

Important Information About Your Visit to Cuba

The United States has a comprehensive set of trade and travel restrictions in place with Cuba, commonly referred to as the Cuban Embargo. Only specific categories of travel to Cuba are authorized, one of which is referred to as the Educational, People-to-people program. Under this exception, entities are granted permission from the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) to organize short term educational and cultural exchange trips to the island.

Your trip to the island will take place within this framework, meaning you will participate in a full-time schedule of educational and cultural activities with Cubans on the island. The Oral History Association's program fully complies with OFAC regulations, and travelers are required to participate in most scheduled activities.

Program in Cuba

Charles Bittner and OHA have wide-ranging contacts with a cross section of Cuban society, including academics, artists, athletes, chefs, diplomats, economists, musicians, politicians, religious officials, students and ordinary Cubans from all walks of life. Your customized schedule will allow you to meet with many different Cubans and take part in a number of site visits, activities and discussions. It is our hope that you will make a number of Cuban friends along the way.

Our guests will often be the top experts in their field and we'll be able to hear a diversity of opinions about 21st century Cuba, U.S. policy and world politics. No questions or topics are off limits, but we ask travelers to be respectful and gracious in all interactions.

Throughout the tour, we will be accompanied by a bilingual Cuban guide. Please keep in mind that we will always do our best to maintain the scheduled itinerary, but all activities and events are subject to change. When alterations are made we'll do everything possible to find suitable alternatives.

All travelers are required to take part in most scheduled activities. Translation will be readily available to facilitate interaction and maximize your experience. For Spanish speakers, there will be plenty of opportunities to communicate in group settings and one-on-one conversations.

What's Covered & Not Covered

INCLUDED

- 5-night accommodation in Cuba (NH Capri La Habana Hotel) and guesthouses in Trinidad
- Daily breakfast
- Lunches and dinners as listed on the itinerary, with drinks and tips
- All local ground transportation
- Speaker fees
- Admission to all museums and public buildings listed in itinerary
- Coordination of all listed activities
- Pre-trip departure information
- Cuban insurance (health and evacuation)
- Compliance with US Treasury Department regulations

NOT INCLUDED

- Extra Airline baggage fees
- Airfare to/from Havana
- Cuban Visa
- Individual house/hotel expenses (mini bar, room service, laundry fees, etc.)
- Meals other than those listed on itinerary
- Tips to tour guide and driver
- Trip cancellation insurance

Getting to and from Cuba

Regardless of your airline and point of departure, I strongly recommend you arrive at the airport a minimum of 2.5 hours prior to the scheduled departure time. The flight officially closes one hour prior to scheduled departure; with no exceptions. There are not always daily departures, and a missed flight can result in significant complications or worse—missing the trip! I recommend leaving at least two hours between connections after we return from Cuba.

Arriving in Cuba

The Cuban government and people open their arms to U.S. visitors. However, it is possible you'll be questioned about the motivation for and content of your trip upon arrival to Cuba. On some occasions an immigration official might ask you questions about your stay on the island (e.g. what electronic equipment you are bringing, how much cash you are carrying and who you

will meet with). This is standard and you should not be concerned – it's part of the experience. Please be transparent and feel free to show them a copy of your program.

Returning to the U.S.

When you return to the United States you will fill out the immigration and customs paperwork as if you were returning from any other country in the world.

What you can (can't) bring back

Art work, music, books, posters, postcards, photos, trinkets and even some clothing is fine to buy and bring home. Under the new regulations, you may also bring back Cuban cigars and rum.

Trip Insurance

Please be sure to read the terms and conditions in your sales agreement regarding cancellation and refund policies. *String Letter Media* is required to finalize and pay for all reservations about 65 days in advance of our departure, meaning that refunds will not be available for any reason after September 10. Again, we strongly recommend trip cancellation insurance.

Cellphones/Internet

In almost all cases, your U.S. cellphone will not work once you are on the ground in Cuba. You will receive contact information for our hotel and guides prior to our departure.

Our hotel will have WIFI internet access in the lobby that costs between 1.5 and 2 CUC per hour. For access you will have to buy a card at the front desk or business center that will provide you with a username and password. You'll also be able to use this card to get online at several parks and other wifi hot spots in Trinidad.

Note: the internet in Cuba is slow and not particularly reliable. Still, you should be able to send and receive emails throughout the trip. But please head into your stay with the understanding that communication will be somewhat uncertain.

Money

U.S. credit cards and ATM cards will not work in Cuba. There are very few, if any, places that accept traveler's checks. Credit and ATM cards from Europe, Canada and countries other than the U.S. may work, but ATM machines and establishments that accept credit cards are rarely accessible. We recommend bringing newer \$20, \$50, and \$100 bills, as sometimes it can be more difficult to change small bills, and worn and torn bank notes will not be accepted.

Here's my suggestion about bringing cash to Cuba: Since the only cash you'll have access to is what you bring with you, make sure to take sufficient cash for your whole stay. You will want cash for entertainment, the few meals outside of those listed in the itinerary, souvenirs, rum, cigars, art, etc. I'm sure you'll want to tip the Cuban tour guide and bus driver, and you'll probably want to tip the housekeepers at the hotel as well. There's also a 13 percent exchange fee.

I suggest you bring at least \$100 per day, per person. You probably won't spend nearly that much, but it's better not to end up short on cash. Particularly if you plan to buy Cuban art, which is often spectacularly beautiful, you may consider bringing at least this amount. You'll be able to change US dollars into Cuban Convertible Pesos (CUC's) as needed at the desk at our hotel. I recommend exchanging about \$100 at a time. Each room has a safe in which you can store the balance of your dollars, travel documents, and other valuables.

There are two currencies in Cuba (CUC and CUP). The exchange rate is complicated and all you really need to worry about is the CUC. You can get the other Cuban pesos (CUP, commonly referred to as moneda nacional) as a collector's item but everything you will want to spend money on requires the CUC.

Tipping

Tipping in the service/tourist industry is expected and appreciated. Government salaries are low and many people survive on the tips they earn. It is true that the average salary in the state sector is \$20 per month, but it is a myth that people survive on only \$20 per month and therefore even \$1 is a lot to them. Average income, which is the result of tips, work on the side, remittances, black market activity and other ways of "getting by," La Lucha as Cubans say, is closer to \$100-150 per month.

You should tip well if you are treated well. Leaving a few dollars a day for maids, 10 percent on meals not included in the itinerary and a dollar or two for a bellman goes a long way. Tips for our tour guide, driver, bellmen, maids and others are not included.

Outlets

Cuba generally has electric outlets that are 110 V or 220 V. Our hotel offers access to both. Still, it's recommended that you bring a converter to deal with 220 V electricity and Cuban plugs, particularly for medical devices.

Although blackouts are now far less frequent, it's possible you may be without electricity for very short periods of time during your stay.

Crime and Safety

Cuba is one of the safest countries in Latin America. Part of the beauty of visiting the island nation is being able to walk freely without worrying about violent crime. However, petty theft does occur and precautions should be taken – especially in Havana and at night. Try to avoid dark streets and never leave purses, bags and other valuables unattended.

Many Cubans, especially in Old Havana, will approach you to try and sell you black market cigars, find you a taxi, or try to bring you to a paladar (restaurant), for which they will earn a percentage of any money you spend there. Most of them are harmless, but keep in mind they're often trying to make a few dollars by interacting with you and will have all kinds of creative tales and "special offers" for doing so.

The streets of Havana and sidewalks are very poorly lit and, in many cases, crumbling and littered with pot holes. Take extra precaution at night keeping a close eye on the ground below to avoid tripping in the frequent ditches and uncovered drains. Waste from stray dogs is also commonplace.

Our Hotel

The Capri Hotel de Habana is a 4 star hotel located in the Vedado district of Havana, close to major sites and many private restaurants and nightclubs. All rooms have hair dryers and irons, and of course soap, toilet paper, shampoo, and towels. The hotel is modern, with even a rooftop pool and bar.

Health

All travelers are covered with full medical insurance, which is included in the cost of your trip. The most common ailments for travelers in Cuba are indigestion, diarrhea and other stomach problems. No pre-trip shots are needed. There is extremely limited access to over-the-counter drugs in Cuba, if any. Therefore:

- Pack Imodium, Pepto-Bismol and other stomach medicines
- Pack cold medicine, aspirin, and medication for other common health issues
- Do not drink water from the tap
- Do not drink unsealed juices/refreshments from street vendors
- Pack and apply bug spray

All major hotels have doctors on call and each city has a hospital designated for foreigners. Please advise the hotel desk and your *Strings host* or local guide if someone becomes ill. Please make sure to notify *me* of any allergies, medical conditions and other health issues prior to the trip

Food

Cuban cuisine heavily features rice, beans, chicken and pork. Ample sea food is available as well. The 1990s were plagued by shortages, which affected the accessibility and quality of food, both at home and in restaurants. However, an economic recovery and recent reforms have led to an increase in the quantity and quality of foodstuffs. Private restaurants, referred to as “paladars,” have opened up across the country.

Meals will be served at private paladars, usually with a fixed menu with various choices. On free evenings and afternoons String Letter Media host and local guides are happy to assist in reservations at restaurants of your choice.

Water

Cuba has an outdated water system and **tap water is not okay to drink**. Even many locals boil and bottle water prior to consuming. Hotels and fine restaurants will use purified water to make ice. Please drink bottled water only and do not drink juices and other drinks if you’re not sure if purified water has been used. We will provide ample access to bottled water throughout our journey.

Donations

Cuba is a poor country. Economic difficulties, the recent hurricane, and U.S. restrictions make some products difficult to acquire, and many citizens, institutions and community programs are in dire need of certain materials. Donations of clothes, medicine, vitamins, sports equipment, music accessories (guitar strings) and school supplies are very much appreciated, and there will be ample opportunities throughout the visit to turn them over to those in need.

I’m personally involved in several specific projects with artists, musicians, community centers, parks, religious entities, schools, and sporting teams. It’s probably best to leave at least part of anything you bring to donate on the bus throughout our trip.

Weather

Cuba is a tropical island with a climate typical to the Caribbean region. It can be extremely warm at times and the sun is strong. Showers are common throughout the year, although most common during the summer and fall. Please be sure to check the weather prior to your trip departure and also see the section with suggestions on clothing and accessories for your packing list.

Fall weather: December

The temperature varies greatly in the late fall, with showers and moderately high temperatures possible. Temperatures are most likely to be in the low 80’s during the day, and low 70’s in the

evening. Please pack clothes and accessories that take into account the possible heat and rain. Our bus, hotel rooms, meeting rooms, and most restaurants and venues are air-conditioned.

Clothing and accessories

Despite low salaries and difficult living conditions, Cubans take pride in dressing well when they can. Shorts, skirts, short-sleeved shirts, and open toed shoes and flip flops are appropriate almost anywhere during the day and at many places at night. Some restaurants and nightclubs prefer a more dressy attire, so you may want to bring some very casual, business attire.

There may be time for nature walks and hiking, but no part of the official schedule will require intense physical activity. When in the countryside it is advisable to use bug spray and wear long pants and sleeves during outdoor excursions. Taking into account the diverse weather in Cuba, we recommend packing:

- Comfortable clothing
- Very casual dress clothes for dinners and meetings
- Sneakers or comfortable Shoes
- Sunglasses
- Cap for the sun
- Sunscreen
- Light raincoat, slicker or poncho
- Umbrella
- Light backpack
- **Bug Spray**

Recommended Reading List

Obviously there have been many excellent books written about Cuba. Here are some I personally recommend (please note, my background is in sociology):

- 1) *One Day in December: Celia Sanchez and the Cuban Revolution* by Nancy Stout (introduction by Alice Walker).
- 2) *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Havana* by William LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh
- 3) *The Cuba Reader: History, Politics, and Culture* edited by Aviva Chomsky
- 4) *Planet Cuba: Art, Culture, and the Future of the Island* by Rachel Price
- 5) *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures* by Sujatha Fernandes
- 6) *Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba* by Jafari S. Allen
- 7) *Telex From Cuba* (historical fiction) by Rachel Kushner
- 8) *Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba* by Tom Gjelten
- 9) *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* by Jon Lee Anderson
- 10) *Waiting for Snow in Havana* (a memoir) by Carlos Eire
- 11) *José Martí: A Revolutionary Life* by Alfred J. López

Charles Bittner Contact Information

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