Nearly seven decades ago, with the global destruction from World War II having ended and the world having started on a path to reconstruction, Roy and Estelle Kelley saw the possibility that Travel & Tourism might bring visitors to Hawai‘i from around the world. At the time, travelers were once again returning to Cuba to enjoy the beaches, exciting nightlife, fine rum, colorful dancing and excellent cigars.

While the travel industry boomed in Hawai‘i and many other parts of the world, in Cuba almost everything came to a crashing halt in 1959 when Fidel Castro seized power and launched that little country (not quite 43,000 square miles) on a path toward brutal dictatorship, alliance with the Soviet Union and a communist (or as Castro preferred to call it, “socialist”) economy, which brought with it poverty, privation, egregious human rights violations and estrangement from the United States.

With the recent slight but important lifting of some restrictions on travel to Cuba by U.S. citizens, many are hopeful that the island, barely 90 miles from the Florida Keys, will once again become a tourist mecca. Based on the observations of my daughter, Anne Marie, and some of her classmates from the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business, who visited Cuba last month on an educational visa as part of a class studying transitions in the Cuban economy, that probably won’t happen anytime soon, but given the spirit of the Cuban people, I wouldn’t completely discount the possibility. I hope you enjoy Anne Marie’s impressions of the Cuba she saw, tasted and sensed, almost exactly 56 years after January 1, 1959, the day Cuba’s president, Fulgenico Batista, and his government were overthrown by Fidel Castro and replaced by the socialist state he then built.

Many parts of Havana appear almost post-apocalyptic, as if the skeletal buildings, whose painted skin rots daily in the heat, are merely remnants of a time long forgotten. Ornate iron balconies groan in the wind, rusting in the salt air, waving bright lines of laundry like Tibetan prayer flags. Between each edifice still standing, stray dogs scamper over piles of rubble from buildings felled by years of neglect. The city should feel like it’s dying – its colonial grandeur falling back into the sea. And yet, there is a vibrancy that pulses through the streets, manifested in the sounds of children playing street soccer, in the brilliant colors of impeccably preserved 1950s American cars that scamper through the alleyways like anachronistic beetles, and in the...
warmth extended to each foreigner whose footsteps stir the Havana dust.

Throughout our five days in Cuba, I found my emotions and my impressions of the city oscillating wildly. There was a constant unease that settled uncomfortably over my shoulders – stemming largely from conversations we had in Miami in which we were advised that the government was always watching, collecting information in yellow envelopes to save for a day when we would be successful and therefore possible targets for blackmail. Certainly, incidents along the way heightened that unease, tightening my need for caution: a laptop stolen from our professor’s safe, credit card numbers mysteriously hijacked from the pockets of classmates, crippling food poisoning that swept through our ranks, the constant barrage of solicitations to follow overly friendly strangers to their friends’ restaurants “just around the corner for a great deal.”

However, if I am honest with myself, none of these things were any different or any less expected than incidents I have experienced in other struggling countries throughout Southeast Asia and rural Africa. I had to remind myself that it was we who were the invaders, stepping in with our new iPhones, photographing what for these people was a daily reality so different from our own privileged world that we felt the need to document it and show it to friends and family through Instagram and Facebook upon returning home and reconnecting to the Internet.

And if we overpaid for a meal to subsidize the friendly stranger who brought us to his friend’s restaurant, perhaps that was the price for passing through their world with voyeuristic enthusiasm. As our 1952 Cadillac driver reminded us, “every day everyone is hustling to exist.” We were the contrast – the curious Americans wandering through their streets, demonstrating an existence they have only caught glimpses of on three regulated TV channels. In contrast, we had at least nine channels in our hotel.

Cuba is so much more than *mojitos*, cigars and vintage cars. I was expecting a culture of fear similar to the unease we felt coming in as Americans to a country on which our own has imposed a substantial economic embargo for decades. What I found was an astonishing entrepreneurial drive to succeed in spite of the system. As our tour guide responded to a question one day, “How does the water get in the coconut?” Everywhere we went – from the farms to the *Imprende* startup business incubator to the art museum – we met bright, curious people whose statements could have been incendiary, yet were delivered with such confidence that I was continually surprised.

The interpretation of protest-oriented art pieces in the national art gallery was not something our museum guide learned in her university classroom, it was knowledge pulled from her own research, conducted painstakingly over the limited and expensive Internet. Our tour guide’s cell phone and email were not paid for by her company, but rather out of her own pocket. And yet she spent hours of her time utilizing these tools to make sure that our group had an exceptional time.

At the startup incubator, something that I never expected to see in Cuba, one of the professors told us that they kept “pushing against the fence. If one day you push too far and there is a gun pointed in your face, you stop pushing for a while, but the fence never returns to its original position.” Statements and interactions like these gave me hope for Cuba’s future. These are not underground actions, conducted in the dark of the night behind closed doors. There is a loosening of control and a drive in the people that I think will eventually propel them forward, not in the manner of an Arab Spring, but in a more systematic march toward information as cell phones flood in from family members in the U.S.
It feels as though everyone in Cuba has one foot on the island and one foot abroad. We were told a popular toast among young drinkers is to “la visa y la riqueza – to a visa and wealth.” Over 700 people apply for visas to the U.S. every day at the U.S. interests section. (Since the U.S. has no diplomatic ties with Cuba, we have no embassy in Havana. However, we do have a “U.S. interests section” which is officially a part of the Swiss embassy; however, it is staffed by American Foreign Service personnel and located in the former U.S. embassy building, and it conducts limited diplomatic business, including issuing visas.) To be awarded a visa, you have to demonstrate ties to Cuba that make it likely that you will return and not overstay the time allowed in the U.S. So it helps if you own a home or a business, if you are married and have children, and if your roots are planted firmly in Cuban soil.

Still, most who are granted visas never return. One of the pieces we saw in the art museum depicts the names of famous Cuban artists written on boomerangs in the shape of the island. Our museum guide told us the piece depicted the hope that these artists would return to Cuba after moving abroad – half of them never did. Scattered throughout the island are parachutes, letters, signs of travel. One of the largest sources of income among Cubans are remittances from family members living abroad. Knowing this, I felt our tourism dollars were well-spent – our own small foreign direct investment that might increase the velocity of money just a little bit and make some people a little better off. Perhaps we are the vanguard of what is to come now that the U.S. is seeking to normalize relations with that country.

Will the normalizing of relations bring a flood of Americans with their iPhones stampeding through Havana’s streets, ruining the old-world feel and driving up prices? Perhaps, but I have trouble believing we will have that much of an impact. The truth is that the rest of the world – including many Europeans and Canadians – can already travel there, and despite U.S. government restrictions, American groups have also been traveling there for years. We are not so special that we will completely disrupt their way of life. Well, if their Internet and cell phone reception opens up, perhaps the introduction of Uber might be disruptive.

One of the contrasts in their culture that we discussed is a side effect of the dual currency system – in which Cubans use their regular currency, the peso, for basic needs, and foreigners and any Cubans who can earn “convertible pesos” (also known as CUCs) from tourists or who receive remittances in “hard currencies” such as the U.S. dollar from family members who live abroad, can use them for larger purchases.

We primarily used CUCs for our purchases, which is why the day we shopped in the grocery market using ordinary pesos was so fascinating. For a group exercise, we were told to buy enough food for a meal with 40 pesos, which is about US$1.60. Most of us failed – coming up with a measly half pound of bean sprouts and a few sad pods of okra. Meat was out of the question.

How do Cubans feed their families on their meager earnings? Guilt twisted my stomach the next day as we sat down to a three-course meal that probably cost 25 CUCs, or 600 pesos. I lamented the piece of chicken I left untouched on my plate.

I never did understand the dual currency system, even after we heard lectures on it. With the end of the CUC approaching, perhaps this distinction will end, or perhaps inflation will rise to record levels. Only time will tell.

We knew we were being given a carefully orchestrated view of Havana – which made our free time so precious. We spent it walking through the streets in small clusters, dipping into studios and speaking with artists, having a cerveza at a bar with an ancient musician who used to play at the Buena Vista Social Club. That was when we learned the most.
I wanted to get in a taxi and go to the countryside to see the value of a peso and CUC in a small village. The closest I felt we got was our day in a bizarre Santeria shelter for victims of domestic and LGBT violence. (Santeria is a homegrown Afro-Latin religion somewhat akin to Voodoo in Haiti and Candomble in Brazil. The BBC describes it as “an Afro-Caribbean religion based on Yoruba beliefs and traditions, with some Roman Catholic elements added.”)

We were in a poor neighborhood, sitting on tiny stools eating pork and rice. However, we had also just been told that homosexuality was widely accepted and recognized by law in Cuba (although gay marriage is still not legal), that women are treated equally to men and are in fact usually the aggressors in domestic violence situations, and that abortion has been legal since the 1960s. We took much of this with a grain of salt; however, the liberal social views under such a controlling government were certainly shocking to me. Here we are in the US where gay marriage and abortion are rights we are still fighting for every day. I was also shocked at the lack of Catholic and Christian influence that pervades most other Latin American cultures. The most we saw of it was in the form of Santeria, in which case the saints are merely a cover for African deities. Perhaps that is where the acceptance of abortion comes from – an allowance made by so many other religions.

As I boarded the plane back to the U.S., having my passport and boarding pass checked as many times as it was in the U.S. interests section, I thought how lucky I was to be returning to a country where I have so much access to information, where I can own and start any company I want – and not just select from a list of 200 approved professions. But who am I to judge and pity a world that I saw from the confines of a bus and the sheltered air conditioning of a lecture room? Of course our shower heads were so rusted they wouldn’t stay up, our mattresses sank in the middle, we were uncomfortable walking around as groups of women without the presence of our male classmates, we had bouts of food poisoning. But the fact remained that we had three huge meals a day. We had not only running water, but hot water anytime we wanted it. We had air conditioning and beds to sleep in. We might have been uncomfortable or on guard because of our own perception of the reality around us, but we were safe. Someone made a point in the final discussion that in a country where weapons and drugs are so highly regulated, we really shouldn’t have worried about our safety.

I look forward to uploading the photos from my camera to my computer – a privilege most people in Cuba will never enjoy – and feeling guilty as I flip through isolated images of old cars and ragged streets, filled with vibrant paint peeling from the old walls of Havana. None of these photos will capture the essence of the people we met and the conversations we had. They will look like the Havana we were meant to see, and we will return to our hot showers, comfortable beds and safe food, hoping for a better future for those we left behind.😊