

CUBA CALLING

V240625

Comments, corrections, or suggested edits? Please email me at Reemberto@Gmail.com

Why do I go to Cuba? Multiple reasons.

[1] I was born there. It is my birthright to visit. If government regulations allow it, I will go. (I would never go clandestine). When you visit Washington, DC, where do you stay, Anacostia or Bethesda? When you visit Atlanta, where do you stay, Reynoldstown or Midtown? When I visit Havana I stay in El Vedado, in a rented room in a private home. I admit it. I do not stay in - well, I'd rather not disparage other neighborhoods :-). But I also do not stay in large hotels, all of which are owned - if not necessarily operated - by the public sector, i.e.: the government.

[2] It has always been my personal passion to accompany, learn, and help people from all walks of life. If I can do so in Cuba, I will. This has taken the road of engaging academically with Cuban professors that form part of the team for the study-abroad course I teach. (The course is Havana's Art & Culture. Havana's history goes back centuries. Its current situation can not negate its historical heritage. And sharing that heritage is a precious, fulfilling endeavor).

[4] I also go to Cuba to share with my USA friends that Havana is not a museum. It is a vibrant, bustling place. Its people are enterprising and always willing to share. I implore my friends that regardless of the Cuban government's dysfunction, nothing merits the USA imposed embargo/blockade, and much less having Cuba on the Terrorist List. Diplomacy is the only mutually beneficial path. We do business with Vietnam, China, Venezuela and Saudi Arabia. That the USA government singles out Cuba for disproportionate punishment is illogical, absurd, and non-defensible. I always ask my friends and students to take action to revert these inhumane policies. (And for my Cuban-American family and friends, I fully understand the depth of the pain. The hurt is real. I do not minimize it. I totally respect your opinion and I do not seek to change it. But, I can't carry the hate. I can't vilify a whole country - or even every aspect of a political system. I do not suggest equivalency. I do seek meeting where our agendas intersect, be it they intersect only for self-preservation and self-interest).

[5] Finally, I go to Cuba to connect with my faith. Experiencing the churches of La Habana and visiting La Ermita de La Virgen de La Caridad del Cobre is a pilgrimage for me. Sharing with those that against many odds are trying to live a decent, dignified life - in Cuba or in the diaspora - gives me humble pride in the people of Cuba, regardless where they reside. And it gives me glorious hope for a future not yet seen.

This most recent journey in June 2024 - short as it was - once again reaffirmed why I go to Cuba. So many stories, so many anecdotes! Here are but a few:

- People rummaging through the dumpsters of weeks of uncollected trash in the shadow of new, fancy, expensive hotels, making the division of the haves and have-nots ever more visible.
- Brand new cars whizzing by the tiny Russian Ladas from the 70's and American Chevys from the 50's, being looked at with yearning eyes by those cramped into the decrepit totally overcrowded buses.
- Having to learn a new system of currency and exchange that changes daily; National currency? USDollars? Euros? Magnetic card?
- Delicious dinners at restaurants and night-spots owned and operated by the fast emerging entrepreneurship class, knowing that the cost of that one dinner is more than what the average Cuban makes in a month.
- Taking a hot shower with excellent water in your host family's house while other neighborhoods have been without water for days.
- Walking on broken sidewalks and driving on pot-hole filled streets listening to the old crumbling buildings as they seemingly weep over days gone by and the inability to access capital to fix a decaying infrastructure or renovate, rebuild and build anew.
- Enjoy a world class performance of 'old (Medieval) music' in a preciously beautiful venue when you feel raindrops fall on your head, even though you are inside..
- And similarly, having to bring out buckets during Mass to capture the water coming through the leaking roof of the church due to the relentless torrential rains of the last few days, enticing the priest to pray: "Oh God, no more water from the clouds please; send us water through the water pipes in our houses!"

(The [Pictures](#) and [short videos](#) expand visually on some of these anecdotes.)

This most recent journey did spark a new thought, worthy of further development: Many adults in Cuba have little to do with their leisure (or non-work) time. Young adults, youth, and children invent what to do. But for many others there is simple little entertainment. Yes, there are token exceptions: Sports have a niche, high art thrives in a limited circle of the affluent, and street culture is alive and well, particularly in poor black communities. However, faith communities are scant. Civic life is non-existent - no Rotary Club or the likes. Going out to eat is a luxury few can afford. Going to the beach is a transportation nightmare. Walking to the nearby park is encountering broken decades old playgrounds. Even treating the children to ice cream - when available - is a challenge. Political activities are interwoven with work, and the choice of such activity is limited; rather it is mandated. Thus, a large segment of the population has nowhere to go for leisure and entertainment, remaining cocooned at home and their immediate vicinity day after day month after month year after year, with television offering some mindless relief and hanging out with friends and family offering that indispensable, intangible human connection. It is jarring to hear stories of how seldom some people visit other sides of the city or region. (A degree of this happens in every culture. But the Cuban situation is acute in many ways). Life is consumed with the daily drudgery of finding where the next meal is coming from, how to deal

with blackouts and no water, standing in line and more lines for the essentials of life, and putting up with pervasive lack of life's staples.

Yet, Cuba survives - and thrives. The determination and ingenuity of the Cuban people never ceases to amaze. Their - our - spirit is hard to break. We are loud, fun, love life to the fullest, and will 'resolver' (to resolve), no matter what. (And, oh, how much more could they 'resolver' if the embargo/blockade was no longer in place!)

Complicated, yes. There is evident consensus on what are the problems and evidence of what needs fixing. But there is very little consensus on solutions or who will invest, profit and control capital in Cuba's future.

Complicated indeed. Yet nothing is impossible when people of good will compassionately and joyfully - and sharing the inevitable lament - accompany each other in exploring possibilities and pursuing a better world without falling into the trappings of any word that ends in "ism". Particularly since no "ism" is absolute - and they do not even exist in practicality anyway.

Journeying on.

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- *All my other Cuba journeys can be found at <https://reemberto.info/2019/01/cuba-journeys/>*