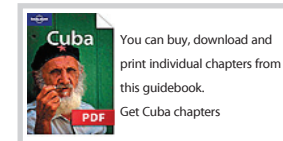


# Getting Started



Cuba is a unique country with many distinct characteristics. Travel here not only requires a passport, money and a good sturdy rucksack; but it also requires flexibility, creativity, good humor, patience and a healthy sense of adventure. Speaking Spanish, though not a prerequisite, is undoubtedly a huge advantage, and will allow you to travel further and dig deeper than the average tourist.

Linguistic dexterity aside, Cuba remains an easy country to travel in and there are few barriers stopping you from wandering around pretty much how and as you choose. The infamous Resolution 10 ruling passed by the Cuban National Assembly in 2005 has led some sources to claim that Cubans have been discouraged from interacting with foreigners and prohibited from receiving 'tips' in the line of duty. In truth, the facts are rather less dramatic. Resolution 10 is actually aimed more at tourist officials and Cuban diplomats traveling overseas on business where (in the eyes of the Cuban government) they are prime fodder for bribery, corruption and running up unnecessary expense accounts. Back on the home front, the hard-working waiters and the towel-folding room maids of the vibrant tourist sector are as ingratiating and chatty as they have always been, and a small gratuity or 'tip' will go a long way in supplementing their relatively meager salaries.

Recent legislation by the American government has further tightened the rules governing travel of US citizens to Cuba. For more information on legal travel to the island check out the Center for Cuban Studies' website on [www.cubaupdate.org](http://www.cubaupdate.org). For additional advice see p469.

## WHEN TO GO

The best time to go to Cuba is between December and April, after the lashing rains of the hurricane season and before the hot and sticky discomfort of the scorching summer months. The downside is that during this period – the high season or *temporada alta* as it is called in Cuba –

See Climate Charts p453 for more information.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

You'll quickly find that basic commodities such as toothpaste, toilet paper and soap are widely available in Cuba. However, condoms, aspirin, dental floss, sunscreen, insect repellent, contact-lens solution, moisturizing lotion and reading material in any language besides Spanish definitely aren't.

Clothing-wise come prepared. Aside from the ubiquitous Che Guevara T-shirts fashionable beach wear is overpriced or low quality. You might also want to bring your own snorkel gear. A flashlight will be handy during blackouts. An alarm clock for predawn bus departures, a universal plug for sinks and tubs and a little washing powder are all useful. People staying in campismos will need a sheet as linen isn't always provided.

Aside from a scant supply of biscuits/cookies and soggy sandwiches, take-out fare is hard to find. Gatorade powder, granola and protein bars, nuts, dried fruit, peanut butter and trail mix provide energy and a break from the vicious pizza/ice-cream/fried-chicken cycle of appetizers. See *Staying Fed* (p76) for more food advice.

Money-wise, your best bet is to bring cash, preferably in Canadian dollars, euros or pound sterling (avoid US dollars as the cost of changing them into Cuban Convertibles is a lot higher). A credit card will provide a good emergency back-up and traveler's checks from non-American banks are usually acceptable. Unfortunately few, if any, foreign debit cards will work in Cuban ATMs.

accommodation prices are hiked up by about 20% (see p448). You'll also find the country a little more crowded at this time, particularly in the resort areas although, off the beaten track, it is unlikely that you will ever have trouble in finding a room in a *casa particular*.

Weather aside, Cuba has few other hurdles for visitors. Culture vultures should keep a close eye on the annual arts calendar (p457) for festivals and events; baseball fans will certainly not want to miss the postseason, which runs from April to May; and political junkies may want to catch important days in the socialist calendar, particularly *Día de los Trabajadores* (May Day; May 1) and Day of the National Rebellion (July 26).

## COSTS & MONEY

For seasoned budget travelers Cuba can be a bit of a financial shock. There's no network of dirt-cheap backpacker hostels here and not a lot of bargaining potential. In fact, compared with say Guatemala or Peru, you could feel yourself staring at a veritable financial conundrum with little or no room to maneuver. Furthermore there is a tendency in Cuba to herd all foreign visitors around in one state-controlled tourist sector. Follow this well-trodden path of organized excursions and prepackaged cultural 'experiences' at your peril. The costs will soon add up.

With a little guile and a certain amount of resilience, however, it needn't all be overpriced hotel rooms and wallet-whacking credit-card bills. Underneath the surface (and contrary to what a lot of tour reps will tell you) Cuba has a whole guidebook's worth of cheaper alternatives. On

### PUTTING THE GUIDEBOOK DOWN

Here at Lonely Planet we like to say that 'the greatest adventure of all is to fly by the seat of your pants' and for several decades successive editions of our guidebooks have been enthusiastically promoting this independent travel culture.

Rather than give you a written itinerary and lead you protectively through the obstacles, we prefer to inspire and suggest, prompt and propose – but never to hand hold.

In Cuba there are countless opportunities to cross the unofficial line that exists between the all-inclusive tourist resorts and the island of revolutionary myth. Throughout the course of this book we will try to offer you a whole range of possibilities about how this border can best be breached. Often the information we put forward will be deliberately vague. Indeed, at times, we will actively encourage you to put the guidebook down for a day or three and venture off intrepidly on your own. Adventurers should bear in mind the following:

- Cuba is a large country of approximately 11.3 million people and far too complex to squeeze into a modestly sized book. Rather than treat this guide as 'gospel', think of it more as a starting point. Get inventive, fill in the gaps, change the itineraries, rework the reviews and don't forget to write in and tell us what we missed.
- Buses break down, hotels close, restaurants change chefs and old revolutionaries eventually die. A guidebook is a stencil; it tells you what's *supposed* to happen. What *actually* happens is often very different – and largely up to you.
- There are no timetables for Santería rituals, cockfights, spontaneous rumba sessions, gorgeous sunsets or anything involving a Cuban train journey. Keep your ear to the ground, follow the crowds and don't be afraid to experiment with something new.
- Cuba's best tour agencies are its *casas particulares*. There are thousands of these congenial private houses scattered across the country and each and every one has the potential to be a fact-packed Lonely Planet guidebook in its own right.

the hotel front, the vibrant *casa particular* scene can cut accommodation costs by more than half, while do-it-yourself grocery purchasing and an ability to muck in with the resourceful locals on trucks, buses, trains and bicycles can give you access to a whole new world of interesting food and transport opportunities.

For those more interested in service and comfort, prices are equally variable, from CUC\$50 per person at Varadero's cheapest all-inclusive to CUC\$200 per person at a swanky Playa Esmeralda resort. If you're interested in getting away to the beach, prearranged air and hotel packages from Canada and Europe can be absurdly affordable (less than US\$500 for a week in Varadero from Toronto) and seasoned Cuba travelers often take these deals because it works out cheaper than just the airfare alone. Most resorts and hotels offer big discounts for children under 12 years of age; it's worth asking. Children also travel half-price on Viazul buses, and many museums and attractions offer a 50% discount for kids. See the Transport chapter for further information on travel agencies (p469) who can arrange travel and tours to Cuba.

As with most islands, Cuba struggles with food supply and prices reflect this – especially if you crave something imported like canned corn or nuts. *Paladares* and *casas particulares* usually offer good value, with monstrous meal portions (no rationing here), including a pork chop, rice and beans, salad and French fries, costing around CUC\$8. Add a couple of beers, dessert and a tip and you're looking at CUC\$12 (or more). Drinking is considerably more affordable than eating, with a strong mojito costing CUC\$2 (in a non-Hemingway-esque bar) and a fresh juice or beer CUC\$1.

For tourists to Cuba, there are many transport options and as many prices to go with them. From Habana to Santiago de Cuba for example, a trip of 861km, you will pay around CUC\$114 to fly one-way with Cubana, from CUC\$50 to CUC\$62 to take the train and from CUC\$41 to CUC\$52 to do the journey on the bus. Rental cars start at CUC\$35 a day for a small Fiat to CUC\$220 a day for a convertible Audi, though a more average price is something in the region of CUC\$65 for a weekly rental of a Toyota Yaris.

There is, of course, the double economy, whereby Convertibles and Cuban pesos circulate simultaneously. In theory, tourists are only supposed to use Convertibles but, in practice, there is nothing to stop you walking into a *cadeca* (change booth) and swapping your Convertibles into *moneda nacional* (pesos). With an exchange rate of 24 pesos per Convertible, there are fantastic saving opportunities with pesos if you're willing to sacrifice a little (or a lot!) in quality, service and/or comfort. For example, a pizza in a fast-food joint costs CUC\$1, but street pizzas cost seven pesos (less than CUC\$0.25). Pesos are also useful for urban transport and some cultural activities (such as movies), but almost everything else is sold to foreigners only in Convertibles: the symphony or theater, interprovincial transport and taxis are but a few examples where Cubans will pay in pesos, but you won't.

Before you become indignant about the marked price differential, remember that the double economy cuts both ways: while Cubans may sometimes pay less for the same services as foreigners they also have to stand in line, frequent ration shops and stay in the kind of fly-blown substandard hotels that most foreigners wouldn't poke a stick at. Furthermore, Cubans (who earn between 190 and 325 pesos, or CUC\$8 and CUC\$13, a month) have to survive in an entirely different economy from affluent outsiders; a financial minefield where access to valuable

### HOW MUCH?

Room in a *casa particular*  
CUC\$15-30

Museum entrance  
CUC\$1-5

Taxi CUC\$2-4

Bike rental per day  
CUC\$3-5

Internet use per hour  
CUC\$6

See also Lonely Planet  
index, inside front cover.

Convertibles is a daily crashout between tips, personal guile and who you know.

Cuban-Americans traveling legally to Cuba in order to visit relatives are currently restricted to spending the equivalent of US\$50 a day. This was reduced from US\$167 a day by the Bush administration in June 2004. There are also new limits on how much money Cuban-Americans can send back to the island from the US.

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

Zoë Bran's *Enduring Cuba* (2002), an illuminating and beautifully written book, conveys the daily shortages, slowdowns and *lucha* (struggle) of the Cuban reality with a keen eye for detail. Isadora Tatlin's *Cuba Diaries* (2002) takes an equally eye-opening look at a similarly thought-provoking and contradictory subject.

Even better on the travelogue scene is *Trading with the Enemy: A Yankee Travels through Castro's Cuba* (1992), by Tom Miller, a rich feast of Cuban lore gleaned during eight months of perceptive travel in Cuba. It may be the best travel book about Cuba ever written. Miller also collected the 38 pieces in *Travelers' Tales Cuba: True Stories* (2001), a medley of views, experiences and takes on the island.

Reminiscent of the uncompromising, in-your-face style of Irvine Welsh or Charles Bukowski, Pedro Juan Gutierrez's *Dirty Havana Trilogy* (2000), is a fascinating, if sometimes disturbing insider look at life in Habana during the dark days of the *período especial* (special period). Carlos Eire's *Waiting for Snow in Havana* (2003), meanwhile, is a nostalgic account of boyhood during the tumultuous days of the Cuban Revolution.

## CUBA ON THE CHEAP

Accommodation and transport are two areas where foreigners almost always have to pay in Convertibles and the bill can add up, fast. Food is another budget parasite. Here are some budget-friendly ideas:

- Families traveling together are pulling from the same financial pool; owners of private rooms recognize this and will often offer a discount to travelers with children. This can occur in hotels too.
- In private rooms, try negotiating a discount for multiple nights or by agreeing not to use the air-con.
- Never arrive anywhere with a *jinetero* (male hustler) in tow. This universally hikes the room price up by CUC\$5 a night.
- The cheapest accommodation is in campismo cabins, which are often payable by the person, not the unit: good for solo travelers or those with a bike or car.
- Astro buses are cheaper than Viazul coaches, and trucks are cheaper than both. Stoics might want to try arranging a *botella* (free or cheap lift) with the *amarillos* (yellow jackets; workers who match potential passengers with empty cars). Use this method and you'll save bundles.
- Learn the public transport mechanism, rent a bicycle or take to the streets and walk.
- Food sold in pesos – bread at the Empresa Cubana del Pan, fruits and vegetables at agropecuarios (agricultural markets) or full meals from someone's living-room window such as pizza or *cajitas* (take-out meals in small boxes) – is very kind on the wallet.
- Cooking at 'home' is cheap and fun. Hit the market and host a dinner party.
- Brush up on some Spanish: nothing jacks up a price or keeps it inflated more effectively than an inability to communicate.

## TOP TENS

### Places to find the 'real' Cuba

Endless line-ups, dirty washrooms, the ever-present *jineteros*, crowded buses, awful food – the search for the 'real' Cuba can sometimes be a little hard on the nerves. And then suddenly, like a blinding light, you find it...

- Weekend street party – La Fiesta de Cubanía (p376), Bayamo
- Riding the rails Cuban style – the Hershey train (p173), Habana Province
- Any given Sunday – baseball (p356) in Holguín
- Hanging out with the locals – Puerto Padre (p345)
- Beach alternative – Guanabo (p164), Playas del Este
- Campismo culture – La Sierrita (p381), Granma
- Rodeo fever – Feria Ganado (p343), Las Tunas
- Market shopping – Agropecuario del Rio (p326), Camagüey
- Art talk – Uneac cultural center (p356), Holguín
- Choosing a casa – Nueva Gerona (p184), Isla de la Juventud

### Beaches

From five-star deluxe to no-star nirvana, Cuba's beaches – all 300 of them – are some of the best places on the island to kick off your shoes, lock up your worries and spend a day or two relaxing in quiet contemplation. The following hints should provide enough inspiration to send you running for your bucket and spade:

- Playa Ancón (p301), Sancti Spíritus
- Varadero (p230), Matanzas
- Playa Santa Lucía (p335), Camagüey
- Playa Maguana (p446), Baracoa
- Cayo Levisa (p213), Pinar del Rio
- Playa Pilar (p320), Ciego de Ávila
- Playa Guardalavaca (p360), Holguín
- Playa Boca Ciega (p168), Playas del Este, Habana
- Playa Sevilla (p426), Chivirico, Santiago de Cuba
- Playa de los Pinos (p334), Cayo Sabinal, Camagüey

### Cycle Routes

Cuba is one of the best countries in the world for bike enthusiasts and, with an estimated 500,000 cyclists in Habana alone, you won't be short of company. To get off the beaten track and discover the corners of the island that most tour excursions fail to penetrate, test your metal on a few of the following:

- Marea del Portillo to Chivirico – the seaside rollercoaster
- Baracoa to Maguana Beach – the rutted road to paradise
- Cajababo to Baracoa – tackle the white-knuckle bends and switchbacks of La Farola, the famous 'lighthouse' road
- Camilo Cienfuegos to the Valle de Yumurí – Habana to Matanzas, via the back door
- Valle de Viñales – meander meditatively among the mogotes
- Morón to San José del Lago – wake up where the cock crows and fall asleep in a sumptuous spa
- Bartolomé Maso to Santo Domingo – the guerrilla killer, Cuba's toughest road ascent is not for the faint-hearted
- Bayamo to El Saltón – time-warped villages and bucolic *bohíos* (thatched huts) in the Sierra Maestra's rural foothills
- Guardalavaca to Banés – scenic undulations from all-inclusive resort to all-Cuban town
- Trinidad to Playa Ancón – from mountains to sea in one fell swoop

In the literary field, classics include Hemingway's Nobel Prize-winning *Old Man and the Sea* (1952), and his less-heralded, but equally compelling *Islands in the Stream* (1970). Graham Greene captures the prerevolutionary essence of Habana in *Our Man in Havana* (1958) while Elmore Leonard documents the events surrounding the explosion of the battleship USS *Maine* and the Cuban-Spanish-American War with thrill-a-minute panache in *Cuba Libre* (2000).

Biographies of Che Guevara abound, although there's no contest when it comes to size, quality and enduring literary legacy. Jon Lee Anderson's *Che Guevara: a Revolutionary Life* (1997) is one of the most groundbreaking biographies ever written and during the research for the book Mr Anderson initiated the process by which Guevara's remains were found and dug up in Bolivia before being returned to Cuba in 1997. Unauthorized biographies of Castro are equally authoritative: try Volker Skierka's *Fidel Castro: a Biography* (2000).

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**AfroCuba Web** ([www.afrocubaweb.com](http://www.afrocubaweb.com)) Everything imaginable on Cuban culture, with worldwide concert listings, dance and drum workshops, seminars and encounters in Cuba.

**BBC** ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)) One of the best sites for up-to-date Cuba news stories, BBC Cuba correspondent Stephen Gibbs uncovers some classic journalistic gems. Type Cuba into the search engine on main page to reveal what's on offer.

**Boomers Abroad** ([www.boomersabroad.com](http://www.boomersabroad.com)) Choose the Cuba icon on the main page for links galore on everything from caving to Che Guevara.

**Cubacasas.net** ([www.cubacasas.net](http://www.cubacasas.net)) Informative and regularly updated Canadian website with information on casas particulares and much more besides. Versions in English and French.

**Granma Internacional** ([www.granma.cu](http://www.granma.cu)) Official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party; news from Cuba in five languages.

**LonelyPlanet.com** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Summaries on traveling to Cuba, the Thorn Tree bulletin board, travel news and links to useful travel resources elsewhere on the Web.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### HABANA

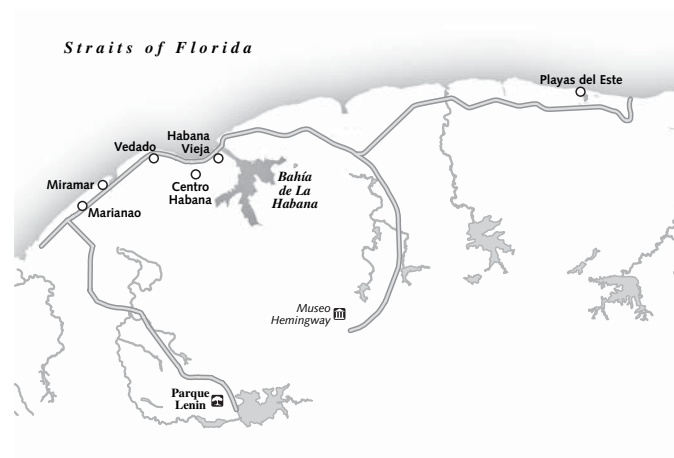
### Two Weeks to One Month

Mandatory museums include the Cuban collection of the **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes** (p102) in Centro Habana; the **Museo de la Revolución** (p102) also in Centro Habana; the **Museo Fortificaciones y Armas** (p162) to the north of Bahía de La Habana; the inspiring (despite so much taxidermy) **Museo Hemingway** (p160); and the fascinating **Museo de Fundación de Naturaleza y El Hombre** (p148) in Miramar.

After museum fatigue sets in, head to the azure waters and white sands of **Playas del Este** (p164), trot around verdant **Parque Lenin** (p154) on horseback or re-energize with some flower power at the **Jardín Botánico Nacional** (p154) in the Parque Lenin area.

When the moon goes up, Habana gets down. Music lovers will enjoy **Jazz Club La Zorra y El Cuervo** (p133) in Vedado; the **Teatro Amadeo Roldán** (p137), seat of the national symphony in Vedado; the **Casa de la Trova** (p133) in Centro Habana; or just hanging out on the **Malecón** (p110) in Habana Vieja. For salsa, it's the **Casa de la Música** in Centro Habana (p135) or Miramar (p152); there are discos or check out the legendary rumbas hosted in **Callejón de Hamel** (p115) in Vedado. Of course, fabulousness happens nightly at the world-famous **Tropicana Nightclub** (p152) in Mariano.

You'll find all manner of transport options in Habana; see Getting Around (p153).



Habana isn't just a city; it's a chameleon, a conundrum, a cultural extravaganza. To see all the main sights in a week is like trying to squeeze the complete works of Shakespeare into just one act. For a brief initiation stick aside a fortnight; to delve deeper count on a month.

## THE WHISTLE STOP

Two Weeks to Two Months

After ogling the incredible architecture of **Habana** (p93), head to **Santa Clara** (p272) and the venerable **Monumento Ernesto Che Guevara** (p274), with its superb mausoleum. Press southwest to charming **Cienfuegos** (p258) next, with its large, placid bay and its noble neoclassical buildings, before working your way slowly down the coast to **Trinidad** (p292). A Unesco World Heritage site, you can easily spend a week in this colonial town hiking in **Topes de Collantes** (p304) and horseback riding in **Valle de los Ingenios** (p303) or lazing at **Playa Ancón** (p301). Smiling is infectious in the labyrinthine streets of **Camagüey** (p322), where a bustling new bar scene will mean you get lost without even realizing it. **Guardalavaca** (p360) is one of the finest resort areas with terrific diving, paragliding and a smattering of local native history. Welcome to **Holguín Province** (p347), with its friendly capital and Fidel's childhood home in **Birán** (p368). Leave time for **Santiago de Cuba** (p393) and its many attractions including **El Cobre** (p424), **La Gran Piedra** (p419), the **Castillo de San Pedro del Morro** (p404), the **Cuartel Moncada** (p402) and of course, the kicking nighttime **music scene** (p412).

Most international flights take you into Habana or Santiago de Cuba, but you can easily start this adventure in **Varadero** (p230) or **Holguín** (p348), other popular entry points.

With two weeks and a car you can see a lot of Cuba, but using public transport can give you a good (sometimes better!) taste too. With two months, you can travel the breadth in depth.



## ROADS LESS TRAVELED

### CUBA THROUGH THE BACK DOOR

One Month

Boycott Habana and head east to the beaches of **Playas del Este** (p164), where private houses and picturesque sunsets abound, or leapfrog straight to **Santa Cruz del Norte** (p173), a worthwhile base camp situated within hiking distance of the golden sands of Playa Jibacoa. Switch west next along the beautiful (and deserted) northern coast route to **Puerto Esperanza** (p212) for a few days of turning off, tuning in and dropping out before pressing on to **Sandino** (p204) within striking distance of María la Gorda. The Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs) area is awash with decent casas, none better than those found on shimmering **Playa Larga** (p253) and you can easily work your way along the coast from here to **Rancho Luna** (p267) and **La Boca** (p304) where assorted private houses offer up an ideal antidote to the tourist hotels of Cienfuegos and Trinidad. The long road east presents ample opportunities to avoid the city hustlers in Ciego de Ávila and Camagüey. Check out unsung **Florida** (p332), with its archetypal sugar mills or bustling **Guáimaro** (p333), with its groundbreaking constitutional history. Turn left in **Las Tunas** (p339) and detour to the remote northern beach 'resort' of **Playa Las Bocas** (p346), where you'll see no one, but a handful of ingratiating casa particular owners. Homing in on Holguín Province, check out the pretty town of **Banes** (p365) as a launching pad for Guardalavaca before making one last fling down to Santiago de Cuba, where peace and tranquility await you in sleepy **Siboney** (p417).

These little-known towns and villages have two things in common: a handful of legal casas particulares and a dearth of regular visitors. If you don't mind roughing it on local transport, conversing in barely intelligible Spanish or reading your Lonely Planet by torchlight, read on.



## THE MUSICAL TOUR

### Two Weeks to One Month

Ease in gently at Habana's **Iglesia de San Francisco de Asís** (p97), where refined classical music echoes eerily through the cloisters of a converted 18th-century church. Next shimmy a couple of blocks west to **Mesón de la Flota** (p119), where rasping vocals and furious flamenco invites listeners to discover the elusive spirit of what aficionados call *duende* (a term used in flamenco to describe the ultimate climax to the music). For something more authentically Cuban, visit Habana's **Casa de la Música** (p135) in El Centro, or forge your way west to venerable Viñales, home of the *Guajira* (a type of flamenco) and location of the spanking new **Centro Cultural Polo Montañez** (p208). In unsung Matanzas, live rumba performances reverberate in **Plaza de la Vigía** (p224) while, an hour or two further on, in Santa Clara's **Club Mejunje** (p278) loose rhythms and heavy bass mix in one of Cuba's most vibrant and underrated cultural institutions. Trinidad has *trova* (traditional poetic singing) and *son* (Cuba's popular music) and a lot more besides in **Palanque de los Congos Reales** (p300), while the long journey east to Santiago's spit and sawdust **Casa de las Tradiciones** (p413) is a musical homecoming, akin to sailing down the Mississippi to New Orleans. With the hangover starting to bite, tie in Haitian drums and voodoo rhythms in Guantánamo's **Tumba Francesa Pompadour** (p435) before heading over the Sierra Puril Mountains for the grand finale: a frenetic all-out Cuban knees-up at the amiable **Casa de la Trova** (p443) in Baracoa.

Cuban music is famous the world over, but to break free of the Buena Vista Social Club ditties that have become the staple diet in Cuban restaurants you have to wander off the beaten track. This compact itinerary details some of Cuba's eclectic music venues.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### PILGRIMAGE

### Two Weeks to One Month

No one can fill the shoes of Che, Camilo or Fidel, but you *can* follow in their footsteps, visiting pivotal sites in the Cuban Revolution. This itinerary follows a loose chronological order (see Map pp42–3).

In Santiago de Cuba visit the **Granjita Siboney** (p418) and **Cuartel Moncada** (p402) before heading to **Playa las Coloradas** (p387), where the rebels alit from the yacht *Granma*. Diehards might head to **El Uvero** (p426), site of the first major rebel victory. Summit **Pico Turquino** (p427) and come out the other side at **Comandancia de la Plata** (p382). Head to **Yaguajay** (p307) in Sancti Spíritus, where Camilo Cienfuegos led one of the last battles, or visit the virgin sands of **Cayo Santa María** (p283) – even wannabe rebels need a holiday – before pushing on to **Santa Clara** (p272), where Che led the decisive victory. Don't miss **Habana** (p85), where that victory was declared. As well as having historical significance, **Playa Girón** (p254) and the **Bahía de Cochinos** (p255) have terrific beaches and snorkeling. Last stop: **Isla de la Juventud** (p180), where Fidel was incarcerated after Moncada.

Rebels with a cause should note that public transport on Santiago de Cuba's coast is tricky and there are no buses out to Cayo Santa María. Access to Isla de la Juventud is by boat or plane. See Transport (p473) for more.



### BIRD-WATCHING CUBA

### Two to Three Weeks

With your binoculars polished, sally forth into the verdant **Valle de Viñales** (p204), where, with a bit of patience and the help of the locals, you can catch glimpses of Cuban Bullfinches or chirpy Cuban Peewees. The **Península de Guanahacabibes** (p202) has virgin beaches and dense flora that attracts everything from tody flycatchers to migratory ruby-throated hummingbirds. Don't overlook the **Sierra del Rosario Reserve** (p217) where it's possible to spot up to 50% of Cuba's endemic birds, including the often elusive carpinteros. The **Gran Parque Natural Montemar** (p252) is a huge protected area encompassing Cuba's largest wetland. Wait around for a few hours (or days) and you might see *zunzuns* – the world's smallest bird. In **Topes de Collantes** (p304) keep an eye out for the bright red, white and blue Toco-ro (Cuba's national bird), then venture into **Cayo Romano** (p334) to get a look at some of the island's more than 30,000 flamingos. **La Hacienda la Belén Reserve** (p332) near Camagüey promises glimpses of Cuban Parakeets, Giant Kingbirds and Antillean Palm Swifts. While the journey might appear long and the hiking arduous, no Cuban birding adventure is complete without a visit to the almost-virgin **Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt** (p446) for viewings of Cuban Amazon parrots, hook-billed kites and – unlikely but not impossible – ivory-billed woodpeckers last spotted here in the early 1980s.



# Snapshot

In a country not given to prophesying about the future, the question of ‘what happens after Fidel?’ is often greeted with a dismissive shrug. But with Castro fast approaching his ninth decade, the issue of adaptation and transition in a socialist state that has been locked in a pre-1960s time warp for nearly 50 years can no longer be brushed underneath the carpet.

Omnipresent and expectant on the sidelines, the bellicose Bush administration has not been shy in adding its two-penny’s worth to the debate. In 2003 US President George W Bush set up the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba under the then-Secretary of State Colin Powell to prepare for – in Bush’s words – ‘the happy day when Castro’s regime is no more.’

True to form, the Commission didn’t take long to muster up a 500-page defamatory document. Tightening the noose on the already embargo-strapped Castro regime had long been Bush the younger’s ‘get mad, get even’ strategy. In May 2004, using the report as a pretext, the US president announced a sweeping set of new proposals that included draconian travel restrictions and stringent financial limitations on how much money Cuban-Americans could send to their families in Cuba.

Stubborn as ever, the pugnacious Fidel responded with a killer right hook. In November 2004 the US dollar – legal tender in Cuba since 1993 – was taken out of circulation, a measure that not only hurt Cuban-Americans, but also burnt a hole in the pockets of the two million-plus tourists who visit the island on an annual basis.

Caught up in the middle of all this diplomatic posturing are the long-suffering Cubans, a proud populace (p53), long bored by the crippling embargo (p47), and frustrated in equal measure by their government’s tendency to give with one hand while taking away with the other.

Life today in Cuba is a complex dichotomy of economic hardship versus guarded optimism about the future. Despite growing trade ties with India and China, and notwithstanding a so-called ‘new left tide’ in Latin American politics spearheaded by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia, the effects of the hated *bloqueo* (US embargo) are still felt widely across Cuban society. Even more disturbing are the 100 or more so-called dissidents who continue to languish in Cuban jails for daring to speak out against their government (p49).

But while there’s grumbling on the streets of Habana, the spark of insurrection is still a long way from fruition. Loathed though US observers would be to admit it, nationalism remains a potent force in Cuba and the likelihood of Castro’s imminent political demise remains about as likely as George ‘Dubya’ going for a golfing vacation in Varadero. Flaws and all he will always be the island’s great liberator, its George Washington, the only person in 500 years who made his people feel inherently Cuban.

In cultural terms, the *período especial* (special period; p49) has had a heavy cost. Few first-time visitors to Cuba will fail to spot the haranguing hustlers who stalk tourists on the streets of Vedado, or the ridiculously over-qualified doctor who’s given up his medical degree to earn tips from waiting tables. Exposed to capitalism via tourism, Che Guevara’s ‘New Man’ is looking decidedly old hat these days and, among younger Cubans, the cultural zeitgeist is gradually changing. Proud as they are of their groundbreaking revolution and respectful as they may be of a government that sends 2000 doctors for earthquake relief in Kashmir, the desire for change is powerful. It’s not so much a case of ‘if’ but ‘when.’

## FAST FACTS

Population: 11.3 million

Area: 110,860 sq km

GNP: US\$33.92 billion

Life expectancy: 75 (men); 79 (women)

Adult literacy rate: 97%

Capital city Habana’s full name: La Villa de San Cristóbal de la Habana

Total annual visitors to Varadero in 2004: 826,000

Doctor/patient ratio: 1/170

First Cuban heart transplant performed: 1985



# The Authors



## BRENDAN SAINSBURY

Brendan is a British freelance writer based in British Columbia, Canada. In between penning offbeat travel stories for the likes of *Africa Geographic*, he has hitchhiked across Mozambique, taught English in Thailand, dug latrines in Angola, and worked as an adventure travel guide in Spain and Morocco.

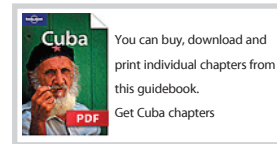
Brendan first 'discovered' Cuba in 1997 after throwing in a career running health and fitness clubs in central London. Fascinated by the country's exotic mix of melodious *trova* (poetic singing/songwriting) and bombastic Che Guevara iconology, he returned again in 2002 to lead a succession of cultural and cycling trips countrywide. He's been coming back ever since.

### My Favorite Trip

When planning a trip I linger in Habana (p85) before heading west, to the village of Viñales (p205) via a zigzag route that takes me past the mellow eco-village of Las Terrazas (p217) and the unkempt beaches of Cayo Levisa (p213). Next I track backwards to the Oriente, with a pit stop in Trinidad (p292), bedding down after two long days on the road in easygoing Bayamo (p372).

Arriving in the exotic east I continue my wanderings in Gran Parque Nacional Sierra Maestra (p380) re-emerging one lengthy trek later in Las Cuevas for a long-awaited glimpse of the azure Caribbean.

Overnighting in Chivirico (p426) I borrow a bicycle, sling it aboard a truck and disembark in hot, dry Cajababo. I take the last 55km into Baracoa (p438) across the precipitous La Farola on two wheels, arriving hot, knackered and ready to drop. It's a sort of homecoming.



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