

# Havana a city of contrast



*Many buildings in Havana appear in disrepair.  
Photo courtesy of K. K. Rhodes*

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Today's Havana is a city of contrasts — while the occasional government-owned Mercedes is spotted, locals ride in crowded, noisy trucks converted into buses, and in the city's outskirts many use horse-drawn carts. The number of doctors per capita is higher than many developed nations, yet clinic facilities and equipment are decades old. Radios and cars from the 1950s are the norm, and old TV antennas are seen on most roofs, yet WiFi is available in city squares and hotel lobbies. Cruise ships dock at the entrance to the harbor, but tourist services in the city are limited, with toilet tissue, operational plumbing and drinking water often scarce.



*Cubans gather at the Cubans gather at night at a WiFi hotspot.  
Photo courtesy of Wren Albertson-Rogers*

My wife and I recently returned from a university-sponsored, week-long cultural exchange visit to Cuba. The buildings we saw in old Havana were striking, with ornate facades and Spanish-influenced features. Intricate wrought iron balconies jut out from upper floors, and in the rare instances that buildings are painted, pastels are used, with pinks, yellows and blues predominating. But they are all decaying.

Balconies are failing, wooden window shutters are broken and plaster is piled on the street. In some places, a lovely old building stands next to a pile of rubble, where its neighbor once stood. Sprinkled throughout the city are drab block-like apartments built during the Soviet Union's 30 years of influence.



*Horse-drawn carriage in the outskirts of Havana.  
Photo courtesy of K. K. Rhodes*

Havana is home to just over 2 million people. Our guide told us that many Cubans were given their homes for free, and buy a monthly ration of rice, black beans and eggs for the equivalent of approximately US\$2 per month.

We were also told that the country's literacy rate is 98 percent, and that Cubans are required to go to school until the ninth grade. Everyone who then passes a test can go on to college, and those that don't, receive vocational training - but university and vocational education is all "homegrown", with outdated books and little access to the internet or information from outside the country.

Healthcare is free, but doctors receive less training than in the US, going from high school to treating patients in six years, and facilities are antiquated.

Even the highest paid Cubans make less than US\$1,000 per year and many depend on money and consumer goods sent to them by relatives from the U.S. Modest signs of government-approved entrepreneurship are being seen, though. Privately-owned storefronts selling souvenirs are interspersed among the state-run shops and there has been a rapid increase in paladares, or privately-owned restaurants. Cuba is anticipating eventually welcoming 1.2 million American tourists each year, and trying to ready themselves for the onslaught.

The people we met were friendly, many saying how happy they were that relations between our governments were improving. We visited cultural sites, and interacted with the people; while they appeared unscripted and sincere, they were certainly well-rehearsed, and occasionally guarded. In the clinic we visited, one of the doctors wrote down all of the questions we asked.

We toured a cigar factory, several museums and monuments, a Jewish Synagogue, a children's theater, a modern dance troupe, a health clinic, an old age home and a nursery school, among others. While no questions were off-limits, the people we spoke with also routinely met with other visiting U.S. groups, and fielded our questions tactfully.

No U.S. cell carrier has an agreement with Cubacel, the subsidiary of the state-owned telecommunications company ETECSA, so American cellphones do not work. But cellphones seemed common (sent to Cubans by their U.S. family members), and coverage is good in Havana and outlying areas. I brought a cellphone I have from the UK, and that worked wherever we traveled in the country. Recently the government established WiFi hotspots in city squares and some street corners, where younger Cubans gather to log on with their phones - but they cannot get internet access at home. Using a scratch-off card, approximately US\$4.00, with a unique user ID and password, you log on and have an hour of WiFi.

Havana is an enigma - while at times it seems to be stuck in the 1950s, at others it feels squarely in the 21st century. The Cuban people we spoke with are genuinely glad that relations are improving, and are hoping that these advances lead to a brighter economic future.

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