Cuba has been off limits to American tourists for a half-century now, behind a U.S. economic embargo meant to bring down Cuba’s revolutionary government. Yet Cuba still holds tremendous fascination for many Americans. Who is not familiar with the old American cars, Cuban *rumba*, and iconic images of *el Che* and Fidel?

In fact, it has always been possible for some Americans to visit Cuba, even during the coldest days of the cold war. These include not only journalists and humanitarian groups, but individual American university students and even entire U.S. university classes.

In the past dozen years, I’ve journeyed to Cuba four times to teach an IUPUI summer course on the geography of Cuba, most recently this past summer with another class in Spanish. Following three weeks of intensive pre-departure study at IUPUI, we traveled to Cuba in June by a U.S.-licensed charter flight for 16 days of field study focusing on Cuba’s landscapes and culture.

Our first stop was Havana, especially Old Havana, a UNESCO World Heritage site being restored after decades of neglect. Before the Revolution, Havana was notorious as a sinful American playground, rife with corruption, gambling, and prostitution. The Revolution in effect turned its back on the city until 1990, when the collapse of its Soviet patrons forced it to welcome foreign tourists once again as a source of foreign exchange. The old city is now being painstakingly and beautifully refurbished, in hopes of attracting tourists more dedicated to history and culture than drinking and gambling.

On the last day there, geography students sallied forth to make field observations for a course project tracing the evolution of Old Havana’s landscape from colonial times to the present day. They rode downtown in cheap taxis—the famous old American cars Cubans call *almendrones* for their resemblance to big almonds—and crisscrossed Old Havana in small groups on foot. Their task was to visit not only the tourist zone but the poor, overcrowded neighborhoods surrounding it, to record relevant details of period architecture and landscaping and to query residents about the nature of daily life in the past and now in the hard times brought by the collapse of the Soviet Union. They worked well together, some contributing their knowledge of Spanish, others their expertise in cultural and physical geography, and others their photographic skills.

The rest of our time was divided among three multiday field trips: to the tobacco region of western Cuba; to the mountains, cane fields, and colonial cities of central Cuba (Sancti Spiritus, Trinidad, and Cienfuegos); and to the coastal tourist mecca of Varadero. We rode in two small buses and made frequent roadside stops (in tropical sun, bugs, and occasional rain) to discuss items of special interest: the karst towers and caves of western Cuba, the remnant...
WHAT DID THE STUDENTS LEARN IN CUBA?

The students certainly saw the problems brought by 50 years of a dictatorial command economy and overreliance on Soviet assistance. On the other hand, they learned that the roots of Cuba’s economic woes reach deeper than the revolution, to Spanish colonialism and American neo-imperialism. They also saw many things to admire: mountains, tropical forests, colonial streets, and gorgeous beaches. They found that Cubans enjoy some benefits that Americans do not, such as free health care and free education. Some must have mused, at least for a moment, about what it would be like to finish college with no student loan debt. Above all, they learned that Cuba is a much more complicated place than is usually portrayed in U.S. media. Practically everything written about Cuba in the United States is polemical, intended to tell the reader which side of a two-sided “reality” is the right one. The virtue of a field course such as this is that students can learn for themselves.