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Report from Havana: Fidel Castro Center, a profound experience

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Fidel Castro, arm raised, entering Havana in January 1959.

Lars Bertling, Russell McClain and Sharon Black, three reporters for Struggle-La Lucha, members of the Socialist Unity Party, and representatives of the Baltimore Peoples Power Assembly are participating in the 31st U.S.-Cuba IFCO-Pastors for Peace Friendshipment Caravan that arrived in Havana on Nov. 15.

This is their account from day three.

Havana, Nov. 19 — We were honored to be the first delegation to visit the Fidel Castro Ruz Center in Havana. It's important to share a small part of the background on the establishment of this museum and interactive teaching facility.

It was Fidel's wish that there would be no statutes, monuments or streets named for him. The "Comandante," as he is affectionately referred to here, knew his importance as a leader and teacher of the Cuban people and the international community. But his emphasis was always on the people.

Statues don't usually pass on ideas. Rather, it is an educated and organized people who do.

It must have been very hard for the Cuban people to abide by his wishes. However, the National Assembly, which is the equivalent of Congress in the U.S. — but much more representative of the people — passed a law that no statues of Fidel could be erected or streets named after him.

So it took a full debate and vote by the Cuban National Assembly to allow this one exemption, the Fidel Castro Ruz Center. And it's wonderful that they did.

The Center is a tribute to Cuba's history. A hectare of gardens (about two and a half acres) surrounds the converted home of an aristocrat that was confiscated by the revolution in 1959.

The gardens were developed to reflect Fidel's commitment to nature and ecology.

There is no way to fully describe the beauty of this garden. Plants from the Sierra Maestra mountains are grown in a vertical garden with an exquisite waterfall, representing the mountains where the guerrilla army was based.

Guides explained that the modern bronze sculpture sitting near the center of the garden represented a species of tree that bends in the hurricanes. Raul Castro, Fidel's brother and also a leader of the revolution, described the tree as representing Fidel's ability to weather storms.

While we surveyed the garden, a white dove flew to the top of the bronze statue and

stayed until a light rain began.

Our tour of the inside was a profound experience of Fidel's history starting as a boy until his death. It illustrated all the important aspects of Cuban history.

Nothing was left out, starting with a display of the jeep that Fidel used before he entered Havana in January 1959, dressed in the clothes he wore in the mountains. Our Cuban guide, a young Afro-Cuban, was profoundly knowledgeable.

Inclusion of children, people with disabilities

What struck us was the Center's thoughtful accessibility to children and those with disabilities of all kinds.

Every exhibit, especially those that were interactive, allowed children and those using wheelchairs to access them through touch and voice, including QR codes.

This was true in the library area and also outside in the garden.

The use of digital technology, art, film, and sound was astounding. For instance, the library section featured facsimiles of books that could be scanned to reveal their contents. Throughout parts of the center you could view modern sculptures and displays. Special rooms were dedicated to audiovisual films and displays.

The detailed preservation of history and excellence in execution reflect the love of Fidel and the pride that Cuban people have in their history of resistance to imperialist domination.

Included in these displays is the tremendous international support carried out by Cuba from Angola to Vietnam.

The accessibility of the museum is a testament to the Cubans' dedication to the next generation, and this is also shown in the detailed preservation of history. The Center

contains more details than you could imagine, presented in a digestible way. Visiting is like reading several books on Cuban history.

We were unable to take photographs, as is common in museums that contain delicate displays, but especially because the Cubans do not want anyone to profit from or sell the images. Nevertheless, the Cubans plan to eventually create a special website for the Center that will be shared internationally.

Our delegation spent close to 4 hours at the Center and there was not a single person who was not deeply moved.

