

Our man in Havana - Me

4 rights - F. Post. 11.2.02

We knew we couldn't be the way we prepared it, so we first-time visitors to Cuba spent much of our brief stay here swapping surprises. Here are a few of mine. The place isn't at all as bleak as I'd imagined it. The drive from Jose Marti Airport did take us through a section of high-rise dilapidation and obvious poverty. But, it turns out that such slums are less typical of the city than are the vibrant (if still a tad seedy) sections of Old Havana. And the newer hotels -- we stayed at the Malia Cohiba -- would be luxurious anywhere in the world.

I was with a group put together by the Howard University Medical Association and the Republic of Cuba to exchange information and perhaps to fashion joint undertakings. Naturally, we were treated well when we traveled or went sightseeing as a group. But even when we ventured out in twosomes and foursomes, the place never felt even slightly oppressive

-- or unsafe. I could tell you about the music -- good traditional Cuban music, terrific Afro-Cuban jazz and great modern jazz performed by young musicians of impressive skill. But I fully expected great music, fine rum and world-class cigars. I'm talking about surprises. A major surprise was the near absence of anti-American sentiment.

After all, everybody knows about the four-decade-long U.S. economic embargo, which, in the minds of the Cubans I talked to, is the cause of their economic distress. I expected to find Cubans liking individual Americans they encountered but hating America generally. Wrong. They love Americans and admire America. It didn't seem to be an act put on in pursuit of the dollar (which is all Americans can spend here, credit cards from U.S. banks being unusable).

I have been to any number of places in the Caribbean, Europe

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and Africa -- some poorer than Cuba and full of "guides" and other hustlers after hard currency, some ostensibly friendly with America -- and found undercurrents of anti-American resentment, a tendency to lecture Americans for their presumed arrogance. The only anti-U.S. sentiment I heard here came from a reporter from Serbia who blamed America for the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Bosnian war. But none among the Cubans. Okay, we didn't see Cuba. We saw a few small slices of Havana. But we saw enough "unofficial" people in the streets and shops to believe we have a fair assessment of Cuban attitudes.

They hate our embargo, and they hate the privations they must endure -- particularly the ones whose logic they don't see. They don't see, for instance, why only foreigners and a few favored professionals are able to purchase cars. Ordinary Cubans tell me that if you

owned a car before the revolution, you can keep it -- but you can't have another one even as a gift. That explains why the streets are full of vintage American autos -- 1955-57 Chevrolets seem to be a favorite, though Plymouths, Fords and even DeSotos abound. Incredible mechanical genius keeps these antiques in action. Cubans aren't happy, either, with the limited choices available in government-operated markets or their limited purchasing power anywhere.

The government ration cards supply at best the bare minimum of food, and even if you manage to find the money, you can't buy much more than that. We, as foreigners, could eat heartily (if not always appetizingly) both in fancy restaurants and in hotels where locals weren't allowed above the public floors. But Cubans aren't about to repudiate the revolution. They are proud of its accomplishments, particularly in education and health care. If only the embar-

go would go away. Perhaps I was surprised most by what I thought I knew best: Cuba's racial situation. I'd been led to believe by black Cuban expatriates that Fidel Castro, though he at first had no particular regard for blacks, had, with the exodus of white Cubans to America, entrusted the civil service, the military officer corps and much of the middle class to blacks.

Well, I saw hardly any brown-skinned or black Cubans running anything -- not as managers or ministers or maitre d's, not even as cashiers, clerks or hotel maids. Black Cubans are plentiful, as a stroll through the poor sections of Havana will make clear. But all the good jobs in this socialist paradise seem to go to people we used to describe as "light, bright or damned near white." Ask non-black Cubans about this phenomenon, and they'll blink as though they've just noticed it for the first time. There's no color problem in Cuba, they'll insist.