



## I WENT TO CUBA AND KILLED A COW



IS IT REALLY AS BAD AS WE HEAR?: A STREET IN HAVANA

RICH WARREN

LIFE BEHIND THE  
PROPAGANDA  
IN CASTRO'S  
EMBARGOED  
BACKWATER

BY RICH WARREN

**M**ore correctly, it was the bus I was riding and not me personally that struck and killed the cow. That livestock roam freely on Cuban expressways is a testament to the Third World experience I had there.

I went to Cuba because I wanted to see a society frozen in time, complete with fleets of patched-together cars from the 1950s. I wanted to see it before Castro dies and Bed, Bath and Beyonds start sprouting on every street corner. And I wanted to see if there was anything to the propaganda we're spoon-fed from the U.S. government. Instead, I came back with a lot of new propaganda.

Many Americans go to Cuba illegally. But don't turn me in to Uncle Sam. I was on one of the final, perfectly legal cultural exchange tours that our "enlightened" President has ended. Nevermind that we can do business with China with its horrific record of human rights violations. Even with U.S. agricultural and manufacturing interests clamoring for the four-decade embargo to be lifted, our government still brands Cuba as a remnant of the "Evil Empire."

My tour was with Global Exchange, a California-based human rights organization that takes "reality tours" to many developing nations to explore their political and social systems. You can even travel to Afghanistan and Haiti with Global Exchange if you've got a mind to. On our humanitarian mission, we each carried 20 pounds of medical supplies. I set off for Havana with boxes of donated sanitary napkins and packages of Dr. Scholl's products for relief of Cuban corns.

Global Exchange warned us that Homeland Security was working overtime to find irregularities in paperwork. A group from Ohio State was one of several turned back at the Miami airport. Another was dragged off their plane after they'd boarded. Apparently, they'd told the feds they planned to attend the Havana Film Festival and

lounge on the beach. Global Exchange advised us Homeland Security would not find such reasons for travel palatable—we weren't to suggest in any way that we intended to have fun.

So until we were airborne, I didn't believe we were going. The plane went up, the plane came down, and we were in Havana—the two countries are so close you'd think we could wave to each other.

The psychological distance is another matter. Almost immediately, I started feeling like I'd landed on the moon. The Havana airport is like a backwater bus stop. The once-opulent city, although still magnificent architecturally, is in an advanced state of decay.

En route to our hotel, we passed several broken-down vehicles, a common sight, invariably surrounded by crowds of men caucusing on how to get them moving. At our hotel, built in the '50s by a Mafioso and still a treasure trove of vintage kitsch, we were instructed not to flush toilet paper or it would clog the aging pipes.

For seven days, the exhausting but fascinating itinerary took us inside schools, museums, hospitals, agricultural collectives, artists' studios, even inside people's homes. We followed Hemingway's footsteps in Old Havana, studied the influence of African religions, heard world-class music. We even found time for salsa lessons.

Daytrips went to the provincial town of Viñales, where horse-drawn carts roamed the streets and chickens wandered around the altar of the town's church. The unfortunate encounter with the cow occurred on our return trip. We were obliged to report the mishap at a local police station where paperwork was dutifully prepared on a manual typewriter using carbon paper.

We also traveled to Vedadero, the mythic tourist resort with its legendary white beaches. I assure you we had *no* fun there; we went purely for educational purposes. By this time, rumors were swirling that a government mole was among us. Global Exchange took the rumors seriously—they even began referring to the beach trip as a "Coastal Excursion."

One evening we went to a virtual slum in Havana where we visited the local "block associations," grassroots organizations that take socialism into the neighborhoods. You'd have thought the circus had come to town. Dozens of people came pouring out of their homes, grabbing us by the hand, eager to tell us about their lives. Children sang, everyone waved little paper Cuban flags. They tried to impress upon their guests how much their lives were improving, even though we could see through their open doors they had very little. But things were much worse in the Bad Old Days (pre-Castro). Or so they said.

Everywhere we went, we heard similar, sincere proclamations of how much better things are under Fidel—everyone calls him by his first name. Even hard questions were answered glibly. Why don't opposition candidates run against Fidel? Oh, no one would want to, was the reply.

We heard lots of statistics. Castro's Cuba, for example, has virtually eliminated a horrendous illiteracy rate, and its healthcare system is among the best in the developing world. We also heard negatives. The housing shortage is so acute that young married couples must live with their parents for many years. And the rural public transportation system is so poor it largely consists of open-air flatbed trucks.

Still, it was apparent we were seeing Cuba through rose-colored glasses. It was tempting to believe most people are much happier than those disgruntled few who set off for Florida in inner tubes. The shelves in the shops weren't bare, though choices were limited. Through open doors we could see everyone had televisions and a refrigerator. Was it really as bad as we hear in the U.S.?

On my last day, I took a taxi ride in a sky-blue 1957 Plymouth with a cigar-smoking, intensely handsome man at the wheel. He knew no government folks were listening. Between his limited English and my even more limited Spanish, he described the circumstances of his life.

He snorted in contempt over what Castro has done. I was shocked when he told me he couldn't afford children, an astonishing fact since taxi drivers are near the top of the heap in a society where those with access to tourists are the ones who prosper. Then he started singing a salsa tune on the radio, broadcast from Miami.

I came home even more confused about the "reality" of life in Cuba. There's no question the regime before Castro was brutally repressive, and most people lived in horrific poverty. Still, there's the little matters of civil rights (or the lack thereof), the inability of Cubans to travel abroad, Fidel's export of revolution to other countries. Yet many people adore him and the transformation he's made in their society.

When I got home, I sent out an e-mail travelogue that dared to hint at some of Castro's positive accomplishments. My message got forwarded to friends of friends. I got an reply from a Cuban-American woman who went ballistic to the tune of several pages. Her wandering rant even mentioned how Cuban AIDS patients have been herded together in concentration camps. Her tone seemed extreme, but then, just days later, Castro pulled the plug on Internet access for most Cubans, preventing all those troublesome ideas from polluting their minds.

I intend to keep reading about Cuba and hope some day to return and go farther into the countryside to see how ordinary people live. In the meantime, my mind keeps returning to those singing, flag-waving residents of the Havana slum. They hadn't been coached—they truly believed their lives had improved. A cynic might argue they'd fallen for the "party line." But who's to say that same cynic hasn't fallen for yet another party line—out of Washington? ☉

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