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## JBJ Special Report: For Cubans, business, life aren't easy

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In Cuba, the typical business person doesn't wear a suit.

In fact, you'll be hard-pressed to find anyone wearing a suit in Cuba — perhaps because of the island's seemingly-endless summer, perhaps indicative of the country's strange, upside-down business climate.

Earlier this month, I traveled to Cuba for two weeks as part of a study-abroad program. We spent time in Havana, the western countryside of Viñales and Soroa, across to the Bay of Pigs and to Trinidad. We spoke with ordinary Cubans — farmers, tattoo artists, journalists, artists, musicians, boxing coaches and taxi drivers — to get a sense of what life is like in Cuba.

Hardly anyone in Cuba has an easy life, especially when it comes to business. The average wage in Cuba is \$30 a month, which leaves many searching for ways to make an extra buck, often in a non-traditional way.

There are some jobs in Cuba that don't even exist in the U.S. In many cities we went, people carrying trash bags filled with empty plastic water bottles pestered tourists to give them their bottles, empty or not: There isn't organized recycling in Cuba, so the collectors will grab what they can to sell them later on.

On one street corner in Old Havana, a younger man stood alongside a few cages filled with puppies, looking to sell them to passersby.

And since new mattresses are often too expensive for most Cubans to buy, a few have taken up refilling old mattresses with new material — a lot cheaper than buying a new one.

Bathroom attendants are used in the U.S., but not in the same way they're used in Cuba. You'll see them at gas stations holding toilet paper in exchange for a tip, the equivalent of roughly 25 cents.

And at the Mural de la Prehistoria in Viñales, a man trained his cow to do a few tricks and offered rides on it to visitors, who were mostly tourists.

Tourism remains a great source for Cubans to make extra money: Taxi drivers cart tourists around in anything from a 1950s Ford to a two-seat bicycle cab. With tips, they do pretty well; full-time taxi drivers can make more than doctors.



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A lot of business — especially in Havana and Trinidad, two cities that have capitalized on tourism — is targeted at visitors. In Trinidad, locals will set up souvenir shops along the streets. Inside, handmade gifts and trinkets are for sale. In a few we visited, the back wall of the store, rather than having a solid wall there were a line of curtains separating the shop from the back of the building. Peek past the curtains, and the shop owner's home and family is hidden behind.

Those with more typical jobs in Cuba still face tremendous difficulties. For one, anyone who needs WiFi will find it difficult to access. One group of independent journalists have to work out of a public park with a WiFi hotspot since getting a private WiFi connection is nearly impossible.

But still, the WiFi connection is just one of the many difficult aspects of an independent journalist's job. Technically, independently run news outlets are illegal in Cuba, but since the government doesn't strictly patrol the internet, a handful of organizations have cropped up, taking advantage of that. But since they're illegal, they can't advertise their publications well and spreading the word about their work proves difficult. One of the blogs relies on their friends and relatives in the U.S. to share their work on Facebook and hope that those in Cuba see it that way.

The independent journalists we spoke with said their industry wouldn't even exist without President Barack Obama's normalization of relations with Cuba.

Nevertheless, they still face many challenges.

"Cuba's trying to change," one of the independent journalists told us. "The government I think is trying to change, not the speed that we want, but it's trying to change."

More change may soon be possible for Cubans. Cuban President Raul Castro announced he would retire in 2018 and a new leader would step in.

Real, substantial change, however, is likely a long way off. Until then, Cubans will keep doing what they need to get by, whether it be selling puppies on the street or trading toilet paper for a few pesos.

A "normal" business climate in Cuba may never exist, and maybe that's OK: It's too hot to wear a suit in Cuba anyway.

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