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Sunday, 9 September, 2001, 16:52 GMT 17:52 UK

## Cuba learns to shop online



Few Cubans use the internet or credit cards

**By Daniel Schweimler in Havana**

Two newly-launched Cuban websites show the internet is catching on fast across the island, although one of them may not win its communist rulers' approval.

The government, which prides itself on being able to feed and house its population free of market forces, often derides capitalism in the rest of the world and the rampant consumerism that comes with it.

There is no advertising in Cuba and shopping is not much fun.

However, quietly, without any fanfare, a Cuban shopping web site has appeared, called, in English, Cuba Gift Store.

### Fridges to jewellery

It allows buyers in Cuba or anywhere else in the world to purchase anything from cookers and fridges to wine and jewellery for friends or family living in and around Havana.

Transactions are done on-line and credit card payment is accepted, with delivery of goods promised within 72 hours.

That is nothing new in many other countries.

But in Cuba, where few people hold credit cards and conspicuous consumption is frowned upon, this is something of a consumer revolution.

President Fidel Castro has said he wants the children of his country to learn how to use the



The website's home page

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internet and will promote its use in schools and youth clubs.

But most Cubans still do not have regular access to computers and surfing the net is an activity available only to a minority.

### Socialist web

For those Cuban internet users more comfortable with President Castro's Socialist revolution, there is a new website for them too.

It is produced by the Committee for the Defence of the Revolution, which is celebrating its 41st anniversary this month.



Castro wants to promote the internet

The Committees, or CDRs, were set up shortly after President Castro came to power to ensure the revolution triumphed and remained strong throughout Cuban society.

Every street and block of flats in the country has a CDR whose job is to watch, support and organise their neighbours.

Some criticise them as snoopers. Others praise them for keeping the revolution strong at grass-roots level.

Their new web page provides information, advice and history lessons.

What it does not contain is advertising or anything to buy.

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