

# Local entrepreneurs: Cuba has a lot of trade potential

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Americans may be forbidden from investing in communist Cuba, but many say they can see a potential gold mine there if U.S. sanctions are one day lifted.

While the U.S. State Department has no intention of relaxing restrictions anytime soon, a group of local entrepreneurs say they saw firsthand how Cubans are attempting to make their own living.

"If they're going to compete with the rest of the world, they are going to have to come into the 21st century," said Jodi Solomon, owner of Boston-based Jodi F. Solomon Speakers Bureau. "And they're eagerly looking for help."

Solomon was one of 150 members of the Washington, D.C.-based Young Entrepreneurs' Organization (YEO) who traveled to Cuba to share information about how to build a business.

They took a special charter from Miami directly into Havana, where they spent five days meeting with tourism and economic officials as well as local entrepreneurs. While Americans are not allowed to travel to Cuba without a license from the U.S. government, the group of entrepreneurs received a license to conduct a "people-to-people" exchange, said YEO's executive director Brien Biondi.

with the government, which almost always takes a 51-percent share of ownership. Cuban workers make about \$11 per month, the entrepreneurs were told, while government employees make about \$20, they said.

"Not much gets back to the people," said Thomas Skelly, owner of Boston-based Skelly Insurance Agency Inc.

Most of their time was spent meeting local people on their own, entrepreneurs said.

Biondi recalls how several members brought over baseball bats and balls to the children, who Skelly noticed were using rocks and sticks to play the game. Cuban people were also pleased to get



Aaron Driben, owner of City Express, a Boston-based courier service; Jodi Solomon, president of Jodi F. Solomon Speakers Bureau; Monique Muri, of RAM Scientific in Waltham; and Thomas Skelly, owner of Skelly Insurance Agency Inc. in Boston, went on a goodwill mission to Cuba.

American companies have been forbidden from investing in or conducting trade with Cuba since sanctions were slapped on the country in the early 1960s.

Under the Trading With The Enemy Act, the State Department attempts to "isolate the (Cuban) government and deprive it of U.S. dollars."

However, another act was passed in 1992 that allows medical equipment and supplies as well as agricultural products to be sold through non-governmental organizations that are not affiliated with Fidel Castro's government.

The Cuban economy is still trying to recover from hard times which struck when subsidies from the former Soviet Union—worth as much as \$6 billion per year—were cut off in 1990, according to reports.

Local entrepreneurs who went on the trip said they noticed the Cuban people driving older-model cars, but said they did not witness people living on the street, either.

They said they learned that most businesses are run by the government, and foreign investors must enter partnerships

American magazines, such as Skelly's Sports Illustrated baseball issue.

The entrepreneurs were not allowed to discuss the possibility of their own investing in the country, but they did meet some foreign investors who have built companies in Cuba and who told of their experience about doing business there. The entrepreneurs dined in "paladares," which are small restaurants built in people's homes and which can seat about 12 people at most.

"I was interested in the number of enterprises popping up down there," Biondi said.

He was also struck by the number of Cuban stores that accepted American dollars, despite the U.S. embargo. The Americans were limited to spending \$195 per day while there, according to their license, Biondi said.

Though they were not even allowed to dream of setting up shop in Cuba, the entrepreneurs said they could not help but think of the possibilities of such an untapped market.

"There's a heck of a lot of opportunity there," Skelly said.

