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**COVER
STORY**



Barack Obama, the president of the USA, and Cuba's president, Raúl Castro, at the baseball game in Havana

HISTORIC VISIT TO CUBA

Barack Obama, the president of the USA, travelled to Cuba on 20th March. His wife, Michelle, and their two daughters, Malia and Sasha, went with him. Their three-day visit was an historic event.

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean. The country is home to 11.5 million people. Cuba is only 144 kilometres (90 miles) from the USA. Yet the last American president to visit the island was Calvin Coolidge. He travelled to Cuba in 1928.

After he arrived in Havana, Cuba's capital city, Mr Obama joked. He said that Coolidge had travelled by train and a battleship. His journey from Washington DC to Havana took several days. Mr Obama and his family flew on Air Force One. Their journey took a few hours. Air Force One is a specially designed jumbo jet or passenger plane. Whenever an American president travels to other

countries or across the USA, he flies on Air Force One.

Many people believe that Christopher Columbus (1451 – 1506) was the first person to sail across the Atlantic Ocean. He landed on Cuba in 1492. Columbus came from the city of Genoa. Today, this city is in Italy. The king and queen of Spain paid for Columbus's expedition. Within a few years, Cuba became a part of the Spanish Empire.

In the late 1800s there were several revolts in Cuba. People who disliked Spanish rule led them. In 1898 a conflict broke out between the USA and Spain. Known as the Spanish-American War, it lasted for three months and a few days. By this time the Spanish Empire was very weak. Spain soon offered peace talks. As part of the peace treaty, Spain gave the USA temporary control of Cuba. It also agreed to pass its

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ownership of the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam (a small island in the Pacific Ocean) to America.

In 1902 the USA agreed that Cuba would be an independent country. However, the USA kept control of Cuba's finances and its dealings with other countries. What's more, the USA kept a naval base on the island. It's called Guantánamo Bay. For the next 50 years many thousands of Americans visited Havana. Most went to gamble at the city's casinos.

In 1956 Fidel Castro started a revolution in Cuba. Then, General Batista ran the country. The American government supported the Cuban leader. Fidel Castro set up a group of fighters, or rebels. Batista was unpopular and many Cubans joined the rebel group. After two years of fighting, Castro's rebel army took control of Havana. Batista fled. He eventually went to live in Portugal. Batista died in 1973.

After taking control, Fidel Castro declared that Cuba was a communist one party state. The government now owned all the houses, businesses and factories. Other political parties were banned. Many American businesses in Cuba were taken over. In 1960, the USA imposed a trade **embargo** on Cuba. Over 50 years later, this is still in place. Because of the embargo, American companies are not allowed to sell anything to Cuba, or buy goods made in Cuba.

Even though Batista was unpopular, not all Cubans were happy about their country becoming a communist state. Thousands decided to leave. Most went to live in the city of Miami, in Florida. From Cuba, Florida is the nearest part of the USA.

One year after the embargo started, the American government secretly helped to organise an attack on Cuba. It became known

as the 'Bay of Pigs' invasion. Fidel Castro's forces easily defeated the invading force. After this, Fidel Castro decided to work with the then communist Russian-led Soviet Union.

In 1962 Russian leaders arranged to send some nuclear missiles to Cuba by ship. The Americans discovered what was happening. At that time, John F Kennedy was the USA's president. He warned the Soviet Union's leader, Nikita Khrushchev, that America would attack the Russian ships if they sailed to Cuba. Many people expected a nuclear war to start. However, the missiles did not get to Cuba, as the Russian ships turned back. This incident became known as the 'Cuban Missile Crisis'.

Russia continued to help Cuba. Yet when the Soviet Union began to break up in 1991, Cuba lost its biggest supporter. In 2008, after running Cuba for 49 years, Fidel Castro decided to step down. Then, he was 81 years old and in poor health. It was agreed that his younger brother, Raúl, would take his place.

Cuba is still a one party state. It is one of the world's few remaining communist countries. Most people in Cuba have little money. On average they earn about US\$20 (£14) per month. However, the country is known for its good hospitals, schools and universities. Cuba has poor electricity supplies and telephone networks. Few people have access to the internet. Many buildings and roads need repair. Because of the American trade embargo, foreign companies have been unwilling to set up operations in Cuba.

Two years ago Mr Obama decided that 50 years of the trade embargo was not working. It had not changed Cuba's political system. Secret talks with Cuban leaders were arranged.

Then, at the end of 2014, Mr Obama made an announcement. At the same time, Cuba's president, Raúl Castro, made a similar declaration. The two men said that the USA and Cuba would begin working with each other again. Last year, the American embassy in Havana reopened. A new Cuban embassy, in Washington DC, opened its doors around the same time.



Mr Obama agreed to visit Cuba. Yet he said that he would only do so if he were allowed to meet some of the country's dissidents. These are people who disagree with the Cuban leadership. During his visit, Mr Obama made several speeches. He and Raúl Castro watched a specially arranged baseball game. It was between the Cuban team and one of America's best teams. The American team won.

Several American business leaders accompanied Mr Obama. Most now plan to invest money in Cuba. Not everyone was happy about Mr Obama's visit. Some Cuban Americans were angry. They say that the USA should not work with Cuba as long as it remains a communist country. Nowadays, Fidel Castro is rarely seen in public. He did not meet Mr Obama. Reports said that the former revolutionary leader was not happy that the American president had come to Cuba. ■