

# TRAVEL TALK

BY CHASE BINDER

## A TRIP TO CUBA?



The N.H. Delegation Meets Ambassador Jeffrey De Laurentis

If you're anything like Bud and me, a trip to Cuba has inched its way up your bucket list over the past several months. In fact, after reading all the buzz about relaxed travel regulations, we finally just had to book a short exploratory trip for early September. Just five days and four nights. Just Havana and the Pinar del Rio tobacco-growing valley. Simple. Quick. Hot. Very, very hot!

But first...how to book? It turns out that you can't just hop on a plane and fly into Havana. The "relaxing of travel regulations" that we've all been hearing about is focused more on what you can bring into (and bring home from) Cuba, especially if you have close family living there. The many-decades-long requirement that Americans *must* spend time in Cuba engaged in some kind of formal program (educational, cultural, professional, etc.) still holds true—though the old need for rigorous advance scrutiny/approval has morphed into fairly routine approval as long as you're with a licensed tour company.

So who sets the rules, writes the regulations, and tells what we can and can't do when we're in Cuba? I had a vague notion it was the Cubans in some sort of retaliation for our post-Cuban Missile Crisis embargo. Not so! The US Department of Treasury, via OFAC (its Office of Foreign Assets Control) is

the responsible agency. OFAC is in charge of administering and enforcing economic and trade sanctions and embargos around the globe—all in accordance with US foreign policy.

OFAC also says, via its licensing process, which companies are approved to provide travel programs to Cuba for Americans. Treasury.gov has more details, including explanations of the 12 approved program types. Most general tours fall under the "People-to-People" cate-

gory, or programs designed to create cultural interaction between Cubans and Americans.

This has a significant impact on *all* tours, something that didn't amuse some of our travel-mates on our Cuba Travel Services (cubatravelservices.com) tour. OFAC requires that itineraries include *full days* of formal cultural/educational programming (visits to museums, farms, community projects, medical clinics, art and dance studios and the like). All day. Every day. Oh, you may get a free night or two to book a restaurant on your own. But taking an afternoon off to go to the beach? Even though Cuba is noted for its sugar-sand stretch of beaches, chock full of all-inclusive resorts (just ask the Canadians), it is NOT allowed. Foregoing a part of the itinerary to lie by the pool at your hotel? NOT allowed!

Your tour company—whether it's Abercrombie & Kent, In-Sight Cuba, Road Scholar or any other licensed company—will offer general itineraries as well as itineraries focused on varied and interesting themes, but will also explain that this

will not be like any other tour you have taken. Tours of Cuba for Americans are intensive cultural immersion experiences. You'll learn more, see more, experience more, than on any other Caribbean trip. In fact, don't even think of it as a Caribbean vacation—you won't be spending the day sipping margaritas with your toes in the sand.

While this wasn't a surprise for us (we *did* read the very clear orientation material from Cuba Travel Services), we had many other surprises. The food was fabulous and



Bud Binder Reads the Bow Times in the American Embassy in Cuba

there are very elegant and upscale restaurants in Havana. The people are engaging and seem quite fond of Americans; they seem curiously adept at separating government and politics from the man on the street. They worship their national heroes (Jose Marti, Che Guevara and, yes, Fidel Castro) in a way our politicians can only dream about.

They have suffered, especially during the Special Period after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in ways that we Americans can't comprehend and would certainly not tolerate. Their music is everywhere and brings smiles to anyone and everyone in earshot. Their take on the mojito will shake your world.

My advice is to go. Go now. Go expecting to learn more than you thought possible. Go expecting to come back exhausted but invigorated. It is an experience not a vacation.



Benito in Vinales Rolls a Cigar