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HAVANA,----- A country of incredible spiritual and dramatic character, Cuba is like a tense actor waiting in the wings.

At the same time, a potentially enormous audience of American travelers awaits the chance to explore this Caribbean island less than 100 miles south of the Florida Keys. Cuba has been closed to U.S. tourists for 30 years by our government's trade embargo against Fidel Castro's Communist regime.

The embargo was tightened in October when President Bush signed the Cuban Democracy Act, despite protests from Canada and Mexico that the law dictated foreign policy to them. The bill's sponsor, Rep. Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.), describes it as a bid to expedite the Castro's demise - and the measure has the support of President-elect Bill Clinton.

Castro doesn't seem to have many cards left as he struggles for survival. Cuba's trading partners are almost all played out following the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Since the advent of the New World Order, the Tennessee-size island has lost 85 percent of its trade and aid. But as long as Castro retains power, he still holds the script - and tourism dollars are part of Cuba's present and future scenario.

"I expect Cuba to become a major, major destination for Americans," says Margaret Zellers, who writes the authoritative Fielding's Caribbean guide. "The country is fascinating and the people are wonderful. The island has some of the Caribbean's most spectacular beaches. And the pricing is very attractive."

At this year's Seatrade Cruise Shipping '92 Conference in Miami Beach, a research firm predicted that Cuba will become the world's No. 1 cruise destination, with more than 2.4 million passengers visiting the island annually within five to 10 years of Castro's fall. The Port of Miami has proposed constructing a downtown port annex for the cruise lines and a Miami-Havana ferry service.

Canadians and European tourists are already exploring some of Cuba's 4,500 miles of coastline, especially Varadero Beach in Matanzas Province - roughly three hours from Havana. Now the focal point of Cuban tourism development, Varadero Beach in the 1920s was the playground for American industrialist Irenee Du Pont. He built a complex called Xanadu that included a nine-hole golf course (now open to the public), a very loud organ room and a landing dock for his yacht and seaplane.

A new generation of U.S. business operators is lining up in anticipation of Castro's tumble. McDonald's reportedly has 30 letters on file from potential franchisers who

want to serve McHemingways in Cuba.

The Radisson Hotel chain plans to operate at least one hotel outside of Havana, pending approval from Washington. Just two months ago, 100 entrepreneurs heard of potential Cuban investment opportunities at a Chicago conference co-sponsored by Jorge Mas Canosa, a noted Cuban exile businessman who some see as a potential leader of a New World Cuba.

It has been 500 years since Christopher Columbus sighted Cuba on his first voyage of discovery. Columbus, according to a 1927 booklet, wrote back to Ferdinand and Isabella: "All my men declare that there could be no land more beautiful. Now therefore, I am silent, for I realize that all I might say would be too little. I assure Your Majesties, that in my belief, there can not be better lands under the sun."

I have been to Cuba three times, most recently last year when I went to Havana with Sun-Times photographer Bob Black. It can be complicated for a U.S. citizen to go to Cuba. Visas are granted on several levels (relatives, researchers, government officials on business, journalists), and most have to be approved by the U.S. Treasury Department. I've gone to write features on music, baseball and tourism - things Cubans are mighty proud of. On our most recent visit, we were denied access to a Havana bicycle factory because we didn't have the proper visa. That story could have been too controversial by pointing out Cuba's crippling fuel crunch.

The 45-minute flight from Miami to Havana is compelling. Passengers fly on maverick airlines such as Haiti Trans Air and there are only certain days and times when U.S. air space is granted for flights.

Most of the passengers are not researchers, government officials or journalists; they are older Cuban-Americans visiting relatives. They carry on tattered bags and suitcases bulging with soap, soft toilet paper, cosmetics, lotion - and especially medicine. These items that many Americans take for granted are hard to come by in Cuba, thanks to the U.S. embargo and the end of Soviet-bloc support.

The first time I flew to Havana, two nurses pushed aboard an 80-year-old woman in a wheelchair. Her head was down, her frail body was bent like an old twig in a summer storm. She was going home to die.

Cuba is a country defined by self-reliance. Despite a per-capita income of less than \$1,500, the rich commonality among the 10.7 million Cubans is found in the expressive flair of their art, their food, their political beliefs - and most of all in the uncompromising spirit in their eyes. I have never seen passion any purer.

The eyes lead a stranger through the two Havanas - old and new.

New Havana looks like portions of New York City, circa 1959, the year Castro's

popular guerrilla movement took power. It is frozen in time. It looks like the scene from "Godfather II" on the eve of Castro's New Year's Day triumph.

Cubans fortunate enough to have cars drive late-1950s Buicks, Chevrolets, Chryslers and a few Russian compacts. The staff at the Habana Libre hotel (formerly the Hilton) still wear faded blue Hilton jackets. Swinging Glenn Miller and Bobby Darin tunes are played poolside at the hotel.

I immediately discovered tourist apartheid at the Habana Libre. I was able to buy expensive cigars, American soft drinks and toiletries with U.S. dollars. Although the hotel shops are staffed by Cubans, they are off limits to their compatriots who lack foreign currency. Such "tourist" stores have plate-glass windows with drawn curtains that prevent passersby from checking out the merchandise.

A short walk from the Habana Libre down to the Malecon, the seafront drive along the Atlantic Ocean, takes a visitor past crumbling buildings that once were American businesses. There are potholes in the streets. Under Castro, the mission has been to develop the rest of the country at the expense of big cities like Havana and Santiago. You can still sense where a Woolworth's was in New Havana, except that lines are three and four deep for an apportioned menu at a stark lunch counter.

The Malecon illustrates Cuba's connections with the United States. Several memorials to Abraham Lincoln still stand, because many Cubans consider black slaves as part of their heritage. U.S. currency is accepted in New Havana. It is not in Old Havana.

The new blends into old along the Malecon. Old Havana was founded in 1515, which makes it one of the New World's oldest cities. The heart of Old Havana is a Spanish castle that is now the Museum of the City of Havana. The castle is topped with a bronze weather vane in the likeness of Dona Ines de Bobadilla, Cuba's first woman governor. In 1539, she replaced her husband Hernando de Soto as he took off to conquer Florida.

Legend has it that Dona Ines could be seen gazing out to sea, looking for the ship that would bring her husband home. Her noble image is replicated all over Cuba, from the tops of swizzle sticks in hotel bars to the labeling on bottles of fine Cuban rum.

The streets of Old Havana are dark, narrow and dirty. The 100-block area is the most densely populated place in Cuba, with roughly 112,000 residents. Some pockets of Old Havana resemble rundown portions of New Orleans' French Quarter. Ernest Hemingway rented rooms in Old Havana before purchasing his country home in 1939 about 12 miles east of the city. (It is now a museum, preserved just as it was when he last stayed shortly before his suicide in 1961.)

Pesos are used in Old Havana, and kids will relentlessly hassle a tourist for exchange. You are liable to be arrested if caught exchanging money.

That didn't stop me from giving kids baseball cards. On my first trip here, I made friends with several youngsters who were playing stickball in front of the former Presidential Palace (now the Museum of the Revolution). I thought it was important for them to have pictures of Don Zimmer, then the Cubs' manager, so I handed out wrapped packages of baseball cards. The kids weren't as interested in the cards as they were in the bubble gum.

One of the most common questions I get after a visit to Havana was if I was "followed." On each trip, I have been able to move around freely and without a great deal of apprehension. To be sure, I have encountered the anti-imperialist attitude conveyed through billboards that read Socialismo o Muerte! ("Socialism or Death!") as well as through conversation.

For example, Black and I met a couple of attractive Cuban women who took us to a dimly lit jazz club that served funky rum on the outskirts of Havana. We talked in remedial Spanish. They asked us where we were from. We said we were from the States. They looked at each other, snarled and pounded their chests in the manner of a ferocious bear.

I don't think it was the rum.

As you learn more about Havana residents, you discover their urgent desire to share ideas and dreams with the rest of the world. Early last year, I received a tattered letter from Jesus Bran Suarez, a twentysomething baseball fan I'd met at the Estadio Latinoamericano in Havana. We had divided our time at the stadium talking about baseball, music and his newly born son.

"Did you see the Grammy Awards ceremony?" he wrote. "They played some six winners on TV here. It was great!!! Mainly M.C. Hammer. Give all my love and desire to Sinead O'Connor and Mariah Carey. They're just what I need, but don't tell them that, they might begin to have funny ideas about me and I'm married."

Then he added: "Remember, don't hesitate to tell me the way to be helpful to you."

On the stadium field, baseball players told me how they played for pride and "inner spirit" by representing their provinces in cross-country competition. But their eyes glowed when they talked about testing their considerable skills against international competition in the Olympics.

In a similar vein, Cuban musicians want as many people as possible to dance to their compelling rhythms. A lack of commercialism enhances the creative process here, resulting in the vibrant release heard in Cuban music, film, art and literature.

For the last 21 years, writer Ester deValle Campello has worked in the gift shop at the historic Tropicana nightclub, where "Fidel," as Cubans call him, is known to drop in now and then. (The Cuban government lavishly remodeled in 1990.)

Ester is a graduate of the University of Havana, where she studied American, English and Spanish literature. She's a huge fan of William Shakespeare. She works at the Tropicana from 8 p.m. until 4 a.m. six nights a week selling programs, cassette tapes and cigars. She writes during the day.

"I write about lives, I write about people and events," she said. "I want to know about people. I'd like to know how they think, how they are, how they meet. I would love to travel. But Cubans never go anywhere."

If and when Cuba becomes a free society, the rest of the world - especially neighboring America - should prepare to open their hearts and minds for some of the most prodigious expression this generation has heard. And American travelers should welcome the opportunity to explore a neighboring culture that has been virtually closed to them for a third of a century.