

# Cuba: Open For U.S. Tourism But Not Prepared

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*Note: I am just back from a week on the tenth cruise ship to go to Cuba in about 58 years. Here is what I saw...*

**Havana:** A beautiful natural port, 90 miles from Key West, and our ship was the only vessel I saw moving about the harbor for two days. We docked at one of what were once three parallel cruise ship piers. Today, 58 years later, only one is usable, and the other two are falling into the water, with no roofs and no traffic.

Old Havana begins at the pier. There are four big plazas in Old Havana, and many of the buildings facing these plazas have recently had their first coat of paint and first fresh plastering since the 1950s, as the government is trying to create some eye appeal on what is otherwise a tired, terribly antiquated neighborhood.

The narrow streets connecting the plazas are freshened up, but a glance down any side street or alleyway, or into courtyards, shows crumbling stairwells, and buildings that are barely habitable.

There are no retail stores, so there is no advertising. The government is the landlord for everything, even the little corner bars with three or four tables and four or five bar stools. No door has a sign announcing what is inside...you just need to know.

The temperature is in the 90s with high humidity. There are many buildings with window units, but the windows are open. Like much else in this country, these units seem inoperable.

Numerous airlines have been granted landing slots in 6-8 cities around Cuba, but the tourism infrastructure is slim. There are 'green shoots' however, with some new hotels going up and some grand old hulks being converted- very slowly- into hotels. I saw a number of construction sites with no workers present.

My guess is that these projects are owned by higher ups in the government or military, those same folks who purportedly live in the nicer homes on the outskirts of town, leaving the dilapidated housing to the normal everyday folks.

The streets are in good shape around Havana, but there are very few cars. There are some horsedrawn surreys pulled by skinny nags. The people are shuttled about in what a Cuban man told me are called "ovens"- rickety trucks into which dozens of people are crammed in sardine-like in the stifling heat. Beautifully restored American cars from the '50s offer one hour rides around town with the top down for 40 Cucs, regardless of the number of passengers squeezing in. A Cuc is a government issue scrip which has no value outside of the country. One Cuc is pegged at \$1 but when you change to Cucs a 13% fee is charged-hand the teller \$100 and you get \$87 Cucs back.

There are a few international standard hotels scattered around Havana, and a number along Varadero Beach, which is down the coast a bit. At the door of every restaurant or hotel for tourists is a doorman whose job it is to keep out local Cubans.

The only private businesses I observed were the recently allowed B&B equivalents where private citizens are allowed to rent out a room or two, or operate a tiny restaurant with a handful of tables.

The only private shopkeepers I observed were operators of small souvenir stands selling merchandise of below standard quality.

I was told there are four television channels, all operated by the communist government, with political programming, as per a Cuban schoolteacher I met in a park.

I was told that sometimes electricity and water is intermittent, but I did not personally experience it.

Shopping by the people is accomplished with ration cards, which permit purchase of a small quantity of rice, beans, cooking oil, and low quality meat. The schoolteacher I met said diapers are not available and his wife must use t-shirts for their 8 month old son. Another lady begged me to go to the store and buy milk for her baby, who she said was 'diabetic'. She said a box of powdered milk cost 23 Cucs, in a country where the average monthly salary is 25 Cucs.

Due to the poverty, there is thinly disguised 'hustle' in many people a tourist meets on the street, although there are strict laws and penalties for any Cuban 'committing a crime against tourism.'

Video cameras are on poles on the major squares and ordinary Cubans will not discuss politics except off to the side, in private.

**Cienfuegos and Santiago:** These two smaller ports we visited seem less poor than Havana, and the people seemed more purposeful, with less loitering in the streets.

**Summary:** Most of the buildings in the country have suffered from almost 60 years of zero or almost zero maintenance, so there is a tremendous pent-up need for all the architectural, engineering, construction, construction materials, labor, expertise, and financing which will be required. All is dependent on the government easing away from communism, and letting the people unleash their energies, as did happen in former communist states such as East Germany, Yugoslavia, Poland, etc., all of which now have thriving economies since The Wall went down in 1989.

With the huge influx of visitors now coming from the one cruise line serving Cuba and the multiple airlines, the challenge will be to deliver enough of a positive experience that people will want to return. My understanding is that this 600 mile long Caribbean island with a population estimated at 11 million has numerous stunning beaches, mountains, and SCUBA diving locations. Getting the tourists there, lodging them, and feeding them will be a huge challenge unless there are significant changes in the governance of the island. ●