

Élian's hometown

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [March 15, 2000](#) issue

The U.S. embargo against Cuba is crumbling of its own absurdity. An increasing number of religious, academic and business groups are eager to visit Cuba. The Clinton administration makes it easy to obtain travel permission (just get a license from the Treasury Department), and Fidel Castro wants U.S. dollars, so he readily sanctions invitations from Cuban groups.

The travel agency that booked my recent trip—one of several that arrange trips there—sent 51 groups to Cuba in January alone. These included seminarians from San Francisco and Yale, as well as groups from the Rhode Island School of Design, Berea College, the Women's National Democratic Club and the Historic Savannah Foundation.

Cuba is crawling with visitors from Europe and the U.S. In the Old City where Hemingway is still remembered fondly, revitalized old hotels are filled, and Hemingway's favorite bars are crowded. When I walked through the Old City well after midnight, it seemed safer than many U.S. cities at that hour. I saw crowds of young people dancing in the Old City square.

The conference I attended included Protestant clergy from southern Florida who testify that their communities have ambivalent feelings toward the embargo. The hard-line leaders of the Cuban-American community in Florida and in New Jersey continue to control U.S. policy with their loud voices, votes and campaign contributions. That lobby, coupled with general indifference in the rest of the U.S., has kept the embargo in place. But now a six-year-old boy may help end it.

Élian González was rescued off the coast of Florida. He was found clinging to an oversized inner tube after the boat on which he and his mother were traveling overturned in a storm. Élian's mother's boyfriend owned the boat and was in the lucrative business of charging for the risky trip. Mother, boyfriend and nine other passengers drowned while attempting to reach Florida. Élian and two other adults were rescued.

The U.S. has a wet feet-dry feet policy on Cuban refugees: anyone picked up at sea is returned to Cuba, while those who make it to dry land are allowed to remain. Élian made it to shore with the help of a fishing boat, so he qualified as a dry foot, but as a minor he should have been returned immediately to his father. Thanks to the politicians who seized the child as a propaganda “hostage,” he remains sequestered with distant relatives in Miami. A federal judge will decide soon on the matter of legal jurisdiction. Most authorities agree that the boy should be allowed to return to his father in Cuba. Meanwhile, Castro has embraced the public relations gift this tragedy has given him, and has orchestrated mass demonstrations that demand Élian’s return.

In Cárdenas, Élian’s hometown, a billboard shows his empty school desk, accompanied by a plea for his return to his classroom and his friends, one of whom is shown gazing sadly at the empty desk. At Cárdenas and elsewhere, the subject of Élian and the embargo were central in our discussions of relations between U.S. and Cuban churches. One of the conclusions reached at the conference, held at the Christian Center for Dialogue and Reflection, was that this tragedy could finally awaken U.S. public opinion and lead to a long-overdue change in U.S. policy.

As we drove to see Élian’s school and his two houses—his parents were separated—scholar Margaret Crahan pointed to an elementary school (not Élian’s) built originally by the Presbyterian Church, which she explained was designed as a school to “encourage social action” and has long been known for its high academic standards. The school is now run by the state, and Crahan says if she lived in Cuba she would want to send her children to the school, which is named, appropriately, La Progresiva. Élian’s classmates were on their way home when our van drove up, and they eagerly posed for pictures. CNN was also around, a constant presence since Élian’s near-death experience.

The propaganda campaign to keep Élian in Miami paints Cárdenas as a backward town. We discovered that Cárdenas is a tourist-oriented spot, without the poverty usually found in Caribbean towns. Many Cárdenas citizens, including Élian’s father, work in the hotels on the nearby peninsula of Varadero. One recent U.S. article described Cárdenas as a “listless, unkempt place dotted here and there with sun-scorched plazas” where “sewage flows down the old streets.” If there is open sewage in Cárdenas, I neither saw nor smelled any.

I found the people in Cárdenas and the church members we met to be hospitable, optimistic and hopeful about the future both of their country—once normal relations have been established with the outside world—and of their churches, which received a huge boost in morale following the 1998 papal visit.

On the morning of our return, I approached the old Havana air terminal with some trepidation (scheduled airlines use the new José Martí terminal), expecting to see a chartered prop plane pawned off on Castro by his old Russian allies. Instead, outside a bustling terminal filled with families sending passengers off to visit U.S. relatives was a gleaming United Airlines jet (hired by a charter company) with United Airlines personnel waiting to take us on the 90-mile flight to Miami. Now is a good time to visit church and academic friends in Cuba. Every passenger who heads south strikes a blow against the embargo.