "The history is so rich. The people and the food. I can't say enough. It's a wonderful place to visit."

Wheeler recommends people interested in traveling there learn as much as they can about Cuba and its history before going. She said she wants to go back in about five years to see how it's changed, but for those who haven't seen it, the time is now.

"It's just a place that people need to go see, and go see now before it changes," Wheeler said.



JANET WHEELER /for the Itemizer-Observer

The ocean view from Janet Wheeler's hotel room in Havana.



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Ernest Hemingway's typewriter is on display at his farm, now a museum.



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Modern tour buses share the roads with colorful classic cars.



JANET WHEELER /for the Itemizer-Observer

Men gather to play dominos on the street. They are surrounded by beautifully designed and painted buildings that have fallen into disrepair.



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People line up outside La Floridita. Ernest Hemingway's signature is shown on the outside of the bar. This was one of the author's favorite places in Cuba. Inside is a statue of him next to a photo of him and Fidel Castro.



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Besides classic cars, another form of transportation on the Cuban streets are "coconut cabs" or "coco cabs," named for their shape.



JANET WHEELER /for the Itemizer

Boats docked at a harbor in Cuba. Wheeler's time was split between planned group trips and sightseeing on her own or with friends.