In March, 2014 I had the good fortune to travel to Cuba. It was a country that I had wanted to see, but prior to 2012, US citizens were prohibited from traveling there due to the US embargo of Cuba. However, beginning in 2012, the US State Department began issuing travel licenses for trips to CUBA under the ‘People To People’ educational and cultural programs. I booked a photography trip through Natural Exposures, Inc., which had obtained the required US State Department licenses and visas. With the official licenses, we were able to take a direct American Airlines flight directly from Miami, FL, to Havana, just a short one-hour flight.

Before taking this trip, I read 2 history books on Cuba for background. Spain was the first country to colonize Cuba, after the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492. However as there was no gold on Cuba, so Cuba’s role for the next two centuries was limited to an in-transit shipping port and farming for the production of food to support the exploration efforts of the New World. Land was appropriated from the indigenous population and granted to Spanish soldiers, slaves were imported and large cattle operations began. The Spanish Monarchy established a state monopoly on tobacco, and sugar cane became the primary cash crop. Slave plantations were the prevailing agricultural system until the late 1880’s, long after slavery was abolished in the US. Spain no longer viewed Cuba as an integral part of the Spanish Kingdom, but rather a valuable sugar colony to be exploited. Similar to the America’s revolt from British rule, the local Cuban independence movement took root at the end of the 1860’s and rebellions against Spanish rule were fought throughout the end of this century. US sugar companies began investing heavily in Cuba in the 1890’s which set the stage for the US support of Cuba’s independence from Spain in 1899. A new era in Cuba began—the period of US intervention. The US had no clearly defined policy on Cuba, some wanted it as a colony and others wanted annexation, and others favored Cuban independence. Cuba evolved into a new republic tightly controlled by the US. A combination of economic exploitation of the sugar industry by the US and weak local Cuban government riddled with corruption, set the stage for the last Cuban independence revolution led by Fidel Castro in 1950’s, ending in 1959. The Soviet Union replaced the US as the partner of influence, until their collapse in 1992.
The transition to Socialism began in 1959, and in many ways, Cuba today looks like Cuba in 1959. All property and businesses were nationalized. The government provides housing, health care, education and jobs. Today, the average Cuban worker earns the equivalent of $20 per month—but they have free housing, health care, education and they get coupon ration books for a portion of their food. Because socialism does not have incentives or rewards, (everyone gets the same) there is little incentive for Cubans to work hard. Their attitude is “you pretend to give me a job (for $20 a month) and I pretend to work”. The lack of capitalism and low economic output results in a very poor country with little available investment for the infrastructure of the country. The beautiful buildings built in the late 1800’s and first half of the 1900’s are crumbling and in disrepair, but there are no funds to rehabilitate them.

Everyone who goes to Cuba is looking forward to seeing the old cars, and they indeed are everywhere—many rusted and in poor condition, and others restored to perfection. At least 50% of the cars on the road are 1959 or older, another 25% are cheap Russian Lada cars, and the rest are various imports from Europe. Most of the old cars are not running with their original engines however, because they have been converted to diesel engines, the main automobile fuel available in Cuba. But if you are an “old car buff”, this is the place for you!

We spent most of our time in Havana, but did have a two day trip through the countryside to the other side of the island to the historic town of Trinidad. I felt safe walking around anywhere we went, and to my surprise we were not restricted in any way. The Cuban people were very warm and welcoming, and many spoke some English and were eager to talk to Americans. Many of them invited us to come in and see their homes as we walked by. Food was basic, and every meal had the staple of black beans and rice. We also had chicken, pork and fish, but these meats are in very short supply for the locals. We also had yucca (which I found surprisingly very good) and other root vegetables. As in Venezuela, the food is bland and not spicy. The water is not safe for us to drink in Cuba (we had bottled water all the time), so we avoided salads and any other raw foods—but none of us got sick on the trip.

Our hotels were modern with air conditioning in the rooms. I was surprised that the televisions in the rooms had CNN and BBC, but later
found out that access to such news stations was limited to the tourist hotels, and that the locals don’t have them. Because of the political situation, U.S. phones and credit cards do not work in Cuba. We had to bring US cash, and then convert it at the hotel to the Cuban CUC (pronounced “kook”). Although the hotel had internet, it was very slow and didn’t work for most people. So if you go to Cuba, you are basically out of touch by normal communication channels while there.

Obviously the Cuban cigar is very important, and the smell of cigars is everywhere! I bought one with the intention of smoking it just because we can’t get them in the US, but I got so nauseated being around all the cigar smoke I couldn’t bring myself to light it up and gave it to my bus driver on the last day there!

In the last three years since Raul Castro (Fidel’s brother) has become President of Cuba, he has started allowing small changes that are helping to bring the Cuban people into the 21st century: they can now have cell phones and some access to the internet, some free-enterprise is now allowed with individuals able to own some businesses like restaurants and produce stands and other personal service businesses. The people are now able to buy some real estate, but very few have the money to do so. The over 50 year old US embargo makes life more difficult for the average Cuban, as it makes many essentials of daily life unavailable or too expensive—like soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste, razors, etc. In fact, we were told in advance of our trip that if we wanted to bring small personal items and candy for the kids that the locals would really appreciate it. So I took pens and candy, and many others brought disposable razors, toothbrushes, toothpaste, hotel size soaps and baseballs. The locals were delighted to get them, and we used them as our ‘payment’ for asking permission to photograph them. I would take more baseballs if I go again, as that is a very popular sport with the kids.

I got a kick out of seeing the political billboards. One that really stood out to me had pictures of Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez and Nelson Mandela, with a title of “The Three Fathers You Can Trust”. The street art, or graffiti was spectacular all around Havana. It is a very artistic place. Because of the US embargo, the only items we were allowed to bring back into the US were education materials like books, and art. We
did go to a large Cuban art show and I bought two original canvas oil paintings of old cars for $30 each. These were my only souvenirs but other than a Panama hat, not sure there was anything else I would have wanted to purchase.

The buildings and people were very colorful and interesting, and there was just so much to photograph. I took over 3,000 photos, but have pared it down to about 50 for you to look at on the CITGO Alumni website. It was like taking a time-travel trip back in time, and was a wonderful experience. I would highly recommend it, and would go back again in a heartbeat.

There are many groups that offer the U.S. State Department approved trips to Cuba. Besides Natural Exposures (which is primarily for photographers), other reputable tour operators I have traveled with that go to Cuba are: Tauck, Abercrombie & Kent, and National Geographic Explorers; and any of these would provide you a great Cuba experience. I think it is just a matter of time before the U.S. embargo on Cuba is lifted. Once it does, I predict there will be a flood of money toward Cuba, and the reconstruction will begin. I am glad I got to see it before this happens. If you decide to go and have any questions, don’t hesitate to send me an email at: Djs5417@aol.com.