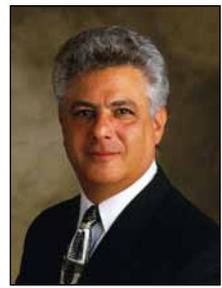


## THE CALL OF

## CUBA



I've had the great fortune to visit many countries and experience their cultures, and I often tell stories based on those experiences. But when I begin to tell people about my most recent trip—to Cuba—their eyes light up, their attention sharpens and they lean forward with great interest and curiosity.

Most Americans' feelings about Cuba are closely tied to our very intense memories about one of the most nerve-racking periods in U.S. history. With a Communist dictator on our doorstep, the Cold War in full swing, and the recent defeat at the Bay of Pigs, Cuba was central to our nation's collective fear. Most people of a certain age remember exactly where they were on October 22, 1962, when President Kennedy went on national television to tell us that U.S. spy planes had detected and photographed missile sites on Cuba and that a flotilla of Russian ships was on its way to supply those sites. He explained that he had ordered our Navy to encircle Cuba and to not permit the Russian ships to deliver their goods, even if it meant war. The world collectively held its breath until the Russians blinked, by turning their ships around and promising to dismantle the missile facilities.

But the fascination with Cuba is as much about forbidden fruit as it is about fear. Since 1960, when the United States began its embargo, we've been denied access to Cuba's world-famous cigars, its tropical beaches and its vibrant culture. The former playground of the world's rich and famous was renowned for drinking, dancing and gambling—and decades later Cuba still calls to us, tantalizing our imagination.

I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to visit Cuba for eight days in March. My wife and I went as part of a cultural exchange mission sponsored by an art group we belong to.

In Havana, you could easily see the grandeur of what once was, but only if you looked past the dirt and disrepair. We saw beautiful buildings, both commercial and private, whose architecture was unlike anything we're used to in America. Many of the homes were very grand, patterned off European styles. Scattered throughout the Hotel Nacional were photos of the famous politicians, movie stars and sports heroes who had stayed there before. But the elevators worked sporadically, the windows hadn't been washed in years, and the carpeting was threadbare. Everything appeared to have at least 10 coats of paint. But through all that you can still see the glory and beauty of the past.

Traveling around Havana was like being on a movie set from the 1940s or 50s. The vibrant colors of the vintage Cadillacs, Buicks, Chevrolets, Chryslers, Plymouths—and

yes, even DeSotos—made me feel like I was in the pages of a Dick Tracy comic book. Old American-made automobiles were everywhere to be found. Because many of the cars are used as taxis, their owners keep them in pristine condition. Even in Cuba, private enterprise seems to have an effect.

Although much of Cuba is run-down and shabby, its people are decidedly energetic, vibrant, warm and welcoming. Being on a cultural mission, we visited musicians, dancers, actors and artists at their studios, homes, schools and universities. We spent a lot of time with young people—typically eight to 25 years old—as well as established artists. These people are held in the highest regard in Cuban society. Although wages are very low for most everyone—mostly under \$50 a month—those in the arts can often do quite well financially. They are the only ones who can trade with non-Cubans using foreign currencies. Some artists sell their work worldwide for as much as \$50,000 per piece. When sold through an official government gallery, the government takes a cut, but artists are also allowed to sell directly to collectors and museums around the world. In that case, they get to keep the entire sales price. Those in the arts also have far greater opportunities to travel and experience other cultures. Despite the disparity in lifestyles, there doesn't seem to be any envy in their society, only respect. Everyone is given the same free opportunity to develop their skills, with free schooling through the university, free healthcare from cradle to grave and almost free housing for everyone.

All in all, this trip has given me a new perspective on Cuba. Seeing the sights has shown me the splendor of what used to be. Meeting the people has given me hope that Cuba's future might one day again be grand. Although I'm not quite ready for a return trip yet, it might be interesting to go back in five years to see what changes have taken place.

Michael Goldstein,

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P.S. To see photos of those old cars in Havana, visit <http://www.geartechnology.com/cuba>