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Destination Cuba

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Destination Cuba



The IWU group poses for a picture taken at a sugar plantation outside Trinidad.

Illinois Wesleyan students explore the contradictions of a nation on the brink of change.

By Tim Obermiller

From a North American perspective, Cuba is a forbidden land, which is precisely its appeal, says Professor of History Michael Weis, who — along with Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies Mauricio Parra — led a group of 24 Illinois Wesleyan students to the island for a May Term class this past spring.

Because current U.S. laws make it illegal to visit Cuba without permission from the federal government, Weis had to jump through several bureaucratic hoops to get the trip on track, but says the effort was worth it for the fresh perspective it gave students who are more accustomed to stereotypes about the island propagated since its socialist revolution four decades ago, when Cuba changed from being a close ally of the United States to one of its most hated enemies.

While wanting to provide a meaningful May Term experience, Weis had his own personal and scholarly agendas in arranging for this firsthand glimpse of Cuba — the first such study trip ever taken by Illinois Wesleyan students. He remembers being fascinated with the country since he was a boy, crouched under his desk in elementary school during bomb drills prompted by the Cuban Missile Crisis. As a Latin American historian, his expertise is Brazil, and his research specifically looks at how U.S. foreign policy has impacted Latin America. So it's natural, he says, that Cuba would be high on his list of countries worth exploring because its destiny is so thoroughly intertwined with America's political landscape.

Weis doesn't disguise the fact that he feels current U.S. policy toward Cuba — including a long-standing trade embargo — is misguided, but he let the 24 students who explored Havana and the surrounding island for three weeks in May make up their own minds about Cuba's government and its impact on the people's daily lives.



During their visit, Illinois Wesleyan students tried to experience as much of the culture as possible — including white-knuckled rides in fiberglass, open taxis called "Coco Cabs."

"I wanted my students to really see the revolution, instead of getting either left-wing propaganda that everything is hunky-dory in Cuba or right-wing propaganda that everything is terrible in Cuba," says Weis. "They could actually see for themselves there are some really good things and there are some really bad things and there are

some things, good things, that have been purchased for a price, and we don't have to support the Revolution but we have to understand the choices that were made.

"I think we succeeded in doing that. I don't think too many people came back from Cuba thinking that they want to be communist but I think that they can understand some of the reasons for the Revolution and why it still has a good degree of support among many of the Cuban people, despite the lack of freedoms and the lack of material progress."

Students' journals written for the class reveal an array of emotions and insights about their Cuban experience — from discomfort at viewing the extreme poverty and being seen "as a walking dollar sign," as one student put it, to admiration for the visible accomplishments of the socialist government in providing equal access to education and health care for its citizens. (Excerpts from some of those journals can be read below.)

Just one month before the IWU contingent's arrival, Cuba's long-time leader Fidel Castro had ordered a crackdown on dissidents, which led to imprisonment of more than 70 and the execution of three men who hijacked a ferry. Wanting his students to mingle as much as possible with a wide range of Cuban citizens — doctors, professors, and ministers, as well as the many vendors on Havana's streets hustling for American dollars — Weis wondered how these arrests might affect people's willingness to openly discuss Castro's policies and their impact on daily life.



Shown above are the two IWU professors who led the May Term trip, Mauricio Parra (left) and Mike Weis. It was Weis' second trip to Cuba and his first opportunity to explore outside of Havana, to see "just see what a beautiful and lush country this is."

"I was very worried that the crackdown was going to stifle people but it didn't," says Weis. "They were willing to talk to us and they were willing to criticize Fidel. In general, Cubans are allowed to criticize Fidel without being punished for it, but they are not allowed to criticize the revolution. I know that's a fine distinction. It's sort of like here in the U.S. — you can criticize President Bush but you can't criticize America, particularly after September 11."

While Weis and fellow professor Mauricio Parra provided students with their own insights and experiences as Latin American scholars (Parra's expertise is in the region's literature), Weis says that another invaluable teacher on the trip was the IWU group's tour guide, Oscar Rodrigues, who used to teach in the education department at the University of Havana.

"Professors in Cuba make about 30 dollars a month," says Weis. "Oscar is a bright guy and he figured out he could make more money giving seven or eight tours a year around Cuba than he could as a professor. He was a phenomenal guide. He gave our students freedom when they needed freedom, because I really did want them to explore as much as possible on their own, but he also made sure they understood the significance of things."

Weis recalls that "when we went to the Bay of Pigs, it was a very memorable visit. The whole place had been devastated by a hurricane two years ago and everything had been destroyed. This was an area that had probably 600 new

homes, all built in the last year, and Oscar said, 'This is why the Revolution is still popular. These people had nothing before '59 and now they have something, even now after this devastating hurricane.'"

While most Cubans with whom the IWU group spoke agreed that the current U.S. trade embargo had placed a stranglehold on the island's economy, there were still signs of progress. For many Europeans, the island has become an attractive tourist destination, and government-sponsored resorts have sprouted up along the picture-perfect shores. Such efforts acknowledge the reality that, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the

guaranteed economic support it provided, Cuba must learn to fend for itself. This reality, says Weis, has led to a kind of underground capitalism in Cuban society, particularly in Havana.

“The fact that the economy now seems to be centered on the U.S. dollar has made a huge difference,” says Weis. That change was even more pronounced this spring than in the previous year, when he first visited the island to investigate its viability as a May Term experience. He noticed a major increase in beggars and street vendors in Havana, all aiming to coax dollars from tourists. “I was shocked by the changes that had occurred in only a year — primarily, I think, because of the ‘dollarization’ of the economy,” he says. “The pace just seemed faster because so many people are hustling so hard to get dollars.”

Even as this underground economy grows, Castro maintains a tight hold on the government — control that Weis believes Castro is able to maintain, in large measure, based on his ability to deflect criticism of his own regime by pointing to America’s continued hostility toward Cuba.

“Because Castro personifies Cuban nationalism, he gets a lot of latitude that I don’t think he would get if we [Americans] embraced him or at least accommodated him. To attack Castro is to attack Cuba, and our hard-line policy has helped him a lot over the years,” says Weis.

Meanwhile, the Cuban people look toward the inevitable day when Castro dies or ages to the point where he can no longer maintain power. When that happens, Weis believes, it is very likely that Cubans will discard their current government and embrace a more open society. What they won’t abandon, he suspects, are the principles of independent sovereignty that fueled the socialist revolution there, and have sustained the people’s sense of pride in the face of undeniable hardships.

While the May Term trip made it apparent to Weis “that we are now witnessing the end of the Revolution as we have known it,” he doesn’t expect that Cubans will ever willingly relinquish their sense of independence. “No, I wouldn’t expect Cuba to become our 51st state,” he says. Instead, Weis predicts that, after a very short transition, Cuba will go to a hybrid system like China in the early 1980s.

No matter what Cuba’s future has in store, it’s clear from the journals that follow that Illinois Wesleyan students who visited the island for May Term have a changed perspective on a country they were raised to view as an enemy. As current sophomore Andrea Bulkley wrote in her journal, “My greatest hope for Cuba is that it can maintain its great dignity and pride no matter what lies in its future; be it tourism, socialism, capitalism and/or the ending of the embargo.”

More student reflections on Cuban culture follow:



The woman above can make more money in a day posing for pictures with tourists than a doctor makes in a month, a reflection of Cuba's changing economy.

The physical atmosphere [of Havana] has very little U.S. influence. I walked down the street and did not see one Honda Civic or a Panera on every corner. There are not McDonald's nor are there fluorescent, flashing lights on every store. There are no billboards lining the superhighways with Michael Jordan or the new "it" celebrity of the week selling one of 20 varieties of cotton socks — there are no superhighways for that matter. I felt as though I was in a different world. That is, until I heard 50 Cent's "In Da Club," a personal Dr. Weis favorite, blasting from a 1950s Dodge. The architecture and cars may not reflect it, but "Western" culture is starting to enter Cuba.

— **Robin Brusman '04**

I find it hard to honor the Revolution the way the Cuban people glorify it. Yes, it did improve the lives of many and it is based on ideals of equality, but it not only rid the country of luxury, it rid the country of upward mobility. It seems to me that there isn't room for improvement in Cuba. Where are the lives of the people heading? They can't work hard to get a better job, they can't save or plan for the future, they can't even easily move to other towns, start over, change jobs or buy a new house. Compared to many Latin American countries, the situation in Cuba is not bad, but is it good enough? Do they want more, do they need more? The idea that more is better is a capitalist thought, but many times these people don't seem to have enough. Yet, at the same time, they seem comfortable and happy. Maybe they truly are satisfied with just surviving. — **Sarah Vales '04**



While most Cuban monuments depict national heroes, British music icon John Lennon has a statue built in his honor and Seth Hubbard '03 takes advantage of the photo op.

The risk of tourism is that you cover the reality of a place to sell things. Cuba should not strive to be another Cancun or Panama City. The history and what Cubans have sought and fought for during the past 150 years is at stake Surely tourism brings in money but it also brings in fakeness.



Above, several students donated clothing, toiletries and other items to a Catholic church in Havana that has the only AIDS program on the island.

I do not think that Cuba is the land of laughter and song, nor is it one long party. Doctors working without aspirin is not laughter, writers being silenced, censored, and thrown in jail for dissident thinking is not song

The people are not satisfied. They want to be able to travel to Miami or around Cuba when they feel like it. They want to make a decent salary for professional jobs (we had a taxi driver who was a mechanical engineer by trade) The positive outcomes of the Revolution (education, health care, better situations for the poor) are tainted with the negatives (masses of people just getting by, poor housing, black markets, people fleeing in rafts, no rights or medicine, the embargo). My greatest hope for Cuba is that it can maintain its great dignity and pride no matter what lies in its future; be it tourism, socialism, capitalism and/or the ending of the embargo. — **Andrea Bulkley '06**



The group takes a break under the hot Cuban sun after their bus breaks down outside Varadero Beach on the road

When I saw those people near the Bay of Pigs who had lost everything in a hurricane last year and heard that the government was there to help those people rebuild their lives, I thought twice about how important those promises are from the government to the people of this country. Government helping the people to that extent doesn't typically happen in other Latin American countries. These are people who also had nothing before the Revolution and that's who the revolutionaries fought for. These people now have access to clean water, doctors, food and if the Revolution regime ends, they might be the first to lose.

[back to Havana.](#)

Cuban socialism and its history reminds me of the power of the lower class among the three social classes. How delicate is that social balance! As I see the U.S. class system change from a powerful middle class to a diminishing middle class and a growing lower class, I wonder what the future holds even for my own country It keenly reminds me of my mission to always think and help those people who are in need of so much — whether it's in the U.S. or elsewhere. I think if anything, this trip has matured people That's the primary purpose of these trips — to open hearts and minds. — **Krista Vogel '03**