

Voices

From

Cuba

Roxbury Community College

April 30, 1996



Introduction

The Cuban Reality Study Tour was an integral part of the Cuban Reality Course and the Caribbean Focus Program at Roxbury Community College. The course took place in the spring of 1995 and the Study Tour traveled during March 16-31, 1996. The goal of the Study Tour was to experience and to bring back as much data as possible on the actual conditions in Cuba today. There were seventeen participants, the majority of whom were students in the course the previous year. Twelve members of the group spoke fluent Spanish. The members of the group are now engaged in reporting their findings to various communities in the Boston area. This collection of information and documents is a first draft. We hope to publish a more complete version later this year.

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**Cuban Reality Study Tour
Itinerary**

- March 16 Send-off in Cambridge, MA. Travel to Montreal.
- March 17 Morning sightseeing in Montreal. Flight to Havana, Cuba.
Arrival at 10:00PM at Jose Marti Airport. Bus to El Abra Camp.
- March 18 El Abra (camp on the north coast).
Santa Cruz del Norte; Day Care Center "Casita de Chocolate";
Neighborhood Health Clinic; Elementary School
Tour of city of Matanzas
- March 19 Travel to Havana; meetings with ICAP, Instituto Cubano
Amistad de los Pueblos, and FMC, Federacion de Mujeres
Cubanas
(Non-governmental organizations which relate to foreign
groups and women respectively)
- March 20 City Tour of Havana including el Morro castle, the old
city, the House of Rum, Cathedral Sq. and shops.
Lecture and meeting at University of Havana with Prof.
Heriberto Hernandez Gonzalez, Prof. of History; participation in
a *tertulia*, a student political discussion, on effects of
tourism; Kohout interviews Elizardo Sanchez Santa Cruz, a
leading dissident.
Benison visits Institute For Biotropical Health and Santiago de
las Vegas Sanitarium
Murphy and Schowe celebrate Baha'i New Year with Cuban
Baha'is.
- March 21 Teel and King Calbazana meet Daniel Reyes, faculty of
CENAM, Centro Nacional de Perfeccionamiento Medico; Museum
of Revolution; visits with dissidents; travel to Pinar del Rio,
Aguas Claras.
- March 22 Tour of Pinar del Rio and visits to a tobacco cooperative,
tobacco factory, and small rum factory. Lunch at a private
restaurant, a *paladar*. Visits with various people in their
homes.

- March 23 Benison conducts interviews at National Center for Health Education in Havana (part of the ministry of Public Health); others tour Vinales valley and Cueva del Indio; Cabaret show in evening
- March 24 Part of group returns to Montreal and Boston; others drive to El Abra, then Matanzas.
- March 25 Matanzas; research on music; visited the family of a man who makes musical instruments
- March 26 Matanzas; Casa de la Cultura; Jesuit Center, Sisters of Mercy convent; interviews on religion; Paez and Valentin drive to Cienfuegos and Trinidad
- March 27 Ochoa and Marchi return to Havana; University of Havana: student debate on religion and the Revolution; Cuban National Ballet performance of "Cinderella"; tour of Trinidad's colonial section; performance of Afro-Cuban music and dance at Canchanchara, a cultural club
- March 28 Havana: Casa de las Americas (publishing house); bookstores; tour of Radio Havana. Marchi and Ochoa interviewed on the program "Juventud Habla", to air on April 28, 1996; in Trinidad, Paez and Valentin interview photographer, Giuseppe Lo Bartolo
- March 29 All return to Havana; Hemingway Museum; Cabaret show; interview with Pablo Menendez, director of rock group Mesela
- March 30 Museo de Bellas Artes; International Dance Festival; bongo lesson and bike ride
- March 31 Return to Montreal and Boston

Initial Impressions of Cuba: Report on the Cuban Reality Study
Tour
March, 1996
by Nancy Teel

Cuban society today represents a series of painful contradictions. As the Cuban Reality Study Tour traveled and talked, recorded and photographed, we constantly saw both the beautiful and the terrible sides of the island. On the one hand, there is great natural beauty, a strong and proud culture, and the positive effects of nearly forty years of attempts to achieve social equality under the socialist government. On the other hand, we saw poverty and economic shortages, severe disinvestment in infrastructure especially in Havana, and an exploding income differential and accompanying danger of widespread corruption that have come with the establishment of a dual economy, capitalism overlaying socialism.

The positive effects of the revolutionary ideals of the Cuban Revolution are impressive: an end to racial discrimination and a serious attempt to eliminate racism, the creation of a positive environment for development of women's potential and a strong national women's organization (La Federation de Mujeres Cubanas), the highest rate of literacy in the Americas, and an infant mortality rate equal to ours in the United States. Cuba is a peaceful, ordered society without a large police or military presence, and, of course, it is known for its free education and medical care. The medical system is recognized world-wide for innovation and special treatments for a variety of health problems. While Cuba is in many ways a poor country, it is not poor in these areas of human development; rather it compares favorably with the developed world. In the arena of politics and economics, however, Cuba has less favorable conditions.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had given Cuba large subsidies and favorable trade relations, the Cuban economy lapsed into a depression. The 36-year-long US. trade embargo made conditions for recovery very difficult. Slowly Cuba has built a new layer of the economy based on tourism and utilizing dollars. Investment from Europe, Canada and Mexico has grown and the economy is now beginning to recover. There are severe negative effects of this dual economy, however; these include widespread

prostitution, begging, and economic hardship for people outside the dollar economy, including some grave poverty. With little record keeping or accounting, there is a wide-open possibility of corruption. And sadly, political and economic opponents are silenced. A large number are in jail. The only available newspapers are published by government agencies and the opposition group must publish and distribute its brief newsletter in a clandestine manner. Members of our group spoke with dissidents and brought back some of their literature.

Besides the economy, my own area of research was education. Cubans enjoy free education from day care center to university. Their system is organized on the European and Latin American model and is rather different from ours. They have a national curriculum and structure. Children attend day care and kindergarten in day care centers. There are also pre-school classes and kindergarten in elementary schools, which go through sixth grade. They have a wonderful system in some schools in which children stay with the same teacher for several grades. The teacher gets to know each child and his or her family, becoming like a second mother. (Yes, elementary school teachers seem to be all women.) Seventh through ninth grade is secondary school and fulfills a student's obligatory education. Children may work at adult jobs at age 16. Most continue their education, however. After taking examinations, many enter a college preparatory sequence leading after three years to university entrance. Others follow a technical course of study until high school graduation and then enter the workforce. Universities have open admissions for people who have the preparation and interest. Depending on the student's major field of study, he or she may spend up to six or seven years in the university, graduating with a terminal professional degree, such as an MD. Cuban doctors and engineers have a world-wide reputation for innovation and excellence. In our interviews and informal conversation, we found our Cuban interlocutors to be well informed and eager to discuss all kinds of issues. Many speak English well, since all students study English from seventh grade on.

Schools are not without problems, however. They lack basic supplies like pens, pencils and paper as well as new and adequate numbers of books. The school buildings need paint and repairs, and computers are only available at the university level. Some elementary school classes have over forty students. Even at the University of Havana, which is generally very well kept up, there are

infrastructure problems. We also heard that recently, university entrance has been limited.

It's impossible to give a full account of the Cuban Reality Study Tour at this time, both because there has not been as yet enough time for reflection and because each participant specialized in a different area of study, so my view is only one among many. As we bring our different experiences together, I hope that they will inspire others to continue seeking to understand the Cuban reality.

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