

CUBA

Cuba is the Caribbean's largest island and one of the world's last bastions of communism. Its relative political isolation has prevented it from being overrun by tourists, and locals are sincerely friendly to those who do venture in. Despite the formality of the colonial architecture, Cuba is pretty relaxed, even in the larger towns. The most frenetic it gets is in the middle of an enthusiastic chachachá, and the loudest it gets is behind one of the huge finned American cars chugging the streets. If you want it even quieter, Cuba's backcountry and beaches are perfect destinations for hikers, swimmers, cyclists, spelunkers or those who just want to smoke a fine cigar under a palm tree.

Electricity: 110V/230V, 60Hz

Time Zone: GMT - 5, April to Sept is Daylight Saving time GMT/UTC -4

Dialling Code: 53

Festival Calendar

January 1st - Liberation Day - Commemorates Cuba's liberation from the Batista dictatorship.

January 28th - Birthday of Jose Marti, Cuba's most notable author and journalist, who has become a national hero.

1st 2 weeks in February - Havana's Jazz Festival

July 25th – 27th - Celebration of the National Rebellion - Honours the attack on army barracks in Santiago de Cuba and Bayamo. Most Cubans take this holiday quite seriously, so many things shut down

Last 2 weeks of July and 1st week of August - Carnival marking the end of the sugar harvest - celebrated throughout the country with dancing and parades

Late August to early September - Havana's International Theater Festival

October 10th - Day of Cuban Culture - Marks the first day of the War of Independence - celebrated throughout the country with many musical events.

Late October - Havana's International Ballet Festival

Christmas - Unlike any of the other countries we visit, Cuba does not celebrate Christmas and hasn't recognized it as a public holiday since 1969 when it was feared that celebrations would disrupt the sugar harvest and cause economic problems.

Currency

Credit cards are very useful for cash advances, Visa being the most widely accepted. As of November 8, 2004 the US Dollar is no longer used as official currency. The Convertible Peso (Cuban Dollar) is at a 1:1 rate (equal) with the dollar, and can be acquired at any change house with no problems, except when trying to change US Dollars, to which a 10% fee will be applied for every cash transaction. This means that if you want to change \$100 USD, you will get 90 Cuban Convertible Pesos. Other currencies can be changed at no extra fee. Please note that this applies only to US Dollar cash transactions. People travelling in Cuba with US Dollar credit cards can still use them for cash advances.

Credit cards, travellers' cheques, issued in the US, and Eurocheques are not accepted anywhere in Cuba. Visa travellers' cheques issued in USD are not a problem, neither are Visa and MasterCard credit cards.

There is generally a small commission of 2 to 3% charged for the use of either credit cards or travellers' cheques. Banks and exchange houses are open from 8:30am to noon and from 1:30pm to 3pm during weekdays, and from 8am to 10am on Saturdays. Hotels will generally change money at any time.

Visas

At present, a visa for stays of no longer than 4 weeks is not required. A tourist card is, however, required and can be purchased along with your airline ticket or at Havana's international airport for about \$25 convertible pesos. Citizens of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Yugoslavia do not require a tourist card. Please verify current requirements prior to departure.

Health

Hepatitis

Several different viruses cause hepatitis and they differ in the way that they are transmitted. The symptoms in all forms of the illness include fever, chills, headache, fatigue, feelings of weakness and aches and pains, followed by loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, light-coloured faeces, jaundiced (yellow) skin and yellowing of the whites of the eyes. Hepatitis A is transmitted by contaminated food and drinking water. Seek medical advice, but there is not much you can do apart from resting, drinking lots of fluids, eating lightly and avoiding fatty foods. Hepatitis E is

transmitted in the same way as hepatitis A; it can be particularly serious in pregnant women. Hepatitis B is spread through contact with infected blood, blood products or body fluids, for example through sexual contact, unsterilised needles (and shaving equipment) and blood transfusions, or contact with blood via small breaks in the skin. The symptoms of hepatitis B may be more severe than type A and the disease can lead to long-term problems such as chronic liver damage, liver cancer or a long-term carrier state. Hepatitis C and D are spread in the same way as hepatitis B and can also lead to long-term complications. There are vaccines against hepatitis A and B, but there are currently no vaccines against the other types. Following the basic rules about food and water (hepatitis A and E) and avoiding risk situations (hepatitis B, C and D) are important preventative measures. Hepatitis A is a common problem among travellers drinking tap water in areas with poor sanitation.

Best time to go

Cuba's climate is considered subtropical, and due to its long tapered shape, few places are far from the Northeast trade winds that blow from the coastal regions, giving Cuba pleasant temperatures year round. The dry season runs from November to April and the wet season from May to October. Even in the rainy season, downpours are short and heavy and should not hinder travel plans. The only problematic months are September and October, when hurricanes can pummel the Northwest coast, but generally leave the eastern seaboard unscathed. Cuba has had its share of these tropical storms over the past few years.

Upon arrival

Once you've reclaimed your baggage and cleared customs, you will be warmly welcomed to Cuba, assisted with your luggage and taken you to your hotel by private air-conditioned minivan/bus. Please do not leave the airport terminal building unless you have made contact with Amazing Peru staff. Also ignore the calls from taxi drivers as your private transport has been provided for you

Food and drink

Drink only bottled water. Pasteurised milk is widely available. Avoid dairy products that are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Avoid street food vendors and the cheaper restaurants.

What to eat

To try some typical foods, here is a selection of what we recommend.

Ajicaco - A typical meat, garlic and vegetable stew
Fritura de maíz - Corn fritters
Natilla - Vanilla pudding
Flan - A small Spanish caramel pudding
Tachinos or tostones - Fried green plantain chips
Plátano frito - Fried ripe banana

What to drink

Guarapo - Made from the juice pressed from whole stalks of sugar cane
Pru - Found in the west, and is a non-alcoholic concoction made from various root vegetables and herbs left to ferment,
Rum - The favourite hometown brand is Havana Club, made in a variety of different types
Cuba libre – You must try it in its country of origin
Mojito - Another national favourite and Ernest Hemingway's drink of choice, made with rum, lemon juice, sugar, soda and mint leaves
Aguardiente - The local firewater made from cane sugar
Local beers - Mayabe and Hatuey are the best

Highlights

HAVANA

Havana is the largest city in the Caribbean and offers a wealth of activities. Arriving early for your A visit to Havana is almost like stepping into a time machine and journeying back to the 1950s. Old American automobiles from that period crowd the streets and little modernization has altered the Spanish architecture. It's little wonder why Ernest Hemmingway fell in love with this capital and called it home for more than 20 years.

Old Havana

Walking Tour - Old Havana is the cultural centre of the city.

Plaza de la Catedral - Around this plaza you will see several famous buildings. First among these is the Catedral de San Cristobal de La Habana which was built around 1748 by Jesuits. Next is Centro Wilfredo Lam, which is home to Cuba's leading modern painters. Palacio del Marques de Arcos is Cuba's old post office, and Museo de Arte Colonial displays decorative arts and furniture. Finally, at the Taller Experimental de Grafica you can see original prints being made, except for Mondays and Fridays when the entire plaza becomes an open-air market.

Plaza de Armas - the centre of power in Cuba is found one block south of the Plaza de la Catedral on San Ignacio where an excellent book market takes shape on weekends. Around the Plaza de Armas you can visit the Palacio de los Capitanes Generales (west side) which is probably the most impressive building in Cuba, and dates back to 1776.

On the northeast side, the Castillo Real de las Fuerza, built in 1558, is the oldest colonial fortress in the Americas, and is home to the Museo de las Ceramica Artistica Cubana.

Just off the Plaza de Armas is the Museo del Automovil which displays classic automobiles.

Museo de la Revolucion - sits opposite the Corona Cigar factory at Refugio No 1 and depicts an accurate account of the Cuban revolution. In front of the building, you can see a SAU-100 tank used by Castro during the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion.

La Bodeguita del Medio - at Empedrado No. 207, this bar is a must visit. It was the favourite haunt of Ernest Hemingway. Other notables have visited such as Castro and Salvador Allende to name but a few, and many have left their autographs on the walls.

Casa de la Obra Pia at Obrapia No 158 - An example of 17th century aristocratic life

Museo - Casa Natal de Jose Marti - on Leonor Perez No. 314, this is the birthplace of Jose Marti, Cuban hero of independence. You can see photos, books, manuscripts and other mementos of his life

Iglesia Paroquial del Espiritu Santo - At the corner of Cuba and Acosta is Havana's oldest surviving church.

Museo Nacional de la Musica - At Capdevila No. 1, this museum houses a collection of Cuban instruments. You can purchase recordings of Cuban music at the gift shop

Central Havana

Parque de la Fraternidad - this park was created back in 1892 when it became a Spanish military parade ground. Around it, you will find the Real Fabrica de Tabacos Partagas at Industria No. 520, Havana's oldest cigar factory. When in Havana, you must take a cigar tour. Also see the Capitolio Nacional, Cuba's answer to the White House, and the Gran Teatro de La Habana which is the oldest operating theatre in the Western Hemisphere

Parque Central - This has become the meeting point between old and new Havana. At its centre is a marble monument to Jose Marti. Be sure to visit one of Havana's most elegant hotels bordering the park, the Inglaterra. Many foreign dignitaries and visiting movie stars have spent time here

Hotel Sevilla - One block north of the Paseo de Marti, this is another notable hotel where Cuba's own Mary Pickford cocktail was invented. It is composed of rum, pineapple juice and grenadine

Plaza de la Revolucion - This enormous square has come to symbolize the Cuban Revolution, due to the massive political rallies held here in the 1960's, and Fidel Castro still sometimes delivers speeches to hundreds of thousands of spectators. There is a large statue and memorial to Jose Marti, an early revolutionary hero, as well as a building size reproduction of the face of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, overlooking the square.

Vedado

Hotel Nacional at Calles 21 and O - A colonial hotel that played a significant part in US-Cuban history. This hotel is definitely worth a visit.

Plaza Ignacio Agramonte - The University square where you can visit the Museo de Ciencias Naturales, Cuba's oldest museum and Museo Antropologico Montane, which displays pre-Colombian Indian artifacts.

Cristóbal Colón - Cuba's most important cemetery. While you may think that a cemetery is the last place you want to visit on a holiday, it is a significant part of Cuban history. Many pivotal moments in the country's history took place between these tombs.

Malecón - Also called the Avenida de Antonio Maceo - Was constructed in 1902 after Cuban Independence, and follows the oceanfront. Many monuments and upscale hotels line the Malecón, so it's definitely worth a stroll.

Outside of Havana

Marina Hemingway - at Avenida 5 and Calle 248, offers scuba diving and deep-sea fishing
La Tropicana - probably the most famous of cabarets in all of Cuba, La Tropicana is located on Calle 72 No. 4504 at Avenida 43 in Marianao (closed Mondays). Admission including one drink is about 55USD depending on your table, but it is well worth it. You should book in advance (tel 33-0110) to ensure seating.

Varadero – Along the Via Blanca, 140km east of Havana is Varadero, easily one of the most popular beach destinations for mainstream tourists hailing from North America and Europe. The beaches of Varadero are some of the most beautiful in the world and so if you are so inclined, it is worth a visit, especially since there are no good beaches in Havana. To get there you can either take the bus at the Terminal de Omnibus Interprovinciales at Avenida de la Independencia and Calle 19 de Mayo (near Plaza de la Revolucion), or rent a car. It is difficult to find inexpensive one-night accommodations in Varadero, particularly on the beach, so keep that in mind should you decide to stay.

Baracoa

Laid-back Baracoa, with its palm tree-lined coast, sits on a headland between two picturesque bays near Cuba's easternmost point of Cabo Maisí. Founded in 1512 by Diego Velázquez, this is Cuba's oldest European settlement. Baracoa, accessible only by sea up until the 1960s, was an important Spanish outpost, as evidenced by the three impressive forts: Fuerte Matachín, now housing the *museo municipal*; Fuerte de la Punta, now refitted with a restaurant; and El Castillo de Seboruco, now a pleasant hotel.

Pinar del Río Province

Naturalists will love this westernmost part of the country. It boasts two UNESCO biosphere reserves protecting some of the country's loveliest landscapes, including parts of the 175m-long (574ft) Cordillera de Guaniguanico, which is something of a hiker's paradise. The province is famous for its surreal and beautiful limestone pincushion hills. The area is riddled with caves carved by underground rivers, some of which make for great diving. If you'd rather scuba through saltwater, María la Gorda boasts some of the finest underwater scenery in the Caribbean.

Santiago de Cuba

Santiago de Cuba, the second largest city in Cuba, is Havana's rival when it comes to literature, music and politics, and is regarded as the 'cradle of the revolution' because of the pivotal role it played in overthrowing the Batista regime. The city overlooks the Bahía de Santiago de Cuba and, unlike other Cuban towns, has a distinct Caribbean flavour due to the influence of French planters and Haitians who settled in the 19th century. The city's character is also due to its isolation from Havana, and its history is just as colourful.

Trinidad

Trinidad was founded in 1514, but remained a backwater haven for smugglers until the late 18th century. This changed in the early 19th century when a slave revolt in Haiti caused French planters to flee to Trinidad, where they re-established their mini-empires. Trinidad boomed until the Wars of Independence devastated the region's sugar plantations and the town again fell into obscurity. The legacy of this short-lived sugar-boom wealth can be seen in the town's baroque church towers, Carrara marble floors, wrought-iron grills and run-down mansions.

Bayamo

Bayamo is the capital of Granma Province, the country's southernmost point. Rarely visited, the area boasts many historic places of interest, including the site where José Martí was shot, and one of Cuba's greatest national parks, Gran Parque Nacional Sierra Maestra, to the south of Bayamo Township. This area was important in the Cuban struggle for freedom: Castro and 81 rebels landed here aboard the *Granma* (hence the province's name) in 1956, and the first War of Independence was launched here in October 1868 when a Creole planter freed his slaves, formed a militia and overran the region.

Isla de la Juventud

Although 350 islands make up the Archipiélago de los Canarreos, Isla de la Juventud is by far the biggest one. Most of it is pretty flat but it does have the Ciénaga de Lanier, Cuba's second-largest swamp. This region is administered from the island's capital, Nueva Gerona. Isla de la Juventud is the least populated region of Cuba, with most people living in the north of the island. Once known as Parrot Island, it was a

hideout for pirates like Francis Drake, John Hawkins, Thomas Baskerville and Henry Morgan, and it inspired Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.

Hotels

All the hotels we recommend are clean, well located and comfortable hotels varying in services according to their category. We rarely use hostels as the price difference is negligible between a good hostel and a hotel. In places like the national reserves areas we do work with some very good lodges. Cuba boasts an excellent range of hotels from three star hotels to 5* Deluxe hotels, so you are able to choose the best hotels in line with your budget. We will always quote you with good hotels on all our programmes but upgrades or downgrades will be available as per your request. However, as the price will decrease with downgrades, this will ultimately reflect in the services and standards of the hotel.

Flights

Unless otherwise stated, we provide all internal flights in your programme, excluding the airport taxes. We also provide international flights around Central and South America and the Caribbean and can quote, upon request, your international flight to Cuba. We work directly with the best airlines in Central and South America and the Caribbean but are not responsible for any changes in flight schedules or cancellations made by the airlines. This is the responsibility of the airline in question. We will always endeavour to minimise any delays or changes but cannot guarantee a successful outcome.

Insurance

It is a mandatory requirement that all our customers take out adequate travel insurance cover. Once you have obtained your insurance, it is company practice to check the validity and cover of your insurance policy and we hold the right to refuse travel to anyone whose insurance does not satisfy Amazing Peru's stringent criteria. These include cancellation and curtailment, death or injury, medical insurance, emergency repatriation, delayed baggage, loss and theft etc.