

## **Getting by, any way they can**

As life gets even tougher in Cuba, scams are a way of life

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HAVANA – Four cases of beer, three cases of soda, six party-length hero sandwiches and a wedding cake. Considering the draconian food rationing here, that's not a bad spread.

A marriage license entitles couples to purchase the goods cheaply from the government – only none of it will be guzzled or chowed down at the reception.

In fact there will be no reception, and the newlyweds were joined not for love but for profit. After the divorce fees are paid, their quota of wedding-feast supplies will have earned them a week's salary on the black market, about \$4. Then they're free to take the lucrative vows all over again.

Such scams, as varied as they are pervasive, are a part of life for Cubans whose legitimate incomes offer no hedge against financial desperation. Surgeons, for example, make the equivalent of \$20 a month. Moreover, the scams have become more widespread, ingenious and brazen for a variety of reasons.

First, Cubans have become deft at circumventing the system, or more accurately, working a system that allows for the black market to supplement paltry wages and shortages of food, clothes, medicines, fuel and just about everything else. And, although the government is posting an official 7 percent growth in its economy for last year, austerity measures are getting worse.

Barren state stores no longer offer meat and fish. The yearly quota of clothes – one pair of pants, one shirt and a pair of shoes – is no longer available. Soap, toothpaste and cooking oil are available two or three times a year at best, in minimal quantities.

And as of now, the government will no longer be providing eggs. Instead it is offering Cubans baby chicks they may buy and raise.

"What good does that do us if we have nothing to feed the chicks?" asks Raul, a Santiago resident who declines to give his last name.

What's more, access to U.S. dollars has promoted an escalation of illegal scheming, and not just to make ends meet. Many black-market entrepreneurs are profiting, saving and investing their money.

In 1993, President Fidel Castro legalized possession of U.S. currency to invigorate the devastated economy, unleashing an influx of American dollars.

Some of the more successful racketeers show off their wealth, eating plenty of black-market food, making conspicuous repairs to their homes and

vacationing in the more expensive hotels. That has touched off a good deal of envy, drawing more Cubans, more heavily, into the black market.

No longer afraid of getting caught with dollars, which previously meant a prison sentence, Cubans pursue them with zeal.

Prostitution is often cited as an example of the lust for green backs. But the creative gamut of racketeering has many more faces than that.

### **Playing the numbers**

Playing the lottery, for instance, though outlawed, is a popular pastime. In the evenings, scores of people crouch around their radios with the volume set low, listening to a certain broadcast with keen interest.

It's not Radio Marti, the Miami-based anti-Castro station. They are tuned into the Venezuelan lottery, hoping their lucky numbers come up.

Cubans bet on which of the three numbered ping-pong balls will be plucked from the hopper in Caracas. Winners claim their money from their local "banker" who takes the bets through a network of agents on the street. Winnings are modest, but the banker can rake in \$300 a day.

"Any Cuban who tells you they are getting by without stealing or doing something illegal is a liar, or one of the privileged government bigwigs," says a former child psychologist in Havana, who quit that profession to broker cheap transportation for tourists at the bus terminal.

A cross-country bus trip that costs a foreigner \$40 is only 40 pesos for a Cuban – the equivalent of \$2. The Havana man, who asked to be called Ricardo, charges the tourist \$20, buys the cheaper Cuban ticket by dispersing the appropriate bribes and keeps \$5 for his trouble.

Ricardo operates a second business out of his home. Serpentine coils of copper tubing running between enormous plastic drums in his small kitchen are ever dripping the product of his illegal still.

He manufactures a cheap and fearfully crude substitute for rum called azukin. Each batch requires 15 gallons of honey, 45 gallons of water and half a pound of yeast. That yields 20 bottles of the concoction, which some compare to drinking kerosene. Cuban customers pay 10 pesos for a bottle – about 50 American cents – giving Ricardo a profit of \$15 a month.

### **TV 'repairs'**

Other, less scrupulous schemers operate in the homes of unwitting victims. There has been a rash of television robberies of late. The sets themselves are never stolen, just their insides. Phony repairmen show up on a doorstep asking if the television needs repairs. Often the con man has been privy to a list of addresses from the local repair service dispatcher.

Instead of fixing anything, the thief guts the set of its working components and slips them into his tool bag. He leaves, saying he'll finish later. He then sells his booty, perhaps to someone whose TV parts were also stolen.

Theft of retail merchandise for black market sale has risen dramatically with the recent proliferation of dollar stores, where purchases can only be made in U.S. currency. These nonrationed stores are wonderlands of goods compared to the dearth in state-run establishments.

Dollar stores are stocked with everything from meat and wine to brand-name sneakers.

The goods are aimed at tourists and Cubans who can afford the prices by whatever means. Jobs in the stores are highly coveted for access to merchandise that can be pilfered and sold.

"There isn't anything you can't get on the black market," observed one huckster in Santiago who traffics in goods stolen from factories, cigars, rum and PPG – the Cuban-made drug for reducing cholesterol levels. Tourists are his principal customers.

"You can buy an airplane if you have the money. Any medicine you can't find in the pharmacy or in the hospitals, you can get on the black market. Everyone knows you can get an American visa for \$ 7,000."