

# Cuba on the Ground: First-Hand Impressions about Cuban Life, History, and Culture\*

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*“A genuine man goes to the roots. To be a radical is no more than that: to go to the roots.”*

Jose Marti

I have been in Cuba for just under three weeks. For the most part, I have been refreshingly amazed, but at times disappointed, by the realities of the Cuban economy, government policy, culture and society. What follows are some preliminary observations, each of which I will explore further in subsequent articles.

First, for those less familiar with Cuba, here are some statistics (what initially sparked my interest in the island). In Cuba, education up to the highest level is 100% free and, at 97%, the national Cuban literacy rate is higher than that in the US. Every Cuban is given an equal ration of food each month and special needs are catered to for those with special conditions, such as pregnant women and young children. Health care in Cuba is free. And since the island has one of the best health care systems of the “developing” world, it sends its doctors to help with training and medical support and services across the “third world.”

Apart from these great social services, many select freedoms have been sacrificed for the collective good of the country: freedom of speech, freedom of the press and the free-

dom to organize within the political sphere, if in opposition to the Revolutionary.

Government. It seems that this has been done to preserve a strong sense of nationalism, a vital key to the preservation of the Cuban government, in the face of constant pressure from the US. Such restrictions highly contrast with the dominant corporate-centered philosophy and culture in the United States, in which a capitalistic economic system thrives on various divisions amongst its citizenry.

Upon arrival into Cuba from the U.S., the most striking thing one notices is the overwhelming difference of mass communication. In the United States, for example, one cannot escape being constantly exposed to corporate marketing, whether on highway billboards or its daily intertwining into every form of electronic entertainment (including the news media). In Cuba, mainstream messages coincide with the government’s (or the state’s) interests and have clear and distinct historical and political relevance. On the highways and byways of Havana, there are many billboards and banners containing quotes and images favoring revolutionary ideology and self-determination, as well as anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist sentiments. Pictures of national icons like Jose Marti, a well-known Cuban and Latin

American independence leader of the late nineteenth century, and Che Guevara, are plastered all over the city. Many banners and signs change with time, reflecting historically important dates and politically relevant issues.

Most Americans do not view Cuba as a place highly influenced by African culture. This is partly due to the fact that over 90% of Cubans and Cuban Americans living in the United States are of Spanish heritage—looking closer to what we call “white.” However, over 70% of Cuba’s mainland population has significant and physically obvious African heritage. This is a direct result of colonial Cuba’s reliance on the importation of African slaves to work in a sugar-dependent plantation economy. There exists obvious racism in Cuba, both institutional and otherwise, although the notions of race on an individual level, as we define them in the U.S., are much different. The U.S.’s contemporary system of racial categorization and mass stereotype perpetuation is absent in Cuba, yet darker skin usually constitutes a lesser social position on the island, and a greater chance of police harassment. The reasons for this are complex and seem to be largely connected to economic issues, many of which are largely influenced by factors external to the nation.

One of the most disappointing realities is the widening economic gap within Cuba, and it is due, in part, to other national problems: the U.S. imposed trade sanctions coupled with a lack of national resources and a large national debt. Most importantly, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 forced the Cuban government to allow more European private investment on the island, which resulted in the emergence of a tourist industry. In fact, tourism has been the largest industry in Cuba for the past two years—

further exacerbating the economic gap and creating a dual economy in which there are now two forms of currency. There is also a significant amount of Cuban private enterprise, in the form of small restaurants and various tourist accommodations, although they are heavily taxed.

Cubans are much more likely than U.S. citizens to have a thoughtful opinion about politics and international relations. This is probably due to both an absence of a dominant and highly distracting entertainment media as we have in the US, as well as the existence of universal access to free higher education. Discourse about social and political issues is much stronger here amongst common people than in the U.S., and a large majority of people think more critically than in the U.S. One of the most vital components to the foundation of democracy is more prevalent here than in the US, although I don’t believe democracy is very strong in either nation.

Because of a lack of resources, Cubans have been forced to become extremely resourceful. The most famous example is the fact that most automobiles used here are from the 1950s and 60s, and are repaired time and time again, in ways and with parts unimaginable to most mechanics. I have ridden in several cabs in Havana in which a window crank substitutes as a door latch, and have heard the term “creative design by necessity” used to describe this type of occurrence, which can be seen in many other aspects of the Cuban life.

\* This article, dated February 12, 2007, is the first installment of a series titled “Cuba on the Ground” by Jonathan Pourzal. It is part of a study abroad project during which he lived in Havana, Cuba, for four months. We publish this with permission from the author.