

## Destination Review: Cuba in Person

If you follow me and Janet on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, you know we recently traveled to Cuba. It was my first trip but Janet's second...she visited on essentially the same itinerary in 2016 and it was



interesting to get her perspective on how things have changed.

One caveat to this review...anything that I present as factual comes from our tour guides. As I will note in the review, to a person our guides were all highly educated, and though I have no reason to doubt anything they told us, neither do I have any basis to validate their comments beyond what I witnessed during my visit. I will say everything I saw tracked well with their commentary. This review is necessarily long. Cuba has been a forbidden country for most Americans for many years and now that you can visit, there is great deal I want to share with you to make your visit as smooth and rewarding as possible.

Unfortunately, there are quite a few misconceptions about Cuba...I

know I had plenty of my own that were completely shattered during my visit, which is why I encourage all of you to consider Cuba as your next bucket list destination.

### The Legal

As Julie Andrews sings in *The Sound of Music*, let's start at the very beginning. Is it legal for American tourists to go to Cuba? In a word, no. And yes. OK that's two words and they contradict each other. Let me break it down. American "tourism" to Cuba is still a prohibited activity based on the trade and financial embargo Congress enacted following the rise of the Castro government. Tourism to Cuba isn't banned per se...the embargo prohibits the money that is associated with tourism from getting into the hands of the Cuban government. The government of Cuba controls the tourism industry within their country, making the embargo's financial restrictions a de facto ban on tourism. That's the "no" part.

Now for the "yes" part. When President Obama was in office, he relaxed the embargo's trade and financial restrictions by executive order specifically as they pertain to tourism. He intentionally opened a giant loophole that Congress did not object to, and that President Trump has left largely in place, making it legal for any American to visit Cuba, with just a few restrictions.

American travel to Cuba is monitored by the U.S. Government's Office of Foreign Assets Control, or OFAC as it is known. The embargo rules allow Americans to visit Cuba under one of 12 categories within the people-to-people program. The rules were initially so restrictive few Americans could visit Cuba. President Obama's executive orders relaxed the rules to the point that now just about any American can visit Cuba legally. The tours and cruises that interest the general American public are permitted under the educational provision of the people-to-people program. It allows for non-degree seeking Americans to travel to Cuba provided they do so as part of an organized tour operated by an organization or entity subject to the jurisdiction of the U.S. All that gobble-de-



gook simply means you can't go to Cuba and tour on your own...you have to book a tour through a land tour operator or cruise line that offers tours in compliance with OFAC rules. That's a bit of an oversimplification, but if you book your trip to Cuba through a tour operator that advertises their product to be OFAC compliant you'll be fine. At Tidewater Cruise and Travel we have relationships with a number of tour operators and cruise lines that we can use to book an OFAC compliant tour for your legal visit to Cuba.

OFAC compliant tours, though highly structured, do allow for some free time to explore Cuba on your own. You can't spend a week at the beach, but frankly who would want to when there is so much to see and do in Cuba? After the day's organized tour activities are over you can go out on your own and go clubbing at the Tropicana or stroll through the streets of Havana and get a bite to eat at one of the many private restaurants that are popping up throughout the country...whatever interests you is fair game.



Cruising has become a very popular way to visit Cuba, but it isn't the best way to fully experience all that the country has to offer. Many of the mass market cruise itineraries give you just a few hours in Havana. About the only thing those cruises allow for is a ride in one of Havana's iconic vintage cars that serve as tourist taxis, or a visit to one of Havana's cigar shops...along with 50 other passengers from the ship. There are cruises that stop at multiple ports giving you more time on land as ours did, but the best way to see Cuba in depth is on a land-based tour. OFAC requires your visit

be with an organized and complaint tour, but it doesn't have to be the large group tour that you will get if you take a cruise to Cuba. You can book a land-based tour for just a few people that is still OFAC compliant and have the best of both worlds.

### **The Logistics**

Commercial airlines provide scheduled public service to several Cuban cities, and cruise lines call at Cuban ports in addition to Havana, so it is easy to get there. Cuba requires that Americans have a visa which you can get on your own, but most tour operators and cruise lines will do that for you. The only other requirement is that your tour operator offer an OFAC compliant tour, but frankly there is little oversight of that.

Clearing immigration at the port of Havana was a breeze, and I understand it is just as easy if you arrive by air. We got through the immigration checkpoint at the port straight away with barely a flip of the passport. The security staff on our ship paid more attention to our identification than Cuban immigration officials. My first impression upon arriving in Havana was one of surprise. The female immigration officers wore black fishnet stockings, very stylish. I wasn't expecting that. You must pass through metal detectors both coming and going through the immigration checkpoint but that too was a breeze. The visa that Cuba requires you to have to enter the country is a loose paper visa that doesn't get attached to your passport. You are required to turn it in when you leave the country, so it is important to make sure you keep it safe. In addition to the visa, your tour operator will likely ask you to fill out an OFAC compliance



certification form, usually online, just to establish a virtual paper trail in the event OFAC ever decides to enforce the monitoring aspects of the people-to-people program. That's not likely to happen.

The Cuban government exercises tight control over their currency...you can't get Cuban money outside of Cuba and credit and debit cards are generally not accepted, so you'll want to visit one of the currency exchange kiosks at your port of entry. There are a couple of ATMs at the Havana port facility where you can use your credit card to get local currency, and according to Janet they weren't there during her visit in 2016 which is a small step forward. Even with the presence of ATMs, most people go to a currency exchange kiosk.

Cuban money is a bit complicated...the government uses two currencies, one for residents and another for tourists. The currency for residents of Cuba is the Cuban Peso, but Americans have to convert our US dollars into what are known as Cuban Convertible Pesos, or CUCs for short (pronounced kook). The Cuban Peso was originally indexed to the value of the Soviet Ruble. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, the Cuban government saw a way to sneak in a tax on tourists by creating the CUC currency. They established an artificially inflated valuation for the CUC which overvalues the currency relative to the dollar in what amounts to a tax of about 17% on Americans exchanging U.S. dollars. Its good to be the king! Our guides told me there is talk of eliminating the CUC currency, but for now that is more wishful thinking on the part of Cubans working in the tourism industry.

Some vendors will accept U.S. dollars though they aren't supposed to, and many Americans leave tips for their tour guides in dollars. Though you may think tipping your Cuban guide in U.S. dollars is doing them a favor, it is quite the opposite. Cubans can't spend dollars...they must take them to a bank or currency exchange booth and convert them into Cuban Pesos. In so doing, they pay the same 17% exchange penalty that you do, which means that \$5 tip you intended to leave only gets them about \$4 worth of Cuban Pesos. It is best to use CUCs for all financial transactions while in Cuba, including tips, even if the vendor accepts dollars.

Cell phones and wifi hot spots have proliferated since Janet's visit in 2016. Then, they were few and far between. Now, we saw Cubans with cell phones pretty much everywhere we went, and our guides



shared with us that cellular service is actually pretty good. It was not uncommon to see a Cuban bicycle taxi using a cell phone to get ride orders...I posted this picture on Instagram and called it Cuban Uber somewhat in jest. When I got back to the states, I read an article that said a group of Cubans put together an app that bicycle and vintage auto taxi drivers are using as an Uber-like service. The government permitted cellphone access to the internet just this past December, and the number of Cubans taking advantage of that has exploded. There are about 11 million people on Cuba, and since residents were permitted to purchase internet packages using 3G service, about 1.8 million Cubans signed up for service plans.

A recent government report noted that over half of Cuba's residents use the internet and social media. That's a staggering increase in just a few year's time, and it is one of several factors pressing the Cuban government to change. Wifi is also more common than when Janet visited in 2016. Then, Cuban citizens would have to go to the town center or promenade to access limited wifi hotspots on their cellphones. Now there is a major infrastructure project underway to lay fiber lines throughout the country providing

more people with access to phone, television, and internet service to their homes and throughout the towns and cities. We passed several construction crews that were laying the fiber well out into the countryside on one of our excursions outside of Cienfuegos.

One of my misconceptions going into this trip, and there were many, was that most Cubans would be eager to leave the country if permitted. Several of our guides related that the government readily allows Cuban citizens to leave the country, either temporarily or to take up permanent residence elsewhere. They must first complete their compulsory military service, but the only real challenge for someone wanting to leave is coming up with the money to start over somewhere else. And while that is no easy task, people do find a way. Our tour guide in Havana was a young lady that had married someone from Africa. Her husband was temporarily working in Cuba, and when he returned home, she was permitted to leave Cuba to live with him. They ended up getting divorced and she and her daughter were able to return to Cuba with no problems from the Cuban government. In fact, she told me it was common for Cubans who leave the country to return after several years abroad. She also shared with me that about 40% of Cubans are millennials, and that generation is more interested in staying in the country and working to improve things in the post-Castro era than they are getting out. While I don't disbelieve the numbers, this was the one time I felt the guide was pushing propaganda over reality, at least to some degree.



As easy as it may be logistically for a Cuban to leave the country, it is quite difficult for them to visit the U.S. but not because the Cuban government prohibits it. That was the case not so many years ago, but now the only restriction on Cubans visiting the U.S. is getting a U.S. issued visa. After President Trump curtailed the staff at the U.S. Consulate in Havana because of the odd and unidentified medical problem embassy officials experienced, the consulate is no longer staffed sufficiently to process Cuban visa requests.

### **The Good...Cuba's People and Culture**

Perhaps the thing that surprised me the most was the openness of the Cuban people we met when it came to talking about their country. Our tour guides were all clear that they were permitted, and in fact encouraged, to answer any question we had about their country, government, and economy. They didn't pull any punches, sharing the good, the bad, and the ugly. Janet encountered that during her first visit, and it was refreshing to see that such openness continues. The Cuban people are fiercely proud of their country and their history. At the same time, they are aware of the challenges they face. They celebrate the good in their country while patiently working to improve the not so good.



The structure of the people-to-people program results in tours that focus largely on Cuba's history, culture, and arts...all of which I found fascinating. I am embarrassed to say that the only things I knew about Cuba's history before our trip were the Castro revolution, the Bay of Pigs, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. I'm sure I'm not alone in that, and as an American it is somewhat embarrassing that the average

Cuban knows more about our history and culture than we do about theirs. Fortunately, we had several tours that involved rather lengthy bus rides during which our guides took the opportunity to educate us.

I'll avoid getting into a history lesson here other than to say Cuba's culture benefited from two main influences. There is the obvious Spanish influence since they were a Spanish colony. That influence is clear in the architecture, the language, and many other areas. What I did not expect was the degree to which the African slave trade influenced Cuba. In many respects it reminded me of how African and Caribbean slaves so deeply influenced the culture of New Orleans, which should come as no surprise since it too was long held as a Spanish colony.

The African slave influence in Cuba is known as Afro-Cuban, and it permeates all aspects of their culture whether that be music, religion, or art. From a religious perspective our guides described it as a combination of traditional Spanish Catholicism with African folk traditions, resulting in the hybrid religion known as Santaria. I found it fascinating, unfortunately we didn't have time to get too deep into it. I did appreciate that our guides pointed out examples of the Afro-Cuban influence throughout our tours. When it comes to music, Afro-Cuban music consists of several genres where lines of distinction are rather blurred. We were treated to several sit-down concerts and encountered a variety of the Afro-Cuban musical genres at the clubs and bars we visited, and I have to say Timba rapidly became my favorite. Timba is a blend of Afro-Cuban folk music, salsa, and there is even some American R&B for good measure. It seemed like every bar or club we visited had a house band, and they were all quite good. You can't listen to this music and stay seated...it makes you want to dance, even if you are rhythmically challenged like me. And dance we did. The clubs were packed with locals which made Latin spot dances (dances that don't move around the floor) like Salsa, Rumba and Cha Cha the most popular and practical, but frankly anything goes.

Another aspect of the people-to-people tours is the focus on Cuba's rich culture of art. One of the more interesting sites we visited in Havana was Callejon de Hamel, a narrow alley in what used to be a not so nice neighborhood that was turned over to local artists to display their work. From paintings to sculptures made from reclaimed everyday objects like bathtubs and plumbing, the works are unique, colorful, and reflect the impressive creativity and talent of Cuban artists. On our tour of the colonial town of Trinidad we visited the home and studio of a well-known Cuban artist, Yudit Vidal Faife. Her award-winning work represents not just the depth of Cuba's artistic talent, but the country's increasing privatization efforts. Yudit owns her own studio and openly sells her work over the internet to the U.S. She also serves as an example of how Cuba's emerging business people (dare I say class?) are spreading their entrepreneurial culture. Primarily a painter, Yudit adds texture to her work by purchasing needle work from local artisans through private transactions and incorporating it into her paintings. The result is a fascinating play of color, texture, and shading that even someone as artistically illiterate as me can appreciate.



### **The Bad...Cuba's Dependency Problem**

Even though Americans have been limited in our ability to travel to Cuba, that has not been the case for the rest of the world. According to each of the tour guides we spoke with, tourism is the most significant

contributor to Cuba's economy, accounting for 93% of their GDP. As one Cuban told me somewhat despairingly, "we don't make anything anymore." They became so dependent on their fellow communist benefactors that now with both the former Soviet Union and Venezuela no longer able to support them, they are in trouble. On the plus side, the government recognizes the importance of their tourism industry and actively encourages private business development. The government is building a second cruise terminal in Havana with berths for two additional cruise ships, and their goal is to have two to four ships in port daily, every day of the week. That alone is reason enough to visit now, before Havana turns into just another Diamonds International outlet. Cuba is also in the process of building what the guide described as a western style hotel adjacent to the port for pre and post cruise stays. Both the new cruise terminal and the hotel are expected to open in 2021 and will bring a much-needed boost to Havana's economy.

Most of the Cubans we spoke with openly expressed their desire for a closer relationship between our two countries, largely for economic reasons. At the same time, I noted a degree of caution when it came to them fully embracing a rapid normalization of relations. Janet noted the same thing during her trip in 2016...particularly with the younger generation. They recognize the futility of remaining an isolated socialist economy and the good that can come from a closer relationship with the U.S. They want that...they want it very much, but they also see the bad things that could result from transitioning too rapidly into a more open, class-oriented society like we have in the U.S., and they want to avoid that if they can. I'm pessimistic that they will avoid some pretty serious growing pains, but optimistic that they will manage to get through it. The post-Castro government has been taking things slow but deliberately and so far, the Cuban people have been patient and supportive. It is a delicate balancing act as many in the older generation don't want things to change at all, but pressure from the growing number of Cuba's millennials makes change inevitable.

After losing economic support from Venezuela in 2008, the Cuban government began to allow private sector employment. Private business ownership has grown to the point that 30% of the population is now either self-employed, or works in some manner in the private sector. In the cities like Havana and



Cienfuegos that comes largely in the form of establishments that cater to tourists, such as restaurants and B&B style lodging run out of private residences. In exchange for approval to run a private business, owners are required to pay taxes at the rate of about 16%. I don't know if that number is accurate...it is a number one of our guides cited, but it sounds believable. As an aside, all the tour buses we rode on were brand new and high tech...imported from China. That seems like a rather innocuous point, but it is something I found quite significant. On the one hand our guides lamented the horrible quality of Chinese products as compared with stuff made in America,

yet as long as our embargo is in place and we can't export products to Cuba, they have no choice but turn to countries like China. It sure seems like a lost opportunity that I hope our politicians can figure out before the Cuban government turns to yet another communist/socialist sponsor like China.

### **The Ugly...Cuba's Economy**

In spite of the many good things I experienced in Cuba, I would be remiss if I didn't also address the country's ugly side. That would be its continuing embrace of a communist style government with its

associated socialist economy. Anyone in the U.S. that advocates socialism needs to visit Cuba. That is not a political statement, it is a fact. From the moment you step foot in Havana you see constant reminders of what 60 years of socialism can do to a country. Throughout Cuba building facades once bright with color have been neglected and are crumbling. What I found fascinating is that the interior of many businesses and residences appeared to be very well maintained. Our guides explained that was the case because the government owned all property, but individuals were permitted to own the businesses, apartments, and homes that occupied that property. The portion that is owned and maintained by the government is in horrible condition, but the portion controlled by the individual is in much better shape, particularly where the individual was involved in a private business or self-employed and had the means to keep things well maintained.

One of the most instructive observations regarding Cuba's socialist economy and their developing privatization came from one of our tour guides when comparing her government salary with the tips she makes as a tour guide. Janet heard a similar story from a guide during her visit in 2016. That guide's mother was a Dean at Havana's medical school. Her salary barely covered the everyday expenses of food, clothing, and shelter. Her daughter, the young tour guide, made more money in one day from tips than her mother made in a month from her government salary. To that point, I was fascinated by the educational background of our tour guides...one had been a lawyer, another had been an engineer, and yet another had been a University History professor. All were highly educated, which makes sense since education up to University and post-doctoral or professional degrees is free, as is medical care. Of course, all of those "free" services come at a cost elsewhere, namely in the form of ridiculously low salaries. I suppose that is why highly trained people abandoned their professional careers to serve as tour guides and taxi drivers, where the tips set them apart from the rest of the population.



People marvel at the quality of Cuba's vintage cars, but the only reason that is so is that there is no alternative. Cuba doesn't import new cars for the most part, and Cuban citizens couldn't afford them even if they did. They keep the '57 Chevys running out of necessity. And the only ones that have a vintage look to them are the private taxis that tourists are quick to hire. The income those drivers make off fares and tips allow them access to parts and paint, the two most important factors in keeping them in mint condition.

The last negative point I want to bring out is that Cubans have learned the art of milking tourists. Just because we haven't been able to visit in droves doesn't mean other countries have stayed away. Cuba's tourist industry as noted is the single largest contributor to their economy, and Cubans have learned to take full advantage. The cruise ships all offer excursions through the same government-controlled tour operator. Those catering to mostly Americans must be OFAC compliant, which means they tend to visit the same places resulting in large tour groups moving about through the cities. Cubans who are down on their luck know it. Panhandlers were prevalent though they weren't overly pushy. In fact I found them to be far less obnoxious than the panhandlers you run across in most major U.S. cities. None-the-less they were ever present. As were the prostitutes.

The more entrepreneurial Cubans at least tried to deliver something for the handouts they sought. Every place we went there were several people doing the human statue routine looking for a handout in exchange for a scare or a picture. Musicians did the same, as did the women dressed in brightly colored traditional Afro-Cuban attire carrying either fake fruit baskets on their head or smoking a ridiculously large cigar. During one stop at a city square I noticed a man with a sketch pad looking me over. I tried to maneuver out of his line of sight because I knew what he was up to. I failed, and after a few minutes he presented me with a chalk drawing that sort of somewhat resembled me, but not really. I had no problem turning down his request for a few pesos in exchange for the sketch...paper is cheap, I didn't ask for it, and the sketch he presented to me looked nothing like me, even in caricature. He moved on to find another tourist to target.

There were one or two occasions when I did opt to leave a few pesos. I encountered a very distinguished looking older Cuban gentleman sitting on a chair minding his own business in Trinidad. He was dressed



in his finest, which had clearly seen better days but was handsome none-the-less. I asked if I could take his picture, and he motioned he would be happy to let me. Then he motioned Janet over to sit next to him and let me get their picture together. He didn't initiate the contact...he didn't try to hustle me, and he didn't have a hat or tip basket out, though it was pretty clear that was what he was there for, so I gave him a few pesos which he gratefully accepted. The other time I made a contribution was when we visited Ernest Hemingway's house. Tourists aren't permitted inside the buildings, but the curators who were present to make sure we behaved offered to take our phones and cameras and take pictures from inside for us. When they hand you back your camera, they expect a tip. It didn't take much to make them

happy and as long as I got something for my pesos I happily obliged.

### **The Destinations...Havana**

Havana is a vibrant city with an even more vibrant night life. There are a number of iconic sites to visit, to include the much-photographed Cathedral Plaza and Plaza de Armas. Of course the must see sites include dropping by La Bodeguita del Medio, supposedly the birthplace of the Moquito, and La Floridita, birthplace of the Daquiri. Fortunately, the people-to-people program recognizes that sampling the local adult beverages is an invaluable cultural experience and we were able to enjoy the signature cocktails of both establishments. And though Ernest Hemingway is rumored to have frequented both bars, the locals will tell you that is just for tourist consumption. Sure, he may have popped in from time to time, but he wasn't a regular, in spite of the folk lore.



No trip to Cuba would be complete without cigars and rum, and what better place than Havana for that? Unfortunately for us, the cigar factories in and around Havana shut down every year for the better part of the month of January. Lesson learned...if visiting a cigar factory is on your to do list when you visit Cuba, make sure you don't go in January! Our guide in Havana was most helpful with educating us on the best places to pick up Cuban cigars and she warned us against buying from people that approached us on the street offering a great deal, and plenty did. The cigars they sell are counterfeit and the vendors





will rip you off. Cigar stores in Cuba are state run and all offer the same prices...selecting the best establishment to make your purchase is more about variety, supply, and storage conditions, less about price. Our guide managed to get us into Legendario, one of Havana's best known cigar shops, and I gladly made my contribution to Cuba's economy. Rum is another important part of the Cuba experience. Cuba is where the Bacardi family originally began making and exporting rum, but the family fled during the revolution and re-established their business in Puerto Rico. Rather

than tour yet another rum factory...we've already toured several throughout the Caribbean...we did something far more interesting. We visited the Havana Rum Museum where we learned all about the history and tradition of rum making, and drinking, in Cuba. Perhaps the highlight of our visit to the rum museum was El Maridaje. The experience features the perfect marriage of flavors one achieves by alternating the flavor and textural sensations that come from smoking a cigar while sipping a hot cup of Cuba's delicious coffee, chased with a swig of rum. Rinse and repeat!



### **The Destinations...Cienfuegos**

Nowhere were the ravages of Soviet influence more evident than in Cienfuegos. Numerous high-rise apartment buildings built in the classic Soviet style where rapid production, quantity, and adherence to the 10-year plan is more important than quality dotted the landscape. To say these apartment buildings were poorly maintained would be charitable. They were falling apart, yet people still lived in them.

On our first day in Cienfuegos we took an excursion out to the colonial town of Trinidad. That tour required about an 80 km bus ride through the heart of Cuba's agricultural and ranching areas. Our guide in Havana told us almost all the meat consumed in Cuba is imported, and meat as well as other imported food staples like beans, rice, flour, and cooking oil are all tightly rationed. The one rationed



item that stuck in my mind were chicken eggs. Every person in Cuba gets a ration of six eggs from domestic production. Per month. That's far from a chicken in every pot. I'm guessing Cuban birthday cakes are quite a bit different than American birthday cakes. Families in Havana work hard to stretch their rationed food throughout the month, and to find the means to buy what they don't get from the ration store. But I think there is cause for optimism, at least based on what I saw on the drive out to Trinidad. We passed herds of cattle, goats, and pigs and all the livestock looked healthy

and well fed. We encountered plenty of evidence that the government's efforts to expand privatization into the farming and ranching industry were showing signs of success. Vendors set up roadside stands where fresh produce was abundant and looked fresh and tasty. In the town of Trinidad we encountered several private butcher shops that were well stocked. Though I have to say they were open air shops like the kind I found when I lived in Turkey...no refrigeration. Knowing the meat doesn't stay fresh for long, the stacks of beef I saw at several of the shops suggest there is a thriving private meat trade, at least in this area.

On our return from Trinidad we stopped at the studio of one of Cuba's best known artisans, Daniel "Chichi" Santander. Chichi's great-grandfather Rogelio Santander founded the pottery workshop we visited and while the Castro government took over the Santander studio, the family remained and are now well respected by the government. Chichi was demonstrating his work in good humor at the front of the house while three young potters worked behind the curtains to make the objects that were sold to tourists. The speed with which Chichi worked and the dexterity he showed belies his age, but the craggy-toothed smile pegged him as someone always looking for the bright side of life regardless of his circumstances. We spent our second day in Cienfuegos touring the city center. It was obviously at one time a beautiful city, now depressingly run down. Still, it was nice to get out and about and interact with the people of Cuba.



### **Santiago de Cuba**

Our final stop was Santiago de Cuba, home to Cuba's best quality rum. The Santiago de Cuba rum is made in the old Bacardi rum factory which the Castro government took over after the revolution. This rum was much more refined than the Havana Club rum we tasted at the rum museum. We spent most of the day touring around historical parts of the city, to include Castillo del Morro and San Juan Hill. Morro Castle stands guard over the mouth of Santiago harbor just as its namesake in Havana protected that city. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the tour was that the castle still has a working drawbridge that is raised from within the castle each night. A caretaker stays in the castle over night and lowers the drawbridge the next morning. Perhaps because the castle is a popular tourist attraction, the path leading to the castle is lined with artisans selling wood and leather work. From the castle we made our way to San Juan Hill where we got a detailed lecture from our guide on the importance of the "Cuban-Spanish-American" war to their culture. Though we call it simply the Spanish-American war, Cuba proudly considers it their war since Cubans fought side-by-side with



Americans to liberate the island from Spanish occupation. They consider it one of the finer moments in Cuban-US cooperation and they even pointed out a monument that was erected to honor the U.S. soldiers who gave their lives in the fight to take over the strategically important hill.

### **Wrap Up**

Cuba is changing. I have heard people say you should get to Cuba now before it is forever changed. I don't buy into that argument. Yes, you should go visit Cuba now, but understand Cuba has already changed forever. The things Janet noticed between her 2016 trip and this visit underscore just how much things have changed. In the post-Castro, digital world, the Cuban government has made the decision to accept change. Truly they had no choice. The question now is if the government and the people can agree on the nature and rate of change. In that, I am optimistic. Everyone we spoke with expressed a desire for closer relations with the U.S. but on their terms, not ours. They see the good that

could come with normalized relations, but they don't ignore the bad that would come along as well. It is a great time to visit Cuba. Not before it changes, but because it has already changed and continues to do so.