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DANIEL SHOER ROTH | VIEW FROM EL NUEVO HERALD

IN MY OPINION

Taking gifts to Cuba? You'll pay

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If you have reservations about Washington's current policy toward Cuba, an 88-page book in old yellowish paper with a turquoise blue cover on the island's customs regulations perhaps will help you decide whether the laws are failing or not.

The third edition of

Normas Cubanas, published last year by Cuba's Customs agency, reflects the hypocrisy of the U.S. embargo. Along with U.S. economic sanctions, Raúl Castro's government collects every year hundreds of millions of dollars in customs duties and tariffs from U.S. Cuban exiles when they visit the island.

Not to mention that cash remittances sent by friends and relatives abroad have become one of Cuba's primary economic engine.

A week ago my column focused on the high costs exiles pay to visit their families and friends in Cuba. Not only do the U.S. companies that enable the trips exploit this captive and chaotic market, but Cuban authorities also squeeze exaggerated fees and duties from expatriates at airports and charge a ridiculously high currency exchange rate.

That column generated a highly positive response from multiple sectors of this community because the issue receives little attention in the mainstream press, yet it affects many South Florida residents. This time, I will bring to light more details of the fees and duties collected from travelers.

One of the more surprising aspects for those who have never traveled to Cuba is the excess baggage fees paid at customs, including all carry-on baggage. Normally, excess baggage fees are collected by airlines, not airports. This means that Cuban exiles — who travel loaded like Santa Claus — must pay overweight baggage charges twice.

Another hidden fee that is hard to understand is what Cuban authorities call "progressive tariffs applicable to custom duties." These airport tariffs are applied based on the total value of the products and goods visitors bring to their families. It is an effort by Cuba to curtail the growing illegal business of "mules" transporting merchandise for commercial use from Miami to Havana.

Also, electrical appliances and other durable goods, as well as their parts, are taxed independently and individually in CUCs, a dollar-like convertible currency unit. To top it all, the Cuban government automatically lessens the value of the U.S. dollar, charging a 12 percent exchange rate.

Every product has an arbitrarily determined duty fee which is unknown to most travelers and often takes them by surprise. I obtained a copy of the

Normas book to find the list of values. Here is a small sample:

› To take to Cuba a multitask printer that you might buy at Walmart for \$119.98, the traveler must pay a customs duty of 150 CUC (\$168) in Cuba — much more than the original price of the printer. If a Cuban immigrant in Miami buys a 42-inch LED Smart HDTV at Amazon for \$479.99, the customs duty is 400 CUC.

› Any kind of musical audio equipment? 60 CUC in custom taxes. A wireless phone? 30 CUC. A hard disc? 60 CUC. A home electrical generator for blackouts? 150 CUC. A fan to ease the heat? 10 CUC.

› Lingerie, home furnishings, musical instruments, toys and sports items are also taxable at the airports. To enter Cuba with a pillow, you must pay 5 CUC; a blanket, 10 CUC; dinnerware for 12, 20 CUC.

› A toy for a grandchild, nephew or niece? If it's battery-run, the duty is 10 CUC, and if it runs on electricity, 15 CUC.

› Would you like to have a family member develop his or her artistic skills? For a brass musical instrument the Cuban government will charge you 200 CUC, and the same tariff will apply to a percussion or keyboard instrument. A future DJ in the family? 200 CUC for a sound mixer.

You may argue that every country collects customs duties from travelers when they purchase certain items listed on customs forms. But nobody has to pay for bringing a doll as a gift to the U.S. In Cuba, however, they will charge you 2 CUC tariff for a doll.

If you want to visit family in any other Caribbean island and bring a wristwatch as a gift, their governments won't charge you. In Cuba, an exile must pay 5 CUC.

Because Cubans cannot purchase many of these products — especially electrical appliances, computers and communication devices — in a free market, they depend on relatives in Florida to be able to acquire them. Since early this year, customs officials also collect tariff for food (by weight), something that was previously duty-free.

Just like Washington politicians debate whether to revise the Cuban Adjustment Act to stop abuses by those who have “fled communism” in recent years and yet return repeatedly to the island, the time has come to also analyze the policy of travel to Cuba to end the U.S. government's double-standard.

The price South Florida Cubans pay is too high — both money-wise and morally.



FRANKLIN REYES/AP FILE, 2012

THE HIGH PRICE OF VISITING CUBA: A Cuban family from the U.S. arrives in Havana with packages for relatives. Cuban officials charged them \$588.

