

## In Rural Cuba, a Slow Road to Progress

Outside Havana, Scarcity of Cars Makes Horse-Drawn Buggies the Way to Go

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CASILDA, Cuba -- Tiny flames jump and sputter in the night here, suspended above the roadbed as if held by an invisible wand.

The uninitiated must pull up close on these unlighted roads to realize that the flames are leaping from small buckets that dangle from wires on the backside of horse-drawn buggies. In the near absence of passenger cars, these buggies serve as taxis and local buses in rural areas of Cuba, and the flaming buckets function as homemade taillights.

Countless chroniclers of Cuba have observed that the vintage American cars in Havana -- the fabulous, hulking Buicks and finned Chryslers -- make the capital feel like a city frozen in the 1950s. But outside Havana, in the vast expanse of the Caribbean's largest island, the ambiance often leans more toward the 1850s.

The roads are there. It's just that the cars aren't.

In the 4 1/2 decades since Fidel Castro's 1959 victory, small-town Cubans have watched the cars that once lined their avenues cough and gasp and eventually die, not to be replaced. What remains are mostly vehicles that Castro's government considers essential to the country's development -- heavy trucks to haul workers and equipment to state-run farms and tractors to till the fields and drag bundles of cut sugar cane.

Transportation is a huge problem throughout the island, even in Havana, where many of the vehicles still on the road are connected to state-run tourism or government activities. Hitchhikers are everywhere, and people wait hours to ride oversize buses that seem to break down as often as they run.

Supporters of Castro blame the U.S. trade embargo for the transportation woes and especially for the dearth of personal cars. Cuba makes no cars of its own. Non-U.S. automakers that might normally be eager to ship vehicles and replacement parts to the island are hampered because of U.S. trade rules. Ships are prohibited from entering U.S. ports for six months after making deliveries to Cuba, effectively blocking access for those companies to the world's largest market.

Castro's critics view the situation differently, blaming the failings of Cuba's economic policies after years of communist rule. The government's weak financial position makes it impossible for it to place large enough orders to overcome the limitations created by the trade embargo.

Either way, the result is that Irela Estela, a dermatologist who might have glided home in a sleek European sedan in another country, waited under a shade tree one recent afternoon for the clop-clop of horses' hooves. Estela, who says with a wink that she is "thirty-something," is among the growing number of Cubans who were born after Castro's revolution 47 years ago and know no other Cuba. Like so many of her contemporaries, she has never owned a car, and she seldom rides in one.

Her eyes tilted upward at the familiar crack of a rein on horsehide, a sound that meant she could finally start home for lunch. Up the street, in the humid shimmer of a scorching afternoon, a brown Creole nag bobbed toward her.

The nag plodded so slowly that a youth on a bicycle buzzed past. Estela waited, arms crossed, for the sleepy-eyed horse. Its name, curiously, was Speedy.

The 1 1/4-mile ride to Casilda from Trinidad, a beautifully preserved colonial-era town about five hours southeast of Havana by car, costs Estela about 5 cents. Not much, yes. But then again, the government pays her only about \$30 a month for her work, treating the sunburns and bug bites that afflict European and Canadian tourists at nearby beach resorts.

Speedy seldom hauls the tourists. His owner, a part-time pig farmer named Ernesto Vuelta Ortega, sighs when he sees tourists whiz past on funny, chauffeur-driven scooters covered by bright yellow, egg-shaped shells. The scooter ride from the beach into town costs almost \$5 -- a pittance for vacationers but a fortune for the average Cuban.

"Yes, that's for the rich folks," Vuelta Ortega said.

He said he remembers gazing at the big cars in Trinidad when he was growing up in the early days of Castro's rule. He was sure he'd own one someday. But it never happened. The cars slowly disappeared, and Vuelta Ortega just laughed when he grew up and people tried to sell him barely functioning, or even inoperable, antique vehicles for \$10,000 or more -- the average amount a Cuban would earn over 27 years.

A new car was out of the question. Cubans need government permission to buy new cars, which usually go to government agencies or to people involved in tourism and development, and almost no one outside those lines of work can afford one if they could get permission.

Vuelta Ortega long ago veered toward the horse and buggy. Today, years later, he knows everything that happens in Casilda. His passengers chat with him as he takes them to weddings and funerals, scoops them up sobbing and red-faced after lovers' quarrels or deposits them at work.

Far from complaining, many of his passengers seem to have embraced their 1800s-style transportation system. The leisurely ride fits the slow tempo of their lives, even though most say they would jump at the chance to own a car.

"This ride always clears my mind," a paunchy man named Sergio Ramirez said as he shuffled bags at his feet.

Behind Vuelta Ortega, the passengers sat on the wooden benches beneath his buggy's sun screen. A man with a lined face showed off a bag of flip-flops that he had picked up in town for 3 cents apiece. Another flipped a banana tree stalk that he'd found on the side of the road and was planning to feed to the pig that lives in his back yard.

A few minutes later, a woman at the side of the road waved one hand frantically at Vuelta Ortega as she clutched a young daughter's hand with the other. Maria Rodriguez Valdepena hopped aboard, rubbing her scraped right elbow.

A few weeks ago, she was going to splurge on a ride in a car taxi -- simply *la maquina*, or the machine, in local parlance. But the only one that runs to the nearby town of Sancti Spiritus -- the one that leaves just once a day -- was broken down as usual. She hitched a ride on a flatbed truck, but the railing broke halfway there and she tumbled to the roadside.

No more transportation involving engines for her, she said. From now on, she'll stick with Speedy.