Reflections and photos by Janet Dudley-Eshbach
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For the past few weeks, I have been struggling to find the words to express my feelings about a country that is simultaneously so beautiful and so deeply conflicted. I traveled to Cuba in early December 2002, on a 10-day trip with members of NAFSA: Association of International Educators. The purposes of the trip were to explore relationships with universities in Havana, Santiago, Holguín and Santa Clara, and to bring the Cuban people needed school and medical supplies. On a more personal basis, as a Latin Americanist by training, I have for many years been interested in Cuba as a “special case,” the only Communist nation in the Western Hemisphere and our close neighbor.

Our group of 30 educators visited universities in Havana, Santiago, Holguín and Santa Clara, and had many wonderful opportunities to interact with the people of Cuba. This article briefly summarizes some impressions I bring back from my trip to our island neighbor just 90 miles to the south of Florida.

There is much to admire about Cuba, starting with the people. For the most part, we were greeted with warmth and broad smiles. Despite all the anti-U.S. government propaganda over the past 40 years, the Cuban people still love Americans. They feel great affinity and simpatía toward us and desperately hope to get closer to us with the eventual normalization of relations between our two nations.

Cuba is a beautiful country. On many days the sun shines brightly, making the sky a clear blue and the sugar cane fields a brilliant green. Red poinsettias as big as trees grow alongside modest dwellings. Brightly-colored flowers grow wild throughout the countryside. The Royal Palm, the national tree, is majestic and stately. The cities, however, look forlorn. This is especially true of Havana, which has many dilapidated buildings, some dating from the late 1800s. The salt air, moisture, lack of paint and lack of repair have taken a huge toll on otherwise beautiful, old buildings.

But, again, the people are remarkable. It seems everyone sings, dances and plays at least one musical instrument. Cuban music is lively and varied, from the conga and son, to jazz and the cha-cha. If you are a music lover, this is a reason in and of itself to travel to Cuba. At every restaurant, in every hotel lobby, you invariably will find a group of singers with...
guitars, percussion and other accompaniment. Not only is every Cuban a musician, most love baseball, chess and dominoes. Thus, Cubans regularly interact with each other through lively activities, in contrast to U.S. society where many teens and others spend long hours plugged into the Internet or television.

The Cuban habanos are the best cigars in the world. And when the Bacardis left Cuba, the Cubans fortunately had learned from them how to make excellent rum!

More significantly, Cubans are justifiably proud of social improvements that have resulted from their controversial Revolution. Everyone is provided a basic level of healthcare, and everyone attends school, usually at least through the eighth grade. There are few, if any, homeless people, and each citizen is guaranteed basic food rations. Cuba is a country that cares for its elderly. Further, there is practically no crime, even in Havana. Most importantly, there is a sense of unity among Cubans, a sense of nationalism. Though there are signs that some are tiring of Castro’s regime, many others are willing to endure hardships and make sacrifices. Most deeply believe that human values are more important than material goods, and that Cuba’s sovereignty as a nation free from foreign domination must be a lasting legacy of the Revolution.

As with any society, Cuba has its many flaws. The Revolutionary propaganda is endless and tiresome. While there are no billboards advertising commercial products (a nice absence!), throughout the country and in the cities there are many, many paintings on buildings and signs spouting a political message.

Under the totalitarian aspect of Fidel Castro’s rule, no real disidence is permitted, whether in the media, artistic expression or public demonstrations. While we were told that there is democracy (members of the Communist Party “run” for office against each other), there is, in fact, no meaningful political process.

Significant problems exist in today’s Cuba, starting with the country’s infrastructure. Buildings are crumbling (it is estimated that 300 buildings each year collapse in Havana), plumbing is in dire need of repair, and drinking water is not reliably safe. Just as in pre-Revolutionary Cuba, prostitution is increasingly becoming a problem, as some women seek a way to supplement meager income.

The Cuban diet is largely vegetarian, and not by choice. There are shortages of food, medical supplies and much-needed equipment, shortages resulting from the U.S. embargo.

One of the most frustrating aspects of our trip was trying to cut through the red tape and contradictory statements to figure out how we might establish exchange programs for students and faculty. Reasons for studying in Cuba include the low incidence of crime, lack of anti-American sentiment, low cost and proximity to the U.S. Disadvantages or obstacles would

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include problems with the infrastructure (including unreliable phone service), insufficient Internet access, limited library holdings and possible repressive action should an American student become an anti-Revolutionary crusader.

Many of the creature comforts to which we have become accustomed here in the States are simply not available in Cuba. Home stays are extremely difficult, if not impossible, so that students would need to live in apartment-like dorms with other students. In this regard, a student wishing to truly become fluent and learn about another culture might be better off spending a semester in Spain, Mexico or some other Spanish-speaking country where living with a local family is an option.

I believe strongly in the educational value of studying abroad. The six years that I lived in Mexico City while earning my doctorate in Spanish linguistics and Hispanic literature provided me the greatest learning experiences of my life. As a result of this most recent trip, I may, in January 2004, lead a study-tour titled “Comparative Global Studies in Mexico and Cuba.” The group would travel to Mexico for a week and then to Cuba for 10 days. The trip could carry course credit, be of interest to students of political science, Spanish, philosophy, history (and other areas as well), and could be of interest to Salisbury University alumni.

As always is the case when I have been abroad, upon my return I feel very fortunate to call the United States home. Nonetheless, there are lessons to be learned from the Cuba experience. I made friends with a gentleman who remembers Cuba before the Revolution, and he has lived through over 40 years of Fidelismo. We talked about many, many aspects of life in the United States and in Cuba. As we concluded our conversation, he gently warned me. His view was that any country that is seen as the sole world power is at risk. He went on to say that societies that get too committed to their consumerism may lose sight of important human values, and that history shows that empires fall.

There was wisdom in the perspectives he offered. As I think about U.S. foreign policy, I believe that we must stop trying to dictate foreign policy unilaterally. Trade embargoes and threats of war will not bring peace and prosperity. Instead, we should sit down at the table with the Cubans, the Iraqis, the North Koreans, the Saudis of the world, and listen to what they have to say, really listen, and work toward a multinational worldview, one that would provide for sustainable development and promote world peace. In the case of Cuba, all of us who had the opportunity to visit came back firmly convinced that the U.S. embargo should be lifted.

Today, when I reflect upon Cuba, I feel enormous sadness. It is a beautiful country, and the Cubans are such passionate, wonderful people. When Fidel dies, and as tourism increasingly becomes the mainstay of the Cuban economy, enormous societal upheaval may result. While some remain committed to the values of Castro’s Revolution, many of Cuba’s young people are weary of Fidel and his tired slogans. The winds of change blow strong, and the future outlook for Cuba is uncertain.