

[A deep love for the homeland](#)



Alex López is moved when he recalls leaving the island as a teenager, practically forced by his parents, and insists that his homeland was never far from his thoughts, throughout the 69 years of his life.

Etched in his memory is July 4, 1962, the day he boarded Pan American Airways Flight 422, at 11:45 am. As he climbed the stairway, he wanted to return, and took a few steps back without turning around to see his mother, who had warned him not to take a final look.

He described the trip as frightening, the 45 saddest minutes of his life; there was no consolation. From the steel bird, as he called the plane, he saw the palms grow small, then the sea, and finally an unknown country: the United States.

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More than 14,000 children were taken from the country during the operation. Photo: Archive

Traveling with him were 10 other children, all without their families, and unaware that they were victims of Operation Peter Pan - a U.S. orchestrated wave of emigration, caused by distortions and lies disseminated to destroy the Cuban Revolution, during which 14,000 children were taken from the country.

His first days were hard, López recounted, living in a camp of Army tents, among older boys, where abuse and hostility reigned. His supposed protectors, Catholic priests and nuns, found it difficult to control the 500 adolescents, between 12 and 18 years of age, housed at the camp. All kinds of physical violence occurred, even sexual abuse by the priests themselves.

These experiences accentuated his love for Cuba, and after completing his university studies in Tourism, he created the travel agency Interplanner Travels, devoted to promoting group trips from the United States to socialist states in Eastern Europe. He established close ties with Cuban friendship centers in these nations, where he bought books and music, and heard news of the Revolution.

How did the first trip to Cuba come about?

Given my relationship with socialist bloc countries, the Cuban mission to the United Nations took interest in my work, during the administration of Jimmy Carter (1977- 1981), who made traveling to the island somewhat easier. I talked with the Cuban diplomats about the possibility of opening up tourism

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with Cuba. Returning was always in my plans, but I never thought I would do so on the invitation of the revolutionary government.



Alex López recovers some of his lost childhood visiting Cuba.

Photo: Karoly Emerson Photo: Karoly Emerson (ICAP)

Direct flights were prohibited, so we flew from Canada in 1978. The first group was composed of professors and workers at Martyrs University in Keith.

To my surprise, on this trip I met the leader Fidel Castro. He visited us at the Hotel Riviera. I was talking with the tourists at the main entrance, where we were waiting for our bus. I suddenly noticed that some in the group changed their expressions, widening their eyes in amazement. I thought I had said something wrong in English, but then I felt someone touch me on the shoulder, like a friend, and when I turned around, I was surprised too, speechless.



His adoptive parents Kathleen and Michael Mulvihill, care deeply for Alex.
Photo: Karoly Emerson (ICAP)

Fidel greeted us casually and said we should call him by his first name, as a friend. He took interest in hearing if the academics were feeling good in Cuba and if the tour program was being conducted without difficulty. I never had any problems, not with this group, or any other I brought here.

This type of specialized tourism must have faced obstacles from different administrations? What has been the greatest problem?

One of the most notorious was during the Presidency of Ronald Reagan (1981 -1989). I was ordered to close my office in Washington within 24 hours. We had to close a well-established company.

Fortunately, we kept our contacts and when there was a change at the White House, with the George H.W. Bush administration, we were able to re-establish the exchanges, at first with many more restrictions than at the beginning.

It is always a big problem making bank transfers to Cuba and can wear down anyone who wants to work.

Now with the Donald Trump administration, it's practically impossible to find a bank to transfer funds. Plus tourists see the travel warning issued by the State Department, which claims that Cuba is not a safe country and that if any accident or illness should occur here, no insurance company would take

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responsibility.

For this reason, in 2017, we had 30 group cancellations, because no one wanted to travel to a supposedly dangerous location, much less when a government institution says so. They hide behind the alleged sonic attacks. I can tell you that, if they existed, I would be deaf. All we hear is the live music of bands.

In reality, the President is responding to the interests of a miniscule group of Cubans residing in Florida who have created a type of mafia, they amass personal fortunes erecting barriers to bilateral relations. They live off this business, because there are millions of dollars available to finance campaigns against the Cuban Revolution that have no effect.

I never thought I would witness a visit by a U.S. President, but I saw it with Barack Obama. He recognized that the economic blockade policy was not having the desired effect, in terms of overthrowing the Revolution, and therefore sought other strategies.

He didn't have these bilateral talks because of goodwill or falling in love with Cuba. His tactics involved creating an atmosphere of rapprochement and direct conversations between the two governments. Perhaps a normal relationship could have been achieved with the reestablishment of diplomatic relations, but the current administration is undoing what had been accomplished. The differences between Cuba and the United States are not going to be solved, because the U.S. is obsessed with controlling and colonizing Cuba, just as happened in Puerto Rico.

I see it as a fatal attraction. The Yankee coveting Cuba's strength.

How do you do promotional work in such a hostile environment, to coordinate group trips to Cuba?

By getting around the obstacles and adjusting to the circumstances. I dedicate hours of my life to conversing, dialoguing, with people. I introduce myself to professional organizations, universities, and other groups to attract them. We promote ourselves on the internet and use the experiences of those who have visited Cuba, since they are always pleasantly surprised.

Many people come with an unfounded fear of Communism. They have expressed absurd opinions, thinking they will be strictly supervised and constantly watched by spies. They think there is no freedom to walk the streets.

I explain that it is a place with a functioning socialist system, very different from other social systems around the world. When they return, they say they never imagined Cuba as a safe country, with no danger whatsoever. They return home excited to have learned of the existence of an educated, well informed people, who know how to settle problems between governments. This bridge of friendship is one that requires daily work.

Why has your love of Cuba been a constant in your work?

My biological parents always taught me to never be a traitor. I believe that when I left Cuba, the family thought I would be coming back soon. It was a five year separation. I felt I had lost my childhood. I promised myself I would return, and recover what had been taken from me, because I did not abandon it.

I was born in Matanzas, and whenever I visit my elementary school, I remember the morning ceremony there, when the children salute the flag in front of a bust of José Martí. This image of lining up every day, separated by the length of our right arms, and then singing the Cuban national anthem, I have never been able to forget.

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The life of an immigrant is hard. In my case, I don't feel I belong on one side or the other. I am in the environment identified as Cuban slash American, but this is not a nationality. I do not consider myself Cuban-American, or a Cuban who is a U.S. citizen. I think my life has been on this long pipeline that never ends. I live there, not on one side or the other.

The people of the country accepted me. They helped me and a family adopted me; they saved me. Now I'm bringing them for the first time. I always remember some of Fidel's words in a conversation with one of my groups. He told us that even when we weren't present, this was our home, where we could lay our heads.

The Mulvihill family, residents of New Jersey, told Granma International how they welcomed Alex into their home, until he was reunited with his biological parents.

Kathleen, wife and mother, recalled that, at that time, her husband worked as a Science teacher and talked about a very intelligent and affectionate Cuban boy in one of his classes. Later, they were visited by a social worker, who told them about the adoption process. They thought their two-bedroom house might be too small for another child, since they had two young daughters. (The Mulvihills later moved and two more daughters were born.)

The social worker looked at the living room couch and said they were in perfect conditions to receive Alex. Her husband Michael was 24 and she was 23, so they accepted the challenge, and it turned out to be a very positive experience, Kathleen said.

Michael emphasized that what motivated him was thinking about how hard it must have been for the biological parents to send a child away to another country. Alex quickly became the boy in the house they never had, and grew to be a much-needed member of the family.

Both say that Alex brought much happiness to their home, helping with the care of his little sisters, and later with their homework. Alex taught them to eat black beans, plantains, and other Cuban dishes. When his biological parents, Osvaldo and Victoria, arrived in the United States, they lived close by, became friends, and continued to enjoy Cuban food together.

The couple reported that they made their first visit to Cuba to see the country Alex talked about. They wanted to visit the place where he was born and where he went to school. They were amazed by their interactions with the Cuban people. Kathleen is a nurse – a daughter and grand-daughter have followed in her footsteps – and she praised the attention given pregnant women in Cuba.

Michael commented that he admired Cuba's educational system, saying he was impressed with the country's academic achievements.

When asked if they would make a second trip, without hesitation both answered at the same time, affirmatively. •

OPERATION PETER PAN

- Operation Peter Pan was launched by the U.S. government, at the end of 1960, as an attempt to destroy the Cuban Revolution which had triumphed in 1959. Among its principal organizers were James Baker and the priest Bryan O. Walsh. Perhaps the name chosen for the operation, Peter Pan, was fitting given the code name used for Miami: Never, Neverland.

- The maneuvers of these two encouraged parents of 14,000 Cuban children to send them to the U.S. between December of 1960 and October, 1962, using fake news about a supposed law to be enacted giving the revolutionary state parental power over minors.

- A huge media campaign was launched, principally on Radio Swan - a counterrevolutionary broadcaster

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in the service of U.S. intelligence agencies that could be heard in Cuba - sounding an alarm to frighten mothers October 26, 1960, and calling on them not to allow their children to be stolen.

- Working in Cuba was CIA agent José Pujals Mederos, who wrote the fake law and introduced it in the country, with the support of another CIA operative, Ramón Grau Alsina, nephew of Ramón Graú San Martín, former President during the semi-colonial republic. This team manufactured false passports and visas through the terrible program for unaccompanied minor Cuban refugees that served as the legal framework to allow for the presence of the children in the U.S.
- The children waited long years for family reunification and many were traumatized by physical and emotional harm in the improvised camps, where little professional attention was provided. Analysts point out that parents were not thinking about a reunification in the United States, but rather one in Cuba, with the return of their children after the revolutionary government was overthrown.

Autore:

- [Barbosa León, Nuria](#)

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