

Open travel to Cuba, but go easy on the beaches



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In 2007, a couple of days after my last chemotherapy treatment, I was riding in a bus along the unspoiled, completely undeveloped white sand and turquoise waters of Cuba's Matanzas province. It was late November and I was intoxicated by the sun, the water, the beauty of the place.

I wasn't unwell but quite groggy and I laid my head against the window, not chatting with my tour group but ogling kilometro after kilometro of perfectly empty, postcard-worthy shoreline. Occasionally, a simple farmhouse would come into view, punctuating the vast openness, the light-years between this place and home.

A few years before, on my first trip to Havana, I shared an enjoyable conversation with a man from Matanzas who was returning home after visiting

Miami. He, a Cuban with a coveted and rare opportunity to visit the United States, and I, an American with a rare opportunity to legally visit Cuba, had a lot to talk about. As our plane descended into Cuban airspace, he encouraged me to come to his beautiful Matanzas, full of fruit trees, flowers and kind people.

When I finally saw Matanzas for myself, my experience was richer for having my airplane friend's voice in my head; I brought fond memories of him and some of his love of the place with me when I arrived there.

There's a zeitgeist brewing to change our relationship with Cuba for the better. Several weeks ago, President Obama lifted restrictions that for nearly 50 years have kept people from visiting relatives in Cuba and kept them from transferring money to those back home. Obama hopes that these measures, along with a freer flow of information and humanitarian items, especially medical ones, from the United States to Cuba, will improve the lives of many people.

But travel restrictions for nearly all Americans remain. As Mavis Anderson, senior associate of the Latin American Working Group in Washington, D.C., told me, "The experience you had in Cuba is still not available to others -- an experience that touched your

heart and did much to humanize the Cuban people in your eyes."

Forging friendships in surprising places is one of the reasons travel is so important. Until Americans are allowed to visit Cuba, our awkward relationship with them will continue. We don't have to agree with a country's politics to vacation there -- just look at China.

I was amazed to learn that Jason Chaffetz, Utah's newest member of Congress, is actually a co-sponsor of House Resolution 874 which would allow travel between the United States and Cuba. That puts Chaffetz on the side of the Latin American Working Group, which seeks to influence U.S. policy to promote peace and justice in Latin America; it puts him on the same side as people like me.

While I've long known that politics can make strange cot-mates, I will confess to being shocked by this one. Hooray for Chaffetz for standing up for fairness and international friendship.

Heaven knows that opening an anachronistic country like Cuba to a flood of potential visitors from a wealthy country just 90 miles from its shores is a double-edged sword. American travelers are sometimes culturally insensitive and demanding. There's more to us than those

The Salt Lake Tribune

half-truths, just like there's more to Cuban people than what we've been told.

The opportunity to interact with delightful people, to see a vastly different culture, to infuse desperately needed dollars into Cuba's economy, and to finally reawaken a 50-year dormant friendship seems irresistible, and just plain the right thing to do.

But I do worry about what we'll do to that perfect Matanzas beach.

BARB GUY is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.