

# ON THE ROAD

YOUR COMPLETE DESTINATION GUIDE  
In-depth reviews, detailed listings  
and insider tips



# SURVIVAL GUIDE

VITAL PRACTICAL INFORMATION TO  
HELP YOU HAVE A SMOOTH TRIP

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THIS EDITION WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

**Brendan Sainsbury**  
**Luke Waterson**

# welcome to Cuba



## Mildewed Magnificence

There ought to be a banner in the arrivals hall at Havana airport that reads ‘Abandon preconceptions, all ye who enter here.’ Get ready for shocks, surprises, and eye-opening epiphanies. Twenty-first century Cuba promises to be like nowhere else you’ve ever visited: economically poor, but culturally rich; visibly mildewed, but architecturally magnificent; infuriating, yet at the same time, strangely uplifting. If the country were a book, it would be James Joyce’s *Ulysses*; layered, hard to grasp, serially misunderstood, but – above all – a classic.

Cuba’s intricacies are a result of its history, a troubled saga of external interference

and internal strife that has bred genocide, slavery, invasion, counterinvasion, and popular revolution. Floating halfway between the US to the north and Latin America to the south, the archipelago has long struggled to work out where it fits in. Even its ecology, as German scientist Alexander von Humboldt once observed, is decidedly weird, a kind of ‘Caribbean Galápagos’ where contradictory phenomena coexist.

## A Certain Romance

For half a century Cuba has been infamous for its politics, dominated by the increasingly wrinkled visage of Fidel Castro, who only has to cough for the world media to go on red alert. But the polemics hide deeper

*Cuba is a continuing education. Just when you think you've figured it out, it confounds you with another brow-beating riddle. That essentially is its underlying attraction.*

(left) Classic American car in the streets of Habana Vieja, Havana  
(below) Musicians playing traditional Cuban music in a bar, Havana.



secrets. Most visitors are surprised to arrive in Havana and find, not some grey communist dystopia, but a wildly exuberant place where the taxi drivers quote Hemingway and even hardened cynics are ensnared by the intrigue and romance.

Cuba's romance isn't of the candlelit, dinner-for-two variety. Here, in a country of few material possessions, life can be raw, in your face, and rough around the edges. But, the austerity is only half the story. Cuba is crammed with innumerable impossible-to-buy riches. Ponder the Latin Lotharios holding court on Havana's Malecón, the ingenious DIY-merchants fine-tuning their hybridized Russian-American cars, or the old ladies in rollers conjuring culinary miracles out of nothing.

## The Spirit of Survival

That Cuba has survived is a miracle in itself. That it can still enthrall travelers from around the globe with its beaches, bays, mountains, rum, music, and impossibly verdant landscapes is an even greater achievement. The key lies in the Cubans themselves: survivors and improvisers, poets and dreamers, cynics and sages. Defying all logic, it is the people who have kept the country alive as the infrastructure has crumbled; and it is they also who have ensured that Cuba continues to be the fascinating, perplexing, paradoxical nation it is. Such uniqueness is a vanishing commodity in an increasingly globalized world. Grab it while it's still there.



# Top Experiences >



**Varadero**  
Relax in a beach resort  
(p205)

**Santa Clara**  
Cuba's edgiest city  
(p249)

**Cayo Guillermo**  
The definitive island in the  
stream (p307)

**Baracoa**  
The best food outside  
Havana (p434)

**Camagüey**  
A labyrinth of narrow streets  
(p310)

**Pico Turquino**  
Climb the nation's highest  
peak (p376)

**Santiago de Cuba**  
The cradle of Cuban  
dance culture (p387)

**NASSAU**  
New Providence

Eleuthera

Andros Island

**THE BAHAMAS**

Cat Island

San Salvador

Great Exuma

Long Island

Tropic of Cancer

Great Bahama Bank

Crooked Island

Acklins Island

Caibarien

Máximo Gómez

**Sancti Spiritus**

Morón

Laguna de la Leche

Esmeralda

**Ciego de Ávila**

El Jibaro

Embalse Pórvénir

Cayo Sabinal

San Miguel de Baga

**Camagüey**

Carretera Central

Bahía de Gibara

Gibara

Guardalavaca

**Las Tunas**

**Holguín**

Moa

**Baracoa**

Archipiélago de los Jardines de la Reina

Santa Cruz del Sur

Guayabál

Golfo de Guacanayabo

**Manzanillo**

**Santiago de Cuba**

**Guantánamo**

Cabo Cruz

Parque Nacional Desembarco del Granma

Pico Turquino (1972m)

Baconao

**HAITI**

**JAMAICA**

**KINGSTON**

79°W

78°W

77°W

76°W

75°W

25°N

24°N

23°N

22°N

21°N

19°N

18°N

79°W

76°W

75°W

# itineraries

*Whether you've got six days or 60, these itineraries provide a starting point for the trip of a lifetime. Want more inspiration? Head online to [lonelyplanet.com/thorntree](http://lonelyplanet.com/thorntree) to chat with other travelers.*



## Two Weeks The Classic

Fall in love with classic Cuba in **Havana**, with its museums, forts, theaters and rum. Head southeast next, via the **Bay of Pigs**, to French-flavored **Cienfuegos**, an architectural monument to 19th-century neoclassicism. After a night of Gallic style, travel a couple of hours down the road to colonial **Trinidad**, with its cache of easily reachable beaches and more museums per head than anywhere else in Cuba. **Santa Clara** is a rite of passage for Che pilgrims but also great for smart private rooms and an upbeat nightlife. Further east, **Camagüey** lures you with its maze of Catholic churches and giant *tinajones* (clay pots). Skip over Las Tunas, and hightail it to gritty **Holguín** for a slice of workaday Cuba. Laid-back **Bayamo** is where the Revolution was ignited, but allow plenty of time for the cultural nexus of **Santiago de Cuba**, where the seditious plans were first hatched. Save the best till last with a long but by no means arduous journey over the hills and far away to **Baracoa** for coconuts, chocolate and other tropical treats.


## STRAITS OF FLORIDA

 The All-Encompassing  
 Escape from Varadero




## Four Days

## Escape from Varadero

 **Varadero** has some cheap packages and is a popular gateway into Cuba, but once you've had your fill of the beach, what else is there to do? Here's a thought. Take your transport west to **Havana**, stopping off for lunch in **Matanzas**, where Cuban reality will hit you like a sharp slap on the face. Book a night in a fine colonial hotel in Habana Vieja and spend the next day admiring the copious sights of the old quarter. The next day, head west to **Las Terrazas**, an eco-resort that seems a million miles from the clamorous capital (it's actually only 55km). Going back east, keep on the green theme in **Guamá**, a reconstructed Taíno village and crocodile farm, before procuring accommodation in **Playa Larga**, where you can either dive or plan forays into the **Ciénaga de Zapata**. A couple of hours east lies the city of **Cienfuegos**, an elegant stop-over whatever the season. A more secretive Cuba can be found in **Colón**, back in Matanzas province, and a dustier, time-warped one in half-ruined **San Miguel de los Baños**, an erstwhile spa. Last stop before returning to your Varadero sun-lounger is **Cárdenas**, home to three superb museums.

## One Month

## The All-Encompassing

 Cuba might not look that big, but you could easily lose a month exploring its nooks and crannies. With time on your hands, linger a few days in **Havana** before heading west to **Viñales**, where enthusiastic naturalists and hard-working tobacco farmers live in verdant harmony. Swing back east next, avoiding Havana and heading straight for the French-themed city of **Cienfuegos**. From here you can press on to **Trinidad** for three days of colonial splendor. Schedule one night in understated **Sancti Spiritus**, and linger at least 48 hours in **Santa Clara** before diverting to **Morón**, where you can plan sorties on **Cayo Coco**. **Camagüey** is on everyone's schedule – pencil in two nights – but **Las Tunas** attracts only the time-rich (that's you). Stop for a day to admire the sculptures. Devote three days to Holguín province, where you can visit beguiling **Gibara** and enjoy pine-scented air in the **Pinar del Mayarí**. Stop off for a night in **Bayamo** on your way to **Santiago de Cuba**, which you can use for a base for excursions to **El Cobre**, **Chivirico** and **Parque Baconao**. Reserve three days at the end to make the obligatory pilgrimage to **Baracoa**.



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VERONICA GARBUTT / LONELY PLANET IMAGES ©

- » (above) Arco de Triunfo, Parque José Martí, Cienfuegos (p234)
- » (left) White-sand beach, Varadero (p205).



## 10 Days Around the Oriente

The Oriente is a different country; they do things differently there, or so they'll tell you in Havana. This circuit allows you to bypass the Cuban capital and make your base in **Santiago de Cuba**, city of revolutionaries, culture and *folklórico* dance troupes. Regular buses travel east into the mountains of Guantánamo province. Pass a night in **Guantánamo** to suss out the *changüü* music before climbing the spectacular 'Farola road' into **Baracoa**, where three days will bag you the highlights. Heading north via Moa is a tough jaunt, with taxis or rental cars required to get you to **Cayo Saetia**, a wonderful key where lonesome beaches embellish a former hunting reserve. **Pinares de Mayarí** sits in the pine-clad mountains of the Sierra Crystal amid huge waterfalls and rare flora. Take an urban break in hassle-free **Bayamo**, before tackling **Manzanillo**, where Saturday nights in the main square can get feisty. More adventurous transport options will lead you down to Niquero and within striking distance of the largely deserted **Parque Nacional Desembarco del Granma**. Spend a couple of nights in **Marea del Portillo** before attempting the spectacular but potholed road back to Santiago.

## Two Weeks Central Cuba Circuit

Focusing on central Cuba allows you to visit places that many itineraries leave out due to lack of time and/or information. Make a base in **Trinidad**, colonial city extraordinaire, and branch out to the historical and equally beguiling **Valle de los Ingenios**. Make for the Sierra del Escambray next, where the muddy trails and clear pools of **Topes de Collantes** justify at least a two-night stopover. A rough road continues on to **Lago de Hanabanilla**, where you can hike some more or net a largemouth bass. **Santa Clara** reintroduces you to urbanity with its museums and nightlife, and there's more of the same in **Remedios**, if on a smaller scale. The quiet northeastern route enables pit stops in **Yaguajay**, with its interesting Museo Camilo Cienfuegos, and **Florencia**, where a peaceful reservoir invites bucolic contemplation. After a day or two in **Morón**, get back on the Carretera Central and hit **Camagüey**, Cuba's third city and a cornucopia of unique architecture. Thirty kilometers to the southeast is the **Hacienda la Belén**, a nature reserve renowned for its birdlife, which makes for an excellent side trip. Finish off in **Holguín** and enjoy a couple of days' beach time in nearby **Guardalavaca**.



### One Week

## A Week in the West

West of **Havana**, green Pinar del Río often gets neglected by travelers taking the classic route east. You can rectify this by heading to **Las Terrazas**, Cuba's most successful environmental project that created a Unesco Biosphere Reserve out of a near ecological disaster. Nearby, **Soroa** is famed for its orchids and waterfalls and can be explored from the same base. Track further west on day two past faded 'spa,' **San Diego de los Baños**, toward **Parque La Güira**, where you can spot birds in between visiting the cave where Che Guevara pitched camp during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The town of **Pinar del Río** deserves a lunch stop, but the real beauty lies 25km to the north in the unique landscape of **Viñales**, prime tobacco-growing country and one of the most instantly picturesque places in the Caribbean. Tour operators in Viñales offer some enticing excursions north to uninhabited **Cayo Jutías** and equally sublime **Cayo Levisa**, both adorned with pristine beaches. If time allows, schedule a visit to Cuba's remote western tip, renowned for its world-class diving and ecologically well-stocked **Parque Nacional Península de Guanahacabibes** before heading back to Havana.

### Two Weeks

## The Northern Route

For Cuba veterans who've already done the 'classic' tour – or adventurers keen to keep off the tourist trail – try this alternative trek east via a little-used northern route (bike or car required). After soaking up the obvious draws of **Havana**, follow the rising sun to **Matanzas**, a gritty city with an interesting culture and the resort-phobe's antidote to Varadero. From here, a web of narrow, potholed roads lure you east, via the isolated spa of **Baños de Elguea**, to the architectural dreamscape of **Remedios**, with its quiet charm and noisy festivals. Further east, **San José del Lago** is another spa, visited primarily by Cubans, close to little-explored forests where Castro's guerrillas once roamed. **Morón** is a good place to relax for a day or two, with fishing lakes and the beaches of Cayo Coco nearby. Camagüey province's northern coast is semideserted until you arrive in **Nuevitas**, an understated industrial town close to the beach. **Puerto Padre** is a salt-of-the-earth Cuban town loved by purists, while **Gibara** is a wonderfully weathered seaside settlement with *mucho* magic. Finish your sojourn in **Holguín**, city of bar crawls, a bolshie baseball team and plenty of other surprises.



**Look out for these icons:**



Our author's recommendation



A green or sustainable option



No payment required

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## OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that's all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*. Within a week they'd sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Melbourne, London and Oakland, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony's belief that 'a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse'.

## OUR WRITERS



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Brendan is a British freelance writer who lives in British Columbia, Canada. He first visited Cuba in the 1990s and returned in 2002, after a spell as a teacher in Angola, to work as a travel guide leading cultural and cycling trips around the country. He researched and wrote his first Lonely Planet Cuba guide in 2006, with his 3-month-old son in tow. Since then he has produced three more Cuba guides, written countless Cuba-related newspaper articles, given presentations and been interviewed by everyone from Rick Steves to USA Today. When not writing and researching, Brendan likes to relax by running unaided across deserts, playing flamenco guitar and teaching his son to cross-country ski. He has also contributed to Lonely Planet guides to Spain, Italy, Canada and the USA.

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Cruising the countryside in wheezing Cadillacs and Plymouths, smoking several dozen cigars, experiencing two drag shows, sinking a myriad mojitos and learning some (tentative) salsa moves while researching this edition helped Luke fall in love with Cuba all over again. He was first smitten with the country back in 2004, on a backpacking trip that coincided with the withdrawal of the dollar from circulation by Castro. Highlights since then have included bathing in a waterfall on a restricted military zone and seeing sea turtles nest. Travel-wise, Luke's passions are Latin America,

Eastern Europe and Britain – yes, Britain: musings on his journeys to these places, and advice on what and what not to do in them, can be found at [www.lukewaterson.co.uk](http://www.lukewaterson.co.uk).

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### Published by Lonely Planet Publications Pty Ltd

ABN 36 005 607 983

6th edition – Oct 2011

ISBN 978 1 74179 802 9

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Printed in China

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