

The Cars of CUBA

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Fidel Castro assumed power on New Year's Day 1959 when his rebels overthrew the government of President Fulgencio Batista. Castro was quick to enact various laws including one banning the importation by Cuban citizens of automobiles. This ban remained in effect until sometime in 2007 when, for approximately one year, Cuban citizens could import cars. Most of the imported vehicles came from relatives living in the United States. >>>

The Cars of CUBA



Since 2008, Cuban citizens have been once again prohibited from importing automobiles. It should be noted that since January 1, 1959 the Cuban government has imported cars, trucks and other vehicles from Russia, China and South Korea for government use.

Upon arriving at the airport in Cienfuegos, I was surprised at the number of late model taxicabs and the absence of the 1950s cars that I had expected to see. The reason was simple. The government owns the taxi companies and thus could

import as many vehicles as they sought necessary to support the recent tourism boom. It was not until I reached the city of Trinidad did I start seeing 1950s American automobiles, mostly Chevrolets.

Talking to their owners, I learned that most of the cars had been passed down from generation to generation. Most of the drivetrains had been converted to diesel power and automatic transmissions. The primary reason for the conversions is that diesel fuel is not only less expensive than gasoline, but more efficient.



Cuba is an interesting country inasmuch as 100% of the adult population is employed, albeit at very low rates of income. The government owns all of the property, but allows its citizens to occupy homes and apartments at no cost. There is no income tax. Medical care is free as is education, Kindergarten through the highest level of graduate/professional school.

The Cuban's low income makes it difficult for them to afford many luxuries including the costs of repairing their aging automobiles. Therefore, when a car breaks down, it can take months to accumulate the money, find the part and then repair the car. Parts are primarily imported from the United States and Mexico. There is however an \$8/pound import tax. Thus, many of the cars are ghosts of their original selves. Many have been painted from spray cans, brushes and rollers. Interiors have been replaced with less than original materials and while chrome plating is available it is very expensive for the average Cuban car owner. As a result, a lot of the bumpers have been either painted or buffed to their original pot metal finishes. Many of the cars have an abundance of rust and most of the original wheels have been replaced with modern cast wheels to accommodate modern radial tires.



During our tour of Havana we had the opportunity to meet Julio Alvaret the proprietor of Nostalgicar Acosta Cabrera. Julio started out as a taxi driver using his 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air sedan. After a few years he married his wife who also drove a taxi. The two of them decided that life was hard enough in Cuba let alone making it on a taxi driver's income. Julio then restored his 1955 Chevrolet to original standards and then performed a second restoration on his wife's Chevrolet. They then approached the ministry of tourism and proposed that they would offer tourists tours of Havana in their completely restored cars. Today Julio has 11 restored Chevrolets and is working on restoring another five cars. He has few metal working tools in his 5,000-square-foot shop, but manages to repair sheet metal with a >>>

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torch and some crude dollies. Parts are obtained in the United States however, payment is an issue. Julio can purchase the parts on the Internet but he needs a credit card to complete the transaction. Cubans have neither credit cards nor any consumer financing available to them. Thus everything that Julio has, has been paid for with cash. A friend of his living in Miami allows him to use his credit card to buy parts, but Julio must pay his friend a 20% fee

on every charge. Parts are shipped to Cuba via DHL and are subject to the \$8 per pound tariff.

Julio is quite famous. When President Obama visited Cuba, it was Julio who chauffeured Obama through Havana in a fully restored 1959 Chevrolet Impala. Several months later Julio was invited to come to Washington D.C. and talk to a group of Congressmen on the subject of entrepreneurship in Cuba.

When he completed his meeting, he was received at the White House by President Obama. Julio is definitely the exception of Cuban entrepreneurs.

Once in Havana, the number of 1950s American automobiles was profoundly abundant. The majority of the cars are Chevrolets with a few Pontiacs, Buicks, Oldsmobiles and a dearth of Cadillacs. On March 17, 2017 the Cuban government opened the doors for Cubans to both sell their existing cars and import new ones. The average Cuban makes only 400 pesos a month so one can only imagine the strenuous savings program one would need to import a modern car, new or used. The question is simply what will the international market pay for Cuban automobiles? While they have lost their originality, each car tells a story of both its owner and of Cuba. The cars will certainly be a fascination to many car enthusiasts and museums. The question remains, what will happen to all of these old cars once they can be replaced with new ones? Watch your favorite auction company catalog to find out!