

CUBANOMICS: HALF-HEARTED NIGHT-LIFE

When I actually met the Cubans they were great. I met a lot of them at a gas station after I drove the Toyota into a big hole, causing a front wheel to fold like a paper plate with too much potato salad on it. The Cubans were pleasant, helpful, cheery, polite, and they all had relatives in Union City, N.J.. The gas station was one of the few visible instances of anybody doing anything for a living.

There's no economic activity on the streets - unless you count begging or pestering tourists to buy "genuine Cohiba cigars" that "a good friend of mine sneaks out of the factory." There are no food vendors or knickknack merchants, and only occasionally are there kiosks selling cigarettes and newspapers, which they're mostly out of.

Sundown was better in Havana. The city has so few lights that after dark I hardly noticed the electrical blackouts. And it looks like nobody lives there. Since hardly anybody wants to, the look is appropriate.

Night life exists, though it's halfhearted. There are some privately owned restaurants now. The food's good, and you can get a meal for \$5. It does have to be dollars, however. No one in Cuba is interested in pesos. Even beggars check to see if the coin being offered is American.

The private restaurants are allowed no more than 12 seats, and only family members can be employed. That is as far as the Cuban government is willing to go with capitalism among its own citizens.

You can get anything you want - lobster, steak, Cohiba cigars actually made by Cohiba and rum older than the prostitutes who are sitting at all the other tables with German businessmen. The catch is, not only can't Cubans afford these things, neither can you. The prices are astonishing.