

Cuba Trip

L. David and Jeanne Roper 8-16
December

We decided to celebrate my 80th birthday on 13 December 2015 in Cuba, so we arranged with Road Scholar to join their week-long “Cuba Today: People and Society” trip (<http://tinyurl.com/i5ozmev>) during 8-16 December.

The trip started in Miami for one night with an orientation for our 18-members U.S. group. We were admonished that Cuba is community oriented, not individually oriented as most U.S. citizens are. (We had to be reminded of that a few times in Cuba.) We flew from Miami to Cienfuegos, Cuba on the south shore about 200 miles south-southeast of Havana on the north shore. While there we visited by bus the cities of Santa Clara and old Trinidad. Then we went by bus to Havana. We stayed 3 nights in Cienfuegos and 4 nights in Havana.

We had a female U.S. guide, the “bad cop”, and a male Cuban guide, the “good cop”. Both were excellent guides!

It was a wonderful trip on which we learned much about Cuba and its people. We visited several groups, including a middle-school for the arts, a children dance group, an adult dance group, a location where citizens pick up their monthly free food packets, a private book store and community gathering place run by a U.S. citizen, and a day center for elderly folks.

We heard lectures about Cuban architecture, Cuban religions and U.S.-Cuban political relations. (I wish we had heard a lecture about the Cuban health system, which is regarded as one of the best in the world.) We visited the Che-Guevara Museum, the Bay-of-Pigs Museum and the wonderful National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana. We heard three excellent music groups sing. One afternoon we rode around Havana in a brightly painted 1955 Dodge convertible.

Our lunch and evening meals were mostly in private restaurants (Paladars), which served excellent food. The grilled warm-water lobsters, which we had three times, were delicious. One dinner in Havana was a birthday party for me and our 39-year-old Cuban guide; I was given a Cuban license plate with the Cuban flag on it, which I have installed below the front Virginia license plate on my Nissan LEAF electric car.

Interesting facts we learned:

- Fidel Castro did not allow his picture to be posted around Cuba; I only saw one large wall painting of his elder face in a hotel in Havana. (There are many pictures of Che Guevara on buildings, posters and clothing.)
- We were allowed to freely roam around Cienfuegos, Santa Clara, Trinidad and Havana many times.
- I saw only one policeman with a holstered gun in the streets.

- I saw no homeless people sleeping in the streets.
- The literacy rate is ~98%.
- About 18% of Cubans are devout Catholics, although many use the Catholic Church for ceremonies.
- The fastest growing religion is Pentecostal.
- Another prominent religion is Santeria (way of the Saints), an Afro-Caribbean religion based on Yoruba beliefs and traditions, with some Roman Catholic elements added.
- Cubans do not eat hot spicy food.
- After the Soviet Union collapsed, Cuban people were destitute for about a decade.
- Every Cuban family has a ration book to receive a standard amount of different foods for each family member, distributed at community centers.
- About 80% of the food is imported, although there is unused agricultural land.
- Cubans can go to the U.S. without defecting. That is, they can then return to Cuba.
- The lecturer about Cuban-U.S. politics stated that Cuba is a socialist, not communist, country, despite communist labels. I think Cuba will become a Socialist-capitalist company. (The U.S. is an Oligarchical-capitalist-socialist country.)
- Cuba plans to change to allow more capitalism, but plans to do it slowly and intelligently.
- Most people own their houses or apartments.

We came away with a very positive attitude about Cuba and hope that they do not allow it to be spoiled when the U.S. embargo is lifted. We would like to go back for a longer stay to get to know the country and people better.

Our Cuban guide stated that, after Cuba opens up for regular U.S. tourists, the facilities may not be able to handle the expected tourists comfortably.

We highly recommend Road Scholar as an arranger of travel to Cuba, and undoubtedly to many other countries.

One member of our group, Paul Wax, is an excellent photographer. You can see some of the pictures he took at <http://tinyurl.com/jqypo8u> and <https://youtu.be/98TbfPnSydQ>.

Here are pictures taken by various members of our group: <http://preview.tinyurl.com/jvfexeo>.

Foreign Travels of L. David Roper: <http://www.roperld.com/personal/LDRTravel.htm>