

An American Journalist in Cuba

Stories from the Front Lines

By: Cary Sherburne

After the [U.S. executive order in early 2015](#) that allowed more classes of U.S. citizens to travel to Cuba without seeking prior U.S. government approval, I decided I would like to visit the island to learn more about the culture and doing business there. In my role as a journalist covering the printing, packaging and publishing industries, the goal was to visit those types of companies.

Since I live in the Dominican Republic, I wasn't quite sure how to go about getting the right permissions from the Government of Cuba, so I contacted my Dominican immigration attorney, Jordi Carrasco-Bladé, to see if he could help me. Using the web site for the Cuban embassy in Santo Domingo was difficult and I couldn't find the right forms or information.

Jordi was not able to personally contact the appropriate person at the embassy, but he was able to secure a name, telephone number and email address for Maikel González Estévez, el Segundo secretario, oficina de prensa, in the Cuban Embassy in Santo Domingo. Once I was able to connect with Maikel, he was absolutely delightful and very helpful. I explained what I wanted to do in Cuba, and he informed me that I would need a journalist visa, and that I had to apply for it in person.

So off to Santo Domingo between other trips! Because that is a 4-hour bus journey for me, and the office is only open between 9-12, I had to go down the day before, and engage my friend Nicolas the taxi driver to take me to the Embassy, where I had a nice meeting with Maikel and his assistant Felix. I had sent all of my documents ahead, so only had to explain again what I wanted to do, answer some questions, and then go to another office around the corner to give them two photos and US\$25 – I only had pesos with me so had to send Nicolas to a Casa de Cambio to change them into dollars. A short wait in line, and my application was submitted. Maikel indicated that the information would be sent to Cuba and they had 21 days to respond.

Fast forward two months. Though it didn't seem that fast! And a few emails back and forth. I had originally planned to go in mid-July but it was clear that wasn't going to happen. So I rescheduled for October, giving Maikel the dates 11-17 October. You have to give them specific dates, and if you want to go back, you have to go through the entire process all over again.

I finally was notified by Maikel on September 29th that my visa was approved, and that I could send someone with US\$55 and my passport to pick it up. At the time, I was in Oregon and on my way to California, not returning to the Dominican Republic until October 7th. I was able to make the hotel and airline reservations while on the road, and on my way home from the airport on the 7th, I dropped off my passport at the Metro bus line for delivery to Jordi in Santo Domingo. He had kindly agreed to take care of it for me and deliver the stamped passport to the hotel where I stay in Santo Domingo. My experience with visas (China and Brazil being the other two I have received) is that everything seems to be at the last minute. Living where I live, I can't use a visa service like my friends in the U.S., so I have to plow through it on my own.

When I arrived in Santo Domingo on the 10th, my passport and visa were awaiting. It was a 1:30 flight from Santo Domingo to Habana on Sunday with Air Cubana, so I had to spend the night (again) in Santo Domingo since I couldn't get there in time using the bus.

Off to the airport on Sunday, arriving about 11 AM. It was a good thing, too, because the check-in process was very interesting. I had to show all my documents to someone, then have my carry-on weighed (it was 8 kg and only 5 kg was allowed so I took some stuff out of my backpack to get it down to 5 kg – silly, really, since I just put it all back in eventually). Got through the check-in process, and realized that my return date was the 18th, not the 17th! Turns out there is no flight on the 17th, so they just put me on the flight on the 18th without asking! They put me on a wait list for the 16th ...



Through security, no big deal – no TSA pre-check, but no big deal. Oh, great, there is an American Express club right by my gate! Had time for a quick cup of coffee and to check email. Out to the gate, waiting, waiting, there was no plane there. Now departure time is 2:40. Back to the club. More coffee, more email. Back out. Now it is 3:40 Confirmed. Okay, back to the club. Kept an eye on the monitors. Still confirmed at 3:40. Sauntered back out to the gate at 3:00 and they were in the final boarding process! We left at 3:15! After all of that, I would have been so upset if I missed the flight! I guess they were missing others as well, since they asked me if anyone else on the flight was in the club!

The plane was decent, sort of like a 737, and I wondered if they could buy a Boeing plane. No, it was a Russian plane, a Tupolev. I had to look that one up. They served a decent chicken sandwich. Went to use the bathroom towards the end of the flight and yuk! This certainly was not an American plane. Enough said.

Havana is a 2.5 hour flight from the Dominican Republic, farther than Miami, which is just under 2 hours. But it's still in the same time zone. We arrived about 5:30-ish, had to have hand luggage scanned coming

into the country, and then there was a jumble of people around a couple of desks filling out forms. I had already filled out the customs form. When I told her I had a journalist visa, she waved me through.

Now waiting for luggage ... which took an hour to arrive, but it did arrive. Through the “nothing to declare” line with no problems.



Interestingly, there were signs all around baggage claim advertising affordable medical services in Cuba. Cuba has a good medical system, although I learned that for poorer Cubans, services (and pharmaceuticals), which are supposed to be free, can often require a bribe. But there is a significant medical tourism thing going on. Also, since my visit, the government has required special permission for medical personnel to leave the country, since many doctors were leaving and not returning. This has not made the medical community happy.



Next step was to find a place to get local currency. Cuba has a dual currency system. The Cuban Peso (CUP) has an exchange rate of 25 to the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC). Most workers are paid in Cuban pesos, which they must exchange, at an unequal exchange rate, for CUC if they wish to buy any luxury item like furniture, electronics, gain entrance to a club, etc. Workers in the tourist and entertainment industries, prostitutes and hustlers, those involved in the informal economy, top tier athletes, people who receive remittances from abroad have access to CUC. Although I found that just about everyone I ran into had access to both – the informal economy at work.

Shops selling basics generally accept only the CUP, while the CUC is the currency of choice in other locations. I found that I could use either almost anywhere, assuming the person could make change for the CUC ... not always easy! While the CUC is tied to the dollar at a 1:1 exchange rate, by the time you figure in the fees for changing U.S. cash, the exchange rate was .87; so for \$100, I would get 87 CUC.



I was fortunate to run into Pepe (not his real name), an enterprising taxi driver who asked me if I was looking for a “casa de cambio.” An older gentleman, he has been driving taxis in Havana for more than years. And no, it wasn’t a ‘50s American car, but rather a more modern (relatively speaking) yellow taxi of indeterminate make.

He suggested that the casa de cambio upstairs would have no line, while the one downstairs was mobbed, so up we went, and he was right, no line. I was talking with the lady behind the glass, when he tapped me on the shoulder and explained that an officer would give me 90 CUC for \$100 ... Fast transaction with a guy in uniform, so, oh, well ...

Taxi into town, to the hotel I had booked ahead of time (Melía Cohiba, part of a Spanish chain) – with an American credit card. By now it’s late, 7:30 or so. That’s when I found out that I couldn’t use an American credit card in Cuba! Uh-oh. I KNEW I should have brought more cash! This hotel was a bit pricey and I didn’t have enough cash to pay for the whole week. So I paid for one night and figured I would work it out the next day. There went a chunk of my available cash! Nice hotel, not worth what they were asking, but nice hotel. It had Internet. And breakfast.

I had arranged for Pepe to come pick me up at 10:30. I was supposed to check in with the Foreign Press Office first thing. But first, I checked out of the hotel, and on advice of the hotel, went across the street to the Western Union office to see if I could send myself some money somehow. No dice. She referred me to the Banco Financiamiento Internacional a block down. No dice again. They couldn’t help me. So I thought, well, let’s go the U.S. Embassy which had recently opened. Surely they can help. Ah, Columbus Day. Closed.

Oh, well, there is always tomorrow. Dear Pepe said he had a friend with a guest house in Old Havana, “una casa particular,” approved by the government to take paying guests. First to the press office and then to the guest house.

At the press office, I had to meet with Lic. Indira Povione. She had only been on the job for a few months, so couldn't help me lining up appointments with printers (I had a list and had sent emails before I left, and only had a couple responses). But she got me my press pass, and let me know that leaving one day later than my visa would not be a problem.

Next up, find lodgings. Pepe's friend didn't have room, but the neighbor did. Angel and Dayanna, Vales House. Delightful couple. The houses are all chock-a-block on Hospital Street, as they are in much of the old city, and it's not much to look at from outside. We entered through a long hallway, and opened the door into a delightful living space, three bedrooms, two of which they rent out. Very clean and nice. No Internet. 35 CUC per night including breakfast. I can do that! So I left my luggage and we went off to change some money and find Pepe's relative, who has a design and printing business. My first meeting in Cuba.





Doing Business in Cuba

I am always surprised at the number of Americans who have told me they are anxious to visit Cuba to take advantage of the business opportunities there “before it opens up.” This is a bit strange, since everyone else in the world can go there, make investments, start businesses, etc. It is only because of the U.S. embargo that Americans face so many restrictions. I do believe there are still opportunities for American businesses to invest there once the embargo is lifted (if it is), and there are already some opportunities due to Executive Orders. But the foreign companies that are already there will surely fight to maintain their dominance in the face of an influx of Americans. And they already have the requisite relationships in place!

That being said, because Cuba is so geographically close to the U.S., and because labor is relatively inexpensive, there is, and will continue to be, significant interest on the part of American companies in entering the market there, and on the part of Cuban companies in doing business with Americans; the smaller Cuban companies I spoke with are very interested in working with American companies. This is a scenario that will need to play out over time, but as restrictions ease, we can expect to see more American investment in Cuba. That means that companies that are interested in either investing in, partnering with, or doing business with Cuban companies should be thinking about this now.

Make no mistake, the embargo (or bloqueo in Spanish) has had a significant effect on the island economy. In fact, people I spoke with explained that just about everything wrong with the economy and infrastructure in Cuba is blamed on the bloqueo by the government. This prominent billboard not far from Havana’s José Martí airport says it all.



Pretty much everyone just wants it to end, and really, it doesn't even seem to make sense anymore. Following Castro's overthrow of the government in 1959, relations between the U.S. and Cuba deteriorated, even though the U.S. supported Castro's efforts to overthrow his predecessor, General Fulgencio Batista, with a 1958 arms embargo against the Batista regime and an immediate recognition of the Castro regime once Fidel was in power. But by 1960, things were going south, with nationalization of hundreds of private companies and heavy taxes on American products. This prompted the Eisenhower Administration to impose trade restrictions on everything except food and medical supplies. And that, in turn, was the beginning of the close relationship between Cuba and Russia; we all know what happened from there, including Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis. A [Time article](#) states, "President Kennedy issued the permanent embargo on Feb. 7, 1962 — right after ordering a shipment of 1,200 Cuban cigars for himself — and within a few years the country, whose economy relied on the use of American-made products, became a shell of its former self."

Today, Havana is what you might call "shabby chic." It looks pretty dilapidated. I live in a third world country myself, and it says a lot that when I landed in Santo Domingo after a week in Havana, I felt like I had returned to civilization. These views are not at all unusual.





The Printing Business in Cuba

Before departing, I obtained a list of some of the printing businesses in Cuba, but since most did not have an online presence, it was hard to tell anything about their size or the type of equipment they had. I was able to make some contact but with the short notice as to the actual dates, a lot of those arrangements had to wait until I was there.

Several of the people I met with explained to me that these days, any companies with larger offset or flexo presses are owned by the Cuban government, with the exception of one packaging plant that is partially owned by Autajon, who I am told is Heidelberg's largest global customer. This French company acquired Spanish company Durero in 2008, and Durero Caribe in Cuba was part of that acquisition. I am told that the Cuban government owns 51% of the company, per its standard practice at the time of the acquisition. However, according to a 2011 article in [Entrepreneur](#), "President Raúl Castro has in recent years taken unprecedented steps to encourage international investment, including steep tax cuts, but while it is now legal for foreign companies to own 100 percent of Cuban-based companies, the market remains dominated by ventures that unite overseas firms with the Cuban government—and in virtually every case, the government seeks a 51 percent ownership stake," as was the case, apparently, with Durero Caribe.

In about the same timeframe (2007/2008), the government began issuing licenses for entrepreneurs to enter into businesses that are fully owned by them, with a massive advertising campaign explaining to people how to get this done. The initiative was slow to get started but is gaining steam, with an estimated 1.8 million workers employed in private settings in 2015. Prior to that, these private businesses were illegal, part of the "informal economy." They were around, but ran the risk of police intervention if they were spotted.

Most of the companies I visited are in business as a result of this loosening of government control. One of the private businesses I spoke with, who didn't wish its name to be disclosed (there is still quite a bit of fear about government action if people are deemed to be acting in a subversive manner) has been in operation for four years. The owner explained that while she owns the business, she must pay a monthly license fee to the government and prorated taxes. For a small business such as hers, this might be as low as 10% of revenues, but for larger companies, it tops out at 50%. It will be interesting to stay in touch with this and other businesses I met with and follow their progress as they try to grow.

Lack of Investment Capital

Prior to the Revolution led by Fidel Castro in the 1950s, there were larger printing companies on the island with offset printing presses. However, over the years, these presses have aged, as have the owners, and I am told lack of funds for capital investments made it virtually impossible for these companies to acquire new equipment; thus, they have closed their doors. The companies I spent time with were designers who had added printing to their businesses. These were all relatively new private businesses, and they all have goals to grow their revenues and add higher end printing services.

The government, however, isn't standing still in terms of print. For example, it is in the process of building a [pharmaceutical packaging plant](#) in the provincial capital of Pinar del Rio, expected to be in operation mid-2016 with a projected ROI of four years. By 2018, the plant is expected to be producing 437 units annual of folding cartons for pharmaceutical products, and the government has indicated it will continue to add technology to the plant.

I did stumble across the printing operation for the Ministry of the Interior. I could hear offset presses running, and I saw a light production or production class digital printer in the back of the area, but military guards very politely informed me that I could not enter without permission from the Ministry, even with my journalist creds. Time did not permit me to pursue that avenue, which I am sure would have been rife with bureaucratic pitfalls, but I will surely have it on my list for the next visit!

Company Profiles

The first company I visited is a small design firm, who didn't want its name used. The company has a print room with five small HP monochrome toner printers and three small color inkjet printers. They produce all of their work internally, except if someone wants oversized material they can't produce on their A4 printers. They are mostly producing business cards, flyers, stationery, that type of thing. The owner is bright and energetic and wants to take the business to the next level. She would really like to acquire a color printer capable of producing 200,000 copies per month and was thinking about Ricoh. But she wasn't sure if she could buy such a thing. I introduced her to a Latin American distributor for Heidelberg who can answer those questions for her.



After our visit, I returned to my room. Angel and Dyanna gave me directions to Hotel Habana Libre, where I could buy Internet time by the hour. It was raining, so I waited till it stopped and then walked the three-quarters of a mile and took advantage of the opportunity to download some work emails and catch up with everyone. Internet is not cheap here. You can buy an hour of time on the street for 3 to 5 CUC, but to be able to work inside the hotel and use their WiFi, it is 10 CUC an hour.

Day Two

Angel and Dyanna put on a nice breakfast every morning. Fruit (banana, pineapple, guava, papaya), café con leche, a blended fruit drink and two eggs cooked however I wanted, plus toast. The first morning, it was a lot of food, which I couldn't eat, so after that they scaled it down to a more reasonable amount.

I went to the U.S. Embassy today to see if they could help me get some money. We got there about 10, and there was already a huge line of Cubans looking for visas to the U.S. The guard told me it had been the same every day since the embassy opened a few weeks ago. In order to get in the line, people already had to have an appointment, and they were checked off on a list as their turn came. As an American citizen, I didn't have to stand in the line. The guard took my passport and asked what I wanted. Then they called me into the guard shack where they looked through my purse and computer

bag. I was forbidden to take any electronics into the embassy, even a flash drive! They kept all of that and gave me a claim ticket.

At the embassy entrance, I was wanded, my purse was again searched and put through the x-ray machine. Understandably, security is very tight. Then I was able to go in, fill out a form stating what I needed, and a very nice Cuban lady (behind glass) explained that all they could do was arrange a phone call for me and give me access to the Internet (there were two computers available, Windows XP, I think). So I used the opportunity to write a note home. She did tell me that someone from the U.S. could send money by Western Union, but as an American citizen, I could not receive the money. It had to be received by a Cuban. Okay, no problem. I could manage that.

Turns out it is not that easy. Over the next two days, we tried a number of options. Western Union from the Dominican Republic cannot send money to Cuba! That seemed like it would be the easiest option. Western Union from the U.S. can only send money from a Cuban to a family member. A Dominican bank can't send money to Cuba. So that was it. I would just need to make do with what I had, which was okay. Not ideal, but okay. My husband and our employee, Amado, jumped through hoops trying to get something done, for which I was very grateful. I think my husband was a bit annoyed over the whole thing, but he put a lot of effort and thought into it, which was much appreciated.

After the Embassy, there were two companies I had arranged to visit. Both were in the Vedado section of Havana, not far from the Embassy. On the way, I had Pepe stop several times so I could take pictures. I saw a sign on a building that said Producciones Graficas, so I asked Pepe to stop. We entered just as some men were coming out of a meeting room. I could hear an offset press running in the back and see a large copier. I introduced myself, showed them my journalist creds, and asked if I could take a look at their operation. Turns out it was the print shop for the Ministry of the Interior and he apologetically said I needed to get permission from his Jefe first, who was in a different location. I decided it probably wasn't worth pursuing, and Pepe also said that it was difficult for anyone to get into a government facility like that because they were very secretive.

The first company I visited was called La Oficina Impresion. It was founded just a couple months earlier by 21-year-old Carlos Mejias. I had communicated with him before arriving in Cuba, and he said he was just a very small company (one person), was I sure that I wanted to visit him. I did, because first of all, I wasn't sure how many other companies I would be able to see, and secondly, you always learn something from these engagements.

La Oficina Impresion is located in Carlos' apartment on the third floor of a nice neighborhood. Carlos has a Brother DCP J 125 A4 color printer, a small (A4) HP B&W toner printer and a couple of computers. He does design for clients, and the printing. It's all very short run stuff, business cards, flyers, invitations, that kind of thing. I asked him if he went to university for design, and he indicated that no, he was basically self-taught. In speaking about the future, Carlos said he had his eye on a Brother dye sublimation printer that could print on ceramics and fabric. He thought he could acquire that within the year. With that, he could significantly expand his offerings. He was a bright and enthusiastic young man, and I am sure he will be able to make a go of this business for himself and his family.



Next up was Ecoimagen Diseño y Realizacion. This was a little larger business, run by Roy Barthelomy and Yamika Soler (husband and wife). Before they would talk to me, they wanted to make sure I had permission from the government to be there as a journalist, so I showed them my press permit, and they took a photo of it just in case. They have been in business for 1.5 years and have a total of 5 employees, including two designers and two production people. The lobby was very cool, and had many samples of their work on display. Equipment included an HP 800 inkjet roll-fed printer (4-color), a Riso 220 U where they did mostly flyers, and an HP Laserjet CP 5524 (color). There was also a cutter and two computers. They produce a variety of signs, flyers, brochures, menus and art reproductions. Some of the art is work of their own designers. They also print and assemble gift bags.





They produce a kind of backlit sign, with artwork on what looked like clear polycarbonate lit from behind, an affordable alternative to neon or screens. And he had a laser engraver that could etch into polycarbonate to create designs on things like business card holders, plaques, and other items. He also was kind enough to present me with a signed poster depicting Ché Guevara, a major figure in Castro's Cuban revolution (named in 1999 as one of the 100 most influential people of the 20th Century by Time Magazine).

He hopes to continue to grow the business, of course, and would like to get a larger format printer, maybe a flatbed. He serves both government and private clients.

After that, I had Pepe drop me at the hotel so I could get on the Internet, and then back to the place I was staying for dinner and some relaxation. Tired!

Day Three

Still trying to work through the money thing, so I went to the hotel at about 9. A bit of work to get done, clean up email, download some things to work on later. The lobby was full of tourists getting ready for their day. What a crowd!



Angel had offered to take me around Habana Vieja later in the day. When I returned to the house, his brother was visiting. We left about noon in his car, a 1986 Russian Moskvitch.



His brother lived in Habana Vieja, so we dropped him off, parked and walked around. La Floridita, where Hemmingway used to hang out, is still in business in Havana Vieja and quite a tourist attraction.



Lots of tourists, lots of people walking around, enjoying a beautiful day. I took lots of photos, and Angel and Dayanna explained the sights, including lots of different museums, churches, schools, government buildings, etc. We also walked through two lovely plazas, Plaza Paloma and Plaza Vieja. Angel bought a treat off of a cart. The best way I can describe it is dough extruded into a crenelated stick and fried, then

rolled in sugar. The carts had a deep fryer and everything, powered by gas. There were a number of them around. The fried dough was served in paper cones.





Classic American cars were everywhere, but I saw my favorite one in Habana Viejo. Mostly they are used as taxis, and parts are either made locally or imported from China.



And there's a Chinatown in Havana!



Some things I found interesting:

- No motorcycles in the streets here. It is rare when you see one. I understand that outside the capital, in the campos, they are more common. Gasoline is about \$1/liter, so that probably contributes. In the Dominican Republic, motorcycles are everywhere, but then, gas is \$7 a gallon there.
- Walking around Old Havana, I was surprised that most of the old buildings seemed to be built in the 1900 to 1920 timeframe, not earlier. Parts of the old city wall still stand, two forts are there,

and there are some buildings that look to be older. Some of them are being renovated or scheduled for renovation. There seem to be more older buildings in Santo Domingo. Perhaps one driver for a construction boom in that timeframe is a series of three U.S. occupations of Cuba:

- The First Occupation of Cuba, 1898-1902, following the Spanish-American War when Spain ceded Cuba to the United States. That was the war prompted by the explosion of the USS Maine in Havana Harbor during the Cuban revolt against Spain. The cause and responsibility for her sinking remained unclear after a board of inquiry investigated.
- The Second Occupation of Cuba, 1906-1909. After the collapse of President Tomás Estrada Palma's regime, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt ordered an invasion of Cuba and established an occupation that would continue for nearly four years. The goal of the operation was to prevent fighting between the Cubans, to protect North American economic interests, and to hold free elections. Secretary of State Taft invoked the terms of a 1903 treaty and declared himself Provisional Governor of Cuba. Following the election of José Miguel Gómez in November 1908, Cuba was deemed stable enough to allow a withdrawal of American troops, which was completed in February 1909.¹
- The Sugar Intervention (1917-1922), a third U.S. occupation of Cuba. In 1916, internal discord over election irregularities led to a military insurgency in Cuba. American sugar plantation owners requested protection from the U.S. Military. Ultimately, the US government decided that the insurgency represented a direct threat to the American property in the country. In the meantime, Cuba had declared war on Germany (!!) and the U.S. had concerns about Germany supporting the insurgents. This was during World War I, but before the U.S. entered the war in April of 1917. The first American troops arrived in August 1917. Technically, the operation was not an intervention. Rather, the Cuban government formally invited the US army to train in a warm climate. But all the activity leading up to this step was an effort to protect American sugar interests in an unstable political/military climate on the island, particularly to protect the 1918 sugar crop.
- On the whole, the streets are cleaner than in the DR, although in worse repair. Some areas have some pretty upscale houses and big lawns, but that's the exception. Those mostly seem to be around Embassy Row and in the area where the bigger tourist hotels are.
- They love Che Guevarra in Cuba. He and Jose Martí are the two big heroes. I have to look into both of them when I get back.
- I'm given to understand (if I understood the Spanish correctly) that the old American cars Cuba is known for are a result of many of them being abandoned here when the U.S. pulled out, and also, before the U.S. pulled out, Cubans were buying U.S. cars. After Fidel took over, Cubans were not permitted to buy cars; they had to be given them by the government. Even today, an individual cannot own more than one car. People told me that repairs can be difficult but that they get many of the parts from China (!!). Estimates are that there are some 60,000 vintage American cars on the island. Most have morphed into some kind of hybrid in a classic car body, with additions such as disc brakes, updated upholstery, newer Russian and other engines. One

¹ Source: Wikipedia, January 3, 2016. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Occupation_of_Cuba

pundit stated, "It's like a Galapagos Island of cars. Because they have been cut off for so long, they've morphed into their own species. It's not a Cadillac. It's something else."²

- There are lots of old Russian cars here, too, but not many Russians anymore, I was told. The Russian embassy, however, is huge. A fortress bristling with antennas.
- The streets feel safer than in Santo Domingo, although I am careful. I've never been accosted by anyone, or asked for money (well, one old lady outside the hotel where I go for Internet did ask, but she wasn't pushing. I just shook my head and walked by, but gave her some money on a later visit).

Even with the embargo, there is still American influence. I loved this hot dog stand – La Casa de Perro Caliente! I didn't try one, though. I noticed they still had a sign in the window that said Happy New Year 2013. That was a little disconcerting!



Back at the house, and got caught up on work. Pepe came by about 4:30. His relative was going to try to set up a couple of appointments we could go to jointly, but she is trying to buy a cutter, and apparently it is a very bureaucratic process that is taking her a lot of time between the government and the bank. That obviously takes priority. Anyway, Pepe was insisting that he could take me to the airport where I could use an American credit card. I told him I thought that was very unlikely, but he insisted. What else did I have to do? So off we went.

About 15 minutes into the trip, it started pouring rain, lots of heavy thunder and lightning (very close, very scary lightning) and the roads were quickly flooded. The car's AC didn't work, and we had to keep the windows up because of the rain, so the windows fogged pretty quickly. Pepe used newspapers to clean them off and turned up the blower. I suggested switching it to defrost, which helped a lot. In some

² Antique Cuban Cars: Why auto collectors are holding off, CNBC, September 23, 2015.
<http://www.cnbc.com/2015/08/03/antique-cuban-cars-why-auto-collectors-are-holding-off.html>

of the areas we went through, I wondered if his little car was going to get flooded or swept away, but we were okay.

He talked a lot about the politics, how the government lies about things, and blames everything on the U.S. embargo. He also said that while health care and medicines are supposed to be free, you often have to bribe the doctors and pharmacies to get access. He believes that the high government officials are socking away money outside the country. He really is very angry about the whole situation, and I suppose that is not uncommon. People here have a fear of the government, as evidenced by the fact that his relative didn't want her name or company name used and Ecoimagen's wish to ensure that I had the proper permissions. Pepe explained that in each quadrant of the City there are Committees that watch everything people do and report up the chain. As I understood it, there was a head person for each quadrant and 18 or more committee members. All of the information about people and their activities gets rolled up to the national government. People fear the knock on their door in the middle of the night that means they might get taken away because of something they did or were perceived to have done.

Just walking around and watching and talking to people, I didn't see a lot of that. Angel and Dayanna didn't really express any of this, but, of course, I didn't put them in an uncomfortable position by asking. So as with any politically charged situation, some of it may be an exaggeration, but a lot of it is probably true.

At the airport, of course, we were told "no can do" with the American credit card. Big surprise. Okay, enough with the money thing. I have enough to get by. Let's just keep moving! I overreacted when I first learned I couldn't use an American credit card in Cuba, and then had to spend cash for an overpriced hotel room. My bad. I should have known better. Next time, I will have a more productive and less stressful trip with these lessons learned. I'm still glad I came. It is a unique experience, especially for Americans at this time.

Back home, did some more work, got dinner, and went to bed. Exhausted.

Tomorrow, I have two appointments in the afternoon. One is a visit to a business; the other one is business owners actually coming to meet with me here at the house. The business is located about an hour away. I was really surprised at that ... we'll see!

Day Four

Today I started with breakfast and the three-quarter mile walk to the hotel for Internet. Had some work come in, so I did that when I got back. Then Dayanna and I walked over to the supermarket. I wanted some yogurt, and I wanted to see what supermarkets were like. It was sad, really. Downstairs was all the frozen and refrigerated stuff, plus they were selling appliances (mostly Daewoo). Cases were empty or had very little in them.

Upstairs was dry goods. Canned foods, liquor, juice, soda, junk food, even Froot Loops and Cocoa Puffs. Upstairs there was a very long line waiting to check out. Most people seemed to have packages of cookies that were on special. No produce. No meat – well, downstairs there were a bunch of those salamis, like Dominican salamis that you would never want to eat, mystery meat. I just wanted yogurt. They had giant containers of it, coco flavored. Dayanna said there was another place that had smaller containers.

So then we walked over to a place that sells meat and milk. Pretty much the same salami stuff but I was able to get some yogurt and queso blanco, also bought an avocado from the street. The yogurt was still in the giant container, like a gallon of ice cream. But theirs was orange flavored.

A little more work, a couple glasses of yogurt (it was great!), and then Pepe picked me up to go to another meeting with a design and print firm, Puropapel. It was delightful. Eilyn Prieto Herrera is very talented and nice and has great aspirations. I hope she does well.



Eilyn has an uncle that goes back and forth to Miami a lot and a neighbor whose job is going to Florida and muling stuff back for people in the barrio. She was able to get an 8-color Canon inkjet printer that her uncle brought her as baggage, and it has really nice quality.



She showed us several samples of her design work. She also has two small embossing machines (manual). Mostly she is doing business cards, invitations, wedding stuff. Really nice work.



Then I had dinner with a group from elfosgráfica, a family owned business that is doing some exciting work with creating digital versions of old and rare books for the National Library of Cuba.



Milena Recio (sitting next to me) has two jobs. She is the web editorial director for [On Cuba magazine](#), a bimonthly magazine that is put on charter flights between Miami and Cuba, and there is an online daily as well. She studied design and worked for the government for a while, then decided to go freelance. She and her sister, Yamilet Moya Silva (in the turquoise blouse) and their husbands are the principals of *elfosgráfica*. They obtained licenses from the government to start their own business as part of the entrepreneur program, and they are making quite a good success of it, it seems.

Once they began to get clients, they found that the clients wanted the services all under one roof – design and production. So they acquired a Roland eco-solvent roll-to-roll printer, 1.3 meters, 4 colors, and have been able to leverage that to grow the business as well.

They produce corporate identity materials for the National Library and the Cuban Cultural Foundation (Fondo Cubano de Bienes Cultural). They produce advertisements for Cuban and foreign businesses that are used in magazines and other places. They also do exhibition signage posters and the like as well as TV spots and are getting more into video.

They were justifiably proud of the work they are doing in book design. *Elfos Grafica* was chosen to do the design for [La Virgen del al cariad del cobre en el alma de pueblo cubano](#) (in English: The Virgin of Charity of El Cobre in the Soul of the Cuban People).³ This is a book that was researched and written by Cuban historian Emilio Cueto, who has been living in Washington D.C. for more than 40 years and is also affiliated with the Smithsonian. The book features the presence of the Catholic patroness of Cuba (Our Lady of Charity) in Cuban art, including music, poetry, sculpture and more. She was important in Cuban culture during the Revolution in the 19th century, and still is today. Many Cubans adore this image and believe she protects them. The book, in hard cover, weighs in at seven pounds has 1,058 images across

³ In “The Old Man and the Sea” by Ernest Hemingway, the fisherman Santiago promises to visit the Virgin’s shrine at El Cobre if he catches a fish. (Hemingway later had his Nobel Prize medal deposited at the shrine.)

its 560 pages, along with poems and songs. What makes elfosgráfica really proud is that the book is the first Cuban book that has been placed in the U.S. Library of Congress. It was also presented to the Vatican and the National Library of Cuba. It is the only Cuban book to be in all three places.

The author also [visited Cuba recently](#) and presented copies of the book to all of the libraries in Cuba.

Elfosgráfica has continued to work with Cueto, and they are currently working on another project with him. The company also does design for a number of other art books, and is in the midst of a project digitally restoring rare and old books from the National Library. These books are fragile and not accessible to the people, but are important to the country's history. By reproducing them digitally, they are able to make them available to the people. Other books they are involved with include:

- La Cuba pintoresca de Frederic Mihale
- Los Ingeios en Cuba
- Tipos y Custumbres de la Isla de Cuba.

Another large book is La Toma de la Habana por los Ingleses (the Seizure of Havana by the English). This book was too large to print in its original form so they had to make it a smaller format. The digital edition contains an English diary and other information that was not in the original book. They are also working on design for a book called *Cuba in the USA*. It is in both English and Spanish and written by Emilio Cueto, documenting the impact Cubans have had in America. One small example is the recent performance by the Buena Vista Social Club at the White House. They are the most well-known musicians in Cuba.

Earlier this week, the elfosgráfica team spent a day with a group from various California Universities that were on an educational mission in the country. I wasn't clear exactly what the topic was, but one of the professors made the comment that, "If you speak three languages, you are trilingual; if you speak two, you are bilingual; if you speak one, you are American." That got us off on a discussion about Americans and the perception of Americans in Cuba, which was pretty interesting.

A delightful dinner with these lovely people. I will be keeping in touch with them. Milena's 6-year-old daughter was there as well. I have her in a photo but they didn't want her photo published anywhere. She was very well-behaved and spent part of the time singing and dancing. She has a solo performance in an upcoming school play. Very charming.

Back home, wrote a few emails, finished up some work and then went to bed.

Day Five

As usual, off to the hotel after breakfast. There were several work items to attend to, some of which I did at the hotel, and some of which I brought back with me to email off tomorrow.

I got back about 10:30 ... I had an 11:00 appointment with Grupo Promociones, Yoaima Rodriguez Marin and her husband Eduardo Fiallo. They are in Alamar, about an hour from Havana, and were kind enough to come to me.



They have a 4-color HP Design Jet with pigment ink, and were very proud of the fact that they had one of only two pigment ink printers in the country. It allows them to print on Chrome Coat, which no one else can do. The ink, they say, is quite expensive, about \$60 US per liter, and black is even more expensive. It is hard to get. These folks were also quite interesting. They do design for magazines, newspapers, produce business cards and other corporate identity. One magazine they showed me was Cuba Foreign Trade, the entirety of which Yoaima designed and is credited with in the publication.

Yoaima has been in printing and design for 20 years and is passionate about it. She worked for the government for a time, but like the *elfosgráfica* folks, wanted to try working on her own, and got the appropriate licenses. She is also a photographer and they are getting into video as well. Her husband works for the government but helps with the business. Both her mother and father are journalists, and her father also works in Radio. Yoaima's degree is in education and her husband's is in graphic design.

They do book design as well, and are working on a book about wine in Cuba and the world written by a Cuban sommelier. They do other cooking-related books as well.

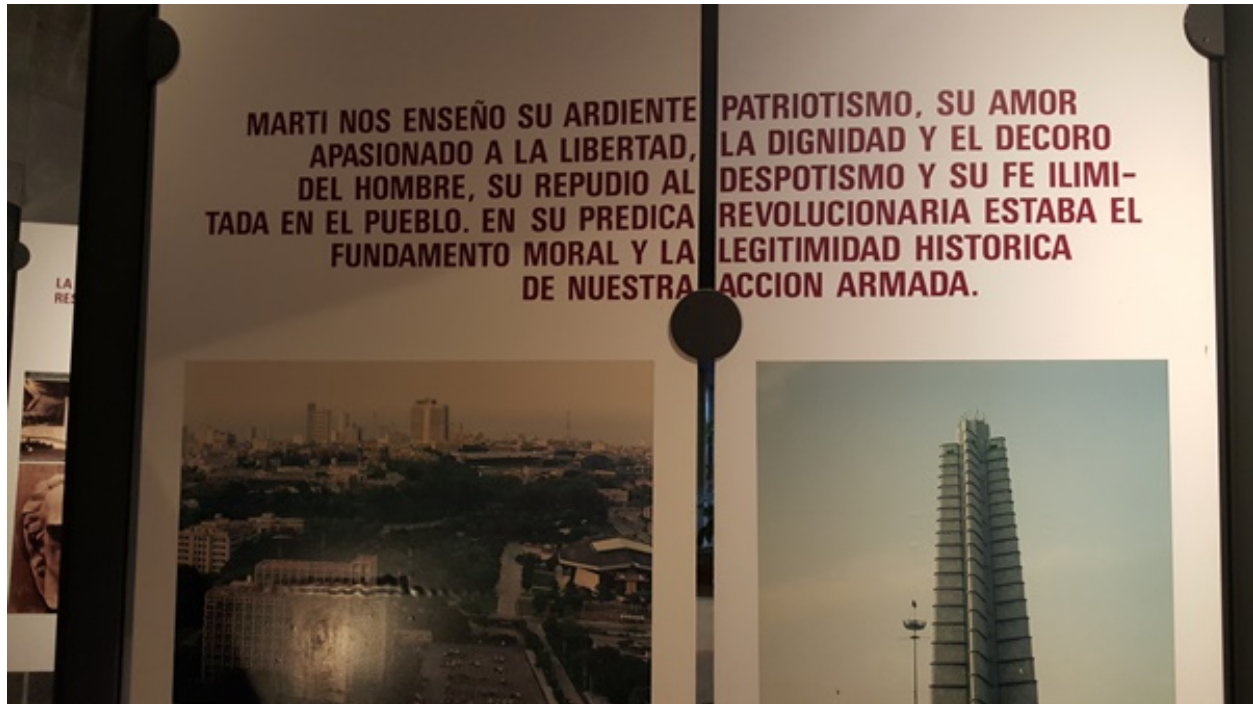
Yoaima and Eduardo are very interested in finding an American printing company that is interested in partnering with them. I think they would be excellent partners.

After a lunch of yogurt, avocado and queso blanco, I headed off to visit the Plaza de la Revolución. I had driven by it a few times (or was driven by it) and wanted to go there in person. It is a memorial to Jose Martí and there is a museum there.



I had general directions to get there and wanted to go there and back before the afternoon rain. It was further than I expected (about six miles round trip), but people were very nice on the way when I asked for directions.

The museum was interesting. There was a lot of copy on the displays about the history of the two revolutions. Here is one example:



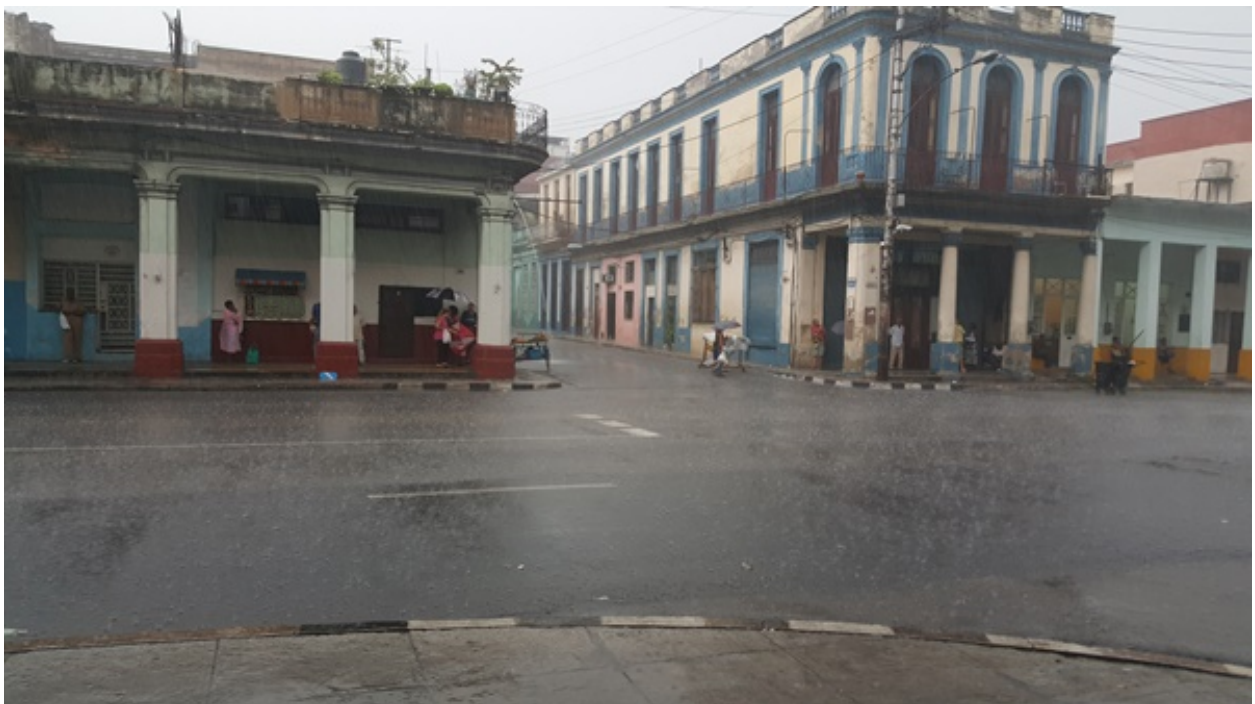
In English: Marti taught his ardent patriotism, his passionate love for freedom, dignity and decency of man, his repudiation of despotism and unlimited faith in the people. His revolutionary preaching was the moral foundation and the historical legitimacy of our armed action.

I found this to be a bit ironic considering the current state of human rights in Cuba.

One of the guards was kind enough to let me take his photo.



I got about halfway back to my room before it started pouring. When it rains, people just stand around on the sidewalks on the main streets that have a 2-meter overhang and wait for it to end or slow down a little. Island style. So I did that for a while, and when it seemed to be abating, I continued on my way. Thank goodness Dayanna had equipped me with an umbrella! Jeans were soaked from the knee down, but it's a warm rain!



That night I had dinner with Angel and Dyanna at a neighborhood Italian restaurant they like, very kind of them to take me there. Way too much food, but it was a delightful evening.

Limited Access to Broadband

The *Entrepreneur* article pointed out that only 3 million Cubans own mobile phones (although they are much more pervasive since that article was published), and few outside the government have access to broadband, limiting the potential to build digital businesses. I found this latter condition to be true with the businesses I visited. They had dial-up service, and it is quite expensive, so they had to be judicious about how it was used.

Day Six

On my final day, I wanted to walk down to the Malecón, the boulevard along the waterfront. It wasn't far. I figured I could find lunch somewhere while I was out. At one end of the waterfront, where the tourist hotels are, there are beaches and it is quite nice. However, the rest of it is sadly undeveloped. I was surprised that there were so few restaurants along the way. I chose between a restaurant that looked okay and a pizza place, seemingly about my only choices. I wanted a hamburger (don't eat them often, but I thought, what the heck). After about 20 minutes, the waiter came by and told me they couldn't do a hamburger. I ended up with the worst ham and cheese sandwich ever. Not quite sure how you manage to do that to a simple sandwich! It was the pink building in the background in case you go to Havana and want to avoid it. The photo also shows a tourist bus and a group of tourists on a bicycle tour.





I obviously looked like a Gringo tourist, and the kids were curious about me.



Lessons Learned

- Don't fly Cubana ... it was actually a little scary, and their on-time record is not good, mostly due to maintenance issues. There are flights on U.S. air carriers from Miami if you can show them you are permitted to travel to Cuba. Or you can fly Copa (a United partner) from Panama.

- Bring lots of cash, preferably Euro or Canadian dollars. As of this writing, the foreign exchange fees are higher for the dollar, and U.S. credit cards (with some exceptions) are not accepted there, even in ATM machines!
- If you are going on your own (not with a tour group), consider staying in a Casa Particular. You get more exposure to the culture that way, and you save a lot that would otherwise be given to overpriced hotels.
- Bring an unlocked phone with you. You can buy a SIM card there and have contact with the outside world. U.S. phones don't work in Cuba. And lines are long to get into the stores operated by the phone companies.
- Be prepared for the fact that Internet is very expensive in Cuba, unless you are staying in an expensive hotel, where you get a limited amount of time on the Internet. I was paying \$10/hour for wireless access in Hotel Habana Libre. I could have gotten it for less on the street, but then you are sitting out on the street doing your work ... not a good option. Most offices and homes I visited either had no Internet or only had dial-up.
- Don't expect the U.S. Embassy to be of much help. They offered to let me make a phone call to the U.S. or use one of their Windows XP computers, but that's about it. If you are there looking to invest or start a business, you may get more help, but they weren't particularly interested in doing anything for me. In fact, I never even saw an American while I was in the embassy, only Cuban workers. They must have been hiding out inside.
- Get to know the people; they are fabulous, very warm and open. There is little crime, maybe less than in a large American city, although like anywhere else, you need to be aware of your surroundings and take the necessary precautions. I never felt threatened or unsafe while I was there.

As relations between the U.S. and Cuba continue to ease, there are business opportunities available. Some of the companies I visited would welcome partnerships with American companies. As it stands now, here, in part is what the Federal Regulations say about importing goods and services from Cuba:

Persons subject to U.S. jurisdiction engaging in import transactions involving goods produced by an independent Cuban entrepreneur pursuant to § 515.582 must obtain documentary evidence that demonstrates the entrepreneur's independent status, such as a copy of a license to be self-employed issued by the Cuban government or, in the case of an entity, evidence that demonstrates that the entrepreneur is a private entity that is not owned or controlled by the Cuban government.

There is a list of restricted items and limitations on certain items – like those Cuban cigars! – but printing and design services are not prohibited according to the list. You can also check out the Federal Regulations concerning who can travel to Cuba without explicit permission from the U.S. government (you will still need a Cuban visa to enter the country).

In terms of who can travel to Cuba without explicit permission from the U.S. government your purpose of travel must fit into one of these 12 U.S. government approved categories:

- Educational activities in Cuba for schools, including people-to-people exchanges open to everyone
- Professional research and professional meetings in Cuba

- Public performances, clinics, workshops, athletic and other competitions, and exhibitions in Cuba
- Religious activities in Cuba
- Humanitarian projects in Cuba
- Journalistic activities in Cuba
- Family visits to close relatives in Cuba
- Activities in Cuba by private foundations, or research or educational institutes
- Any type of support for the Cuban people
- Exportation, importation, or transmission of information technologies or materials
- Certain authorized export transactions including agricultural and medical products, and tools, equipment and construction supplies for private use
- Official business of the US government, foreign governments, and certain intergovernmental organizations.

If you are going ...

You will want to familiarize yourself with the latest regulations.

The Cliff Notes version can be found here: https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/guidance_cuba_travel.pdf.

The full regulations are here: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/31/part-515>. If in doubt, give the government a shout. They appreciate clarifications sought in advance!