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From Cuba with Love

By Jenny Chen '12

The streets of Havana are a patchwork of antique cars, peeling historic buildings in cotton candy colors, and the crackling sounds of sizzling *chicharritas de platano* (fried plantains) on the grills of street vendors.

It's the city that Carey Powers '14 fell in love with when she was just 9 years old, when she was visiting the city with her family while her dad studied the Cuban medical system. Thirteen years later Powers is back, working with Cuba Educational Travel at one of the most exciting moments in Cuban history.

Cuba is the only country in the world that Americans can't visit as regular tourists. These restrictions date to the Cold War, when President Kennedy instituted a travel ban after Cuba began hosting nuclear weapons provided by the Soviet Union.

In December 2014, President Barack Obama announced a new course for Cuba-America relations, and restrictions were eased allowing Americans to travel to Cuba for humanitarian, research, or educational purposes. Powers helps facilitate those trips by obtaining permits, planning educational excursions, and booking hotels and restaurants.

The last bit has gotten trickier since Obama signed the agreement to restore diplomatic relations. American tourists have flooded Cuba, many wanting to see the country before it "modernizes" (though Powers points out that Cuba has been changing all along). Still, booking hotel rooms and making restaurant reservations can

be a capricious process—you never know what the prices are going to be, and you never know what is going to be available.

For Powers it's a dream job. She's at home around the small vendors and chatting with locals in the *casas particulares* (Cuban bed and breakfasts). At Colby, Powers majored in global studies with a Latin American concentration, and she wrote every paper she could on Cuba, even for classes that had nothing to do with Cuba. (She once wrote on Catholicism in Cuba for a gender and religion class.) The Cuban American literature she read with Allen Family Professor of Latin American Literature Jorge Olivares still rattles around in her head as she walks the streets of Havana.

Cuba has changed dramatically since Powers visited in 2003 and when she studied abroad there in 2012, she said.

Because jobs in the tourist industry are becoming more lucrative than jobs like doctor or professor, many young intellectuals are leaving the country to apply their skills elsewhere. In response, the Cuban government imposed new laws requiring doctors to wait five years and forfeit all benefits. But that isn't deterring the nearly half a million Cuban doctors who have traveled to other countries on "personal business," she said.

In addition, warming relations have many young Cubans worrying that the American government will no longer give Cubans preferential immigration status. Many are hustling to get to



America before that happens. Powers says many of the Cuban friends she met while studying abroad have already left the country.

Despite these issues, Powers maintains, Cuba has its bright spots. The Cuban government provides a quality university education (the best in Latin America, according to a World Bank study) and supports a vibrant arts scene. She hopes that Americans who visit will gain a more nuanced view of the island nation.

The Cuban-American literature she read with Jorge Olivares still rattles around in her head as she walks the streets of Havana.

"I know I'm doing a good job when [Americans] tell me that Cuba is so complicated," Powers said. "And these are like older people. It's so neat to see grandmothers start to get obsessed with something I've been obsessed with since I was nine."