

Additional Misc Info that is Good to Know

Some Spanish Phrases

Any Spanish you know will greatly enhance your enjoyment of your time in Cuba. Here are some phrases to start with...

Pronunciation

A /a/ like in car
E /e/ like in Bet
I /i/ like in Sheep
O /o/ like in Pot
U /u/ like in took

Greetings

Hello – Hola (Ola)
How are you? – Como estás? (COhmoh ehsTAS)
I'm well thank you – Estoy bien, gracias (esTOY biYEN, GRAsias)
How are things? – Que tal? (Ke tal)
Is everything good? – Todo bien? (Todoh biYEN)
See you later – Hasta luego (Astah looEYgoh)
Goodbye – Chau / Adiós (Chow / Ahdiyos)

Basics

Thank you – Gracias (GRAsias)
You're welcome – De nada (Deh NAAdaa)
Yes and no – Sí y no (Sii ii noh)
Please – Por favor (poor faBOR)
Excuse me (to get past someone) – Permiso (perMIIso)
Excuse me (pardon me / I'm sorry) – Perdón (perDON)
Where is? – Donde está? (DONdeh esTA)
The bathroom – El baño (el BAAnyo)
Good / Bad – Bueno / Malo (boo-ENo / MAAlO)
Big / Small – Grande / Pequeño (grandeh / peKENyo)
Cold / Hot – Frio / Caliente (friiyo / caaliienteh)
Before / After – Antes / Después (AANtes / desPOOes)
How much does it cost? – Cuanto cuesta? (kooaanto kooESta)

In the house

The room – La habitación (la aabitahsiiYON)
The bed – La cama (la CAAMA)
The key – La llave (la YAABeh)
Breakfast – El desayuno (el de-sigh-00noh)
There is no water – No hay agua (no ay AAgwa)
The toilet doesn't work – El baño no funciona (el BAAño no foon-sio-na)
I want breakfast at 8 – Quiero desayuno a las ocho (kii-ero de-sigh-00noh a las Ohcho)
Can you please refresh my room? - Puede limpiar un poco mi habitación por favor? (pwede lim'pjar unpoko miabitajom porfavor?)
I don't want eggs – No quiero huevos (no kii-ero oo-E-bos)
Did you sleep well? – Dormiste bien? (door-MIIS-teh biiyen)

Small Talk

How old are you? – Cuantos años tienes? (koo-WAN-tos AANyos tii-ENes)
I am years old? – Tengo años (TENgo... AANyos)
Where are you from? – De donde eres? (deh DONde ERes)
When did you arrive? – Cuando llegaste? (koo-WAN-doh yeh-gaasteh)
Where do you come from? – De donde vienes? (de DONde biiYENes)
From what country are you? – De que país eres? (de ke pa-IIS ERes)
I am from England – Soy de Inglaterra (soy de in-gla-TE-ra)
When do you go (from here)? - Cuando te vas? (koo-WAN-doh te baas)
Tomorrow – Mañana (maan-YAAN-na)
The day after tomorrow – Pasado mañana (pa-SA-doh maan-YAAN-na)
It's cold/hot – Hace frío/calor (AH-se FREE-oh / ca-LOR)
What time is it? – Que hora es? (Ke ORah es)
Do you like? – Te gusta? (te GOOsta)
Do you have children? – Tienes hijos? (tii-YENes Ilhos)
It is very beautiful – Es muy bonito (es mOOii bonIItoh)

Restaurant

Chicken – Pollo (PO-yo)
Fish – Pescado (pes-CAA-doh)
Pork – Cerdo (SER-doh)
Beef – Res (res)
White rice – Arroz blanco (aaROS BLAN-coh)
Beans and Rice – Congrí (con-GRII)
Beans – Frijoles (free-HOL-es)
Salad – Ensalada (ensa-LAA-dah)
Potatoes/Sweet potatoes/Fried bananas (soft) – Vianda (bee-YAN-da)
Fried potatoes – Papas fritas (paa-pas free-tahs)
Fried banana chips – tostones (toss-TON-es)

The bill – La cuenta (la koo-EN-tah)
A beer – Una cerveza
I don't speak Spanish – No hablo español
Another beer please – Una más por favor

Numbers

1–uno, 2–dos, 3–tres, 4–cuatro, 5–cinco, 6–seis, 7–siete, 8–ocho, 9–nueve, 10–diez, 11–once, 12–doce, 13–trece, 14–catorce, 15–quince, 16–dieciseis, 17–diecisiete, 18–dieciocho, 19–diecinueve, 20–veinte, 21–vientiuno, 30 –treinta, 40–cuarenta, 50–cincuenta, 60–sesenta, 70–setenta, 80 – ochenta, 90–noventa, 100–cien, 1000–mil, 134–ciento treinta y cuatro.

Food in Cuba

Cuban Food

Many travelers are pleasantly surprised at the quality and variety of food that can be found in Cuba. Vegetarians however, usually have to endure a certain lack of variety. Beans and rice are the staples, with cucumber, tomato and cabbage, conventional ingredients for a Cuban salad. Chicken and pork are the most common meats served in Cuba, however fish and some delicious seafood is also very frequently on offer. Fresh fruits and vegetables that come and go with the seasons include mouth watering mango, pineapple, papaya, guava, coconut, orange, grapefruit, breadfruit, corn, an assortment of sweet potatoes, bananas, and enormous avocados! As well as many other tropical fruit that have no equivalent names in English.

Both coffee and chocolate are produced in Cuba, and the quality of coffee is considered excellent, although quite strong for many visitors.

Milk is available although not in abundant quantities. Local cheese is good quality and Cubans like to make a tasty snack with this, some bread, and a slice of guava paste.

Cuban food is not spicy, so if you like your food with a bit of a kick, then its advisable to bring a small bottle of hot sauce, as this is can be difficult to find on the island.

Food offered in the Homestays

Breakfast is included everyday on the tour in Cuba. It is an especially wholesome and filling experience at the homestays. The breakfast varies from house to house, and typically includes coffee, milk, fruit juice, bread, eggs (or omelette), and fresh fruit.

The families pay a fee for serving food to tourists. They will provide you breakfast and offer to serve you dinner. Despite the taxes they pay, the prices compare favorably to the state run restaurants. Guests are generally served meals separately to the family. The dinners are usually an “all you can eat” deal, and you have a choice of the main dish (typically chicken, pork, or fish), at a cost of between 7 and 12CUC. If you are vegetarian you should be able to arrange a discount, and just eat the soup, rice, beans, salad, and fruit that usually accompanies the main dish. The families like you to have dinner in their house as this provides them with extra income and helps pay for their license. There is no obligation however to dine in your house, and the tour leader can suggest to you some alternatives if you are interested.

Must Tries

Ajiaco - a typical meat, garlic and vegetable stew
Fritura de maiz - these corn fritters are a great street snack
Natilla - vanilla pudding
Flan - a small Spanish caramel pudding
Tachinos or Tostones - fried green plantain chips
Platano frito - fried ripe banana

Cuban Drinks

Rum is the base ingredient for the world famous Cuban cocktails. Excellent draught beer is available everywhere in Cuba as well as local and imported soft drinks.

Typical Cuban Drinks

Guarapo – the juice from pressed stalks of sugar cane.
Prú – found in the East - a non-alcoholic concoction made from various root vegetables and herbs left to ferment, said to be medicinal - interesting.
Cuba Libre – white rum, cola, ice, and lemon juice
Cubata – the same as Cuba Libre but with dark rum.
Mojito – Ernest Hemingway’s choice of drink - white rum, lemon juice, sugar, soda water, ice, and mint leaves
Daiquirí - claimed to be a Cuban invention as well. They make it with white rum (surprise!), soda water, lemon juice, sugar, and marrasquino (a cherry liquor). Hemmingway also had plenty of these too.
Canchanchara - rum, honey, lemon juice, and cinnamon
Ron Collins - like a mojito but without the mint.
Aguardiente - unrefined rum - potent
Local Beers - Mayabe and Hatuey are perhaps the best. Cristal and Bucanero are the most commercial. Bucanero “Max” is the strongest at nearly 6% alcohol.
Local soft drinks – Cuba has its own forms of Coca-cola (tú-cola), Sprite (cachito), and Fanta (najita). Interestingly Coca Cola can also be found – a bizarre result of the humanitarian exemption to the embargo for food products.

Juices – excellent packaged fruit juice (tetra-pak) that is produced in Cuba is also commonly on offer.

Lemonade – at most bars and restaurants you can also order a limonada which is just lime juice, sugar, soda water, and ice, and is very refreshing.

Food and Drink Prices

Below is a summary of how much food and drink costs in Cuba. Whether you eat in a government restaurant, in a private restaurant (called a paladar in Cuba), or in your homestay, the prices are quite similar. There are some paladares (especially in Havana), that you may like to try, that are of a higher quality and can cost a lot more than this. The best value invariably is in the homestays.

Breakfast – included

Lunch – 6CUC-12CUC

Snack (or light lunch) – 5CUC

Dinner – 10CUC-20CUC

Beers, juice, and soft-drink 1CUC-2CUC

Cocktails 2-4CUC (depending on where you buy them)

Bottle of rum from 4CUC (white rum), up to 85CUC (top shelf 12-years-old)

Water comes in 600mL (0.60CUC-1CUC), 1500mL (1CUC-2CUC), 5 Litre (2CUC-3CUC) bottles.

Laundry

In the home stays they will offer to wash your clothes for you. This is a convenient and economic service and will cost between 3CUC and 7CUC depending on the size of the bundle of clothes you give them. They will have your clothes back to you the next day nicely ironed and folded. Remember to always set the price with them first before they wash your clothes to avoid misunderstandings!

Keeping in touch

Email in Cuba

Internet and E-mail is becoming increasingly available in Cuba. The main telecommunications company in Cuba is called ETECSA, which has offices throughout the country. These usually have machines for e-mail use for tourists and journalists visiting Cuba. The ETECSA e-mail system requires that you show your passport. Rates are quite expensive at US\$6 per hour of use. Some hotels in Cuba also have internet available, and often this is even more expensive, up to US\$12 per hour in some 5 star hotels.

Telephoning from Cuba

International phone calls from Cuba are very expensive. The cheapest being about US\$2 per minute to Canada and the most expensive being over US\$4 per minute to Europe, Africa, and Australia. You can either buy a phone card from an ETECSA to use on public phones, or call from a hotel. At present in Cuba there are \$10 and \$25 cards available. The rates from hotels may be slightly more expensive but more convenient as you are not cut off when the card runs out and only pay the cost of the call. 119 is the code to make international calls from Cuba. Cellular or mobile phones will work in Havana and other major cities, however, a significant proportion of your time will be in places where there is no service for cellular phones.

Cuban SIM Card

Cuba's only mobile phone operator, Cubacel, provides the service of renting SIM cards for tourists to use in their mobile phones, thus providing them with a local mobile phone number while they are in Cuba. The cost of renting a SIM card is 3CUC per day, and to rent a handset costs 6CUC per day. There is no official system for tourists to buy a SIM card in Cuba.

If you are using your own handset, it needs to be unlocked, and work on the 900MHz frequency band for it to work in Cuba. There is no mobile internet service yet in Cuba, and sending sms from Cuba to another country depends on the receiver's operator (Cubacel does not have contracts with all overseas operators - you will need to check with the receiver's operator).

Mail in Cuba

The postal system in Cuba is reasonably reliable, although sometimes a little slower than in other countries. The prices are more reasonable than internet and phone calls. There are some attractive and interesting post cards widely sold in Cuba (old photos of Che, Fidel and the 'heroes of the Revolution' being quite popular). You can also buy pre-paid postcards in Cuba from the shops which are quite convenient and do work.

Etiquette

There are a few general codes of behavior that apply in Cuba.

- When introduced to someone it is polite to at least shake hands. When greeting someone you are already familiar with, it is customary to shake hands (man to man) and to 'kiss' - ie touch cheeks on the right hand side, and make a kissing noise (man to woman and woman to woman). When saying goodbye to a friend the kiss is less customary unless it is a farewell.

- When joining a queue (often seen just as a crowd of people), ask who is last in the queue by saying “Ultimo?”. The person who is last in the queue (before you) will raise their hand. When the next person arrives to join the queue they will also ask “Ultimo?”, and you should raise your hand and say “Yo!”, to indicate that you were the last person to join the queue before they arrived.
- Use pleasantries such as ‘por favor’ and ‘gracias’ when you feel appropriate.
- If they are in good taste, accept ‘piropos’ (compliments given by strangers in the street) by ignoring or by saying ‘gracias’ rather than feeling threatened or reacting with scorn.
- Take Photos with Care - Always ask permission to take photos of people and respect their wishes if they refuse. If you do take a photo, offer to send copies back to them and make sure to follow through with your promise. If your subject wants immediate compensation in return for the photo taken, offering a piece of fruit or bread, or a souvenir from your home are ways to do it.
- Learn a few phrases - Learning about the customs and a few local words and phrases can go a long way and is appreciated by the Cubans. It also makes your interactions more meaningful and memorable.
- Support local artisans - Support local artists and artisans by purchasing locally made goods. Many communities sell handmade crafts that you may purchase while on tour.

Safety and Security

Cuba must be one of the safer countries in which to travel. This is in no small part due to the swift and severe penalties handed down for even minor crimes. Stealing from a tourist is one of the more serious crimes for which lengthy jail terms can be given.

There is a high concentration of police in the cities, especially in tourist areas. Police in Cuba are very well paid compared to most Cubans, so they are not so prone to corruption.

Crimes against tourists, however, do occur in Cuba, so it is advisable to take general precautions, as you would do so when traveling in any other country. The less safe areas in Cuba would be in Central Havana and Santiago de Cuba late at night, where pick-pocketing in crowded areas, and bag-snatching (especially late at night) have been known to occasionally occur. Violent crimes are virtually unheard of, as are armed robberies and hold-ups.

During your trip you will have some free time to pursue your own interests, relax and take it easy or explore at your leisure. While your guide will assist you with options available, please note that these optional activities you undertake are not part of your itinerary, and we offer no representations about the safety of the activity or the standard of the operators running them. Please use your own good judgment when selecting an activity in your free time.

If you keep in mind these basic safety precautions you will be sure to have a very enjoyable and safe visit to Cuba.

- Valuables on you while we travel - The use of a neck wallet or money belt while travelling between destinations is recommended, for the safe keeping of your passport, air tickets, cash and other valuable items.
- Valuables locked in your room while at destinations - Leaving most of your valuable items and documents locked (with a luggage lock) in your bag in your hotel room or casa is much safer and more convenient than carrying them about with you in the street. The homestays are very safe places to keep your valuables while out exploring. This is because if ever a robbery occurs from a homestay accommodation, the hosts will most likely lose their renting license and therefore their privileged livelihood. They therefore take the utmost care with the security of your belongings. It is, however, best to store any valuables you have inside your backpack or suitcase (instead of leaving them lying about the room) so as not to tempt any worker that the house may employ to help with the house chores.
- Don't flaunt it - Although they have the 'basics' such as food, housing, health care, and education, the majority of Cubans are very poor in comparison to any tourist. So it is advisable that while in Cuba, as a basic courtesy, to not flaunt your wealth excessively and announce yourself as a potential target.
- Don't carry unnecessary cash – while exploring each destination, don't to carry lots of unnecessary cash around with you.
- Going out at night – try not to carry external bags, go as a group of 2 or more, and take a taxi. Also be careful that nobody spikes your drink (not common but known to have occurred) - don't accept a drink from a stranger socializing with you, that is not in a closed can, and that is prepared out of your view.

Jineteros and Hustlers

Because of the complicated situation present in Cuba today, many Cubans feel the need to look for creative but harmless ways to earn money. One of these is to illicitly offer services to travellers such as accommodation, restaurants, and taxis. These

people, commonly known as jineteros ('jockeys' in English), are normally quite decent and friendly people, but unfortunately their persistence can often become annoying.

What complicates the situation even further is that these jineteros often aren't transparent about their business and disguise their motives, instead showing interest in becoming your friend. As a 'friend' they can make money from you by finding you accommodation or restaurants and secretly taking commissions. As an independent traveller in Cuba it is very common to meet a Cuban in the street and become friends with them, later to find out that all they are interested in is your money. This is one of the most common complaints that independent foreign travellers have about their time in Cuba.

While the services of a jinetero can be useful (in helping you to locate accommodation and a decent restaurant), and they can be quite charming and entertaining characters, what frustrates independent travellers, is that their local friend becomes pushy and manipulative in their quest to earn more commission and that the whole relationship is based on dishonesty and deceit.

Furthermore, towards the end of your stay, the jinetero often pleads with you for money to help them better their life, and frequently invents a story about a sick mother or a daughter's birthday as extra reasons for you to give them money.

Refreshingly a majority of Cubans aren't in this game and feel extremely ashamed about their fellow compatriots that are. Like people everywhere, they would feel very uncomfortable about asking for money from somebody they have just met. Most Cubans are very honest and generous people who are delighted to meet a foreigner with no interest in their money at all.

Fortunately, being part of a small group tour with a local guide, means that you will come into contact much more frequently with these honest Cubans, you won't have to rely on using the services of jineteros, and have less unpleasant interactions with people that try to take advantage of you. When the jineteros see you with a local guide, they are much more reluctant to approach you because they know you probably have your accommodation and restaurants already organized and have someone to show you around. Furthermore, they may even know the guide and know that he will easily recognize them and disallow him to socialize with your group.

The Cuban Reality

Cuba is not easy to understand. One thing travellers tend to say is that the more time they spend in Cuba, the less they understand it! Hopefully the guides on the tour can help you come to some sort of comprehension about this unique country and society.

Perhaps the most difficult thing to fathom is the economy and how it works. The minimum wage in Cuba is about US\$8 a month and the norm is between about US\$20 and \$30. How then, can the Cubans survive on such a small income? For a start, education and health care is free, and rental prices, and services such as water, and electricity are very low. Every household is also entitled to food rations, which although not free, are extremely cheap. These food rations provide a bare minimum of nutrition designed so that at least nobody starves to death.

How is it then that many Cubans are very well dressed and well fed, well beyond what you would expect based on the above? Since the government wages are so low, every Cuban has to look for ways (invent ways) to make money on the side to cover their basic expenses - they call this in Cuba la lucha or 'the daily struggle'. There is consequently a very extensive black market, and grass-roots corruption is omnipresent.

Many Cubans (especially in Havana) have relatives overseas that send remittances to family members in Cuba every year. Actually these remittances, when added up, are quite a significant portion of the real economy's income. In addition, the advent of the tourism industry in Cuba has given the Cubans new black market business opportunities and the chance to earn substantial tips for those that work in this industry.

At the depth of economic problems during the "Special Period" (the time immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of favorable trade agreements with Cuba), Communist ideals had to be compromised, and limited small-scale capitalist ventures were allowed to open. Contradictory to what you might expect, and also running against the government philosophy, some Cubans therefore do in fact run their own businesses, albeit with tight government control and restriction.

Another thing that complicates the situation is the dual economy. Cubans are paid in Cuban Pesos (M.N), while most of the shops (with the exception of a few, such as ration stores etc) sell goods in Convertible Pesos (CUC). The exchange rate of 24 M.N. to 1CUC gives them little opportunity to buy goods in CUC with their government wages alone. Only some goods are available in M.N. and those that are, are usually of inferior quality. Goods that are considered 'luxury goods' or rather 'not essential for survival' by the government, and any imported items (such as new shoes, a hair dryer, new clothes, shampoo, razors, a television etc), are generally very expensive, even compared to prices in developed countries. So for anything more than the bare basics, Cubans need CUCs in quantities that compare to what you need in developed countries.

One thing that affects the Cuban mentality is the fact that the economic situation was much better in the past, such as in the 80's when Soviet Union was helping prop up the Cuban economy. Just like a child suffers if you give them a toy and then take it away from them, the Cuban people are hurting from this. So while Cubans seem no

worse off than residents in most of their neighboring countries, people in general are less willing to accept their present situation and be content with it. Also, even for those that want to do something about it and work to make a better life for themselves, they find themselves confronted by a wall of oppressive laws covering every aspect of their lives, and are left with little or no legal options to better their lot, and few feasible illegal ones.

Apart from that, the Cubans are very educated and aware of the realities outside their country, which means that they are less inclined to accept their situation without questioning, or a certain frustration. Despite all of these difficulties you will be delighted by the Cubans' warmth, energy, and zest for life, and amazed at their ingenuity, generosity, and friendliness.

It has to be mentioned that many great things have come from the Cuban Revolution, such as free and universal health care and an education system that is the envy of most developed countries. Huge advances have been made with regard to literacy, equal opportunities, sexual equality, and eradicating racism. The Cuban government also has very strong internationalist policies and at present there are some 25,000 Cuban doctors working overseas in poor countries and communities.

Cuba also gives out thousands of scholarships to students from poor countries to come to study and obtain a qualification in Cuba. All of this while the U.S maintains a strict trade embargo on the island. Cuban policy (together with its isolation) has helped preserve and nourish the Cuban culture (music, dance, the arts, literature, and sport) so that today, it has the richest and most 'Latin' culture in Latin America, mostly undiluted by northern influences.

Our Challenge in Cuba

The Cuban government reluctantly took on tourism as a solution to the economic crisis that happened after the Soviet-block, and their favorable trade agreements with Cuba, ended. The laws in Cuba try and keep the tourists as separate as possible from the Cubans, so that socialist ideals are not corrupted, and the Cubans are not tempted to make private business with the tourists, who carry a currency worth 20 times their own.

Our big challenge on these trips in Cuba therefore, is to respect the local laws while also providing a local experience as much as possible for our groups. It's a fun challenge and as you will discover, it just makes the trip all the more adventurous! The family stay accommodation helps us a lot in this cause as you get to see how Cuban's live from the inside. It is a belief of many that homestay accommodations are only permitted by the Government as they have not yet built enough hotels to house all the tourists – so that is fortunate for us.