

Review of May Day Study Tour to Cuba 2017

A First Taste of Cuba

Just a month ago I had the honour of being present in the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana, Cuba for the annual celebration of May Day. Not 250 metres behind me Cuban President, Raúl Castro, was up on the rostrum, doffing his straw sun hat or waving a small Cuban flag, as hundreds of thousands of Cubans and international guests paraded before us. Castro was not surrounded by hordes of security service operatives or armed police. His presence was relaxed and natural. The assembled guests below, myself included, would occasionally turn to offer a wave or cheer in solidarity and receive an acknowledgement before we all turned to focus upon the incredible sight below us.

The first May Day since the death of Fidel Castro, in November 2016, and perhaps the last with any Castro in a position of authority in Cuba, Raúl has stated more than once that he will step down in 2018, was running smoothly as planned.

As part of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign May Day Study Tour 2017, this was my first time in Cuba. The May Day rally itself was the centrepiece of a tour that included a wide range of meetings at health, education and agricultural projects as well as visits to key cultural centres. As an introduction to the country, it was an excellent way to both see Cuba and to understand the context in which this Caribbean island of 12 million people, only 90 miles from the United States, has to function.

There is a misconception that, due to the thaw initiated by Raúl Castro and then US President Barack Obama in the 2013 – 2015 period, relations between the two countries are now on a normal footing. It is true that there has been some change. In July 2015 the Cuban embassy reopened in Washington D.C., for the first time in 54 years, and the following month an American embassy was re-established in Havana. Previously, each country only had a “special interest section” in the other country.

However, there are still key issues outstanding between the two countries. The most significant of these is the ongoing illegal economic and financial blockade of Cuba by the United States. The blockade has been in place for nearly sixty years and has a significant impact upon the ability of Cuba to both export and import on the international market. The US will not allow Cuba access to the dollar for example, the currency in which most international trade is conducted, thus forcing the Cubans to find alternative ways to trade, through third parties, in order to sustain the economy.

Also, the United States persists in its illegal occupation of the Guantanamo Bay naval base, made famous worldwide for the detention of terrorism suspects, in order to retain a military foothold in Cuba. Given the recent change in the administration in the United States there is little hope that the issue of the blockade, or that of Guantanamo, will be addressed soon.

The blockade, in particular, featured at various times in our discussions. In terms of the health and medical sector, the blockade restricts access to many vital drugs and medicines. However, the converse impact has been that Cuba has had to become more self reliant and generates 80% of the pharmaceuticals it requires internally. Agricultural machinery, which could be sourced in Mexico, has to be imported from other parts of the world, adding to transport costs and the logistical problems of sourcing spare parts and expertise.

Against this background Cuba has made great strides as a developing country. There is a universal health care system, free at the point of use, and able to boast an infant mortality rate of 4.2 per thousand live births, to rival that of the UK at 3.6 per thousand live births. Latest World Health Organisation statistics put the United States figure at 6.5 per thousand live births. Given the

inequalities in wealth and health provision across the United States that figure will undoubtedly mask significant differences in areas of high deprivation.

Cuba places great emphasis upon training for the medical profession, with staff employed across the Cuban medical system and thousands of medical professionals deployed in other developing countries, in order to provide them with much needed support. In the region of 15,000 Cuban doctors are serving outside of the country.

Discussions we held with medical staff in Pinar del Rio and Viñales made clear that the community based emphasis of the services is vital to the well being of the population. The family doctor, at the core of a team based in each community, can draw upon specialist expertise at the district level, where necessary, and at a national level if needed.

Education provision, right through to University level is free across the country. The level of literacy in Cuba is 100%, a level established initially in 1961. That year was declared by Fidel Castro as a year to combat illiteracy in Cuba, then running at 20%, and teams of young people from the cities spent the year in many rural homes, where illiteracy was rife, to tackle the problem. The Literacy Museum we visited was a testament to the significance of this campaign and underlined the ongoing importance of literacy and literature in Cuba today. The 1961 campaign culminated in all of those who had participated marching through Plaza de la Revolución in Havana wielding massive pencils, a fabulous image!

Cuba spends 48% of its gross domestic product on health and education services, a clear indication of where the priorities of the government lie. The UK equivalent figure is 29%, which tells its own story.

Economically Cuba is tackling the issue, common in many parts of the world, of de-population from the countryside. At the time of the revolution in 1959, 80% of the population lived in the countryside and worked in agriculture, with only 20% living in the cities. Those figures are now exactly reversed. In part, this is due to the success of the Cuban education system which means that, unless young people are training as specialists in agriculture, they inevitably gravitate to the cities and professional occupations. Our discussion at the agricultural co-operative, in Viñales, centred on the impact of this shift and policies to combat it.

One initiative from the government is to promote land lease arrangements to encourage more people to return to the land in order to redress the imbalance in agriculture. It is too soon to evaluate the impact or success of this approach but more people working the land will be vital to maintaining economic balance.

At the same time, a great deal of emphasis is being placed upon tourism as a foreign currency earner for the economy. This inevitably requires far greater engagement with the private sector, both at a macro and at a micro economic level. On a macro level this means attracting investment from companies such as Spanish hotel giant Iberostar, who have now built 14 hotels in Cuba, in order to bring in the knowledge and expertise required to cater for growing numbers of Western tourists.

At a local level the plethora of artists and musicians across Havana, the growing number of restaurants and the constant stream of sellers of Che Guevara paraphernalia, are an indication of increasing levels of local entrepreneurship. A new fleet of bright yellow taxis outside the José Martí International Airport in Havana were a further indication of the government drive to support the tourism economy.

The drive to attract tourists is combined with a major programme of building restoration across Havana. In places such as the Plaza Vieja, where much restoration has been completed, the buildings look fabulous, returned to former glory. In other parts of the city, there is clearly still work to do. The US blockade however is a factor here too, slowing down access to the materials required to make progress at the pace the Cubans desire.

While earning much needed foreign currency, tourism is potentially a double edged sword. The growth of the private sector, if not carefully regulated, has the potential to generate differentials in earnings, which may undermine the social gains of the revolution. We were assured that Cuban trade unions are aware of this and are actively recruiting in the private sector. The next decade will be critical for Cuba in ensuring that the social gains of the revolution are defended, while the economy is expanded.

There are many other aspects of the tour I have not covered. The excellent education provision we saw, the visits to the Museum of the Revolution and the Museum of Fine Arts, or the great bars and restaurants in Havana. The approachability and friendliness of the Cuban people was a key feature of the visit. The camaraderie of the tour group was also a vital part of the experience. Each visit and discussion was subject to forensic analysis over a glass of Cristal or a mojito. This was not a beach holiday, nor did anyone want it to be, though the half day spent by the Caribbean was certainly an experience not to be missed!

A visit lasting two weeks is no time in which to evaluate the achievements of a whole nation or get more than an impression of a country. The overriding sense from my visit to Cuba however was one of hope for the future and pride in the achievements of the revolution so far.

The discussions we had with health, education and other professionals were frank, open and honest. There was no sense that Cuba had all of the answers or had solved all of the problems for its people. There was no suggestion that we were in some socialist paradise, it was clear that there were challenges but there was a great sense that with a united, collective effort they could be overcome.

There was no evidence of homelessness. There was universal free access to health care and education. There was no unemployment. Cuba has no millionaires and no one is going to get rich but no-one is homeless or starving. For a developing country, that is some achievement and one from which many richer nations could learn.

Steve Bishop, participant on CSC May Day Study tour 2017