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CUBA: IN FORM

Cuba might evoke old cars, vibrant streets, beautiful music & dance and the sweet, pungent smell of tobacco, but after two weeks of interaction and discussion the country's true complexity starts to shine through. Strongly defined by its Socialism and the historical embargo which accompanies it, thanks to US relations gone sour back in 1962, they say that although Cuba is full of contradictions, you can embrace it wholeheartedly. Yet as an American, on a surreptitious visit to a prohibited country, it was hard not to fixate on the incongruities of daily life.

Consider a system with a two cent bus fare, a four cent phone call and an eight cent admission to a movie while an hour of internet costs six dollars.

These disparate values are the result of the two opposing currencies working side by side within Cuba's economy- the peso convertible (CUC) and the moneda nacional (CUP). The peso convertible, which is pegged to the USD value and intended for use with all tourist-related exchanges or imported goods, is worth twenty five times the moneda nacional, which is the currency in which citizens are paid their wages (equivalent to around \$15-30 USD monthly). What results from this incongruity is that tourist-related industries are remarkably lucrative, even compared to those of skilled professionals; a taxi driver who runs an airport shuttle at \$20 a trip can make considerably more than a doctor employed by the state.

Imagine a life where you couldn't leave an island without special permission from the state and you needed more funds than your wages for life.

Cuba is, without a doubt, an incredible country. Envision the first architectural vestiges of European colonialism within the Americas. Recognize the constant reminders of their revolution (1953-1959) and its history in the presence of party propaganda throughout the regulated street paintings and billboards. Remember that the government provides universal health care at no cost, and a college education is free. Understand that free speech is regulated, and media outlets are controlled by the Ministry of Information.

Consider a system where domestic internet is illegal and you need special permission from the government to purchase a car or move your residence.

The embargo influences much of society, as Cuba has been excluded from the international free market for 40+ years. Foreign traders are prohibited from docking in the United States for six months after visiting Cuba, so many companies have ceased trading with Cuba in order to maintain valuable business opportunities with the U.S. How has such isolation affected Cuban life? We experienced the scarcity of foods like cheese and ripe tomatoes. We saw that bottled water is more expensive than beer, soft drinks cost almost as much as rum, and yet a glass of fresh-squeezed sugarcane juice is just 4 cents. We visited state-run restaurants where the menu offered eight types of sandwiches, but the reality was that there was only one type of hamburger available.

And now, back stateside and retrospective, we reconstruct our perceptions about what Cuba is like. Here on the outside world, where we can recall our experience with the island's radiance, the embargo's significance begins to materialize. Here is an island just 90 miles from our borders, yet a reluctant barrier of old arguments and economic conflict muddles our understanding of a remarkable country.

~Justin Wright Hargesheimer