

Before the Revolution

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Socialites and celebrities flocked to Cuba in the 1950s

By Natasha Geiling, July 31st, 2007

Americans can't travel to Cuba, but tourists from other parts of the world—mostly Europe and Canada—visit the island for its beaches, culture, Spanish colonial architecture and vintage American cars. They buy art and Che Guevara souvenirs in outdoor markets and drink beer in newly restored plazas, where musicians play Buena Vista Social Club tunes in a constant loop.

In some places, the country appears stuck in its pre-revolutionary past. The famous Hotel Nacional displays photographs of mobsters and celebrity guests. La Tropicana still features a nightly cabaret. And many Hemingway fans stop at La Floridita, one of his favorite haunts, to slurp down overpriced rum cocktails.

For many tourists, 1950s Cuba holds romantic appeal. Last year, more than two million people visited the island, bringing in revenues of \$2.4 billion, according to the Cuban government. The tourism industry has saved Cuba from economic ruin more than once—most recently after the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s. But tourism has provoked a tension between the sultry image paradise travelers expect to find and the country's steadfast desire to remain independent. In the years leading up to the Socialist Revolution, the façade came crashing down.

Cuba's reputation as an exotic and permissive playground came to light in the 1920s, when the country became a favorite destination for robber barons and bohemians. Scions like the Whitneys and the Biltmores, along with luminaries such as New York City Mayor Jimmy "Beau James" Walker, flocked to Cuba for winter bouts of gambling, horse racing, golfing and country-clubbing.

Sugar was Cuba's economic lifeline, but its tropical beauty—and tropical beauties—made American tourism a natural and flowing source of revenue. A 1956 issue of *Cabaret Quarterly*, a now-defunct tourism magazine, describes Havana as "a mistress of pleasure, the lush and opulent goddess of delights."

By the 1950s Cuba was playing host to celebrities like Ava Gardner, Frank Sinatra and Ernest Hemingway. But the advent of cheap flights and hotel deals made the once-exclusive hotspot accessible to American masses. For around \$50—a few hundred dollars today—tourists could purchase round-trip tickets from Miami, including hotel, food and entertainment. Big-name acts, beach resorts, bordellos and buffets were all within reach.

"Havana was then what Las Vegas has become," says Louis Perez, a Cuba historian at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It attracted some of the same mafia kingpins, too, such as Meyer Lansky and Santo Trafficante, who were evading a national investigation into organized crime. In Cuba, they could continue their stock trade of gambling, drugs and prostitution, as long as they paid off government officials. The fees, however high, were a small price for an industry that raked in millions of dollars every month.

But while tourists eagerly spun the roulette wheel in sexy Havana, a revolution brewed in the less glamorous countryside. The sugar boom that had fueled much of Cuba's economic life was waning, and by the mid-'50s it was clear that expectations had exceeded results. With no reliable economic replacement in sight, Cubans began to feel the squeeze. Poverty, particularly in the provinces, increased.

Unlike other Caribbean islands, however, Cuba boasted a large upper-middle class. Cubans had fought vehemently for independence from Spain from the 1860s to the 1890s, but by the 20th century, the country had become beholden economically to the United States.

By the late '50s, U.S. financial interests included 90 percent of Cuban mines, 80 percent of its public utilities, 50 percent of its railways, 40 percent of its sugar production and 25 percent of its bank deposits—some \$1 billion in total. American influence extended into the cultural realm, as well. Cubans grew accustomed to the luxuries of American life. They drove American cars,

owned TVs, watched Hollywood movies and shopped at Woolworth's department store. The youth listened to rock and roll, learned English in school, adopted American baseball and sported American fashions.

In return, Cuba got hedonistic tourists, organized crime and General Fulgencio Batista. In military power since the early 1930s, Batista appointed himself president by way of a military coup in 1952, dashing Cubans' long-held hope for democracy.

Not only was the economy weakening as a result of U.S. influence, but Cubans were also offended by what their country was becoming: a haven for prostitution, brothels and gambling.

"Daily life had developed into a relentless degradation," writes Louis Perez in his 1999 book *On Becoming Cuban*, "with the complicity of political leaders and public officials who operated at the behest of American interests."

In 1957, a group of students fed up with government corruption stormed the National Palace. Many historians consider this a turning point in the revolution.

Over the next few years, bursts of violence erupted throughout the city. Bombs exploded in movie theaters and nightclubs. Gunshots rang out. Dead bodies turned up on sidewalks and streets.

"There had been an idealization of the [Cuba's] War of Independence and of being a revolutionary," says Uva de Aragon, a Cuban academic now living in Miami. "In this climate, people thought revolution was a solution to problems."

Bloody battles ensued between Batista's troops and the rebels in the mountains. Still, Cubans tried to keep some normalcy in their lives, going to school, watching baseball games and taking cha-cha lessons.

"It was surreal," says de Aragon. "There was a lot of fear in those last two or three years." A teenager at the time, she was particularly aware of what was happening because her step-father, Carlos Marquez Sterling, had run for president against Batista and lost; Marquez wanted negotiation, but Batista's camp claimed power.

All classes of Cubans, including the very rich, looked to the young and charismatic Fidel Castro as their hope for democracy and change. Castro, a young lawyer trained at the University of Havana, belonged to a wealthy landowning family, but espoused a deep nationalism and railed against corruption and gambling. "We all thought this was the Messiah," says Maria Christina Halley, one of Uva's childhood friends. Her family later fled to the United States and now she teaches Spanish in Jacksonville, Florida.

When Castro's entourage finally arrived in Havana in January of 1959 after defeating Batista's troops, Batista had already fled in the middle of the night, taking more than \$40 million of government funds.

In protest of the government's corruption, Cubans immediately ransacked the casinos and destroyed the parking meters that Batista had installed. Castro also eliminated gambling and prostitution, a healthy move for the national identity, but not so much for the tourism industry.

More than 350,000 visitors came to Cuba in 1957; by 1961, the number of American tourists had dropped to around 4,000. The U.S. government, responding to increasing intolerance of Castro's communism, delivered a final blow by enacting the trade and travel embargo in 1963, still in place today, closing off the popular Caribbean playground to Americans.

Still, the excitement and solidarity brought by the new government didn't last long, Halley says. Many of Castro's supporters ended up fleeing when they realized his Communist intentions. Between 1959 and 1970, half a million Cubans left the country.

"It all happened so fast," says Halley, who boarded a plane with just one suitcase in 1960, expecting to come back in a few months. Almost 50 years later, she and many others who left are still waiting for a chance to return.

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While Americans saw only decadent gangsters, Cuban revolutionaries diagnosed deeper social ills.
by Samuel Farber, September 6, 2015

To the American popular eye, pre-revolutionary Cuba was the island of sin, a society consumed by the illnesses of gambling, the Mafia, and prostitution. Prominent American intellectuals echoed that view. Even in 1969, when Cuban reality had changed drastically, Susan Sontag, in an article in *Ramparts*, described Cuba as “a country known mainly for dance, music, prostitutes, cigars, abortions, resort life, and pornographic movies.”

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Gambling

To Americans, gambling in Cuba meant casino gambling.

Casinos began to develop in Cuba in the 1920s in connection with the growth of tourism. After several ups and downs in the following three decades, the casino industry took off in the mid- to late 1950s as Batista and his cronies, working together with American Mafiosi, used the resources of Cuban state development banks, and even union retirement funds, to build hotels, all of which hosted casinos, like the Riviera, the Capri, and the Havana Hilton (today’s Havana Libre). In the process both Cuban rulers and Mafiosi lined their own pockets, skimming the casinos’ proceeds, cheating investors, and trafficking drugs.

However, if the casino world of the island got ample coverage in the American media, it never became a central issue in the island’s media, and in the Cuban consciousness. Aside from the American tourists, who were the casinos’ principal customers, only a small number of Cubans — upper-middle and upper-class whites — gambled there. The casinos’ dress code and minimum betting requirements kept most Cubans out, though it is true that a relatively small but significant number of Cubans earned their living servicing the casinos and the hotels and nightclubs where they were usually located.

But the economic impact of casino gambling, and even of tourism, was greatly exaggerated in the US. In 1956, a good year for tourism, that economic sector earned \$30 million, barely 10 percent of what the sugar industry made that year. This relatively modest performance was due in part to the fact that mass international tourism facilitated by widespread commercial jet travel had not yet begun. In the 1950s between 200,000 and 250,000 tourists visited Cuba annually, compared with slightly over three million in 2014, and likely more in 2015.

The casinos of Havana were looted immediately after the overthrow of dictator Fulgencio Batista on January 1, 1959. The great majority of Cubans saw casinos — as well as the parking meters that had been installed in the capital a few months earlier — as odious expressions of the oppressive corruption of Batista and his henchmen.

But as Rosalie Schwartz, a historian of Cuban tourism, has pointed out, “disgust with government excesses preceded and outstripped outrage over casinos . . . Revolutionaries charged Batista henchmen with torture and murder — not casino operations — when they put them on trial.” Most Cubans also did not object to gambling, and many had been engaging in the practice for a long time, though in a manner that was worlds apart from the casinos populated by tourists and privileged Cubans.

Cuba had an official national state lottery that had existed since Spanish colonial times. Every Saturday afternoon, a drawing took place sponsored by the *Renta de la Lotería*, an agency of the Cuban government created for that purpose. The *Renta* had become a massive source of corruption, although some legitimate charitable organizations obtained funds from the lottery’s proceedings. Even the Cuban Communists shared in those proceeds when, in control of the trade union movement during their alliance with Batista from 1938 until 1944, they built a new union headquarters at least in part with the money that the government granted them from the national lottery.

The lottery drawings were broadcast over the radio featuring a peculiar mixture of modernity and the Middle Ages. The weekly spectacle...had the orphan and abandoned children raised by the nuns of the Casa de Beneficencia announce the different prize numbers with a distinctive chant in a characteristic voice, tone, and cadence. But the fact that even the smallest fractions of the official lottery tickets were relatively expensive stimulated the growth of an informal, illegal lottery based on the results of the official lottery that accepted bets as small as five cents.

This illegal lottery, referred to as "la bolita," became big business and had its own capitalists, or "bankers," some of which came to be well-known. The bankers, however, could not have survived without their numerous agents ("apuntadores") in the barrios.

There was little if any connection between the people who owned and ran the casinos and the bankers who ran the illegal bolita. What the bolita bankers and casino owners did have in common was that they had to pay off high government functionaries and the police.

The "bolita" was primarily a gambling activity for poor people. But for many poor and even some middle-class people, la bolita also became a means to support or to supplement their income by working as apuntadores, or numbers runners.

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The Big Crooks

For a long time, several Mafia families entertained the idea of taking their business to Cuba both as a means to expand their enterprises and to escape the reach of the FBI and the IRS, among other US government agencies. In December 1946, Havana’s classic Hotel Nacional hosted an important gathering of the Mafia attended by the heads of the most powerful families and organized by Lucky Luciano, who had been residing in the island since October of that year. But under heavy American pressure, the Cuban government deported Luciano in February of 1947.

There were undoubtedly strong links between the Mafia and the Batista regime, but some observers have greatly magnified and distorted the nature of those links. Journalist T. J. English, for example...claims that the mob “had infiltrated a sovereign nation and taken control of financial institutions and the levers of power from top to bottom.” According to English, Batista had embraced the dictates of the American mobsters and had become the muscle behind the Havana mob.

English may have taken his cue from Cuban writer Enrique Cirules’s book *El Imperio de la Habana*. Cirules...argued that the power of the Mafia, in a permanent alliance with the US intelligence services, had taken over every level of power in Cuba. Batista’s 1952 military coup, which brought the retired general back to power, was not the cause of the power that the Mafia had amassed, but the coronation of its power, and led to a power triangle formed by the dominant financial groups, the Mafia, and US intelligence.

Cirules also makes the fantastic claim that the gains from the Mafia’s cocaine trade were even bigger than those of the sugar industry. However, the Mafia in Cuba was only one, albeit highly corrupt, interest group. The Mafia had no interest whatsoever in running Cuba; it just wanted a place to pursue their interests, primarily in gambling, and also in the drug trade, unmolested by the US or the Cuban government. Rather than trying to control the government and the political and economic life of the island, these mobsters focused their efforts on preventing other criminals from invading their turf.

That’s how, for example, internal mob disputes about gambling interests in Cuba led to the murder of gangster Albert Anastasia in a New York hotel barbershop in October 1957. The Mafia’s association with Batista fit the needs and requirements of the mob, but it is wrong to claim that its power in the island was greater than that of Batista and his military forces — just as the power of the mob in the United States of the twenties was not greater than that of the largest corporations, the Pentagon, and the Democratic and Republican parties.

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Sex Work

Sex work was relatively common in the pre-revolutionary Cuba of the fifties, but North American opinion gave it a lot more importance than people did in Cuba, including the most radical critics of the island’s social and economic status quo.

It is estimated that by the end of the fifties Havana had 270 brothels and 11,500 women earned their living as sex workers. Compared with New York City in 1977, where 40,000 female sex workers were reportedly working, the ratio of sex workers in 1950s Havana, with a population of 1 million people, was approximately double the amount of the one in New York City, with 8 million people.

Considering the much greater poverty, unemployment, and the sexual double standard geared to preserve the virginity of “decent” girls — not men — until they were married, the difference at the time between the two cities is not as stark as one might expect.

Despite the high number of Cuban women engaged, and exploited, in the industry, there were many more Cuban women in other highly exploited sectors. Poor and unemployed young rural women, a major recruitment zone for the Havana bordellos, were far more likely to end up working as maids in a middle- or upper-class urban household than as prostitutes. The moral economy of the Cuban peasant and agricultural proletariat, which included notions of dignity, strong parental authority, and folk religion, were powerful forces against sex work.

According to the 1953 Cuban national census — the last census held before the revolutionary victory in 1959 — 87,522 women were working as domestic servants, 77,500 women were working for a relative without pay, and 21,000 women were totally without employment and looking for work. Moreover, an estimated 83 percent of all employed women worked less than ten weeks a year, and only 14 percent worked year-round.

These were the far more shocking realities of the uneven economic development induced by the US empire and Cuban capital on the island. But the work and the problems of being a maid, or a seamstress, may not have been as risqué and exciting to North American observers, whether left- or right-wing, interested in Cuban exoticism and difference.

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Colonial Folklore

As far back as the nineteenth century, many US politicians and ruling-class leaders saw Cuba as a potential target of annexation, a strategy that was ideologically justified by a body of assumptions that, as historian Louis A. Pérez has pointed out, regarded Cubans as a people ill-fit to govern themselves, ruled by a country (Spain) ill-equipped to govern anyone. It was this notion that supported the US intervention in Cuba’s war of independence against Spain and that, notwithstanding the genuine sympathy and compassion that many Americans felt for the oppressed Cubans, justified its imperialist design for the island.

After Spain lost the war, Cuba became independent in 1902, although only in a very limited sense considering the Platt Amendment granted the US government the right to militarily intervene in Cuba. As Pérez has indicated, the new reality of the island became represented in the predominant American ideology as a nation of children, or schoolchildren, with the Americans as their teachers.

The American emphasis on gambling, prostitution, and the Mafia as the central elements of the ills that affected pre-revolutionary Cuban society was, besides the general American fascination with the Mafia, a form of colonial folklore and ideology that also influenced Americans who would not consciously support colonialism or imperialism.

It was an ideology that was also present in the other imperialist power of that era, the USSR, as echoed in the 1964 Soviet film *Soy Cuba*. As Jacqueline Loss, a scholar of Soviet cultural influence in Cuba, has argued, the Soviet film represented Cubans as hot-blooded, sexy, impoverished, and in need of civilizing.

Cubans living on the island in the 1950s were not just dancers and fun people with a good sense of humor, but were also, for most of the time they were awake, working very hard either at ruling over the country (all the way down from dictators, capitalists, and landlords to soldiers and policemen) or, as for the great majority, at surviving as workers, peasants, public employees, students, professionals, shopkeepers, or intellectuals.

Whatever cultural behavior these various Cuban groupings may have shared, they were also substantially different from each other, sometimes even having more in common with their occupational and class counterparts in the United States than with other Cubans. After all, oppressed people in all countries act on the basis of the same drives and aspirations, trying to defend their standard of living, meet certain nutritional requirements, and limit if not eliminate their oppression.

This view of pre-revolutionary Cuba as a culturally homogeneous society so “exotic,” so far away from any similarity to a “developed” society, and fatally afflicted with the ills of gambling and Mafia control, suggested the image of an exhausted lumpenized society devoid of any political, moral, and spiritual resources and thus — unable to engage and conduct its own struggle for self-emancipation — dependent on saviors from above.

In the very early stages of the successful revolution, before it adopted the Soviet model, the Mafiosi were unceremoniously kicked out of the country, casino gambling was abolished (after some initial difficulties addressing the problem of substantial numbers of casino employees who would be left unemployed.) In February 1959 the national lottery was converted into the INAV (National

Institute of Savings and Housing) — a transitional measure channeling the proceeds remaining from pre-revolutionary gambling into a savings fund dedicated to housing.

Sex work was initially allowed, but reformed, with the extortions by pimps and police abolished. Later on the sex workers were trained and provided alternative employment, but sex work eventually reappeared with the severe economic crisis of the nineties and the exponential growth of tourism.

Still, whether one approves or disapproves of the present Cuban government, it's undeniable that the changes in the country, including the establishment of a one-party state, grew out of internal social and political realities in Cuba that were radically different from the American perception of Mafiosi decadence and lapsed island morals.

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