

Cuba - Special Adventures and Honeymoons Dossier

Highlights

- Explore Havana's old city on a walking tour
- Visit tobacco plantations
- Enjoy the stunning scenery of the Vinales Valley and Escambray Sierra Range
- Relax on the pristine beach of Caye las Brujas



Factfile

Transfers Private airport transfers upon arrival and departure

Escorted Tours and transfers by English-speaking guides

Transport Private air-conditioned car, boat on excursions

Activities Extensive walking at sites, walking tour of Old Havana, American classic car tour, Sugar Mill Valley excursion

Accommodation 4 nights colonial hotels, 5 nights tourist hotels, 4 nights small beach resort

Meals As per itinerary. B - Breakfast, L - Lunch, D - Dinner

Entrance Fees - Included for all sites listed as part of the itinerary

Itinerary

DAY 1 - Havana

Arrive and transfer to your colonial hotel in Old Havana.

Havana

The city of Havana is the capital of the Republic of Cuba and was founded in 1515. Due to its geographical position and the excellent characteristics of its bay it was given the name Llave del Mundo (Key to the World) and for centuries it was an obligatory stop for Spanish fleets, conquerors and adventurers. During the Wars of Independence in the latter half of the 18th century the city was untouched, making today's Havana the finest surviving Spanish Complex in the Americas. During US prohibition Havana became a haven for anyone seeking good rum, good company and a fine cigar. This all ended in 1959 when rebels, led by Fidel Castro, marched into town, declared most things illegal and implemented an old-fashioned Soviet Socialism.

Hotel del Tejadillo

The Hotel del Tejadillo was created from three colonial mansions dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries. With quiet courtyards and spacious rooms, this charming establishment is ideally located in the heart of Old Havana, close to the cathedral square and 'Hemingway's Bodeguita'.

DAY 2 - Havana

Morning walking tour of the old colonial town, including 'Hemingway's Bodeguita', a bar famous for its Mojito cocktails. After a local lunch with live music you will take a tour in a classic American car. (BL)

DAY 3 - Havana

Day at leisure to discover this fascinating city. (B)

DAY 4 - Havana - Vinales Valley

Early morning start along the Tobacco Road to the province of Pinar del Rio in the western part of Cuba. You will visit a cigar factory on the way to the picturesque village of Viñales, where time seems to stand still. Visit the house of a tobacco farmer and the Prehistoric Wall, a huge artwork painted on rock by the Cuban Painter Gonzalez Morillo in the 1960s. Overnight at Los Jazmines with splendid valley views. (BL)

Vinales Valley

The Viñales Valley is extraordinarily picturesque, with fields of tobacco, coffee and other crops interspersed with the round-topped hills that are typical of a karst landscape. Aside from its natural beauty, the region is also renowned for the traditional methods of agriculture which are still used today and which have survived unchanged for several centuries.

Los Jazmines Hotel

This Spanish-style hotel offers breathtaking views over the expanse of the Vinales valley floor and provides an ideal base for exploring the area. The hotel has two bars, a swimming pool overlooking the valley and a range of facilities including massage and horse riding.

DAY 5 - Vinales Valley - Las Terrazas

Drive to Soroa for a visit to the orchid garden and the Arco Iris waterfall. Continue to Las Terrazas Biosphere Reserve. (B)

Las Terrazas

Las Terrazas is an eco-resort which is internationally renowned for its success and for the changes it has brought about for the local community. The landscape in this part of Cuba was significantly damaged during the 19th century by French coffee plantation owners, who cut down thousands of trees to make way for their plantations. This degradation of the eco-system was compounded by poor agricultural techniques and fire. In the 1960s the area was therefore targeted by Castro's government for a major reforestation programme; over time funds began to dwindle so the community developed an eco-tourism resort to provide additional employment and income. This has been hugely successful and the resort is a fascinating (and stunningly beautiful) place to visit.

Hotel La Moka

Built on a hill in the San Juan Valley in an impressive natural setting, this hotel is in the heart of the Las Terrazas reserve and is the ideal base for exploring it. Its colonial style blends harmoniously with the surroundings and the atmosphere is intimate and welcoming, with wonderfully personalized service.

DAY 6 - Las Terrazas - Cienfuegos

Morning drive through the plains to the picturesque colonial city of Cienfuegos. Overnight at Hotel La Union. (BL)

Cienfuegos

Cienfuegos was founded by French colonists in 1819 on the edge of a magnificent bay that had obvious merit as an international port. Its tranquil atmosphere and attractive colonial architecture make this one of the most appealing towns in Cuba. There are a large number of mansions, decorated with cupolas, imposing public squares and refined neoclassical public buildings.

Hotel La Union

The hotel offers comfortable accommodation in a traditional colonial setting in the heart of Cienfuegos. There are gorgeous views of the bay and the city and a large pool situated in an attractive courtyard.

DAY 7 - Cienfuegos - Trinidad

Free morning to explore Cienfuegos. In the afternoon drive through panoramic scenery to Trinidad where you will stay at Las Cuevas hotel. (BD)

Trinidad

Trinidad was founded in 1514 by Cuba's first governor, Diego Velazquez, as the island's third settlement. During the 17th and 18th centuries Trinidad's economy depended on trading contraband with pirates from the 'Puerto de Casilda'. Later the merchants began to import goods from Jamaica and other Caribbean islands, and tobacco became the region's most important crop, cultivated using slave labour. In the early 19th century colonists from Haiti began to cultivate sugarcane and it was the profits from this that laid the foundations for the colonial splendour of Trinidad today.

The historic centre of Trinidad is charming, with restored colonial villas and shaded courtyards. Combined with its naturally spectacular setting between the mountains and the sea, it is not difficult to see why the town has become one of Cuba's most popular attractions. The Plaza Mayor is the historical core of the town, overlooked by the Church of the True Cross, as well as several museums.

Las Cuevas Hotel

Located high on a hill overlooking the Caribbean Sea and a few steps away from the historical centre of Trinidad, this hotel has stunning views of the Caribbean. Villa-style bungalows are interspersed across the hillside, allowing a feeling of isolation and peace.

DAY 8 - Trinidad

A free day to explore this UNESCO World Heritage town with its unique colonial architecture. You will have time to wander along the cobblestone lanes to the main square, surrounded by the mansions of former sugar barons. (BD)

DAY 9 - Trinidad - Caye Las Brujas

In the morning discover the Sugarmill Valley in the Sierra Escambray, one of the most beautiful landscapes in Cuba. Then continue to the colonial town of Sancti Spiritus, barely touched by tourism, and the charming town of Remedios en route to the coast. Overnight at Villa Las Brujas. (BD)

Hotel Villas Las Brujas

This unique, inn-like hotel is tucked into a small headland amongst the mangroves, overlooking a wonderful little beach. There are 24 individual bungalows and a restaurant which has great views over the sea. Apart from a handful of sun loungers and thatched beach umbrellas below the restaurant, the beach is pure, untouched and spotlessly clean.

DAY 10 TO DAY 12 - Caye Las Brujas

Three days to relax on the picture-perfect beach of Caye Las Brujas, the most unspoilt and beautiful in Cuba. (BD)

DAY 13 - Caye Las Brujas - Havana

After breakfast drive to the historical city of Santa Clara, a buzzing provincial town that was the first major city to be liberated by the communists. After a visit to the Che Guevara monument, you will return to Havana. (B)

Santa Clara

Santa Clara occupies an important place in the history of the revolution – it was seized by the communists under the command of Che Guevara, which started the chain of events that ultimately toppled the Batista regime. As a result the town is favoured with abundant iconography, the most notable being the monument to Che Guevara and the adjacent museum.

DAY 14 - Havana

Transfer to Jose Marti International Airport. (B)

Supplementary Information

Staffing

Throughout the tour you will be accompanied by an English speaking driver / guide. You will also enjoy the services of an English speaking guide on the tour in Havana.

Hotels

For this tour we have selected some of the finest hotels that Cuba has to offer. However please note that in general, hotels in Cuba are not on a par with international standards and you should not expect high levels of luxury.

All of the hotels that we have listed in the itinerary will be booked subject to availability. If we are unable to secure a booking at the selected hotel we will suggest a suitable alternative; however please be aware that some of the places that we visit have only a limited selection of accommodation and the alternative may not be of equivalent

standard. Where this is the case, we may be able to offer a small discount off the cost of the trip to reflect the lower standard. Please discuss this with your travel consultant at the time of booking, if appropriate.

Laundry

A laundry service is available in most of the hotels we use.

Voltage

220 volts. Sockets are a mixture of the European, two-pronged round variety and US flat-pin.

Visas

You will need to obtain a single entry visa for Cuba (known as a 'tourist card') in advance of your tour. Regulations and costs change frequently and differ according to nationality. For the latest information on your specific visa requirements you should contact your local Cuban Embassy or Consulate. Visas are usually valid for 3 months for a stay of up to 1 month. Your passport will need to be valid for a period of 6 months from the date of departure from Cuba.

For your own safety and freedom of movement, a copy of the tourist card together with a copy of your passport must be kept on you at all times - particularly when travelling outside of the main towns. You must also retain this card for when you exit Cuba.

Please note that the US government prohibits its citizens from travelling to Cuba.

If the visa application form requires a contact address in the destination, please give either your meeting point hotel:

The Hotel del Tejadillo
Calle Tejadillo 12
Havana
Cuba

It is your responsibility to ensure that you are in possession of the correct visas for your holiday and onward travel. The Imaginative Traveller cannot accept responsibility for anyone who is refused entry to a country because they lack the correct documentation.

Transport

During the course of the tour you will travel in a private air-conditioned car with an English speaking driver.

For local travel within cities we recommend that you use taxis. These generally have meters but you will often find that the driver will prefer to just give you a set price and not switch on the meter, as this way the money goes straight into his pocket rather than to the government. The price will usually be almost the same as it would have been with the meter.

The other option is to use a coco-taxi which is similar to the tuk-tuk or auto rickshaw. These are particularly common in Trinidad and can be great fun. They do not have meters so you should agree a price in advance.

Local buses get very crowded and are best avoided but you might like to try the red "camello" in Havana (an articulated truck with a long trailer in which the passengers stand).

Border Taxes

There is a departure tax of CUC25 (US\$32), payable in Cuban currency.

Money

Until recently US dollars were accepted for all purchases in Cuba. However in response to the tightening of sanctions by the US in 2004, the government banned the currency and introduced the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC) which is, to all intents and purposes, equal to the US dollar.

There is also a second currency, the Cuban Peso (CUP), which is for use by Cubans only.

The Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC) is divided into 100 centavos. Approximate exchange rates (as at January 2008) are as follows:

- 1 Pound Sterling: 1.8 CUC
- 1 US Dollar: 1 CUC
- 1 Euro: 1.34 CUC

XE.com is a useful site for currency conversion.

Changing Money, Credit Cards & ATMs

Since the introduction of the CUC in 2004, it has still been possible to convert US dollars into CUCs but a 10% tax is applied on all such transactions. We therefore strongly recommend that you take most of your cash and travellers' cheques in £ sterling or Euros.

Cash

Cash can be easily exchanged at official exchange houses (casa de cambios) called CADECA. You should try to bring small denomination notes as these are much easier to change. Please note that we recommend that you bring most of your funds in cash as other forms of currency exchange are not straightforward.

Travellers Cheques

Travellers cheques in Euros and £ sterling can be changed at many (but not all) banks in Cuba. You should therefore not rely on these as your sole source of funds. Please note that you will not be able to exchange any travellers cheques which have been printed by an American bank (eg American Express).

ATMs and Credit Cards

ATM machines do exist in Cuba but they generally do not work efficiently so again you should not rely on these as a primary source of funds.

You can get cash advances through your credit card from banks but they will NOT accept any US issued credit cards (eg American Express). Getting a cash advance can be a very drawn out process and all banks will need to see your passport and possibly require a photocopy. If you do decide to queue in a bank, always check that what you want to do is going to be possible before lining up as different banks have different rules. In addition please note that some banks may have a limit to the amount of currency you can exchange. It is therefore worth trying to exchange as much as you can at one time. Having said that, please also note that once out of Cuba you will not be able to use or exchange Cuban pesos whether they are convertible pesos (CUCs) or local pesos (CUPs). Therefore you must make sure you spend/exchange/donate any left over money before leaving the country.

The following cards are accepted in most Cuban ATMs (if you can find one that works), banks and tourist shops and in some restaurants and hotels; Visa, MasterCard, Access, Diners and Banamex. Please be aware that authorisation can sometimes be denied due to poor computer connections or other problems.

Lastly please note that it can be very expensive using credit cards to get local currency as commission of up to 7% is frequently charged; furthermore as the CUC is not an internationally recognised currency, the transaction is often conducted in US dollars which then means that you have to pay the 10% tax.

Given the difficulties explained above, we advise you to carry the majority of your funds in cash and to ensure that you have a secure way of carrying this (for example a money belt).

Cuba is a relatively expensive country for travellers so you should be sure to bring enough money.

Tipping

Tipping is very common in Cuba; wages are low and tips are therefore greatly appreciated. It is common to leave 10% in restaurants and for cab drivers and a few dollars per person per day for guides / drivers. You will also find toilet attendants and street musicians will expect a few pesos for a job well done.

Entrance Fees

Entrance fees are included for all sites that are visited as part of the itinerary. There may be other museums and sites which you wish to visit; entrance fees generally cost between US\$2 and US\$10. If you have an International Student Card you will often be entitled to reduced entrance fees.

Please be aware that many museums are closed on Mondays.

Flash photography is strictly forbidden and in many churches, museums and other sites you will be expected to pay to take your camera and/or video inside; the charge is normally around US\$2-3.

You might also get the chance to take in an evening cabaret show such as the famous Tropicana (US\$65+) or you might like to try the Parisien in the Nacional Hotel in Vedado which is just as good but half the price. If you want to listen to typical Cuban music visit the Casa de la Trova, (\$5 entry) where you will find all the locals. All the above are in Havana but also remember that all the other towns and cities have good nightlife.

Clothing

As a general guideline, clothing should be lightweight, loose fitting, hard-wearing and easily washed. In the hot summer months, cotton clothing is much more comfortable than man-made materials like nylon. Be prepared for cooler evenings - for this reason you will generally find it better to pack several thin layers rather than one thick layer. A fleece can be invaluable and double as a pillow. A water resistant jacket is essential during the rainy season from May to October.

Cultural & Environmental Guidelines

Begging

Begging is not common in Cuba but has started to appear at some tourist destinations. Ultimately donations are a traveller's personal choice; however, our recommendation is NOT to give money, pens, gifts or sweets as this may occasionally result in the imprisonment of the beggar by local police authorities. If you do want to help it is probably better to give to a recognised charity. If you choose not to give, simply say no with a smile and keep on walking. If you learn nothing else of the local language, try to learn to say 'no thank you'.

Shopping

Haggling is expected in Cuba and hunting for bargains can be a real highlight. The main buys are, of course, rum, cigars and all types of Latin music - salsa, zapateo, cha-cha-cha, rumba, jazz. Paintings can also be an excellent buy, especially if you're good at bargaining. There are many art stalls around the country but some of the best can be found around the main plaza in Havana and in the large souvenir market that runs along the river's edge.

Given that it is very expensive and generally not reliable to send packages home, you should only purchase what you are able to carry with you.

Safety

Crime does exist in Cuba but on a relatively small scale considering that many people live in poverty. It is important to be sensible and alert but like anywhere in the world, you can be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Care should be taken, especially whilst walking around the larger cities. Try to keep away from dark quiet areas and if you are out at night, it is best to take a taxi. We suggest that whenever possible you leave all of your important documents in the safe ("caja fuertes") or at least locked in your main luggage. However you should always carry some form of ID or a photocopy of your passport.

It is advisable not to wear expensive looking watches or jewellery and keep your camera concealed when not in use. Remember that most thieves don't use violence but rely mostly on diversionary tactics which can take place at any time of the day or night.

Food & Drink

Food

Breakfast is included on each day of the tour (except day 1). Some lunches and dinners are also included, as detailed in the itinerary.

Most food in Cuba is pretty expensive compared to the rest of Latin America. The best value meals can be found in 'casa particulares' or 'paladares' which are privately owned restaurants that have opened up all over Cuba. These restaurants are only supposed to have 12 seats but many break the rules. Most dishes consist of beans and rice with chicken or pork (the national dish, 'congrí', is beans and rice). Cows are all Government owned, so you probably won't see beef outside of Government run restaurants and hotels and it is usually expensive. The same applies to lobsters and prawns which are either saved for the export market or sold in smart hotels and restaurants.

Drinks

All drinks such as water, soft or alcoholic drinks are at your own expense at all times. The following is a rough guideline for drinks bought in a shop in the street. Prices in restaurants and hotels can sometimes be more than

double the prices specified below;

- Half litre of water - US\$1.00
- Bottle of soft drink - US\$1.50
- Bottle of national beer - US\$2.00

Drinks such as “guarapo”, which is sugar cane juice, will cost about US\$0.05 but remember it will probably have ice in it, so be careful if you have a sensitive stomach. Cuban coffee is normally good but order a cafecito or café cubano, not café americano (which can be weak and mostly tasteless). You can also get milkshakes (batidos) at street markets.

If you only learn one word in Spanish it's bound to be “cerveza” – beer! There are countless beers and the most common are Cristal, Maybe, Hatuey and Bucanero.

Rum (ron) is definitely the most commonly drunk spirit in Cuba. There are over 80 different brands on the island and it is served up straight or in all sorts of cocktails (i.e. mojitos, daiquiris) as well as in cuba libre (rum & coke).

Special Dietary Requirements

Vegetarians

If you are a strict vegetarian you may experience a distinct lack of variety in the food available, especially in small towns, and you might find that you are eating a lot of omelettes and other egg dishes.

Communications

Email

As with everywhere in the world, the easiest and cheapest form of communication is via the Internet. There are ETECSA offices throughout Cuba with public internet facilities and the average cost is US\$6 an hour.

Phone

To call overseas from Cuba you must dial ‘119’ followed by the country code, city code etc. You can buy special telephone cards from ETECSA offices which also have internet facilities. With these cards you need to use one of the blue ETECSA public phones, which you can find throughout Cuba.

Please note that calling from hotels is always VERY expensive, and even if your call is connected for 1 second you will be charged for a full minute.

Post

The postal service is good and stamps are available everywhere.

Camera Film

Camera film is widely available and generally of good quality.

Weather

Cuba can be visited year round. May through to October experiences more rain and higher temperatures and peak season is November through to April.

The average temperature throughout the year varies between 20 and 35°C, lowering sometimes to 10°C between December and February. The Eastern region enjoys warmer weather than the western and the variations of temperature between the day and the night are less accentuated in the coastal regions than inland. The average water temperature is 25°C.

Due to its geographic location, the country is affected by the cyclone season between June and November. This can affect the island in hurricane form with winds of up to 200 km/h and heavy storms. The experience of a cyclone emergency is disturbing but please remember that all the hotels that you will be staying at are modern structures or have been strengthened to cope with inclement weather.

National Holidays

- New Year's Day/ Liberation Day - Jan 1
- Victory of Armed Forces - Jan 2
- Labour Day - May 1
- Independence Day - May 20
- Days of Rebeliousness - Jul 25-7
- Anniversary of the beginning of the War of Independence in 1868 - Oct 10
- Christmas Day - Dec 25

Reading

Guidebooks

- Rough Guide to Cuba
- Footprints Guide to Cuba

Background Reading

- Revolution in Cuba – Herbert Matthews
- Cuba and the Night – Pico Iyer
- Can Cuba Survive?: An interview with Fidel Castro – Beatriz Pages
- Six Nights in Havana – James A. Michener & John King

Useful Phrases in Spanish

- Hello - Hola Excuse me/sorry - Permiso
- Goodbye - Adios How much is it? - Cuanto cuesta
- How are things? - Que tal Too expensive - Es demasiado caro
- Please - Por favor Yes - Si
- Thank you - Gracias No - No

Spanish Numbers

- 1 - uno 20 - veinte
- 2 - dos 30 - treinta
- 3 - tres 100 - cien
- 4 - cuatro 1000 - mil
- 5 - cinco
- 6 - seis
- 7 - siete
- 8 - ocho
- 9 - nueve
- 10 - diez

24hr Emergency Contact

Tel: +53 5 2643281

In an emergency, if you are unable to get through to this number you can call our regional manager, who is based in Peru, on +51 849652116

General information

Price includes:

- Staffing as shown in the 'Factfinder'
- Accommodation, meals, transportation, and sightseeing excursions as per itinerary.

Price does not include:

- Visa costs
- Border Taxes
- Entrance fees not part of the itinerary
- Drinks, tips, laundry and other items of a personal nature.
- International flights
- Meals other than those listed

Are You Ready To Go?

Before you travel it is essential that you read all of the following documents which you can download from our website www.imtravdossiers.com or obtain from your booking agent:

- Trip Dossier (this document)
- Cuba Country Dossier
- Pre-Departure Information

The itinerary and supplementary information has been compiled with care and provided in good faith. However it may be subject to change, and does not form part of a contract between the client and The Imaginative Traveller.