

GENERAL TRAVEL INFORMATION FOR CUBA

Language – The official language of Cuba is Spanish, quite similar to the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rican Spanish, although the version here is quite different from that spoken in Spain (although quite similar to the one in Canary Islands because many Cubans are descendants of Canarians), Mexico and South America. Cubans tend to swallow the last syllable in a word and generally swallow the 's' sound.

Basic to fair English is spoken in most tourist locations and language should not be a deterrent to visiting the country for non-Spanish speaking tourists capable of speaking English.

Safety – Cuba is generally a very safe country with little petty crime; strict and prominent policing, combined with neighborhood watch style-programs keep the streets safe from violent crime. Tourists can walk in most neighborhoods and feel safe. Pay attention to your surroundings and your belongings like you would in any other big city. Lock your money, passport and plane tickets in your hotel room safe or suitcase. A copy of your passport is sufficient so avoid carrying the original with you. Many Cubans are entrepreneurs of one sort or another (much of the Cuban economy is bolstered by black market activities) who hope that being helpful might earn them a few dollars. Hustling is benign, and not intended to be threatening in the slightest. If anything, Cubans will try to sell you good cigars and a good "paladar" (family run restaurant) - the two most easily hustled items.

Weather – Except in the mountains, the climate of Cuba is hot, sub-tropical all year. The average minimum temperature is 21°C (70°F), the average maximum 27°C (81°F). The mean temperature in Havana is about 25°C (77°F). The trade winds and sea breezes make coastal areas more habitable than temperature alone would indicate. Cuba has a rainy season (May–Oct) and a dry season (Nov–Apr). The mountain areas have an average precipitation of more than 180 cm (70 in); most of the lowland area has from 90 to 140 cm (35–55 in) annually; and the area around Guantánamo Bay has less than 65 cm (26 in).

The dry season is characterized by mild, sunny weather with average daytime temperatures of 75° to 80°F (24°–27°C), but passing "cold fronts" can cause a severe drop in temperature, especially in December and January. The rainy season has higher temperatures with summers in the 90s with high humidity and some rain.

Medical Care – Some hotels have a nurse or doctor on call for minor illnesses and injuries. There are also several good tourist hospitals, clinics and pharmacies in Havana. Visitors can go to Cira Garcia Hospital in Miramar with emergencies, as well as non-critical injuries or illness. There is a small charge for a doctor visit, with extra fees for lab work and medicine. Prescriptions written by a physician can be filled at a tourist or Cuban "peso" pharmacy.

What to bring – If traveling in spring or fall, the weather is warm, so pack for the tropics. Summer can get very hot. Much of the joy of Cuba is walking its streets and many of those streets are cobbled, so bring good walking sandals and shoes. Shorts and T-shirts are fine for the day; skirts, nice shorts, slacks and shirts are good for evening. You might want to bring a special outfit for an evening out (nightclub, ballet, etc.). Some places are air-conditioned, so you might want to bring a light, long-sleeved jacket or sweater. Hat, sunglasses, and sunscreen are essential. Additional items to bring; extra pair of sunglasses, contact lens supplies, tissues, alarm clock, batteries, mosquito repellent, umbrella.

Electricity – Can be erratic and both U.S (110V) and European (220V) systems are used in hotels. You might want to bring an adapter for shavers. Most hotels have hair dryers. There are limits in weight and the airlines do charge for excess baggage. The total weight allowed for normal baggage is 44 lbs. Excess baggage (including any camera equipment) is charged at \$1 per pound - subject to change without notice.

Room Safes – Are available in every room for your cash, passport and other travel documents. Sometimes a small fee is charged to use it—ask at the front desk of the hotel. You do not need to carry your passport on you while in Cuba. Leave passports, airline tickets and cash in the safe. Make several copies of your passport before traveling. You will want to carry one on your daily excursions and keep the original in your room safe.

Bathrooms – If you need to go, simply ask: “Donde esta el banyo?” Public bathrooms in Cuba are not as neat or clean as what we are used to. The bathrooms in restaurants, museums etc. are the best of the lot and they usually have attendants who are tipped in exchange for toilet paper and cleanliness. \$0.25-0.50 is adequate. It’s always a good idea to carry a pack of tissues anyway.

Food – Cuban cuisine is Caribbean – not Mexican. Food is not spicy though it is flavorful. Cubans do not use chili pepper or tortillas. Expect a choice of fish/lobster, chicken, or pork/lamb for the main course, accompanied by rice, beans, plantains, yucca, or other root vegetables. Desserts of flan (custard) and/or ice cream are the standard. The hotel serves a breakfast buffet every morning. Most restaurants are run by the State, but in recent years, paladars, which are private restaurants run in people’s homes, have sprung up throughout the city. Going to a paladar is a great way to see a Cuban home and people who are bridging the gap between a collective and private economy.

Special Food Needs – The Cuban diet is heavy on rice, beans, and animal protein. Low-carb diets are difficult to maintain in Cuba, however the breakfast buffets at most hotels are amply stocked with cheese, hardboiled eggs and fruits and vegetables. Strict vegetarians (i.e., no lard, no meat bullion, no fish) will have a hard time. Cubans don’t really understand vegetarianism, and when they do (or when they say they do), it can be summarized rather adroitly in one key word: omelet - or, at a stretch, scrambled eggs. The other problem is preparation. Even if your omelets’ has no meat in it, don’t assume that it has been prepared in a manner that is in any way sympathetic to vegetarian requirements. Indeed, Cubans often interpret vegetarianism as ‘no meat chunks in the soup.’ The solution: pick out the offending items just before serving.

Snacks – Snacks are not easily obtained in Cuba. We will be eating hearty meals, and breakfast is a buffet. However, if you want to have something to take along during the day walking around, we recommend bringing granola bars, nuts, trail mix and such. Vegetarians in particular may want to bring along something to supplement their diet.

Water – Drink only bottled water. Ice for drinks (at major hotels and restaurants) comes from filtering machines and is safe to drink. Bottled water is easily available throughout Havana. Drink plenty, especially if you are not used to the tropical heat. If you’re visiting a Cuban friend in their home, it’s okay to ask if the water has been boiled. Drinks and ice cream sold on the street will likely not be made from boiled water. Eating salads in restaurants and brushing your teeth at the sink does not normally present a health concern, but each person will need to decide how careful they should be based on their own sensitivity.

Money – There are also no ATMs (for US based banks) in Cuba, so you will need to plan to bring as much spending money as you need. The Convertible Peso, or CUC is a currency that only circulates in Cuba’s tourist sector. It is essentially a bill that is worthless outside of Cuba. It may save you a few dollars if you already have Canadian Dollars or Euros and bring those to Cuba to use. However, generally speaking it is *not* worth your time to change your US dollars into Euro or Canadian Dollars to bring to Cuba. It is not illegal to have Dollars or Euros in Cuba; however, you are restricted from spending those Dollars in government stores. To buy at Cuban stores, restaurants, taxis and other services, you have to convert your dollars to the CUC. This can be done at the airport, hotel, local bank or cadecas (money changing stations). At the end of the trip you will be able to convert any unused Cuban currency back into Dollars. You cannot use credit cards or checks originating from US banks in Cuba.

At present, no US travelers may purchase any consumer goods or products in Cuba that are not for educational purposes. Consumer goods include, but are not limited to cigars, coffee, rum and souvenirs and, as such, are not allowed under the terms of the embargo; Art, music on CD and DVD, books, tapes and videos are all considered educational materials and authorized travelers are allowed to bring back these items.

Music Venues – If anything defines Cuba, it is its exceptional music. The country is noted for being the origin of the Mambo, cha-cha-cha, rumba, danzón, Cuban bolero, Latin jazz, and the son, which is the precursor of salsa. Modern rhythms that are not well known in the United States include timba. Havana has a great music scene, though like much else it is sometimes hard to find out what's going on in town.

Tips – Tipping is customary in Cuba. We suggest at least a 10% tip for meals in restaurants and paladars. Tip bellhops, maids and taxi drivers, as well as other helpful service people, like front desk clerks and cashiers. It will be greatly appreciated.

Gifts for Cubans – Cubans are a proud people, but they are happy to receive gifts. For women the best gifts are small necessities such as perfume, costume jewelry, make-up, nail polish and hair accessories. For men, cologne, disposable razors, baseball caps and t-shirts (especially with American sports logos) are always appreciated. And of course, anything for children—toys, books, chewing gum, backpacks with logos - are well received. Other helpful items to consider leaving behind or bringing along to give include: toothbrushes, sunglasses, deodorant, batteries, aspirin, ibuprofen, cold and flu medicine and vitamins.

Communications – Telephones, Internet and FAX machines. Calling from your room is reliable and easy. Cost in Havana is usually 2 CUC/minute. There is Internet access in almost every hotel in Havana now. The speed is about like dial-up, but there are some slightly faster connections. The hourly rate is 6–8 CUC per hour.

Medicines – Bring anything you might need with you. There are limited pharmacies or drug stores in Cuba and medicines are hard to obtain. Cuban medical care is excellent in general but medicines are hard to come by.

Immigration – You will arrive at Jose Martí Airport and will go through immigration before picking up your luggage. You will need your Cuban visa (which will be provided to you) and passport. They will stamp the visa, but *not* the passport.

Customs – Pass through the security checkpoint and proceed to baggage claim. Cuba also imposes a fee for overweight baggage, but this usually pertains to Cubans returning to the island and not foreign visitors. You will probably not be asked to declare gifts or have your bags weighed unless you are Cuban. You may be asked to present your claim tags for luggage and/or your passport exiting the airport, so have those documents handy.

Airport taxes – The Miami airport tax is included in the air price. To leave Havana the airport tax is \$25.00 CUC cash. This tax is not included in the trip price so please keep the \$25.00 CUC in your passport to be used when you depart Cuba.

Taxis – For extra transportation there are regular taxis throughout Havana. The tariffs on different taxis vary but most are quite reasonable. Most taxis will charge a flat fee. One example is the fee of \$25–30 CUC for a taxi from the airport to any part in Havana.

There are also tricycle taxis that you can hail at any time. You might also see “Coco taxis” available. These are essentially a scooter with a fiberglass shell but good for travel in warm weather.