

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the culture surrounding the vintage American cars found in Cuba and how it compares to the car cultures in the U.S.

Through preliminary research, Cubans are continuing to use these cars as means of transportation and a source of income. They have kept the cars maintained by recycling parts from other cars, tractors, and boats, as well as buying new parts from the black market. Once they have been repaired, many owners around major cities use them as taxis.

While in Havana, I observed many vintage cars and how they were used and treated. Additionally, I interviewed two drivers of vintage cars. One was the owner of a 1953 Plymouth, while the other was a driver of a government owned 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air.

I found that most of the vintage cars around Havana are used as taxis. This is so that the owners can afford to maintain them as well as provide additional income for their families. The owners are required to pay the government about \$600 a month to use them as taxis, but if used in Havana, the owners can make about \$20-\$30 per hour driving tourists.

Methodology

Much of the Research done on the trip was done through observations. These observations took place throughout Havana, Viñales, and Varadero as well as what can be seen from the window of a bus in between these cities.

Two interviews with vintage car drivers were also completed while in Havana.

Findings

Beginning in 1959, the Cuban government outlawed private ownership of cars. Only recently, 2011, did it restore private ownership for cars made after 1959. Due to the inability of the people to get new cars, they had to maintain these cars from the 1950s.

These cars became masterpieces of ingenuity. The owners were creative with how they maintained their cars and where they got the parts. Both of the gentlemen I interviewed stated that there cars had new engines put in them recently. One of them being a soviet era 4 cylinder gas engine, and the other being a V6 Diesel engine from a tractor.

When speaking with the owners/drivers, you can tell they take great pride in their vehicles. A man who drove a 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air said his dream car would be a Ford Fair liner and that he wouldn't trade it for a brand new Ferrari.

Most of the vintage cars found in Havana are used as Taxis by the owners to secure additional income for themselves and their families. This is one of the only ways they can afford to maintain these cars to the standard that they do. While most are in decent shape, there are some that show their age worse than others.

Conclusion

While the owners and drivers of these classic American cars take great pride in their cars, the current economic situation is not ideal for the growth of a car culture similar to those found in the U.S.

Cubans have developed a culture that centers around catering to the tourism around major cities. The main use for vintage cars was found to be as taxis, but just because they are used as such does not mean the Cuban people think any less of the cars. They view them as a source of great pride and their views are confirmed by the growing number of tourists visiting the island.

Right: Me pictured with a 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air and the driver.



References

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Left: First encounter with vintage cars in Havana (1957 Chevrolet Bel Air).
Right: 1959 Chevrolet Impala at the Bridge of Bacunayagua.

