

Visualizing Cuba  
A Photo Journey through Cuba



By Harrison Gill  
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Cuba represents a place unlike any other that I have travelled in the past. Many Americans probably grew up with limited knowledge of what Cuba actually is like in real life beyond the news headlines. This was certainly the case for me, coming from a family where my military officer grandfather was personally preparing for nuclear war with Cuba during the 60s.

At the same time however, Cuba's relationship with the United States government remains extremely contentious. With the election of President Trump, Cuba has seen increased sanctions justified by an alleged sonic attack on American diplomats. Additionally, a travel warning has hurt travel, especially coming from programs sponsored by international educators who might not be able to send their students to a location with an active travel warning. Today, with the revision of the travel warning system, Cuba remains a level 3 country, with the US advising travelers to avoid non-essential travel all the while they have lower advisories on countries like Israel, which faces frequent terror attacks, and during my time living there also saw two mass shootings and a bus bombing. As such, I'm inclined to believe that politics plays a significant role into some of the travel advisory decisions and the Cubans we met seemed to think that as well.



As a result of US policy towards Cuba, which the Cuban government has defined as a blockade, due to the severe impact of the US embargo on the Cuban economy, it is understandable why

both Cubans and US citizens might feel skeptical about how we can both get along with one of our closest neighbors.

One of the impacts of the blockade or embargo is the fact that there is next to no meaningful trade between the two nations. One area this can be seen is in food and agriculture. Food shortages were common and certain products would be available in some of the provinces we visited but not others. Partially due to this, as well as the agricultural production of the country and local taste preferences, the Cuban diet is relatively simple. While some Americans would think that Cuban food would be spicy by virtue of Cuba being considered part of Latin America, they would be wrong. While the picture below represents Cuban food options, this is food served at one of the paladares (or private restaurants) for tourists. Instead, Cubans largely rely upon limited state-provided rations for their own basic nutritional needs.



Cuba's agricultural sector is known for a great deal of resilience being unable to rely upon the products of large American agricultural giants like Monsanto's Roundup. As a result, Cuban agriculture is largely organic and ecologically friendly. Since the end of the 90s, Cuba has seen more agricultural innovations.



For example, the farm we visited in Alamar had laboratories dedicated to the breeding of bugs beneficial to organic produce.

Another example of the US embargos on Cuba make the importation of cars challenging because these cannot come from the closest ports in the US. Additionally, cars are expensive on a Cuban salary and our guide noted that only somewhere around 4% of Cubans own a private car or motorcycle. In flatter cities with less traffic, like Holguin, bikes and bike taxis are more popular than cars. Those living in Havana or Santiago often rely on public transit or sometimes ride in others private vehicles, including in the beds of trucks. The majority of private cars are either pre-embargo American vehicles from the 50s or Russian cars from the 70s or 80s.



Still, the vast majority of cars had license plates starting with the letter “B,” which meant that they were owned by some branch of the Cuban government or by one of its many nationalized industries. This included our tour bus as all the major tourism entities are owned by the state.

Despite all the challenges American policy puts on the Cuban people, I still found the Cuban people extremely welcoming of Americans from the United States. In fact, one evening we had the opportunity to meet with ordinary Cubans through their Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, as can be seen below.



This type of committee, commonly known in Cuba as a CDR, can be found in every part of the country, on nearly every block and in every apartment building. While historically the CDR was used to ensure that Cuban socialist values were practiced within the community, today they serve more so as an organizing body for community welfare. During our visit in Santiago, they threw us a block party, where I also had the opportunity to speak with sisters who work within the Cuban healthcare system. One of the women even shared and gave away some of the personal art projects she worked on in the past, which she made with recycled materials from the hospital she worked in, further demonstrating the creativity of the Cuban people we witnessed throughout our trip of using the things they already had access to for a number of different purposes.

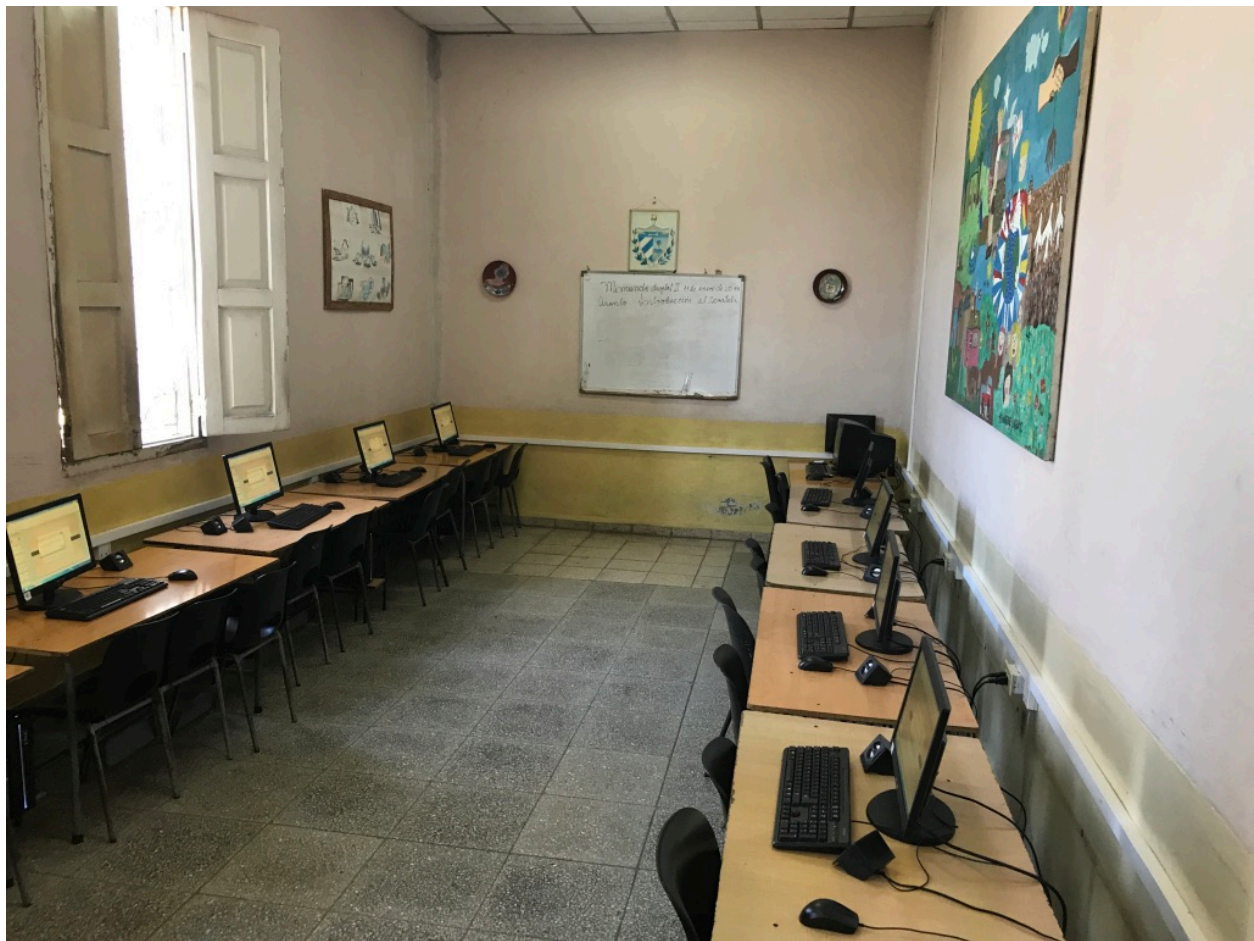
While the Cuban healthcare system is free and very well-respected among the Cuban population, unlike the United States, it is often not the field someone goes into if they want a lucrative job. Today, tourism is one of Cuba's most lucrative sectors. The US embargo limits the full potential of the sector as tourism is prohibited by the US government.

Despite the challenges, the healthcare system does what it can to support the Cuban people. The situation with the US may have pushed the system to be more resilient, having to develop

common generics on their own and even researching new medications that haven't been discovered yet in the US, such as a vaccine for lung cancer.

The school system does its best with limited resources as well. Despite this, we had the opportunity to see a school implementing MIT's Scratch program to teach programming at the same time also teaching kids cursive starting in first grade, two years earlier than it was taught as part of California's curriculum when I was in elementary school (which was probably at a time when I was even younger than when today's students learn it).

While Scratch was being implemented as part of a pilot program, it shows what Cuban authorities want to do given greater access to resources.



One of the biggest changes from what I was expecting was the prevalence of the Internet. While WiFi is relatively expensive (at a rate of around 2 US dollars per hour), Cubans and tourists are capable of purchasing time in the form of a card from the state-owned telecom company. Unlike China where one needs to show their passport to access Internet and pages are restricted, I ran into no barriers during my personal browsing, even while visiting website that have been censored in a number of other countries. Historically, Internet in Cuba has been restricted and had been reported to be censored, but it didn't feel like that anymore. Still, I am

unsure what happens when Cubans attempt to post critical content online today, something that Cubans had been imprisoned for in the past. However, as a result of the extreme price in a country where people might only make around fifteen to twenty-five dollars a month unless they freelance on the side, access remains cost prohibitive. Additionally, when Cubans want to purchase Internet access, they often need to go to the phone provider, which often appeared to suffer from long lines all day long. Tourists could purchase Internet at the hotels, but even then, sometimes, the hotel would run out of cards and need to send someone to the phone store to purchase more. Cuban NGOs and non-profits have sought to remedy this situation, the first of which was awarded Chromebooks by Google for offering free access to the Internet for the public.



Similarly, books can be a challenge to access, however this seemed to be more due to the cost of books and not any restrictions beyond the inability to have books shipped commercially as a result of the embargo. In fact, a former MIIS grad started a bookstore in Havana called Cuba Libro. To make up for the fact that purchasing books might cost a significant portion of a Cuban's salary, they also make books available for rent.





During our visit there, we also had the opportunity to meet with a local professor who, despite loving things about his country, did critically point out some particular challenges in the government and education systems. During our conversation, he candidly mentioned the role of communism on Cuban education and how he felt it negatively affected pedagogy and teaching methodologies by creating teacher-centered classrooms guided by lecture at the University of Havana, where he teaches. At the same time however, he has seen progress in the system becoming more open to other methodologies and also mentioned that he takes the time to address some of his students more critical questions – even if it means doing so after the official class period. During our visit, this was the only Cuban I spoke with that I felt was generally critical of the government.

Another thing I was originally not familiar with was how Cuba held elections or the fact that they were held at all. While Cuba holds elections, instead of individuals voting for those in the highest office, they vote for community representatives. Multiple rounds of elections are held where individuals vote for community members to vote for provincial and national government officials. Ultimately, while the Communist Party and Cuban mass organizations have the greatest say in who can be a candidate in the final round, the Cubans we spoke with still felt that their local representatives played a significant role in making the final selections from among party members. From my understanding, local representatives still had the ability to

reject candidates that they had concerns about. Obviously, this leads to concerns here in the US that Cuban elections are not free or fair, and while that potentially may be true, the actual role that Cubans felt that the local elections had on politics was more nuanced and complex.



Major changes may be coming to Cuba in 2018. President Raul Castro announced his retirement at the end of December 2017. The top candidate to replace him is significantly younger but not immediately expected to implement any major changes beyond continuing those Raul has already been implementing.

While I still have much to learn about the country, the insights provided by our guide Amircal, Professor Black, and the Cuban people were fascinating. Is Cuba perfect? Of course not. It is a country struggling with challenging economic contexts afflicting a significant portion of the population with poverty. At the same time, it seems the US could learn some things from the Cubans, who live within a well-connected social structure and are provided services to lessen the burdens of the embargo in the post-Cold War period. Despite the challenges, we saw dedication, community, and an incredible warmth to us as outsiders new to their country.

Ultimately, the goal of this article is not to pass a value judgement on whether what Cuba does is right or wrong, but rather point out their system works drastically differently than ours. Some

Cubans have been dissatisfied with it either for political or economic reasons and had chosen to leave Cuba. Today, this is easier, as Cubans can obtain passports. In the past, leaving was much harder due to a number of restrictions. In reality, the vast majority of people we spoke with, even those pointing out a number of shortcomings, were happy with living in their country. At the same time however, one of the largest injustices is the fact that Cuba's development has been stunted by an embargo that hurts the Cuban people. Given the fact that the US government has already restricted licensed travel from utilizing Gaviota military-owned hotels and tourism agencies, and Cuban entrepreneurs their own enterprises, such as restaurants and bed and breakfasts, it is now more possible than ever to go to Cuba, do business in Cuba, and support ordinary Cubans. Yet, Americans still cannot do so without a general or specific license in accordance with OFAC rules. Now, it's Americans whose freedom to travel is truly restricted.

If there is anything I realized from this experience, it's not necessarily that what Cuba does is right or wrong, but rather American policy has had a severe impact on ordinary life and a lot of why Cuba is the way it is today in so many different ways is because of that situation. Yet, while this reality is so ingrained in Cuban society and despite the fact it has hindered Cuba from full economic development, the Cuban people have found ways to make the best of the situation the best they can, especially as Trump seems to have little interest in improving US-Cuban relations.

Despite this policy challenge though, I have never felt more welcomed in any of the 30+ countries that I've traveled to thus far in my life as much as I did in Cuba.