

SO, YA WANNA DO CUBA?

(Those of you thinking of going to Cuba may find this interesting, from a retired USAF officer.)

As a 77 yr. old guy who has gone to Europe, Canada, Mexico and now Cuba for bicycle road trips, I thought you might enjoy reading my report of my bike trip to Cuba:

On February 1st, I flew to Atlanta, met some friends, and we flew to Cancun, Mexico. We spent 4 days there, mostly touring the Mayan ruins of Tulum and Chichen Itza and getting ready for the next part of the adventure. Seven more people flew in and we all boarded a Mexican airline, Interjet, and flew to Havana for a week of bicycle riding in Cuba.

Cuba, where nothing works, including the people. Unemployment is 48% and of those who do work, 8 out of every 10 work for the government. Before heading to the western part of the island, we spent a night in Havana at the Riviera Classic, the finest hotel at one time. 20 stories with 3 elevators, but only one worked. Contrary to what I found in the rest of the country, my shower only had hot water. Turn the knobs all you want, but you only got hot, scalding water.

The stories about the old cars is quite true, but many of those cars are used to take tourists on tours of the city. \$30.00 gets you 2 hours in a 1952 Cadillac convertible and you can pile in as many people in as you want. Old Chevys seem to be the most popular and a few are quite nicely restored. They all fell in the 1941 to 1957 range. I saw nothing newer than a 57. By restored, I mean they look good on the outside, but as our Cuban tour guide said, there would not be a V8 under the hood. The original had failed decades ago and with no parts to fix it, other means had to be found. Generally that involved putting a 4 cylinder Russian made diesel in and making the necessary changes to get it to fit and mate up with an unknown transmission.

The country is still in the 19th century. Many people walk, but equally as many use horses, both to ride and pull carts. I saw wagons pulled by oxen on the highway. We traveled by motor coach, stayed in crude motels, and ate in restaurants; all owned by the government. Staying clean was a challenge. In the public restrooms washing your hands was interesting. You need three things to wash your hands; water, soap, towel to dry. Well the towel was your shirt or pants, because there never were any towels. In 1/3 of the toilets, there was no water and

in one case, there was a lady standing beside the sink with a bottle of water to pour over your hands. In an equal number of places, there was no soap.

If you thought not having soap and water in the rest room was a problem, imagine not having a toilet SEAT. Yep, no toilet seat and it wasn't just confined to public facilities. One of the rooms we stayed in had no toilet seat, which was matched by the fact there was not toilet paper. In its place, somebody had carefully torn individual sheets of toilet paper from a roll and placed them on the back of the toilet.

Free health care and education is one of the things Castro brought with his revolution. The health care is generally limited to the bigger cities. Our guide told us that a taxi driver in Havana earned more in tips each day than a medical doctor earned in salary in one month. Oh, and the doctor can be arrested and jailed if he attempts to treat people on the side for extra money. Education is free, but the reality is that most people cannot afford to stay in school. Our tour guide was the exception. He completed college and got a Master's degree in computer technology, but can't find a job in that field, so he conducts tours.

We visited a tobacco farm, where we had the opportunity to purchase genuine Cuba cigars for \$3.25. The farm had been in this man's family for 3 generations, but only recently had actual title been put back in his name. The government claimed it after the revolution. After harvest, the government takes 90% of the tobacco, leaving the farmer with just 10% for his "own personal use". He chose to demonstrate how to hand roll a cigar, then sell it to tourists. I asked our guide if all farmers lost 90% of their crop to the government. His reply, "Oh no, vegetable farmers only give up 60% of their crop".

The roads looked like they had been carpet bombed with huge pot holes everywhere. Add that to the very steep hills we encountered and it made for slow biking. While I am no speed demon, one day I averaged just 4.5 MPH as I attempted to find bits of pavement between the holes in the road. In many cases, there was no road, just dirt and when the trucks went past, we were engulfed in a storm of dust and exhaust fumes. A few of the trucks were left over Russian military vehicles. Personal transportation in the rural area was provided by stake bodied trucks. People would stand by the side of the road and climb aboard when such a truck came by. The fare was around 8 cents and you stood packed in the bed of the truck with several dozen other people.

Those on welfare receive \$25 a month, plus a ration of beans, rice, and cooking oil. The money came from the Cuban government, but the Russians provided the food. Each month a supply cargo ship docks with beans, rice, and cooking oil sent by the Russians. Speaking of them, the Cuban version of the Missile Crisis is quite different from what we heard in the US.

Glad I went, but have no desire to return. Cuba makes our inner cities look like paradise, and the poverty is staggering. After two weeks abroad, we flew home and I spent the night in a Hampton Inn at the Atlanta airport, before catching an early morning flight back to Seattle. Took the longest hot water shower ever after having a cheeseburger, fries and two gin & tonics for dinner. I was really glad to be back!

Dedicated to all Bernie Sanders supporters, like Jacintico and others that believe "Government Socialism" is so much better than "Capitalism."