

SNG-Reflections from crumbling Cuba-5-9-16

Reflections from crumbling Cuba

By Jim Nowlan

I just returned from two weeks in Cuba, and offer a few reflections from the land of Fidelismo.

Individual travel from the U.S. to Cuba is still technically prohibited, though American educational and professional groups may visit the island nation. Soon, I predict, American travel restrictions will be lifted, which will overwhelm the already strained hospitality resources of Cuba.

If you can withstand stressful long lines at entry and departure, it's well worth the effort.

[The Cubans we met are pleasant, helpful and handsome, often a caramel blend of Spanish and former slave black. The indigenous population was killed off by the conquistadores upon their arrival.]

My lady friend is a medical scientist at the Mayo Clinics. She was asked to give a paper in Cuba at an international conference. My cover for tagging along was to serve as her "research assistant."

After the conference, we traveled on our own all over big swaths of this verdant, tropical island nation of 11 million, which has roughly the land area of our state (with our 13 million people).

The Castros, Fidel and now "younger," 86-year-old brother Raul, have been in power since 1959. To their credit, decent health care is free for all, and youngsters, all in neatly pressed public school uniforms, receive good educations, I am told.

And nobody starves; each person is allotted some rice, beans and basics each month.

There is little crime, and I felt safe everywhere I went, even at night on narrow dark side streets off the beaten path in Old Havana.

And Fidel achieved his goal of communist equality—Everybody has nothing!

Summary observation, which won't surprise you: Communism and central planning don't work. Cuban gross domestic product per person is about \$5,300, or around one-tenth that in Illinois.

Cuba is stuck in the 1950s, or earlier.

Rural life is even more primitive than I expected. Farmers typically use horse and cart to get around. In the mountains, a horse-drawn wagon might carry 10-12 children home from school, quite a quaint site.

The few tractors I saw looked like clunky, 1950s vintage Soviet rejects, with probably less horsepower than a big lawnmower here. Water buffalo pulled one-bottom plows in a number of fields.

Livestock often appeared emaciated, ribs showing prominently. Some cattle and horses grazed on thin roadside grass, each tethered to a stake.

[The fruit was surprisingly bland and unappealing, the oranges full of seeds and lacking sweetness, for example.]

Across Cuba, some 75,000 pre-1959 American autos, mostly GM models, are critical to transport.

Friend and I rode, for example, in 1952 and '53 Chevrolet taxis that no longer had inside door handles or any functioning dashboard indicators (we held on for dear life), yet sported more recent Mitsubishi engines.

We shared our cab rides along established routes with four or five others, and paid the equivalent of \$1 each to ride many miles from our hotel into central Havana.

Old Havana, with its once magnificent 18th and 19th Century rococo Spanish architecture, has been crumbling since probably before the Castros, which almost brings tears to your eyes. Building balconies were sometimes propped up with timbers.

People have the legal right to *live* in their homes, but they don't *own*, nor can they sell, the structures. Thus there is no incentive to keep up outside appearances, which results in depressing streetscapes of unpainted house facades, plaster often falling away.

That's the fundamental problem—a lack of incentives in all facets of Cuban life.

All doctors, engineers and other professionals are paid \$20-25 a month by the government, for whom all work. Our taxi drivers were often doctors who could make more in tips from tourists in a couple of days than in a month of salary.

But change is coming. In the past year, Raul Castro has allowed private restaurants to open, often in a converted family home.

We dined a number of times at these “paladares,” which are already putting the government-operated eateries to shame. The lobster tails were always fresh, succulent and huge, at maybe \$10-15, and the cuisine often quite varied and sophisticated.

Households may now also offer tiny, but neat and clean, rooms for rent, which we tried a couple of nights. Ours had no window, but a shower and good breakfast of much fruit, eggs and toast.

The \$35 we paid per night represented huge money to the households.

We could feel the entrepreneurial spirit straining to burst free.

[Cruise ships are arriving next week for the first time, and soon there will be scheduled air service from the U.S.]

Nearly half of all Cuban tourists are from Canada, which has one-tenth of our U.S. population. When the floodgates are drawn open for Americans, the country will be overwhelmed at first. And its charms will be gone soon thereafter.

Old Fidel's passing, whenever, will trigger irresistible demands from young people, who yearn to breathe free, for opportunities to be rewarded for their enterprise, to earn real money, advance, travel and be part of the larger world.