



You Can't Take It with You

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In late August, after Miami businessman Teo Babun and three anonymous partners founded a company to help Cuban exiles reclaim their former belongings on the island, 75-year-old Vicente Lago Grassot shuffled into the corporation's sixth-floor Biscayne Boulevard headquarters with the help of a cane. He carried a red-plastic folder bursting with property titles to homes, land, and a perfume factory he owned before departing his homeland in 1964. Luis Garcia Lasa called the offices of Cuba Claims Registry Assistance from Kissimmee to chat about the gas stations he lost. And Carlos Cobiella arrived at the crammed, forest-green carpeted office to reminisce about the iron factory Fidel Castro's government had confiscated. "They all had stories," Babun complains. "And they saw Cuba Claims as an opportunity for someone to listen."

From August 8 through mid-September, more than 3000 Cubans who were considering registration of their long-lost property, telephoned Babun. About 150 of them, mostly *viejitos*, paid \$99 to register their seized belongings with Babun and his associates. About fifty of those who signed up numbed executive director Tery Orizondo with live discourses that lasted an average of five hours.

When Babun set up Cuba Claims with much fanfare this past summer, he hoped authorities would use the records to help redistribute property after *la liberación de la isla*. The idea wasn't new in Miami. In the Eighties Tony Valent, a Californian, charged nostalgic Cubans five dollars each for gold-bordered property titles.

Former Miami-Dade Commissioner Barry Schreiber and Jaime Suchlicki, director of the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, began in 1991 collecting claims for a book. They never published it.

ADVERTISING

When Babun started, he thought recording each claim would take five minutes. Instead Babun and Orizondo spent hundreds of hours compiling narratives. "Our offices became a clinic for listening to stories," asserts 52-year-old Babun. "The more we started doing it, the more we realized very old people were coming in and they weren't just listing their claims."

Operating costs were sky high. Profits weren't. Orizondo says they spent \$20,000 a week on publicity. So on September 21 Babun announced that Cuba Claims would scale back and operate only on the Internet (www.cubaclaims.com). Customers would not be charged. Babun refunded money to all the clients. The five partners lost \$400,000. "We couldn't break even," Babun says glumly, his tired eyes magnified by the thick lenses of heavy-framed glasses.

Babun works in an office that includes walls covered with maps of Cuba and bookcases jammed with three-ring notebooks, containing thousands of studies on subjects ranging from abortion to the value of zinc ingots. The son of once-wealthy Cuban industrial pioneers has stewarded several other failed businesses related to the island of his birth. They have cost him more than \$2.5 million. Now Babun says he's finally learned his lesson and will make no more bad business decisions.

Unlikely as it may seem, Babun comes from a business-savvy family. His paternal grandparents left Palestine for Santiago de Cuba in 1918 and started a lumber and logging company called Relámpago (which means lightning). The family, which also owned a cement plant and a few mines, then began dredging ports to export their merchandise and ended up in the shipping industry. In 1960 the revolutionary government expropriated the Babun holdings and asked the family to leave. Teo Babun was twelve years old. He finished high school in St. Petersburg, Florida, attended college in Michigan, and worked in Wisconsin before returning to Miami in 1987. "I had been so removed from the whole Cuba thing," he comments.

"Initially I became involved because of my desire to do business there. But then it became more than that. I have a great love for Cuba and the people. I have a tremendous desire to be a part of that."

Inspired by the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, Babun in 1989 created an investment fund and a consulting firm called La Habana Investments Corporation. The fund was open to companies or individuals interested in gaining a foothold in Cuba after Castro's fall; the consultancy was for foreigners who wanted to prepare for the island's future as a free-market economy. The endeavors were the first of four that eventually flopped. Discouraged investors withdrew their money from Babun's fund and he lost \$125,000. A few years later Babun closed the book on La Habana Investments after surviving a helicopter accident in the Dominican Republic. "No one died," Babun says "But there were a lot of broken backs, broken heads, and broken legs." One of the passengers was the Dominican Republic's secretary of tourism.

Babun tried again in 1990, opening another consulting firm called Cuba-U.S.A. Venture Enterprises, which rounded up American investors. But after three years and more than \$300,000 in losses, Cuba-U.S.A. could no longer operate under the notion of investing in Cuba's unforeseeable future.

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In 1993 Babun entered a joint venture with Fort Lauderdale-based Tropical Shipping and opened yet another consulting firm. Two years later, when it seemed as though Cuba's ports would remain inaccessible, Tropical pulled out. Babun, who had poured \$1.6 million into the company, had to shut down. "There was a time when preparing to do business in Cuba was considered innovative," Babun comments. "It was strategic, cutting edge, positioning yourself at the right place, at the right time."

The following year Babun included much of the data he had accumulated in a book he wrote called *Business Guide to Cuba*. The 252-page tome, printed by the Miami Herald Publishing Co., provided information on the island's natural resources, roads, electrical power capabilities, ports, banking, and accounting systems. Babun sold 1500 books at \$300 per copy, but by 1998, it was out of print.

These days Babun's Cuba Claims Website, which has no advertisements, receives only twelve hits per day. "But I have more information on Cuba than the Cuban government," Babun boasts. "Then again, I've also probably lost more money on Cuba than anybody else in the world." Babun now dedicates much of his time to reaching out to Christian Cubans on the island through a humanitarian group called Echo Cuba. In June he returned to his country for the first time on missionary work. Babun says he cried for eight days straight while in the land of his childhood. "All your life you hear about Cuba," he says. "There's so much pent-up emotion. When you finally get there it hits you all at once."

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