

CUBA TRIP –Information to Know/FAQs

BEFORE YOU GO

Packing Tips

- You will be on the move a great deal, so please pack as lightly as possible.
- It's best not to check in luggage as wait times are incredibly long in luggage claim. Guides have reported waiting up to 2 hours to get their luggage back. Carry on luggage is highly suggested and we should all try to do this. You can coordinate with your roommate to limit bringing the same item twice (e.g., hairdryer).
- Recommend luggage type is the use of a duffel bag or backpack (whatever you find easiest to carry), or a bag with wheels will be fine as long as it's not too big. Keep in mind however, that you will normally have to carry your own luggage on and off vans and along cobblestone streets, also some of the casas may involve one or two sets of narrow stairs.
- A good sized daypack is essential.

Packing Tips

- Bring all the over-the-counter medications and personal products you think you'll need. Pain relievers, cold medicines, products for stomach issues (diarrhea, heartburn, indigestion), and feminine products can be found in pharmacies, but not the brands or the prices you're used to.
- It's a good idea to bring snacks with you. You won't have a problem bringing factory sealed food in through customs and granola bars, nuts, crackers are great for long rides.
- You may want to consider bringing some of your own personal hygiene products from home, as they may not be the same quality or available while in Cuba.
- Bringing your own water bottle can reduce plastic waste and save you money. Rather than buying lots of small plastic bottles in Cuba, you can buy a large 5L bottle of water (the largest available in Cuba), and use this to refill your own smaller bottle. The 5L bottles, although heavy, are reasonably easy to carry as they have a handle and can be left in your home stay and taken on the bus.

- Weather in May – Average high temperature is 86 degrees and the average low is 73 degrees. Cuba can be quite hot and humid so consider bringing a hat, sunblock, and rain jacket/umbrella for any rainy weather.
- Consider bringing DEET bug spray or bug wipes. There may be sand flies and mosquitos out, especially if it's been raining.
- For footwear, some people can get by with just a pair of sandals. In summer, open footwear is definitely preferable, even in the evenings. For going out in the evenings, casual dress is acceptable everywhere, so there is no need to bring clothes or footwear especially for this, although some people may be more comfortable doing so. Despite their low income levels, Cubans love to dress up smartly and fashionably whenever they can. There will be opportunities for swimming so bring your swimwear.
- Electricity is 110v/220v/60hz and plugs are 2 prong US or sometimes the 2 round pin plugs. Most of the plugs are the US type and most travelers and guides have not had any trouble charging their electronics.

Packing List

- Passport (with photocopies)
- Travel insurance (with photocopies)
- Airline tickets (with photocopies)
- Cash
- Visa or MasterCard credit card
- Sun-hat
- Sandals and footwear for walking
- Watch or alarm clock
- First-aid kit
- Small towel and swimwear
- Toiletries
- Insect Repellant
- Sunblock
- Soap and toilet paper (for toilet stops on travel)
- Hair dryer
- Sunglasses
- Camera
- Reading/writing material
- Binoculars, cover for backpacks
- Hand-sanitiser gel
- Money-belt
- Soap

- Small Flashlight
- Umbrella
- Water Bottle (& perhaps the kind with its own built-in water filter, e.g., Brita)
- Women's Personal Hygiene

Currency/Money

- **BRING CASH.** All that you think you will need for your entire stay. Your credit/debit cards will not work and many people are surprised to find how expensive Cuba is. Expect to pay US prices for everything and expect to tip everyone from musicians to bathroom attendants. You'll need to bring cash because US debit/credit cards **DO NOT** work.
- Your first opportunity to change money to Cuban Currency will be in the Havana airport, our airport greeter will take us to the exchange place. It's slightly more expensive at the airport than in town, but also very convenient. In an emergency your family can Western Union money to you, which you can pick up in any city in Cuba, and sometimes our guides can facilitate an emergency cash advance.
- If you can inexpensively purchase one of the major foreign currencies (GBP, CAD, EUR, MXN) and bring that instead of USD, you'll save on the 10% tax that is charged only on changing USD in Cuba. If it's going to cost you 8% to purchase a different currency, you may find that it's not worth the hassle. It is suggested to bring clean 100s and 50s, no tears and no marks, and change only a couple hundred at a time so that you don't end up with CUC that you have to change back.

AT THE AIRPORT

- Customs and immigration in Cuba can be an intimidating process, sometimes you'll breeze through in minutes, but sometimes there are officials wandering around randomly selecting tourists and you may get stopped, questioned, and have your passport checked 6 times before you even exit the airport! Not to worry, this doesn't indicate a problem. Just remain polite, calm, and keep in mind that you are there as a TOURIST. Avoid using the word "donations". Anything you bring should be either for personal use or as a "gift."
- There is no longer a 25CUC exit tax to pay at the Havana airport.
- Note: Theft from checked luggage flying into and out of Cuba has been known to occur. This is thought to be from the baggage handlers working at the airport in Cuba. We recommend the use of a pad lock on the zipper of your main bag. This is also useful in the accommodations as well to make you feel safer about leaving any valuables in your room.

WHILE IN CUBA

Home Stay/Casa Accommodations

- Our tour involve homestay accommodation ('casas particulares'). For many people, this experience can be a major highlight of their visit to Cuba. They provide a great opportunity for travellers to interact with everyday Cubans. In some ways the homestays are similar to B&B style of accommodation, as guests are served meals separately to the family.
- Every family and every homestay is unique, with slightly different levels of comfort. However, the casas are consistently rated by travelers as more comfortable than 3 star hotels in Cuba. They provide a very different experience to staying in hotels. The rooms are basic but all very comfortable and clean, and the families will try to make you feel at home as much as possible.
- Most Cubans are very friendly and love to talk to you. In some casas the family members speak quite good English, while in others they are practiced at communicating with their non-Spanish speaking guests simply by gesturing and smiling. Overcoming these communication challenges is seen by most as part of the fun! In the towns where we have home stay accommodation, the group will split up into different homes, with between 1 and 4 group members in each casa.
- The houses we use are much nicer than the average Cuban dwelling. The casas particulares are a form of accommodation for foreigners in Cuba that is legal and formalized, and the rooms for guests are required to meet a certain standard of comfort for the house to obtain a license to rent. The fee that the owners of the houses pay to the government for this license is quite substantial.
- Most rooms have air-conditioning while a few just a fan. All the houses we use have either a private bathroom for each guest room, or a bathroom that is shared between 2 Guest Rooms. All the bathrooms have a hot water shower. A towels is provided by the home stays for each guest and soap is also usually provided (although not always). Often the host families employ people to help them do the work in the house, they will try to keep your rooms tidy while you are staying there. You can always ask them to please refresh your room if this wasn't the case, ask for some more toilet paper or soap if necessary with no problems at all, they will be more than happy to help you. Ladies- no hairdryers so please bring your own. No wi-fi or internet access will be available.
- The local tour company does its best to provide quality accommodations, the lack of resources in Cuba means that the casas may not be up to US comfort standards, and the increase in tourism has made it even more difficult to be choosy. To put it simply, these days it is a sellers' market. While the vast majority of feedback we receive is very positive, sometimes there are complaints about

lumpy pillows (feel free to bring your own), loud a/c, no toilet seat, low water pressure, and water that is not sufficiently hot.

- Breakfast is usually eggs, fruit, bread, cheese, juice and coffee. If it becomes monotonous for you, keep in mind that Cubans usually have coffee and toast for breakfast and they are especially providing you a more nourishing breakfast, change it up by eating different fruits or having your eggs prepared differently, but things like pancakes, waffles, etc are going to need to wait until you get home.
- In the casas, DO NOT FLUSH your toilet paper. The pipes can't handle it. Yes it's a bit gross to toss it in the trash but you'll get used to it :) Just keep in mind the local culture and conditions & its not up to U.S. standards.
- While mini soap bars are provided at most Home stays, these some times can be missing, unavailable at the time, or may not be the same soap that you are used to at home so consider bringing your own.

The Tour & Local Tour Guide

- Regarding concerns that the tours for Americans are formulaic and heavily influenced by state run enterprises, we are using one of the very few companies that do these tours in a way that is unique and different, so the tours provide the best way to give travelers an authentic experience. That's why we use private accommodations, private restaurants when available, and specially trained guides. If you end up not wanting to participate in any planned activity, you are free to opt out.
- During our tour in Cuba, we will be accompanied by a local group leader. The leader will have a mobile phone and if not physically with the group, are contactable at any time during the tour, including during arrival and departure days.
- The aim of the local group leader is to take the hassle out of your travels and to help you have the best trip possible. Your leader will provide information on the places you are traveling through, offer suggestions for things to do and see, recommend local eating venues and introduce you to their local friends. Many of the tour leaders are local Cubans who have either worked previously as tour guides or as translators. Others are experienced tour leaders who are foreigners and have worked in other countries in Latin America as well as Cuba.

Communications

- Be prepared yourself & warn your friends and family that you will be off the grid so they don't worry about you if they don't hear from you. You will have access to internet as it is more widely available than ever, but as with anything in Cuba it is unpredictable and unreliable.
- There is NOT wi-fi/internet at our accommodations
- You can make calls by either enabling Cuba calls with your US cell phone provider, or purchasing a calling card while you are in Cuba.

Language

- Learn as much Spanish as you can, Even simple words and sentences will go a long, long way in Cuba. People love to talk to you and if you know a little of their lingo, they'll be even friendlier. It also helps if you're staying in casa particulares so you can speak to your generous hosts.
- There are a lot of Cubans who speak English and many other languages (Italian, French, Russian, Portuguese), but to varying degrees, a lot of times they understand it better than they speak it. Either way, anyone in the service industry will know how to communicate.

More on Local Currency

There are 2 official currencies in Cuba. The Peso Convertible (CUC), and the Cuban Peso (CUP or Moneda Nacional – M.N). The exchange rates of these currencies are fixed by the Cuban Government, however they are liable to change at any time.

CUC

As a tourist, nearly all of your transactions we will be using the CUC. Presently, the CUC is at a fixed rate of 1CUC = US\$1. However, the effective value is about US\$1.03 because the Cuban banks always take a commission of around 3% when they give you CUC, whether this be by exchanging cash, travellers cheques, or using a credit card at an ATM or for a cash advance. Warning: If you buy CUC's with US\$ cash, there is an additional 10% fee. So in this case, 1CUC = US\$1.13.

- 1CUC = US\$1.13 - using US\$ cash • US\$1 = 0.88CUC - using US\$ cash
 - 1CUC = US\$1.03 - using other currencies • US\$1 = 0.97CUC - using other currencies
- CADECA exchange houses

In Cuba there are official government exchange houses called CADECA. These can be found in every reasonably sized city and also at the airport. There are CADECAs in some bigger hotels and also near to our joining home stay in Havana. These exchange houses can exchange foreign cash, make cash advances on credit cards, and exchange travellers cheques. To do any of these operations you will need your passport. Be sure to count the money you receive from the CADECA, as staff have been known to short-change tourists.

Some times CADECAS can not operate for different reasons, they don't have communication to calculate exchange rates, run out of notes, etc. We suggest you plan ahead and change cash in the early mornings to avoid queuing in the heat, and a few days before you actually run out of cash.

Cash

Cash is still the best way to travel in Cuba. Even though things with the United States are settling down now, it's always a good idea to take some hard currency with you, Preferably take Euros or GBP Sterling, as these get the best exchange rate. The only currencies that you are guaranteed to be able to exchange are CAD, EUR, and GBP, and sometimes Swiss Francs. You can also exchange US\$, however, the Cuban Government charges a 10% fee for accepting US\$, which is built into the exchange rate. Faded, torn, or heavily marked notes may be difficult to exchange. It is best to bring notes in good condition, and in denominations lower than US\$100 (equivalent)

Credit Cards and Cash Advances

Visa cards issued by US banks will not work in Cuba. Credit cards (both Visa and MasterCard) from non-US banks, should work at the CADECA for cash advances. We find occasionally that people come with a Visa 'debit card' from a non-US bank that does not work. For others they work perfectly fine. We don't know why this happens. We do know that a Visa debit card obtained through Travelex or Citibank will not work in Cuba. Credit cards are not accepted at most stores or restaurants and can only be used to draw money. Because of these unpredictable difficulties it is best to come to Cuba with a back-up plan of obtaining cash if your credit card does not work. As of the end of 2015 we still have passengers that had extreme difficulty accessing any money or bank cards whilst in Cuba.

ATMs - Automatic Teller Machines

The ATMs in Cuba work for most Visa cards, but not for Mastercards, note that it is not guaranteed the ATM you found will work fine every time. There are quite a few ATMs near to the joining accommodation in Havana, and also one at Havana international airport which is usually open and working. Outside of Havana, there are fewer opportunities to access an ATM machine so easily. At present, the only

cities in Cuba with ATMs are Havana, Trinidad, Camaguey, and Santiago de Cuba. You will need a pin number on your credit card to be able to use the ATMs.

Local Cuban Pesos

The local Cuban Pesos (CUP), are more commonly abbreviated by the Cubans to M.N (Moneda Nacional). They have a value of about 1CUC=24 M.N. This currency has very limited use, especially for travellers. You may however get the chance to use it occasionally, so it is perhaps a good idea to exchange about 1 to 3CUC, to M.N after you arrive. Having said this, goods sold in M.N that are more likely to be of interest to you, will most of the time be sold by privately run businesses. These businesses will accept CUC at a rate of about 20M.N = 1CUC. So for example, at these stores you can buy something for 10M.N with 0.50CUC, and then you not have to worry about changing CUC to M.N at a CADECA. These businesses will also give you change in M.N. The government stores that sell in M.N will not accept CUC. The M.N currency is used by Cubans for buying goods at ration stores - bodegas (for which they need their household ration card - la libreta). Goods for sale in M.N are also found at street stalls, second hand shops, and some other stores, and include items such as: street snacks (pizzas being common - for about 10 M.N), flowers, beer, second hand clothes, coffee, and surprisingly excellent ice cream (1 to 3 M.N). Something for sale in M.N is likely to be much cheaper than the same product if sold in CUC, although the quality is often inferior. The confusing thing for visitors is that Cubans call both currencies "pesos", so you have to know the value of something to know which currency they are referring to. Otherwise you have to ask. CUC is also colloquially known as convertibles, chavitos, baros, cañas, and cabillas, and also loosely referred to as divisa, dolares - although these last 2 are more specifically referring to US\$. Not all CADECA exchange CUC to M.N. The CADECA at the airport does not carry M.N.

Spending Money

- Every traveler is different and therefore spending money requirements will vary. Some travellers may drink more than others while other travellers like to purchase more souvenirs than most. Please consider your own spending habits when it comes to allowing for drinks, shopping and tipping. Please also remember the following specific recommendations when planning your trip.
- Generally Cuba is a lot more expensive than most developing countries. This is mainly due to the government placing large taxes on anything considered "non-essential", and anything to do with tourism. It is also due to the trade embargo placed on Cuba by the United States. Prices however, still compare favorably to those in more developed countries.
- If you intend to purchase many souvenirs, or if you enjoy spending a lot on big nights out, we would recommend that you take a bit more than the estimated

amount. In total as an estimate, you need to allow about US\$40 to \$60/day for expenses for the trip, where activities and meals are not included. This does not include souvenirs.

Personal Tour Budget Summary

Expenses you will have once you arrive in Cuba (in CUC), Taxi from airport to joining homestay - \$25, Other - drinks, souvenirs, communications, Food - Allow about \$15 per meal for non-uncluded meals, & Tips (see below).

Emergency Funds

- Please also make sure you have access to at least an additional US\$200 (or equivalent) as an 'emergency' fund, to be used for any personal reason or when circumstances outside our control (e.g. a natural disaster) necessitate a change to our planned route. This is a rare occurrence.

Tipping

- There will be times during the trip when there is opportunity to tip the local guides, musicians, waiters, drivers, etc. This is a completely optional practice to show your appreciation for excellent service and you should never feel obliged to do so, especially if you feel you did not receive good service. Having said that, it IS a common practice in Cuba - especially in the tourist industry - where many people rely on tips for their main income.
- We encourage discerning tipping to reward good service. You may do this individually, or your Tour Leader may offer to collect the money and tip as a group. Also at the end of the tour, if you felt your Tour Leader did an outstanding job, tipping is appreciated. There is no set amount for what is an acceptable tip for the Tour Leader. As a suggestion we can recommend \$10 to \$30 per person for the entire trip depending on your level of satisfaction and your budget.
- For local guides on day trips and other optional activities, as a suggestion we recommended a tip of \$2 to \$5 per person.
- Sometimes the groups have one bus driver that accompanies the group throughout the tour. In this case it is appropriate to tip the driver at the end of the tour. The drivers are employed by a Cuban government transport agency and therefore receive a typical Cuban salary (which would be in the range of about \$10 to \$20 a month). We therefore encourage you to tip the bus driver, especially if you received excellent service and your experience was enhanced by their presence.

Shopping

Remember to get a receipt before purchasing any valuable souvenirs in Cuba as this allows you to export them duty free.

- Cigars. Cohibas are said to be the best and hence they are the most expensive. Other notable brands are Corona, Montecristo, Partagas, Hoyo de Monterrey, H Upman, and Romeo y Julieta. We recommend to not buy cigars from street vendors, the very most of them being counterfeit or fake.
- Guayaberas have become more or less the national dress. They are a man's pleated tropical shirt and can be purchased almost everywhere.
- Rum is arguably the best in the world from \$2 to \$85 / bottle.
- Cuban artwork is for sale at many of the galleries found in Havana
- Coffee

Gifts for Cubans

- Cubans are delighted to receive gifts from foreigners even if they are items that you would consider throwing out at home. Note that what people value as gifts vary widely from one city to another. Clothes (both new and second-hand) are warmly accepted as gifts as they can be distributed among family members and friends. Soap, shampoo, perfumes, hand lotions, non-prescription medication (such as Panadol, paracetamol and ibuprofen) and Specially Pens or Pencils are actually very popular with the Cubans.
- Basically anything that normally has to be bought in a shop will be happily received, even very simple items such as hair clips for girls, colouring books/crayons, small toys for children you find along the way, etc are much appreciated. Inexpensive soap is readily available in Cuba if you intend buying some as gifts. Used mobile phones (and chargers) that work on the 900 MHz frequency are much sought after.
- Although they would be most happy to receive them, it is not necessary to bring gifts for your host families, as they are probably some of the more well-off families in Cuba and will be happy enough with just your good-natured presence. Often the host families employ people to help them do the work in the house. As much as anyone you will meet, these people would be suitable and deserving recipients for any gifts you have as they typically get paid about \$10 a month for working part-time in a private house. Some of our past travellers have recommend Nail varnish, lipstick, hair accessories, make-up, scarves etc for the ladies who really did most of the caring. If you want to take gifts for your host families perhaps something that they can use around the house or in the kitchen would be a well received and inexpensive gift - such as key rings, place mats for the table, towels, etc.

- We like to discourage people begging on the street or hassling tourists for gifts. This promotes further dependency and encourages the practice which will in turn lead to unpleasant experiences for other travellers. Instead, we would suggest offering a piece of bread or fruit. Perhaps you could offer postcard from your home, or a small pin etc. We encourage you to give gifts spontaneously to people who treat you with respect, don't ask for anything, who are poorer than the average Cuban, and with whom you have some sort of positive interaction.
- Cubans are generally not ashamed to receive money as a gift. So this is also an appropriate way to help somebody especially if they have provided you with a service you value.
- Donating larger amounts of items in Cuba can be a little more complicated. Your tour leader will be the best person to help you with ideas on who to donate to, and how best to carry this out.

Here are a few suggestions on who you might like to donate to in Cuba: cleaning staff at the hotel, people employed in the home stays, teachers and school principal of any schools you are able to visit during the tour, people working at somewhere like one of the organoponicos (urban organic farmer's markets).

Public Transport in Cuba

- Much of the transport for locals (buses, trucks, tractors, horse-drawn carriages) is subsidized by the government and it is illegal for tourists to take this transport. If the driver is caught with a tourist on board, it is assumed that the driver is taking extra money for this from the tourist and the driver can be fined. The government therefore has a bus company designed for tourists to take (called Viazul – www.viazul.com), which in effect is “public transport for tourists”. Some richer Cubans also sometimes take the Viazul service.
- The taxis around town in Havana are all required to use a taxi-meter and you are expected to pay the price the meter states at the end of the journey, plus a small tip if the driver deserves. Like most things in Cuba, the taxi is owned by the State and the driver has to give all the official takings to the Government. Most tourists leave a small tip for this taxi driver if they are pleased with the service they received as the taxi drivers rely on these tips as their main source of income because the fares they collect go straight to the government. Around town the taxi drivers will often turn off the meter so that they can pocket the takings themselves. In this case it will be useful for you to know how much the fare would cost with the taxi meter so that the taxi driver doesn't overcharge you. Around Havana a taxi fare will cost from 2 to 8CUC. A taxi from Parque Central to Vedado should cost about 3 to 4CUC. From Parque Central to the Fortresses on the other side of the bay, will cost about 4 to 5CUC.