

Shopping ■

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Shopping

If shopping is one of your favorite vacation pastimes, don't make a special trip to Habana. To the relief of many and the disappointment of a few, Western-style consumerism hasn't yet reached the time-warp streets of Cuba's austere capital. That's not to say you have to walk away empty-handed. Cuba's tourist industry has upped the ante considerably in recent years and specialist shops are spreading fast.

The holy grail for most foreign souvenir hunters is a box of Cuban cigars, closely followed by a bottle of Cuban rum, both of which are significantly cheaper than in stores overseas. Another often overlooked bargain is a bag of Cuban coffee, a potent and aromatic brew made from organically grown beans and best served espresso style with a dash of sugar.

Elsewhere memorabilia is thin on the ground. Aimed strictly at the tourist market, there are cheap dolls, flimsy trinkets, mediocre wood carvings and low-quality leather goods, but Cuba is a world leader in none of these things. Far better as long-lasting souvenirs are salsa CDs, arty movie posters, musical instruments or strings of Santería beads.

In the realm of books you'll find plenty of erudite exposés of Che, Fidel and José Martí in a number of different languages plus a plethora of glossy coffee-table books. Look out in particular for cheap books at the famous secondhand book market (p152) in Plaza de Armas.

Painting is another of Cuba's fortes, and local artists are both numerous and talented. If you buy an original painting, print or sculpture, be sure to ask for a receipt to prove you bought it at an official sales outlet; otherwise, it could be confiscated by customs upon departure (see Exporting Artwork, below).

In a country where clothes were – until recently – rationed, and lycra is still considered to be the height of cool, finding the latest pair of Tommy Hilfiger jeans could prove a little difficult. Incurable fashion junkies can spend their convertibles on *guayaberas* (pleated, buttoned men's shirts) or a yawningly predictable Che Guevara T-shirt. Take your pick.

Opening Hours

Cuba is different to other Latin American countries in that there is no afternoon siesta; however, some stores do close for lunch. In general, opening times are 9am to 5pm Monday to Saturday, with some of the more tourist-orientated stores opening on Sunday from 9am to noon.

Consumer Taxes

Most stores list their prices with the tax included. The price you see displayed is thus the price you pay at the till.

Bargaining

Although bargaining is almost nonexistent in shops in Habana, you can try out your haggling skills at open-air markets that sell souvenirs to tourists. If it's your first time in the city, don't expect Moroccan-style deals and discounts; after nearly 50 years of state-sponsored socialism, bartering isn't really part of Cuban culture.

EXPORTING ARTWORK

When buying art at an official outlet, always ask for a receipt to show Cuban customs, especially if the object won't fit in your suitcase.

To discourage private trading of works of art, officials often confiscate undocumented artwork at the airport. If you've purchased a work of art at a state-run gallery and have the receipts, you shouldn't have a problem, but it's always better to have a certificate to export artwork anyway (and you'll definitely need one if you've purchased directly from the artist).

Certificates to export artwork are issued by the **Registro Nacional de Bienes Culturales** (Map pp224-5; Calle 17 No 1009 btwn Calles 10 & 12, Vedado; ☎ 9am-noon Mon-Fri). To obtain an export certificate, you must bring the objects here for inspection, fill in a form, queue for two hours, pay a fee of between CUC\$10 and CUC\$30 (which covers from one to five pieces of artwork), and return 24 hours later to pick up the certificate.

It makes sense not to leave this bit of business until your last day.