

Roundtable News

The Roundtable in Cuba

Relations restored, economic embargo endures



Roundtable gathers in front of Alma Mater at University of Havana, an impressive university providing tuition-free undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs to 15,000 Cuban students

In April, the Roundtable visited Cuba to speak to its people and learn from the experience of a national education system, which accounts for nearly 13% of the country's budget and that has produced a 99.7% literacy rate, among the world's highest.

A packed agenda started in Havana, where members met with teachers, students, artists, sociologists, urban planners, and economists, and toured the city's cultural sites. We then traveled to the Viñales Valley, a stunning landscape, to visit farms and a rural community arts program for students; to

Cienfuegos, "the Pearl of the South"; and to Trinidad, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Roundtable members were able to visit Cuban schools and academic institutions, where we toured the facilities and spoke with teachers, administrators, and students. Elementary school students charmed us with serenades at every stop, while advanced music students provided jaw-dropping exhibitions of their talents at the National School of Music. Everywhere we went, skilled combos beat out an Afro-Cuban beat.

And of course we admired cars like the old DeSoto above!

We also visited impressive community programs intended to benefit children and students with after school programs in Havana and rural Cuba. A powerful community-based effort to educate young people with Down Syndrome impressed us greatly in Cienfuegos.

Cuba has many challenges. A Soviet client state it hung on for decades in the face of an American embargo. As impoverished as Cuba remains, its accomplishments in education, the arts, and health care are commendable.

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Beautifully preserved classic American cars, like this 1957 DeSoto, dot the streets of Havana and the countryside.

HISTORY AND CULTURE

We obtained powerful insights into Cuba’s history, culture, and economy from city planner Miguel Coyula; former University of Havana sociologist, Marta Nunez; our guide, Christopher Elias; University of Havana economist, Giulio Ricci; and Trinidad architectural historian, Nancy Benitez.

Havana is a city rich in history and 500 years of tradition. It has played a central role in Cuba’s development, starting about 100 years after Columbus first landed. The city became a center of the slave trade, used to support the production of sugar cane, the heart of Cuba’s economy well into the 20th century. Most housing stock is very old and resources for repairs so scarce that an average of three buildings annually collapse.

Occupied by the Spanish until the United States seized control in 1898, Cuban wealth was built on sugar through the 20th century and the mafia came to dominate Havana through gambling and prostitution in the 1940s, as a corrupt Batista regime lived in the lap of luxury while rural peasants worried about feeding their children. All of that came to an end with Castro’s successful revolution on January 1, 1959.



Plaza de Cathedral, Havana

Adequate housing, transportation, and income remain major challenges 50 years after the revolution, we were told. Meanwhile inequality of various kinds remains a challenge.

Economic inequality

Economic inequality is in some ways grounded in decisions made shortly after the revolution. In 1959, all Cubans were given the dwelling in which they lived. The dwelling could be a hut or a mansion. Meanwhile, although citizens are paid in pesos, Cuban exiles frequently send “remittances” to family members in much more valuable dollars. These two effects combine to create a very visible side-by-side inequality, with many Cubans unable to afford the paint to maintain their homes, while neighbors with remittances rebuild theirs. In addition, the exiles are typically white, so the remittances become a ratchet that cranks inequality to new levels.

Gender Equality and Sexual Identity

With respect to LGBTQ issues, Cuba is a highly homophobic society that has had to battle against discrimination based on sexual orientation. Oddly, however, we were told, that analysis of 17 years of Cuban television programming, suggested that treatment of gay men and women in these shows was quite sympathetic. Nevertheless, families encourage boys to play after school and to spar and box, so that they can avoid the label of “sissy,” while girls are required to work in the house and do well in school.

Equality for women, especially professional women, is a major issue. Women make up 40% of the workforce, but 66% of all professionals. But when women get home, they are expected to go to their second job of housework. Of 51 universities on the island, only eight chancellors are women, but they make up 60% of the faculty.

A Primer on Cuba

- 1492: Columbus mistakes Cuba for India
- 1530 - 250,000 natives of Cuba have been annihilated
- 1558 - first fortress in North America built in Havana
- 1565 - Havana has first city water system in North America
- 1762 - England occupies Havana for a year
- 1837 - sixth railroad in the world serves sugar industry
- 1890s - first nation to export sugar
- 1898 - Spanish-American War
- 1920’s - sugar boom of the “fat cow era”
- 1940’s - *Mafioso* divide up Cuban gambling from Hotel Nacional
- 1959 - Castro’s revolution
- 1960-1992 - various US economic sanctions enacted against Cuba
- 1962 - Cuban missile crisis
- 1990 - Soviet support for Cuba ends
- 2015 - U.S. restores diplomatic relations; sanctions continue

Racism and Religion

Racism remains a problem. The belief that white skin is more desirable is pervasive. Asked the color of their skin on regular censuses, 66% of Cubans report they are white - a nonsensical finding as common experience in Cuba indicates.

When sugar became the economic life blood of Cuba, slaves were imported to work the sugar cane fields. By the middle of the 19th century, (*to p. 8*)

EDUCATION IN CUBA

The Roundtable was fortunate to have the opportunity to visit four educational institutions in Cuba

Don Mariano Marti Primary School

We were given the chance to visit two primary schools. A highlight of one day was a visit to the Don Mariano Marti Primary School, named after the father of José Martí, “The George Washington of Cuba.”

Martí was born on the Havana street in which the school is located and, in fact, lived in what is now the school building at one point.

Rector Milton Arbesuk reported that it is a small school that enrolls 158 students in Grades 1 through 8. It employs a staff of 28, including 17 teachers. Immunization of children is not required prior to enrollment, but all the shots students need are incorporated into the health program as part of the school.

A wonderful looking group of fifth graders in the maroon uniforms with red ties that signify they are in elementary school entertained us with a rousing rendition of a song by Martí’s 19th-century revolutionaries, “Revolution: The Pride of Cuban Pioneers.”



We then visited a first

grade

classroom, where it was noted that the curriculum focuses on reading, writing, and mathematics and is part of a common curriculum nationwide.

Manuel de Cespedes Primary School

On a trip to Cienfuegos, the “Pearl of the South,” a visit to Carlos Manuel de Cespedes primary school was top of the agenda. The school is named after another hero of a the rebellion against the Spanish in 1868, a man known as the “father of Cuba.” Rector Tania Diaz presided over a lovely greeting from the music teacher and two students.

They performed two songs, the first dedicated to Fidel Castro on his death: “Riding Home with Fidel,” the second a celebration of the values of peace and freedom, “Knowing Cuba.” Also on hand to greet us at the school were community representatives concerned with international visitors, a metallurgical engineer, and representatives from higher education and the school’s UNESCO liaison, part of a worldwide program emphasizing environmental stewardship, that includes 69 Cuban schools.



de Cespedes Students Greet Roundtable Marti 5th-Graders Serenade Roundtable

The school, said Diaz, serves 313 student with a staff of 49, 40 of whom are teachers. About five have master’s degrees, 11 are studying for their master’s, and seven are undergraduate students focused on pedagogy. She feels the school has everything it needs to deliver a high quality program and proudly noted that every classroom has a television, while the schools has 11 computers in a lab, along with five DVD players.

The school functions from 6:30 AM until 6:30 PM, with classes beginning at 8:30 and finishing at 4:30.

Once a month the staff meets with parents to go over student progress and advise parents on what they can do to help students move along. “We are nothing without the support of the parents,” said Diaz, who taught for 24 years before becoming Rector ten years ago. She emphasized, “We are both teachers - family and us. By the end of six years we are a family and it is possible for a student to remain with the same teacher throughout their time in the school.” (to p. 5)

A NATIONAL LITERACY CAMPAIGN

The Columbia Barracks in Havana was once home to 8,000 soldiers who maintained order in the city. Its commandante, Fulgencia Batista was a brutal and despised despot, living, when he was at the barracks, in a handsome mansion. The old barracks now houses schools, and Batista’s home is now an administration building. Old buildings are now home to kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools, vocational programs, and a university program training teachers.



Batista’s mansion is now an administration building

Tucked away in one of the smaller buildings is a monument to a remarkable transformation that took place in Cuba in a 12-month period. Fidel Castro had told the United Nations that, “Cuba will be the first country in Latin America in which it will be possible to say that not a single person is illiterate.” How did he pull this off? Rector Risa Campos of the National Museum of Literacy led us through the story.



Rector Campos beside a model of the uniform worn by the literacy volunteers

An educational miracle transformed Cuban society in 1961 through an army of 334,000 volunteers, drawn from students, social workers, academics, and housewives, mostly from cities. This army included 100,000 students between the ages of 8 and 16 who went out into the rural areas to provide instruction in reading and writing to Cuba’s peasants.



Eight-Year-Old Literacy Volunteer in Uniform

At the end of the year, Cuba’s illiteracy rate had dropped from 25-30% to about 35. One 102-year-old woman learned to read and write for the first time. Another elderly man wrote to Castro that he had not truly felt proud to Cuban until he learned to read and sign his name.



102-year-old woman learns to read and write

Cuba subsequently launched programs throughout Latin America and in parts of Eastern Europe. Campos proudly estimated that Cuba has helped more than 10 million people learn to read around the world - with fully one million of them continuing their education through at least sixth grade.

EDUCATION IN CUBA (CONT'D)

National School of Music

During a trip to Cuba's National School of Music, the Roundtable was treated a spectacular performance by a trio of the school's gifted students.

The school, located on the former Havana Country Club, draws on the best of the best students from across Cuba, enrolling a total of 500 students over three years, with 300 of them living on campus. It provides outstanding educational opportunities in wind, brass, stringed and keyboard instruments.



Jorge Fernando Ocasto (piano) and Sarbalio Matos Fernandez (violin) wow the Roundtable

The school provides instruments to the students for three years and permits them to keep the instruments for two months following graduation, after which they are returned to the school. Most of the students are able to earn enough money from their music during those two months that they can purchase their own instruments. A total of 30 schools of art exist in Cuba, all free to students, and permitting the development of remarkable talent not only in music, but also in important areas such as art, ballet, and drama.

We watched as three phenomenal high school students stated their stuff with piano, violin, guitar, and singing. Jorge

CUBAN ECONOMY

It is not impossible but it is difficult for the visitor to understand Cuban money. Government finances are shrouded in secrecy, and day-to-day life revolves around three different kinds of cash. Cubans are paid in pesos.

But most commerce in Cuba from visitors involves a second unit of currency, the CUC, which trades at 1 to 1 with the American dollar. The Cuban government introduced the American dollar as an official unit of currency in the

Fernando Acosta played beautiful scores he had created for a movie while Sarbalio Matos Fernandez brought tears to many eyes with his violin rendition of "Romance of the Autumn."

Higher Education

Last but not least, we toured the University of Havana. Founded in 1728, the University enrolls 15,000 students, including 2,000 foreign students, and employs some 1,500 faculty members. Tuition is free for Cuban students. Foreign students, including Americans, are welcome to attend classes across the entire curriculum at what appears to be an annual tuition of \$5,00 (U.S.).



University of Havana's Great Hall

The University of Havana is clearly the jewel in Cuba's higher education crown, the most prominent of the 51 universities on the island. We briefly enjoyed the opportunity to peak at the University's magnificent "Great Hall," but were ushered out when it became apparent the Cuban Minister of Education and the University Chancellor were on hand to launch a new program in honor of Raúl Castro.

1990s, seeking to attract hard currency during the economic troubles that followed the loss of the Soviet Union's patronage. Then, the CUC was implemented to replace the dollar in 2004 in response to Bush (to p. 6)

ECONOMY (CONT'D)

crackdowns on the flow of cash to the country, and to require Cubans accepting money from American family members to pay an exchange fee of about 13%.



Beautiful Viñales Valley

Although on the surface it would appear agriculture is the driving force in Cuba’s economy, we learned that the three most significant sources of national income are biotechnology, medical services, and “remittances” of dollars from abroad. Without access to American medicines, Cuba has developed its own and reports suggest it has produced more than 70% of the medications needed on the island and vaccines for more than 20 different diseases. The vaccines include the first “vaccine” for treating lung cancer, a Cuban form of immunotherapy that is receiving serious attention worldwide.

Still, agriculture is significant, with the most prominent crops being coffee, tobacco, and sugar (for rum). The government requires farmers to give up 90% of their crop at nominal prices to the government, which markets the products under brand names. Farmers keep 10% to sell on the private market, as in selling handmade cigars to tourists who visit

their farms. Farms are inefficient, we were told, producing only perhaps a quarter of the product of American farms, largely due to lack of irrigation systems and modern equipment (banned via the embargo).

Citizens get the equivalent of \$25 (US) a month guaranteed income, along with a ration of free food, free health care, and free education. No one starves and housing, even if modest, is guaranteed. Even so, the monthly income is insufficient to live on. Everyone needs a second source of income, either a real job or something they can peddle and profit from. Lawyers work as waiters in the evening and petty graft and reliance on tipping is commonplace. The presence of this “la lucha” (the struggle) necessarily involves cheating on the day job in order to get enough money to live through the side job. “The government pretends to pay us,” quipped one wag, “and we pretend to work.”



Ivan rolls a handmade cigar for us

We were, of course, meeting with experts and guides approved by the government. Still, we got a real sense that these people (who are also involved in their own “la lucha”) are



La Lucha: Skilled combos everywhere as people struggle to make ends meet

committed to the revolution. They believe the socialist experiment worked in the sense that it produced noticeable improvements in health care, education, and the arts, largely due to being a client state of the Soviet Union. The downside of that, of course, is that Cuba is still digging itself out from the collapse of its economy when the Soviet Union



disintegrated. Cuba lost 85% of its foreign trade at that time and its GDP declined 35%.

The wheels on the bus go round & round- we spent a lot of time on the bus

COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

The Roundtable benefitted from the opportunity to visit three exceptional community programs dedicated to youth or special needs populations.

El Patio Pelegrin

In the rural Viñales Valley we El Patio Pelegrin, a collection of rustic cabins providing after-school tutoring and arts education to community children and many elderly people (known as “accumulated youth”!). The Pelegrin Center, now 19 years old, is the first of its kind — providing community learning opportunities for children and adults in an isolated, rural community of 7,500 people without a movie house, dance hall, or community gathering place of any kind.



Pelegrin Community Library

Barrio Habana



Barrio Habana founder Pavel Valdez

Barrio Habana, a community-based after-school program in Old Havana, offers sports and arts for children and youth, especially for at-risk children on the street. We met Pavel Valdez, a lawyer and former soccer player who founded the program 12 years ago. The main athlet-

ic facilities are located in public space (available free), which he set out to clean and paint. The space is a concrete playground that accommodates a small football (soccer) field.

The program also offers chess and now boasts the best 8-year-old chess team in the city, as well as an arts program and intergenerational programs with a local senior citizens center. The program desperately needs such elementary materials as balls and Lego and chess sets.

The Graphical Society of Cienfuegos



Artwork of Down Syndrome Students

In Cienfuegos, the Roundtable visited the Graphical Society, a program specializing in lithography, but also in community service. Our particular interest was in the project assisting children and adults with Down Syndrome, a lifelong developmental challenge that cannot be cured but can be managed with educational interventions. The society program is part of an effort *(to p. 8)*



Roundtable Meets with Graphical Society Students

COMMUNITY PROGRAMS (CONT'D)

managed 5 days a week by the local cathedral to improve the quality of life of people with Down Syndrome.

Society director Rafael Casades, cathedral program director Anita Alfonso, and society volunteer Jennifer Delgado outlined the elements of the entire project for the Roundtable, clearly pleased with the progress they see with their clients and the artwork the student have produced.

HISTORY AND CULTURE (CONT'D)

slaves made up one-third of the island’s population of three million. They were uniformly forced to become Christians when brought to Cuba.

But they brought with them their own religious traditions. Cuba, like many nations in Latin America, displays a type of religion known as syncretism. It is a synthesis of Catholic beliefs brought by the Spaniards with African spiritual traditions brought by enslaved peoples. So, asked to worship the Virgin Mary, slaves created their own “Black Madonnas,” which they used as a screen to worship their own deities.



Black Madonna on Easter weekend. Below the Hotel Nacional



Above: 16th & 18th century forts guard Havana harbor; Havana’s 5-mile Malecón sea wall; & wealth (private home) and poverty (emaciated mule) in Trinidad