

Report of experiences

Project: Developing Sustainability

Location: Santa Clara, Cuba

10/2009 – 03/2010

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Preparation

Language and Culture

Before I went to Cuba, I spent two semesters in Spain. So it wasn't almost necessary to prepare again for my stay in Cuba. If you don't have any Spanish language experience I recommend at least the first three Spanish classes. Because of the Cuban- Russian History almost only the Students and the people who are working at the university or other people that have business connections to international concerns have English experience. Therefore, the life outside the university it is necessary to speak Spanish!

After my arrival, I thought that the Cuban accent is similar to other Latin American accents but it's more like the accent, which is spoken in the south of Spain.

Host country, university and subject

To inform myself about Cuba and the university, I just read some stuff in the internet and bought a guide. But I don't advise you to do that before you arrive there. Just a few things are really necessary to now:

- Money: It's only possible to get money by credit cards! The most common Credit Card is Visa. During my stay, there was some kind of leak in the system of Master and Visa. So they changed the customer's credit cards. If this happens when you are in Cuba, try to get as much money as you can. Four out of seven European Students weren't able to get money. So I would therefore recommend to take two different cards with you.
- Electric Socket: it's the same like in America

All the other stuffs like crime rate, etc.: it's not like the guides say. So that part was not helpful.

We prepared the subject in Oldenburg. But it's always hard to manage that with every participator. I think the biggest problem is that you are not able to talk directly or by phone with the members in Cuba. So it always takes a long time to communicate. It doesn't matter if you are in Germany or in Cuba.

Formalities

If it's possible, try to get a University Visa in Germany. It very time-consuming, but you have a better status in the Cuban culture. If there is no way to get it here, just buy you the tourist visa and change it in Cuba. One option is to buy it directly at the embassy, easier is to buy it at the airport.

To change the kind of visa in Cuba, you need to be inscribed in the university, you need a permanent accommodation (legal!), money and four small pictures. After three weeks you get the new visa.

With this, you can travel and pay the prices (f.e. the entrance of museums) like a Cuban, this saves a lot of money!!

Accommodation / Arrival

The legal way to stay in Cuba is very expensive. There is no possibility to rent a flat like in Europe, so you have to stay in a Casa Particular (like Bed & Breakfast) or in a hotel. I tried to manage my accommodation before I went with one of my advisers in Santa Clara. But when I arrived, the Casa didn't exist. I think the better way is: go without any accommodation to Cuba, spend one week to search and negotiate! There are a few Casas which are willing to lower the price if you stay one or more months .

Every town in Cuba has more or less fixed prices. They vary in high and low season. In the whole country exists a price area between 5 € and 30 € depending on the season. During the high season in Santa Clara the cost per day is approximately 20 € inclusive breakfast, in the low season less 5 €.

There is only one possibility to lower the costs. If your host university has a student exchange contract with the guest university, you are able to stay at the campus. In that case, you share a room with at least two other people. But you have to remember, that the conditions of the apartments are very bad.

When I arrived to Cuba I stayed my first three days in Havana. To go by Taxi to the center you have to pay 15 € or more. Depending on your ability to negotiate. While you are traveling like a tourist there are two possibilities to travel to your final destination. By bus with Viazul, the Cuban tourist transportation medium, or by taxi. If you are a bigger group, the last of the two options is more comfortable and faster. The pricing is more or less the same, about 15 € per person to Santa Clara. If you arrive with a student visa, you can already travel like a Cuban. Then you pay just 2 €!

Experiences at the host university

Studying / Working

It's almost impossible to study or work at home. If you rent a cheap hotel, there is no space. If you live in a Casa, normally there are 4 or 5 people living in the same house. Because of the thin walls, there is no chance to concentrate on your work. Furthermore there are no laws to regulate the loudness of music: Cubans love music, they love loud music.

So the best way is to go to the university. If you are like a Student in Cuba, you only have the rights of a Student. That means that you don't have a permanent place to stay in a laboratory. The only chance to work at a computer, sometimes with internet, is during the night. In my case it was a little bit different. I already had my graduation of bachelor. For that reason I was registered like an external professor. I obtained the right to stay at the room of the professors, if there was a free chair. For sure, the local professors had a higher priority.

After my first week I stayed the first day at the laboratory of the professors. I carried my own laptop, so there was no problem to find a place. Just in the case you like to use the internet, it will be a little bit complicated. To change my visa into a permanent, it took three weeks. Without that, you are not able to register at the university. Without registration, there is no chance to get access to the internet. If you like to use your own laptop to surf the Internet, it needs additional time. So if you add all the waiting time: it took five weeks to get internet access at the computers who are installed. Three weeks more to get access with your own notebook.

Expect for the factor of the internet, there is no problem to get a place to work, the other professors are amiable and willing to help. Some of them also speak English.

Everyday life at university

If you are not participating at classes, you can spend your time at the university almost flexible. There are no rules for entering the laboratory. If you have good connections to the concierge you can get the key to enter also if there are no other professors working. Fridays for example the normal professors are leaving at noon the university. So it's helpful to get in contact with him.

For lunch there are different possibilities. You can eat for free at the cafeteria, but the quality of the food is very bad. There are a few restaurants at the campus who offer better food and you can also buy the most popular food of Cuba: a mini pizza.

Project

Support of you supervisor/mentor/coordinator

I met my supervisor before I went to Cuba. He stayed several time at my host university. When I arrived to Santa Clara he picked me up at the bus station and helped to find a accommodation. As I already mentioned, it is better to look by yourself. Mostly it's cheaper.

My supervisor preferred to talk in English, just for practice. He helped me in every step, with all the organization stuff like visa, registration etc.

Sometimes it was not hard, but complicated to reach him. In Europe we are accustomed to have internet at home or a mobile phone. So you have to adapt you to the Cuban way of live: everything takes little time. If he says "we meet up at 11", sometimes it will be three hours later. But except of that, he was always present and helped a lot!

Contact and work with teachers and students

To get in contact with other teacher was without any problem. We shared a laboratory together. It is normal that you prefer to get in contact with people of your age. In my case: other students. I participated a class of the master studies to get in touch with them, but the most master students just have monthly one week at the university and three weeks at their company.

I met up some other exchange students who already lived some months in Santa Clara. They told me, that they needed more or less to months to get in touch with Cuban students, while they visited classes. With this connection I got also contact to Cuban students.

Progress of your work/studies also with regard to the project's main aspects

At the beginning we needed to change my topic. We discovered at the first meeting, that the content we planed was not realizable. My plan was to start with my master thesis, but because of impossible feasibility we had to change the subject. So I spend a lot of time to figure out a adequate theme.

My supervisor helped me a lot and after a while we defined the new subject and I started with my work. My biggest problem was the kind of studying. In the past I preferred to use the internet to build a overview of literature. That was almost impossible in Cuba. I had great luck - my supervisor had a big compilation of eBooks, so it was possible to make process with my work.

experiences outside the university

Language and Culture

Because of the history of Cuba, most people outside the university are just speaking Spanish and sometimes Russian. In my case there was no problem because I spend one year in Spain. But without that previous knowledge it is very hard to communicate. Also the owner of the Casas, who has the from most contact to tourist, are not able to speak English. At the other hand, it's helpful to improve your Spanish.

Accommodation, travelling, formalities, money matters

I spend one month for travelling. To visit the whole country you need more time. Because I lived in Santa Clara like a tourist, there is no different between your cost while you are travelling. Because of the student visa, I was able to travel like a Cuban. It's mostly just a trickle of the tourist prices.

I advise to buy a travel guide to get information about Cuba. I think it doesn't make sense to talk about that part, because the interests are quite different. The only places to visit I like to mention :

- Havana
- Santiago de Cuba
- Baracoa
- Pinar del Rio

There are a lot more of interesting places , but in my case they were the best!

Last name, first name: Droste, Rainer

Home university: Universität Oldenburg

Host university: Universidad Santa Clara

Host country: Cuba

Subject:

Duration of your stay (day, month, year): 4 months

Type of stay (studies, research, internship): studies / research

I agree that my email address can be given to prospective exchange students within the project:

Yes, Email address

rainer.droste@uni-oldenburg.de

No

I agree that this report on my experiences abroad within the project Developing Sustainability may be published on the project's homepage.

Yes

No

Date, Signature: 16.06.2010

R. Droste