

Cuba – Behind the Blockade

How to describe Cuba? Words like “charming” and “retro” splice easily with “bureaucratic” and “stagnant”. My recent honeymoon saw us spend four nights in what is not only a pleasant city for tourists but a country whose political problems give it a unique nature, and it is this uniqueness rather than the tourist travelogue that is most interesting. The balmy weather, cheap rum, cigars, Spanish-era Old Town and classic cars contrast with a visible poverty and a **sense of deliberate economic decay**. As with any dictatorship (this one made 8,000 political arrests last year), the tenor is set at the top; as it trickles through, it seems to strip people of their individualism and accountability. Everyone knows what the official line is, yet no-one can speak for it.



It started at the check-in for Cubana Airlines at Cancun airport. When travelling, one should always take idiosyncracies with a grain of salt and remember that we are guests in their country – if you’re going to get worked up by their ways, then don’t choose to travel there. I watched in mild amusement at the most **ramshackle and lengthy check-in process** I’d ever seen while noting the high number of consumer products passengers were taking for resale in Cuba – everything from microwaves to TVs to air-conditioners. A premium-class line was available – but aren’t all passengers equal under socialism? Perhaps they still are, as no-one used it, allowing the attendant to read a book rather than serve the waiting economy-class passengers.

The plane had no livery but was comfortable inside, though not stylish, and the 65-minute flight was uneventful. Havana airport clearly has been used for military purposes in the past and was fairly **unkempt and underutilised**. Airports are all about logistics and can give a few clues as to how well a country operates. The Havana luggage collection area was better than some I’ve seen - it had a conveyor belt - but we waited about 45 minutes before it started to move, and it stopped intermittently to the sound of grinding gears. Immigration was uneventful, though I noted the female Customs staff had a standard uniform of very tight, short skirts and intricate lace stockings. Was it to Mr Castro’s taste or did they hope to snag a wealthier foreigner as their ticket out of Cuba?

Cuba remains a very closed-off country – our mobile phones couldn’t pick up any networks and **money is particularly hard to access**. We had been warned not to rely on our Mastercard/Visa cards and had instead pre-paid our hotel and brought Euros to exchange. As it turned out, US dollars could be changed into the Cuban convertible currency (CUC) at the airport, with the CUC slightly **stronger**

than the USD (of course!). Tourists may only use CUCs; the domestic CUP currency is used by Cubans and cannot be converted. No doubt a **thriving black market** exists somewhere. Four burly secret-policemen in ill-fitting suits lounged around the exchange counter, keeping half an eye on proceedings. Having exchanged enough for our holiday (we hoped), we took a new Renault cab for the 40-minute drive to Havana.

Looking out the car window, **electricity and lighting were minimal** and the people seemed poor – not well-dressed and lounging around aimlessly. All private cars were dated from the 1940s and 1950s, had patchwork welding and spewed black smoke. What industry I did see seemed in a state of disrepair and the largest billboard declared “**Socialismo o Muerte**” (“Socialism or Death”).



We stayed at the Hotel Telegrafo, one of the premium hotels in Havana. Like the cars outside, it was **built in a different time** – a beautiful art-deco building with vast expanses of corridors and big rooms that would not survive a modern developer’s focus on yield per square foot. The main lift was out of order, the water went off one afternoon, and tissues were unavailable. Interestingly, a whole range of **US TV channels were available**, including 24/7 MTV – so the first song to blare through my open window and down the streets of anti-Yankee Havana was the US rapper DJ Khaled shouting, “All I Do Is Win”. The hotel staff were fairly friendly and responsive, and breakfast was held in an opulent dining room with live classical music –typical of a Communist country, great effort is taken to excel in certain areas while others are neglected entirely.

Now forget Jenny Craig, paleo diets or boot camps. If you want to lose weight, go to Cuba – the food ranges from **inedibly awful at worst** to disappointingly bland at best (the Chocolate Museum in the Old Quarter being a pleasant exception). The borders appear to have closed to spices and culinary trends as firmly as any other “contraband”. My Irish heritage is drawn to a potato, but not when it had the taste of soap (I’m not exaggerating). I briefly considered taking it back to my room, as we had run out of actual soap. On the upside, **they do make a very good rum cocktail**, and tours of rum and cigar factories are popular. Apparently Havana Club is like Fosters Beer – that’s the rubbish they export rather than drink – and the local Santiago de Cuba is one of the best I’ve ever tasted. Even better, a full bottle cost the equivalent of only 8 USD.



Cigar-rolling is done by hand in primitive factories that blare “news” (propaganda) over loudspeakers. To be a **cigar-roller is actually a prestigious role** which requires many years of training; to visitors from a developed economy it seemed like a punishment. Our presence in the factory was ignored but clearly not appreciated; despite being pre-booked our tour was only ad-hoc and appeared to be at the discretion of **someone unidentified but clearly paid off**. It was a dynamic I’ve seen in countries like Zimbabwe – where power is centralised and all officials are corrupt, the rules at ground level are made by whomever is bold enough to assert their authority following a process that resembles a poker game, with all the players eyeing each other off and trying to guess who holds which cards. But because **control is illegitimate and non-permanent**, the poker game never stops.

Havana is a pretty city and we were lucky to tour in a beautifully restored red and white 1954 Chevy – a car from the days when cars were designed to be beautiful. These are not the cars that most Cubans drive, however – the well-maintained cars are used for transporting high-paying tourists, not for personal use. **The streets are decently maintained** and traffic isn’t heavy, though the exhaust **fumes certainly are**. The famed seaside Malecon road is picturesque, though not on the land-side, where all the apartments are clearly old and not well-tended – almost **everything in Havana is dilapidated**.

Cuban Communism seems to have a **higher tolerance for “bourgeois”** past-times than other variants; rum, salsa dancing and beachgoing are popular. Girls celebrate their fifteenth birthdays by dressing in ball gowns, makeup and tiaras and having professional photo-shoots beachside or in the forest – perhaps it’s **impossible to entirely suppress Latin extravagance** (particularly among female Customs staff!) Surprisingly, religion was not suppressed **and places of worship abound** in the capital. My wife’s greeting of “Feliz Navidad” to our taxi driver at the airport was returned with delight, and Christmas trees and decorations were quite visible. Until the USSR fell in the 1990s, **Cuba was a welfare country**, relying entirely on Soviet aid. At this point Cuba was unable to feed or clothe its citizens and teetered on the brink of famine. In our guide’s words, “**people had nowhere to turn but God**” and churches responded, bringing food aid to the island. Apparently religion was tolerated since the Cuban Revolution; the depth of Christianity in Latin America made it impossible to eradicate although it was clearly not allowed to step outside certain bounds.

Cubans are now allowed to travel; my guide told me there are no restrictions from their own government, although the cost is high. **Awareness of the outside world is low**, internet access is expensive and slow, and the effects of propaganda in history education are clear. Our guide didn't understand the word "best", so I asked "what is numero uno thing for tourists in Havana?" "Numero Uno? **Numero Uno in Havana is Raul Castro!**" came the decisive reply. Later, I sensed a feeling of foreboding, even fear, when she described how Raul Castro has announced his retirement in 2017 but a successor has not been anointed. Officially, the task will be performed by their Congress (housed in a building resembling the US Capitol) but whether that will happen, and what the result will be were both unknown to our guide –and the prospect of something unpleasant filling the void was **clearly unsettling** to her.



Cuba has very little private industry, though **private businesses are allowed to form** in some sectors and must pay monthly permits. Some small cafes are housed in private homes that have varying and innovative menus and replace items they run out of. Otherwise, shops, hotels, restaurants and so on are all owned by the state, which shows in the level of service. The ultimate "**can't be fired, couldn't care less**" public sector mentality is on clear display. Even at a small local shop with its narrow range of Cuban-produced goods, I watched as an employee chatted on the landline telephone about baseball. Every few minutes he would cast a **desultory look at the throng of customers** waving cash over the counter and ask of one, "Si?" If you weren't quick enough or your order wasn't easily filled, he'd shake his head and turn back to the phone. His two colleagues stood chatting away, glad that their section had no customers and with **no desire to help**. Bored employees and impatient customers resigned to bad service – when the government is boss, there are zero incentives to produce and no accountability, leaving everyone worse off.

The newly-announced US Embassy was being prepared as we visited and changes are clearly afoot in Cuba. Foreign investment is slowly being sought, but it will long-remain a difficult country to invest in, with most **important sectors both government-controlled and decimated**. Even the sugar industry has not recovered and modernised, two and a half decades after the loss of free Soviet oil highlighted a need for agricultural reform. Cuba has potential and has many natural advantages, but it must first shed its authoritarian regime. The **low-hanging fruit for foreign investment** is obvious, but once it is permitted it will take quite some time and reassurance before investors can feel safe in

their property rights. Even more fundamentally, **a change of culture is required** among a people used not to working for themselves and to whom concepts of productivity, profit, contract and customer service are unfamiliar. The good news is that any economy can be turned around with the correct free-market principles and Cuba is no exception. In anticipation of a brighter future, may I say, "Viva La Cuba!"