

Destination Cuba

Caressed by the warm currents of the Caribbean and lashed by regular destructive hurricanes, Cuba is the ultimate travel contradiction; a dynamic mix of music, history and revolutionary politics that, at times, seems to have had the life sucked out of it by 50 years of austere, unbending socialism. As much as you'll love it (and it's hard not to), there will be occasions when it baffles and frustrates you, raising both your passion and your ire.

To the outside world, life in Cuba has changed little since the 1960s. Castro's isolated island nation remains one of the world's last great Cold War anachronisms, a stubborn contrarian caught in an ideological no-man's-land between an ever-powerful USA on one hand and a long defunct USSR on the other.

But, while gasping 'yank tanks' still splutter unhealthily around the streets of Santiago and Havana, Cuba has been quietly dusting off its communist cobwebs for more than a decade. Aided by a growing medical and pharmaceutical sector and bolstered by a 'new left tide' in Latin American politics, Cuba is no longer the international basket case that it once was.

The first signs of a thaw came in the early 1990s when the post-Cold War economic meltdown forced the Castro administration into making some important free-market concessions. Allowing limited private enterprise and opening up the floodgates to tourism, the Cubans were able to let out their homes to foreigners and mingle freely with visitors from the capitalist West.

Progress was slow at first, but by the mid-2000s subtle signs of the new economic buoyancy were beginning to appear. A veteran of the Special Period returning home today after a 10-year exile would detect a plethora of subtle but important changes. There's a greater choice of consumer goods in the city's shops, the expanding waistlines of the better-off Habaneros and – most noticeably – the traffic: in the late '90s you could have quite conceivably sat down and had your lunch in the middle of Havana's Malecón sea drive; today, it takes a good five minutes to even cross it.

On inheriting the presidency from his brother in February 2008, Raúl Castro initiated a handful of progressive but largely symbolic reforms. In May, the Cuban government passed a law that allowed its citizens access to all tourist hotels (they had previously been barred from all but the cheapest). The same month the Cubans were also legally permitted to own cell phones, buy various electronic goods and own larger tracts of land in private farms.

The Cubans greeted the inauguration of Barack Obama to the White House in January 2009 with guarded optimism. Cautiously they envisaged, if not an immediate end to the embargo, then at least the start of some long-overdue dialogue. But with the country battered by three hurricanes inside two months and bloodied by the global economic downturn, the long-awaited celebrations to mark the 50th anniversary of the Revolution in January 2009 turned out to be muted and low-key.

After half a century of on-off austerity, the Cubans have grown wearily accustomed to false dawns. Placing their hopes in new leaders on both sides of the Straits of Florida, the optimists are hoping that this is not another one.

FAST FACTS

Population: 11.3 million

Area: 110,860 sq km

GNP per capita:
US\$12,700

Life expectancy:
76 (men); 80 (women)

Adult HIV/AIDS
prevalence rate: 0.01%

Ethnicity: 65% white,
24% mixed, 10% black,
1% Chinese

Number of cell phones:
198,000

Total railways: 4226km

First Cuban heart trans-
plant performed: 1985

Ranking on World Press
Freedom Index: 169th

Getting Started

Cuba is a unique country with many distinct characteristics. Travel here not only requires a passport, money and a good sturdy rucksack; 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. A slight loosening of the screws since Raúl Castro took office in February 2008 has allowed Cubans access to cell phones and entry into tourist hotels, meaning interaction with the locals is now simpler and often surprisingly candid.

Legislation under the Bush administration tightened the rules governing travel of US citizens to Cuba, though early signs from the Obama camp suggest many (if not all) of these limitations could soon be lifted. The thaw began in April 2009 when President Obama signed a law permitting unlimited travel to the island for Cuban-American families visiting relatives; they had previously been restricted to one visit every three years. For more information on legal travel to the island check out the Center for Cuban Studies' website at www.cubaupdate.org. For additional advice see the boxed text, p474.

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 – accommodation prices are hiked up by about 20% (see p458). 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 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 (p26) for festivals and other 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 Labor 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 the accommodation front, the vibrant casa particular scene can cut costs by more than half,

See Climate Charts (p462) for more information.

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 about. 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 (p474) 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 such as 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 Havana 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 approximately CUC\$52 to do the journey on a Viazul bus. Rental cars are expensive – bank on CUC\$70 a day for a small Fiat to CUC\$220 a day for a convertible Audi.

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* (Cuban 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 sub-standard hotels that most foreigners wouldn't poke a stick at. Furthermore, Cubans (who earn between 200 and 400 pesos – or CUC\$8 and CUC\$15 – a month) have to survive in an entirely different economy from outsiders; a financial minefield where access to valuable Convertibles is a daily crapshoot between tips, personal guile and who you know.

Since April 2009 Cuban-Americans traveling legally to Cuba in order to visit relatives have faced no financial restrictions (they were limited to spending US\$50 per day under the Bush administration).

HOW MUCH?

Room in a casa particular
CUC\$15-35

Museum entrance
CUC\$1-5

Cross-island train ticket
CUC\$62

Bike rental per day
CUC\$3-5

Internet use per hour
CUC\$6

See also Lonely Planet
index, inside front cover.

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 occasional 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 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 the boxed text, 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 Convertibles is a lot higher). A credit card will provide a good emergency backup and traveler's checks from non-American banks are usually acceptable. Unfortunately, few (if any) foreign debit cards will work in Cuban ATMs. For more information see the Directory, p466.

TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

Cubans are pretty forward-thinking when it comes to the environment. What in the West would be viewed as conscientious eco-practices, are often everyday necessities here (general recycling, public transport, locally grown produce), meaning finding excuses to 'go green' are easy. While hiring a car might make life simpler in some areas, getting a bus or train will lower your footprint and often be more fun. Many of Cuba's newer Chinese-made buses have lower emissions and are far cleaner than the fume-belching monsters of yore.

Staying in *casas particulares* is a great way to taste the local food, and you can be sure that everything your *casa* owner cooks will have been produced or reared locally, probably within a few kilometers of your plate. The resort hotels are a different matter, and the exotic out-of-season fruit and vegetables that you enjoy at your fantastic dinnertime buffet will have undoubtedly been flown in from Europe or North America.

Real eco-resorts are in their infancy in Cuba, the two main exceptions being Hotel Moka (p224) in Las Terrazas and El Saltón (p436) in Santiago de Cuba. Many of the newer places in Cayo Coco and Guardalavaca, however, have been built with respect for the local environment and incorporate some sustainable practices.

Undertaking visits to national parks and Unesco Biosphere Reserves is a great way to learn and understand about Cuba's environmental practices and share the passion of its forward-thinking people. For more details see p33.

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. Christopher Baker provides

TOP PICKS



CUBA ON THE CHEAP

While ostensibly expensive, Cuba's dual economy ensures that cheaper treats are hiding just beneath the radar – and they're usually more sustainable options too. If you're armed with guile, patience and an open-minded sense of adventure, the following only-in-Cuba innovations are yours for the taking. Check out the Directory (p458) for more information.

- **Amarillos** Line up with the transit officials and pay five centavos to travel 50km
- **Casas particulares** Go local, stay in private rooms, and save money
- **Campismos** Go even more local, stay in rural huts, and save even more money
- **Agropecuarios** Buy local at free-enterprise markets and do your own cooking
- **Cadecas** Swap your Convertibles in the change booths and enter the peso economy
- **Peso pizza** It's not Italian but it's got cheese and tomatoes, and it's cheap
- **Quiet towns** No tourists = lower prices; hit Las Tunas, Gibara, Puerto Esperanza...
- **Spanish lessons** *Se habla español* and suddenly the prices start to drop

FAMOUS NON-CUBAN 'CUBANS'

Relocating to Cuba was an important career move for many of history's famous expats. Make a note of the following names and look out for their colorful legacies as you troll your way around the country (and through this book). See also History (p34) and Culture (p53) chapters.

- **Ernest Hemingway** They loved him so much they named a marina after him
- **Graham Greene** Observant Brit who brought the seediness of 1950s Havana to life
- **Winston Churchill** WWII leader who did his apprenticeship as a journalist in Cuba during the 1895–98 Independence War
- **Diego Maradona** History's greatest soccer player was once treated for cocaine addiction in Holguín
- **Che Guevara** The most famous Argentine (and non-Cuban Cuban) on the planet
- **La Rusa** The Russian émigré from Baracoa who gave Fidel US\$25,000 to buy more rifles
- **Meyer Lansky** A Mafia boss who ruled Havana as his personal fiefdom
- **Hatuey** Cuba's first rebel was a Taíno mercenary from Hispaniola with an axe to grind – literally
- **Máximo Gómez** A great Independence War general and native of the Dominican Republic
- **Alexander von Humboldt** The second 'discoverer' of Cuba was an eminent German naturalist

SEMINAL CUBAN MOVIES

They haven't won any Oscars (yet), but cutting-edge cinematic creativity has kept Cuban movies at the forefront of Latin American culture for decades. For more details see p61.

- **Fresa y Chocolate** Robbed of an Oscar in 1995, but who cares – it's still brilliant
- **Memorias de Subdesarrollo** In which Tomás Gutiérrez Alea tests the boundaries of Fidel's censorship police
- **Lucía** Humberto Solás' made-in-Gibara classic that inspired a film festival
- **El Benny** The Barbarian of Rhythm in glorious Technicolor
- **Soy Cuba** The director's choice, this 1964 groundbreaker apparently influenced Scorsese
- **Viva Cuba** Award-winning road movie with kids
- **Una Mujer, Un Hombre, Una Ciudad** Obscure, art-house flick about postrevolutionary life in Nuevitas

a slightly different take on the *período especial* (Special Period; Cuba's new economic reality post-1991) in *Mi Moto Fidel* (2001), a book inspired by a cross-island motorcycling odyssey undertaken during the mid-1990s.

Reminiscent of the uncompromising, in-your-face style of Irvine Welsh or Charles Bukowski, Pedro Juan Gutierrez *Dirty Havana Trilogy* (2000) is a fascinating, if sometimes disturbing insider look at life in Havana during the dark days of the 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.

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 Havana 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) or Tad Szulc's exhaustive *Fidel: A Critical Portrait* (1986). By far the best to date is *My Life: Fidel Castro* (2006), a spoken-word testimony catalogued by Spanish journalist Ignacio Ramonet who spent more than 100 hours interviewing the Cuban leader between 2003 and 2005. It provides a fascinating insight into Castro's life in his own (many) words.

INTERNET RESOURCES

AfroCuba Web (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) One of the best sites for up-to-date Cuba news stories; BBC Cuba correspondent Michael Voss uncovers some classic journalistic gems. Type 'Cuba' into the search engine on the main page to reveal what's on offer.

Boomers Abroad (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) Ostensibly a Canadian website containing information, photos and contact details for *casas particulares*, this colorful website is one of the most comprehensive and consistently accurate sources of Cuba info on the web. There are full versions in English and French.

Granma Internacional (www.granma.cu) Official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party; news from Cuba in five languages.

LonelyPlanet.com (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.

Events Calendar

The Cubans are never shy of holding a fiesta, and through revolution and recession the country's social calendar has always included its fair share of cerebral and celebratory happenings. Indeed, many of Cuba's annual get-togethers are internationally renowned cultural extravaganzas that draw in movers and shakers from around the globe.

JANUARY

DÍA DE LA LIBERACIÓN Jan 1

As well as seeing in the New Year with roast pork and a bottle of rum, Cubans celebrate the triumph of the Revolution, the anniversary of Fidel's 1959 victory (see p43).

FEBRUARY

FERIA INTERNACIONAL DEL LIBRO

First held in 1930, the International Book Fair is headquartered in Havana's Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña (p168), but it later goes on the road to other cities. Highlights include book presentations, special readings and the prestigious Casa de las Américas prize.

MARCH

FIESTA DE LA TORONJA

Famous for its citrus plantations, Isla de la Juventud celebrates the annual grapefruit harvest with this animated excuse for a party in Nueva Gerona (p190) where the *guachi* (grapefruit schnapps) flows freely.

APRIL

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DE CINE POBRE

Gibara's celebration of low- and no-budget cinema (see boxed text, p372) has been an annual event since 2003 when it was inaugurated by Cuban film director Humberto Sales. Events include film-showing workshops and discussions on movie-making with limited resources.

BIENAL INTERNACIONAL DEL HUMOR

You can't be serious! Cuba's unique humor festival takes place in San Antonio de los Baños in out-

of-the-way Havana province. Headquartered at the celebrated Museo del Humor (p182), talented scribblers try to outdo each other by drawing ridiculous caricatures. Hilarious!

MAY

DÍA DE LOS TRABAJADORES May 1

Hundreds of thousands of flag-waving Cubans converge on Havana's Plaza de la Revolución (p119) on Labor Day to witness military parades and listen to impassioned annual 'worker's day' speeches. It's a fantastic spectacle, even if you're lukewarm about the polemics.

ROMERÍAS DE MAYO 1st week of May

This religious festival (p366) takes place in the city of Holguín and culminates with a procession to the top of the city's emblematic Loma de la Cruz, a small shrine atop a 275m hill.

JUNE

JORNADA CUCALAMBEANA late Jun

Cuba's celebration of country music and the witty 10-line *décimas* (stanzas) that go with it takes place about 3km outside unassuming Las Tunas at Motel Cornito (p353), the former home of erstwhile country-music king Juan Fajardo 'El Cucalambé.'

FIESTAS SANJUANERAS last weekend of Jun

This feisty carnival in Trinidad (p303) is a showcase for the local *vaqueros* (cowboys), who gallop with their horses through the narrow cobbled streets.

JULY

DÍA DE LA REBELDÍA NACIONAL

Jul 26

On this day the Cubans 'celebrate' Fidel Castro's failed 1953 attack on Santiago's Moncada Barracks (see boxed text, p416). The event is a national holiday and – in the days when Castro enjoyed better health – the loquacious leader was famous for making five-hour speeches. Expect *un poco* (a little) politics and *mucho* (much) eating, drinking and being merry.

CARNAVAL DE SANTIAGO DE CUBA

end of Jul

Arguably the biggest and most colorful carnival in the Caribbean, the famous Santiago shindig (p421) is a riot of floats, dancers, rum, rumba and more. Come and join in the very *caliente* (hot) action.

AUGUST

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL 'HABANA HIP-HOP'

Organized by the Asociación Hermanos Saiz – a youth arm of Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (Unec; Union of Cuban Writers and Artists) – the annual Havana Hip-Hop Festival is a chance for the island's young musical creators to improvise and swap ideas (see p68).

SEPTEMBER

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DE MÚSICA BENNY MORÉ

The Barbarian of Rhythm is remembered in this biannual celebration of his suave music, headquartered in the singer's small birth town of Santa Isabel de las Lajas in Cienfuegos province (see boxed text, p270).

FIESTA DE NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LA CARIDAD

Sep 8

Religious devotees from around Cuba partake in a pilgrimage to the Basílica de Nuestra Señora del Cobre (p435) near Santiago to honor Cuba's venerated patron saint.

OCTOBER

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DE BALLET DE LA HABANA

Hosted by the Cuban National Ballet (p64), this annual festival brings together dance companies, ballerinas and a mixed audience of foreigners and Cubans for a week of expositions, galas, and classical and contemporary ballet. It has been held in even-numbered years since its inception in 1960.

NOVEMBER

FIESTAS DE LOS BANDAS ROJO Y AZUL

Considered one of the most important manifestations of Cuban *campesino* (country person)

culture, this esoteric fiesta in Ciego de Ávila settlement of Majagua splits the town into two teams (red and blue) who compete against each other in boisterous dancing and music contests (see boxed text, p320).

MARABANA

late Nov

The popular Havana marathon draws between 2000 and 3000 competitors from around the globe. It's a two-lap course though there are also races for half-marathon, 10km and 5km distances.

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DE JAZZ

Intrinsically linked to Cuban jazz maestro, Chucho Valdés (p68), the International Jazz Festival is staged in the Karl Marx, Mella and Amadeo Roldán theaters in Havana, and draws in top figures from around the world for some truly memorable concerts.

DECEMBER

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DEL NUEVO CINE LATINOAMERICANO

The internationally renowned film festival (www.habanafilmfestival.com) held in cinemas across Havana illustrates Cuba's growing influence in Latin American cinema worldwide (see p61).

PROCESIÓN DE SAN LÁZARO

Dec 17

Every year on this day Cubans descend en masse on the venerated Santuario de San Lázaro (p164) in Santiago de las Vegas, on the outskirts of Havana. Some come on bloodied knees, others walk barefoot for kilometers to exorcize evil spirits and pay off debts for miracles granted.

LAS PARRANDAS

Dec 24

A firework frenzy that takes place every Christmas Eve in Remedios (p285) in Villa Clara province, Las Parrandas sees the town divide into two teams who compete against each other to see who can come up with the most colorful floats and the loudest *bangs!*

LAS CHARANGAS DE BEJUCAL

Dec 24

Didn't like Las Parrandas? Then try Las Charangas (p182), Havana province's cacophonous alternative to the firework fever further east. The town splits into the exotically named Espino de Oro (Golden Thorn) and Ceiba de Plata (Silver Ceiba).

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

Cuba has certain rites of passage, cultural must-sees which condense the country's confusing kaleidoscope of varied attractions into one succinct, easy-to-understand whole. This tour reigns in the highlights.

CULTURE CULTURE

Say a big warm *buenos días* to Cuba in **Havana** (p94) with its museums, forts, theaters and rum. Pinar del Río is tobacco country and its scenic highlight is **Viñales** (p210), where farmers grow the stuff with skill and *amor* (love). On most itineraries these days is French-flavored **Cienfuegos** (p262), an architectural monument to 19th-century neoclassicism. A couple of hours down the road is colonial **Trinidad** (p298) with more museums per head than anywhere else in Cuba. **Santa Clara** (p277) is a rite of passage for Che pilgrims but also great for smart private rooms and an upbeat nightlife. Further east, **Camagüey** (p332) is a confusing maze of Catholic churches and giant *tinajones* (clay pots). You can bypass Las Tunas, but you'd be foolish to miss gritty **Holguín** (p361) which is about as *real* as Cuba gets. Laid-back **Bayamo** (p386) is where the Revolution was first ignited, but the cultural nexus of **Santiago de Cuba** (p407) was where it was conceived. Save the best till last with a long but by no means arduous journey over the hills and far away to **Baracoa** (p449) for coconuts, chocolate and other tropical treats.

Two to Three Weeks / Havana to Baracoa



BEACHES Two Weeks to One Month / Playa Santa María to Playa Paraíso

From the capital, colorful **Playa Santa María** (p170) is the most easily accessible beach, an exuberant mélange of makeshift fish barbecues, beach-volleyball tournaments and wandering troubadours. Tracking west it's a toss-up between low-key **Cayo Levisa** (p218) and even lower-key **Cayo Jutias** (p217), so why not throw the dice away and hit both. There's a reason why Varadero boasts more tourists than any other resort in the Caribbean and 20km-long diamond-dust **Playa Varadero** (p236) might well be it. Few beaches adorn Cuba's swampy south coast, making platinum blond **Playa Ancón** (p308) all the more gorgeous. Of the few remaining public beaches on Villa Clara's Cayerías del Norte, **Playa Las Salinas** (p289) is a windswept classic. Guarding the biggest sand dunes on the archipelago, **Playa Pilar** (p329) is the one Cuban beach worthy of a 'world top 10' listing. **Playa Santa Lucía** (p345) competes with Varadero as the island's longest beach (20km plus), but beats it hands down on the diving front. Postcard-perfect **Playa Pesquero** (p373) in Guardalavaca is paradise found for many, with a 933-room, five-star resort to match. White sand? What white sand? Granma's southern coast is more Big Sur than Palm Beach, but the wildness of the setting adds romanticism to an evening walk on the beach at **Marea del Portillo** (p402). It rains at least half the year on **Playa Maguana** (p456), but when the sun breaks out, so do the locals, with their swimming costumes, snorkels and Baracoan sense of fun. If you'd rather leave your swimming costume at home, you'll need to jump on a flight to **Playa Paraíso** (p196) on the tiny island of Cayo Largo del Sur, where Cuba's only nudist colony basks in almost perfect seclusion.

Beaches are the lifeblood of Cuba, providing the country with its innate beauty and its premier source of tourist income. Come and see what all the fuss is all about on this sandy sojourn around some of the archipelago's best-served and most secluded coastal spots.



ROADS LESS TRAVELED

CUBA THROUGH THE BACK DOOR

One Month / Playas del Este to Siboney

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.

Boycott Havana and head east to the beaches of **Playas del Este** (p170), where private houses and picturesque sunsets abound, or leapfrog straight to **Santa Cruz del Norte** (p178), 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** (p217) for a few days of turning off, tuning in and dropping out before pressing on to **Sandino** (p207), within striking distance of María la Gorda. The Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs) area is awash with decent *casas particulares*, none better than those found on shimmering **Playa Larga** (p257), and you can easily work your way along the coast from here to **Rancho Luna** (p271) and **La Boca** (p309), 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** (p343) with its archetypal sugar mills, or bustling **Guáimaro** (p344) with its groundbreaking constitutional history. Turn left in **Las Tunas** (p351) and detour to the remote northern beach 'resort' of **Playa Las Bocas** (p357), where you'll see no one but a handful of ingratiating *casas particulares* owners. Homing in on Holguín province, check out the pretty town of **Banes** (p378) 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** (p429).



THE MUSICAL TOUR

Two Weeks to One Month / Havana to Baracoa

Ease in gently at Havana's **Iglesia de San Francisco de Asís** (p111), 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** (p128), 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 Havana's **Casa de la Música** (p144) 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** (p213). In unsung Matanzas, live rumba performances reverberate in **Plaza de la Vigía** (p230) while, an hour or two further on, in Santa Clara's **Club Mejunje** (p283), 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 **Palenque de los Congos Reales** (p307), while the long journey east to Santiago's spit-and-sawdust **Casa de las Tradiciones** (p426) 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** (p445) 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** (p454) 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

BOOK TOUR

Start off in Havana in the **Hotel Sevilla** (p131), which Graham Green borrowed as a setting in his comedic novel *Our Man in Havana*. Head east next through **Centro Habana** (p114), the seedy, mildewed quarter disturbingly brought to life by 'dirty realist' author Pedro Juan Gutiérrez in *Dirty Havana Trilogy*. Stop at the **Monumento a las Víctimas del Maine** (p121) to recall the historical events chronicled so eloquently by Elmore Leonard in *Cuba Libre*. Don't leave town without first calling in at **Uneac** (p98) and **La Casa de las Américas** (p98), where bookish intellectuals trade tall stories. Take a beach break next on **Cayo Guillermo** (p329), a fishing key to which Hemingway paid homage in *Islands in the Stream*. South and a little east is **Camagüey** (p332), birthplace of Cuban national poet and Uneac founder Nicolás Guillén. Low-key **Gibara** (p370) produced and inspired Guillermo Cabrera Infante, the Cuban Joyce whose *Tres Tristes Tigres* is often called 'the Spanish Ulysses.' **Dos Ríos** (p392) provides one of the most poignant monuments to the ubiquitous José Martí – writer, poet, sage and politician. In Santiago de Cuba you'll find the **Casa Natal de José María de Heredia** (p413), another classy Cuban poet. Close the book in **Baracoa** (p449), the magical town that provided both the characters and backdrop for Alejo Carpentier's classic *La Consagración de la Primavera*.



BIRD-WATCHING CUBA

With your binoculars polished, sally forth into the verdant **Valle de Viñales** (p210) 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** (p207) 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** (p223), where it's possible to spot up to 50% of Cuba's endemic birds, including the often elusive *carpinteros*. The **Gran Parque Natural Montemar** (p256) is a huge protected area encompassing Cuba's largest wetland. Wait around for a few hours (or days) and you might see a *zunzún* – the world's smallest bird. In **Topes de Collantes** (p311) keep an eye out for the bright red, white and blue *tocororo* (Cuba's national bird), then venture into **Cayo Romano** (p347) to get a look at some of the island's more than 30,000 flamingos. **La Hacienda la Belén Reserve** (p344) 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** (p456) for viewings of Cuban Amazon parrots, hook-billed kites and – unlikely but not impossible – ivory-billed woodpeckers last spotted here in the early 1980s.



ISLANDS IN THE ARCHIPELAGO

Hotel-free **Cayo Jutías** (p217) is the highlight of the Archipelago de los Colorados, the necklace of quiet keys that stretches west from Havana. If you need a room for the night, catch the boat to **Cayo Levisa** (p218), its more developed but equally beautiful eastern sibling. Leapfrogging Havana, you'll have to go upmarket on **Cayo Ensenachos** (p290), where a plush new resort has embellished (and privatized) one of Cuba's most stunning beaches. Three keys on the huge Sabana-Camagüey archipelago are linked to the mainland by a massive causeway. **Cayo Guillermo** (p329) plays heavily on its Hemingway connections; **Cayo Coco** (p326), Cuba's fourth-largest island, is replete with large resorts; while uninhabited **Cayo Paredón Grande** (p327) guards a solitary lighthouse, a couple of fine beaches and plenty of fishing possibilities. Heading east on another causeway to **Cayo Romano** (p347), the tourists are replaced by flamingos, mosquitoes and plenty of interesting birdlife. **Cayo Sabiná** (p345) with its lighthouse and old Spanish fort is a favorite of many, while tiny **Cayo Saetía** (p381) has a safari park with exotic African fauna. For real Robinson Crusoe-like isolation you'll need to charter a trip to the **Jardines de la Reina** (p330), a chain of 600 uninhabited keys where the only accommodation is on a floating hotel. It's not particularly Cuban, but tourists love **Cayo Largo del Sur** (p195) for its visiting turtles and Cuba's only nudist beach.



PARKS & RESERVES

On the island's western tip, the **Parque Nacional Península de Guanahacabibes** (p208) is home to crabs, turtles, archaeological sites and not many humans. Further east but also in Pinar del Río province, the karstic, cave-flecked **Parque Nacional Viñales** (p214) is a Unesco World Heritage Site that exhibits the fine art of Cuban tobacco-growing. Pinar's third Unesco site is the **Sierra del Rosario Reserve** (p223), an oft-lauded biosphere and site of the country's most successful environmental reclamation project. Cuba's biggest protected area, the expansive **Grand Parque Natural Montemar** (p256), is also the Caribbean's largest swamp and ideal for bird-watching, fly-fishing and spotting the odd sun-bathing crocodile. **Topes de Collantes** (p311) in the Sierra Escambray is one of the island's most accessible and popular protected parks and has a plethora of waterfalls and junglelike trails. To the north, **Parque Nacional Caguanes** (p314) is a little-visited mix of mangrove and marine park that sits amid the Buenavista Unesco Biosphere Reserve. **Parque Nacional Desembarco del Granma** (p400) is a collection of plunging marine terraces where Fidel Castro mistakenly landed aboard his stricken yacht in 1956. Nearby, Cuba reaches its highest point in the **Gran Parque Nacional Sierra Maestra** (p393), home of 1972m Pico Turquino. **Parque Baconao** (p433) is a strange mix of ruined coffee haciendas, sheltered beaches and surreal stone dinosaurs. Things get clearer in the **Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt** (p456), an almost virgin Caribbean rainforest that registers Cuba's highest levels of endemism.



On the Road



BRENDAN SAINSBURY

This photo, taken by the Lago San Juan in Las Terrazas (p222), belies the hullabaloo of my research. I'd just spent two months gallivanting across Cuba, gate-crashing music venues, trolling around museums, gawping at dive sites and traveling alfresco on antiquated Russian trucks. Las Terrazas was the final chapter, a placid eco-village with nothing to do but sidle up to nature. Boy, did I need it!

MY FAVORITE TRIP

I hit the ground running in Havana (p94) before heading east to the understated and under-appreciated city of Matanzas (p227) for a bit of rousing rumba. Santa Clara's (p277) the next exciting revelation with some excellent *casas particulares*, and a buoyant and youthful nightlife. You can combine beach, mountains and history in Trinidad (p298), while Gibara (p370) is strictly for loners and tour-circuit escapees. Marea del Portillo's (p402) no Varadero, but it's gloriously spectacular, while hot Santiago (p407), with its colorful *folklorico* troupes, is a Cuban rite of passage. Then there's Baracoa (p449) – my all-time favourite – weird, zany, wild and magical, for reasons far too complicated to explain here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brendan is a British freelance writer based in British Columbia, Canada. He first went to Cuba on a whim in 1997 and returned, equally serendipitously, five years later to work as a travel guide. In 2006 he researched and wrote the 4th edition of Lonely Planet's *Cuba* guide with his wife and three-month-old son in tow. The following year he went back to research for Lonely Planet's *Havana* guide. When not in Cuba, Brendan likes to run across deserts, play flamenco guitar and hang out with his three-year-old son, Kieran.



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