

# GPS students make historical trip to Cuba



**A tradition following the School’s winter quarter course on Cuba, GPS students travelled to Cuba for spring break—and it couldn’t have been better timed**

By Sarah Pfladderer | GPS News



While the stereotypical spring breakers throughout the U.S. fled to far-flung destinations to absorb sun and fun, Sophie Silvestri experienced something far more breathtaking.

“When we approached the plaza in Old Havana and saw an American flag hanging

next to a Cuban flag, I will never forget that,” reminisced the 2016 [MAS-IA](#) candidate at the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS).

Silvestri and 15 classmates traveled to Cuba, the Latin American country now thawing relations with the U.S., March 18-25 as an informal conclusion to their winter quarter course Cuba: Revolution and Reform, taught by Professor [Richard Feinberg](#). A tradition in its fifth year, this trip couldn’t have occurred at a better time. After all, students said, they had a front-row seat to history in the making.

## **Immersing in the culture, celebrating rekindled relations**

Their stay overlapped with President Barack Obama’s official state visit, the first to Cuba by a sitting U.S. president in more than 80 years. It also coincided with a baseball game between the Cuban National Team and Tampa Bay Rays—the first Major League Baseball team to play in Cuba since 1999—and a free concert in Havana by the Rolling Stones, the band’s first-ever performance in the country after decades of western rock music forbidden by the government.

Mariana Lopez, 2017 MAS-IA candidate, said they could “breathe in” the Cuban people’s identity and pride everywhere.

“The immediate connection with Cuban people could be felt in every corner,” Lopez said, noting how Cuban and American flags flew alongside one another off of balconies and on taxi dashboards. “The atmosphere and spirit in Havana at the time of Obama’s visit was very positive, yet mixed with uncertainty. People were—and are still—hoping to see changes coming soon.”

The principal architect of the 1994 Miami Summit of the Americas during the President Bill Clinton administration, Feinberg is a former diplomat, policy adviser and corporate consultant. He is a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, authoring three reports assessing Cuba's economic reforms on foreign investment, the country's private enterprise and the emergence of its middle class. For Brookings, Feinberg recounted his sense that Obama's visit has the potential to give average Cubans a greater voice in determining their own national destiny. He touches on this more in his forthcoming book, ["Open for Business,"](#) slated for release later this year.



Amid engaging in the excitement over Obama's visit, GPS students stuck to an agenda that built on what they learned in Feinberg's course, which hones in on politics, economics and foreign policy in contemporary Cuba, assessing the social gains of the 1950s revolution and the challenges of reforming socialism and, later, communism.

Staying in Havana with a daytrip into the countryside of Viñales, the students focused on understanding Cuba's culture, entrepreneurship and technology. Their itinerary included a visit to the Museum of Cuban Art, immersion in the Old City and a meeting with the Cuban hip-hop duo Obsesión for a conversation on race and gender equality.

"Having an opportunity to discuss social issues with Cubans after having read and had a class about the social issues in Cuba made for a very powerful learning opportunity," said David Price, 2017 [MIA](#) candidate.

"In particular, it was impactful to have a chance to speak with tobacco farmers in Viñales, (giving) a window into the rural heart of Cuba and into the culture that exists outside of the city," he said. "This trip reinforced my belief that the very deepest and strongest education is experiential. When one interacts, touches and feels the subject matter they are learning, the educational experience is both deeper and more profound."

Students also connected with Cuban economists, urban planners and former diplomats, as well as the founders of multiple tech startups. Touching on the private sector, they learned about Airbnb’s growth in the country and visited several small businesses, including the first private car service on the island, Nostalgic Cars.

“Professor Feinberg spoke a lot about the emerging private sector, and it came full circle for me when I observed signs of it,” Silvestri detailed. “Among paint-chipped and seemingly abandoned buildings, there are new, upscale restaurants and bars that are well-attended by lively and modernly clad crowds.”

For Marla Recio Carbajal, 2016 MIA candidate, this private sector facet of the trip was also most fascinating.

“There is so much opportunity between Cuba and the U.S. to do business,” she said. “That’s what I’m going to do after graduation. I’m going to start my own company in the tourism sector to bring Americans into Cuba.”

Recio Carbajal is a Cuban citizen and was working as the owner of her own boutique in Cuba when GPS students embarked on their trip there the first year. Through a mutual friend to Feinberg, Recio Carbajal became acquainted with the class, including Collin Laverty ’12, whom she now is engaged to.



## Starting and preserving a tradition

Laverty, in fact, was the mastermind behind the spring break tradition—or, as Feinberg calls him, “the right man at the right time”—as he organized the inaugural trip in his first year at UC San Diego. Laverty came to the university from a position at the Center for Democracy in the Americas, a nonpartisan institution promoting U.S. policy toward Cuba.

“Steps taken by the Obama administration made it increasingly easier to arrange academic exchanges, and I wanted to help GPS be on the front lines of that engagement,” Lavery said.

The experience of spearheading that initial trip was both life changing and career altering.

“It became clear to me that I had very specific experience, knowledge and networks I could tap to create a successful business,” Lavery said. “It allowed me to realize how much I love Cuba and want to play a small role in securing a better relationship between our two countries and Cuba’s future.”

After graduation, he opened [Cuba Education Travel](#), a travel agency based in Havana that specifically organizes visits to the country for U.S. citizens and groups such as schools, think tanks, associations, families and companies.

As an alumnus, he continues to provide support in organizing the trip for Feinberg’s class, although Recio Carbajal has, for the past two years, coordinated the logistics.

Feinberg, who has attended the trip three of the past five years, said he most enjoys hearing students’ impressions after traveling to the developing country, particularly their surprise with its level of education and good health care.

Of course, there’s also a feeling of accomplishment as a teacher when his students are able to apply the theory and the empirics of what they studied in the classroom to what they experience firsthand in the country.

His student Lopez can attest to this.

“Having learned about Cuban institutions, revolutionary ideas and the ideology and influence of the Soviet Union, Fidel Castro could only be fully understood when I felt and saw it,” she said. “The perspectives and the experiences of the human element can never be learned in a book. In addition, to be part of history in the making has an added value. To witness a historic moment is priceless.”

View more [photos](#) from the trip.