

Time to Open Up to Cuba

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by Wayne Trujillo, COTA Director of Communications

As the Chamber of the Americas prepares a cultural mission to Cuba and plunges into preparation for a journey that embraces personal passions, cultural education and exploration, I ponder the benefits of American-Cuban exchanges.

While the very notion of the chamber's mission to Cuba provokes anger from a small but powerful group, the chamber believes that such missions promote, rather than hinder, democracy.

I'm not going to debate specific political and policy positions. However, I can translate empirical experience to the possibilities of tourism and economic reform in Cuba, which American tourism and cultural exchange would encourage.

Without tourism in Eagle County, we'd be talking about Hispanic absence rather than Hispanic presence. Then again, there would be many demographics missing from the valley. But tourism not only retained and increased Hispanic residency in the valley, the associated economics encouraged assimilation, advancement and assets.

I peered into the past, recalling the idyllic rustic Minturn of yesteryear in an article a couple weeks ago in the Vail Daily. However, nostalgia does not blind me to a current reality. Nostalgic Minturn would not persist, or even exist, today without today's tourism and previous economic anchors. The Meyer, Moreland and Lucero stations would have run out of gas after the railroad and mines cut or ceased operations.

We have successful Hispanics residing in the valley, some with enhanced assets and others with enhanced exposure to international cultures. Some of the valley's Hispanics, like Alan Salazar and Gil Cisneros, have interacted on the national and international stage beside political and economic leaders. All have a better understanding of global society and cultures.

The shift from mining to tourism saw its share of stereotypes and disparities, but no more than existed previously or elsewhere. More importantly, the Hispanic standard of living increased. Hispanic integration in today's Eagle County encompasses professions, politics and marriage, all of which today provoke a shrug rather than a scandal.

Sure, there are social and occupation separation among Hispanics, particularly recent immigrants, but I've known members of that population who've sped and surged into the mainstream.

People point out that Cuba already enjoys international tourism to no discernable benefit for the average citizen. However, economic opportunities have slowly improved. American tourism and business investment (including foreign companies with American investments and interests) would hasten the process.

Perhaps more important are the cultural advantages. American tourism would remove a long-standing misperception that the American embargo equates to American opposition against Cuba's people. Many Cubans with wealth, position and/or foresight fled at the onset. Others left in successive waves and decades. However, many Cubans simply do not have the exposure, means and contact to appreciate American society.

For many Cubans of a certain age, memories of Cuban-American exchanges on an official, friendly and regular basis recall Fulgencio Batista and the associated torture, exploitation and unabashed racism.

Batista is four decades dead. America has changed.

Around the time of American support for and involvement with Batista's Cuba, the Civil Rights Act was still a somewhat distant dream in the U.S. (and the dream of a black president even a greater distance) and signs outside Colorado businesses with the direct and simple statement, "No Mexicans or dogs allowed," didn't seem odd, let alone controversial.

The obvious weakness in the tourism and cultural corollary is that the valley – and America – isn't communist, so the comparisons don't equate. However, on a human level, the cultural and economic exchanges and comparisons agree.

Since I'm a journalistic voyeur and not a licensed economist or sociologist, I have to rely on the opinions of others. Economists tend to agree that economic exchanges for goods and services foster democracy, free markets, opportunity and living standards. Sociologists universally agree that social and cultural exchanges promote understanding, reconciliation and cooperation.

Most residents of Eagle County would also agree. Can anyone answer a pertinent question: Has the Cuban embargo and travel ban in its half century of existence accomplished any of the above?

Wayne Trujillo, Director of Communications for the Chamber of the Americas, is a Minturn native and Battle Mountain High School graduate. His family moved to Eagle County nearly a century ago. His uncle, Oscar Meyer, was the Eagle County sheriff gunned down by James Sherbondy on Tennessee Pass in 1937, and his Aunt Ollie Meyer was Eagle County superintendent of schools. His grandparents, Irene and Ralph Meyer, moved to Minturn in the 1940s and owned and operated Meyer's Garage. Trujillo currently lives in Denver.