

By Marcus Guerra

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When I walked past the Customs check point in Havana, Cuba, we grabbed our bags and just to the outside of the building we could hear a crowd of people waiting, crying and just chattering while waiting for loved ones to arrive. It was like walking into another world. Right away everyone knew we were not Cubans, stared at our clothes, hair styles and our look of amazement.

We took a short drive from the airport to our rooms and from what I saw there was no police in sight and no signs of being defeated on people's faces. I saw people who were living life with the same look you would see on a proud Texan. I'm not trying to say Cuba is a dream land, the pictures I will show are real torn down cars and buildings that have seen a real revolution with bullet holes to show. I expected to see police patrolling the streets with machine guns and people hating Americans. This turned out to be the opposite. Everywhere we went we were approached by people who were happy to see Americans and excited to hear what we thought of Cuba. For some, we were the first Americans they have ever seen.

When it came down to the citizens of Cuba, I saw nothing but a lot of pride of national spirit. There were many churches practicing many types of religion. There is no one religion in Cuba. Young Cubans see the current leaders as "old men". I had the chance to speak with some of the people who shared their house with me about life in Cuba. They made it clear that they love living in Cuba and that they are aware the economy could be in better shape and some do see it as a 3rd world country. Cubans do get free health care, free college and receive a monthly income regardless if they work or not, to stay healthy. One of the things that stood out was some people had amazing degrees and master's degrees but were forced to wait on tables. While I walked the streets of old Havana, I didn't see people starving on the streets nor did I see people who looked as if they were hating life. It was amazing to take a ride in a 1955 convertible Cadillac which was converted to a taxi for 5 CUC's which is closely equivalent to the dollar bill.

Every day was filled with activities from agriculture to water sustainability. We got to explore caves, organic gardens and ate everywhere we had a chance to. One of my favorite places was downtown Havana, it was filled with places to drink, eat or even just hang out with other people who loved to chat about baseball. I did see how the black market is out of control. There were people selling on the streets which were filled with very persuasive salesman trying to sell you everything from cigars to a tour of the town. The people were harmless but, persistent.

What was amazing was to hear the young people talk about the revolution. This was spoken with great pride and what was gained out of it will never be lost or forgotten. They want to keep moving forward with the strength of those who fought for it. Murals and hand paintings are all over Cuba to remind people of the revolution, who fought it and why it was fought. They also want to keep the socialist economic system. I got to see many great things at the Museum of the Revolution, here there are still bullet holes on the walls which were fired by people back during the revolution. Art was present in the museum showing how repressed some people feel here in Cuba. Some made fun of US presidents, like showing George Bush wearing a Nazi emblem on a cartoon helmet. It wasn't hard to find paintings, murals or even metal art work of Jose Marti Cuba's national hero and advocate of freedom of expression.

Little shops catered to tourist which sold many items with the face Che or Fidel on it, viewed as pop heroes not heroes of the revolution. I heard the best expression of the embargo by my house mother who took care of everything while I was staying with her. She explained that the embargo just did the opposite of what it was supposed to do. They do not see it as America keeping Cubans away from the US but as the US keeping Americans away from Cuba. I thought of that every time I saw something that proved how little I knew about Cuba. I had a great time meeting people and walking the Malicon along the sea wall at night. I would have never known Cuba as much as I do now if it wasn't for taking this Study Abroad trip.