



The Committee on Illinois  
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## **The Committee on Illinois (Cuba Tours 4U) Frequently Asked Questions**

### **THE BASICS**

#### **IS IT LEGAL to TRAVEL to CUBA – 2018?**

Cuba has been off-limits for U.S. travelers for decades and that shroud over travel to Cuba has often created a strong interest in the island as well as a pervading fear of what to expect. President Obama's Cuba Policy Change announcement on 17 DEC 2014 has renewed hopes for easier travel. The key may be in how the new rules will be regulated but currently travelers must still travel within one of 12 authorized travel purposes (e.g. family travel, journalistic, researcher, etc.) and can now simply sign an affidavit if they qualify for one of the licenses instead of formally applying for a specific license. The traveler, however, must keep a record of the trip for five years showing a full schedule of category related activities.

Conventional tourist travel or beach resort travel remains prohibited. **People to People Educational Travel** is still the way most travelers can qualify for travel to Cuba. Such a traveler also signs a general license affidavit agreeing to engage in a full schedule of education activities, travel with a U.S. organization that sponsors such exchanges to promote people to people contact and work with an employee of that organization accompanying the group to ensure a full schedule of educational exchange activities. Another emerging category is Support for the Cuban People.

#### **IS IT SAFE TO TRAVEL IN CUBA?**

As for the dealings with the Cuban people, be comforted to know that despite past problems between the U.S. and Cuban government, the people of Cuba feel a genuine affinity and affection for U.S. citizens due to our geographic closeness, our shared history, culture (e.g. baseball) and even the shared weather patterns. More so, many Cubans have relatives residing in the U.S. and these U.S. families can now travel more frequently back and forth.

Cuba has the lowest crime rate in the Western Hemisphere. In country you may notice a visible police presence which is specifically there to protect and help tourists. However as with any major city, be aware of your belongings and environment.

A company representative will normally be with you on your trip and we will usually have the services of a bilingual Cuban guide assigned to your group. Our Travel Service Provider or Charter Air Company can also forward any emergency message to you in Cuba while you're there and we can handle any problems that might occur during your stay. Most hotels have direct phone lines to the U.S.

## **PREPARING IN ADVANCE AND GETTING THERE**

### **HOW DO I FLY TO CUBA FROM THE UNITED STATES?**

Past travelers flew on Air Charters, but the emergence of commercial flights at the end of November 2016 has made it easy for you to book your own flight from a number of cities. Be aware that as in regular domestic air purchases, tickets are non-transferable and saddled with change fees. Prices also fluctuate regularly until you lock in your purchase. You will be charged for baggage as on regular flights.

**Cuban Health/Travel Insurance** is required for any medical expenses while in Cuba. This covers 100% of medical expenses in Cuba up to \$25,000 and re-patriation or transportation due to illness, accident or death (up to \$7,000). Limitations may apply for pre-existing conditions. This insurance should be purchased from the Commercial Airline providing your flight to Cuba.

### **WHAT TYPE OF DOCUMENTS WILL I NEED TO ENTER CUBA?**

US citizens will need a Cuban Visa (we can procure these for our travelers), Passport, and U.S. Treasury Department General License Affidavit on File. If you are not a U.S. citizen, you must also carry all necessary documentation to enter the U.S. (e.g. green card).

**NOTE:** You must have a valid Passport (the expiration date must extend at least 2 months past the return date of your scheduled trip). And persons born in Cuba, no matter what their current citizenship, will require additional documentation. Please contact our office for further information.

### **WHAT ABOUT INSURANCE... DO I NEED IT?**

We strongly recommend **Travel Insurance** which can include: Trip Cancellation Trip Cost, Trip Interruption, Missed Connection (3 Hours or More), Travel Delay (6 Hours or More), Baggage and Personal Effects, Baggage Delay, and Accidental Death and

Dismemberment. The Committee on Illinois does not carry insurance. Sarah Erskine at MILA Tours (800) 367-7378 has handled individual trip insurance for many of our Cuba travelers.

### **WHAT IS THE WEATHER LIKE IN CUBA?**

The Cuban climate is subtropical therefore it is usually always warm. The island receives trade winds and marine breezes throughout the year with average temperatures ranging between 70F (20C) - 90F (30C). The coolest and driest period is December to March while summers can get hot. Although rain can occur throughout the year, the wettest months are generally May – June and September – November (also known as hurricane season in the Caribbean).

### **HOW SHOULD I PACK FOR MY VISIT TO CUBA?**

Be prepared for hot weather, with a chance of brief periods of rain. In the winter month, it may cool off in the evenings so bring a light sweater or jacket. As a rule, clothing is generally on the informal side.

The following list contains non-clothing items you may consider bringing:

- Sunscreen/Sunglasses/Sun Hat
- Extra pair of eye glasses
- Mosquito Repellent
- Spanish/English dictionary
- Alarm Clock
- Light rain jacket
- Tissues/Tampons (toilet tissues are sometimes in short supply in public bathrooms)
- Anti-bacterial Gel or Small Soap
- Normal Medications and basic first aid kit items including aspirin and antacids
- Small flashlight
- Camera film/Extra batteries
- Plastic bag for soiled clothes

You can bring gift parcels to Cuba for individuals (except high ranking government or Communist party officials), charitable, religious or educational institutions including informational materials, medical supplies and equipment, clothing, personal hygiene items and consumer goods. You cannot bring in food items. We can coordinate delivery of gift parcels on site.

Furthermore, if you are bringing prescription drugs into Cuba, be sure the pharmaceutical label is on the container and you carry a prescription for emergency refill purposes only (should your container become lost or the contents compromised during your stay).

## **IN WHAT TIME ZONE IS CUBA LOCATED?**

Cuba is in the Eastern Time Zone. Cuba also follows daylight savings time.

## **WHILE IN CUBA**

*Are there things I should know before I leave the U.S. about travel in Cuba?*

## **IS IT SAFE TO DRINK THE WATER?**

It is recommended to drink only bottled water. The most common afflictions to visitors are mild diarrhea and sun-related illnesses. Therefore, it is advisable to keep hydrated by drinking plenty of water, and/or non-caffeinated, non-alcoholic drinks... and don't forget to use sunscreen!

## **IMMUNIZATIONS**

Make sure that you are up to date on routine vaccinations including measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine, diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis vaccine, varicella (chickenpox) vaccine, polio vaccine and yearly flu shot. No special immunizations are required although the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends Typhoid vaccine and Hepatitis A vaccine.

## **HOW DO WE GET AROUND?**

All our Group Transfers between the airports, hotels, and meeting locations are in air conditioned buses or vans. Some travelers may also have a domestic flight or two, depending on your itinerary. Because you have a full-time schedule you will not require additional local transportation while you're there, but taxis and pedi-cabs are easily found should a need arise for an alternative form of transportation.

**Taxis:** Metered tourist taxis are readily available at all of the upscale hotels, with the air-conditioned new European or Asian foreign taxis charging higher tariffs than the non-air-conditioned Soviet built Ladas. The cheapest official taxis are operated by *Panataxi* (55-5555) and cost 1 CUC flag fall, then 0.50 CUC a kilometer. Tourist taxis are metered and charge 1 CUC a kilometer. Almost all hotel receptions will be able to call or book you a taxi relatively quickly.

The cheapest taxis are the older yellow-and-black Ladas, which are state-owned but rented out to private operators. They won't wish to use their meters, as these are set at an unrealistically low rate, but you can bargain over the fare. They're not supposed to pick up passengers within 100m of a tourist hotel.

**Other taxi forms:** Yellow, egg shaped **Coco-taxis** for two people are fun and functional for narrow streets, but can be dangerous. They charge about the same as tourist taxis. Another more romantic travel option is the **horse drawn carriage**. These usually go along fixed routes in popular, city tourist areas.

Two-seater bicycle taxis (**Bici or Ciclo-taxis**) will take you anywhere around Centro/Old Habana for an agreed upon price. It's a lot more than a Cuban would pay, but cheaper and more fun than a tourist taxi. Some Bici-taxis are licensed to carry only Cubans, and drivers may wish to go via a roundabout route through the backstreets to avoid police controls (if the drivers get caught breaking the rules, it's their problem not yours).

**Colectivos:** *Colectivos* or gypsy cabs are old pre-revolution American cars that act as collective taxis for Cubans. They're not supposed to take foreigners but, if you're stuck somewhere out of the way, you can bargain for a ride.

**MONEY:** **In Cuba, we will need to change our currency into the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC).** Although the CUC functions on a near one to one parity with the U.S. dollar, we are penalized with a 10% surcharge on all U.S. dollar currency exchange operations into CUCs, in addition to the exchange commission levied on all currencies. For this reason, many travelers bring in EUROS, Canadian dollars or British pounds to exchange into CUCs.

There is a dual currency system in Cuba with nationals receiving wages in Cuban Pesos called CUPs (roughly 25 CUPs to 1 CUC). Be sure that change received in transactions is in CUCs.

Recent experience showed 87 Cuban Convertible Pesos (CUCs) for \$100 U.S. dollars exchanged. Meals outside of the group meals cost in the range of 20-50 CUCs. Wine (often Spanish or South American) is more readily available. It is generally in the range of 15-30 CUCs per bottle and 3-5 CUC per glass. National drinks of Cuban beer and cocktails with rum are generally 3-5 CUCs (a bit higher at the Floridita and top hotels). Bottles of water are 1-2 CUCs.

A nightclub like the Tropicana will run 100 or more CUCs for a good table, appetizers, bottle of rum for four and a flower or cigar per person.

**CADECAs (money exchanges)** are located throughout the city. Hotels will also exchange money for you, though normally in limited transaction amounts.

**U.S. bank issued credit cards** have been recently cleared for use in Cuba but this transition will be slow. To date, we have not seen or heard of U.S. credit or debit cards

being accepted for payments in Cuba or for use in ATM machines. Travelers' checks drawn on U.S. banks are also generally not accepted in Cuba. Plan ahead to bring sufficient cash to Cuba. There is limited or no access to money if you run low except for personal loans from other travelers.

### **WILL I BE ABLE TO ACCESS THE INTERNET IN CUBA?**

You will be able to purchase internet access at most tourist hotels, either through their Business Center or with a login. Rates vary per property and may also be variable between hourly and daily rates. Please confirm your rate before starting your access, and seek immediate assistance if your connection is bad. This charge is "on own" and not covered by your trip price. Each hotel is different so access may be via a data port or the hotel may offer wireless internet access. WiFi cards for street use in designated areas are now available in parts of the city and some new internet cafes.

### **WHAT ABOUT TIPPING IN CUBA?**

If you're not in the habit of tipping, you'll learn fast in Cuba. Parking guards, ladies at bathroom entrances, restaurant wait staff, tour guides - they're all working for hard-currency tips. Musicians who gather round tourists while they dine want a convertible peso, but only give what you feel the music is worth (the music is almost always good). Washroom attendants expect five or 10 cents (centavos). Taxi drivers will appreciate 10% of the meter fare, but if you've negotiated a ride without the meter, don't tip as the whole fare is going straight into their wallets.

At meals, leave \$1-2 CUC for the wait staff (normally group meal tips will be handled by the trip leader). Room housekeepers/maids should be given \$1 CUC per day. Your Cuban guide should receive \$5-\$10 CUC per person per day or more depending on your satisfaction. Tip our bus driver \$3-\$5 CUC per day. Group tips for the Cuban guide and bus driver will be collected in group envelopes at the end of the trip on the way to the airport.

### **ARE THERE TAXES I SHOULD PLAN FOR?**

There are no direct or specific taxes on goods or services in Cuba. However, some tourist restaurants have savvyed up and begun adding a 10% "service charge" onto their bills. This charge goes directly to the restaurant – not the waiter, so plan to leave a cash tip for your server.

### **ANY NOTES ON ETIQUETTE AND CUSTOMS?**

Cubans are friendly, open, and physically expressive people. They strike up conversations easily and seldom use the formal terms of address in Spanish. However, be

aware that as a foreigner, many Cubans who start a conversation with you are hoping in some way to get some economic gain out of the relationship. *Jineterismo*, or jockeying, is a way of life in Cuba. This may involve anything from offers to take you to a specific restaurant or hotel (for a commission) to direct appeals for money or goods.

**Dress** is generally very informal, in large part due to the tough economic times faced by the broad population. Suits are sometimes worn in business and governmental meetings, although a simple short-sleeved cotton shirt with a tie or a *guayabera*, are more common. The *guayabera* is a loose-fitting shirt with two or four outer pockets on the front and usually a few vertical bands of pleats or embroidery. The *guayabera* is worn untucked, and is quite acceptable at even the most formal of occasions.

### **WHAT DO I DO IF, ON THE VERY REMOTE POSSIBILITY, I HAVE AN EMERGENCY WHILE I'M ALONE?**

Your Committee on Illinois (Cuba Tours 4 U) guide or the Cuban guide traveling with your group is your first contact. They can operate on your behalf. If unavailable, contact the hotel front desk.

For legal emergencies, contact your diplomatic representation. All U.S. citizens can find assistance at the U.S. Embassy. The **U.S. Embassy Office** is a short distance along the coast from the Hotel Nacional at Calzada e/ L y M, Vedado, Havana. Telephone: (53) (7) 839-4100.

### **WHAT IS THE ELECTRICAL VOLTAGE IN CUBA?**

Most of the hotels in Cuba use the 110 volt current with standard U.S. style outlets. If you are staying in a hotel it is estimated that 90% use 110 volt current, however if you are traveling to remote areas or in some of the newer hotels where they 220-volt AC current, you may need to bring a voltage converter and an electric adapter.

### **WILL I BE ABLE TO USE MY CELLPHONE OR PDA IN CUBA?**

Until recently, you were not able to use your U.S. cell phone while in Cuba. This is rapidly changing and several travelers on a December 2016 trip could make and receive calls from the U.S. On my return, I had a bill 4 X normal. Phone info on charges while in Cuba was sketchy, but I thought that I kept calls to a minimum but moreover were the constant Roaming charges, even though I was always trying to connect to a Cuba purchased internet card. Proceed with caution in these initial months of new service.

International mobile phone services can be used. And, there are phone rental services available but arrangements are usually made once in the country.

If you purchase wireless access at your hotel, cell phones and PDA devices can usually be used to connect to the internet. Unfortunately, travelers to Cuba will soon not be able to enjoy being off the computer grid during their trip.

### **WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH MY VALUABLES?**

The properties that we use offer safes either in the room or at the front desk. There may be a daily rate charged to use the safe. This charge is “on own” and not covered by your trip price.

### **HEY, I LIKE THAT... CAN I BRING IT HOME???**

Informational materials such as books, films, original artwork, posters, photographs, tapes and CDs have always been allowed. Per a series of recent changes, you may now bring back home an unlimited amount of Cuban merchandise including cigars and rum for personal use.

### **IS THERE AN AIRPORT DEPARTURE TAX?**

The Cuba Departure Tax is 25 CUCs (Cuban Convertible Pesos) which is roughly \$30 and until recently was collected at the airport on departure. Unless specified, it is now included in your airfare. The Miami Departure tax (for flying into Cuba) is included in your air fare as well.

### **SUGGESTED READING**

Many of the travel books provide good basic information and are useful for trip preparation reading and for reference on site. Other books recommended by travelers include:

*On Becoming Cuban - Identity, Nationality and Culture* by Louis A. Perez, Jr. (The University of North Carolina Press, 1999 and 2008)

*Cuba: What Everyone Needs to Know, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* by Julia Sweig (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)

*Dateline Havana, The Real Story of U.S. Policy and the Future of Cuba* by Reese Erlich, PoliPointPress

*Hemingway in Cuba* by Hilary Hemingway and Carlene Brennen, Rugged Land Press

*Havana Nocturne: How the Mob Owned Cuba and Then Lost it to the Revolution* by T.J. English – a segment of history but one many U.S. citizens are interested in. One of the Cubans we often visit is Enrique Cirules who did the original Cuban research that this book used.