

CUBA

MARCH 25, 2016 4:10 PM

Miami's Cuban-American business elite spent spring break in Havana

HIGHLIGHTS

Part of the hard-line old guard has embraced Cuba travel

They've caught up to regular Cubans, who've been going back for years

Don't call it a vacation



Miami billionaire Jorge Perez talks with President Barack Obama at an entrepreneurship event at La Cervecería in Havana on Monday. **PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS** - AP

BY PATRICIA MAZZEI

pmazzei@miamiherald.com

HAVANA — Mojitos, strawberry daiquiris and hand towels awaited the well-heeled guests that strolled into the Saratoga Hotel. The lobby felt like the airy foyer of a Havana country clubhouse of old — right down to its members:

Almost all hailed from Miami.

Hugs and backslaps, handshakes and introductions. Half the men sported blue blazers and khakis; the other unwrapped matching *guayaberas* in picture-perfect baby blues and pale pinks.

If you panned across the room at any given moment this week, you had to blink twice to make sure you weren't in a hotel in Brickell. There was developer and tech entrepreneur Manny Medina. And healthcare magnate Mike Fernandez. And condo king Jorge Pérez. Attorneys Pedro Freyre and Ralph Patino. Big Sugar's Andres Fanjul. Businessman Carlos

Saladrigas. Former U.S. Ambassador to Belgium Paul Cejas helping himself to brunch. Former U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez hopping on an elevator with businessmen Enrique Sosa and Ariel Pereda.

“This is literally a 45-minute flight away,” said Joe Arriola, the Miami-Dade County Public Health Trust chairman, who was also at the Saratoga. He pointed to communist regimes in faraway China and Vietnam. In Cuba, he maintained, “Things are going to change so much faster.”

Miami's Cuban-American business elite spent spring break in Havana, chasing President Barack Obama. Some took part in official White House events. Others lingered in the periphery, witnessing history — and trying to figure out how to prod it along with the power of their wallets.

Don't call it a vacation.

“I'm going to work. I'm not going there to play,” Fernandez, who gave some of the others a lift to Havana aboard his private plane, said the day he departed Miami. “I don't drink, and I'm a lousy dancer, so I'm *not* going there to play.”

“

I'M GOING TO WORK. I'M NOT GOING THERE TO PLAY.

Mike Fernandez

A few years ago, many of the businessmen — several of them lifelong Republicans — would have refused to set foot in Havana, much less consider investing there. Now they're among the most prominent proponents of the Democratic president's push for renewed U.S. cooperation with Raúl Castro's regime. Several met with Obama at the White House the week before the president's trip and offered ideas for what he might say in Havana. He took up many of them, the Cuban Americans said with satisfaction Tuesday after watching Obama deliver his speech in person.

They've got big-name company. Also traveling to Cuba for an entrepreneurship event Obama held at an Old Havana brewery Monday were a slew of CEOs from national companies such as the Marriott and Starwood hotel chains, PayPal, Xerox and Air BnB.

The bigwigs were hardly alone. Regular Miamians made their way to Havana over the past few days too — because of Obama, but also to watch the Tampa Bay Rays play the Cuban national team, or catch the Rolling Stones, or spend Easter with Havana friends and family.

“*He* decided to go the same week *I* was going to go,” said 51-year-old Carlos Delgado, a tutor who left Cuba in 1985. He planned his trip months ago and was delighted he'd coincided with the president — and the Stones: “Such an important week!”

The biggest days on Cuba's political calendar in recent memory would have felt somehow incomplete without the robust presence of exiles who wrestled for decades with the pain of seeing their old home slip into totalitarianism. Yet seeing part of the Cuban-American old guard there — the one still oft-derided on Cuban state-run television — seemed striking.

“Taking these positions 10-15 years ago in Miami was not a popular thing,” said Patrick Hidalgo, 37, who worked in the Obama administration. “I've had people scream at me for discussions that now would seem extremely benign.”

“

TAKING THESE POSITIONS 10-15 YEARS AGO IN MIAMI WAS NOT A POPULAR THING.

Patrick Hidalgo

Hidalgo confessed to initial “mixed feelings” about Obama’s Cuba trip. But he came around and accepted an invitation to his Havana speech. He stayed with a cousin in Havana — “That’s kind of how me and my family keep our pulse on what’s going on with people in Cuba” — and noted many South Florida acquaintances hoped to make it to the island themselves.

“It’s been shocking,” he said. “Me and my sister joke around that we could open up a Cuba travel agency just from the sheer number of friends that hit us up for advice. They don’t just want to stay in Varadero,” the famous beach, he said. “They want something even more meaningful.”

Average Cubans, particularly more recent arrivals in the U.S., have been traveling back and forth between both countries for years, in some cases spending U.S. government benefits back on the island. The elite that clung to its refusal to engage for so long is merely playing catch-up.

The difference is their clout.

Most of the Miami businessmen are on a first-name basis with Cuban foreign ministry officials and leaders of the U.S. embassy. They get invited to private meetings. They see historic Old Havana as an untapped opportunity — for Cubans or foreigners — to build fancy shops and seaside condos. They insist political change — democracy — will follow, roiling hard-liners back in Miami who first want the release of political prisoners and the guarantee of crucial freedoms.

Meantime, the members of the new Cuban-American establishment squeeze in art-gallery tours and jogs along the Malecón seawall. They congregate under one roof at the Saratoga, with its massage treatments, rooftop pool and Freixenet bottles — and its reliable stream of suspected state-security lookouts. They enjoy a breakfast-buffet feast of delicacies most Cubans can only dream of: smoked salmon, prosciutto, dates, figs, four types of soft cheeses.

“To think we can have unlimited food and they’re rationed? Yeah, it bothers me,” Miami Beach Commissioner Ricky Arriola, who made the trip separate from his father, said one morning. “But in the end, by pushing for change, we’re doing the right thing.”

MORE CUBA

COMMENTS

18 Comments

Sort by **Oldest** ▾



Add a comment...



Pablo Suarez · Miami Dade College

Cuban exile's "business royalty" validating the 57 year old tyranny. Modern day carpet baggers (opportunist northerners who moved in on the south after the Civil War looking to take advantage of and to exploit the regions misfortunes). Shame on you!

Like · Reply · 18 · Mar 25, 2016 1:36pm



Stephen Esteban Davie · Toronto, Ontario

Great astute comment.

Like · Reply · 1 · Mar 26, 2016 8:12am



Jorge Rafael Regalado · Director (company) at Jorge Regalado, P.A. | Mortgage Broker

Agreed

Like · Reply · Mar 26, 2016 4:12pm



Axel Esordia

**Axel Pooie**

Let the car bombings commence.

Like · Reply · 2 · Mar 25, 2016 1:45pm

**Micco Mann** · University of Miami

Wonder if the "old guard" will be waving their Cuban flags and marching up and down on Calle Ocho in protest over the "betrayal" of their own?

Like · Reply · 7 · Mar 25, 2016 2:07pm · Edited

**Roberto Ravelo**

They won't do it cause there is money to be made n they will probably go back to live in their mansion that they left behind COWARD !!!!

Like · Reply · 3 · Mar 25, 2016 2:46pm

**Ulises Padron**

Not even worth arguing with any of Castro lovers.

Like · Reply · 1 · Mar 25, 2016 6:45pm

**Scott Charlton** · University of Miami

Ulises Padron - "Castro Lovers" as you call them are those who wanted better lives, prior to Castro, many Cubans lived in fear of their lives unless they followed the direction of a government bought and sold to American interests. Sadly, the embargo brought the worst conditions to the island which was entirely the fault of the United States and those criminal elements to came to this country.

Like · Reply · 2 · Mar 26, 2016 3:26am

[Show 7 more replies in this thread](#) ▼**Jorge Martinez**

The, Cuban Mafia of Miami, tailgating party!

Like · Reply · 5 · Mar 25, 2016 2:56pm

**Roberto Ravelo**

Those were the ones that the dum Cubans were counting to bring Castro down

Like · Reply · 2 · Mar 25, 2016 3:26pm

**Stephen Esteban Davie** · Toronto, Ontario

Roberto Ravelo There are lot of bright young Castro men in the waiting line. Obama has wasted seven years of time in which he could have restored Cuban relations. Instead he went there last minute, and insulted the government and the people. Lying will get the USA nowhere! It is Cuba's time. The entire world is there to help. Cuba does not need the USA for anything. Just scrap the embargo and get our of Guantanamo.

Like · Reply · 1 · Mar 25, 2016 6:01pm

**Jorge Martinez**

Stephen Esteban Davie , the world is not dummed to keep giving freebies to Castro, only Uncle Sam would do that. 😊

Like · Reply · 1 · Mar 26, 2016 9:47am · Edited

[Show 2 more replies in this thread](#) ▼**Greg Hamilton** · Miami, Florida

All prostitutes who urinated on all the reasons their parents took them out of Cuba into the US. Their moral compass is define by their next deal. They deserve the same respect as the drugs cartels. They both are doing business with murderers .

Like · Reply · 6 · Mar 25, 2016 3:27pm

**Roberto Ravelo**

Damm Gregg 3rd time I agree with u

Like · Reply · Mar 25, 2016 3:34pm

**Stephen Esteban Davie** · Toronto, Ontario

Gosh...sorry...but I agree with you!

Like · Reply · Mar 25, 2016 6:02pm

**Rob Sheer**

They run the drug cartels my friend. They are the drug cartels. LOL

Like · Reply · Mar 26, 2016 12:12pm

Like · Reply · Mar 20, 2016 12:12am

[Show 4 more replies in this thread](#) ▼**Roberto Ravelo**

Hope Omega 7 would still be around to teach them a lesson

Like · Reply · 1 · Mar 25, 2016 3:28pm

**Stephen Esteban Davie** · Toronto, Ontario

Obama's lies and deceit did not go undetected in Cuba and around the world. he has totally mishandles the yankee side of the Cuba situation, and his recent visit will go down as a virtual disaster. Raul and Cubans have made it clear. #1....get out of Guantanamo....#2....Scrap your illegal cruel murderous embargo which the UN voted 99.5% to trash in October 2015! And #3...Cuba has the entire world wanting to help, trade, and assist in friendship. Obama has made it clear that the USA is their enemy, as are about 25% of Miami former Cubans. I feel badly for the majority of good exiled Cubans in Fl... [See More](#)

Like · Reply · 1 · Mar 25, 2016 5:58pm

**Scott Charlton** · University of Miami

"Good Cuban Exiles" is an oxymoron! Those Cubans who left or were thrown out of Cuba in '59 were nothing more than criminals and prostitutes who sold their country to U.S. and Organized Crime interests to line their pockets.

Like · Reply · Mar 26, 2016 3:31am

**Stephen Esteban Davie** · Toronto, Ontario

Scott Charlton You are correct with respect to many who arrived from Cuba, but not the majority who became solid citizens of their new country. Sadly, it is the worst of the Cuban immigrants who seem to be the ones influencing the policies of the American government regarding Cuba. These are the Louis Posada and Orlando Bosch worshippers, the violence supporters, those who wish to go back there and take the country from innocent decent resident Cuban nationals. It is these bandito Miami ex-Cubans who are responsible for the stalemate which Obama has upheld, and as long as the embargo and the overholding of Guantanamo exists, Miami Cuban thugs can continue to howl at the moon and suck their thumbs. Cuba will follow the course of Vietnam in order to keep her lands Cuban.

Like · Reply · Mar 26, 2016 8:10am

**Regina Roca**

Stephen Esteban Davie Good grief. When was the last time you came to Miami? You seem to be referencing a Miami decades past, if that Miami ever existed anywhere except in your addled mind.

If Cuba belongs to Cubans, might want to listen to them and stop trying to impose upon them the nonsense you're spewing.

Like · Reply · Mar 26, 2016 12:10pm

[Show 2 more replies in this thread](#) ▼**Stephen Esteban Davie** · Toronto, Ontario

er....yer Jorge Perez feller may have a good law case against his hair transplant guy. Looks like someone trying to grow hay in the desert. Sorta sparse and unnatural lookin' ya know.

Like · Reply · Mar 25, 2016 6:03pm

**Michael J. Papp** · Green, Ohio

Steve Davie... You are too hard on President Obama. He was only in Cuba to get the ball rolling. Yes, Cuba is for Cubans. It is up to Cubans (in Cuba) to decide with whom they will trade once the embargo goes bye, bye. Regina has some valid points. Then you go and personally attack a guy about his hair. A classless Donald Trump impression on your part! You should've taken Regina's advice while you were ahead! Jorge Perez is a classy guy whether he is losing some hair (now at his age), or has a head full of hair (like in high school in Colombia). Jorge Perez is a CNG Condor of a guy. You, Steve, are classless.

Like · Reply · 19 hrs

**Stephen Esteban Davie** · Toronto, Ontario

Michael J. Papp I have been well aware of Perez for many years. He is indeed very talented, focused, and most of all, respected. But the hair job was the central focus of the photo, so how could we miss it. When Castro paraded around Santiago de Cuba and Camilo and Che were in Havana, the Cuban population cheered, and the vast majority...some huge A+ percentage, were behind that. This we all know. As they rolled along towards running for cover under the Russian blanket of security money and arms/missiles, the favour with Cubans we all know seek. But WHY did the revolution happen in the first... [See More](#)

Cubans we all know sank. But WHY did the revolution happen in the first ... See more

Like · Reply · 19 hrs



Johnny Tinder

Let the corruption begin

Like · Reply · 2 · Mar 25, 2016 7:35pm



Jorge Canovas · Hialeah, Florida

When did it end?

Like · Reply · Mar 26, 2016 4:50pm



Erika Vass · Miami Beach, Florida

sad now they want to make more money for themselves and their greed more corruption.

Like · Reply · 4 · Mar 25, 2016 7:46pm

Load 8 more comments

Facebook Comments Plugin



Russian Presidential Administration Chief Sergei Ivanov Visits China
SPONSORED CONTENT

Russian Presidential Administration Chief Sergei Ivanov Visits China
BEIJING, CHINA - MARCH 25: Chinese President Xi Jinping (2nd-R) meets Russian Presidential Chief of Staff Sergei Ivanov (2nd-L) at The Great...



SPONSORED CONTENT

Top 10 Travel Destinations of 2016

TripAdvisor just released their list of the top destinations on the rise, including 10 spots across the U.S. Check them out!

By vroll.tv



ORIGINALLY FROM TOWNANDCOUNTRYMAG.COM