

SILVER SPRING CUBA JOURNEY

A journey experiencing the selective glory of Cuba's checkered past, the real challenges of the precarious moment, and the uncertainties of the unknown future.

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FIRST DRAFT

This time it felt different.

It is easy to say that Cuba is a complicated place, but so is everywhere else.

Yes this time it felt different:

- More evidence of class differentiation. More beggars. More blackouts. More expensive and newer cars. More evidence of wealthy people.
- Less value of the peso. Less gasoline. Less people. Less affordability of food and everyday staples.

Doing the journey with 20 neighbors and friends was also different. Seeing Cuba through their eyes was exciting - and instructive. What a good group of folks!

We experienced so much warmth and genuine loving exchanges, particularly with our host families*, guide, driver and the organization that arranged the logistics, Alandis. (*We did not stay in hotels. We stayed with host families in their homes).

The focus of our journey on art and culture hit the mark. Cuban's passion for the arts was evident in all aspects of its culture. From high art at the theater to street art to beautiful galleries to music everywhere - Cuba excels.

The relatively new entrepreneurship spirit is alive and well - even in the face of an economic crisis, unprecedented migration, and an uneven regulatory environment.

We were fortunate to visit two faith communities, one a Jewish synagogue, the other a Catholic senior housing and support facility. Their work in both, directly helping the Cuban people and maintaining deep commitment to the faith, it's truly commendable. We were fortunate - thanks in part to other friends in Silver Spring that were unable to join us in the journey - to contribute financially to their work.

And yes, we had fun - lots of fun. We shared many meals together. We shared stories of what we discovered by happenstance or intentionally. We danced and played with the

music groups that accompanied almost every meal*. We went to the beach, a baseball game, walked and walked and walked. Fun indeed. (*We ate meals almost exclusively at restaurants owned and operated by entrepreneurs).

And we hurt.

We hurt because it does not have to be like this.

We hurt because the pain in the eyes of the Cuban people - oftentimes hidden behind the veil of beautiful smiles - is all too real.

We hurt because of what might lie ahead - on both sides of the Florida straits. There is no apparent quick fix or easy solution for Cuba - on either side of the Florida straits.

If anyone tells you they know what will happen next, they do not know what they are talking about.

One thing is for sure: The people of Cuba will not be starved into submission.

A cruel US policy of tightening the embargo, scaling back remittances and limiting academic and artistic exchanges will lead only to more hunger, less electricity, and a desperation which will lead to desolation and a massive exodus of innocent people.

The fact that we have healthy transactional diplomatic relations with Vietnam, that Americas can use US credit cards in Nicaragua, and send unlimited amounts of dollars and goods to Venezuela - all things that are restricted with Cuba - makes the draconian current and potential future US policies towards Cuba indefensible. Indefensible!

I am no apologist of the Cuban system. Of course, the Cuban structural and economic system is ripe for improvement. Centralization of every aspect of society, intense bureaucratic inefficiencies, squelching of dissent, state control of the media, hyper limitations for entrepreneurship and capital accumulation, and alliances with some of US arch enemies are real impediments to improved relationship with the US.

But the US seems to conveniently look the other way in so many relations with other countries around the world! Yet the US insists Cuba create a model society including implementing policies the US itself fails to practice before loosening the noose it has around Cuba's neck.

And now we have an incoming Presidential Administration that is talking tougher than tough, 'rah rah rah', "let's finish them". Well, let's see what happens when Cubans in south Florida can no longer visit kinfolks or send money to Cuba. Is Florida ready for another Mariel, make-shieft raft invasion, or worse? Will the Coast Guard really - really? - shoot at Cuban rafters? Not even that will stop desperate people from trying to reach the US - through whatever means necessary. Having another massive exodus of Cubans coming to the US is not what the US nor the Cuban government wants.

Making life possible for the Cubans in the island is the only nonviolent, humane path forward. And both governments know they can make this happen.

In the meantime, we can each do our part. We can visit Cuba while we can, experience the reality firsthand, and accompany and help the people of Cuba in whatever way remains possible, through whatever means are available.

And we can raise our voices for sensible humane policies by the US government towards Cuba. The fact that the incoming Presidential Administration will have no patience for our voices or that the Cuban government may remain intransigent does not mean that we should not stay informed, exercise our rights, voice our opinions, and 'be the change we want to see'.

Onwards.

Reemberto Rodriguez