

Sex, Lies, & Tourism

Is Cuba really prostituting her teenagers, or is this another cynical manipulation by the Bush Administration?

Citizen Cane

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Let me say right off that the subject of Cuba is extremely polarizing. This makes it difficult to have a discussion without the people involved, from the political left or right, simply going deaf and repeating familiar good-vs-evil litanies. After years of visiting and studying the island, I have found it to be anything but simple to figure out. On the contrary, like most places one gets to know well, it's endlessly complex and nuanced. Hence, my rule of thumb when checking out Cuba analysis is to look for this complexity. The moment I hear tripe peddled by self-deluded leftoids of Cuba-as-socialist-utopia—or the Miami Mafia's more repugnant portrayal of it as a dirty third-world basket case—I start looking for the exit.

Let's be clear about this: whatever their rhetoric, the Bush Administration's decision to sic Homeland Security on Cuba travelers is about avoiding (re)defeat in Florida in the 2004 election, period. If his people were serious about impeding the mass sexual exploitation of a generation of impoverished Caribbean "comfort women," they could start with half a dozen other countries in the region where they have real influence and could actually change things.

In October of 2003, President Bush announced in a televised address that the latest official reason we must rush toward regime change in Cuba is to protect young women there who are being sexually exploited.

What Bush's junta is claiming about Cuba has little to do with reality as I have seen it. Does sex tourism exist in Cuba? Of course it does, as in all countries in the tourist-dependent and economically-depressed Caribbean. The more critical and intelligent question is this: does the Cuban government actively or passively promote the activity, as the Bush Administration and a June 2003 State Department paper claim? The answer is a resounding no.

I find it interesting that at the same time the State Department was releasing this report stating that the Cuban government denied and ignored the problem of sex tourism, I was actually on the island with my Cuban girlfriend, struggling against a state apparatus vigorously clamping down on any sign of sex tourism.

We ended up going to jail, the local Immigration office, and the provincial headquarters of the Department of the Interior, to visit the Center for Classification of Prostitutes. I had frank discussions with street cops, their bosses at police stations, and officials in the Interior Department. All freely admitted the existence of sex tourism. Open discussion is not even an issue any more: any taboos against that are long gone. It's an official problem: even Granma, the party newspaper, occasionally mentions the clampdown.

Hence, when I read the State Department's report, I really wonder what country these folks are writing about. The glaring inaccuracies in an important government document highlight more than ever the need for independent travelers to visit Cuba and bring back honest impressions not beholden to politics in the fashion of the State Department and the Bush Administration.

Rather than sponsoring sex tourism, the Castro regime is doing just the opposite: they have unleashed their own homeland security apparatus in sweeping repressive dragnets. Having decided it is a national crisis, their

response has been to round up any Cuban they even suspect of prostituting themselves to foreigners. In their zeal, they routinely violate due process for these detainees.

Making abuses of civil liberties even worse has been an extremely unjust policy to leave sex tourists in relative peace, while prosecuting Cubans involved in the trade to the full power of the law. And jail sentences on the island—like in the United States—are draconian.

The Cuban government has seized the immense power of mass arrest and not tempered it with a responsibility to use all means at their disposal to determine who is who. They have a nasty tendency under stress to toss everyone in the clink and let the cockroaches sort it out. Obviously, concern for individual human rights in Cuba isn't as much a priority for the state as building new cafeterias and hotels to catch desperately needed tourist dollars.

The Guadas (spelling?—I've only heard this word spoken) are reeducation camps that exist throughout the island specifically for young women getting into this type of behavior; they are separate from criminal jails. A friend of mine from a small town outside Holguin spent two years in one in the late 1990s, and told me it was like a strict boarding school surrounded by barbed wire. (Sadly, as I write this, the latest wave of repression has swept her up again and she is back in Holguin's Guada until the summer of 2004.) Is this heavy-handed control of the population problematic from a civil libertarian point of view? Of course it is. But does it constitute active or passive participation by the Cuban government in prostituting the island's young women to foreigners? Hardly.

No Caribbean government is unaware of rampant sex tourism in what used to be called the American Lake.

And few governments in the region expend as much energy fighting the quixotic battle against it as do the Cubans. Castro's regime sincerely worries over what rampant jiniterismo ("jockeying:" literally, to ride foreigners for their dollars) is doing to Cuban society. A concrete indication of their concern is government construction in several locations across the island of schools of social work. I personally watched one massive campus go up from start to finish outside of Holguin in 2001 to 2002.

The state sees what is happening as well as the citizenry: by opening up the country to tourism—and the resulting increase in economic stratification of society that comes with it—they are encountering classic social problems that dollar dependency brings. If they want to maintain the remarkable social peace on the island, a quality of life that makes Cuba a particularly unique place, they figure they'd better start training large numbers of social workers, fast.

The Cubans also have political reasons to lock up young jiniteras. According to official doctrine, taught in the schools and shown on frequent television documentaries, prostitution is closely associated with pre-revolutionary Cuba. Then, the island was a brothel for American weekenders and U.S. Navy sailors. The Cuban state has stressed this for 40 years, and as the people have watched Caribbean sex tourism creep back into their society, government prestige has suffered.

However crude and repellent it is to set up detention camps to solve social problems, understand that the Cuban state's goal in this case is to impede an international scourge of exploitation and to expose the falsity of the current media campaign by the Bush Administration and State Department.

It should be noted that, along with the recent massive expansion in training social workers, the Castro government has also started to apply criminal penalties to predatory foreigners, and not just to the Cuban girls and boys involved in these financial trysts. Cuba has recently barred return, and even prosecuted and jailed the most egregious visitors violating laws against the corruption of minors. Thus far, these punishments have only been handed out in instances when the offender was caught red-handed; the trickier problem of identifying the perps preemptively and intervening without triggering criticism and economic disaster is still daunting, but at least this latest government action begins to address obvious inequities in the old policy.

The reality is that Cuba is making a flawed but sincere effort to deal with the spread of Caribbean-style sexual exploitation that returned to the island in the 1990s, when it again opened up to tourism.

The lurid accusations by Bush and his people have almost nothing to do with the imperfect efforts of Cuba, and everything to do with never-ending demonization of the nation to curry favor with Cuban exile leaders. This displaced ruling elite and their offspring are a powerful Washington lobby, and they walk point on the long march to retake the island with U.S. economic muscle.

If we norteamericanos are prevented from traveling to our nearby island neighbor, and US citizens must rely solely on Cuban exile propaganda or State Department pronouncements like the 2003 “Trafficking In Persons Report” for news, then who here can challenge the distortions?

DISPATCH FROM REPRESSIVE CIENFUEGOS

The following is one of a series of messages I emailed to a friend in Detroit while experiencing difficulties in Cuba last spring. These messages were angry salvos fueled by frustration and anxiety that I was feeling at the time. They would have been lost to cyberspace had my friend not saved them. He also appreciates the complexity of the island, and wanted to publish the messages as a firsthand account on repressive Cuban police tactics.

I agreed to this while still on the road, then changed my mind. I was worried that without sketching in a background, it would simply result in Miami Mafia-style Cuba bashing. Exile critics are excellent at focusing on the island’s failings while ignoring anything positive. Always, they must obscure the crucial context behind their critique: that many of the “third-world” problems Cuba experiences are really North-South exploitation issues that exist throughout Latin America.

These details were mostly forgotten until the Bush junta announced in October a major mobilization of Homeland Security resources to hunt down and prosecute Cuba travelers. What they are claiming about Cuba has little to do with reality as I have seen it; they likely did focus group studies to see what would galvanize the populace into supporting this latest flex of imperial muscle.

Here is one of the dispatches, unedited except for patching it together smoothly. The repressive policies of the US government have forced me to use a pseudonym.

Well, I knew it was coming, but when it came, it still caught me a bit by surprise. I’ve been in Eastern Cuba for a month, and everyone has been talking about the latest wave of repression.

There were obvious signs: all the guys whom I’ve bought weed from during past visits are in jail, and I’m talking 15 years. I haven’t smoked since I arrived, the atmosphere is totally different now, and very paranoid. Not smoking is no big deal, I needed to clean out my lungs a bit, anyway, but what a drag about my socios.

We traveled in the Sierra, enjoyed some clean living, camping, biking, you know the drill. After a short rest in Holguin, we tossed the bicycles on the bus and came to Western Cuba...and here, the Sword of Damocles has descended upon us.

For the first three nights in Cienfuegos, the police accosted us every night, basically insinuating that Yudi was a prostitute, and me, a sex tourist. We talked our way out of trouble the first two times, but three is always the charm. On Thursday, we walked right into una operation and my street protestations came to nothing: they hauled Yudi off to jail. And for what? The crime of trying to visit another part of her own country? Cuba Libre my ass!

So I spent the entire night in the cop shop, trying to get her out. No dice.

“Check the fucking computer;” I suggested helpfully, “and you’ll see she’s no hooker, she’s got a clean record.” But they wouldn’t or couldn’t.

“No,” I was told, “She must wait for the morning, when the boss lady of the prostitute squad will come in and interview her etc.”

“But she didn’t do anything,” I countered. Going right to my ‘A’ material, I added: “What am I supposed to say when I go back to the US and I hear the Cuban-American mafia claim that you can’t go anywhere in Cuba without being hassled by the police?”

They were somewhat impressed by this line of reasoning, but to no effect. Socialist cops, like coppers everywhere, must follow orders. OK, whatever, I thought, let’s wait until morning for the boss lady if we have to, and we’ll resolve this thing once and for all.

Yeah, right. The blond jefa shows up at nine a.m.; three hours later Yudi finally comes to the front of a long line of female detainees who have been swept up with us the previous evening. Blondie commences by threatening to send her to the clinic for a vaginal examination & to draw blood for testing. Then she told Yudi she ought to boot her ass back to Holguin on the next police truck going east. Literally, a vampire, this so-called revolutionary. All this

time I'm outside in the sun, having been asked to leave the waiting room with everyone else. When I sat on a curb in front of the station house, a cop actually came outside and told me to get up, I couldn't sit there.

I guess I should have been flattered to be treated like just another Cuban; it must have been my all-night complaining. Usually, tourists here are handled with kid gloves.

Contrasting with this harassment, a sympathetic cop who remembered me from the night before passed a message to Yudi for me, along with her toothbrush and some antibiotics she was taking at the time.

And do you know what? As we learned later at the Immigration office, and had confirmed at the Department of the Interior, these police abuses were entirely against Cuban law.

Technically, by Cuba's own legal code, Yudi has the right to visit any place in her own country that she desires, but its hardly news that most cops are criminals, eh? It just sticks in your craw a bit more when they try to pass themselves off as "revolutionaries," whatever the hell that word means. Here, unlike in most countries, it's a term of the Establishment.

Back to the story: I asked Blondie to check the computer or at least take five minutes to call Immigration in Holguin and ask about Yudi. "That's not my job," she snipped. What is her job, I wondered; to arrest and threaten innocent citizens with total impunity? Apparently so... though I thought better than to share this revelation with her.

Fortunately, Blondie's role as Bad Cop was counterbalanced by Good Cop: a mulata who took the time after boss lady threw Yudi back in the tank to interview her properly, and then me. Our stories checked out, and after I made a rapid bike trip over to the bed-and-breakfast where we stayed in January and got the lady there to call the police-station & further confirm our tale, they grudgingly let Yudi go...after threatening her a few more times.

What a mierda this was! Yudi's reward for her interest in visiting historical places in her own country was 14 hours in jail, for nothing. And we got off easy...

There is definitely a war going on against the youth here, like in the US during the 1960s. Not that I wasn't aware of this before, but in the past, My Cuban friends & I were usually up to something when hassled by the cops; y'know, the same game of cat-and-mouse we play with flatfoots at home.

But not now. The police are casting a street-net so large as to catch everyone in it, and they'll sort out who's who later. Or, as in our case, maybe they won't even do that for a while.

The Cuban government has, with their ham-handed control techniques, almost entirely lost the support of the youth. As a teenager waiting in the cop-shop next to me said to his buddy, "De pinga, socialismo," or basically, "Socialism can suck

So onward we go. Next, we pedal around the Bay of Pigs, then onto Havana, which Yudi has never had the opportunity to visit. We walk with a little more fear now, eyes always alert for pigs on foot, or the patrullas, the police cars. My instinct is to fight this injustice, to protest, to picket the police station, pass out flyers, complain to the higher ups, do something! But Yudi looks at me like I'm nuts; Cubans generally don't make that kind of trouble. Like in Mexico or Guatemala, people here figure to complain about the police only brings on more problems.

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