

Bill Dwyer's 1976 trip

Cuba Draws the Curious, Despite the Law

Most Americans are forbidden to spend their tourist dollars in Cuba, but some go anyway

By MIREYA NAVARRO

AT the Marina Hemingway, a complex of hotels, restaurants and shops in Havana, the grocery store's shelves are stacked with Kellogg's Corn Flakes and Rice Krispies, Nestlé chocolate bars and American cigarettes. English is spoken along the aisles. The sights and sounds are so familiar that Americans may have to remind themselves that they are in Cuba.

A popular playground for Americans before the revolution, Cuba has been off limits to tourists from the United States for most of Fidel Castro's four-decade-old rule. Under restrictions imposed by the American economic embargo, now in its 37th year, only certain travelers — including journalists, Government officials and those visiting close family once a year for humanitarian reasons — can visit Cuba, spending up to \$100 a day for living expenses. In addition, travelers can apply for a specific license to go if they have a religious or educational purpose, for example.

Anybody else is banned from spending money under the Trading with the Enemy Act, which in practice deters travel. But while the embargo has minimized American tourism, more Americans have found ways to visit since limited free-market reforms adopted by Cuba in the 1990's legalized the dollar.

Since Pope John Paul II's visit last year, the number of American religious and academic groups wanting to visit has skyrocketed, some travel agencies say. Bob Guild, program director for Marazul Tours in Weehawken, N.J., said his agency has booked 45 such groups just this month, which are



Photographs by Robert Rattner



traveling legally under Federal licenses, compared to five or six groups during the same period in past years. Neither Cuban nor American officials have estimates of American visitors, saying the number is difficult to gauge because of unauthorized travel.

At any given time, 9 out of 10 boats at Marina Hemingway come from the United States. Americans traveling through third countries like Jamaica on package tours can often be found at the Tropicana, the legendary outdoor nightclub where Las Vegas-type chorus girls dance with chandeliers on their heads to Cuban rhythms. In Varadero, Cuba's premier tourist beach area, the high-end hotels also draw American visitors seeking respite from the decay and hardship that are now staples of this socialist country of about 11 million people.

"Curiosity — that's what brings everybody," said a 55-year-old boater and con-

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struction worker from Key West anchored at the Marina Hemingway for two months, on his third visit since last year. He refused to give his name. "You just want to go visit places and see what it's like."

What Cuba is like can best be described as

a time warp. The ride from the José Martí International Airport into Havana offers a surreal sight: roads populated by bicycles and 1950's Cadillacs, some decrepit but many in mint condition; billboards filled with revolutionary slogans; the utter ab-

ABOVE Plaza de la Catedral in front of the 18th-century Cathedral of Havana.

LEFT Bicycle taxis at the Floridita restaurant.

sence of fast-food franchises or chain hotels.

In Old Havana, unpainted, sometimes crumbling colonial architecture remains magnificent. And an excursion to the countryside, to places like the Viñales Valley in the Pinar del Río Province and to beaches and mountains unspoiled by development, makes a visitor feel just plain lucky.

Travel throughout the island is unrestricted; visitors can get around by bus, train, airplane and car. Public transportation is overwhelmed by demand, but tours are available and visitors can also rent a car, or hire a driver with a car.

Some Americans visiting for the first time say they are struck by the friendliness of people and the lack of abject poverty they have found in places such as Africa and India.

"Everyone had shoes, everyone had clothes on their backs," said a 32-year-old Miami woman who traveled illegally through Nassau recently and stayed with the family of a Cuban-American friend. "We didn't see starving people."

But there is also the economic need that

makes Cuba ration rice, sugar and other staples for residents and that leads even professionals to moonlight as drivers and "jineteras," Cuba's prostitutes, who are the draw for a thriving sex tourism industry. A heavy-handed Government provides amenities for tourists that the Cuban people can only dream of.

This can all translate into deeply unsettling experiences for a visitor. It is not uncommon, for instance, to dine at a nice restaurant next to kissing couples, teen-aged girls and men three or four times their age, or to have Cuban friends suffer the humiliation of being denied entry to hotels, even to the lobby for a visit. American officials call it "tourism apartheid," but Cuban officials say they are trying to promote equality among Cubans by not allowing special privileges to those with dollars (sent by relatives in the United States or earned by working for tourists).

Dollars, however, are sometimes of no use in the face of shortages. Meat and fresh vegetables can be hard to come by even at better restaurants, and many items taste as if they were cooked in lard.

Havana has a wide range of restaurants and fast-food cafeterias, and outside the capital most hotels have restaurants, all catering to the dollar-carrying customer.

The quality of service varies wildly, with hotel staffs ranging from efficient and friendly to slow and surly. Worn-out carpets



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and mismatched furniture can be found in some of the highly-rated hotels in Havana, such as the Capri, and hours-long power outages are not uncommon. One hotel in Matanzas, near Varadero, shuts off the water for most of the day. By comparison, Varadero's luxury resorts, the product of Government joint ventures with private companies from countries such as Spain, Germany and Canada, seem like a step into the First World. Almost everything is imported, from fruits and meats to tools, and the feeling is one of pampered comfort.

Cuba is relatively cheap; the most expensive hotels often charge less than \$200 a night, depending on the season. Prices can be even lower if a visitor sidesteps the Government infrastructure and deals directly with Cuban solo entrepreneurs. Unauthorized drivers, for instance, charge much less than metered taxis, although many of the cars are not air-conditioned and some

seem to be falling apart. Lodging with a family and taking meals at "paladares" — private restaurants in the owners' homes — can offer higher quality at lower prices than hotels and bigger restaurants. And because of a thriving black market, it is possible to get Cuban cigars at bargain prices. (Almost every Cuban one encounters claims to know somebody at a cigar factory, but the product can be junk, and tourists are often warned to buy tobacco only at Government stores.)

Before the Communist revolution, Americans made up the largest tourist bloc visiting Cuba. Now Canadians and Europeans have filled the void. Tourism, which the Government began building up in the 1990's, has steadily increased to 1.4 million visitors in 1998, according to officials of Cuba's Tourism Ministry. If an ambitious target of two million visitors by the year 2000 is reached, they said, Cuba will have nearly doubled its tourism since 1996.



Robert Satterer

ABOVE Varadero Beach in Varadero, Cuba's most popular resort.

LEFT Vintage American car in Old Havana.

RIGHT An American boat with satellite dish at Marina Hemingway.



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"We're bringing more tourists and the tourism infrastructure is also growing," said Manuel García-Crespo, a tourism spokesman. The infrastructure is key at this point for an industry that is still in its infancy but that has become the largest source of foreign currency for Cuba, contributing about \$1.8 billion a year to the island's economy, officials said. To accommodate the two million visitors Cuba hopes to attract at the turn of the century, it needs to increase hotel rooms to 34,000 from the current 28,000, Mr. García-Crespo said.

Among the earliest and biggest private investors in Cuba's tourism industry is Spain's Sol Meliá hotel chain, which co-owns with the Government four upscale hotels and manages several others; its investment on the island surpasses \$55 million. Carlos Pereda-Navarro, general manager of Meliá Las Americas in Varadero, considers Cuba an attractive investment because of Government support and the potential for growth. He said this more than compensates for such extra costs as having to import most goods.

"We're just beginning," said Mr. Pereda-Navarro, who has worked in Cuba for the past nine years. The potential would be even greater, he added, if Americans were free to travel to the island.

Mr. García-Crespo said American travel was up but still relatively negligible.

Under regulations enforced by the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, travel to Cuba without a specific license is generally limited to Government officials and representatives of international organizations, journalists and those visiting close relatives. (Cuban-Americans on family visits make up the largest group of visiting Americans, numbering about 30,000 a year, United States Government figures show.) Since American carriers do not fly to Cuba, travelers usually go through third countries like Mexico, Canada and the Bahamas, although since last year many have been able to depart from Miami on authorized charter flights that reach Havana in about 40 minutes. In new steps announced this month, the Clinton Administration said it would authorize charter flights from additional United States cities to destinations in Cuba other than Havana.

For those traveling legally, there is a limit of \$100 worth of goods such as cigars that can be brought back from Cuba. Because transactions are in cash — Americans cannot use credit cards issued by American banks — visitors often go over the spending limit with little risk of being caught. And Cuba enables illegal travel by waiving boating fees at marinas and not stamping passports at airports.

American officials say a big problem is illegal travel through third countries where

weekend tour packages in Cuba are commonly offered. Also, they say, some United States-based organizations make travel possible under the guise of educational or cultural trips that are mostly tours.

"The policy is no tourism," an American official who spoke on the condition of anonymity said. "There are people who violate the law and a lot of people in the travel industry who promote this."

Although sailing to Cuba itself is not prohibited, paying for meals, transportation, lodging and mooring fees is, and returning passengers by air or vessel can be the subject of investigation by the United States Customs Service, Federal officials said. While enforcement has been lax, officials say it has become progressively easier over the years for the Government to penalize people for violations. In 1992 civil fines of up to \$55,000 for each violation were instituted. The presumption is that a United States citizen traveling to Cuba has spent money there unless he can prove otherwise.

Criminal penalties for violating the travel restrictions are up to 10 years in prison and \$250,000 in fines for an individual. There have been only 16 criminal prosecutions for Cuba travel violations under the Trading With the Enemy Act since 1983, officials said. But the Treasury Department has collected nearly \$1.9 million in civil penalties for embargo violations in 379 separate cases over the last four years as of last September, most related to travel.

"The result is, this can ruin your vacation," the American official said. The United States Interests Section, the American diplomatic mission in Havana, does not refuse consular services such as replacing a lost passport to Americans traveling here illegally (unless the American was born in Cuba, in which case Cuba treats the person as a national and does not allow the Interests Section to get involved). But the diplomatic mission would also refer the case to Treasury for enforcement.

United States Government officials said their policy responds to concerns that override the desire American tourists may have to visit Cuba. "We're trying to get Cuba to make the reforms needed to avoid a chaotic transition when Castro falls, that would create a massive migrant wave," the American official said. But American officials also acknowledge that people almost invariably become more conciliatory toward Cuba, and opposed to the embargo, once they visit. "It creates a constituency," the American official said.

Some of those who flout the law say they do not care about politics. "People can come over, go out fishing and have a good time and it doesn't cost them a fortune," said the boater from Key West at Marina Hemingway, where boats from 30 to 50 feet long sport satellite dishes and American flags and sometimes anchor for months at a time. The American said he stood ready to defend his rights in court if ever prosecuted, arguing that it is unconstitutional for the United States to restrict Americans' right to travel.

"A lot of Americans come here basically because it's a beautiful country," he said.