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CUBA

# What Cubans don't know, and don't know they don't know

BY PATRICIA MAZZEI  
*pmazzei@miamiherald.com*

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HAVANA — A few steps from *la esquina caliente*, the shady spot in Havana's Parque Central where men gather at all hours to engage in their favorite Cuban pastime — talking baseball — a 54-year-old sailor who gave his name as Manuel de Jesús Richards Adams admired the ornate theater across the street. He hoped to glimpse at President Barack Obama.

Obama didn't plan to deliver his landmark speech at the Gran Teatro until the next day. But to Richards, Obama's schedule remained a mystery.

"Do you know if he's there?" he asked me. "Do you know when he's coming?"

In Cuba, people don't know.

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## Obama's full speech: pro-democracy, anti-arbitrary detainment

President Barack Obama encouraged Cubans to embrace democracy and its leaders to tolerate dissent and criticism, during a much-anticipated and nationally televised speech Tuesday that highlighted how much the longtime foes have in common.

And not only about Obama's itinerary, though the lack of detailed information about his visit seemed particularly stunning given how palpably excited Cubans felt about his trip.

Down Old Havana's busiest drag, Obispo Street, 34-year-old Alexander Noriega sold wooden statues — whittled by his uncle — at a small handicraft market. He seemed surprised to learn Obama had held a news conference moments earlier, side by side with Cuban leader Raúl Castro, who was forced to field a couple of reporters' questions.

"They'll show it to us later," Noriega said confidently, referring to state-run television. His assumption proved only partially correct: A government network did re-air the joint appearance — but without the inconvenient Q&A bit where Castro was asked about political prisoners.

In Cuba, people don't know what they don't know.

During Obama's speech, Jesús Magán and his wife, María Lastres, stared in disbelief at a president who could give such lengthy remarks without flipping pages in front of him. They'd never seen transparent TelePrompTers. (The state-run newspaper Granma was quick to point out the next day that Obama was, in fact, reading.)

While I waited for Miami Beach Mayor Philip Levine's delegation one afternoon, his Cuban tour guide inquired why I'd left Venezuela, the country of my birth and childhood. Crime, I said, offering the shortest, most concrete answer I could muster. She'd never heard of Caracas' infamously high homicide rate.

"What do you mean?" she asked, puzzled. She referred to the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. "Not during Chávez? Because Chávez was the best!" I tried to explain. "I don't understand," she continued. "We're not told about that."

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The five days I spent in Havana last week — my first in the Cuban capital — reminded me, jarringly, how isolated Cuban people are, even though they're a mere 45 minutes away from Miami, so short a distance by plane that the captain hardly gets a chance to tell passengers they can unbuckle their seatbelts once they're in the air before they must buckle them again to land.

I'd been to Cuba once before — six months ago, to the eastern town of Holguín, during Pope Francis' visit — so I expected to again feel secluded. But I'd figured Havana, with its mobs of tourists, would feel different. It did, and it didn't: More establishments boasted Wi-Fi connections and satellite TV. But the services are still mostly for foreigners, not Cubans themselves.

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**WE LEAD SIMPLE LIVES.**

A Cuban tour guide in Havana

European tourists tell her they want to experience Cuba “before it changes,” as if Cubans were museum or zoo exhibits stuck in time. Here's Cuba before it changes: Tufts University graduate students traveling with Levine and staying at Airbnb properties learned they had no CVS, no 7-Eleven, no corner market where to pick up bottled water and snacks. (When a family offered me homemade guava juice, they made sure to note it was safe to drink, because it was “made with boiled water.”)

American tourists tell her they appreciate Cuba's unhurried pace, because Americans don't regularly devote time to talking to each other like Cubans do. In Cuba, she said, Americans can share a leisurely, uninterrupted meal. Unsaid: in restaurants most Cubans can't afford, undisturbed by emails and cellphone alerts and let-me-Google-that-right-now searches that most Cubans can't choose to turn off because they can't turn them on in the first place.

Before my trip, a colleague and I planned to write parallel stories about watching Obama on TV in Miami and Havana. We'd each go to a public location — say, a Hialeah restaurant — and record viewers' observations at the same time, to compare the experience on both sides of the Florida Straits.

When I got to Cuba, I asked several people where I could go. They all stared at me blankly. A public gathering space to watch politics with other Cubans? You mean, outside of hotels and restaurants for tourists?

Maybe the government will put up a big screen somewhere, one man said hopefully, like it did during the 2014 World Cup.

But only Lionel Messi gets that treatment. The man watched Obama from home, alone.



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### Obama, Castro attend historic baseball game together in Havana

President Barack Obama and the First Family join Cuban President Raúl Castro at Havana's Estadio Latinoamericano for an exhibition baseball game between the Tampa Bay Rays and the Cuban national team.

Brittany Peterson - bpeterson@mcclatchy.com



Local Cubans watch from their balcony as President Barack Obama's motorcade departs Havana's Gran Teatro on March 22. PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS - AP

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