



GEODYSSEY

# ***CUBA***

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**Travel guides to Havana and  
around the island**

**Planning your trip**

**Private guided touring  
holidays**

**'Easy Cuba' trips**

**Small group holidays**

**Selfdrive holidays**

**Walking holidays**

**Revolutionary Cuba**

**Specialist birdwatching**

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**Where to stay**



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Lots of things to see, and plenty of ways to see them. 'Off-the-peg' designs are the very best value, or plump for something tailor-made for you by our Cuba experts.

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Travel with a guide for the very best of Cuba.

### 19 Classic Cuba

Three days in Havana and six days touring Pinar del Río, Cienfuegos, Trinidad and Santa Clara.

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A busy two weeks covering almost the whole of the island.

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You can see a lot in just a week.

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Excellent short trip to the east.

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Great value trips centred on a few choice locations. Travel by shuttle bus or taxi. Add extra days at the beach if your time allows.

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Simple, economic and popular. A great way to sample the real Cuba.

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Ideal for couples ready for relaxation and exploring different aspects of Cuba.

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A classic choice for a two week stay. Havana, Viñales, Cienfuegos and Trinidad



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## Making a booking

**The Booking Information supplement that comes with this brochure covers dates, prices, and how to book.**

It's good to know that when you book your holiday with Geodyssey you not only get the benefit of our in-depth knowledge of our destinations from many years of making travel arrangements to Latin America, and our up-to-date knowledge of the best places, old and new. You also get our experience in designing holidays for different tastes and budgets, the confidence that your money is fully protected, and the reassurance that if anything goes wrong while you are away you have a network of helpful, knowledgeable

and resourceful people locally and back in the UK to support you. We're a phone call away when you are planning your trip, preparing to leave, or out in Cuba.

When you get back we will send you a short questionnaire to make sure everything went well and to gather your comments on the places you visited. We will also ask what you think of us. More than 95% of our customers describe their overall level of satisfaction with their holiday as "Excellent" or "Good", with over 90% rating it as "Excellent". A staggering 99% rate the service that our office provides as "Excellent".

#### We protect ALL our customers

The air holiday packages in this brochure are ATOL protected by the Civil Aviation Authority. Our ATOL number is 5292. ATOL protection extends primarily to holiday arrangements that include air travel for customers who book and pay in the UK.

Geodyssey also provides equivalent financial protection for customers who do not buy flights from us and for customers who book and pay from outside the UK.

For more information please see the Booking Information supplement that comes with this brochure.

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# Welcome

This brochure on Cuba is part of our growing series of in-depth travel brochures for selected countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Our aim is to provide you with a wide choice of travel and holiday ideas that bring out the best in each destination, so that you can pick the holiday that suits you the best.

In each country we focus on travel experiences rather than just staying put at the beach. We highlight the distinctive places to visit, ways to gain insights into local cultures and communities, the best opportunities to see wildlife, as well as great beaches and characterful hotels. There are different ways to get around too, from joining a small group with a knowledgeable local guide, to hiring a car and setting off on your own, catching special tourist buses, or having a private guide or driver all to yourself.

Also included in the mix are special options like walks in the Cuban countryside and birdwatching at all levels.

We bring all this together for you in a well-organised trip that makes the best use of your precious time and the budget you decide on. We would like to be thought of as providing the best choices, excellent service, and excellent value.

Geodyssey is not an ordinary travel company. We started life in 1993 as a travel specialist for Venezuela, an extraordinary country for which we developed our own dedicated and personal style that many people seem to like. We have grown, but we are still a small team and we really care about each and every customer. Travel is our passion, and we want to share that with you. Each of us has travelled widely in our destinations (and beyond), so if one of us happens not to have been to a particular place we offer, the chances are that someone else on our team will have been there, probably several times.

When you are deciding where to go for your next holiday you'll want to turn to someone who really knows the area you'd like to visit. For Cuba we hope you will choose us.

*Gillian Howe*  
Managing Director



E:

aliza,  
tro trabajo  
y ese porvenir

o bien claro:



PHOTO  
Entrance hall below 'La Guardia' restaurant



# Inside Cuba

Cuba is one of the world's most intriguing and enthralling countries. Hedonistic yet strongly socialist, with dazzling cities, beguiling landscapes and, of course, beautiful beaches. There's an intoxicating blend of Spanish, French, English, US and Russian influences, mixed and transformed in the tropics, and brought to life by the redoubtable and resilient Cuban people: the planet's leading exponents of positive thinking. Add to that Cuba's special history from wealthy colony to Hollywood playground, followed by the revolution and its heroes—Ché, Fidel and the rest—and you have a heady mix.

On holiday in Cuba you will certainly feel that you have gone back in time—with classic American cars and crumbling architecture in abundance. It's an evocative and memorable experience, one that will immediately intrigue you and soon win you over.

But hurry! Cuba might be about to change. Whatever might happen, Cuba as it is now is unique. Experience this Cuba before it moves on.





# Havana

*There's no city in the world to match the atmosphere and style of Havana, and nowhere with so many surprises and contradictions.*

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Cuba's amazing capital city is an unforgettable combination of the magnificent and the decayed, the lively, the hip, the arty and the humdrum, the exuberant, the defiant and the fractured.

It's hard to capture Havana in a few words, but let's start with some history.

Havana was founded by the Spanish at the mouth of a wide bay that makes a wonderful natural harbour. The new city became a vital staging post for Spain's other colonies in the New World, notably to Panama for the shipment of gold and silver from Peru. Attacks by France, Britain and pirates led to the building of fortifications to shield the port, including thirty foot city walls to landward.

What is now Old Havana developed in this confined space, so its streets are narrow and every square inch is used. The magnificent buildings funded by the port's trade, are crammed in cheek by jowl.

Eventually the walls came down and the city spread westward, phase by phase.

Today as you travel through Havana from east to west each area is marked by the styles of its period, from the colonial baroque of the old city, through restrained neoclassical styles of the nineteenth century, to bourgeois suburban, now peppered with bold modernist and brutal soviet styles.

This is a city that has been wealthy, and even in these harder times still seeks to impress. Five times bigger than the next largest city in Cuba, Havana speaks for whole country (or thinks it does), and stands for Cuba to the world.

Any city by the sea should have a grand seafront boulevard, and Havana is no exception, with its 'Malecón' skirting the bay past the Old City, then sweeping westward by the long Atlantic shore. Grandly planned avenues march across the city, between plazas small, large and enormous (for political rallies).

It's a city marked with bold gestures too: here a wall of flags, there a superbly ornate theatre for ballet, here a sixty foot portrait of Ché Guevara. Political slogans abound, with pictures of Fidel or Ché, calls for the return of the Cuban Five, the importance of Youth, or condemning the US for its invasions or for its part in the world's economic woes.

## OLD HAVANA

The old city, Havana Vieja, spans 500 years. Every street seems to have a story to tell, every building a message from the past.

The oldest and most monumental buildings are closest to the waterfront. The Castillo de la Real Fuerza guards the entrance to the bay, while the Basilica of St Francis of Assisi has guarded the souls of the city's believers since 1738. Both are historically important but neither need detain you.

It is in the narrow streets behind, bounded by the line of the old city walls, that Old Havana lives and breathes. Impossibly grand mansions sport pillared porticos, hung with doors ornately carved in Spanish oak, their upper storeys festooned with elaborate balconies in iron or stone. Many look onto equally outrageous neighbours just ten feet away on the opposite side of the street.

But this is Cuba. The buildings are crumbling, their elegance is threadbare and become a backdrop to ordinary working lives. Families chat, hug, cook and laze. Dusty hallways clatter to the sound of ball games. Laundry, pot plants and music spill out from open windows.

Declared a World Heritage Site in 1982, Old Havana is being restored. It's a long process, but the city's building teams have been steadily busy. The results are good: structures are preserved, façades brightened, magnificence restored, and at least some of the families remain to enjoy it. But the old city is a big place, and only a portion has so far been touched. Elsewhere the grandeur remains faded and the streets ooze romantic decrepitude.

The busiest streets can be jostlingly busy, and though sometimes given over to visitors are not at all bad for it—it's a lively and colourful mix. There are some excellent new hotels in this area too, with a special effort to preserve their historic buildings while providing modern comforts—often with considerable taste and style.

For your first visit, you will want to see the main plazas, the most distinctive streets and the notable buildings. There is plenty to absorb and entertain you—and many *jineteros* to tempt a few extra notes from your wallet.

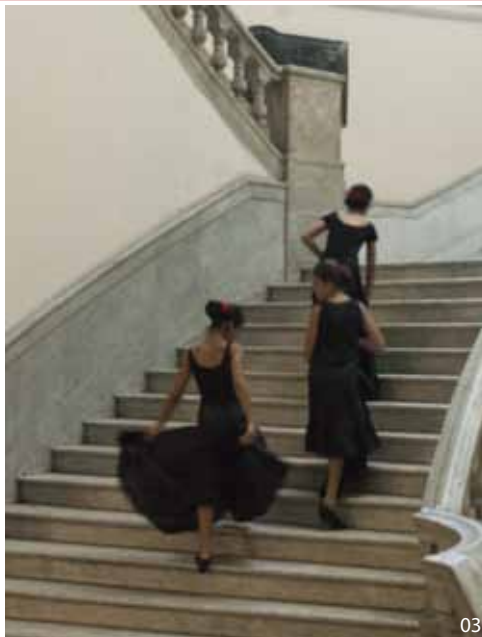
You may also feel that Old Havana deserves more, and you vow to return for another taste of the atmosphere and colour of this fascinating place.



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### CENTRO

By the mid-nineteenth century Havana could no longer be contained within the Old City and the westward expansion began. The city walls were torn down and new streets put up in styles you'd find in Paris or Madrid—now faded.

Separated from Old Havana by Parque Central and the Capitolio Nacional, Centro is Havana's busiest district today, and buzzes with the 'real' life of a modern city—Cuban style. It's not touristic, but Centro definitely has plenty to explore.

Apart from scruffy urban streets of shops, offices and apartments, there is a thriving Chinatown, the Callejón de Hamel—a street dedicated to Santería, and the remarkable but little-visited neo-gothic Church of the Sacred Heart.

### VEDADO

Where Old Havana is historic, and Centro commercial, Vedado exudes affluence, comfort and suburban space. Elegant boulevards lined with grand houses, in every style from art deco to faux renaissance, flow between leafy parks.

Hot money poured into Cuba from the USA in the 1920s and 30s, bringing to Vedado an explosion of hotels, nightclubs, and casinos

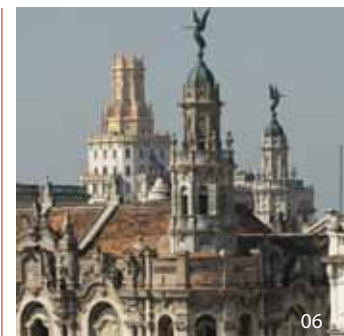
that injected the loucheness of Atlantic City or Harlem. It made Havana a place for Hollywood to be seen in, and put the city in the pocket of Mafia mobsters.

Vedado's main avenue, La Rampa, rises from the Malecón between the gargantuan Hotel Nacional and the 27-storey tower of the modernist Tryp Habana Libre. The Yara cinema, the Coppelia ice cream parlour, the La Zorra y el Cuervo jazz club, and many lesser venues are all on La Rampa, as it runs on, regaining its sobriety, towards the campus of Havana's distinguished University.

### MIRAMAR AND PLAYA

Leaping the Almendares river, Havana's westward expansion became ever more elegant and affluent in the districts of Miramar and Playa.

Before the revolution this was where the wealthiest *Habañeros* lived and had their country clubs. Afterwards their mansions were given over to government offices or were divided among favoured ordinary families. These days foreign companies and international banks congregate here as Havana gradually opens to outside capital—Cuban style.



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### Havana's history

From its founding here in 1519 'La Habana' (literally, 'the harbour') became a hub for Spanish fleets, first those laden with gold and silver plundered from the conquests in Mexico and Peru, and with spices from the Philippines landed at Acapulco and transported across Mexico. Strategically located at the Atlantic entrance to the Gulf of Mexico, and with a deep natural harbour, Spain's galleons were able to re-provision in Havana and shelter from storms and pirates before their long journey home.

Rich pickings brought frequent pirate raids. In response, the Castillo de la Real Fuerza—one of the oldest fortresses in the Americas—was built on the edge of the bay. Two other forts, the castillos 'Del Morro' and 'La Punta', were added in 1630 to guard the harbour entrance, followed by an immense city wall (of which not much remains now).

European demand for sugar and tobacco brought plantation farming to Cuba, creating enormous wealth on the backs of African slaves. At first most of the riches were siphoned off to Spain, until the city fell to the English in 1762. When it was handed back the following year in exchange for the Floridas, the colonialists obtained better terms from their mother nation for this booming business.

Spain made Havana its showpiece in the New World and the city developed in the nineteenth century as a sophisticated capital and centre of trade with stunning avenues and splendid colonial buildings. Its citizens flaunted their wealth with the latest and grandest architectural styles. In those days Havana dressed to impress.

The city has spread ever westwards since then, with each area bearing the marks of its time.

#### PHOTOS

- 01 Ice-cream and girl talk at La Coppelia
- 02 The Partagas factory in central Havana where 'Cohibas' and 'Bolvians' are still hand rolled while readers recite the newspaper—or a classic novel or a Shakespeare play (hence 'Montecristos' and 'Romeo y Julietas')
- 03 Hurrying to a ballet class
- 04 Art deco detail of the Bacardi Building
- 05 Parque Central
- 06 The Gran Teatro's neo-baroque magnificence
- 07 The Malecón as it skirts the 'Centro' district

### Getting around Havana

Getting around Havana is to experience a motor museum run by Professor Brainstamm. Buicks, Oldsmobiles, Chevies and Fords from the 1950s, shabby Russian Ladas, Chinese buses, yellow 'coco' scooter taxis, bicycle rickshaws, horses and carts, trucks and minibuses jostle each other, mostly amicably, with anything more than a few years old bearing special adaptations, fantasies of the welder's torch to cope with the absence of factory parts, plastic jollities added by proud owners, and umpteen coats of paint.



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## Don't leave Havana without seeing...

### Parks and Plazas

**Plaza de Armas**, Havana's oldest square is one of its most colourful. A statue of Céspedes, the nation's father, presides over an elegantly laid out garden where tourists jostle, school kids play and *jineteros* work their tricks, ringed by grand buildings in blowy styles.

**Plaza San Francisco**, the entrance to the Old City from the harbour, between the bold Cuban Stock Exchange and the lovely Church of St Francis.

**Plaza Vieja** among the streets of Old Havana this wide square has been thoroughly restored, with several minor museums, galleries and attractions to poke a nose into.

**Plaza de la Catedral** Havana's striking baroque cathedral faces this lovely square, bordered also by elegant historic residences. Good views from the top of the cathedral tower.

**Parque Central** A long tree-lined square surrounded by swirling traffic, Parque Central marks the edge of the Old City. Bustling, atmospheric, a slice of urban theatre with lots going on day and night.

**Plaza de la Revolución** A wide Soviet-style parade ground ideal for lengthy demagoguery and massed demonstrations of revolutionary allegiance. Ché's image at huge scale gazes splendidly from the front elevation of the Ministry of the Interior.

**Parque John Lennon** A pleasant suburban park in Vedado where the late Beatle lounges casually on a park bench waiting for you to come and talk to him, with lyrics from 'Imagine' in front of his bronze likeness.

### Eccentric delights

**Gran Teatro** A big bold neo-baroque building on Parque Central with sweeping staircases and creaking magnificence. See a Cuban National Ballet performance here if you have the chance.

**Partagas factory** Everyone knows about Cuban cigars and how they are rolled by hand in hushed workshops while readers recite Shakespeare. This is where it's done, right in the heart of Havana.

**Tropicana** Established as a casino in the heyday of Mafia influence, these days the Tropicana is the epitome of Latin dance extravaganzas. Lots of feathers, sequins

and absolutely brilliant performers.

**Camera Obscura** on Plaza Vieja gives a reflected view over the rooftops of Old Havana and down onto Plaza Vieja.

**ICAIC** A temple to Cuban cinema, every inch of wall and ceiling decked in film posters. DVDs etc are sold in its shop across the street.

**Taller Experimental de Gráfica** Specialist art/design artisanal print works producing intriguing and provocative engravings and lithos on antiquated presses.

### Museums and Galleries

**Museo de la Ciudad** Probably the finest museum in Havana celebrates the city itself. A succession of magnificently restored rooms from colonial era sit above

**Museum of the Revolution** The grand former presidential palace, decorated by Tiffany, now presents a detailed account of the revolution and Cuba's progress from slavery to Soviet partner. Outside is the *Granma*, the boat that brought Castro's men to the island. More on our 'Viva La Revolución' trip, p35.

**Museum of Fine Art** Cuba's national art museum contains the work of artists whose names are little known outside Latin America, so we see them fresh. It's an excellent collection and you will certainly find plenty to inspire you, especially in the 20th century galleries.

**Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wilfredo Lam** Closer to the cutting edge, this commercial gallery shows some of Cuba's foremost contemporary talent.

**Obrapia Street** Notable galleries here include Casa Guayasamín, Estudio Galería Rigoberto Mena, Casa de Simon Bolívar, and Casa de los Arabes.

**Museum of Rum** Along Old Havana's waterfront are palaces to commerce Cuban style. The most lively of these is the Museum of Rum, a toast to Havana Club.

**Museo de la Farmacia Habanera** Turn a corner in Old Havana to find yourself back in time among the paraphernalia and nostrums of nineteenth century medicine.

### Landmarks

**Capitolio Nacional** Completed in 1929 to emulate the US Capitol in Washington,

Cuba's Capitolio stands boldly at one end of Parque Central. Worth visiting for its magnificent interior.

**Malecón** The dramatic promenade and busy avenue that runs along the seafloor from the harbour to the Miramar tunnel. Habañeros meet, stroll, lounge, bathe, romance and party here on 'the longest sofa in the world'.

**The Wall of Flags** 'Anti-Imperialism Park', in front of the US Interests Section of the Swiss Embassy is a long-standing propaganda battlefield. When USINT set up a huge screen to play anti-Castro messages, the Cubans responded with a field of 138 flag poles to obscure it. The screen has gone, the flags remain.

**Edificio FOCSA** Great views over the city from this 33 floor apartment block, which has a French restaurant and bar at the top.

### Iconic architecture

**Hotel Nacional** Commanding in sheer scale, and its location high on a bluff facing the ocean, the enormous Hotel Nacional was built in the 1930s since when its guest list has numbered Hollywood stars, mafia bosses, to Winston Churchill,

**Tryp Habana Libre** near the Nacional on La Rampa, a stunning modernist hotel completed just before the Revolution, when Fidel made its presidential suite his Havana HQ. The lobby is spectacular.

**Bacardi Building** A gigantic lavish masterpiece of art deco, geometry stretching into the sky. Marble inlays, mahogany panelling, brass, gold leaf, flowers, fruit and nudes by Maxfield Parrish. A nice cafe too.

**La Moderna Poesía** An extraordinary contrast to the Bacardi, also art deco but bloated and squat—a gorilla of a building. Inside is a books, music and movies shop.

**Edificio Solimar** Looking across the Malecón to the sea, its curvy concrete balconies like cartoon waves, this early (1944) modernist apartment building stands for many other fine but decaying examples in Centro.

**Teatro Nacional** Curved concrete, out-sized overhangs and glass grids evoke 1960s public culture seriousness in this nearly successful building on P. Revolución.

**Russian Embassy** If you're driving out to western Cuba, chances are you'll pass this

unloved monster, once home to legions of Soviet advisers, as you navigate Miramar.

Brute authority and space-race aesthetics.

**Edificio Girón** If you like the Russian Embassy you'll love this 1960s apartment block, transposed from Moscow suburbs to the Malecón. Soaring concrete walls launch themselves off rocket feet.

### Spanish forts

**Castillo de Real Fuerza** The oldest stone fortress in the Americas, newly-reopened as a maritime museum charting Havana's seafaring history—from shipyards that were among the busiest in the world, to a huge model of the Santísima Trinidad, which fought at Trafalgar.

**Castillo de los Tres Reyes del Morro** Dating from 1589, this impressive fortress commanded the entrance to the harbour. Now open for visitors, its former guises included the gaol in which Cuban poet and novelist Reinaldo Arenas was held for being gay, the film of his autobiography *Before Night Falls* starred Javier Bardem.

**Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña** Big brother to Castillo El Morro, *La Cabaña* was the largest fortress complex in the Americas. Its small museums include Ché Guevara's office from 1959.

**Castillo de San Salvador de la Punta** You'll drive past this small fort between the Malecón and the harbour entrance, probably wondering what's inside. Though it stands well and is in good shape, there's not much to see within.

### Santería

**Museo de los Orishas** Santería's pantheon runs to 401 gods, or *orishas*, and here in this lively mix of museum, church and cultural centre, the key protagonists are represented and the basis of the African-Cuban faith explained.

**Callejón de Hamel** Community artist Salvador González's street of murals reflecting the experience of Santería and the African cultures of the Cayo Hueso barrio has turned a back alley into a community hub.

### Cafes, bars and music

**Coppelia** Brilliant ice-cream parlour much loved by locals, a futuristic pavilion with vaulted dome and stained glass set

among banyan trees. Great for cooling off and people-watching.

**Le Louvre** Busy french patisserie on Parque Central attracting an arty crowd.

**La Guarida** Book well in advance for dinner at the emperor of *paladares* (small privately-run restaurants), hugely atmospheric, impossibly romantic and great food, featured in *Strawberry and Chocolate*. A legend.

**Taberna de la Muralla** Deservedly popular microbrewery and bar that spills out onto Plaza Vieja, offering excellent Cuban beer.

**La Zorro y el Cuevo** A basement club in Vedado for serious jazzers. Virtuoso performers (some top names). Reasonably priced, cramped, smoky and dark. Also consider **Jazz Cafe**.

**El Gato Tuerto** Sophisticated venue in Vedado for a range of Cuban music styles, great cocktails, and a nice restaurant.

**Delirio Habana** Late night music venue looking out to the Plaza de la Revolución from the top floor of the Teatro Nacional (above).

### Hemingway specials

Captivated by Cuba, especially Havana, Ernest Hemingway, man of action, war correspondent, hunter, sailor, rumbustious drinker, philanderer, and Nobel prizewinner lived here for 20 years.

**Finca Vigía**, his home on the outskirts of Havana from 1939 to 1960, has been preserved, shrine-like. His tiger skins, typewriter, mementoes, size 11 shoes, and boat stand at ready.

**El Bodeguito del Medio** and **Floridita**. Long-established bars in Old Havana much frequented by Hemingway in search of the perfect daiquiri. Extremely busy in high season months.

**Hotel Ambos Mundos** You can visit room 511, looking out to the harbour, which Hemingway rented from 1932 until he moved to Finca Vigía. Everything is just as if he had popped out to a bar or for a spot of marlin fishing from writing 'For Whom The Bell Tolls'. His lover, the wife of an airline magnate, is said to have climbed through his window, 5 floors up, for an illicit rumba. Naughty girl.

## Your Man in Havana

Suggestions for a short visit to Havana, with a your own private guide to the city.

### One day only

A day is much too short a time for one of the world's most amazing cities, but sometimes needs must.

We recommend that you stay in a hotel on the spot in Old Havana. Your guide will collect you for a morning's walking tour of the streets and squares of the old city. There should be time before lunch to visit either the City Museum or the Museum of the Revolution as well. Stroll a little longer in Old Havana after lunch.

To get the feel of the wider city the ideal is a driving tour, and there is no better way to travel than in a gleamingly maintained classic

American car from the 1950s. A two hour tour includes many of the main sites, though you've scant time to stop and explore them.

Back at your hotel say 'hasta la vista' to your guide. An evening stroll, a mojito at Floridita, and dinner at a restaurant close to your hotel would round off a perfect day.

### Two days

With two days you can spread your wings a little further. There is so much to see and do in Old Havana that you would devote the whole of your first day to exploring it with your guide.

You would spend part of the second

day with a driver and your guide exploring Centro, Vedado, Miramar, and Playa, including the Plaza de la Revolución, the Wall of Flags, Casa de la Amistad and John Lennon Park. There is time to stop and explore, and usually time for some flexibility—so consult your guide early if there is something special you'd like to include.

Back in the old city in the afternoon, your guide will draw you to a selection of the more unusual sites in which the Old City excels: the perfume museum, Taquechel pharmacy, Havana 1791, the Bacardi building, and more.

### Three days

Three days begins to do justice to Havana (though a month would not be enough). Follow the 'two day' schedule then on the third day choose between three options, each with your own private guide:

- **A day of Hemingway** A trip out to Finca Vigía, returning to visit room 511 in Hotel Ambos Mundos, Bodega del Medio and Floridita.
- **A day of art** Visit the Museum of Fine Art, galleries on Obrapia, La Casona Cultural Centre, Taller Experimental de Gráfica, and the studios of selected Cuban artists

such as Carmen Montilla and Eduardo 'Choco' Roca.

- **A day of cigars and rum** Visit the Havana Club museum, including rum tasting and cocktail lesson, visit a cigar factory and museum, and the 'Cigar Smokers Hotel', where you may meet the 'roller of the house'. If you wish to visit specialised cigar stores your guide will advise on the choices available.



# Around Cuba

*Away from the tourist beaches and the bustle of Havana, the 'real' Cuba has lots for the traveller. There is glorious natural scenery, a scattering of atmospheric colonial towns, and gorgeous coastlines.*

## WESTERN CUBA

Western Cuba is blessed with spectacular scenery, a proud regional character, and a scattering of quiet beaches.

A far cry from the bustle of Havana, western Cuba has a lazy rural feel. As in many parts of the countryside, one has a sense of going back in time. Farmers use oxen to plough the fields, the horse and cart is much in use, and tobacco leaves hang in thatched wooden *vegas* or drying houses.

Chains of hills run along the spine of the region, with the Sierra del Rosario in the east, and the Sierra de los Organos to the west.

The Cuban national tree, the Royal Palm, is everywhere and gardens grow bananas and other fruits in abundance. Flaming flamboyán trees, purple bougainvillea and red hibiscus stand out against fields bursting with the vibrant green of tobacco flourishing on the rich soil.

### Sierra del Rosario

Just an hour up the autopista from Havana, the Sierra del Rosario is a remarkable success story for Cuban conservation. Its pretty limestone hills have been extensively reforested and now the region boasts UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status. Bird life is particularly good, and there are plenty of opportunities for walkers. Its a pleasant place just for exploring too.

The epicentre is **Las Terrazas**, a harmonious eco-resort and model working community founded in 1971 to explore how self-sufficiency could work in a Cuban context. The answer seems to be 'excellently'.

The climate is suited to coffee, and close to Las Terrazas an original nineteenth-century coffee plantation house, **Cafetal Buenavista**, has been restored, complete with some of its drying terraces and the incredibly cramped slave quarters.

Orchids grow well here too and the village of **Soroa**, nestling in the hills of the Sierra del Rosario, hosts an orchidarium with over 700 species, 250 of which are native to Cuba.

### Sierra de Los Organos

Limestone scenery runs amok in the Sierra de los Organos, with the most extraordinary formations of complex caves and rocky outcrops.

Sheer-sided hills, known here as 'mogotes', rise craggily in many parts. Close to the little town of Viñales, the hills are set above pastures that are flat as a billiard table and scattered with traditional smallholdings, with the same other-world beauty of the limestone landscapes of Yunnan in China. UNESCO has been here too, rightly declaring the Viñales Valley a 'world cultural landscape'.

The town of Viñales itself preserves the same rich traditions, with its pantile-roofed, colonnaded buildings running the length of the main street, and picture postcard wooden houses set in neatly fenced gardens. It's a step back to an idyllic era, but this is a thriving community too and a thorough delight.

An excellent stop for gardeners is the nearby **Casa de Caridad**, a private house where the family maintains a tradition of growing local species: a lush mix of ornamental and medicinal plants and flowers, orchids,



### Tobacco

The little farms of Pinar del Río region grow 70% of Cuba's tobacco. Their particularly aromatic and mild flavoured leaves are in demand throughout the world. It is worth visiting one of the region's many farms (or *vegas*, from the word for a tobacco field). The most notable are in Vuelto Abajo, the best tobacco producing area just south west of Pinar del Río City along the Carretera Central, including that of the most revered grower, the late Alejandro Robaina.

Farmers harvest the large fleshy tobacco leaves when they are green, stitch them into pairs and hang them up in the palm-thatched drying barns that dot the landscape.

When the leaves have dried to a reddish gold they are bundled together and stored for about a month to ferment. They are then hand-sorted and classified, then stored for a further two months to mature.

The finished product is then taken to the cigar factories, where skilled hands roll them to create the nation's most iconic export.



bromeliads, palms, and fruit trees.

Among the many caves in the region are the **Cueva del Indio** (Indian's Cave), where Arawak people found temporary refuge when the Spanish arrived on the island, eventually driving them almost to extinction. Visitors can walk and explore the interior by rowing boat to reach a small waterfall. Other caves that have been made over to tourist 'attractions' can be safely ignored, with the exception of the **Cueva de los Portales** which was Ché's HQ during the Cuban missile crisis and is worth a visit.

Not far from here is **Hacienda Cortina** (now known as Parque La Güira), an early twentieth century folly reminiscent of Stourhead or Giverny; a surprising find and a great place to stop for a stroll or a picnic.

### Pinar del Río

The provincial capital of western Cuba, Pinar del Río is a largely commercial town with unusually little to recommend it: a cathedral, regional museums, and busy streets of small shops. There is also a cigar factory, if you missed the Partagas version in Havana.

### CENTRAL CUBA

Central Cuba stretches from Santa Clara and Trinidad to Las Tunas. It hosts the magnificently colonial towns of Trinidad and Cienfuegos, the more cosy and intimate Camagüey and is split in two by the Carretera Central that links Havana with Santiago and the major cities along its length.

The region is also divided between the beautiful mountain range, Sierra del Escambray, to the south with its tropical vegetation and colonial sugar plantations and the flatter agricultural plains to the north, famous for its agriculture, dairy farming,

pineapple plantations and fruit orchards, where, away from the Carretera Central, you will meet the people and also gain an insight into Cuba away from the tourist track.

There are also stunning cayos to the north and excellent sandy beaches to the south near Trinidad, see page 41.

### Trinidad

Trinidad is the loveliest example of a colonial town in Cuba. Originally founded by Diego Velasquez as a base for gold mining in the Sierra del Escambray, the town's fortunes flickered briefly, and it was not until the early half of the 19th century that Trinidad flourished and became one of Cuba's most important centres for sugar and slaves.

With the demise of the slave trade Trinidad's sugar plantations went into steep decline and the town became almost forgotten. Its colonial mansions, public buildings and cobbled streets fell quiet. Preserved by neglect, with the arrival of a measure of tourism the town's undoubted charms have made it a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The central squares and streets have been restored, the fine homes have been brightly painted, mansions converted into museums, shops sell hats, colourful handicrafts and hand-rolled cigars—all made hereabout—and the town has come very much alive.

Music has flourished particularly strongly, and almost every street corner seems to be sway with lilting rhythms from musicians who take up position almost anywhere when they are not playing a local bar, or Trinidad's famous Casa de la Trova, generally acknowledged as one of the best in Cuba.

Trinidad is close to excellent beaches—see p41.



### Sierra del Escambray

The pine-forested hills of the Sierra del Escambray, behind Trinidad, rise to 1440m. Sparsely settled, with few roads, this is gorgeous countryside for walking, with lovely views, crystal clear rivers, tumbling waterfalls, pools, caves and underground streams. Geologically, the sierra's 'double dome' structure explains the variety of its landforms, matched on the surface by forest, open hillsides, look-outs, family farms and small coffee plantations. There's something new around every turn. Bird life is plentiful, and with a naturalist guide you are likely to see a lot, including, with a little luck, the world's smallest frog. Horse-riding is also an option.

### Lago Hanabanilla

Lake Hanabanilla, a sinuous sparkling lake set gorgeously below the slopes of the Sierra del Escambray, is on the far side of the sierra from Trinidad and is more easily accessed from Santa Clara. The lake looks beautiful in its unforgettable setting from any angle and makes a fine starting point for walks into the sierra itself. There are boat rides on the lake, and anglers may be excited to hear its widemouth bass reach record sizes. The not very lovely **Hanabanilla Hotel** (p46) is the only real accommodation option, but works well.

### Topes Collantes

On the Trinidad side of the range, Topes Collantes is a mountain resort built at the height of Soviet influence. Intended as a reward for the party faithful, it feels as though Khrushchev himself might appear round the corner. It's worth a curious look, and is well situated for good walking trails.



02



03



04



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## Cienfuegos

Cienfuegos was founded by French immigrants from Bordeaux and like Trinidad grew in importance with the sugar trade. Its squares and boulevards have a French elegance about them, in contrast the Spanish styles of its neighbour.

The Parque José Martí is the town's focus, a wide square with a bandstand and triumphal arch, shaded by palm trees. A late 19th century theatre looks onto the square. The Palacio Ferrer is a fine early 20th century edifice, now the Casa de la Cultura, and well worth the effort to climb its turret.

Another extraordinary architectural folly is the Palacio Valle a fantasy Moorish palace, now a restaurant, looking to the bay.

## Santa Clara

The very pleasant university town of Santa Clara was founded in 1689 by citizens of Remedios escaping pirates. Life today revolves around the central square, the Parque Vidal, where Santa Clarans like to stroll in the evenings beneath its royal palms, flanked by the town hall, library and an elegant theatre. From here you can stroll along Independencia—a lively shopping street.

The last battle of the revolution took place at Santa Clara, when Ché Guevara's band of bearded fighters used a bulldozer to derail an armoured train bringing reinforcements to Batista's forces holed up in the city. Santa Clara fell to the revolutionaries soon after and Batista fled into exile. The bulldozer and the train are preserved where they stood. In town the 1950s Hotel Santa Clara Libre still bears the bullet holes it took in the action.

A mile from the centre a huge bronze

statue of Ché in combat fatigues, trailing a machine gun, stands heroically above the Museum of the Revolution, given over to Ché's life with memorabilia and photos showing his progression from medical student to revolutionary icon. Next door is a quiet mausoleum holding his remains, recovered from Bolivia in 1997, with those of 16 of his men.

## Remedios

The exquisitely sleepy colonial town of Remedios on the road from Santa Clara to Cayo las Brujas is a welcome tonic after enervating, exciting Havana! Take a moment to walk round its lovely square with its pretty, neoclassical bandstand.

Founded in the 16th century, much of the town was destroyed by fire and most of the buildings date from the early 19th century. However, in spite of its size the town hosts two churches, one of which, El Mayor de San Juan Bautista, dates from the 16th century and is said to be the oldest church in Cuba. The church was restored following an earthquake in the 1940s thanks to a donation of \$1m from a Cuban milliner, Eutimio Falla Bonet. Its baroque altarpiece is encrusted with gold leaf.

The simple but charming Hotel Mascotte was the 1899 meeting place for General Maximo Gomez and President McKinley to discuss the discharge of Cuban troops who had fought in the Spanish-American War.

## Camagüey

Out of reach of most visitors, in the agricultural central heartland of the country, Camagüey is an excellent place to stop if you are driving between Havana and Santiago.



### El Mayor de San Batista

The lavish baroque altar of El Mayor de San Batista in Remedios (see text) is encrusted with gold leaf.

### Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs)

Central Cuba is home to The Bay of Pigs, the site of an abortive invasion by US-backed Cuban exiles on 17 April 1961. Today history buffs can visit a museum in Playa Girón, which displays artefacts, photos and a film showing how the invasion was repelled and within 72 hours, 200 CIA-trained Cuban exiles were killed, 1,197 captured and 11 planes shot down in the failed operation.

### Ciego de Avila

If you have time to stop and explore, then spend a little time in this picturesque, easygoing town, founded in 1849, which appears comfortable and almost suburban.

You will see examples of local art in the Galeria del Arte Provincial on the Parque Martí and lovers of Art Nouveau should peep into the Museo de Artes Decorativas. Its exhibits also reveal the level of luxury enjoyed by the colonial population.

#### PHOTOS

01 Mogotes of the Viñales valley, Pinar del Río

02 Trinidad

03 El Saltón, Sierra Maestra, see p46.

04 Tobacco drying, Pinar del Río

05 Straw hat in early stages, Trinidad



The town serves productive farmlands stretching for miles, has its own university, and generally buzzes with life. Its rich historic past is reflected in its colonial buildings, churches and cobbled squares, and single storey mansions around elegant courtyards.

Camagüey is also lively and good fun. There is excellent salsa most evenings at Hotel Gran.

## EASTERN CUBA

**E**astern Cuba, the 'Oriente', embraces some of the most stunning scenery to be found anywhere in the Caribbean. Gorgeous coastlines, imposing mountains, and colourful cities make this one of Cuba's highlights.

### Santiago

Tucked between the mountains of the Sierra Maestra and Gran Piedra, Santiago de Cuba is set beside the Caribbean across a fine bay. Looking down from the hills, you are presented with a fabulous view of blue sea, forest-clad mountains, and a city clothed in bougainvillea and flamboyán trees.

The city's streets climb up from the harbour to a small historic quarter dating from colonial times, with a fine cathedral set on a grand square, the Parque Céspedes. The older streets radiate from the square, their grand buildings in colonial baroque and neoclassical styles testifying to past wealth from sugar and slaves. The city grew to a considerable size, with leafy avenues serving suburbs that flourished in bourgeois years before the revolution. Times are much harder these days, but Santiago thrives on its good-humoured resilience and an appetite for life itself.

Santiago was Cuba's capital for a few decades until it was decided that Havana had the better harbour. There has been a rivalry ever since, with Santiago considering itself more essentially 'Cuban' than Spanish and American-influenced Havana. Accordingly it was Santiago that led the way to independence from Spain in the 1870s and against the Batista regime in the Revolution.

Santiago's character is different in other ways too. This is Cuba's most 'Caribbean' city, with vibrant African influences, a busy carnival, its own styles of music and dance, and an important role for the cult of Santería.

European influences include strong French elements from immigrants who resettled here from Haiti.

Among the sites, Santiago offers the beautiful House of Diego Velasquez, which holds a museum of Cuba's social history in creakingly atmospheric rooms that look out through traceried shutters onto the main square. The Museo del Carnaval is a fun place, with examples of masks, costumes and instruments; there are lively dance exhibitions here on many afternoons. An assortment of other museums, many dusty, include the houses of notable *Santiago*eros, a rum museum, and the Ortiz centre of African culture. Santiago's key role in the early days of the revolutionary struggle are honoured in the Museo Frank Pais, the house of one of Castro's earliest (and youngest) adherents who led the 30 November 1956 uprising, and the Museo de Lucha Clandestina marking the uprising itself, set in a beautiful courtyarded house. Details of Fidel's attack on the Moncada garrison are force-fed to visitors at a museum on that site. More light-hearted is the Classic Car Museum which houses the Castro family's cars among many others. Most are still roadworthy and are taken out for a rally as part of the Expo Caribe in June. Several small art galleries are worth calling at.

Santiago's musical heritage is second to none, with plenty to explore in this domain too. Its Casa de Trova is among the best, and there are many other venues around town. Cuban *son*, which underlies most of today's Latin music styles, including *salsa*, is said by many to have originated in or around Santiago. *Son* is at the heart of the music of Buena Vista Social Club - whose stars Compay Segundo and Ibrahim Ferrer hailed from this part of Cuba.

### Holguín

Some international flights touch down in Holguín, which happily makes a good place for a first night in Cuba. It is a genteel city of colonnaded squares and gardens with a friendly atmosphere: a pleasant place to explore in an unruffled way. There are museums and churches to see in the day, while in the evening there is nothing nicer



### Who was Ron Bacardi?

The first clear or 'white' rum was created by a Sr Facundo Bacardi Masso in Santiago in 1862, by filtering the ordinary liquor through charcoal and aging in oak to restore some flavour. The family distillery housed fruit bats in the roof, hence the brand's bat symbol. With the end of Cuba's War of Independence (1895-98), the creation of *Cuba Libre* and the daiquiri resulted in a surge in demand for rum, especially the white variety. The success that followed was rapid and huge, demonstrated by the Bacardi's family mansion in Santiago and the fabulous art deco Bacardi building in Havana (pictured). Today it is the world's largest privately-held drinks company, with a host of global brands in its stable, but HQ'd in Bermuda with no production in Cuba since Castro confiscated its Cuban assets in 1960.



### Gran Piedra

Despite its prosaic name (meaning simply 'Big Rock') Gran Piedra, 40 minutes from central Santiago, is a special place. A colossal rock, ranked, if you will, as the third largest rock on the planet stands on a 1200m peak facing the Caribbean.

On a clear day the view from the top is formidable, extending across the city of Santiago and far into the Sierra Maestra to the west, and covering the entire southeastern coast. Some cold war strategist ran a road up to the rock, which does make it easy to get the view, and placed a Dan Dare-style radar tower beside it. French planters fleeing Haiti were allowed to set up *cafetales* (artisanal coffee plantations) in these hills, now a 'unique and eloquent cultural landscape' and UNESCO World Heritage Site. A few of the *cafetales* remain in production, and some can be visited. The Gran Piedra and Baconao National Parks protect the tropical forests (which include tree ferns) down to the sea.



than to sit in one of the squares and watch the townspeople go by, but even so this is not a town to spend long in.

Holguín province has a fascinating history going back to Taino times at least. It is also the birthplace of the Castro brothers and of Batista, the dictator they overthrew.

Nearby Gibara, now a simple fishing village, was originally the main town for the region. Some of its grander houses echo its previous rank.

### Baracoa

Baracoa, near the most easterly point of the island, was accessible only by sea until the 1960s. Columbus stopped here during his second voyage and wrote in his log 'this is the most beautiful land that human eyes have ever seen'. It is still an enchanting spot. Bayamo is a welcoming town whose people value their degree of independence from mainstream Cuba. The scenery and beaches around it are lovely, and the road from Baracoa to Santiago (built on Ché's orders) is spectacular. Chocolate, coffee, coconut palms and tropical fruits grow in abundance, though the difficulty of reaching markets elsewhere on the island keeps the area poor.

### Bayamo

Bayamo, founded by Velasquez, is the proud capital of the province of Granma. It is a calm, typically Cuban town with immaculate colonial buildings and a rich history. Belying its quiet sobriety, Bayamo was an instigator of Cuba's war of independence and also of the abolition of slavery on the island. It is the birthplace of Carlos Manuel Céspedes considered the 'father of the Nation': who was the first plantation owner to liberate his slaves. He also began the Cuban independence movement against the Spanish crown. Clearly not the sort of people to be taken lightly, Bayamo's citizens burnt their town down during the independence

struggle, rather than hand it to the Spanish.

If you're here on a Sunday you will see locals playing chess or dominoes around the main square. You'd be welcome to try your hand if you've a spare ten minutes and don't mind a drubbing.

### Santo Domingo

An area of considerable natural beauty and a must-see location on the revolutionary trail. Situated amidst forests deep in the Sierra Maestra, Castro and his guerrillas set themselves up here as a focus to inspire the Cuban people towards their revolution. Their headquarters at La Plata can be visited from here—a drive into the mountains in a Russian jeep followed by a not too strenuous hike. You can also trek right across the mountains to the Caribbean from Santo Domingo, a journey of several days with some pretty rough camping.

### Mayarí

The busy little market town of Mayarí, below the Sierra Cristal, marks the start of stunning scenery for those driving east around the coast. At Pinares de Mayarí there are some good country walks in pine-forested hills. Coffee is one of the area's main crops. A bumpy drive on country lanes brings you to Birán, birthplace of the Castro brothers, now a museum.

### Guantánamo

Guantánamo is a typical everyday Cuban town that might not hold your interest for long en route between Baracoa and Santiago on the lovely La Farola road. It's quite odd to find a US naval base here. If you do stop, then look for the genuine Russian sputnik opposite the Guantánamo Hotel: an unsubtle raspberry to the US from the early days of the space race. With eyes half-closed you can imagine a peasant girl (a guajira) from these parts (so a guajira Guantanamera) breaking the heart of 1920s crooner, Joséito Fernández. Now you'll be humming that tune for the rest of the day.



### Cayo Saetia

This strange safari-park island once served as a country club for party officials and army higher-ups. Zebra, antelope, buffalo, giraffe, and ostrich were imported for target practice. They now roam free in surreal splendour.

Intrigued and disbelieving, we arrived at dusk, parked our car and made our way to the hotel's little gate. Suddenly a galloping dromedary bore down on us, chased by the gardener as it made its escape from the garden. We stepped smartly aside as the hefty 12ft high beast ducked and clattered through the 9ft archway, snorting its annoyance at having been found out yet again.

#### PHOTOS

- 01 Prima ballerinas in the making
- 02 Ché portrait, Museo del la Lucha Clandestina, Santiago
- 03 Parque Céspedes, Santiago
- 04 Heated debate
- 05 Sierra Maestra



# Planning your trip to Cuba

## The best of Cuba

Since launching Geodyssey in 1993 we have always prided ourselves on creating travel ideas that are individually adapted to each country we offer. Each of our destinations is very different, and each has its own ways to discover and enjoy it.

Cuba certainly has a huge amount to offer, much more than any other island in the Caribbean. To get the most from a trip to Cuba the best options are:

- **Private guided touring** Travelling with your own local guide really does add a lot to the experience of Cuba. You'll have a rich experience with lots to see and do each day, really getting close to the real Cuba. **page 18-21**
- **'Easy Cuba'** This is our name for simple itineraries where you explore each place for yourself (sometimes with a local guide for a day or half-day), and travel between locations by special shuttle buses or by private transfer in a chauffeured car or taxi. **page 22-23**
- **Selfdrive Cuba** Driving in Cuba is an adventure itself, but you can really see a lot and get to know Cuba at first hand. For confident drivers (and unruffleable navigators) this is a great way to see the country at your own pace. **page 24-29**
- **Small group holidays** On our 'Cuban Odyssey' holiday you join a group of like-minded travellers on a convivial fully-escorted trip around the island. **page 30-31**
- **Cuba on foot** A walking holiday is a great way to explore the Cuban countryside, take in some fabulous scenery, relax and get fit. **page 32-35**
- **Revolutionary Cuba** The extraordinary story of Cuba's revolution told against the backdrop of the places where it all happened. **page 35**
- **Birdwatching in Cuba** Cuba is a great place for a birdwatching trip, with plenty of variety, the most endemics in the Caribbean, and lots of enjoyable scenery. **page 36-39**

*For beach options see pages 40-43*

*For hotel suggestions see pages 44-47*

## The right design for you

Our Cuba experts have carefully designed each sample holiday in this brochure to be the best of its type. You can choose with confidence one of those itineraries 'off-the-peg', just as it stands. We can also design something just for you on a fully 'tailor-made' basis.

Our specialists are available to advise you. There is plenty in this brochure to help you plan your trip before you contact us, but if you are in a hurry please at least just browse these pages to get the flavour of what's possible before you call!

### Off-the-peg holidays

**Choose a holiday design straight off-the-peg for the best possible value.**

The designs shown in this brochure have been specially created to focus on highlights that most of us with a real interest in Cuba will want to see and experience.

By choosing one of these carefully crafted designs 'off-the-peg', ie exactly as it is described, you have the advantages of a private trip (not in a group) to start on any date, with a thoughtfully designed itinerary that fits international flight options, at a very competitive price. There is often a choice of hotel selections at different budgets.

While an 'off-the-peg' design cannot be changed without increasing the price, you can easily add extra days at the start or end of the holiday. You might round off your trip with a few days at the beach, or spend longer in Havana.

The letters "B", "L" and "D" (for breakfast, lunch and dinner) indicate the meals that are included in the prices in the Booking Information insert.

#### How to book your holiday 'off-the-peg'

To book your holiday 'off-the-peg', select your favourite holiday design from this brochure, check our current Booking Information supplement for prices and latest details, then contact us with the dates you'd like to travel.

We will answer any questions you have, update you on any changes in the itinerary since this brochure went to press, go through any hotel choices etc with you, and discuss flight options. You can book your flights independently or through us.

When you send in your signed booking form and payment our specialists will make the reservations. If a hotel etc in the design happens not to have availability for your dates we will suggest a suitable alternative at similar cost.

### A note of caution

Cuba is refreshingly different - and we love it - but be warned: Cuba is not for everybody. If you are looking for elegant accommodation and fine dining on the whole you won't find it in Cuba. If you need your holiday to run like clockwork, and wouldn't accept things that do not turn out as planned, then Cuba is not for you. In Cuba you never quite know what might be around the corner. You will best enjoy your experience of Cuba if you can readily adapt yourself to it.

A holiday in Cuba is a great adventure and if you embark on your trip with an open mind, ready to expect the unexpected, it may just be the best travel experience you ever had.

### Tailor-made holidays

**Use our tailor-made service to see Cuba exactly the way you want.**

On a fully tailor-made holiday your entire trip is designed day-by-day to suit you. Our specialists have lots of ideas and some great suggestions. They know what's available and they really understand how the country works.

A tailor-made holiday allows you choose the way you travel, the type of hotels you prefer, and the things you like to do. You can choose whether to have a private guide for all or any part of your trip. You can build in a special interest (such as walking, cycling, music, scuba, or bird watching) for most of your time, or just a day or two. It's up to you.

#### How to book a tailor-made holiday

First look through the holiday designs in this brochure and pick the ideas that appeal to you the most, perhaps from different designs.

Then call us with your choices and questions and we will discuss them with you and prepare a full written proposal. We can modify this as often as necessary to create your perfect trip. Meals can be included or left for you to decide as you go along.

#### There's no commitment until you are ready

When you are happy with a proposal, send us your booking form and payment and we will put everything in place. There is no commitment until you send us your booking form.

A tailor-made service naturally adds a little to the overall cost of a holiday, but you're making sure that you get the most from your valuable holiday time and from the rest of your holiday budget.





## Practicalities

### When to visit

**You can take a holiday in Cuba at any time of year, with December to April being the driest months. This is also the most favoured season for visitors fleeing northern winters.**

The chances of rain are not too bad in the wetter months, when there is also the risk of a hurricane.

### Tourist seasons

The high season for visitors is from mid-December to mid-March. It's best to book well ahead at this time of year if you can. Although the busiest hotels may be fully booked there is usually a decent choice of reasonable alternatives. Cubans take their annual holidays in July and August.

### Temperatures

The weather in Cuba is hot, sunny and tropical, with an annual average temperature of 24C. The hottest months are July and August, when the average daily maximum rises to around 32C.

The weather is coolest in January and February, with average daily maxima of 26C. Nights become significantly cooler than the day, and some people may even think the sea is not warm enough for swimming.

### Rainfall

The dry season begins in November and lasts through to early May, with lots of days with clear blue skies. Even so, rain can come at any time.

In Cuba's wet season, from May to October, there may be two or three days with rain in a typical fortnight. But the rain does not usually last long - coming in short sharp bursts that clear quickly.

### Hurricanes

The Caribbean hurricane season formally begins in June and is most active in September and October. Some years have fewer hurricanes than others, but the chance of actually being affected in a two week trip is fairly low.

Cuba is well-prepared for hurricanes and looks after its visitors efficiently and safely.

The storm generally passes in 2-3 days and the drama compensates in some measure for the inconvenience. Electricity and water are usually cut off while the storm lasts, with no air-conditioning and no water other than bottled water for drinking.

At worst you may well find yourself evacuated to safer but less pleasant accommodation until things blow over.

### Where to stay

■ **In Havana** Havana has a good selection of hotels, with plenty of characterful options at many levels of comfort and price. See pages 44-45 for examples.

■ **Travelling around the island** Most towns you might most want to visit have a good hotel or two, but in a few places the options are just serviceable. 'Hotels for touring' has examples on page 47.

■ **Country hotels** For hotels to stop awhile and enjoy the countryside see page 46.

■ **At the beach** Most of Cuba's beach hotels and resorts focus on package holidays to well-established formulas. Some are a reasonable choice for a few days at the end of a touring holiday. There is a small scattering of alternatives out of the mainstream. Turn to page 43.

### Hotel grades

We use the following to indicate relative prices:

■ **MID-RANGE** A good standard option which we think is comfortable and pleasant but with few frills and at a price to suit the cost-conscious traveller. Guest bedrooms all have private bathrooms, of course.

■ **UPPER RANGE** A notch or two up, with prices to match

■ **TOP RANGE** At the top end of what's available. A special place to stay, but at the top of the market price-wise. High prices do not always mean luxury facilities.

Cuban hotels do not achieve the standards expected of their equivalents in Europe, though some may come a lot closer than in the past.

### Food

Cuban food used to be the butt of jokes, but these days things have improved a lot. It's rare to find anything approaching elaborate gastronomy, but there's a good choice of fresh ingredients, often nicely prepared.

### Guides

**Having a guide with you is far and away the best way to learn about Cuba in a short space of time.**

Cuban guides are incredibly well-trained, speak fluent English and are a fount of knowledge on all things Cuban.

You could have a guide throughout your trip (see our 'Guided touring' on pages 18-21 for examples), or just for a day or two here and there. It's up to you.

### Take the family

**Cuba makes a great destination for adventurous families.**

There is a lot to see within reasonable travel times, and hotels to suit most budgets. Recommended vaccinations are the fewest in the tropics, and there is no recommendation for malaria pills.

## We know Cuba

**G**eodyssey's in-depth knowledge of our destinations is legendary. Our Cuba specialists have travelled the length and breadth of Cuba over a long period. We go back again and again, researching ideas, checking hotels, meeting guides and testing routes.

Our knowledge is kept up-to-date by working with Cuba every day, by contact with our local partners throughout the island, and by the feedback we receive from our clients when they get back.

We have lots of practical experience in designing trips that really work well for different customers with different tastes and budgets. That's what we enjoy best of all.

Our experts are a helpful bunch, so when you are ready just give them a call and talk things through. Their expertise is yours when you want it.

### We are trusted by demanding clients

We plan trips to Cuba every day of the week for our clients. They are a great bunch of people: school teachers, doctors, cabinet ministers, business people, retirees, honeymooners, young professionals in couples and groups, birdwatchers, surfers, walkers, wildlife photographers, and many more. They are all demanding in their different ways.

At the end of their trip they generally award us very high ratings, so we must be getting most things right.

Conde Nast Traveler magazine once expressed it well when they included Geodyssey in their Special Agent list:

*"This list represents those who have impressed me the most with their knowledge of specific destinations and types of travel. They also possess a certain degree of frankness, friendliness, taste, the willingness to work with a range of customers and budgets, and an understanding of the types of experiences that Conde Nast Traveler readers want."*

### You can do anything

Because we know a lot about Cuba we offer lots and lots of choice. Whether it's a relaxing break you are after, a see-it-all touring holiday, something with a wildlife focus, expert bird watching, activities from day walks to serious trekking, scuba diving and more.

So if you have something special in mind, there's a very good chance that we already have experience of designing something similar. Go on, try us.

### When things go wrong

It's good to know that when you are on your holiday you have got the support, knowledge and back-up you need locally and from here in London. If something goes wrong, we're here to help fix it for you.



## Valle de los Ingenios

This area on the eastern slopes of the Sierra del Escambray was a centre of slave-powered sugar production in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The area was peppered with 50 sugar mills, which gave the valley its name—the Valley of the Engines—and brought great wealth to the slavocracy and the town of Trinidad, with whom the valley shares UNESCO World Heritage Site status. The Manaca Iznaga bell tower (pictured) served to keep watch over a large estate, ring the days' end, and warn of escapes. Its plantation house still stands, while the valley is scattered with the ruins of others. These days the village beneath the tower is a centre for embroidery and lace-making, notably of tablecloths.

## Planning your trip

# Private guided touring

**C**uba is such a very extraordinary country, with so much to see, and so much more to understand beneath the surface, that it's a special benefit to have a guide and well worth the extra outlay.

Our guides are all local Cubans, well-educated and with good English. They are personable people, with plenty of experience. A good guide is able to turn a successful trip into a truly memorable one with insights into Cuban life that only someone who has grown up under the revolutionary system could explain.

As you travel you will be intrigued by the differences between the towns in each area. It seems that each has its own individual story to tell, with very different histories, events and local characters. Guides help to make this come alive.

Then there is the still vivid history of the revolution itself, and its pantheon of heroes, as well as the more distant history of the struggle for independence from Spain. Both are key elements of Cuban identity which a guide's knowledge and stories told while travelling help build into an understanding.

To be able to explore how everyday life works for ordinary Cubans is a real bonus from spending time with a good guide. Most are generally frank about local problems, but you will also find out about the good things too - some of which may surprise you. There's a lot for outsiders to learn.

Now and again your particular guide may be less forthcoming if the conversation strays into awkward areas where the official line may not sit comfortably, with local opinions or your guide's private views. Tact is essential when what is not said can be as significant as what is.

The other great thing about guides is that they can make things happen. If you fancy taking a walk in the country, they'll know a nice place to stop. If you'd like to see how tobacco is grown and harvested, they'll know not only which finca runs a good official tour, but which small farmer might be more than happy to show you proudly around his own 'vega'. They'll know which restaurants to recommend, a characterful bar that makes the perfect mojito, and where there's a notable son band playing tonight. They also know what there is time for in the day, and what might leave no time for the other things you want to do, so if you'd like to adapt your schedule for the day they can help you decide on a way that should work.

And when things go wrong, as is almost inevitable, your guide will be there to fix it and put everything back on track - more or less. An unexpected diversion on the highway, a hotel receptionist who can't locate your reservation, a sudden rain shower, they'll know an alternative route, they'll know who to call, and they'll know where there's shelter and something interesting to see or do.

Local circumstances may mean that your guide drives you himself, or that you have a separate driver as well. Drivers are generally very helpful, but usually speak little or no English: either your guide will translate or you can practise your Spanish - or your sign language!

## Cars

On a private guided touring holiday you can expect to be driven in a relatively modern vehicle, in reasonably good working order, fitted with seat belts, and kept clean. Saloon cars, MPVs and minibuses are the norm.

Sometimes, usually for door-to-door journeys rather than touring, your vehicle may be a taxi especially contracted for the purpose. These are the official tourist taxis, not the more rickety unofficial variety which although emblazoned with the word 'taxi' are not authorised to carry foreigners.

If your hotel, for example, hails you an unofficial taxi, take a careful look at it and send it away if you are not happy to be driven in it.



02

PRIVATE GUIDED TOURING • CHOOSE MID-RANGE HOTELS THROUGHOUT, OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS WHERE AVAILABLE

## Classic Cuba

A fabulous trip, with three full days in Havana and six days of sightseeing on tour with your own guide in Western Cuba, with the option of extra days at the beach of your choice to end.

### Havana

**Day 1** You are met on arrival and transferred to your mid-range or upper range hotel in Old Havana.

**Day 2-4** BL Three days to explore Havana with a private city guide (see 'Your Man in Havana' on page 9).

### Pinar del Río

**Day 5** BL This morning your own private touring guide, with a comfortable vehicle, collects you at your hotel and you set off on your 6 day trip around western Cuba.

Heading west you reach the truly stunning area north of Pinar del Río, a limestone landscape with dramatic *mogotes* rising above peaceful farmlands awash with hibiscus, bougainvillea and flame trees.

You visit the famous Cueva de los Portales, the cave from where Ché Guevara directed military operations during the Cuban missile crisis. You also stop at Hacienda Cortina, an estate laid out in classical style, with imposing gates, sweeping drives, and landscaped gardens that deserve to be better maintained.

You stay for 2 nights near the little town of Viñales, pretty as a postcard, where there are some notable *paladares* (family run restaurants) for dinner. Your driver is on hand if a lift is needed.

**Day 6** BL You walk round Viñales this morning, pausing at the *Jardín Botánico de Caridad*, an intriguing garden valiantly run by two sisters who carry on their family project of growing all of Cuba's native garden plants and fruits.

Another of Viñales' quirks is its uniform factory on the main street. You can peer in as you walk by, and stop at the village shop for a packet of biscuits or some fruit, before leaving town to explore tobacco farming area of Vuelto Abajo—the cigar enthusiast's equivalent of the Haut-Médoc. Here you visit the *vega* of Alejandro Robaina, one of the masters of Cuban tobacco. Any time remaining

in the day is free with your guide and vehicle at your disposal.

**Day 7** BD A leisurely start for a morning at the beach. You drive out to Cayo Jutías—a coral island with a near-perfect long white sand beach facing clear turquoise waters sheltered by a reef. Facilities are simple: shade and loungers for rent, a small beach cafe for a sea-food lunch, and a dive shop that also rents snorkelling gear.

If you head back to Viñales in the mid-afternoon there will be time to visit the extensive orchidarium at Soroa.

### Cienfuegos

**Day 8** BL A morning or so's drive to the colonial port of Cienfuegos (p13), founded by French settlers in the early 19th century. On arrival your guide takes you for a tour of the city's highlights. The evening is free, your guide can recommend a restaurant.

### Trinidad

**Day 9** AI In the morning you drive along the coast from Cienfuegos to Trinidad, a stunningly beautiful town dating from the 1500s. Its great wealth from sugar was short-lived, and the town became a backwater retaining its original character, cobbled streets and architecture to the present day, when it is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Your guide takes you on a walking tour of this delightful town including a visit to the Museo Romántico for insights of settlers, colonial life, slave and sugar trades. You can then explore the town at leisure in the company of your guide or independently if you prefer. The town is set back from a lovely beach, and you can either stay in the town itself (B&B or half-board) or by the beach, where there is a reasonable all-inclusive resort. This evening is free but your guide and driver are on hand for a lift to and from town.

**Day 10** BLD Cuba's second mountain range, the Sierra del Escambray serves as a backdrop to the cities of Trinidad and Cienfuegos.

Today you opt for either a delightful walk among waterfalls in the hills above Trinidad or a more sedate and less strenuous excursion to an old coffee plantation including lunch at the old hacienda and an easy stroll in the nearby forests with a naturalist guide from the hacienda.

### Santa Clara and Ché

**Day 11** BLD Today you leave Trinidad and return to Havana airport in time for your international flight home, stopping en route at Santa Clara to visit the wreck of the train ambushed by Ché, his mausoleum and the small museum in his honour.

### Beach options

Instead of returning to the airport from Trinidad you could stay on at the beach there, or be taken across the island via Santa Clara to the lovely beaches of the Northern Cays (Cayo Las Brujas or Cayo Santa Maria) or to Jibacoa. See p41 for details.



PHOTOS: 01 Viñales Valley



01

PRIVATE GUIDED TOURING • CHOOSE MID-RANGE HOTELS THROUGHOUT, OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS WHERE AVAILABLE

## Completely Cuba

A full two weeks touring exploring almost the whole of Cuba, from end to end, with your own private guide. The long loop through the heart of the island from Havana to Santiago is an amazing experience, capped by the gorgeous trip between the mountains and the sea to Baracoa. You fly back to Havana and then explore Cuba's western tip, with its dramatic scenery, peaceful countryside and lovely beaches.

### Havana

**Day 1** You arrive at Havana's airport, where you are met and transferred to your chosen hotel in Old Havana for the next two nights.

**Day 2** **BL** A day in Havana with a private city guide—see 'Your Man in Havana' on page 9. You'll explore Old Havana on a walking tour in the morning, and in the afternoon take a drive around modern Havana in a classic American car.

### Bay of Pigs and Cienfuegos

**Day 3** **BLD** Today you set off out of the capital along the island's main highway, which soon begins to skirt the Zapata Biosphere Reserve, the largest protected area in the whole Caribbean. You turn into the reserve, passing crocodile farms, to arrive at the Bay of Pigs—a long inlet of clear Caribbean water, popular with divers. In 1961 this was the site of the notorious US-backed invasion of Cuba, soundly defeated. You stop en route for lunch and wherever you feel like exploring with your guide—perhaps at the small museum at Playa Girón, the invasion's exact landing site—then continue to the town of Cienfuegos to stay the night.

### Trinidad

**Day 4** **AI** The colonial port of Cienfuegos (p13) was founded by French settlers at the beginning of the 19th century, and became rich from the sugar trade. Your guide takes you around the town.

It is then an hour or so's drive to the lovely colonial town of Trinidad (p12), with its cobbled streets and pretty squares. You spend two nights in Trinidad, either staying in the town itself or opting for a beach hotel a few minutes outside along Playa Ancón. Trinidad's lively *Casa de la Trova* is on tonight's agenda.

**Day 5** **AI** Your guide picks you up after breakfast for a walking tour of Trinidad's colonial centre, including a visit to the *Museo Romántico*—an old mansion overlooking a plaza planted with palms. There are plenty of tempting craft stalls: you might pick up a hand-woven straw hat in best Cuban style direct from the lady that made it, some delicate hand-made lace, a cigar or two, or an amusing souvenir. You might then drive a short way into the mountains above Trinidad for some cool air and exquisite scenery, or decide to spend the afternoon on the beach if you prefer.

### Camagüey

**Day 6** **BL** A little way from Trinidad is the Valle de los Ingenios, where slave plantations thrived in the sugar boom. Now an attractive little country village stands beneath the gaunt tower of a sugar mill. Next is Sancti Spiritus, where you may stop if there is time on your journey to the characterful town of Camagüey (p13), at the centre of the island. Camagüey's curiously winding streets were designed to deter pirates, it is said; among other sources of civic pride are its Byzantine-style terracotta water jars.

### Bayamo and El Saltón

**Day 7** **BD** You could explore the hidden colonial squares of Camagüey either when you arrived or this morning before you set off to Bayamo (p15), a pretty town of pastel hues and an important revolutionary history. Your guide will show you around. The magnificent Sierra Maestra rises to the south of Bayamo, and the road skirts the foothills before you turn in to arrive at the delightful El Saltón (p46).

### Santiago de Cuba

**Day 8** **BL** This morning after a leisurely breakfast you relax at the hotel or opt to set off with your local guide to explore the area around El Saltón (there's a modest fee for this to pay locally). After lunch set off for Santiago de Cuba, where the rest of your day is free.

**Day 9** **BL** Today you are taken on a walking tour of the centre of Santiago, where you visit the Museo de Ambiente Cubano, originally home to Santiago's founder Diego Velasquez, who sailed with Columbus, which is among the oldest buildings in all the Americas.

You also visit the Bacardi Museum and Moncada Barracks - a darker side of Cuban history. Lunch is at the impressive Castillo del Morro overlooking the Caribbean, before you return to the city via Santiago's own Plaza de la Revolución and Vista Alegre suburbs, pausing if you wish at the cemetery whose occupants include Cuba's independence leader José Martí, and Compay Segundo of Buena Vista Social Club. Evening visit to Santiago's famous Casa de la Trova a home of *son*.

### Baracoa

**Day 10** **BL** You set off after breakfast for Baracoa, Cuba's first town (established in 1511), which until the 1950s was accessible only from the sea. Your route takes you via the city of Guantánamo (p15) which stands a few miles back from a double bay and the notorious US naval base.

Beyond lies a beautiful country road that curves and bends between the mountains and the sea, before turning north and crossing an impressive viaduct at La Farola which was built under Ché's orders to keep a promise made during the revolution. Lunch on your arrival in Baracoa, followed by a walking tour of the little town with your guide. In the evening you might try the local Casa de la Trova which has an excellent reputation.

**Day 11** **BL** Baracoa has a lovely easy-going atmosphere and is a great place to stop and do very little. But if you're feeling fit and active, you could make the strenuous rewarding climb up El Yunque (1900ft) a flat-topped mountain behind Baracoa with magnificent views, in an area rich in orchids and epiphytes, ferns and palm.

Other small attractions include a family finca outside the town which offers a nice lunch and visits to its a chocolate plantation. The fishing village of Boca de Yumuri further along the coast is also worth a trip. Your guide will help you decide.

**Day 12** **BL** You begin today with a trip to the Alexander Humboldt National Park and take a boat trip around the coastline this morning, followed by lunch at Villa Maguana where there is a lovely beach for you to while away the afternoon.

### Havana

**Day 13** **B** Your guide will collect you from your hotel and take you to Baracoa's small airport for the flight to Havana, where you are met and taken to the magnificent Hotel Nacional in the Vedado district where you stay for 2 nights. Free time to settle in and explore the hotel and its extensive grounds, or you might take a taxi to some of the sights you missed on your first visit to the city.

### Viñales

**Day 14** **BL** A new guide collects you from your hotel for a full day's tour to Viñales (p11), returning in the early evening.

**Day 15** **B** Free time today to sightsee and shop before your transfer to the airport for return flight home.

### Beach options

The best beach to fit this trip is the lovely Cayo Levisa (see p41), which connects well with Vinales on the last day. For the facilities of a mainstream beach hotel of the kind that attracts thousands to Cuba you'll need to travel further, to Jibacoa or Varadero - either is in easy reach. Alternatively, you could extend your time at the beach during the trip at Trinidad (days 4-5) or at Baracoa (days 10-12), but your guide and vehicle would be on stand-by.





02



03

## Just a week ...

If you've only a week to spare, you can still see a lot and taste the real Cuba. 'Just a week in Western Cuba' visits Havana and the most evocative places around this part of the island, while its sister, 'Just a week in Eastern Cuba', visits Santiago and ventures into the heart of the Sierra Maestra.

### Just a week in Western Cuba

#### Havana

**Day 1** You are met on arrival at Havana airport and transferred to your hotel in Old Havana.

**Day 2-3** BL Two days to explore Havana with your private city guide (see 'Your Man in Havana' on page 9).

#### Trinidad

**Day 4** BL Today you are collected from your hotel by your touring guide and driven via Santa Clara to Trinidad. In Santa Clara (p13) you visit Ché's mausoleum and small museum, and the armoured troop train wrecked by Ché in an action that changed the course of the war. After lunch in Santa Clara you drive down to the picturesque colonial town of Trinidad (p12) for one night, where you stay in the historic centre. You might take an evening stroll among its cobbled streets before dinner, which is at your hotel, then visit the Casa de Trova for some live Cuban *son*.

**Day 5** BL Your guide takes you on a walking tour of Trinidad, including a visit to the Romantic Museum, followed by lunch.

Then it's an hour or so's drive to Cienfuegos (p13), a colonial port founded by French settlers in the early nineteenth century. Explore the town with your guide. The evening is free: your guide can suggest a restaurant for dinner.

#### Pinar del Río

**Day 6** BLD Today you travel to Pinar del Río province, stopping at Soroa for lunch and to visit its extensive orchidarium, then continuing to stay 2 nights at the nearby community of Las Terrazas (p11) where the rest of the afternoon is free. Dinner at your hotel.

**Day 7** BLD Today you explore this lovely countryside, sometimes breathtakingly beautiful as sheer-sided limestone hills rise above tropical plains rich with hibiscus, bougainvillea and flame trees. You stop with your guide at the characterful little town of Viñales, and continue to the heart of Cuba's tobacco farming region. Your guide takes you on country stroll to see how the leaves for some of the world's finest cigars are grown, harvested and dried. You return to Las Terrazas in the evening.

**Day 8** BL This morning you visit the limestone caves of Cueva de los Portales, Ché's base in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, then Hacienda Cortina—a park in classical style, complete with folly, from the early 19th century: shades of Stourhead in the tropics. After lunch, you return to Havana airport for your international flight home.

#### Beach options

Your guide can easily drop you at Cayo Levisa at the end of this trip. Jibacoa and Varadero are also in reach, or the itinerary could be turned around to end at Trinidad. See p41.



### Just a week in Eastern Cuba

#### Bayamo

**Day 1** D You are met on your arrival at Holguín airport by your guide and driven to Bayamo (p15), a laid-back town that has done well out of sugar but which prides itself more on its key roles in the emancipation of slaves, independence and the revolution. A statue of Céspedes, 'father of the Nation', stands amid palms in the plaza, where you might pause on your first evening in Cuba.

#### Cabo Cruz

**Day 2** BLD Today you travel to the island's most southerly point at Cabo Cruz. It's a fascinating drive along tree-lined avenues, well off any tourist routes, to the beach where the Castros and Ché Guevara landed in 1956 from their boat the *Granma* to begin the revolution. There's a small museum, a replica of their boat, a path to the landing point, and nature trails. At Cabo Cruz a lighthouse stands above unusual rock terraces. There's a lovely white sand beach by azure Caribbean waters if you'd like to stop a while before looping back to the small sugar town of Niquero, where a scent of molasses drifts on the air, to stay at a simple hotel that's the best in the area.

#### Sierra Maestra

**Day 3** BLD This morning you are driven into the Sierra Maestra mountains. Pause in Bartolome Maso, a bustling factory town, then climb into the spectacular scenery of the Santo Domingo area, arriving in time for lunch. In the afternoon your guide is at your disposal to explore the area, accompany you on a country walk, etc.

#### La Comandancia

**Day 4** BLD Fidel, Ché and their small band of revolutionaries hid out in the rugged mountains of the Sierra Maestra while they recruited, trained, and established themselves as a revolutionary group. This morning you make the exciting, fairly strenuous hike to the rebel commanders' HQ in the mountains. From your drop off point it's a 3km walk—downhill at first, then level, then uphill for 1.5km—to *La Comandancia*, their secret HQ. Return to Santo Domingo for a late lunch then drive around the mountains to El Saltón (p46), arriving in the late afternoon. Options include horse riding, walking, birding, massage, a cooling dip below a lovely waterfall, or relaxing in the gardens with a book.

#### El Saltón

**Day 5** BL This morning you take a country walk through woods and fields and by sparkling rivers, in the beautiful scenery around El Saltón. It is a chance to 'meet the neighbours' in their little farmsteads sprinkled with hibiscus, mimosa, mountain apple blossom and crops of soursop, mandarin, pineapple, sapodilla, star apples, sweet limes, cocoa, avocado and coffee. Lunch at El Saltón before the drive to Santiago, your base for the next 3 nights.

#### Santiago

**Day 6** BL Bayamo is a fascinating city and you spend the day exploring the town with your guide, from the colonial Parque Céspedes, cathedral, and the Diego Velasquez museum, to the

PRIVATE GUIDED TOURING  
CHOOSE MID-RANGE HOTELS THROUGHOUT, OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS WHERE AVAILABLE

other sites around the city such as the Moncada barracks and the . Your guide could even arrange a salsa lesson for you, in preparation for your evening at the Casa de la Trova.

**Day 7** BL Today you head out from the city to visit the Gran Piedra region. It's a short hike to the top of the rocky outcrop with great views, in cool conditions where tree ferns abound.

There should also be the chance to visit a delightful garden filled with agapanthus and roses, a coffee plantation, and a classic car museum. Return for a final evening in Santiago.

**Day 8** B Your morning is free in Santiago before you are driven via Birán (Castro's birthplace) to Holguín airport for your flight home.

#### Beach options

The beaches of Guardalavaca (p42) link well with this trip.



PHOTOS: 01 Limestone landscape, Pinar del Río 02 Parque José Martí, Cienfuegos - 'Your example lives. Your ideas endure.' 03 Across the harbour entrance to the castle of El Morro, Havana

## Planning your trip

# Easy Cuba

Instead of being escorted by a guide throughout the time you go touring in Cuba, you can choose to travel the long journeys by yourself. There are two ways to travel: shuttle buses and 'door-to-door' chauffeur-driven transfers. You still have the option of a local guide in each place, as illustrated in the two sample itineraries below.

### Shuttle buses

There's a small network of shuttle buses, or tourist minibuses, that travel between Havana and the main locations of Western Cuba, picking up from a designated point in each place and dropping off their passengers at their hotel at the end of the journey. It's a very economical way to see the country.

You take a taxi to the pick-up point (your hotel will arrange this for you). Your bags are safely stowed in the back and you hop on board. Your fellow passengers may be from anywhere in the world, and although the driver or his assistant may speak enough English for you and their immediate purposes, you won't have the arguable benefit of a bus guide's commentary as you travel. There are comfort stops as needed.

When you reach your destination your hotel may not be the first place the bus stops, so a little patience is called for - the system works well if you are prepared to lose some time in this way.

### Private transfers

Even easier, and faster, is to be collected from the door of your hotel and driven direct to your next hotel in a private chauffeur-driven saloon car, MPV, minibus or an official taxi. Your driver may have some English, but probably not enough for much of a conversation. You will be the only passengers.

## Dance in Santiago

Santiago is a hub for African dance of the highest quality, exemplified by the blazing talents of the Ballet Folklórico Cutumba, who create mesmerizing performances of dance, vocals and percussion drawing on Orisha rituals and sensual styles from the Cuban-Haitian heritage. Look for their performances (when they are not touring internationally) and other groups such as El Cocoyé. A good alternative is the daily show at the Museo del Carnaval (almost opposite the Casa de Trova), where the dancers are often from one or other of the major troupes.



CHOOSE MID-RANGE HOTELS THROUGHOUT, OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS WHERE AVAILABLE, OR TOP RANGE HOTELS WHERE AVAILABLE  
CHOOSE SHUTTLE-BUS OR PRIVATE TRANSFERS

## Havana & Trinidad

A simple, economic and popular itinerary combining Havana and Trinidad. This is the shuttle-bus version.

### Havana

**Day 1** You arrive at Havana airport, where you are met and transferred to your chosen hotel for 3 nights.

**Day 2** BL A day in Havana with a city guide, see 'Your Man in Havana' on page 9.

**Day 3** B Free day in Havana.

### Trinidad

**Day 4** BD Early this morning you get yourselves to the designated pick up point in Havana for the 8hr minibus journey to Trinidad, where you are dropped off at your beach resort just outside the town on Playa Ancón.

**Day 5** AI Today your English-speaking local guide meets you for a morning walking tour of picturesque colonial Trinidad and its museums, then after lunch your guide takes you out of town to the Valle de los Ingenios, a valley of sugar plantations and mills where a picturesque village stands beneath a belfry from which slaves were called in from the fields.

**Day 6-7** AI Two free days to relax at Playa Ancón beach. After sunset you might return by taxi to the streets of Trinidad where there always seems to be dancing and live music somewhere, salsa, Cuban jazz, or *son* at the Casa de la Trova.

### Havana

**Day 8** B Today you will be picked up from the designated point in Trinidad (your hotel will arrange a taxi there) for your shuttle bus back to Havana, where you are dropped at your hotel. Evening free in Havana.

**Day 9** B Free time in Havana until it is time for your private transfer from your hotel to the international airport.

### Beach options

You could either extend your time at the beach in Trinidad, or travel from Havana to the mainstream beaches of Jibacoa or Varadero, or to the more pared-back Cayo Levisa. See p41.





CHOOSE SHUTTLE-BUS OR PRIVATE TRANSFERS CHOOSE MID-RANGE HOTELS THROUGHOUT, OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS WHERE AVAILABLE

## A Cuban Romance

Ideal for couples, this holiday starts at the beach at a luxury resort that's an ideal place to unwind. There's time to explore Havana together and to visit Trinidad. This is the chauffeur-driven 'door-to-door' version.

### Jibacoa

**Day 1-5 A** Arriving at Havana international airport, you are met and transferred directly to Jibacoa and your chosen all-inclusive hotel right by the beach, where you stay 5 nights. Your hotel has an excellent swimming pool, a tennis court and a gym. The beach is of velvety sand, fringed by sea-grape trees, lapped by turquoise waters and great for sunbathing, swimming or snorkelling.

### Havana

**Day 6 B** At a leisurely hour you are collected from your hotel by your private driver and driven to a romantic boutique hotel in a converted mansion in Old Havana, your home for the next 3 nights. Around midday you meet your local English speaking city guide for a private tour of some of Havana's highlights.

Dinner, which is not included, might be arranged at your request at the romantic *paladar* 'La Guarida'.

**Day 7 B** Your guide takes you on a private walking tour of Old Havana today. Old Havana encapsulates most aspects of Cuban life with its many international influences, Spanish, Byzantine, African Caribbean, British, French and American, and its history of trade

from Incan treasure to coffee, tobacco, and sugar. You visit the plazas of Old Havana, the Museum of the Revolution, and a cigar factory or other sites such as the Museum of Colonial Art or the City Museum.

**Day 8 B** There's lots to see in Havana and having sampled a few highlights yesterday with your guide you spend today exploring the city independently. See the panel on page 9 for ideas.

### Trinidad

**Day 9 B** Today you are collected from your hotel in Havana and driven to your next hotel in the town of Trinidad, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Trinidad grew wealthy on the sugar trade, but then fell on hard times, its grand buildings and cobbled squares from the colonial and early republican period becoming preserved by neglect. You stay 3 nights at a delightful colonial hotel in the town, handy for the excellent Casa de la Trova and other nightlife.

**Day 10 B** A leisurely morning, meeting your local Trinidad guide in the hotel reception at 11am for a low-key tour of the town, including the bell tower and Museo Romantico, and with cocktails and lunch at Canchanchara.

**Day 11 B** A free day in Trinidad.

### Havana

**Day 12 B** This morning you are collected from your hotel by a private driver and driven to Cienfuegos—a French-influenced colonial town—and onwards to Havana. You spend your final night in some luxury at the Hotel Saratoga, one of Havana's best hotels.

**Day 13 B** A free morning in Havana relaxing by the pool or last minute shopping before your transfer to the international airport for your flight home.



CHOOSE MID-RANGE HOTELS THROUGHOUT, OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS WHERE AVAILABLE  
CHOOSE SHUTTLE-BUS OR PRIVATE TRANSFERS

## Easy Classic

A few more days allows time to complete a classic trip, visiting the lovely Viñales Valley and Cienfuegos, as well as Havana and Trinidad. This is the chauffeur-driven 'door-to-door' version.

### Havana

**Day 1** You arrive at Havana airport, where you are met and transferred to your chosen hotel for 3 nights.

**Day 2 B** A day in Havana with a city guide, see 'Your Man in Havana' on page 9.

**Day 3 B** Free day in Havana.

### Viñales

**Day 4 B** Your driver picks you up from the door of your hotel in Havana for the journey to the Viñales Valley, set among some of Cuba's most distinctive and photogenic scenery. Stay here 2 nights.

**Day 5 B** A free day. Your hotel is set in the countryside and has a beautiful view of the valley and a swimming pool. Optional excursions are available locally.

### Cienfuegos

**Day 6 B** Early this morning you are picked up from the door of your hotel in Viñales and driven to the French colonial town of Cienfuegos for a 2 night stay. The rest of the afternoon is free.

**Day 7 B** Free day in Cienfuegos for sightseeing. Much of the city can be explored on foot, but it is worth taking a taxi to visit the

port at Punta Gorda and the Byzantine folly, Palacio del Valle.

### Trinidad

**Day 8 A** After a morning free in Cienfuegos, a driver collects you from your hotel for the journey to Trinidad, on a road that passes between the Caribbean and Cuba's second highest mountain range—the Sierra del Escambray.

On arrival you are dropped at your hotel at Playa Ancón beach where you stay for 3 nights. The rest of the afternoon is free to relax on the sands or beside your hotel's pool.

**Day 9 A** Today your English-speaking local guide meets you for a morning walking tour of picturesque colonial Trinidad and its museums.

After lunch your guide takes you out of town to the Valle de los Ingenios, a valley of sugar plantations and mills where a picturesque village stands beneath a belfry from which slaves were called in from the fields.

**Day 10-11 A** Two free days to relax at Playa Ancón beach, with your evenings either in Trinidad or at your hotel.

### Havana

**Day 12 B** You are collected from your hotel in Trinidad and driven to your hotel in Havana. Evening free in Havana.

**Day 13 B** Free time in Havana until it is time for your private transfer from your hotel to the international airport.

### Beach options

As well as the beach options for 'Havana & Trinidad' opposite, we could arrange a private transfer from Trinidad across the island to the beaches of the Cayos de la Herradura, where there are both mainstream resort options and also the laid-back Cayo Las Brujas. See p41.



PHOTOS: 01 Museo Romantico, Trinidad 02 Cayo Las Brujas







02

## Selfdrive in Cuba

*Driving in Cuba has its adventurous moments, especially for the navigator, but a selfdrive holiday is a great way to see the country and experience the 'real' Cuba at first hand.*

If you like to break free and travel as you please, then a selfdrive trip is for you. It's a great way to see the country, bag a whole variety of experiences, and get a little closer to the Cuban way of life.

Cuba is a big island, but it's not so enormous that you can't comfortably cover a substantial chunk of it in the space of a fortnight. In that time you can see a great range of landscapes, stroll around a variety of Cuban-looking towns empty of adverts except for socialist pronouncements with pictures of Ché or Fidel, munch picnics in woods and fields, take siestas by rivers and streams, and bathe in the Gulf of Mexico, the Florida Straights, the Caribbean and the Atlantic.

You can meet farmers, shopkeepers, musicians, ladies selling fruit, teachers, old men chatting on street corners and young mothers dandling chubby babes. You will share the road with men driving donkey carts or leading packhorses, taxi drivers in brightly

painted pony and traps, lumbering oxen, cattle, chickens and dogs, cyclists young and old, 1950s Buicks, Chevrolets and Dodges, clapped-out Ladas, orange Chinese buses and slow trucks hefting sugar cane or bricks. You can go for hikes in the hills, imagine being a revolutionary, spot birds, stop by endless beaches, dunk yourself under a waterfall, and pick mangoes off a tree.

We make it as easy as we can for you. We've designed routes that work well, so you can just pick one off-the-peg, or we can tailor-make an itinerary just for you.

We make all the reservations, we arrange for you to be met at the airport when your plane gets in, and we make sure you have 24 hour support throughout your visit. We send you your own driving pack, with guide book, maps, and a driving guide tailored to your particular route.

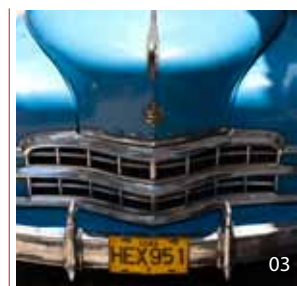
Then you're off and away, exploring Cuba for yourself.

### PHOTOS

01 The narrow coast road westwards from Santiago no longer connects with the small town of Piñón, due to hurricane damage several years ago. We passed around the blocked stretch but only by driving along the seashore. Not on our recommended routes, but the scenery is so glorious we're keeping an eye on things and hoping the road is repaired soon.

02 A 1957 Pontiac Star Chief still hard at work as a taxi for local Cubans.

03 All this lovely chromium belongs to a 1949 Dodge Coronet, a typical sight on the streets of Havana, where seemingly every third or fourth car dates from this era.



03

### Classic cars

Cuba is THE place to see those glorious all-American hunks from the 1940s and 50s: Chevies, Dodges, Oldsmobiles, Buicks, Fords, Hudsons, Pontiacs, Plymouths, Studebakers and Packards in every state of repair from gleaming perfection to held together with bits of string.

If you'd like a ride see 'Your Man in Havana' on page 9 for a driving tour in a well-kept example.

Sadly we can't rent you any. Instead it will be a recent model from the likes of VW, Audi, Skoda or Suzuki. Much less exciting, we know, but a touch easier on fuel.

Why are so many of these old 'Yank tanks' still in everyday use in Cuba? The reason is that the only cars that ordinary locals could buy or sell are those that predate the 1959 revolution. Anything more recent was allocated by the state. As the rules change, the days of these beautiful monsters may draw to a close.



## Planning your trip

# Selfdrive in Cuba

**C**uba is 1,000km from end-to-end, so it takes a lot of driving to cover it all in one holiday. Instead you'd be wise to focus either on the west, or the east. For details see our 'Havana & Western Cuba selfdrive' trip opposite and our 'Havana & Eastern Cuba selfdrive' trip on p28.

You can combine the east and west by flying between the two (central Cuba being the least interesting part of the island), or with two long days on the 'Carretera Central'. Our 'Cuba Explorer' trip (p29) shows how this is done.

### Cars and roads

The cars available for foreign visitors are generally reasonable, and road conditions are really quite good for the low levels of traffic using them.

On the main highways you can bowl along nicely, often with little other traffic to contend with.

You will need to keep your speed down on country roads - you never know what you might find around the corner.

### Finding your way

The two main challenges for the navigator are getting in and out of Havana and finding your way in the countryside. Around the capital the weight of traffic and lack of road signs can make it easy to miss your intended turning. To help you, the detailed instructions we provide for your driving routes include turn-by-turn instructions going in and out of Havana. Most people find these work well for them. Even so, you can easily miss a junction, roadworks might take you on a surprise detour, or your sense of direction may just suddenly go AWOL.

Road signs in the countryside are few, but helpful bystanders are plentiful. Some scratching of heads and a few words of Spanish (best with fingers stabbing at the map or pointing at the name of your hotel), will usually get you where you want to go.

We'll supply you with the road maps you need and a guide book, detailed instructions for getting in and out of Havana, and how to find your hotels.

Satnav is not an option in Cuba.

### Lifts

Very few Cubans have a car, so in rural Cuba it is considerate and kind to offer a lift now and then if you've got room in yours.

But you should never feel you have to. Men and boys can always hop on the back of farm vehicles and pick-up trucks, so you could confine your offers of lifts to old ladies, young mothers and others with fewer alternatives and less testosterone.

Most are only travelling to the next village or so, but you'll be doing your bit if you can save them the bus fare or a long wait in the sun.

### Words to the wise

A few words of caution:

- Keep your speed down, your eyes open and expect the unexpected.
- Keep your fuel tank topped up, in case the next three gas stations are all closed.
- Keep an eye on your tyres and check your spare.
- Try to get to your hotel before dark. Driving on country roads at night is a lot harder, fraught with surprises, and is not advised.

### More information

Our **Booking Information insert** shows the current cars that are available, rates, insurance details etc.



SELFDRIVE • CHOOSE MID-RANGE HOTELS THROUGHOUT, OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS WHERE AVAILABLE

## Havana & Western Cuba selfdrive

You'll visit some stunning parts of Cuba, with a mixture of great scenery and colourful towns and villages. A few days discovering Havana at the beginning and relaxing at the beach at the end make this a great way to explore and enjoy the real Cuba.

### Havana

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Havana's international airport and driven to your chosen hotel for a 3 night stay.

**Day 2-3** B Two free days for you to explore Havana under your own steam. There's lots to see and do in this colourful and intriguing city—see page 9 for ideas.

### Pinar del Río

**Day 4** B Collect your hire car today and set off westwards. If you are starting from Old Havana your route would take you along the seafront on the Malecón and through the western suburbs, to join the start of the East-West highway linking Havana with the town of Pinar del Río (p12).

You turn off the dual carriageway into the countryside, where winding roads take you through sleepy farmlands past tobacco 'vegas' growing some of the finest leaves in Cuba, into the Sierra de los Organos—a stunning limestone landscape. Here, stubby hills called *mogotes* rise sheer above a chequerboard of small fields laid out beneath flame trees, and homesteads awash with hibiscus and bougainvillea.

Stay at your hotel in the area for 2 nights.

**Day 5-6** B There are quite a few options for you today and the next. You'll want to visit the small country town of Viñales, where you could pick up basic ingredients for a picnic, then perhaps drive among the hills, perhaps stopping at the nearby caves opened as attractions for visitors but generally just out and about exploring this part of Cuba.

Beyond the hills, on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, a narrow stone causeway leads to the coral island of Cayo Jutias where there is a small restaurant that serves a delicious sea-food lunch. You could include that in your first day's trip, or stop there next day en route (almost) to Soroa along the coast road.

There's also the Alejandro Robaina *vega* (plantation) to see, or the Cueva de los Portales—the rather spectacular cave where Ché set up his HQ during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. End your day at Soroa, which has an extensive orchidarium that you could visit when you arrive or the following morning. Stay the night near to Soroa.

### Cienfuegos

**Day 7** B From Soroa it is a pleasant few hours' drive to the colonial port of Cienfuegos (p13), joining for a while the 'Carretera Central'—the highway that runs from Havana across Cuba to the other end of the island. Cienfuegos stands beside a wide bay that leads to the Caribbean. It was founded by French settlers at the beginning of the nineteenth century and its historic centre retains an air of those times amid the busy streets that have sprung up since.

You stay 2 nights in a small restored colonial mansion in Cienfuegos.

**Day 8** B Some of your options today include taking a break from driving to explore Cienfuegos itself, perhaps with an afternoon at the beach at Playa Rancho Luna around the bay, or you could backtrack to the infamous Bay of Pigs where the US-backed invasion came to grief, or visit the Zapata peninsula which is excellent for bird life.

### Trinidad

**Day 9-10** BD Along the coast from Cienfuegos is the quaint colonial town of Trinidad, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. You could head straight there on the main road, which runs by the sea, reaching Trinidad in an hour or so, or turn off through the mountains of the Sierra del Escambray, Cuba's second mountain range, a journey that with stops for walks and a picnic could take much of the day.

You'll stay for 2 nights in Trinidad. You'll want to spend some time in the town itself, both during the day to explore the streets and squares and visit a museum or two, and in the evening to hear some live music Cuban-style. You might flop at the beach on your second day, or explore part of the Sierra del Escambray.

### Beach at Cayo Santa Maria

**Day 11-13** BD Across Cuba from the Caribbean to the Atlantic. It's not very far (120 miles in all), and even if you take your time on the road, with plenty of stops to explore, you would plan to arrive in the late afternoon.

Soon after leaving Trinidad you'll see the turning for the Valle de los Ingenios, where you might stop to explore the pretty little village that stands beneath a derelict tower that was once part of a sugar estate (see p18).

Onwards along country roads to Sancti Spiritus and Placetas, before you arrive at the delightfully amiable town of Remedios, one of our favourites. Stop here if you've time, before pressing on to the beach at Cayo Santa Maria.

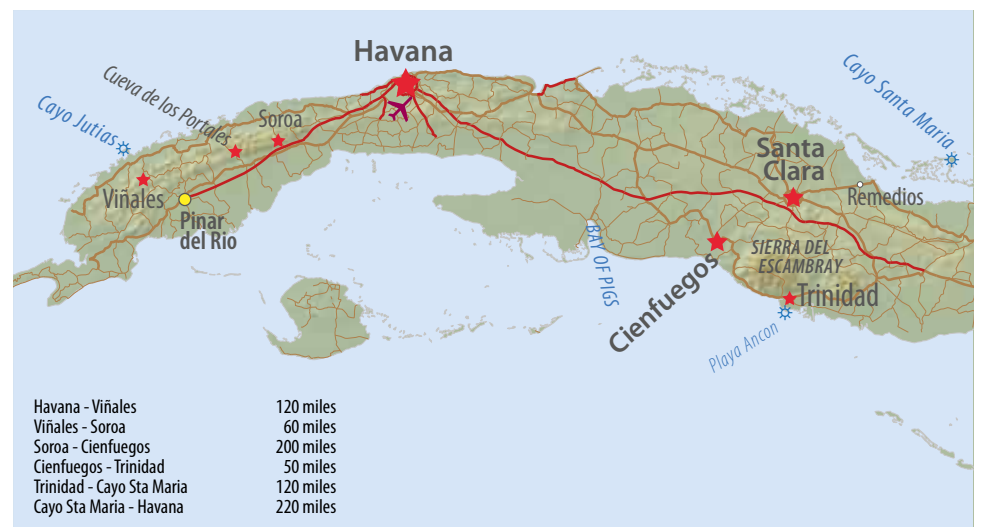
For the next 3 nights you stay at your hotel on the gorgeous Cayos de la Herradura, part of the Archipelago de Camagüey.

### Havana via Santa Clara

**Day 14** B This morning you loop back to Havana via Santa Clara (p13), which played an important part in the Revolution. Here you might visit Ché's mausoleum and the museum dedicated to him, and stop at the wreckage of the Tren Blindado, blown up by Ché's men while it brought up government reinforcements—a turning point in the campaign.

Navigating into Havana can be a challenge, even with the maps and directions we provide, but you should arrive in plenty of time to check in at the Hotel Nacional (something rather grand to round off your trip!), drop off your hire car, and perhaps even take a look at some of the sights in the area.

**Day 15** B A morning in Havana for a final museum or two, some sightseeing, strolling or shopping, before you are picked up from your hotel and transferred to the airport for your flight home to the UK.



PHOTOS: 01 Trinidad 02 Kiss seller, Havana (a demur but heavily lip-sticked kiss on the cheek, a photo, a modest fee)



01



02



03

SELFDRIVE • CHOOSE MID-RANGE HOTELS THROUGHOUT, OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS WHERE AVAILABLE

## Havana & Eastern Cuba selfdrive

Another hugely enjoyable trip, spending a good amount of time in Havana before flying to eastern Cuba and the mountains of the Sierra Maestra, the city of Santiago, the gorgeous scenery around Baracoa, and the beach resort of Guardalavaca.

### Havana

**Day 1** Your international flight arrives in Havana, where you are met at the airport and driven to your hotel in Old Havana for a 2 night stay.

**Day 2** A free day to explore Havana. There is a huge amount to see, so to get you started we have listed some of the sights on page 9.

**Day 3** Most of today is free in Havana, then in the late afternoon you are collected from your hotel and driven to the airport for your domestic flight to Holguín in eastern Cuba. You'll be arriving at the end of the day, so rather than collect your car straightaway you are met at the airport and taken to your nearby hotel.

### Bayamo and El Saltón

**Day 4** When you are ready for the off, you take a taxi from your hotel to pick up your hire car at Holguín airport, which is on the road you want for Bayamo. You drive on a good road through open countryside, reaching the peaceful and pleasant town of Bayamo in about an hour.

Bayamo lies just below the Sierra Maestra, the forbidding mountain range that flanks much of Cuba's southern coastline. You might be able to see its main peaks as you set off eastwards skirting the foothills and passing through a handful of small towns, before turning into the mountains to arrive at El Saltón, where below a pretty waterfall there is a delightful mountain lodge (see p46).

### El Saltón

**Day 5** At El Saltón there is some beautiful and relatively easy walking close to the lodge and longer trails in the hills behind. It's a good idea to hire a local English speaking guide (reasonable cost, payable locally) for the longer walks. You can bathe below a pretty waterfall, go birdwatching, hop in the car to explore the area, or just stay around the lodge's very pleasant grounds. There's also a basic spa with massage service and whirlpool.

### Santiago

**Days 6-8** Leaving El Saltón it's a straightforward drive of around 60 miles, by a choice of routes, to Santiago, your base for the next 3 nights. Santiago (p14) is arguably Cuba's most colourful city, with an easy-going Caribbean atmosphere and a great location looking across a bay to the mountains and the sea, and a proud place in Cuba's history. It is a great place to explore during the day, and in the evening to dine in restaurants and *paladares*, and enjoy live music at the Casa de la Trova, or one of the many other bars and venues around town. You might spend the whole of one day in the city, and the next day mix some more of the city with perhaps a trip to Gran Piedra (especially good on a clear day), or a coffee plantation, or the beach.

### Santiago to Baracoa

**Day 9** Now begins one of the most memorable driving routes on the whole of the island: from Santiago, past Guantánamo Bay, around Cuba's easternmost tip to Baracoa, and up to the beautiful beaches of Guardalavaca. The drive-time today, from Santiago to Baracoa, is usually about 4½ to 5 hours, so an early start means you should have time to stop here and there along the way.

The highway from Santiago turns into a smaller road as you enter the town of Guantánamo, well back from the bay and the US naval base. You could stop to see the town before continuing down to the sea and onwards, skirting beautiful beaches below forested mountains, with plenty of places to stop and enjoy, before you reach the village of Cajobabo.

Leaving the Caribbean here, take the 'La Farola' road with its spectacular mountain section crossing the edge of the Sierra del Plurial, arriving on the Atlantic coast at the little town of Baracoa. Stay here for 2 nights.

### Baracoa

**Day 10** Baracoa is, in its way, among our favourite places in Cuba. Gorgeously set beside a curving bay backed by low mountains, the area is a piece of paradise. Columbus glowing described it as "the most beautiful land that eyes ever beheld". Set apart from the rest of Cuba by the extra effort needed to reach it, the town of Baracoa has an amiable, low-key, slightly scruffy atmosphere. But of all the memorable places on this trip, it is likely to be Baracoa that will work a spell on you and steal your heart, and that you will return to in your mind long after your visit.

Coffee, cacao and bananas flourish (it rains a lot here!), and there are lovely walks in the hills; you should be able to arrange a guide locally to take you. Don't forget to try the local chocolate, which is delicious, or the coffee freshly roasted. There are some good *paladares* for dinner, and an often excellent *casa de la trova*—better than the one in Santiago, the locals claim.

### Baracoa to Guardalavaca

**Day 11** The second half of your drive around Cuba's eastern tip takes you through magnificent scenery along the coast road. After leaving Baracoa the road has

been badly hit by hurricanes and it is a tough bumpy drive for a while, best taken slowly. The worst is over within an hour or so as you wind along this wonderful coast, with bay after bay of turquoise water sparkling in bright sun below the hills of the Humboldt national park.

The road gets better as you approach the town of Moa, close to a nickel-mining area, before it turns slightly inland, winding its way past Nicaro, through Mayarí (where the train in Buena Vista Social Club's 'Chan Chan' is heading). You could take a small detour to Birán to visit Castro's birthplace, before choosing either the slow roads around the Bay of Nipo, or better roads via Holguín. You arrive at Guardalavaca late in the day if you have made stops, where you stay for 3 nights.

### Guardalavaca

**Day 12-13** A couple of days at the beach in Guardalavaca in an all-inclusive resort with lots of facilities—a huge contrast to the rest of your trip, as you relax in a conventional holiday surroundings. You drop off your hire car on arrival at the resort.

### Havana

**Day 14** An early transfer this morning to Holguín airport for the morning flight back to Havana, where you are met and transferred to the landmark Hotel Nacional in the Vedado district.

There should be time to explore Vedado and to see the Plaza de la Revolución. To mark your last night in Cuba the hotel desk should be able to book you in at a club in the evening—perhaps the Tropicana, Cabaret Parisien, or one of the local jazz clubs.

**Day 15** Most international flights leave in the late afternoon, giving you at least the morning to see some more of Havana before you are collected from your hotel and transferred to the airport.





SELFDRIVE • CHOOSE MID-RANGE HOTELS THROUGHOUT, OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS WHERE AVAILABLE

## Cuba Explorer selfdrive

Travelling almost the length of Cuba from Havana to Santiago, a real Cuba experience, you'll explore Havana, then take several days to see revolutionary Santa Clara, sleepy Remedios, and Trinidad. A couple of driving days to Camagüey and Bayamo, bring you to the east and Santiago - Cuba's fascinating second city.

### Havana

**Day 1** You arrive at Havana airport, where you will be met and transferred to your hotel in Old Havana for 2 nights.

**Day 2** **BL** A free day to explore Havana. There is a huge amount to see, so to get you started we have listed some of the sights on page 9.

### Santa Clara

**Day 3** **B** You pick up your hire car and set off for Santa Clara, where you spend tonight. You visit the Tren Blindado (hijacked train that marked the end of the revolution). The tren blindado cannot be missed and is easy to find but the small museum section is closed on Monday).

Santa Clara's town main square is lively and worth a visit - the Habana Libre Hotel on one corner still retains the bullet holes from that final revolutionary battle!

### Remedios

**Day 4** **B** Move towards the coast today for a day exploring exquisitely pristine Remedios before maybe moving on to spend the rest of the day on the beach at Las Brujas. Overnight in Santa Clara.

### Trinidad

**Day 5** **BD** You leave Santa Clara today firstly for the magnificent colonial highlights of Cienfuegos and then on to Trinidad, where you are steeped in more colonial heritage but here in contrast to Cienfuegos' French influenced boulevards the streets are narrow and cobbled with the ballast of the slave ships. You opt to stay either at the beach or in town for 3 nights.

**Day 6** **BD** Cuba's second mountain range, the Sierra del Escambray serves as a backdrop to the cities of Trinidad and Cienfuegos. You could take the car today to explore the countryside and rural communities but be aware the roads are not fantastic and you may well prefer to spend the day in Trinidad and at Playa Ancón (Trinidad's best beach).

**Day 7** **BD** Trinidad's wealth due to the sugar trade was short-lived and the town became a backwater, which is why much of the town retains its original character, cobbled streets and architecture. Savour the visual delights of the town, learn or practise salsa at the excellent and popular casa de la trova - local music venue or just enjoy the beach and the ambience of 21st century Cuban town in a colonial setting.

Alternatively opt for a morning excursion to Topes de Collantes (bookable locally) and end the day at the beach.

### Camagüey

**Day 8** **B** Today you drive to Camagüey, a colonial town with

winding streets, designed to confuse marauding pirates, and lovely colonial squares. Camagüey is famous for its *tinajones*, large clay water pots redolent of Byzantine times. The town is situated in an efficiently managed agricultural area. An evening stroll can reveal hidden colonial gems.

### Bayamo

**Day 9** **B** A stroll around Camagüey today to enjoy this busy town with its colonial squares then on to Bayamo today, a pretty, friendly town with a lively revolutionary history originally founded by Velasquez in the seventeenth century. Bayamo is a three hour drive from Camagüey. Bayamo played an important part in the Wars of Independence at the end of the 19th century.

### Santiago

**Day 10** **B** You might opt to drive to Santiago via El Cobre, Cuba's most important shrine, which featured in the Pope's 2012 visit to Cuba. Plenty to see in Santiago. It is a colourful, bustling city with a rich revolutionary history, has been a hotbed of revolution over the centuries, so it was not surprising that Castro chose it to launch his first attack on Batista.

One of the original seven Spanish settlements, the city was Cuba's capital for a short time in the 16th century until it was decided Havana was better for trade.

Santiago's port was originally important due to the gold and then copper found locally, but the reserves were small so Santiago sank into the background again until in the late eighteenth century, when French settlers from Haiti realised that the area was ideally suited to sugar and coffee plantations and the city became prosperous once more.

**Day 11** **B** It is worth walking or driving out to the once wealthy suburb, Reparto Vista Alegre, to see how grandly the settlers lived. There has been many a rivalry between the two major Cuban cities, especially as the origins of the citizens are very different: in Havana the population mostly descended from Spanish settlers whereas the *Santiagueros* were mainly descended from Cuban creoles, who were not happy to be ruled by Spain.

Many of the country's heroes heralded from Eastern Cuba, e.g. Antonio Maceo and Carlos Manuel de Céspedes.

Santiago's history of Jamaican, Haitian and slave labour combined with Spanish influences has resulted in a rich musical heritage. In Santiago music and rhythm are never far away. Eastern Cuba is considered a birthplace of the rhythms and composition of *son*, a unifying element to much Cuban music.

The Casa de la Trova in Santiago is considered the best in the country—even Paul McCartney has paid homage there.

**Day 12** **B** It is worth driving out to the imposing fortress of El Morro, and perhaps up to Gran Piedra if you have the time.

### Havana

**Day 13** **B** This afternoon you drop off your hire car at Santiago's airport. There will be a drop off charge to pay. Take the mid afternoon flight back to Havana, where you are met and transferred to the historic Hotel Nacional.

**Day 14** **B** A free day based at your 1950s hotel on the Malecón with garden setting and pool. We can pre-book a tour for you at an additional cost, see page 9 for ideas.

**Day 15** **B** Free time today until you are collected from your hotel and driven to the airport for your return flight to the UK.



PHOTOS: 01 Bayamo streets 02 Casa de Diego Velásquez, Santiago 03 On the road, eastern Cuba 04 Casa del Gobierno, Santiago 05 Hibiscus 06 'The fundamental clay of our work is youth', Havana



SMALL GROUP HOLIDAY • MID-RANGE HOTELS

## Cuban Odyssey

Join a small group for a wide-ranging trip, with lots to see and do each day. Delightful people, captivating countryside, fascinating history and culture. A great holiday, and much praised by Cubans themselves as far and away the best designed and most complete two-week tour of Cuba—and of course much enjoyed by our clients too!

### Book your place!

This small group holiday has departure dates throughout the year - see the current Booking Information supplement that comes with this brochure.

### Havana

**Day 1** You are met on the arrival at Havana airport of your chosen international flight and transferred to the group's Havana hotel, where we enjoy a welcome cocktail and meet our fellow participants. Everything one has heard about Cuba's capital city is true! Lovers of history, architecture, music and people will revel in this fascinating city that outwardly seems frozen in time since the days of the revolution, while seismic shifts in politics have affected the lives of everyone.

**Day 2** BL This morning we meet our local Havana guide and set off on foot for a walking tour of Old Havana, through narrow colonial streets, around elegant plazas, beside lavish mansions—some now crumbling, others beautifully restored.

We visit the Plaza de La Catedral, the delightful Museum of Colonial Art and the worthy but fascinating Museum of the Revolution.

After lunch we stroll past the Castillo del Real Fuerza (a 17th century fort), stop at a peaceful courtyard shrine to Princess Diana, paid for by the British Embassy, and continue to the lively Plaza de Armas. We may have time to visit the Camera Obscura to see life on Havana's rooftops or enjoy a refreshment at Taberna de la Muralla.

We'll then take a tour of Havana in old American open-top classic cars before returning to our hotel. Our guide will be able to provide information on restaurants, and on nightspots from the gaudy Tropicana to cool jazz hang-outs.

**Day 3** BL Less pressure on the feet today as we are driven out to Miramar and Playa, a well-to-do area of embassies and government offices in art deco and neoclassical styles, where some luckier Cubans still live. On the way back into town we stop to see John Lennon in the park that bears his name and visit the 1920s art deco mansion that is now the Casa de la Amistad, a cultural centre. We then repair to the rather lavish Restaurant 1830 for lunch.

Our afternoon brings us firmly into post-revolution Havana with a visit to the vast Plaza de la Revolución, with a giant outline of Ché gazing across it. Our route back passes the US Special Interest Section and the Wall of Flags defiantly blocking it from view.

It will then be time to collect our bags and be driven to the airport for our flight to Santiago. We are met on arrival and transferred to our hotel for a 3 night stay.

### Santiago

**Day 4** BL Santiago was one of the first Spanish settlements in Cuba and even the country's capital for a brief time. The most Caribbean city in Cuba with the highest African-Caribbean population, the city is as vibrant as Havana yet retains an intimate small town atmosphere.

One of the first Spanish settlements, it boasts one of the oldest

buildings in the Caribbean—the Museo de Ambiente Cubano, built for the conquistador Diego Velasquez in 1515. Santiago's magnificent fort looking over the bay was built to deter rampaging pirates (without much success).

This morning our guide takes us on an orientation tour in the historic centre around Plaza Céspedes including the Museo de Ambiente Cubano and the Museo Bacardi.

After lunch we visit Moncada Barracks, a stark and moving reminder of young people's sacrifices, where the horror of Batista's brutality hits one with considerable force. In the same vein we visit the Museo de la Lucha Clandestina, a tribute to the pre-revolutionary struggle. The museum is housed in a reproduction of the original 18th century house, burnt down in 1956 in an attack by another Santiaguero, schoolteacher Frank Pais.

In the evening we visit the city's famous Casa de la Trova, one of the true homes of *son*, the Cuban style that influences most of today's Latin American music and has a following around the world.

**Day 5** BL A day exploring the area just east of Santiago. We pass by Siboney Farm, where the young fighters led by Fidel Castro dined before their ill-fated attack on the Moncada Barracks. We visit the dramatic rock out-crop of Gran Piedra, a vantage point with great panoramic views, and the Isabelica coffee plantation. In the afternoon we continue down the 'Revolutionary Highway' to Baconao Park where we can take a pleasant lakeside stroll. Here you might spot the Cuban Tody, a most delightful small bird. We pass the marvellously incongruous 'Valley of Prehistory' theme park where life-size dinosaurs roam the landscape, and visit a museum of classic cars.

Our evening is free. Santiago buzzes at night, with rooftop cafes and bars, plazas where locals come to stroll after their day's work, and some of the best places for music on the whole island.

**Day 6** BLD A leisurely start today. First we tour the outskirts of Santiago and visit the immediate suburbs of the city to take a look at Vista Alegre, an elegant leafy suburb, for an impression of how wealthier people lived before the revolution. Although some

houses appear a little shabby, there are some fantastic examples of colonial and neoclassical homes, some still private residences, but most are now museums, community buildings or restaurants.

Close by is the cemetery with José Martí's mausoleum. Buena Vista Social Club's Compay Segundo, who wrote their defining song 'Chan Chan' and others you will hear all over Cuba, is also buried here. We move on to El Castillo del Morro San Pedro de la Roca, the splendid seventeenth century coastal fort built high on the cliffs.

After lunch we depart for Holguín via Birán, where Fidel and Raúl were born. The Castro family home is now a museum and we stop for a short visit.

We cross the train tracks from Alto Cedro to Cueto, that go on to Mayarí, with 'Chan Chan' in our ears. Overnight just outside Holguín at a hilltop hotel with commanding panoramic views.

### Central Cuba

**Day 7** BL Today we descend into Holguín to stretch our legs a little strolling along the principal avenues which link several small tree filled squares. Cubans call this the 'city of parks'. There's a little time to explore the shops or just sit and watch the world go by before we drive to Camagüey (3-4hr), where we stay 2 nights in a characterful mid-range hotel.

Camagüey is a colonial town with winding streets, designed to confuse marauding pirates, and lovely colonial squares. Look out for its *tinajones*—large clay water pots redolent of Byzantium. An evening stroll reveals other gems from the past.

**Day 8** BL Camagüey is a friendly, lively place, and is in many ways a typical Cuban town. This morning we find out about two initiatives that help show how Cuba works and has found its unique identity. At the busy farmers' market we learn about a national scheme, for which Camagüey is the pilot project, which calls for farmers to grow fruit and vegetables and raise some livestock in 4-mile rings around 150 towns and cities, so that fresh produce can be easily brought to market to feed the townspeople. Then after lunch we visit the HQ of the internationally successful Camagüey ballet at the beautiful Teatro Principal. Potatoes and pirouettes in one day.

Later, there is time for you to explore Camagüey by yourself if you wish. It is easy to get around on foot or by *bici-taxi*. There is music, of course, and quirky local events such as a regular synchronised swimming display. Your guide will help you decide.

### Trinidad

**Day 9** BLD Today starts with a drive to the beautiful colonial town of Trinidad. On our way we visit the Valle de los Ingenios, a tucked-away valley of sugar plantations that were worked by slaves, where a gaunt bell-tower stands over a picturesque village now known for its handmade lace and embroidery.





Having settled into our beach hotel just outside Trinidad we set out in the evening to the Casa de la Trova for live music, Cuban style. Opportunities to join in the dancing may prove irresistible.

**Day 10** At Trinidad, a UNESCO World Heritage Site is definitely one of Cuba's loveliest towns. This morning we take a stroll through the picturesque cobbled streets with our guide, looking into the many colonial houses with their magnificent internal patios, and visiting the delightful Museo Romántico with its delicate painted frescoes and insights into fine living in centuries past. The rest of the day is free to explore further or enjoy the beach or the hotel pool.

**Day 11** BLD We drive up to Sierra del Escambray, the mountain range just behind Trinidad, for a day in hills and lush forests. We arrive at Hacienda Codina in time for lunch. After lunch you may decide to relax on the lovely verandah, or to put on your walking shoes for a leg-stretching country walk, or for a gentle meander around the plantation. You might even be the one to find the world's smallest frog! We return to our hotel later in the afternoon.

### Cienfuegos and the Bay of Pigs

**Day 12** BLD An early start today to explore with our guide the nearby city of Cienfuegos, which has a distinctly French look to it. We continue to the Bay of Pigs, where we visit the museum at Playa Girón dedicated to Cuba's gallant resistance to the woefully misconceived US invasion.

We move on to the Zapata Biosphere Reserve, Cuba's unique wetlands with its wealth of bird life. We take our lunch at Zapata before we are driven on to Soroa, where we spend one night.

Depending how the day goes, we may also be able to visit the orchardium in Soroa before we arrive at our hotel, if not, we will visit it tomorrow.

### Viñales Valley

**Day 13** BLD Today we visit breathtakingly beautiful Viñales Valley with its *mogotes*—limestone hills that rise above flat fields awash with bougainvillea, hibiscus, and flame trees.

We spend much of the day in this lovely area, and then return to Havana in the early evening for 2 nights at the Hotel Nacional, the great 1930s megalith that looks over the Malecón and out to sea from its hilltop setting. Is that Errol Flynn at the bar, and Rita Hayworth?

### Hemingway's Havana

**Day 14** BLD Today we drive to Finca Vigia, Ernest Hemingway's home for 20 years before he left Cuba forever in 1960, giving the house and its small estate to the Cuban government. He left his boat, the *Pilar*, to his faithful skipper, Gregorio Fuentes, and the salty little launch stands dry-docked in the grounds. The house is so meticulously kept that 'Papa' might step through the door at any moment.

At Cojimar we lunch at the great writer's favourite restaurant and return to Havana for a walk through Old Havana's streets where you can stop at either or both of his two favourite bars, La Bodeguita del Medio and La Floridita, for a daiquiri or a mojito. We also visit the room at the Ambos Mundos Hotel, where he wrote part of 'For Whom the Bell Tolls'.

We return to the Nacional, and step out for a farewell dinner with our guide.

**Day 15** B A final free morning in Havana before we are transferred to the airport for our chosen international flights. You might relax by the hotel pool or fit in some independent sightseeing or shopping. Your guide is on hand to advise and assist.



PHOTOS: 01 Plaza Mayor, Trinidad 02 Mogote, Pinar del Río 03 Tobacco farmer's wife and daughter, Pinar del Río 04 Street musicians, Havana 05 1956 Ford Fairlane 06 Rooftop bar, Santiago

07 Iconic Ché image, Ministry of the Interior, Plaza de la Revolución, Havana 08 Urgent business 09 Family-run restaurant, Viñales







## Walking in Cuba

*What better way to discover any country than on foot? These itineraries take you into the rural heart of Cuba in a mixture of touring and walking.*

Cuba has some wonderful opportunities for walkers, especially the long country rambles that put you in close touch with local people and rural life. You can almost sense your batteries recharging and your busy mind grounding itself again as you tie on your walking boots and step into the warm air.

Walking in Cuba brings you into contact with nature, places you amongst the best scenery, and puts you in touch with local lives.

You'll pass farmers: strapping chaps burnt to a gleaming mahogany and old geezers with watery eyes valiantly steering oxen to plough that little field for the fortieth, fiftieth or sixtieth time in their lives. Some are too busy for more than a nod or a wave, others only too happy to stop and pass the time of day, waving at their little house where their wife might invite you for home-roasted coffee, or pluck a guava for you from the tree by the door.

Out on the hills you can be striding along with Cuba spread out below. Faint sounds float up to you of little trucks passing on country roads, a cattle lowing or a donkey braying, the yell of a boy chasing a ball or a grandmother calling her husband to fetch the water.

Cuba is quite active in setting up and maintaining national parks, and some of them are stunning, spanning ecosystems from swamps to mountain forests. If nature, wildlife and birds are your thing there will be some

wonderful highlights almost every day.

There's a strong folk memory of the revolution in many areas, especially in the Sierra Maestra where Fidel and Ché hid in the mountains while they trained their comrades into a fighting force. You'll find their enthusiasm persists, with many farmers today using a rousing 'Hasta la victoria siempre!' to say goodbye.

The walking holidays we design are not difficult (the 'El Turquino' trek on this page is an exception). On most of the walking days there are several options, so you can decide how much walking you'd like that day.

For the most part you are accompanied by an experienced English-speaking walking guide to help you choose the day's trail, keep you on the right track, translate when necessary, and share his knowledge as you walk.

The two walking holidays shown here can be added to, with time at the beach, for example, or extra time in Havana, before or after your walking itinerary, which you can choose straight off-the-peg, or ask us to adapt into a special tailor-made design to suit you best.

They also work well together if you have time to combine them for a three week holiday.

If you're keen to do other things but still would like to walk as part of your holiday, then we would be delighted to design one or two day walks into your time on the island.

### El Turquino

Climb the highest peak in Cuba.

**Day 1** D Transfer to Santo Domingo from Bayamo, El Saltón or Santiago (extra cost). Evening briefing and preparations.

**Day 2** BLD After breakfast transfer by jeep to *Altos del Naranjo* and walk (2hr, moderately strenuous) to *Comandancia de la Plata*, Fidel's rebel HQ deep in the mountains. Return to *Altos del Naranjo* and onwards to the *La Platica* ecological community, to stay the night at a simple bunkhouse.

**Day 3** BLD With an early start to beat afternoon rains you walk along an undulating ridge (4-5hr, moderate), with magnificent scenery and distant sea views to the *Aguada de Joaquín* mountain refuge.

**Day 4** BLD Three ascents in succession (6-7hr, mostly strenuous), first Pico Joaquín (1360m), then Alto Regino (1680m), and finally Pico Turquino itself (1974m). Descend to the refuge of *La Majagua*.

**Day 5** BL A 3.5km descent (2hr, mostly easy) to arrive at the Caribbean, where you are met by jeep and driven to Santiago.

#### PHOTOS

01 Ploughing with oxen, Pinar del Río

02 Grocery store, Remedios



PRIVATE GUIDED WALKING HOLIDAY • MID-RANGE HOTELS



## Havana & Eastern Cuba Day Walks

A lovely combination: great travel experiences and some astounding walks. You explore both Havana and Santiago, and go walking in the Sierra Maestra, in the gorgeous hills behind sleepy Baracoa, and in Gran Piedra. Your private walking guide helps you choose the types of trail you like.

### Havana

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Havana airport and transferred your hotel in Old Havana.

**Day 2** **BL** Your Havana city guide collects you from your hotel and takes you on a walking tour of Old Havana, followed by lunch and a tour of modern Havana in an old American car - see 'One day in Havana' in 'Your Man in Havana' on page 9. Your evening is free: your guide can suggest a choice of restaurants for dinner.

### El Saltón

**Day 3** **BLD** You are collected bright and early from your hotel for your flight to Holguín in eastern Cuba, where you are met by your English-speaking private walking guide. Driving south you cross quiet plains of farms growing sugar cane, to the market town of Bayamo, and then climb into the foothills of the Sierra Maestra. Here you stay at the little mountain retreat of El Saltón (p46) for the next 2 nights.

**Day 4** **BLD** Once a health spa for Cuba's elite, El Saltón has evolved into a comfortable eco-lodge. It is set in hillside gardens at the head of a green valley, where a mountain river cascades over a rock face into an inviting pool. It's a lovely area for walking, and today you step out with your guide to explore wooded hills and streams, and a countryside dotted with family smallholdings. You can walk as much or as little as you like—it's your choice. The lodge offers a spa, which, although it could not be accused of pampered luxury, makes a rewarding end to a day in the open air.

### Baracoa

**Note:** You could insert the *Turquino trek* (p33) to start on this day

**Day 5** **BL** A glorious day of touring as you cross to Baracoa. You descend from the Sierra Maestra and cross to the town of Guantánamo, set well back from the unwelcome US base. The road winds down to the coast and becomes one of the most beautiful in Cuba, skirting the Caribbean below the mountains of the Sierra del Plurial. Turning inland you cross the viaduct of La Farola, and descend to the little town of Baracoa, for centuries only accessible from the sea. You may come across sellers of *cucuruchos*—a palm leaf cone holding a sticky sweet of coconut, honey and condensed milk, plain or with fruit: try pineapple, guava or orange. Settle in at your hotel, then explore the town with your guide. Baracoa's *Casa de la Trova* is well worth a visit in the evening.

**Day 6** **BLD** Baracoa gazes sleepily across a pretty bay, set in gorgeous tropical countryside, with low palm-forested hills, scattered with small fields for cacao and bananas. Its backdrop of rugged mountains includes the impressive flat-topped bulk of El Yunque. There are several excellent walks: a fairly strenuous trek to the top of El Yunque, an easier trail to the River Toa via the Finca Duaba chocolate farm, and others. Your guide will help you decide.

**Day 7** **BLD** Today you walk the *Balcón de Iberia* trail in the Alexander von Humboldt National Park, which (to quote UNESCO) holds 'one of the most biologically diverse terrestrial tropical ecosystems in an island setting anywhere on earth'. The trail itself passes through gorgeous countryside and includes some lovely views. On the first, mainly level, section look for the Bee Hummingbird, the smallest bird in the world. The trail then leads up the small Mount Iberia (755m), through forest with more excellent birds, to the 25 metre El Majá waterfall where it is possible to swim. The walk usually takes about 5 hours in all.

### Santiago and Gran Piedra

**Day 8** **BLD** Returning via the Farola road you arrive at Santiago (p14), Cuba's most Caribbean city. Your guide takes you on a tour of the old colonial streets at the heart of the city. At the end of the afternoon you drive up to your hotel near Gran Piedra for a 2 night stay, with distant views of the Sierra Maestra.

**Day 9** **BLD** Lots of walking today, roughly 12 miles but mainly flat or downhill, with lots to see, all with your guide. First a short hop up the steps to the top of the Gran Piedra outcrop for its great views, then a visit to the atmospheric 'Isabelica' coffee plantation, one of the best preserved slave plantations in Cuba.

You descend to the valley via a hillside garden, a sculpture park, and Granjita Siboney (where Fidel and his followers gathered for their fateful assault on Santiago's Moncada Barracks)—all before lunch! Your trail then takes you to the bizarre 'Valley of Prehistory' to end at the quirky 'Museum of Transport' where you meet your driver.

### Havana

**Day 10** **BL** Early start to see El Morro fort before you are driven to the airport for your afternoon flight to Havana. You are met on arrival and driven to the Hotel Nacional for your final night in Cuba.

**Day 11** **B** There is lots to see in the Vedado district close to your hotel, or you could take a taxi to art galleries or museums (see p9). You need to be back at the hotel in time for your transfer to the airport for your flight home, usually late in the afternoon.



## Day Walks in Rural Cuba

A very popular walking holiday that seems to capture many touches of the revolution at Santa Clara, visit colonial Trinidad (and great music), then cross to the tobacco fields and hills

### Havana

**Day 1** You are met on your arrival at Havana airport and transferred your hotel in Old Havana.

**Day 2** **BL** Your Havana city guide collects you from your hotel and takes you on a walking tour of Old Havana, followed by lunch and a tour of modern Havana in an old American car - see 'One day in Havana' in 'Your Man in Havana' on page 9. Your evening is free: your guide can suggest a choice of restaurants for dinner.

### Lake Hanabanilla

**Day 3** **BLD** You are picked up from your hotel in Havana this morning by your English-speaking private walking guide and driver for the 3-4hr journey to Lake Hanabanilla, in the countryside below the Sierra del Escambray. At Santa Clara you could visit Ché's mausoleum and museum, and the wreckage of the armoured train carrying Batista's men that Ché's men overwhelmed. Your hotel for the next 2 nights is next to Lake Hanabanilla itself. It's a fairly unlovely concrete hotel from the era of Soviet economic support but well-placed for walking.

**Day 4** **BLD** A short boat ride on the lake brings you to the start of a winding trail up Cola Cambiada (which means 'curly tail' in Spanish), a winding, steep trail giving panoramic views over Lake Hanabanilla. Joined by a local naturalist guide you pass by banana and coffee plantations, and a little coffee finca. It's a good 3-4hr walk in all, ending with a late lunch by the lake before returning to your hotel.

### Trinidad

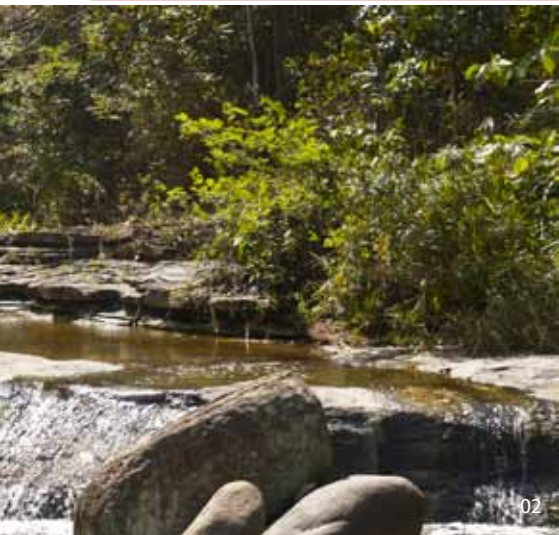
**Day 5** **BL** First a drive to the start of the trail to Salto del Caburni waterfall followed by a day's fairly strenuous walking via waterfalls and steep paths.

Look for hummingbirds and Cuba's national flower, the white mariposa (butterfly jasmine) with its lovely scent. Listen out for Cuba's national bird, the Toco-ro, with its blue, red and white Cuba plumage.

Later you drive down to the colonial town of Trinidad, staying at your beach hotel on Playa Ancón for 2 nights. In the evening you might take a taxi into Trinidad to stroll the cobbled streets and perhaps enjoy an evening's music in the Casa de Trova.

### Sierra del Escambray

**Day 6** **BL** There is some lovely walking behind Trinidad in the Escambray mountains, with tremendous views on hillsides of mixed forest, with coconut palms, and banana and cacao plantations on lower slopes, and coffee higher up. You follow trails around Hacienda Codina, with a local nature guide to introduce you to the local flora and fauna. Mind you don't step on the world's smallest frog!



PRIVATE GUIDED WALKING HOLIDAY • MID-RANGE HOTELS

...y people's dreams of Cuba. You explore Havana, ...d (with lakes, mountain walks, a Caribbean beach ...of Viñales for glorious scenery—with a dash of Ché.

### Las Terrazas

**Day 7** BLD An early start today as you travel to western Cuba, stopping en route for lunch, and arriving at the eco-community of Las Terrazas in the early afternoon in good time for a walk on one of the 6 trails. A local guide will show you around, explaining how the community works and the sustainable technologies they use.

**Day 8** BL This morning you walk the Santa Serafina trail (5km approx), which offers easy walking in lovely countryside along the valley of the Río San Juan, partly by the river itself. The path passes the evocative ruins of the Santa Serafina coffee plantation, built by French settlers. The trail is especially good for birds, passing through several different ecosystems before it ends by the river at a local swimming spot.

After lunch it's a short drive to Cueva las Portales, an impressive limestone cave that was Ché's base during the Cuban missile crisis. Continuing to Viñales for a 2 night stay, you have dinner at your hotel with a spectacular view over the Viñales valley.

### Viñales

**Day 9** BL Enjoy a day in the Cuban countryside, exploring this sometimes breathtakingly beautiful region known for its tobacco plantations and the sheer sided *mogotes*, or rugged limestone hills, which rise from a tropical plain rich with hibiscus, bougainvillea and flame trees, laid out in a patchwork of tobacco fields and rice paddies.

Your guide will take you on a day of country walks, passing smallholdings where farmers still plough with oxen, and rickety drying sheds where tobacco leaves hang in loose rows developing the subtle flavours that will command the highest prices. It's a tropical idyll, at peace with itself, though the work is back-breakingly hard.

### Havana

**Day 10** BL There should be ample time for a leisurely start to the day and a visit to Havana's Botanical Park before you are driven to the airport for your flight home.



PRIVATE GUIDED TOURING • CHOOSE MID-RANGE HOTELS THROUGHOUT, OR UPPER RANGE HOTELS WHERE AVAILABLE

## Viva La Revolución!

An exciting trip for aficionados of the Cuban Revolution covering most of the key places in the struggles of Castro, Ché Guevara and their comrades, with knowledgeable guides to bring events to life and set them in their context.

### Havana

**Day 1** You arrive at Havana airport, where you are met and transferred to your hotel for one night.

### Eastern Cuba

**Day 2** BD An English-speaking Havana guide collects you from your hotel to visit the Museum of the Revolution and see the 'Granma', the little boat that brought Castro's revolutionaries to the island. Later you return to the airport for your flight to Holguín in eastern Cuba, where you are met and driven to the town of Bayamo for one night. You should arrive in the late afternoon with time to see something of the town with your touring guide, who is with you until Day 10.

### Granma Landing

**Day 3** BLD Today you visit Las Colorados NP and the beach where Fidel, Ché and their band of revolutionaries landed in the 'Granma' in 1956. It's an attractive spot, as well as an evocative one with much to tell. There should be time for a dip in the blue-green Caribbean waters of a nearby beach. Overnight at a functional hotel at Niquero (the best in the area).

### Sierra Maestra

**Day 4** BLD You cross through scenic countryside to Santo Domingo in the Sierra Maestra, where you stay 2 nights. Your guide takes you on a short tour of this beautiful spot.

**Day 5** BLD Deep in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra, you visit *La Comandancia*, the rebels' HQ set in hard mountain terrain. You are driven part way, probably in a old Russian truck, with a further strenuous walk to the HQ itself (2hr walking in all).

### Santiago

**Day 6** BL On to the bustling city of Santiago overlooking the Caribbean, where you stay 3 nights near the city centre. You explore the streets and plazas at the centre of the city and in the evening we've included a visit to Santiago's famous Casa de la Trova, one of the best Cuban music venues on the island (though you may have to pay an extra entry if there is a special concert).

**Day 7** BL This morning your guide takes you to the sites from Santiago's key role in the revolution. In 1953 Castro chose Santiago's Moncada Barracks for his first attack. It failed, costing many idealistic young lives. Fidel and his brother Raúl were caught but spared execution. On their release they fled to Mexico where they gathered a group, including Ernesto 'Ché' Guevara, and prepared to sail back. A group of young revolutionaries attacked Santiago's police HQ, customs house and harbour on 30 November 1956, to draw troops away from the landing area, and 5 days later 'Granma' set sail. The Museo de la Lucha Clandestina, which you visit, evocatively commemorates the group's heroism.

### Gran Piedra

**Day 8** BL This morning you drive to the Granjita de Siboney, where Fidel prepared the Moncada attack. The road taken by his group, which you drove in the opposite direction, is now dubbed The Revolutionary Highway. While in the area there is a car museum you might visit, before you drive up to Gran Piedra, walking up the rock itself for spectacular views across to the Sierra Maestra and visit the moving 'La Isabelica' slave plantation.

### Fidel's birthplace

**Day 9** BLD A free morning to explore Santiago, leaving at noon to drive north to the village of Birán where the Castro brothers were born, where their family home is now a museum. After your visit you continue onwards to Holguín to stay one night.

### Santa Clara

**Day 10** BD Fly early from Holguín back to Havana, to be met by a new guide and driven to Santa Clara, a key location in the closing phase of the revolution. You visit the Hotel Havana Libre that shows bullet holes from the firefight for Santa Clara and the wreck of the armoured train carrying government soldiers blown up by Ché, that led in a few days to complete victory. You visit Ché's mausoleum and drive to Cienfuegos for one night.

### Cienfuegos and the Bay of Pigs

**Day 11** BL At El Museo Historico Naval Nacional you learn about the uprising at Cienfuegos' naval barracks in September 1957, that was crushed by Batista. You drive to the Bay of Pigs, where another small museum outlines the botched US-backed invasion, and continue to Havana for 3 nights.

### Havana

**Day 12** BL Today you visit Ché's family house, where you meet a member of his family or a former comrade to talk about Ché's life in Cuba. You visit the Plaza de la Revolución with its iconic portrait of Ché, and the Ché student centre in Lenin Park. Heading back, you'll pass the Russian Embassy and the US Special Interests Section screened by the Wall of Flags, and stop at Hotel Nacional. You visit the La Cabaña fort, the largest Spanish fort in the Americas, where Ché had his office in 1959, to see the Cannon Ceremony.

**Day 13** BL More Ché today as you drive to Cueva de los Portales, his base in the Cuban missile crisis. You see where he worked, exercised and planned operations. You could also visit the nearby gardens of Hacienda Cortina before returning to Havana.

**Day 14** BL You spend the whole of today exploring Old Havana with your guide.

**Day 15** B Free time in Havana before your transfer to the airport in time for your flight home.

PHOTOS: 01 Calling by for a chat 02 Sierra stream



### **Cuban Trogon**

One of Cuba's 24 endemics, the Cuba Trogon sports the red white and blue of the Cuban flag, and so was adopted as the national bird. Found widely around the island, like most trogons it likes to sit in the shade, but unlike other trogons it often hovers while it feeds.



01

## Birdwatching in Cuba

*Cuba is very attractive for birdwatching. In enjoyable surroundings and some wonderful countryside you can readily achieve fairly long lists, with plenty of endemics—all at very reasonable prices and with direct flights from the UK.*

Cuba's natural side offers a great variety of landscapes and habitats, from lush forests to blue hills and expansive wetlands.

Birdwatchers visit Cuba to experience its exciting avifauna with a large number of endemics. Cuba is an important as well as very enjoyable destination for some mostly rather relaxed birding, enlivened by some sensational species.

This is by far the most important island in the Caribbean for birds. Its mix of habitats and range of endemic species and sub-species together with its important position for migrants have made the bird list for Cuba a long one. Its 350 or more species include 24 Cuban endemics and 19 of the 51 Caribbean endemics not restricted to single islands.

### BIRDWATCHING WITH GEODYSSEY

We are experts in private birdwatching holidays to Cuba, with many years' experience of arranging successful birdwatching trips adapted not only to birdwatching priorities but

also the unique factors that make Cuba such a very special place.

The suggested itineraries presented here can each be chosen 'off-the-peg' or adapted as tailor-made trips to suit different interests, styles, budgets, and time-frames.

Most clients prefer to be accompanied by a local specialist birdwatching guide, though often it is necessary to use different guides in different regions—such is Cuba.

Our classic '**The Birds of Cuba**' itinerary is a comprehensive review of Cuba's birds. It is usually possible to see most of the endemics and a host of others in this thoroughly memorable trip carefully designed with a minimum of unnecessary travelling.

For the adventurous 'DIY' birder, self-drive birding is a great option. Our '**Selfdrive Birdwatching in Cuba**' makes it all possible.

Our popular '**Birds and Culture**' combines just as much birding with extra opportunities to experience Cuba's history and culture, which makes a very enjoyable compromise for partners less dedicated to birds.



02

#### PHOTOS

01 The largest remaining populations of the near-threatened Cuban Amazon are on Cuba, with small numbers on the Cayman Islands and the Bahamas

02 Cuban Tody, one of the island's 24 endemics

#### Country hotels for birders

If you enjoy your birds but would prefer to spend your time walking or relaxing rather than gadding about from one prime birding spot to the next, then why not choose to spend your time at a country hotel or two?

Cuba has a small selection of reasonably good hotels in lovely natural settings where you can happily spend a few days close to nature, with binoculars as well as your book or walking boots.

Turn to page 46 to find out more.

# Planning your trip

## Birdwatching site guide

### Soroa

In the forested areas near Soroa one can find Cuban Vireo, Cuban Pygmy Owl, Great Lizard-Cuckoo and a selection of warblers including the lovely Black-throated Blue and Black-throated Green Warblers.

### La Güira NP, Sierra del Rosario

Highlands of semi-deciduous tropical forest, interspersed with pines, rising to 800m. Two specialities found easily here are the near-endemic Olive-capped Warbler and the endemic Cuban Solitaire. Limestone hills that rise from the plain are peppered with caves, home to the Cave Swallow. Other interesting species found here include Blue-headed Quail-Dove, Scaly-naped Pigeon, Cuban Tody, Cuban Trogon, Gundlach's Hawk, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Western Spindalis, Antillean Palm Swift, Cuban Martin, Greater Antillean Grackle, Loggerhead Kingbird, Cuban Bullfinch, Cuban Grassquit and Giant Kingbird.

### Zapata Swamp

The top birding site of the island, mangrove swamp, salt pans, thick scrub, forest and coastal habitat around the Bay of Pigs, home to Zapata Wren, Zapata Sparrow and Zapata Rail, and the best site for Bee Hummingbird (world's smallest bird). Other specialities include Cuban Green Woodpecker, all 4 of Cuba's Quail-doves, Zenaida Dove, West Indian Woodpecker, the endemic race of Northern Flicker and the rare endemic Fernandina's Woodpecker. From December to April Zapata is home to numerous N American migrants, particularly warblers and this is the time for great displays of water birds, inc Caribbean Flamingo, Roseate Spoonbill, jacana, Anhinga, Night-Heron, Belted Kingfisher, Clapper, Spotted and King Rails, Sora, Wilson's Plover, Yellow-breasted Crane and Chuck-wills Widow, plus many heron, ibis, grebe etc. Raptors are well represented with Snail Kite, American Kestrel, Common Black, Grub and Bautista Hawk, the rare Gundlach's Hawk, Bare-legged Owl or Cuban Screech-Owl and Cuban Pygmy-Owl, Bare-legged and Stygian Owl and Greater Antillean (Cuban) Nightjar. Other good sites in the area include trails around Playa Larga and Playa Giron, Jicarita cattle ranch (where the last Zapata Rails are mooted), Palpite, Soplillar for Ferdinanda's Flicker, Montemar NP (home to wintering American warblers such as Black-throated Blue, Black and White, Magnolia and Palm Warblers and American Redstart), and Cueva de los Peces restaurant for Blue-headed Quail Dove, Ovenbird, Northern Parula, Bermejas. Take plenty of mosquito repellent to Zapata!

### Camaguey, La Belen, S de Najasa, S de Cubitas

Najasa is the place for two of the rarer endemics, Giant Kingbird and Cuban Palm Crow, the globally endangered Plain Pigeon, Cuban Crow, Cuban Parakeet, Cuban Parrot, Rose-throated Parrot, the Cuban race of Eastern Meadowlark, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Cuban Pygmy-Owl and Cuban Vireo. Nearby the Sierra de Cubitas mountains have Great Lizard Cuckoo, Cuban Trogon and Cuban Emerald, Ruddy, Key West and Blue-headed Quail-Doves, Cuban Martin, La Sagra's Flycatcher, Oriente Warbler, Cuban Bullfinch and Cuban Blackbird.

### Cayo Coco

Low islands reached by a causeway. Found only here are the endemic subspecies of Thick-billed Vireo, Mangrove Cuckoo and Bahama Mockingbird. This is the western limit for Oriente Warbler and Cuban Gnatcatcher. Clapper Rail, Key West Quail-dove and a different subspecies of Zapata Sparrow are also found, plus Cuban Crab Hawk and West Indian Whistling-Duck. From the causeway there is Red-breasted Merganser, large flocks of Greater Flamingo, Roseate Spoonbill, Magnificent Frigatebird, Anhinga, Tricolored Heron, Willet, Reddish Egret, Short-billed Dowitchers and many others.



01

FULLY GUIDED SPECIALIST BIRDWATCHING • MID RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES

## The Birds of Cuba

A classic itinerary combining the most important sites in a relaxed and efficient way. You should see most or all of the see-able Cuban endemics, a lot of the other residents, and plenty of migrants depending on season.

### Havana - Soroa

**Day 1** D You are met on arrival at Havana airport and driven to Soroa for your first night.

### La Güira National Park

**Day 2** BLD In the morning you bird forest near Soroa looking for your first Cuban Vireo, Cuban Pygmy Owl, Great Lizard-Cuckoo and a selection of warblers including the lovely Black-throated Blue and Black-throated Green Warblers. You should also see Ruddy, and possibly Grey-headed, Quail Dove.

Lunch in Soroa. In the afternoon head further west to La Güira NP, an important reserve protecting some of the best and most productive forests on the island, mostly broadleaf forest, but with areas of pine descending to the coast.

Here you should find Cuban Trogon, Cuban Tody (todies are unique to the Caribbean), and Cuban Emerald (one of only two hummingbird species on Cuba) and a good number of others. You stay for two nights near the park, in San Diego de los Baños.

**Day 3** BLD Birding in La Güira National Park.

**Day 4** BLD After a morning's birding in and around the park you return to Havana in the afternoon. Night Havana.

### Zapata

**Day 5** BLD After some birding on the Havana seafront, a tour of Old Havana and lunch, you head for Zapata, where you stay at Playa Giron or Playa Larga for the next 4 nights.

**Day 6** BLD The Zapata area southeast of Havana is the richest single area for birds in Cuba, and perhaps the entire Caribbean. Here the Ciénega de Zapata National Park, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and Ramsar site, protects a range of habitats from semi-deciduous forest down to coastal mangroves.

Birding opportunities are good, ranging from the Bee Hummingbird to Great Flamingo. Gundlach's Hawk is a speciality of the forest here. The swamp lands might allow you to see the rare Zapata Wren along with large numbers of other species.

You might keep your ears open for the Zapata Rail, but with little hope of a sighting this possibly mythic species.

**Day 7-8** BLD Birding in the Zapata area.

### Camaguey

**Day 9** BLD Today you drive through Cuba's sugar-growing heartland to Camaguey, an attractive historic city in south-central Cuba. Lunch in Camaguey. Afternoon tour of Camaguey.

Accommodation options include a very small guest house close to the birds at La Belén, with just 2 queen bedded rooms, or several good hotels in Camaguey itself.

### La Belén

**Day 10** BLD Today you explore the nearby Sierra de Najasa, a region of open forests and palm groves south Camaguey. Here the forests are more akin to those on neighbouring Hispaniola. You search for the rare West Indian Whistling Duck and Masked Duck along with Cuban Martins. You should also find Giant Kingbird, Northern Crested-Caracara and Limpkin. You also try for the very uncommon Cuban Grassquit and the rare Giant Kingbird. There is a lot to see.

### La Belén - Cayo Coco

**Day 11** BLD With an early start you visit the Sierra de Najasa to look for the threatened Cuban Palm Crow amongst the Cuban Crows in its palm grove and forest, along with other uncommon or rare species such as Plain Pigeon, Rose-throated Parrot and Cuban Parakeets.

After lunch it is time to drive to the north coast and across a causeway to the beautiful Cayo Coco, your base for 4 nights.

### Cayo Coco

**Day 12-14** BLD For the next 3 days you take your time exploring coral cays, mangroves and littoral habitats, finding a wonderful mixture of birds in gorgeous surroundings.

In the wooded habitats you are on the look-out for Cuban Gnatcatcher, Bahama Mockingbird and Thick-billed Vireo along with Key West Quail-Dove and a host of other species.

In the more open areas you can relax and watch an abundance of wetland species including Reddish Egrets, a pink haze of American Flamingos, Tricoloured Heron, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, White Ibis and Roseate Spoonbill. These species are accompanied by an odd variety of more familiar species such as Red-breasted Merganser, Merlin, Clapper Rail, Ring-billed Gull, Caspian and Sandwich Terns, Belted Kingfisher, Prairie Warbler and Yellow Warbler.

### Havana

**Day 15** BLD After some final birding you return by road to Havana where you have dinner before being transferred to the airport for your chosen international flight home





02

SPECIALIST BIRDWATCHING (NOT GUIDED) • MID RANGE HOTELS AND LODGES



03

FULLY GUIDED BIRDWATCHING &amp; TOURING • MID/UPR HOTELS

## Selfdrive Birdwatching in Cuba

An excellent 'DIY' birdwatching holiday, getting about in a hire car and finding your own birds in each area. It takes an adventurous spirit, but this is a thoroughly enjoyable way to explore Cuba and see a very good proportion of its endemics plus many others.

### Havana

**Day 1** You are met on arrival at Havana airport and transferred to the splendid Hotel Nacional set in gardens overlooking the sea in Havana's Vedado district for one night.

### Soroa

**Day 2** BD You might step out for some early morning birding in the gardens or along the seafront before you pick up your hire car and drive west into the countryside to arrive at Soroa in plenty of time to spend most of the afternoon birdwatching.

**Day 3** BLD In the morning you would bird the forest near Soroa looking for your first Cuban Vireo, Cuban Pygmy Owl, Great Lizard-Cuckoo and a selection of warblers including the lovely Black-throated Blue and Black-throated Green Warblers. There is the chance to see Ruddy, and possibly Grey-headed, Quail Dove. Lunch at Soroa.

Driving westwards into the limestone hills, you might target Cueva de los Portales, the cave that was Ché's base during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. As well as being an excellent spot for swifts there can be good chances of finding Cuban Solitaire. Continue to your hotel, El Mirador at San Diego de los Baños, for 2 nights.

### La Güira National Park

**Day 4** BLD La Güira National Park will be your main birding area today. It's an important reserve that protects some of the best and most productive forests on the island, mostly broadleaf forest, but with areas of pine descending to the coast. In a very enjoyable day's birding you should find the Cuban Trogon, Cuban Tody, and Cuban Emerald (one of just two hummingbirds on Cuba) and a good number of others. The hotel will provide a box lunch.

### Zapata

**Day 5** BD Time to head round to Cuba's Caribbean coast by a choice of routes, each of 5-6 hours on the road, to reach the Zapata area. If you time it well you should have some productive birding in the early part of the day, and arrive in time for a late afternoon session.

**Day 6-8** BD Three full days of birding in and around Zapata - the richest area for birds in Cuba, and arguably the entire Caribbean. The Genega de Zapata National Park, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and Ramsar site, protects a range of habitats from semi-deciduous forest down to coastal mangroves.

Birding opportunities are really excellent, ranging from the world's smallest bird - the Bee Hummingbird - to Great Flamingo. The impressive Gundlach's Hawk is a speciality of the forest here. The park's swamps are home to rare Zapata Wren, which you may well get, and supposedly the Zapata Rail, which you certainly won't. There are many others. Bring insect repellent.

La Salina and Santo Tomás in Zapata National Park are good sites, and there are several others in the vicinity, such as the trails

around Playa Larga and Playa Girón, Jicarita cattle ranch where Zapata Rails have been claimed, Palpite, Soplillar for Fernandina's Flicker, Montemar NP which is home to wintering American warblers such as Black-throated Blue, Black and White, Magnolia and Palm Warblers and American Redstart and 'Cueva de los Peces' restaurant for Blue-headed Quail Dove, Ovenbird, Northern Parula, Bermejas. You're going to be busy.

### Sierra Najasa

**Day 9** BD Today you drive to Sierra Najasa, a well-regarded birding destination, via Camagüey. Depending how your journey goes you may manage some late afternoon to dusk birding on arrival.

**Day 10** BLD With an early start you can hope to see the threatened Cuban Palm Crow among the Cuban Crows in a nearby palm grove and forest, along with other uncommon or rare species such as Plain Pigeon, Rose-throated Parrot and Cuban Parakeets. This area of forest akin to those on Hispaniola is home to the rare West Indian Whistling Duck and Masked Duck along with Cuban Martins. There is a chance to see Northern Crested-Caracara and Limpkin. You can also look for the very uncommon Cuban Grassquit and the rare Giant Kingbird. Another busy day with lots to look for.

### Cayo Coco

**Day 11** BD Leaving Najasa you drive to the north coast, taking a causeway on to the beautiful Cayo Coco for three nights. You'll be based in an all-inclusive resort, venturing out to explore coral cays, mangroves and mixed littoral habitats to find a wonderful mixture of birds along this lovely coast.

**Day 12-13** AI In the wooded habitats you can find Cuban Gnatcatcher, Bahama Mockingbird and Thick-billed Vireo along with Key West Quail-Dove and a whole host of other species. In the more open areas you can relax and watch an abundance of wetland species including Reddish Egrets, a pink haze of American Flamingos, Tricoloured Heron, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, White Ibis and Roseate Spoonbill. These are often accompanied by an odd variety of more familiar species such as Red-breasted Merganser, Merlin, Clapper Rail, Ring-billed Gull, Caspian and Sandwich Terns, Belted Kingfisher, Prairie Warbler and Yellow Warbler.

### Havana

**Day 14** B Sadly you are turning back to Havana today, where you deposit your car and check into the historic Hotel Nacional for your final night on the island. You could break the long journey at Santa Clara to visit Ché's mausoleum and the Tren Blindado.

**Day 15** B Your morning is free to relax on the Nacional's terrace over the Malecón, explore the sights of Vedado, or we can arrange a guided walking tour of Old Havana for you at extra cost. By mid-afternoon you will be transferred to Havana airport for your international flight home.

## Birds and Culture

An excellent birdwatching holiday, artfully combined with the some of the best of Cuba's history and culture.

### Havana, Soroa, La Güira and Zapata

**Days 1 - 7** You following the same itinerary as 'The Birds of Cuba', see left, on Days 1-3, then transfer directly to Zapata on Day 4 for 4 nights. You can bird as intensively as you wish.

### Trinidad

**Day 8** BLD Today you transfer from Zapata via Cienfuegos to the lovely town of Trinidad with its cobbled streets and colonial houses, where you stay for 2 nights, with upper range hotel accommodation among the options.

**Day 9** BLD A two-day break from birding starts today, with a guided visit to Trinidad—a World Heritage Site, followed by a trip to the Valley of the Sugar Mills, a UNESCO 'Cultural Landscape of Mankind' taking you back to the time of slavery. You visit the Manaca Iznaga Tower before returning to Trinidad with the rest of the afternoon at leisure.

### Camagüey

**Day 10** BLD Camagüey is an attractive historic colonial town with winding streets (designed, they say, to confuse marauding pirates) with an affluent and relaxed air. You tour the town with your guide and then enjoy some free time to explore further. Its thriving daily market is worth a visit.

### Sierra Najasa - Cayo Coco

**Day 11** BLD It's back to birding today, with a visit to Sierra de Najasa, see Day 11 of 'The Birds of Cuba', then driving to Cayo Coco.

### Cayo Coco

**Day 12** BLD Birding at Cayo Coco, or relaxing at the beach.

### Havana

**Day 13** BL You visit Santa Clara, site of a pivotal moment in the revolution when Ché attacked the Batista army's armoured train, effectively putting the whole of eastern Cuba under the rebels' control. The derailed train is still there to see and you also visit Ché's impressive mausoleum outside the town.

You arrive in Havana towards the end of the afternoon. Lovers of history, architecture, music and people will adore this fascinating city.

**Day 14** BLD This morning you are introduced to Havana with a guided tour visiting Old Havana, followed later by a driving tour in a classic American car.

**Day 15** B Free time in Havana before returning to your hotel for your transfer to the airport in the late afternoon or early evening for your chosen overnight flight back to the UK.





# Beaches, beaches, beaches and more beaches

*Endless beaches and glorious weather make Cuba a fantastic destination for beach lovers*



02

The large majority of Cuba's visitors arrive for a fortnight's sun and sand in mainstream resorts. A growing variety of other options beyond the mainstream make good choices for a few nights by the beach as part of a wider visit to Cuba.

## WEST OF HAVANA

The northern coast of Pinar del Río, west of Havana, is a simple and beautiful paradise of white sands and coral islands, palm trees and clear turquoise waters that are off the beaten track for mainstream tourism.

### Cayo Levisa

Quiet country roads arrive at a small checkpoint and a motor cruiser that sets off a handful of times each day to cross a few hundred metres of shallow sea to the small coral island of Cayo Levisa. Fringed with white sand beaches and shaded by palm trees, this is a Robinson Crusoe experience. Spend your days sunbathing, lolling in the shade and taking dips to cool off. Snorkelling and diving are reasonably good. You can walk around the island in an hour or so. There is just one small hotel (p43), with plenty of space on the beach.

### Cayo Jutias

A secluded beach for locals and visitors staying around Viñales. The narrow beach is very long, so there is always an uninhabited spot to set out your beach towels. A rickety beach bar serves simple food during the day. There's nowhere to stay.

### Guanahacabibes

Humanity has thinned out to practically nothing long before you reach Cuba's remote

western tip with its tongue-twister name.

Wide skies and open landscapes of dry forest scrub and mangrove (a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve) meet clear blue seas in a world set apart from the rest of the island.

There are two places to stay: Cabo San Antonio and Maria La Gorda, each reached on reasonable, though pot-holed, country roads.

### Trinidad

The best beaches on Cuba's Caribbean coast are on the small Ancón Peninsula just by the town of Trinidad (p12).

A long curving finger of land lapped by the sea, the peninsula's principal beach stretches for 1.5km. The sand is gorgeous and the sea is perfect. Three tourist hotels set side-by-side facing the sea leave plenty of space for nature.

A taxi ride of barely 10 minutes takes you from the hotels into Trinidad to explore the town during the day, or sample its restaurants, bars and music places in the evening.

## NORTH COAST

Two extensive archipelagos of low coral islands run almost the entire length of Cuba's northern coast between Havana and Holguín, facing the Florida keys and the Bahamas—and yielding little to either for gorgeous beaches.

### Jibacoa

Jibacoa suits a short stay at the end of a holiday. While it is just 60km from Havana and handy for the international airport, local options beyond the few hotels are limited. The beach is lovely, backed by trees and sheltered by coral reefs that are accessible for snorkellers and divers.



## Cuba by scuba

Much of Cuba is skirted with coral reefs, making for some great diving.

Starting in the far west, **Maria La Gorda** is a favourite spot, with flourishing coral and fantastic underwater scenery. Drop-offs add to the spectacle.

**Cayo Jutias** and **Cayo Levisa** offer some reasonable snorkelling on healthy lagoon reefs.

The 500km reef system along the north coast of central Cuba is the longest of any Caribbean island (although this is the Atlantic of course). Mangrove lagoons fringe the mainland, beyond them are chains of islands (the Cayos) followed by reef crests, the reef slope, and then the ocean wall. There is plenty to see. You can experience this area on dive trips from **Varadero** or, better, **Cayo Coco**.

There are diving facilities elsewhere around the island, e.g. at **Trinidad**, the **Bay of Pigs** and **Chivirico**.

### PHOTOS

01 Cayo Levisa

02 Maria La Gorda



01



02



03



## Varadero

The long-established tourist town of Varadero is set beside 25km of postcard-perfect white sands and turquoise waters that has drawn large numbers of visitors for decades. Charter packages arrive at its own airport, offering a fortnight at the beach without ever venturing beyond. Connections to Havana airport are quick and easy so, if you like its touristic style, Varadero works well for just a night or two at the beach to round off a trip mainly exploring the rest of the island. For a longer spell it is better to travel a little further.

## The Northern Cays

Along the Archipelago de Sabana, the islands known as the Northern Cays have only recently been developed for visitors, generally in a more considered way and a smaller scale. A narrow causeway close to the attractive town of Remedios (p13) runs out to Cayo Las Brujas, Cayo Ensenachos, and Cayo Santa Maria. Villa Las Brujas is the smallest and most likeable of the 6 hotels on the islands, much further out on Cayo Santa Maria there is a behemoth offering a staggering 925 rooms.

## EASTERN CUBA

### Guardalavaca

Guardalavaca is the largest resort in eastern Cuba, but even so is on a reasonably modest scale. Its handful of hotels, all all-inclusives, are at least a notch or two above the norm.

Guardalavaca's hotels are set on four gorgeous white-sand beaches with azure sea.

Playa Guardalavaca, closest to the small town, is 1.5km long with sugar-white sand backed by sea grapes and palms. It's a public beach with a pleasant atmosphere. Playa Las Brisas adjoins it, past a rocky divide, and is reserved for guests at the Las Brisas hotel. Playa Esmeralda, 10 minutes drive away, also strives to be rather select. Further on, and the most recently developed, are Playa Pesquero and Playa Turquesa—arguably the loveliest of them all.

### Baracoa

Playa Maguana is a beautiful white sand beach midway between the small town of Moa and Baracoa (p15). There's plenty of shade, and a reef for snorkelling. This part of the island receives more rain than most though.

At one end of the beach a secluded hotel, the Villa Maguana, offers comfortable rooms. It's a good choice for a few nights if you prefer not to be tucked away in a resort, and enjoy sharing the beach with locals in an amiable atmosphere, Cuban style.

### South coast

The beaches of the south coast, squeezed between the Caribbean and the Sierra Maestra, and reached by another scenic small road, are very quiet and out-of-the-way. At the little village of Chivirico there is a triplet of hotels, on brown sand beaches, with the slopes of the sierra rising rapidly behind them.

#### PHOTOS

01 Cayo Las Brujas,  
Northern Cays

02 Cayo Levisa,  
West of Havana

03 Cayo Esmeralda,  
Guardalavaca

# Where to stay in Cuba

- MID-RANGE A good standard option to suit the cost-conscious traveller
- UPPER RANGE A notch or two up, with prices to match
- TOP RANGE At the top end of what's available

## Beach hotels

Examples for beach time to round off your trip



**Villa las Brujas**

MID-RANGE

### Northern Cays

One of our favourite beach spots in Cuba. Set on the edge of a cay facing the ocean, the hotel has a salty, natural style. It perches on low rocks, catching sea breezes at the end of a long curving white sand beach backed by sea grapes and dunes. The style is simple, reflecting the quiet natural setting. A set of single and two storey units face the sea and connect to the beach via a short boardwalk through mangroves. There is a very pleasant small deck with jacuzzi but no swimming pool. The beach becomes fairly narrow at high tide. It is possible to book diving, snorkelling and fishing excursions locally.



**Breezes Jibacoa**

UPPER RANGE

### Jibacoa

Nestled in a beautiful bay with lush green hills protecting the invitingly white sandy beaches, Breezes Jibacoa is a mainstream resort but relaxed and not brash. All 176 garden/pool view rooms are well furnished and offer air-conditioning, private bathroom, hair dryer, satellite TV, telephone, safety deposit box and balcony/patio. The 10 tropical suites offer an additional mini-bar and separate living area. There is plenty to do at Hotel Jibacoa with its numerous leisure facilities, including swimming pool, Jacuzzi, fitness centre, tennis courts and water sports.



**Cayo Levisa**

MID-RANGE

### Viñales

One of our favourite away-from-it-all beach places on the whole island. A beautiful castaway location (see above), and a hotel that has just enough to sustain life. Comfortable modern cabins with en suite facilities line the beach, others with verandah, slightly superior space, and an extra shower in the open air, are set a little further back. The restaurant is decent, with limited options but quite enough for a few nights. You can book diving and snorkelling excursions at the desk. There is no swimming pool or other distractions—all unnecessary. An hour's drive from Viñales, two hours from Havana.



**Playa Pesquero**

UPPER RANGE

### Guardalavaca, Eastern Cuba

Very nice, despite being exactly the type of huge all-inclusive resort we shy away from. Certainly our first choice in Guardalavaca. Set back from a lovely white, soft sand beach with turquoise waters. Spacious grounds, very large swimming pool. Choice of 7 restaurants, lobby bar, aqua bar, beer garden, and entertainment theatre, sports club with ping pong, aerobics, mini soccer, water polo, beach volley, basketball, archery, mini-golf, dancing classes, Spanish language classes, tennis courts, squash courts, and (motorless) water sports! Popular with honeymooners. On-site baby and mini-club make it good for families.



**Villa Maguana**

MID-RANGE

### Baracoa, Eastern Cuba

Overlooking a small cove alongside Maguana beach, this tiny complex of wood built cabins is in a truly delightful setting and perfect for people who enjoy peace and quiet and the sound of the sea. The simple rooms are spacious and very comfortable, the staff are delightful and there is a restaurant on site. A truly idyllic retreat. There is snorkelling close by (but no official snorkelling from the hotel). Villa Maguana is also ideally situated for exploring the Alexander Humboldt National Park, and only 22 km from Baracoa.



**Trinidad Brisas del Mar**

MID-RANGE

### Ancón beach, Trinidad

A conventionally styled all-inclusive resort hotel along Ancón beach. The complex is large with 2 restaurants, 2 swimming pools, bars, two tennis courts and a gym. Water sports, diving and fishing are available from Marina Trinidad. A good choice for combining the beautiful colonial town of Trinidad with a good quality beach hotel.



**Maria La Gorda**

MID-RANGE

### Western Cuba

Also in the Guanahacabibes Biosphere Reserve, this is a fabulous place for easygoing travellers for peace and quiet and a beautiful beach. The snorkelling and diving are excellent, rated amongst the top 10 dive locations in Latin America, with 39 dive spots in generally crystal clear waters with abundant marine life and extraordinarily beautiful corals. Divers can enjoy 50 sites of high level diving, all of them less than a 1 hour cruise away, some even 5 minutes away. The accommodation is adequate but basic and there is no swimming pool.



**Melia Buenavista**

TOP RANGE

### Northern Cays

The newest, most luxurious and most modest in scale of four Melia resorts on Cayo Santa Maria. Upmarket in aspiration, the Buenavista is laid out beside a choice of 3 beaches. Its 104 junior suites and suites and one large villa, are generously proportioned and well-equipped, and the restaurants, pools, and spa facilities are all to a high standard. Levels of comfort and service rank amongst the best in Cuba, although the resort would struggle to earn its 5 star status elsewhere. Everything is aimed at a relaxing, quiet, well-tended holiday experience for couples. The resort applies a 'no children' policy.

## Worth a mention

**Cabo San Antonio** Guanahacabibes

MID-RANGE

Natural setting in woods by the sea close to Cuba's westernmost point, this relatively new hotel was constructed with respect for the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in which it is set. 8 nicely-made wooden cabañas each house two sets of spacious guest rooms. Facilities include excursions, water sports (there's a little marina nearby), shop, plus car and bike rental. Dinner options are limited to simple fare in the hotel restaurant (unless you drive the 80km to Maria La Gorda). The epitome of seclusion.

**Sol Cayo Santa Maria** Northern Cays

UPPER RANGE

Friendly bustling conventional all-inclusive hotel in lovely grounds by 400m of pristine white sand beach. Recently improved and extended to nearly 300 rooms, there are adult and kids' swimming pools, full entertainment programme, water sports centre, and gym with sauna and jacuzzi.

**Tryp Cayo Coco** Cayo Guillermo

TOP RANGE

Upscale all-inclusive resort 17km from Havana's international airport in the northern keys off the coast of Ciego de Avila. The hotel has excellent amenities and very comfortable accommodation. Located in one of the richest natural environments in the country, between a spectacular lagoon and extensive beaches.

**Brisas Sierra Mar** Chivirico, near Santiago

MID-RANGE

Brisas Sierra Mar is delightful and fairly isolated with charming hotel staff, a relaxed atmosphere, and many long stay repeat clients. Sit back and relax on the seal coloured sand in the dappled shade of sea grape trees. A great place for diving.

## Hotels in Havana

**H**avana has some great hotels to choose from. Many are in buildings of considerable historic or architectural interest and in good locations for exploring the city.

The widest choice is in **Old Havana** and nearby **Parque Central**, which are especially rich in characterful hotels created with style in what were originally lavish colonial residences or ostentatious commercial HQs.

The restoration of the old city has been an ongoing project for many years, and the hotels that have been created are an important part of its success story. They all fall under a single umbrella organisation which administers the whole of Old Havana, which means they are generally managed to a very reasonable standard.

Hotels in **La Rampa**, also a good location for visitors, generally date from the 1930s-50s, at a time when Havana

was a playground for wealthy Americans. The Hotel Nacional (pictured on this page) is a prime example from early in that period, and is still a great hotel today. The modernist Hotel Tryp Havana Libre and Hotel Europa are also worth considering.

Further west in **Miramar** there are several very large hotels with less character but plenty of capacity if everywhere else is full.

If you are touring Cuba you might stay in Havana twice, at the start and the end of your trip. You could begin with a hotel in Old Havana, and later stay in La Rampa when you return to the city.





### Palacio de San Felipe y Santiago de Bejucal TOP RANGE

#### Old Havana

A small chic boutique hotel in a good location for exploring the old city, and with easy access to other parts of Havana. The gorgeous baroque façade, dating from the 18th century, overlooks Plaza San Francisco de Asís.

Unusually among Old Havana restorations, the decision was taken to transform the interior of what was once a nobleman's palace into cool contemporary spaces. The suites are especially large and well-equipped. A rooftop terrace overlooks the Basílica Menor de San Francisco with views across the old city.



### Ambos Mundos UPPER RANGE

#### Old Havana

Close to Obispo and conveniently situated for walking around the old city, Ambos Mundos was made famous by Hemingway: you can visit the room where he worked on *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. It is worth going to the rooftop bar and restaurant for magnificent views of the city.

The rooms are sparsely furnished and with a rather tepid colour scheme. Street-facing rooms get plenty of natural light and have privileged views of local life. Rooms facing the atrium have no sunlight but are more peaceful.



### Florida UPPER RANGE

#### Old Havana

In the heart of the old city, on Obispo itself, Hotel Florida is housed in a beautiful colonial building, a nobleman's residence that dates from 1836. Stepping inside from the busy street, you are in an oasis of calm with an attractive Spanish style inner courtyard, glamorous bar and good restaurant.

The 25 colonial style rooms have a touch of antiquity and elegance (high-beamed ceilings, marble floors, ornate iron bedsteads), whilst still having all the normal modern facilities too. A popular choice.



### Raquel UPPER RANGE

#### Old Havana

An elegant hotel in Old Havana, close to Plaza Vieja and all the sights of the area. It opened as a boutique hotel in 2003 after years of careful restoration of a grand art nouveau building from 1905 with a Jewish heritage.

The rooms are spacious and neat, there is a nice bar, a grand restaurant, and a roof terrace with good views. It is a relatively quiet spot a few blocks from the busiest parts of the old city.



### Tejadillo MID-RANGE

#### Old Havana

The Hotel Tejadillo is composed of three restored colonial mansions dating from the 18th and 19th centuries. The location is ideal, just around the corner from Cathedral Square in the heart of Old Havana.

Most of the hotel's 32 rooms are arranged around a small, pleasant and tranquil courtyard, adorned with a central fountain and pierced dramatically by a tall, tropical tree.



### Park View MID-RANGE

#### Old Havana

Very conveniently situated close to Prado and the narrow streets of Old Havana, a short walk from Parque Central and the Malecón. Mid-range accommodation over 7 floors. There is a popular small bar on the ground floor.

Rooms are small, but nicely furnished and comfortable, with A/C. There are excellent views of the city from the seventh-floor restaurant, where you have breakfast.



### Saratoga TOP RANGE

#### near Parque Central

Havana's Hotel Saratoga is an elegant, eclectic style building with marked neoclassical features, located on one of the busiest streets in the Cuban capital. On the edge of Old Havana, the Saratoga looks across to the Capitolio building, a few steps from Parque Central. There are excellent views of the city from its impressive rooftop terrace and swimming pool.

The hotel's 96 rooms are top of the range for Cuba, with European levels of facilities and service.



### Telégrafo UPPER RANGE

#### Parque Central

The Hotel Telégrafo is built in colourful art deco style. It is a lively meeting point with excellent public rooms, as well as providing very comfortable accommodation with modern furnishings. It is also very well situated on the edge of Old Havana and on Parque Central, convenient both for sightseeing and for collecting hire cars.

You are close to all the main tourist attractions of Old Havana, including the Capitolio and National Theatre, the Prado and within walking distance of the Malecón. One of our most popular hotel choices.



### Nacional MID/UPPER RANGE

#### La Rampa

The iconic Hotel Nacional overlooks the Malecón a short taxi ride from Old Havana, and has had many distinguished guests in its time: Hollywood film stars, Churchill, Roosevelt and many more. There is oodles of atmosphere and the hotel is always lively—this is a hotel for people-watching. It has a lovely terrace and gardens looking out to sea—a great place for that evening mojito.

The rooms are of a standard business style but the majestic lobby and extensive gardens add that certain frisson.

## Worth a mention: Havana hotels

### Santa Isabel Old Havana TOP RANGE

Great location on Plaza de Armas for people watching and exploring Old Havana. Rooms are mostly spacious though not luxurious; service can be variable.

### Armadores de Santander Old Havana UPPER RANGE

Set in a quiet location slightly away from Plaza San Francisco, this gem of a hotel looks to the harbour. The style is comfortable, conservative, and slightly nautical.

### Palacio O'Farrill Old Havana UPPER RANGE

A grand neoclassical mansion with an especially over-the-top impressive entrance. Good location. Most rooms are very good and well-liked, just a few are cramped.

### Sevilla Old Havana MID-RANGE

A busy hotel on the edge of Old Havana. Elegant lobby, magnificent public spaces. Lots of character and history. The rooftop pool and restaurant are good for families.

### El Comendador Old Havana MID-RANGE

Recently renovated, this 14 room hotel close to Plaza de Armas and Plaza San Francisco is a great mid-range choice for exploring Old Havana.

### Parque Central Parque Central TOP RANGE

Grandiose, highly-rated modern hotel with 277 rooms in a fantastic location on Parque Central close to Old Havana. Great views from its rooftop swimming pool.

### Tryp Havana Libre La Rampa MID-RANGE

A modernist landmark, a good location on La Rampa, and Castro's base immediately after the Revolution. Buzzes with hip Latino visitors to the city.

### Hotel Riviera Vedado MID-RANGE

Travel to 1957 in this modernist pleasure palace, once Mafia casino, facing the sea. Featured in '7 Days in Havana'. Tatty rooms, but striking exterior and public areas.

### Melia Havana Miramar MID-RANGE

409 room all-purpose monster that's a comfortable and practical choice for a few nights in the city if others are full. Choice of restaurants, 3 swimming pools, etc.

## Parque John Lennon

It's a pleasant, and quite moving, surprise to be walking in the sun through a leafy park in Vedado to find John Lennon lolling on a bench waiting for you to join him. His likeness was unveiled by Fidel Castro in 2000 on the 20th anniversary of his murder, a welcome reversal of official attitudes of the 60s and 70s that saw the Beatles banned. "You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one" is inscribed in Spanish at his feet, bringing to mind other lines from 'Imagine' that would be just as appropriate.



## Cuba ★ WHERE TO STAY - COUNTRY HOTELS

### Country hotels

Examples for walking or birding



#### La Moka

MID-RANGE

near Soroa, Western Cuba

A destination in itself, La Moka is part of the Las Terrazas eco-community. La Moka has nicely appointed, comfortable rooms with attractive Spanish tiled flooring and wonderful views from the bathroom, as the baths are carefully designed to look into the trees. The verdant grounds are well cared for and you will see how the local community live and work, which is an important part of the whole complex. There are various restaurants for you to choose from, and all use the home grown local fare. La Moka is also good for walking, and even has a zip line for the adventurous. Horse riding is a popular activity here.



#### El Saltón

MID-RANGE

Sierra Maestra, Eastern Cuba

Within a couple of hours drive from Bayamo or Santiago de Cuba, Villa El Saltón is located in the middle of the Sierra Maestra, Cuba's highest mountain range. The hotel is surrounded by beautiful scenery and cared for by warm and welcoming staff and naturalist guides who come from the local rural community. This 22 room small hotel is set within a delightful verdant setting, with an inviting natural cascade and pool. The rooms are spacious and adequate with air conditioning and a balcony, and there is a lovely traditional restaurant terrace and patio area.



#### Hanabanilla

MID/LOW RANGE

Sierra Escambray, Central Cuba

Surrounded by the dramatic Sierra Escambray mountains and overlooking Lake Hanabanilla, this is an ideal spot for exploring this beautiful region. The hotel is a typical Russian style concrete building from the 1970s, but it has been refurbished and offers plain, comfortable accommodation after a day's walking. There are excellent guided walks from the hotel, usually beginning with a short boat trip. The pool is a good size and has magnificent views of the lake and mountains. This is an excellent hotel for generally mingling with Cubans and is quite lively with an evening disco by the pool. This hotel is booked on a half board basis, as there is no other restaurant nearby for dinner in the evening.

### Worth a mention: Country hotels

#### Finca Guabina Pinar del Río

MID-RANGE

Popular, small farm guest house, set in mountains, valleys and a lagoon. Popular for horse riding and good for nature enthusiasts and birders. 5 rooms and 3 cabins.

#### Casa Belén Sierra Najasa, near Camagüey

MID-RANGE

The birders' preferred choice for Sierra Najasa. Simple but pleasant rooms with queen beds. The home cooking is highly recommended.

## Hotels for touring

Examples for touring around Cuba



**Iberostar Grand Hotel Trinidad** TOP RANGE

**Trinidad, Central Cuba**

An elegant boutique hotel in a fine colonial-style building on palm-treed Parque Céspedes, Trinidad's most prestigious square, within easy walking distance of the cobbled streets of the old city. This a deservedly popular, top of the range hotel with 40 well equipped comfortable rooms with telephone, satellite TV, a/c, minibar, safe and en-suite bathroom. There is no swimming pool and children under 16 years are not accepted. The beaches of Ancon peninsula are 13km away.



**Palacio Azul** MID-RANGE

**Cienfuegos, Central Cuba**

This small family-run hotel is set in a beautifully restored grand colonial building overlooking Cienfuegos bay. The roof terrace has lovely views. A grand marble staircase leads to the 7 rooms, each named after a flower, which are spacious and comfortable with modest furnishings. All but one have balconies. Guests speak highly of nearby restaurants. It is a 10-15min walk or short taxi ride into the centre of town. Raúl Castro and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela have reportedly stayed here!



**La Union** MID-RANGE

**Cienfuegos**

The main hotel in Cienfuegos, on a bustling street behind the main square and very convenient for seeing the town. The hotel itself has bags of atmosphere and rickety faded elegance, with two rather grand inner courtyards. There is a small roof terrace and a small swimming pool. The 49 rooms have a/c phone, satellite TV, etc, but can be noisy. The hotel restaurant is fine for breakfast, and for dinner there is a choice of restaurants in the area or within a short taxi ride.



**Los Jazmines** MID-RANGE

**Viñales, Western Cuba**

With stunning views of mogotes across the Viñales valley, Los Jazmines is an ideal spot to bask in the area's beauty. Rooms are clean and comfortable and feature french doors that open on to a small balcony with fabulous views. The swimming pool is suspended on the very edge of the valley. Like all hotels in Viñales the restaurant is barely adequate; for dinner we suggest you try a *paladar* in the village instead.



**La Ermita** MID-RANGE

**Viñales, Western Cuba**

A tranquil setting in the beautiful Viñales Valley with spectacular views, La Ermita's cabins are set around gardens and a swimming pool. Meals are usually served on a dining terrace with lovely views, and you are within walking distance of the town and the local *paladares* for dinner. There is plenty to see and do, including locally guided walks and horse riding excursions which can be booked at the hotel. The 62 comfortable en-suite rooms are simply furnished, and each has a small terrace.



**Hostal del Rijo** MID-RANGE

**Sancti Spiritus, Central Cuba**

A renovated, colonial mansion situated on the town square in Sancti Spiritus, opposite a delightful 17th century church. The 16 rooms are large with private bathroom, TV, fridge, safe and a/c, arranged around a central patio courtyard with fountain. The hotel has a café and bar that opens onto the square. Breakfast is served in the atmospheric courtyard. This is an ideal location to explore the local attractions in Sancti Spiritus.



**Mirador de Mayabe** MID-RANGE

**Holguín, Eastern Cuba**

In our view the best choice for a short stay in Holguín, with its pleasant rural setting on the outskirts of the city and panoramic views across the Mayabe valley. The 24 simple rooms are clean and bright. There is a good-sized swimming pool, with palm trees for shade, and an attractive restaurant that suffices for dinner. The hotel has a jovial ranch-style atmosphere. A local tale has it that the owner won a handsome bet when his donkey guzzled a whopping 36 beers in one go!



**Villa Soroa** MID-RANGE

**Soroa, Western Cuba**

A pleasant small hotel with simple cabins set in wooded countryside surrounded by the spectacular Sierra del Rosario, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Only 75 km from Havana, it's an attractive and relaxing spot. Close by there is a 21m waterfall and a large orchidarium and orchid gardens with over 700 varieties, and coffee plantations originally owned by French settlers that fled to Cuba from the Haitian Revolution over 200 years ago.



**Las Cuevas** MID-RANGE

**Trinidad**

Just above the town, with views across to the Caribbean, Las Cuevas offers bungalow-style accommodation set in gardens just above the centre of Trinidad, which is within walking distance or a short taxi-ride. The rooms are rather basic but have air-conditioning and are kitted out with satellite TV etc. There's a swimming pool with basic loungers. And a disco in a cave.

### Worth a mention: Hotels for touring

**Rancho San Vicente** Viñales, Western Cuba MID-RANGE

In the beautiful San Vicente Valley. 20 cabins with a/c, pleasant swimming pool. Good spot for birds.

**Gran Camaquëy** Camaquëy, Central Cuba MID-RANGE

Great atmosphere with much original charm. Pleasant top floor restaurant for breakfast. Piano bar with top-notch cocktails. Frequent salsa sessions!

**Colon Camaquëy** Camaquëy, Central Cuba MID-RANGE

Well located in the centre of town, a recently refurbished colonial style hotel set around an inner courtyard. Rooms are reasonable, with a/c. Attractive cocktail bar.

**La Granjita** Santa Clara, Central Cuba MID-RANGE

Traditional and modern concrete cabañas with a/c, set out in a park of palms and pine trees, with a good swimming pool, bar, large restaurant. Adequate for a touring stop.

**Hotel Pernik** Holguín, Eastern Cuba MID-RANGE

A good choice for a positioning night. Located in a quiet green area in downtown Holguín. 202 comfortable rooms with a/c. There is a large outdoor swimming pool with bar.

**El Castillo** Baracoa, Eastern Cuba MID-RANGE

Attractive, characterful, comfortable mid-sized hotel in the centre of Baracoa. Based on a Spanish fortress, it has panoramic views of this beautiful area. There's an excellent pool.

**El Royalton** Bayamo, Eastern Cuba MID-RANGE

Centrally situated facing the main square, Parque Céspedes, and refurbished a few years ago, the Hotel Royalton has 33 rooms and a small restaurant. A comfortable choice for the area.

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