
'SECULAR' CUBA MAKES RELIGION A REASON TO VISIT

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Source: BY PETER DELEVETT, Mercury News

It's a Wednesday evening in Havana. Humid, so the balcony windows overlooking the Parque Central are open. From below we hear music -- not uncommon in this city of 2 million sensual souls, but this is different: guitars, hands clapping. I look out to see a circle of maybe 100 young people beneath the statue of revolutionary Jose Marti.

I amble downstairs to investigate, figuring it's a rally by the *Union de Jovenes Comunistas* -- the Young Communists League. Instead, it's an old-time Bible singalong, brought to you by a local Baptist church. Youth pastor Alexandro Isasi Oropesa and his charges are passing out pocket New Testaments, 740 of them every Wednesday night for the past few months. How long will you be singing, I ask? "Until the Bibles are gone," he says in Spanish.

"And the police?" I ask, motioning toward a beret-wearing member of the Tourist Police keeping a close eye on things. "Do you need to get permission?" He shakes his head and flashes a smile. "Nobody bothers us," he says with a shrug.

This is Cuba in the new millennium: an island stronghold whose citizens are directed where to live and work, forbidden to criticize their government and obliged to trudge past Marxist billboards plugging revolution and socialism -- yet who are free to worship as they please. Religion may be anathema to Communist orthodoxy -- the party is the highest power, after all -- and for 30 years after Castro's revolution, Cuba was declared an atheist state.

But in the decade since the Soviet Union's disappearance, much has changed in Cuba. A collapsed economy has rebounded on European tourism, and a constitutional amendment has renamed this a secular state -- an important distinction. Today, those wishing to climb the party's rungs no longer must sign statements disavowing religion.

Cuba's pledge brothers in the shrinking Communist fraternity, China and Vietnam, give lip service to the concept of religious freedom, but any group of 100 spontaneously gathering in Tiananmen Square risks a quick trip to prison. Here it's different, a contrast that delights and bewilders a visitor.

Coincidentally, religion is also one of the few bridges left standing between the United States and Cuba. At the end of this month, new Bush administration rules will wipe out most of the loopholes in America's decades-long ban on travel to Cuba. No longer will Americans be able to go to Cuba legally for educational and cultural tours.

But the smaller number of organizations licensed by the Treasury Department to conduct religious and humanitarian trips to Cuba still will enjoy that exemption from the travel embargo. Groups like the Interfaith Foundation, in Los Angeles, can set up individuals or groups with detailed itineraries to visit spiritual sites in Cuba -- and, along the way, help spread the gospel of democracy.

Restrictions abound

There are some caveats: Travelers approved for the program have to promise not to spend their time lounging on beaches or hitting the links. The itineraries are expected to be followed. But for that trade-off, we were able to travel without fear of the \$55,000 fine an illegal trip to Cuba can bring.

Limiting a visit to spiritual sites still leaves plenty to see and experience. Religious symbols, in fact, are everywhere in Cuba, from the giant illuminated statue of Christ that looms over Havana harbor, to the nickname for the ubiquitous black beans and rice: *moros y cristianos*, Moors and Christians.

Food and music are the twin obsessions of Cuba. At Restaurante El Jigue, in the southern coastal town of Trinidad, we find both. In the evenings, chef Lionel Ramirez takes a break from the kitchen to sit in on a few songs with the in-house combo. A big man with a deadpan face, he stands before the diners with his tall chef's toque and belts out "El Carretero," a plaintive Cuban country blues. His voice is heart-aching, head-shaking, operatic.

Ramirez's restaurant sits in the shade of a calabash tree where Catholic Masses have been said since 1513. Half a block away, Israel Bravo Vega oversees the Templo de Yemaya, dedicated to the Santeria goddess of motherhood and the sea. Like all Santeria deities, Yemaya has a Catholic counterpart; in this case, the Virgen de Regla, an image of Mary that is revered as the patron saint of sailors.

In Vega's simple, open-air temple, the Black Madonna perches on a limestone altar dressed in a brilliant blue-spangled robe. At her feet are beads and conch shells; in her arms, the Christ child. Vega, a husky 39-year-old, completed formal studies to become a *babalucha*, or priest. "It was passed down by my ancestors," he says in Spanish.

On a small altar sit glasses of sweetened holy water, a rosary, a cross, a horsehair whisk, a tin bell and a cigar -- "For incense," Vega says of the stogie.

Then he lifts the cover of a pot and motions to the oblong stones inside. "Very old," he says. "From Africa." Santeria was brought to the New World by slaves who nurtured the Yoruba religion of Nigeria and Benin. To make the faith more palatable to Spanish overseers, the *orishas*, or spirits the Africans worshiped, became affiliated with Catholic saints. Thus developed a melding of religions, followed now by Cubans of many ethnic backgrounds and known collectively as the Way of the Saints.

Venerable buildings

Back in Havana, we pass sun-faded colonial buildings so lovely and crumbly they would break a preservationist's heart. We take a *cacharro* taxi, a remnant of the 1950s, to Vedado, wedged between the collapsing alleyways of Centro and the restored mansions of Miramar. On a leafy back street, we find Temple Beth Shalom, founded in 1953.

"The first Jew came here with Christopher Columbus," says synagogue vice president Adela Dworin. But not until the start of the 20th century did Jewish people come to Cuba in substantial numbers, as American Jews arrived to plant tobacco and sugar cane.

By 1959, there were five synagogues in Havana and 15,000 Jews throughout the country. Then Castro came. Dworin says most Jews, like most Cubans, welcomed the revolution at first, glad for an end to the corrupt regime of Fulgencio Batista.

But Castro's economic reforms cut deeply: businesses were taken over by the state, private schools were closed. Most Jews fled for the United States, some to Israel, still others to South America. During the atheist decades of the '60s, '70s and '80s, the synagogues remained open but hardly anyone attended -- only the elderly and people who, as Dworin puts it, had nothing to lose.

"It wasn't an issue of anti-Semitism," she says. "The same happened to the Catholics and other faiths."

After the reforms of the early 1990s, American Jews raised money to rebuild Beth Shalom, which had fallen into disrepair; Castro even visited several years ago, at Dworin's invitation.

Havana's three surviving synagogues now serve about 1,100 Jews. But there is no rabbi. "There hasn't been a rabbi in Cuba for 40 years," Dworin says. Havana's Jews, and congregations in a handful of other provinces, are served by visiting rabbis who come to the island a few times a year.

To Dworin, though, it's a small hurdle. "What's most important," she says, "is the community is alive."

Castro ubiquitous

Unlike Dworin, few Habaneros we meet have met Fidel in person. But his presence hangs all over, in snapshots and on billboards proclaiming, "DEFENDIENDO EL SOCIALISMO;" "MAS VIGILANTES Y COMBATIVOS;" "ANTIIMPERIALISTAS."

"People here are sick of ideology. The revolution can't give any more," says Pepe, an artist whose studio is right across the street from La Terraza, the restaurant where Ernest Hemingway set "The Old Man and the Sea."

On his wall hangs a collage of the Santeria goddess Oya, keeper of the gates of death, adorned with tufts of coconut husk and the rainbow shards of a compact disc. I ask if he believes in Santeria, and he motions me to look behind the door. There squat the telltale totems: a caldron with charred iron implements, the remnants of a chicken. Tradition holds that if anyone brings evil into a house, the totems send it back out.

"We don't really believe," Pepe says with a grin. "But we believe in getting good luck."

The same is true of the taxi driver we meet who keeps a Buddhist amulet dangling from his rear-view mirror. "*Por suerte*," he tells us -- for luck.

His cab takes us past Calle de Hamel, in central Havana, a narrow alleyway covered with bright splashes of color courtesy of a local muralist. On Sundays, the alley comes alive with rumbas and open-air altars dedicated to Palo Monte, another African religion imported from the Congo. Throngs of people squeeze in for the street dances, the alley hot and crowded.

Stepping out of the cab in Old Havana, we're washed over by flute and conga and cowbell. Someone nearby is plinking out a melody on the specialized six-string Cuban guitar called a *tres*; it's "Chan Chan," the moody love song that kicks off the "Buena Vista Social Club" soundtrack and film. It is giving the venerable "Guantanamera" a run for the title of Most Overplayed Tourist Song.

Street bands compete with the sounds of hammering. On all sides is scaffolding, men laying new cobblestones, wielding paintbrushes. In the Plaza Vieja, every building but one has been restored to glory, and I wonder what will happen to the people in the last derelict holdout, hanging their laundry on the balconies and counting the rosary.

In a copy of Granma, the official party mouthpiece, I read a story marking Pope John Paul II's 25th anniversary. The pope's 1998 visit to Cuba was a watershed for the island's religious rebirth, giving the Catholic Church access to the state-run media for the first time. Today, there's even talk that Cuban Cardinal Jaime Ortega might succeed John Paul.

In many ways, the changing church reflects the changing face of Cuba -- relics from the past dusted off, decaying edifices spruced up. On the corner of Calle Obispo and Mercaderes stands the perfect symbol of this renewal: Across from the Hotel Ambos Mundos, where Hemingway lived, cranes and scaffolding herald the resurrection of the Santo Domingo Convent.

The convent is thought to have been built as early as 1648. In 1957, two years before Batista fell, the grand old structure was demolished and replaced with a soulless building that resembled a parking garage. Today, workers are bringing back the past, or rather, merging it with the present to form a new future. Architects' renderings in front of the site show plans for a new cathedral built from the skeleton of the 1950s monstrosity.

With its plate-glass windows and white plaster walls, the remodeled church looks like someplace George Jetson might attend; but in a sense, I realize as I look at it, that's the beauty. Another house of worship is coming back to Cuba, another tradition returned. *Viva la revolucion.*

IF YOU GO

Getting there: The Interfaith Foundation, in Los Angeles, holds a U.S. Treasury Department license that can be extended to groups or individuals for \$180 per person. The license allows U.S. visitors to spend up to \$162 a day in Cuba for living expenses. Each person can legally bring home up to \$100 worth of Cuban goods.

Applicants must submit to the foundation passport copies, liability waivers and a letter stating that their trip is of a spiritual nature and detailing their reasons for traveling to Cuba. Licenses are good for up to a two-week stay.

Once accepted, applicants receive a detailed agenda of religious sites. The applicant must agree to follow this program. For more information, contact foundation director Barbara Fox at (310) 841-6135 or visit www.theinterfaithfoundation.org.

For more information on religious licenses, contact the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control at (202) 622-2480.

Even with a license, most travelers will have to fly to Cuba via a third country like Mexico, Jamaica or Canada. Cuba Travel Services, in Los Angeles, can arrange legal chartered flights directly from the United States to Havana; call (800) 963-CUBA or visit www.latocuba.com. Another helpful tour operator is Mayan Tours and Travel in Cancun, Mexico: www.cancun-mayantours.com

There are a small number of direct commercial flights from Miami to Cuba for legal travelers; contact the Cuba Interests Section, Havana's unofficial embassy in Washington, D.C., at (202) 797-8518, for information. The office also issues Cuban visas, which you will need once you have your license.

Note: U.S. checks, credit cards and traveler's checks are not accepted in Cuba. All transactions are in U.S. dollars, the street currency of Cuba.

Places to stay: Old Havana is the most picturesque (and most heavily visited) part of the capital. The Conde de Villanueva is a charming former villa that's been converted to a nine-room hotel; rooms are \$100 and up and often booked in advance. 202 Calle Mercaderes; 011-53-7-862-9293, fax: 011-53-7-862-9682.

Nearby, the Hostal Valencia is a historic and reasonably priced (\$80 a night) alternative. 53 Calle de los Oficios; 011-53-7-867-1037, fax 011-53-7-860-5620.

On the border of Old Havana and Centro is the Hotel Inglaterra, overlooking the Parque Central and near most of the city's key sights. Rooms start around \$80 in low season (May-June and September-October), making it a relative bargain. 416 Paseo de Marti (also called the Prado); 011-53-7-860-8595, fax 011-53-7-33-8254.

The cheapest way to stay -- and the most unusual -- is in private homes, or "*casas particulares*." These are licensed by the Cuban government and often run about \$25 a night, including breakfast. A good online clearinghouse can be found at www.casaparticular.info.

In Trinidad, the colonial town that's on UNESCO's list of World Heritage sites, you can stay at a historic home at Casa Font, 105 Gustavo Izquierdo, 011-53-419-3683; or Hostal Casa Munoz, 401 Jose Marti, 011-53-419-3673; www.casa.trinidadphoto.com; e-mail trinidadjulio@yahoo.com.

Places to eat: The best meals typically are found at *paladars*, private homes that are open for dinner. Two "musts" in Havana are La Cocina de Lilliam, which counts Jimmy Carter among its former clients (1311 Calle 48; 011-53-7-209-6514); and Restaurant La Guarida, a favorite of Steven Spielberg and the Hollywood set, and the setting for the Oscar-nominated Cuban film "Strawberries and Chocolate" (418 Concordia; 011-53-7-264-4940).

Less well known, but equally delicious, is Paladar Dona Carmela, across Havana Harbor near the historic Morro Castle. Comunidad No. 1, casa 10, Habana del Este; 011-53-7-863-6048.

La Bodeguita Del Medio (207 Calle Empedrado) and El Floridita (557 Calle Obispo) are Old Havana institutions, in large part because they were favorite haunts of Ernest Hemingway. While both offer unbeatable atmosphere for a drink, the food is overpriced and unexceptional. La Terraza (161 Calle Real), another Hemingway favorite, is worth the drive out to Cojimar for the daiquiris and ocean views; it's a nice stopping point en route to Santa Maria Beach, east of town.

In Trinidad, Paladar Estela (557 Simon Bolivar, 011-53-419-4329) amply lives up to its reputation as the best meal in town.

Caption: PHOTO: KIM DELEVETT -- SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS
The Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes overlooks Havana's Parque Central.

PHOTO: KIM DELEVETT -- SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS
The shift ends at a cigar factory in Havana's Chinatown.

PHOTO: KIM DELEVETT -- SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS
Christopher Columbus was once interred at Catedral San Cristobal.

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