

Wanderer between worlds: A life in Cuba and Florida



Raúl Pérez Góngora in conversation (source: A. Hesse)

Raúl Pérez Góngora, 65, belongs to a tiny group of people who live in both the US and Cuba. Raúl receives his pension in Florida and, in May 2023, opened the open-air paladar (private restaurant) “El Rakata” in his home town of Mella in eastern Cuba because he feels spiritually drawn to his homeland. He divides his time equally between the two hostile countries. Andreas Hesse spoke with him about self-employment in Cuba, its opportunities and limitations, Donald Trump, US-Cuba relations, and the devastating human and economic consequences of Washington's new immigration policy.

A guest contribution by Andreas Hesse.

How did you come up with this life plan?

I went to the US in 2011. I live in Sebring, Florida. I'm doing well there, I receive my pension and continue to work as a taxi driver for Uber when I'm there. Spiritually, my heart is tied to my Cuban homeland. Today, we divide our time between Cuba and Florida, depending on current needs. I left to improve my economic situation. I always had the idea of starting a project here in Cuba with my family, which is possible today, unlike in the past. It was supposed to be in my hometown, even though the community of Mella has been in economic decline since the sugar factory closed. But we weren't thinking about money, we were thinking about the human factor, which is why we didn't do it in Havana or Santiago. It enriches me spiritually, not materially. It's more of a cultural or community project than a business. We also rent out rooms; there hasn't been a hotel or guesthouse here until now. If a tourist wants to explore the beautiful surroundings, the large reservoir or the mountains, and perhaps stay at the Pinares de Mayarí nature hotel, we organize everything. There are always cultural activities here. Our project has already been positively evaluated by international organizations, for example from Italy.

The purchasing power here is very low. That's why our prices are lower than other *paladares*, because we want everyone to be able to come here. We don't make any social distinctions. The simple worker is treated the same as someone who has money. It's about respect. When our compatriots abroad want to send food to their relatives here, they transfer money to us and we take care of the delivery. Incidentally, no trees or bushes were removed from our courtyard, so we have guavas, lemons, grapefruit, sapotes, oranges, mangoes, and coconuts.

What are the biggest challenges for you?

The state dictates how many employees I am allowed to have. The state cannot really judge that, and it restricts us. Everyday hardships have already led to employees stealing from us, as happens in any other crisis-stricken country. In addition, there is a mentality among workers in state-owned companies to take whatever they can get away with. Of course, that's not acceptable to us. But there's no need for it, because we pay better than the state and better than other private companies. We have now found good staff.

How do you assess the political situation between the US and Cuba?

In Cuba, we have basically always been oriented toward the US, simply because of our proximity and level of development. My big concern is that Trump will cut flight connections between Florida and Cuban provincial airports, as he has done before when only flights to Havana were allowed. The road conditions make it very difficult to travel from Havana to the east and back.

Since 1959, there have been repeated periods of greater flexibility, but the phases of aggression have been dominant. Whenever Washington took "measures," the ordinary people in Cuba had to pay the price. Life has become infinitely more complicated for them. Due to inflation, the ordinary population can no longer afford anything and no longer sees the fruits of their labor.

How do you see the situation of Cuban and non-Cuban migrants in the US?

Most people from Cuba have emigrated via Nicaragua in recent years (where you can fly without a visa, *author's note*). Not everyone's dream has come true. For some, it's because they didn't manage to get any further, at least not to the US. Others now see their dream as a nightmare, either because they were unable to legalize their stay or because they cannot cope with the harsh economic reality. Some are now being deported, while others are preempting this by "deporting themselves." In Cuba, they may then have to start from scratch because they sold their cars and houses. Still others do not even have the money to finance a return ticket to Cuba. Then there are those who have been granted political asylum and, as soon as they receive their papers, fly to Cuba on vacation, even though they are supposedly being persecuted there. This causes a lot of bad blood.

Some Cuban people are still very attached to their cultural patterns, for example when it comes to loud music. Or the disrespect they show toward police officers in Cuba. Try that with a police officer in the US—you'll be in big trouble!

Many so-called *indocumentados* (people without papers) from all countries work and pay taxes in the US. Now that they are [threatened with deportation](#), they are hiding and not showing up for work. Their children are afraid to go to school. The economic effects are enormous. The lack of workers is causing existential problems in the construction industry, in basic services, and in agriculture. The population is paying the price for Trump's policies with inflation. We are already seeing panic buying. You have to put yourself in the shoes of the *indocumentados* when suddenly your father, son, uncle, or aunt is deported. In their "home countries," which they sometimes hardly know anymore, they may have nothing left that can help them. This leads to the formation of gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador.

The interview was conducted by Andreas Hesse on March 7, 2025, in J.A. Mella, Provincia Santiago de Cuba.

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Andreas Hesse has been visiting the island since 1992 and has been writing about Cuba for various media outlets for over two decades, most recently on a regular basis for *ila*.

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