

Cuba: A socialist paradise?

by Marc Jones



Black vultures circle Havana's Plaza de la Revolución, where Fidel Castro has in the past spoken to millions of Cubans. Today it's empty save for a few tourists and looks like a sprawling car park. The only buildings of note are the Che bronze outline on a nearby block and the José Martí column made of marble that towers above.

Anyone expecting to find a workers' paradise in Cuba is in for a shock. The rural east of Holguin Province, for example, is still agricultural and you're as likely to see oxen or horses drawing carts as private cars on the pot-holed roads. Hitch-hiking is popular and it's almost obligatory to stop if you're in a car. The tourism boom has been largely contained in all-inclusive resorts owned by state companies.

The area's main tourist attraction is Naranja Bay's aquarium. It's a world away from the commercialised Florida experience because the aquarium is on a tiny island in the centre of the bay - just a few dozen people at a time are taken across in speed boats to swim with the dolphins in sea-pens. The emphasis is on the environment rather than cashing in on tourists. If you've ever got fed up of forking out for kids on holiday, this is the place. Cuba's tourism industry has a refreshing lack of commercialism - no inflatables in the hotel shop but plenty of Che T-shirts, on which more later.

The effect of the tourism boom is hard to estimate - tourists must pay for everything in convertible pesos, which are set at about 10 times the local peso. So a convertible peso (maybe 70p) is worth far more to a Cuban barman, taxi driver or waiter and there was evidence that people were taking up these jobs for the tips.

Food is rationed in Cuba as a result of the ongoing economic blockade from the US. The monthly ration allows, for example, for just five eggs a person but a generous five kilos of sugar! A taxi driver said that petrol for him was free and his monthly electricity bill was just a peso, less than a pound. Health and education are famously well provided - so much so that life expectancy and literacy rates in Cuba are higher than in the USA. So although there isn't much spare cash

around, a lot of the essential needs are provided by the state. The blockade - imposed after the 1959 revolution - is so extensive that a Cuban delegation was recently barred from staying in a Norwegian hotel because it was owned by a US chain.

Havana is an amazing city. Obviously more affluent than the rural east, it was once the richest city in the Caribbean, but many locals seem to be living in little more than ruins of grand old colonial buildings. In fairness to the government, hundreds of building projects are underway in Habana Vieja (Old Havana) to restore buildings to their former grandeur. Some streets and plazas which have already been done up are stunning.

The Museo de la Revolución is a must-see - sited in the impressive former palace of the dictator Batista, it's a reminder of what Fidel and Che were overthrowing. Cuba in the 50s had become a Mafia-dominated society of massive inequality and the rebels who fought the revolutionary struggle won support in both city and countryside because of their commitment to equality. The museum is a moving reminder of the various revolutionaries who made their sacrifices - Frank Pais of Holguin, for example, was shot by the state and now has an airport named after him.

Che Guevara's image is everywhere and it's no surprise. The youthful bravado of the revolutionaries, with their handmade weapons and almost Dad's-Army-like motor division, is captured in that image of defiance that plasters t-shirts and posters. If you wear a Che t-shirt, be prepared for more attention in the streets. People sidle up to you and offer you three-peso notes or coins with Che's image on them. One Che lookalike, complete with beret and fatigues, was offering to have his photo taken - but the hassle is low-key and easy-going.

Havana feels safe and relaxed unlike most other Caribbean cities and the mixture of races was very noticeable. Cuba has more white immigrants than most other islands and, although blacks did have an inferior status pre-revolution, that does not seem to be the case now.

Castro's extended absence from the leadership following a serious illness has caused uncertainty but doesn't seem to have stopped the warmth and friendliness of the Cuban people. Cubans like a good time - after all, the place is famous for its cocktails, dancing and music. Every bar seems to have a band knocking out tunes that get people dancing and some streets of Habana Vieja are reminiscent of New Orleans' French Quarter before the deluge.

The architecture takes your breath away - even when the buildings are falling down. The great old Chevys and Dodges are a throwback to a different era - some have lasted better than others but all give the place a really different feel. It may not be a workers' paradise but it seems a damn sight better than what was here before, and Cuban socialism certainly has a human face and very Caribbean style.

Top tips - buy some vintage rum (a litre bottle costs about £4), cigars if you know anyone who smokes (not cheap, unless you risk buying the inferior ones off the street) and spend some time in the Museo del Chocolate. If you think you've ever had hot chocolate, try the cafe there! It's also well worth spending an afternoon people-watching in one of the squares over a long cool Mojito or Cuba Libre cocktail.

I drank the last of the Mojitos on a rooftop bar overlooking the city. Suddenly a flock of swallows swooped down to gulp at the hotel pool's water, a surreal moment that was completely in keeping with this magical city. To me, swooping swallows make a far more appropriate symbol of this city than the black vultures circling.

Change your diet - change the world

Who are we?

Wrexham Veggies is a group of vegetarians and vegans who have come together to campaign for cruelty-free diets and lifestyles. We have run two very successful events so far in Wrexham - a Free Food Fayre in July 2006 and a Xmas Fayre in December 2006. In addition, Wrexham Veggies takes part in local and national protests, holds street stalls, distributes leaflets and contacts the local press on Veggie issues.

Why go veggie?

Going vegetarian is the most effective single thing you can do to make this world a kinder, fairer and better place, while also improving your own health. Now is a good time to make the change: the choice of food available to vegetarians has never been more varied or more appetising, and the scale of destruction caused by the global meat business has never been greater.

More and more people are choosing to go vegetarian or vegan. The reasons can be grouped into a number of categories:

Saving animals

In the UK alone, 850 million animals and hundreds of millions of fish are killed every year to put meat on tables - more than three million animals every weekday. Before they are slaughtered, hundreds of millions lead desolate, disease-ridden lives on factory farms. Turning vegetarian means you're no longer a part of that cycle of death.

Saving the planet

Rainforests are cleared for grazing; methane from livestock causes global warming; soil is eroded by cattle; slurry poisons waterways; seas are laid to waste by over-fishing. The global appetite for meat and the industrial techniques of the meat industry are destroying the Earth.

Saving yourself and others

While 750 million people go to bed hungry every night, one-third of the world's grain is fed to farmed animals. A typical Western meat-based diet can only feed 2.5 billion people on the planet: a plant-based diet will feed every one of us.

by Wrexham Veggies

Vegetarians tend to live longer and suffer less from diseases such as hypertension, obesity, coronary artery disease, certain kinds of cancer and diabetes. Vegetarian diets can even be used to treat illnesses.



Wrexham Free Food Fayre, 2006

If you are interested in joining our campaigns or would like more information about moving towards a vegetarian or vegan diet, contact us by email or visit our website.

Email: info@wrexhamveg.org

Website: www.wrexhamveg.org

A new Green Group

by Alix Fairclough

What are the issues?

Global warming is the general rise in temperature of the earth's atmosphere - climate change in other words. Humans evolved on earth and learned how to burn fossil fuels in order to create energy. Burning fossil fuels created more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and the more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the more the temperature rises. This is the 'Greenhouse effect'.

The polar ice caps are melting, the melted ice joins the ocean and raises the sea levels, which in turn causes flooding for every continent; increased flooding is already affecting the UK. The rise in temperature also causes diverse weather conditions worldwide, including drought, rainstorms,

hurricanes, tornadoes and earthquakes.

Think of all the things you take for granted, like electricity, and hot water... the fossil fuels that supply most of our energy won't last forever. Imagine a world where tigers and polar bears are extinct. Closer to home, it is predicted that by 2020, there will no longer be snow or ice on the Snowdon summit, even in the depths of winter.

What can you do about it?

We need to send less carbon emissions into the atmosphere, by saving energy produced from the burning of fossil fuels. Here are some energy-saving ideas:

- Turn your heating down by 2 degrees. Be prepared to wear a jumper in the house
- Close doors and windows to conserve heat
- A brick in your freezer acts as a cold-pack, so the freezer needs less energy to do its job
- Use energy efficient light bulbs
- Use rechargeable batteries
- Try to buy local produce wherever possible
- Use public transport when you can, organise car shares and don't make unnecessary journeys
- Recycle as much as possible
- **Join NEWI's Green Group – open to everyone!**

Contact us if you'd like to get involved.

For people with **myspace** accounts, you can add **greennewi** as a friend or you can email: greennewi@yahoo.co.uk for more information