

REFLECTIONS

Buying Potatoes in Havana

BY ROBERT BLAU

“Psst. Tengo papas” (I have potatoes), says the Cuban vegetable-market guy in a stage whisper, as he comes out of the shadows. You would think he’s using some sort of a code to try to sell you cocaine, or ask your help to migrate out of Cuba, but he really is just trying to sell you potatoes.

Shoppers at Havana’s agro-mercado, where many fruits and vegetables are for sale, must go through this secretive drill for potatoes, which are a more tightly controlled product than, say, green peppers, onions or bananas. Those products are permitted to be sold there, so long as producers supply the official market quota to the government first.

Potatoes, by contrast, are legally produced and distributed only to the food-ration stores, where they are sold at heavily subsidized prices to average Cubans. But that doesn’t stop the potatoes from falling off the supply trucks and making their way to the murky basements on the fringes of the agro-mercado.

Cuba is the hemisphere’s most screwed-up economy, like a failed laboratory experiment that the mad scientist in charge doesn’t know has failed because the results fit his basic plan: keep Cubans poor and scampering around for food all day so they have no energy left to protest their lack of fundamental human rights. Every ordinary citizen understands the official system is a failure and does what he can to hustle on the side. (The official wage is the equiv-

Every ordinary citizen understands the official system is a failure and does what he can to hustle on the side.

alent of about \$15 per month.)

Restaurant employees steal food and resell it. Drivers of official cars steal gasoline and resell it. You can go to a hardware store and buy hammers but not nails, because “Hammers are something Cubans buy; nails are something they steal.”

Anyone with farmland will hide as much of his output as possible from the production-quota police and sell it on the side. And, as regards potatoes, truck drivers in the food distribution system misdirect part of their cargo to black markets.

Some of these people get caught and are made an example of. The following dialog could be heard in any of the many Cuban prisons:

Prisoner A: What are you in for?

Prisoner B: Armed robbery and murder. You?

Prisoner A: Handing out copies of the International Declaration of Human Rights. How about Juan over there?

Prisoner C (Juan): Trafficking in potatoes.

You’re aware of this as you go to the

market, having learned that the official policy of “socialism or death” has done nothing in 50 years to undo the hard-wiring for creativity and entrepreneurial talent in Cuban DNA. This strand is right next to another that makes Cubans love the United States, despite 50 years of daily anti-American propaganda. The seller knows from your license plate that you are an American, but he wants to sell you those potatoes just as badly as you want to buy them.

So, if it’s potatoes you want, you nod your head to the guy from the official state-run car-parking mafia who approaches you with “Psst. Tengo papas.” Or, if he’s slow on the uptake, you can wait for the bag-carrier guys who pretend to be political dissidents to get bigger tips and who can also be potato middlemen.

Third choice (my favorite) is the wizened old man who sometimes shows up at the back of your car with his potatoes in a little red wagon, hawking them with the promise that they are the best in all of Cuba.

Finally, if none of these sellers materialize, you learn to walk around the perimeter of the market area with a look on your face that says: “I’ve got hard currency and I need potatoes.” And, in a matter of less than a minute, a seller will appear. Guaranteed. ■

Robert Blau, an FSO since 1983, returned in July from a two-year tour in the U.S. interest section in Havana. He is now deputy director of the Cuban Affairs Office in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs.

Great News!



INFINITI®

G Sedan
G Coupe
M
FX
QX



Versa
Sentra SE-R
Altima Coupe
Z
Rogue
Pathfinder
Armada
Titan

Sentra
Altima
Maxima
Quest
X-terra
Murano
Frontier

Nissan and Infiniti are now available at Diplomatic prices!

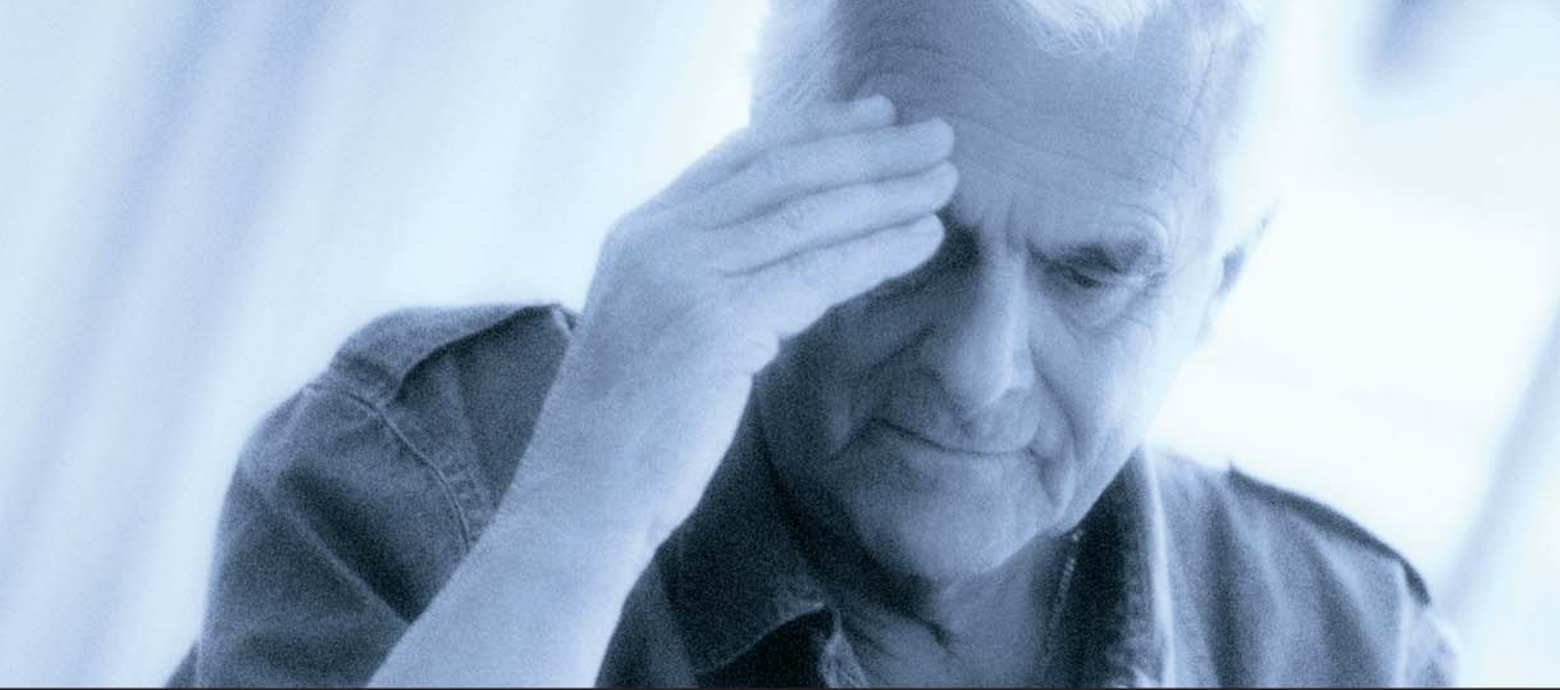
Worldwide Delivery ♦ Worldwide Warranty ♦ Exclusive Diplomatic Pricing
Satisfaction Guaranteed ♦ Custom Factory-Ordered Vehicles

Phone: (516) 496-1816 www.diplosales.com E-mail: diplosales@diplosales.com

Diplomatic Automobile Sales 
Diplomatic Automobile Sales is an authorized distributor
for the International Diplomatic Community.

*Proud Sponsor of the
Foreign Service Youth Foundation*

Chrysler ♦ Dodge ♦ Jeep ♦ Audi ♦ Volkswagen ♦ Mazda ♦ Ford ♦ Lincoln ♦ Mercury ♦ Nissan ♦ Infiniti ♦ Harley-Davidson



What You Need to Know

About the Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program (FLTCIP)

The government is not providing the insurance.
The government is not subsidizing the premiums.
The government is not guaranteeing the benefits.

FLTCIP is a group program. After September 30, 2008, the premium and benefits may change.

One size does not fit all. An AFSA Representative can help you select the plan best for you.

AFSA Plans offer an indemnity option, survivorship benefit, limited pay option, restoration of benefits, lower premiums and discount plans for family members. FLTCIP does not.

If You Are Young (Seventy or Below), Healthy and/or Married, the Federal Program Is Not Your Best Option.

Contact The Hirshorn Company or visit hirshorn.com for information about your best option: the AFSA Long Term Care Plan.

AFSA Desk The Hirshorn Company

telephone 800 242 8221 | facsimile 215 247 6366 | www.hirshorn.com | afsainfo@hirshorn.com

AFSA Sponsored Long Term Care Plan



The Very Best in Long Term Care Insurance