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Geographical Review: Field Note

Research in Cuba: Navigating Logistical Barriers by Jeffrey S. Smith, Charles O. Collins, and Jenny Pettit *

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James Parsons (1977) once remarked that many of us are geographers because it affords the latitude to explore the world around us and get to know at least one culture or environment other than our own. Fieldwork is central to many a geographer's mission. Geographers engage in fieldwork to obtain data otherwise unavailable, yet overcoming difficulties is par for the course. Sometimes the barriers are linguistic or there is a need to navigate foreign cultural customs. Other times, the difficulties rest in gaining access to remote and inaccessible study sites. In other cases, there are larger political hurdles. Given the current geopolitical climate, imagine the difficulty conducting fieldwork in Syria, Iran, or North Korea. Some would add Cuba to that list.

Numerous scholars see Cuba as fertile ground for research ranging from music, religious syncretism, and even *beisbol* or quaternary studies on karst. Yet, those same scholars balk at going to Cuba. A common perception is that the U.S. government forbids Americans to set foot on Cuban soil. Or, if they are not forbidden, the thick bureaucratic red tape makes such a trip impractical. The popular alternative is to travel through a third country and hope you do not get caught. Although indeed there is a travel and export ban imposed upon U.S. citizens, most of the negative perceptions are highly exaggerated. The purpose of this field note is to assist scholars who wish to

navigate the complexities of legally traveling to Cuba for research.

U.S. - Cuba Relations

In the early 1960s, as Fidel Castro and his cadre of revolutionaries consolidated power in Cuba, nationalized foreign-owned businesses, and sought to export the Cuban Revolution, tensions between the U.S. and Cuba escalated. On October 20, 1960, following eighteen months of mutual political grandstanding and heated rhetoric, the U.S. government imposed an export ban on most non-humanitarian goods to Cuba. After the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), relations between the U.S. and Cuba deteriorated to such an extent that the Kennedy administration imposed travel restrictions on U.S. residents and citizens. Over the subsequent three decades, Congress obliged U.S. presidents to renew the travel ban every six months. In 1977, the Carter administration let the ban lapse, but President Reagan reinstated it in 1982. Fourteen years later the U.S. government further clarified the export ban and travel restrictions. Although the Helms-Burton Act (1996) does not actually prevent U.S. citizens and residents from traveling to Cuba, it prohibits unauthorized activities that benefit the Cuban government economically or commercially.

Under the U.S. Department of Treasury, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) regulates all travel between the U.S. and countries with strained diplomatic relations, including Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Syria. According to OFAC documentation (excluding U.S. government officials), the following are authorized for

travel-related transactions in Cuba: 1) Cuban-Americans visiting immediate family members, 2) journalists, 3) individuals engaged in humanitarian activities or cultural exchange programs, and 4) full-time professional researchers (OFAC 2011). In 2006, the U.S. Department of Treasury started aggressively prosecuting individuals and businesses that violate the export and travel ban. As recent as 2009, the penalties ranged from fines of \$250,000 to ten years in prison (Bellows 2009). Regardless of the party occupying the White House, U.S. - Cuba travel is strictly regulated and trips for the sole purpose of pleasure or tourism remain illegal.

The official OFAC webpage (OFAC 2011) provides an up-to-date document identifying permitted travel to Cuba under *general* and *specific licenses*. These “Comprehensive Guidelines” are intimidating at best. For the uninitiated, trying to decipher the cryptic text can be exceedingly frustrating. Those who have traveled to Cuba know that the process is far less complex than it first appears. Drawing upon our recent travel experience (December 2010 – January 2011), this article discusses (1) securing permission and preparing for travel to Cuba, (2) navigating Cuban and U.S. Immigration and Customs, and (3) practical information for the researcher. Because legislation changes frequently, it is important for travelers to be familiar with the latest OFAC guidelines.

Before Departure

Step One: Start the Process Early

Over the past two years securing permission to travel to Cuba and acquiring a

visit has become relatively straight forward with fewer, albeit some, unexpected wrinkles. The bigger concern is that, as more and more people travel from the U.S. to Cuba, competition for seats on planes and desirable hotel rooms is particularly stiff. Therefore, anyone going to Cuba should begin securing proper documentation and reservations at least three to four months prior to their trip. Persons planning to travel during the high season (December to April – after the hurricane season comes to an end and temperature and humidity levels become more tolerable) should allow six months lead time.

In 2011, the Obama administration announced it was loosening travel restrictions to Cuba. Under the January 14 declaration, full-time students as well as cultural and religious groups are now permitted to engage in travel-related transactions in Cuba (Clark 2011; Peralta 2011). Moreover, President Obama sought to improve competition among charter companies by expanding the number of airports from which the flights can depart. U.S.-based charter flights are now permitted from Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Dallas, Fort Lauderdale, Houston, New Orleans, and Tampa (Reuters 2011). Regardless, the competition among Cuba-bound travelers is expected to remain high especially with a historic number of Cuban-Americans traveling to the island.

Step Two: Identify an Authorized TSP

The OFAC webpage states that U.S. citizens and residents may make travel arrangements privately or through an OFAC-authorized Travel Service Provider (TSP). Yet for many reasons, the single most important step in the process of traveling to Cuba

is identifying a suitable TSP. The website provides an up-to-date list of authorized TSPs (OFAC 2011). There are numerous OFAC-authorized TSPs, but it is imperative to choose one that is experienced, reliable, and prompt. We found that Distant Horizons, Inc. fully met our needs. Other recommended TSPs include Marazul Charters, Inc. and Tico Travel (Bellows 2009).

The TSP will screen and verify your eligibility for travel to Cuba, make necessary travel arrangements and reservations through the Cuban government, provide receipts and confirmation numbers, and prepay your airfare and hotel expenses to avoid carrying large sums of cash. The TSP will also provide the name of a local contact in case of problems.

Because the OFAC is underfunded and understaffed, the TSPs are much more than merely travel agencies. In fact, they are charged with primary responsibility for screening all applicants seeking to travel to Cuba. Currently, the OFAC does not grant pre-travel permission under a general license (as it once did), rather the office conducts a post trip audit to ensure that travelers were compliant with regulations. If the TSP does not screen applicants properly, travelers may encounter legal problems during the OFAC audit and the TSP may lose its license as an authorized provider. It was a revelation for the authors to learn that the process works in reverse. Travelers are screened before the trip by the TSP, but their eligibility is verified by OFAC after they return.

Step Three: Write your Letter of Eligibility

Crafting a letter of eligibility is the next step in securing a general license. Research scholars or those attending a professional meeting fall under **General License 31 C.F.R. § 515.564(a) i-iii** which authorizes *“certain travel-related and additional transactions that are directly related to full-time professionals conducting professional research in Cuba... Research requires a full work schedule of noncommercial, academic research that has a substantial likelihood of public dissemination and is in the traveler’s professional area”* (OFAC 2011; 16).

To facilitate securing a general license, the letter of eligibility should appear on appropriate letterhead and consist of three main parts: (1) a specific declaration of eligibility as a noncommercial academic, (2) a detailed, full-time itinerary and work schedule accounting for all professional activities during your stay, and (3) past publications and how proposed research will lead to public dissemination of the information learned.

Step Four: Flying out of Miami (ABC Charters, Inc.)

Regardless of which TSP you chose, the vast majority of passengers who depart Miami contract with ABC Charters, Inc. It is our understanding that flying from New York and Los Angeles is very similar (Bradshaw 2011). During high season when Cuban-Americans visit family members, however, demand is high and most flights are sold to capacity. Your TSP may have difficulty securing a seat for your preferred departure and return dates. This becomes a bigger concern when you are trying to coordinate flight schedules for a group.

Once ABC Charters has reserved departure and return seats, they will require a separate affidavit verifying your eligibility for travel to Cuba. We found contacting ABC Charters directly to be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. Therefore, the TSP will serve as the communication link to ABC Charters. These are two more reasons it is preferable to select an experienced TSP.

Step Five: Securing Accommodations

In Cuba finding a place to stay is not difficult. Even the smallest towns have at least one hotel. At the other end of the spectrum, major cities (e.g. Havana, Santiago de Cuba) and tourist destinations (e.g. Varadero, Pinar del Rio) have ample accommodations, including some five-star hotels. It became even easier after 1997 to find places to stay when the Cuban government officially permitted private households to rent a room (*casa particular*) for a fee. Yes, capitalism is alive and well in Cuba.

Given the options available, it is tempting to wait to find lodging until arrival. Before warned, however, at José Martí International Airport you will be asked to show the Cuban Customs agent verification of lodging. A hotel confirmation number will prevent delay and can save a considerable amount of money since those without reservations are assigned a room in the government-owned hotels, some of which can be very expensive¹. We highly recommend your TSP make a hotel reservation for at least the first night in Cuba as it is another piece of documentation confirming the legality of your visit to Cuba.

Step Six: Check Baggage Weight

OFAC guidelines limit luggage for Cuba-bound passengers to 44 lbs (ca. 20 kilograms) including both checked and carry-on; the penalty for overweight luggage is US\$2.00 per pound. For academics conducting research in Cuba this should not pose a serious problem. Limit the clothes you bring because it is inexpensive to have them laundered. If critical field equipment is needed, obtain a special license from OFAC granting permission for an overage.

Step Seven: Convert U.S. Dollars to Another Currency

There are two official currencies in Cuba – the *Peso Nacional* and the *Cuban Convertible Peso* (CUC). Most visitors will use the convertible peso. Its value is arbitrarily pegged to the Euro, Canadian dollar and other world currencies. It is approximately equal to US\$1.30. The Cuban government levies a *ten percent* surcharge for converting U.S. dollars to CUCs. As a result, it is strongly recommended that prior to arrival U.S. dollars be converted to Canadian dollars or Euros as there is no surcharge for exchanging these currencies. The use of travelers cheques is highly discouraged since changing these is fraught with difficulties. Plus, it is important to remember that, because of U.S. legislation, credit/debit cards that draw upon U.S. bank accounts are not valid in Cuba.

Finally: Checklist for Necessary Documentation

The following is a list of documents you will need:

- U.S. passport (Must be valid for six months past the last day of your planned trip.)
- Cuba visa permit (provided by Cuban Government via TSP)
- Flight documents from ABC Charter, Inc. (provided by TSP)
- Hotel reservations with confirmation number (provided by TSP)
- Name of Cuban Government contact (provided by TSP)
- Hotel Guest Card (issued at hotel by the Cuban Government – Habaguanex)
- Photocopy all documents and leave in hotel safe

Clearing Immigration and Customs

Arrival in Cuba

The experience of passing through Cuban Immigration and Customs is similar to most countries. Your passport will be examined, your Cuban visa will be verified and one-half will be retained, and you will be photographed. Next you will proceed through security including a metal detector and a second inspection of documents. Be aware that individual travelers may be selected for an extensive interview and their passport temporarily taken. After the completion of the interview the passport will be returned.

Proceed to the baggage claim area. Unlike in the U.S., all baggage is handled by authorized personnel *only*. Bags may appear in a protracted and sporadic fashion. It is likely that most of your co-travelers are Cubans or Cuban-Americans returning with large quantities of shrink-wrapped luggage, and this may delay the process. We

encourage you not to contribute to the organized chaos; simply watch the cultural events unfold.

At this juncture, most likely a hotel accommodations officer will approach you, simply show him/her your reservation number and things should go smoothly. At various times throughout the arrival process you will be asked the purpose of your travel to Cuba. Although the U.S. government authorized your travel on the basis of research, the Cuban government requires a research permit. Unfortunately, those applications are not available at the airport. It is recommended that you declare yourself to be a “tourist.” Your first trip to Cuba will most likely focus on field reconnaissance and establishing contact with a potential colleague at a Cuban institution. On subsequent visits it is recommended you obtain a research permit which commonly requires a host institution to sponsor you.

Before leaving the airport, convert some of your foreign currency to CUCs to pay the taxi driver. Because there are five terminals at the Jose Martí International Airport, be sure to ask the driver the number of the terminal at which you arrived so that you may return to the correct terminal for departure.

Departing Cuba

At least twenty-four hours before your scheduled departure, verify the return flight. The hotel desk clerk can perform this task and confirm your seat. On the day your flight is scheduled to depart, arrive at the correct airport terminal three hours in advance of your flight. For early morning flights (e.g. 8:00 AM) you can arrive two and

one-half hours in advance without causing yourself problems.

The check-in process has four parts. First, reconfirm your seat and check baggage with the flight reservation desk. Next, pay the exit tax of CUC25.00. At the currency exchange booth, remaining CUCs can be converted without surcharge (including U.S. dollars). Then, at the Immigration and Customs exit booth an official will retain the remaining stub of your Cuban visa and take your photo. The last step is the security checkpoint.

When the announcement for departure is made, make your way directly to the boarding area where the gate attendant will check your ticket and verify you paid your exit fee. Although you have purchased an assigned seat through your TSP / ABC Charters, in Cuba seating is very often first-come, first-served. Sharpen your elbows and practice *su Cubanidad*. Once you are in a seat, enjoy the flight back to the U.S.

Returning to the U.S.

People returning from abroad must, of course, pass through U.S. Immigration and Customs. When identified as academics returning from Cuba, we were directed to an area where inspection was more intensive. We were reminded that the U.S. has imposed a travel ban and trade embargo against Cuba. ICE agents vigilantly inspect luggage and confiscate contraband. The OFAC website provides an up-to-date list of prohibited imports (e.g. rum, cigars, artisan products, tourist items) (OFAC 2011). When the Customs officials learned our visit to Cuba was research based the inspection process was expedited.

Practical Information for the Researcher

- **International Phone Calls:** Person in the U.S. can call to Cuba by dialing < 011 - 53 - 7 - ... >. However, connections can be problematic and you may hear a recording that states, “you are not authorized to make this call.” Hang up and redial; persistence seems the key.

- **Internet:** Connecting to the Internet is possible but very time consuming. Purchase an Internet user card (available at most tourist hotels), log in on an authorized computer (available in the lobby of most tourist hotels), and practice your waiting skills. Because internet connections are so slow, some have found it helpful to use their internet minutes just for uploading and downloading pre-written correspondences.

- **Pricing:** Most prices for goods and services are regulated by the Cuban government. Even the price for a bottle of water should not vary greatly between locations. Watch out for less than honest shopkeepers who prey upon wet-behind-the-ears tourists.

- **U.S. Interests:** If you encounter serious legal or political problems, the U.S. does not have an embassy in Cuba. Instead, the U.S. government has an immense *Interests Section* in the Swiss Embassy located off the Malecon (near Hotel Nacional). U.S. citizens and residents visiting Cuba do not have to wait in the long lines outside the Interests Section. Instead they can go directly to the gate for admission as long as they

bring their passport and visa/permission papers.

- **CDR:** Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) are virtually ubiquitous.

They include taxicab drivers, hotel reception clerks, bartenders, tour guides, and essentially every citizen. Be cautious in asking questions in public about politically sensitive issues or putting Cuban citizens in compromising situations.

- **Havana:** For a city of 2.5 million people Havana, in our experience, is remarkably safe, quiet, and pedestrian friendly. Even though many of the street lamps do not function, the city appears secure and crime free. Women should be prepared to receive long looks and “compliments” which are part of the rich Cuban street culture.

- **Views of Americans:** Cubans were uniformly cordial, helpful, and welcoming. Most were surprised to learn that we were U.S. citizens but happy to have us in their country. Many stated that they love Americans, but dislike American foreign policy. Dark skinned Americans should be prepared for Cubans to act incredulous when they declare they are not of Cuban origin.

- **Gifts for Cuban Academics:** Many academics in Cuba do not own a home computer, but they do have access to one at work or through a friend. Therefore, a flash drive is a very appropriate gift as are favorite pens, notebooks, and field journals.

- **Post-trip Audit:** According to OFAC guidelines, a post-trip audit may occur within five years. Be sure to keep all receipts, important documentation, and evidence of research publications and/or public dissemination of information garnered.

Conclusion

On ancient maps, *tierra incognita* was filled with fanciful beasts and dragons. In contemporary times, such voids – Iran, North Korea, and even Cuba – are filled with outdated information, speculation, and propaganda. In the case of Cuba, this geographic deficit, from the U.S. perspective, is largely the product of geopolitical conflict.

This field note is intended to encourage and facilitate geographic field study in Cuba. This involves stripping away some of the misperceptions and misinformation. Indeed, it is possible for Americans to legally visit Cuba for the purpose of research. Fundamentally, it is a matter of following prescribed procedures and guidelines as outlined above. Many research opportunities await those who are willing to get their boots dirty or scuff their shoes. It would be a shame to let political red tape get in the way of doing good geography.

* The authors are deeply grateful for the insight and feedback provided by the anonymous reviewers on the first draft of this article.

¹ One of the blind reviewers indicated that a useful website for *bed and breakfast*

options can be found at [www.casaparticular.org]. Also, favorable accommodation rates can be obtained through Nash Travel in Canada [www.nashtravel.com].

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