

Religion Professor Mullinax Visits Cuba

By Joey Wilson

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Cuba is a country facing incredible change as for the first time in 49 years the president's name is not Fidel. Fidel Castro resigned February 19, due to ill health, although the title of president did stay in the family. On February 25 Cuba's parliament chose Fidel's younger brother, Raúl to replace him. This is the first change that Cuba has had in almost half a century. This is a depiction of what Cuba was like just before this past election.

He found a country without cell phones, Internet, advertising, or major chain stores, and enjoyed it. Mars Hill Associate Professor of Religion Marc Mullinax traveled to Cuba over winter break.

His church in Asheville, Circle of Mercy, organized the trip to visit a sister Baptist church in Camaguey, Cuba's third largest city. Eleven members, including three children, made the 10-day trip in early January, bringing back stories and photos from a land that few U.S. citizens get to see. "I imagined heaven, but it wasn't that, and then I imagined hell, and it wasn't that either. It was a happy medium," said Mullinax.

They flew from the Charlotte airport to Cancun, Mexico, arriving at around 12:00 p.m. just in time for lunch. As their flight to Havana wasn't going to leave until that evening, they spent the afternoon soaking in the sun on the public beach of the famous resort. When 7:30 p.m. rolled around, they boarded the plane of an independent airline for the hour-long flight to Havana, the capital of Cuba. It was midnight before they reached the Martin Luther King Jr. Center, located in central Havana, for some much-needed rest. They would later stay the final two nights of the trip there as well.

The next day, they met their driver, Nestor. He would guide them from then on, tell them about places to eat, where to go and where to stay away from. They first traveled 50 miles in a van to the north-coast town of Matanzas, where they spent the night and visited a Baptist seminary. The next day they drove on 260 miles to Camaguey in the interior.

The Group

They drove first on two-lane roads, which turned into what Americans know as an Interstate highway, but in Cuba, said Mullinax, "everybody can go on it—walkers, bicyclists, horse-drawn carriages, international-size trucks, as well as cars." The trip took nine hours, and they arrived about an hour and a half late for a 3 p.m. worship service, which they thought was at 6. Later on that week they did in fact share a Wednesday worship service in the church they had come to visit.

On the road they had plenty of time to read, practice singing Spanish hymns, and socialize. Whenever they were stuck in traffic, Mullinax and a friend from Warren Wilson took pictures of the scenery. The two of them also got into the habit of taking snapshots in the early morning and late evenings when the light was best.

Skies were blue because it was the dry season, and temperatures ranged between 65 and 85. Mullinax wore his Chaco pants the whole time. They ate Cuban food, which includes beans and rice at every meal and lots of fruit seldom served in Mars Hill—yucca, plantain, mango, and guava—and afterward café cubano. "It's a really really sweet espresso," said Mullinax, "The whole energy of Cuba comes from sugar."

Baptist Church

Mullinax noted that farming is the main occupation in Cuba, and their food may be healthier because they have had to grow it without pesticides and little chemical fertilizer. He said they'd worked out how to plant certain plants next to each other so that rodents, bugs, and pests are repelled. The Cubans had perfected this skill.

"The chicken," he said, "tasted a lot better, than ours. It was completely organic." Cuba's economic issues were evident nevertheless. Mullinax photographed dozens of cars on the road that haven't been seen in the United States since the 1950s.

"It was a hard country to understand," said Mullinax. "People say—if they're liberal—it's a 'utopia,' and if they're conservative, they say it's 'hell.' But it's really neither. It is a very complex place."

The American embargo (against trade with Cuba), that started back when John F. Kennedy was president, explains part of why Cuba is the way it is, Mullinax said. "The lack of money makes it even more complex. There's no capitalism, so you don't have a Wal-Mart and the manufacturing stuff that would bring in a lot of outside capital. It's not like anyone is dying of hunger, as they were when the embargo first began, but it's not a place that has a lot of capital, so certain things just don't happen. Toilet seats are optional!"

On the other hand, Mullinax found that a college professor is assumed to be very wealthy in Cuba, whereas in America it is almost the exact opposite.

Political advertising everywhere

Cuba is one of the hardest places to travel to if you are a U.S. citizen, because of the embargo, which continues, Mullinax feels, because it is the policy of the United States to treat Cuba as an enemy nation. As part of the embargo, the U.S. Government has banned travel to Cuba except for politicians, members of recognized religious groups, or journalists with credentials, and they must apply for special travel "licenses."

Mullinax's church had to send documents off to the U.S. State Department listing the people traveling and stating why they were traveling to Cuba and how long they were going for. The group did receive traveling "licenses." This gave them permission to come back into the U.S. without penalty; however, they could not return with Cuban cigars, Cuban coffee, or Cuban rum. These are considered to be the top of the line across the world, but American citizens can only enjoy them outside the United States, without facing fines for breaking the embargo.

Washing feet

Many times Mullinax mentioned that the Cuban people showed him something that Americans often do not. He said Cubans really embrace each other like people in no other country. They seemed to have a trust, a respect, and a love for each other; no matter what they wear, what their social status may be, or where they are from, they are all treated the same.

Asked what he had learned from his trip, Mullinax replied, "Breathe in the moment, and don't worry about the future". He was referring to how Cuban people are calm, relaxed, and not worried about the future or possessions. And from the sound of the way Mullinax was talking about Cuba, he is looking forward to returning.

Besides the church in Camaguey, the Circle of Mercy group visited a seminary in Matanzas, where they met the seminary students and directors of seminaries and churches from across Cuba. The seminary invited Mullinax back to teach a class. "I do have a sabbatical coming up. I need to learn Spanish," he said.