

CUBA - A Country Frozen in Time

Five Philadelphian residents in search of international jazz return with much more

BY CATHERINE LAWRENCE

In January, a group of residents traveled together to Cuba. Catherine Lawrence gives us her impressions of life in Cuba today as it still grapples with the U.S. trade embargo enacted in 1962.

Cuba . . . only 90 miles from the United States. A mere 36 minutes of actual flying time from Miami. But what a surprise. I didn't fully understand that, in many respects, I was entering a country frozen in time because of the 1962 embargo.

The focus of our trip was Cuba International Jazz Plaza Festival, featuring Latin, Cuban, and Afro-Cuban jazz, among other styles. Overall, we saw more than 100 performances by musicians from almost 20 countries. But, for me, jazz took a backseat to seeing firsthand the impact of the embargo on the country and the people.

Travel to Cuba is very different from other travel I have done. Before we left, we were told medicines must be in their original prescription-labeled containers, and we should carry cash, preferably small bills, \$1s, \$5s, and \$10s. Why small bills? Because you cannot use credit or debit cards in Cuba. While merchants accept U.S. dollars, you receive your change in the local currency, Cuban Convertible Pesos (CCP), which are accepted only in Cuba. Depending on the availability of U.S. dollars, when you leave the country, you may or may not receive dollars in exchange for the local currency.

I can sum up my first impression of Cuba in a word: "crumbling." The buildings are not very tall and, often, you can look from the front through to the back. Inside, some are hollowed-out, staircases in plain view. Window frames, once part of the broken facade, are now just holes.

The trade embargo does not allow Cuba to secure the resources needed for repairs. Building supplies and paint are not available, making the town look war-torn. Some countries do trade with Cuba, but they are few because interested countries fear retribution from the United States. So, the embargo continues.

Of course, some supplies do get through, one path being tourists and visitors. Tour



Five Philadelphians visited Havana in January: (from left) Catherine Lawrence, Linda Rosenstein, Jim Rosenstein, Ceane Rabada, and Barbara Moore.

guides suggest you bring items to leave behind for the locals. Under the premise that they need everything, I left about 80% of what I brought to Cuba, including over-the-counter medicines, COVID-19 masks and test kits, all kinds of toiletries, and even some clothes that were not new but still usable. One incentive to leave everything, clothes and all, is the \$200 checked-bag airline fee you save when returning to the States.

We all brought stationery supplies, copy books, pens, pencils, post-it notes, etc., for distribution at the music school we visited. The school is not big enough for the 400 students it serves and must rotate on-site instruction. Students bring their own instruments. The school provides nothing.

Cubans say their national pastime is "waiting in line." As we moved from various venues, we saw lines of people waiting—for buses, pharmacies, and many other businesses around the city. People packed the buses because public transportation is the primary source of travel.

Every day, the Cuban people experience frustration because of food and medicine shortages and power outages. They live with constant blackouts because of aging equipment and the lack of materials needed

for repairs.

In Cuba, they say, "When you see it, buy it, as you may not see it again." The cities we visited had no supermarkets, only small, hole-in-the-wall, mom-and-pop stores. The locals stand on the sidewalks and reach through iron bars to buy whatever items are available.

In the heart of the city, a fruit and vegetable stand inside a garage has sparse offerings: plantains—a staple—as well as rice and black beans. In the back of the garage, slabs of meat hang on hooks. The meat is sheltered from the sun, but conditions are unsanitary, with flies, dirt, and people.

No fast-food places exist in Cuba and, as a result, snacking is not something you can readily do. The benefit of this—no soda cups, sandwich wrappers, or bags litter the streets.

In a world of 5G internet technology, the Cuban people live with an expensive 3G network (that is, if they can afford it and can gain access). WiFi is not free, and connectivity is patchy; however, you can buy Cuban WiFi cards for slow and unreliable access.

We did a walking tour of the El Ce-

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menterio de Cristóbal Colón, considered the world's third most important cemetery. It hosts the largest outdoor mausoleum in Latin America, and its elaborately sculpted memorials are kept in pristine shape (unlike the buildings in Havana). I could understand why Cubans in some quarters say, "The people in the cemetery live better than the locals."

Classic cars fill the city. I cruised Havana in a 1956 turquoise Ford Fairlane Victoria V-8 convertible. The driver played a CD with American music, including Kool & The Gang's 1982 hit, "Ooh, la, la, la – Let's Go Dancing." We rode around for a few thrilling hours, dancing in our seats, and blasting the "la cucaracha" car horn to the many other classic car travelers we passed. These iconic American cars, relics of a time gone by, made me wonder how they kept them in such good running and pristine condition.

We left the island's Atlantic side and headed south to Cienfuegos and Trinidad for a few days on the Caribbean side. While not as congested as Havana, the Caribbean side is no less poor. During our five hours of travel, we saw miles of unused land that the Cubans call "poor land." Over 2.7 million hectares (10,400 square miles) owned by the government lie fallow, primarily because of the lack of investment capital.

Another throwback in time: We passed few cars on the

highways but many horse-drawn carts, which even today take the place of trucks and tractor-trailers—another casualty of the embargo.

Tourism is the main staple of the economy, with cigars and rum as runners-up. (Americans are not allowed to bring "Cubans"—as people there call their cigars—back to the U.S., but I did manage to hide a few in my luggage.) Only 20% of its tourism has returned since COVID-19. But, if the "Cuban thaw" gains momentum, those 90 miles may not seem so far away, and the Cuban people may gain access to all that we Americans take for granted.

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