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Holden photographer sees brighter vision for Cuba

By Nancy Sheehan CORRESPONDENT

After two trips to Cuba, photographer Ron Rosenstock sees a new picture developing.

"The government already has been loosening up," he said. "I went 12 months ago and I went a few weeks ago and in that short period there's more private enterprise. More restaurants are opening up privately. Farms now can be privately owned. There's a lot of private industry and I think, regardless of the embargo, that's been on a course by itself. It's been changing, and once they can get supplies easier things are going to change big time."

Shortly after Rosenstock returned home to Holden after his most recent trip, President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro made simultaneous announcements of renewed diplomatic relations between the two countries that could result in expanded travel and trade, effectively ending an acrimonious 53-year political standoff.

Throughout that time, Americans were forbidden to travel to the palm-graced island nation where once they had flocked to luxury beachfront hotels and casinos. It was the educationally focused agency People to People Ambassador Programs, with authorization from the U.S. government, that allowed Rosenstock and his group to enter Cuba legally.

Working for a company called Strabo Tours, Rosenstock has led photo trips all over the world. He is an award-winning photographer who has published five books and exhibited in many galleries as well as the Reykjavik Art Museum in Iceland and the Worcester Art Museum. He has a show, "Inspirations, Photographs of Iceland," running at the Jewish Community Center in Worcester through Feb. 27.

His tours teach photo skills to camera-toting travelers and take them to photogenic locations they might not find on their own at the times of day when the light is best suited for photography. He has never run into the anti-Americanism some travelers complain about on any of his trips, he said, least of all in Cuba, though the people there perhaps have had more reason than most to dislike us.

"We found the Cuban people to be so open," Rosenstock said. "Contrary to any myths, they love Americans. They always have. That's never ever been an issue among the people. The issue is political."

American anti-Castro politicians through the decades have portrayed the Cuban people as suffering great economic lack under a repressive regime and, while there is undoubtedly truth in that, there also have been some successes, according to Rosenstock. "Cuba is just such an interesting mix," he said. "They have the highest literacy rate of any country in the world. Their education is good. They have a lot of doctors, so many that they export them to other countries. They're highly intelligent and educated people."

The U.S.-imposed trade and travel embargo aimed to destabilize the Cuban government and promote unrest among the citizenry. That hasn't materialized on any large scale, Rosenstock said, even after years of withholding the plethora of consumer goods Americans have long enjoyed.

"I didn't see any of what I would call serious poverty," he said. "Everyone is, by our standards, poor but it's like when I grew up in the '50s. Everyone came from working-class families and we were all kind of poor but we didn't know it because we were all alike. That's sort of the way the Cubans are. They don't really think of themselves as poor."

In spite of a sub-par standard of living, the Cuban people are basically a very happy people, he said, and music is a big part of their lives. "It's hard to have a quiet meal there because there's always some group of musicians in the restaurant," Rosenstock said. "There's live music wherever you go, and they get you involved in it. I have a photograph of me playing the maracas with a group."

The effects of the embargo are evident, however, though often in small ways. Little things that we take for granted can be scarce in Cuba. Rosenstock always brings guitar strings when he goes because Cubans have a hard time getting them. "In every (musical)

group there's always a guitar player and strings always break," he said. "Almost every guitar player there, on a six-string guitar, had, like, five strings. There was always one string missing, and they all learned to improvise around a missing string. But you can't even tell there's a string missing when they play with a group because they're just so good."

Among other talents prodigiously displayed in Cuba is the art of meticulous auto maintenance. It has been estimated that there were about 150,000 American cars in Cuba when the embargo went into effect, many of the large, fin-bedecked, V8 variety, which was in automotive vogue at the time. The cars, colorfully dubbed "Yank Tanks," were essentially stranded in Cuba at embargo time, cut off from any replacement parts needed to keep them rolling. Nevertheless, most are still on the road decades later because the Cubans became masters of innovation, resorting to fabricating parts out of scrap metal, fashioning brake pads out of bits of asbestos, making do with whatever they could find to keep the cars in flawlessly shining shape.

"It's a little bit like going back in time seeing all these old cars," Rosenstock said. "It's been like a major industry to keep these cars going. They're from the late 1940s all through the 1950s up until 1961 or so when the embargo first started, and they look like they're in mint condition. Some of them look like they've just come out of the showroom."

While the United States remained staunch in its opposition to the Cuban government until President Obama revealed the recent negotiations, other countries, including our allies, have been slowly breaking the embargo. "When I was there, the embargo was still on and most of the hotels were full because you had the Canadians and all the Europeans and South Americans," Rosenstock said. "Americans were the only ones not going to Cuba in droves. You could still go with special groups but pretty soon someone could just go to Travelocity and book a trip."

After leading a revolution in 1959, Fidel Castro, now 89 and sequestered out of the public eye, earned our enduring Cold War ire after turning to the Russians for support of his fledgling Communist government, even granting them permission to locate missiles on the island a mere 90 miles from our shores. Conditions hadn't changed appreciably when his brother, Raúl, took over as dictator in 2008. Behind the scenes, however, Raúl has been slowly loosening some of the chains that have bound his people for so long.

"The future is about the Cuban people. It's not about an 89-year-old guy in some assisted living place," Rosenstock said. "After 53 years, it's really all about the future of the 11 million people that live there now and it's been very, very difficult for the Cuban people being cut off from the rest of the world."

The recent talk of an end to the embargo has given Cubans much cause for hope, he said.

"When I was there about three weeks ago, they were all hoping and praying it would end soon and they would love to be able to travel to America," Rosenstock said. "A lot of them haven't been able to see their families in a long time now. They're over the moon about this new proposal."

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