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## Photographer's lens captures life in embargoed Cuba

WOODSTOCK - Jeffrey Milstein feels like he's been privy to a unique and soon-to-be vanishing country that lies a mere 90 miles off the Florida coast.

Fortunately, he's been able to preserve and capture images of what promises to become a transformed Cuba.

Earlier this month, President Barack Obama said he plans to lift the decades-long trade embargo imposed by the U.S. as well as restore diplomatic ties with the country.

Milstein is a renowned Woodstock photographer who's visited Cuba as often as he could over the past 10 years. The fruits of those journeys can be found in his book "Cuba: Photographs by Jeffrey Milstein." The book has attracted new attention on Amazon.com due to the diplomatic change.

"I've always had to go with religious groups in order to get in," he said. That meant traveling with Jewish Solidarity, a group founded to support the island nation's 15,000 Jews.

Those experiences have been eye-opening, he said. Physicians traveling with the group typically bring in bags of drugs "with stuff as basic as Tylenol - the embargo affected those kind of basic needs."

He said there may be no more obvious - or impressive - example of Cuban ingenuity in dealing with the embargo than the way people have preserved, embellished and simply continued to operate American-built cars whose pedigrees harken back to the days of gas-guzzling land barges.

"They keep them running, by hook or by crook. A car might have a Pontiac headlight and a Buick tail light. But they keep them going," he said.

Milstein said there are two classes of cars in Cuba: the ones that are "slicked up and new-looking" ply the tourist trade at the island's hotels. Other, less spiffy rides are more often found in the countryside "and there's never just one person in them - there's eight."

He calls it Cuba's own version of Uber.

Though he said he's not very political, Milstein characterized the change from Fidel to Raul Castro's rule as one in which the younger Castro has been more pragmatic than his firebrand brother.

"Fidel is like Ralph Nader - he won't give in to practicalities."

Though he said he welcomes the change, and that he's happy for the Cuban people, Milstein said he can't help but think the country's new relationship with the U.S. and the world will have its downside as well.

"I suspect it signals the end of a place that was unique, that it's only a matter of time before Cuba becomes just like other Caribbean countries."

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Woodstock photographer Jeffrey Milstein has made multiple trips to Cuba with religious groups in order to shoot a country that was in a decades-long trade embargo with the U.S. Cubans showed their ingenuity during the embargo by preserving and using old American cars. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Milstein

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