

THIS BEAUTIFUL EARTH: PHOTO ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA BLUE SKIES OVER CUBA

Rising columns of massive clouds — stately as an armada of tall ships with white sails — floated in the blue skies. In the distance lay the Caribbean Ocean, and the sweeping panorama of Havana spread out 460 feet below.

After presenting a wreath at the statue of José Martí, I took an elevator to the observation deck atop the José Martí Memorial, built in honor of this hero of Cuban independence. From there, I could see the whole city.

The Cuban Minister of Culture, Armando Hart Dávalos, encouraged me with a smile to take as many pictures as I wished. In his words I sensed Cuba's new confidence.

It was unthinkable in the past for a visitor to photograph the area surrounding the Memorial, the heart of the Cuban government where the ministries of Defense, Internal Affairs, and Communication as well as Communist Party Headquarters are located. The Memorial stood majestically in the Revolution Square, at the center of Havana.

June 25, 1996. The Caribbean sun was hot, full of energy. When I presented a wreath, the sun's glaring rays reflected off the marble statue scattered in the Square. The José Martí Memorial Hall, just built in the beginning of that year, is located underground, beneath the tower. Inside we viewed various items and works of Jose Martí. One hundred years passed since his death.

He continued to live, however, in the hearts of the people. It was as he once wrote: "Death is a lie when one has worked well in life. The thinking skull turns to dust, but its thoughts live forever and bear fruit" (Carlos Ripoll, *José Martí: Doctrines, Maxims and Aphorisms*; a bilingual anthology with a concordance, p. 94). Cuban President Fidel Castro told the Cuban people that if it took 100 years to win their struggle, he would fight with them for 100 years. In fact, he said, they had already been fighting for 100 years!

Jose Martí said: "My future is like the light of white charcoal that burns within me to illuminate my surroundings. I feel that my struggles will never cease" (*José Martí: Obras Completas*, vol. 20, p. 459; translated from Spanish). He fought and died for Cuban independence from Spain and to win freedom and equality from the giant to the north, the United States.

"There are men who do not tire, when their people tire; and they decide to fight before the people do..." (*José Martí: Obras Completas*, vol. 18, p. 305).

Jose Martí remained true to his own words.

Just as Jose Martí did, Cuba has continued its struggle. Around the time of my visit, the country seemed to be facing difficulties more than ever. The U.S. economic embargo on Cuba had been in place for decades since the Revolution of 1959. Meanwhile, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's important ally, the economy had plunged deep into recession. To make matters worse, "Cuba bashing" had renewed its strength, and rather one-sided anti-Castro propaganda intensified.

This is precisely why I decided to travel to Cuba.

From the observatory of the José Martí Memorial, I could see the red brick roofs of the Palacio de la Revolución, Palace of the Revolution, below. That night, I talked with President Castro there. Standing 6 feet 2 inches tall, his stature is manly, but his air unassuming. His friendliness seemed to make it easy for people to call out to him as a fellow countryman.

The once young revolutionary was nearing 70. I noticed the gray streaking his trademark beard.

“You have really struggled and endured,” I said, deeply moved by his presence. This began our dialogue, our unhurried discussion of the future. Despite his age, he is a man who never shows fatigue. He firmly believes that having once stood up for his revolutionary cause, were he to complain even the slightest, he would be going against all that he had fought for.

In speaking with him, I conveyed my respect for his efforts while being straightforward in asking him about his successors, global arms reduction, prominent Americans who support his cause, increasing cultural exchanges between Cuba and Japan, and many other topics.

I am a Buddhist, and as a practitioner of Buddhism, I have no anti-U.S. or anti-Cuban sentiments in my heart. My sole concern is that the people living in these countries become happy. As long as we share the fundamental goal of peace, then I firmly believe that we should seek possibilities for humanitarian solidarity with any nation.

Being frank with the president, I said: “Politics are no more than a technique to help people become happy; socialism, too, is merely a means to the same end. These things are comparable to a runway. After a plane has lifted off the runway, it may encounter turbulence. While facing this tumultuous reality, the plane must be capable of carrying its passengers, the people, to their destination. What is necessary during such times of turbulence is the wisdom to fill the gap between harsh reality and the ideals, or destination, one is aiming for.”

Our dialogue was at times intense and at times amiable, but it was a dialogue enveloped in friendship from beginning to end. I was deeply impressed with his warm hospitality.

From the observatory of the Memorial, I caught a glimpse of the green of trees beyond the rooftops of the Palace of the Revolution. Further beyond lay state-owned land farmed by residents, among whom economic competition was encouraged. I could see how this country was steadily transforming.

Cuba was facing a multitude of challenges. While trying to improve the economy, how should the country continue to pursue the humane ideals of the revolution, to live and struggle alongside the most impoverished people? How would they build a society rich with both material and spiritual wealth, without being poisoned by the worship of money and wealth overtaking the world at an alarming pace?

Because of its system of public education, Cuba’s literacy rate is nearly 100 percent. Free public health care is available to everyone. The average life expectancy is comparable to that of developed countries. Above all, there is a noble sense of idealism in this country, of which material wealth is no measure.

There are those who criticize Cuba based solely on what they see of its economy.

Is it too critical of me to say that such people only expose the inadequacy of their view of humanity while remaining blind to Cuba’s real character?

A young Martí once said: “One seeks the origin of the evil and goes directly to it, with the force of man capable of dying for man. The egotistical do not know of that light...” (*José Martí: Obras Completas*, vol. 2, p. 377).

This is a country of great pride. The people, knowing that money isn’t everything in life, are cheerful and confident.

Their brightness matches that of the blue skies of this tropical country.

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Twenty-four in a series