

*Upon receiving several photos from Margaret Dinkel of her journey to Cuba, Alumni Director Susan Fitzpatrick asked Margaret several questions about her trip. Since travel to Cuba was opened up to Americans only recently, it is still a relatively rare travel destination. Margaret kindly replied with details about her trip. Here is her story.*

## CUBA

### **Why we decided to go?**

I have always been interested in Cuba. My curiosity piqued with the Cuban Missile Crisis when I was in early elementary school. I remember hearing my father speak about it. Also, about that time the Spanish teacher in our elementary school was a Cuban refugee. His back story was that he was a lawyer and fled the country because of persecution when Fidel Castro was waging the revolution against Batista. Lastly, within the past couple of years I read the book *Che* by John Lee Anderson which is about the life of Che Guevara who was a top leader in the revolution.

Because of that backdrop I wanted to learn more about the Cuban history and its people so when the opportunity for travel to Cuba presented itself, it was a “no-brainer”.

### **How we got there?**

The trip was originally advertised as part of a group trip organized by a local television station. However, we were the only ones from the area who were interested so we became part of a larger group of 27 people from various parts of the U.S.

**Collette Travel** arranged the trip. There are only twelve categories under which Americans can travel to Cuba. They are as follows:

1. *Family Visits*: We had many Cubans on the plane returning to visit family.
2. *Official U.S. Government business*
3. *Journalistic Activity*: news reporters, etc...
4. *Educational Activities*: Includes people-to-people exchange, cultural exchange.  
This is the category that the travel agency used. They had to have a license issued by the Cuban government to do so.
5. *Religious Activities*: practice of religion is permitted. (More on that later.)
6. *Public performances, workshops, athletic competitions, etc...*
7. *Support for the Cuban people*
8. *Humanitarian projects*
9. *Research projects of educational facilities, private foundations*: there is a collaboration of research between Cienfuegos Province Botanical Gardens and Harvard University.
10. *Professional research and meetings*
11. *Transportation, importation, or exportation of information*
12. *Certain export transactions that may be considered for authorization under existing Department of Commerce regulations*

### **How long were we there?**

The trip lasted six days.

## Thoughts on Cuba:

Cuba is a communist country. As such, all aspects of the average citizen are dictated by the government. They do permit some “private” business, but the government owns 51% of each one.

The government owns all of the horses and cows in the country. Beef as a meat is non-existent. The people are permitted to have cows and horses and many in the countryside do. Horses and carts are the norm for transportation in the country. Cows are used for milk (and subsequently making cheese). The citizen can sell extra milk and cheese to neighbors on a small scale and not have to pay the government, but if they sell on a larger scale—like set up a stand and have a larger clientele, then they have to pay the government 51% of what they make. If a cow or horse dies (hit by a train, truck, etc. or natural causes) the citizen must report it to local government authorities who will then investigate the death to make sure it was not suspicious.

The people are awesome. They are friendly and accommodating. They are also very proud of their Cuban heritage. They can take junk and make beautiful pieces of art. We visited a few art galleries where they did this. One in particular had artists who took old car parts and made metal sculptures. Another took broken tile and made beautiful mosaics. They are a very resourceful and industrious people.

Religion is permitted. Catholicism is the main religion, but not many are practicing Catholics. There is also a fairly large group of people practicing Santeria which is a mix of Catholicism and Voodoo. As such, most people have large pots of cacti on the roofs of their homes to ward off the evil spirits. One practicing Santeria gentleman told our group not to try to overthink the Cuban culture, just enjoy what it has to offer. He said even Cubans can't figure out their culture.

Electricity is unreliable. While waiting at the airport for departure back to the U.S., the electricity went off several times. Because of the unreliable electricity which leads to the water pumps not working, most people have large urns on the roofs of their houses to catch rain water which then gravity feeds into the house.

The food is good, but not hot and spicy like you might think. Beans and rice are the staples. We had beans and rice two times a day and could have had it three if we really wanted it for breakfast. The main meat staples were pork and some chicken. (The government didn't own those two animals.) Most people, even those in city apartments, had a pig or two and chickens. There was reserved space in the area of the apartments where people could keep them. There was fresh tropical fruit—pineapple and bananas and some leafy greens used for salads, but no salad dressing. It was a bit different to eat salad without dressing on it.

As Americans, we had to stay with our group. We had a local tour guide who was very well versed in Cuban culture and history. He did a fantastic job and related well to us.

There was very little down time to wander about. Everything was scheduled, even “free time”.

Transportation for citizens in cities is public transportation—bus—which is quite unreliable. Gas for motorized vehicles is very expensive. Some people have scooters or small motorcycles. The “newer” cars are Russian built—Leda is the name and of course there are the famous 1950’s U.S. cars. They are very proud of their American cars and work very hard to keep them running—many time scavenging or building parts.

The average worker makes between 15 – 25 pesos a month—guaranteed by the government. 1 peso is equivalent to 1 U.S. dollar. So---they don’t make much money. It’s difficult to understand how they manage to survive. They are allotted a certain amount of electricity per month at a set low price, but if one goes over his or her quota, the price is staggering. The same is for food. We saw no grocery stores—that we could identify, but the people have ration coupons to take to the store to “buy” staples like flour & sugar, etc..., but again, if one goes over the quota—he or she pays dearly.

There is some internet (when the electricity works) for the Cuban people, but we were told that we had to pay for it if we wanted access. Apparently they also have access to Facebook.

While we were there, there was a national referendum to vote in a new constitution. We asked our guide how elections worked in Cuba. He said the polls were watched over by school children. We did see children about ten to twelve years old out in front of polling places. He also said that that particular ballot was just a piece of paper with Yes—No on it to indicate Yes in favor of the new constitution or No not in favor. The referendum passed. Essentially, it gave more power to the Communist Party, but gay rights was also part of it.

More thoughts:

Having not traveled internationally (except on cruise ships), I wasn’t aware that one did not throw toilet paper in the toilet and flush. Plumbing can plug up really fast—don’t ask---. Just suffice it to say that there is a reason a waste basket is placed by the toilet.

And...on the subject of toilet paper...if you travel to Cuba, bring your own. Just in case. Also, toilet seats are a luxury, even in the women’s restroom.

**Anecdote:** We visited the Revolution Museum and several of us ladies used the restroom before we got back on the bus to travel to the next stop. There was no toilet seat—(ugh!!)—and no toilet paper. Not to fear—I had my own in the backpack. As I was almost finished, a hand reached over the stall door with a wad of toilet paper. It was the restroom matron handing it out. On the way out, she indicated that she expected to be tipped 1 peso for the service.

**Anecdote:** Our tour guide knew what was going on in his country politically and on occasion his sarcasm came out. He then had to re-state what he said in more political correct terms. On the voting process: he stated that at the polls the voter was given a **pencil** to mark the ballot. He said of course the referendum would pass (because a person’s vote could be changed). Then he glossed it over and said the line-item about improving gay rights was a good thing. We saw graffiti on the back of street signs that

read  $2+2=5$ . In George Orwell's book *1984*, there is a reference to this. My personal thought is maybe the people were protesting the referendum on giving more power to the Communist Party. (Just my opinion).

These are just a few things we learned. It is a complicated and awesome country and culture.

