

Traveling to Cuba What You Should Know

WEATHER: Tropical. It is hot all year round and two kinds of seasons prevail: humid from May to the first half of November and dry from the second half of November to April. During the warmer season and frequently from August to October, it is possible the occurrence of cyclones which sometimes get stronger and become hurricanes of great intensity. Even though living a similar experience with that kind of phenomenon can result pretty “tiresome”, Cuba is a well-prepared country to face it. On the other hand, during the dry season it is possible to meet “cold fronts” which are disruptions in weather that carry fresh air coming from the North. They are not intense at all; it is just that those days temperatures would not be appropriate to swim in the beach.

GOVERNMENT: Republic with socialist character.

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE: Spanish with the typical Cuban variant. English and other languages are also spoken in touristic resorts.

RELIGION: Though tourist guide report a high percent of Catholics, in Cuba the great majority of the population believes in Santeria rituals (an Afro-Cuban religion)

DOCUMENTS REQUIRED: Valid and updated passport along with a tourist visa that can be acquired in travel agencies, on an airline or in the Cuban embassy of the country you live in. With a tourist visa you can stay in Cuba for 30 days though it is possible to renew it for other 30 days through Cuban migratory authorities (call 206 2254 in Havana for more information). Once you reach the 60 days you must leave the country.

ELECTRIC CURRENT: 110/120 volts with American-model plug (adaptors are available in Cuban stores). It is possible to find 220 volts electricity with European-model plug in some houses to rent and hotels.

VACCINATION: is not necessary. It is recommendable to bring some medicine with you in case you need it (Ex. antidiarrhea, antibiotics, antipyretic, etc.). Drugstores in Cuba do not provide some medicine that you commonly find in the rest of the world. There are also international drugstores (Cira García Hospital, Habana Libre Hotel’s, Sevilla Hotel’s drugstore, etc.) that generally offer a great variety of medicine, but prices are quite high.

COMMUNICATIONS: For telephone communication it is possible to call Cuba from another country by dialing 0053 followed by the code of the city you would like to phone (Ex. 7 for Havana) and then the number of the person you are calling. But, to call to a Cuban cell phone it is necessary to dial 00535 followed by the person’s number. You can make international calls from Cuba in ETECSA (Cuban telephone system operator) cabins which are all over the city.

Regarding cell phones, GSM network covers a pretty broad area. CUBACEL is the agent of Cuban network for cell phones. It rents a rechargeable SIM for 3 CUC every day. International calls rate vary depending on the place you would like to phone, but they are never greater than 1,2 CUC per minute. It is also possible to send faxes in the service centers of the best hotels of the country. It is not possible to access Internet from the houses but it is available in hotels and ETECSA designed places for this (Ex. Obispo Street)

CURRENCY EXCHANGE: Since November 8th, 2004, USA dollar is not accepted in Cuban territory transactions. Since then two currencies are used in Cuba: Cuban peso or MN (National Money) and Cuban convertible peso or CUC. Generally, tourists use CUC that can be acquired when arriving at the airport foreign exchange outlet (CADECA). Besides, it can also be acquired in the following banks: BFI (Banco Financiero Internacional), BANDEC (Banco de Crédito y Comercio) and Banco Metropolitano. CADECA's outlets (currency exchange) can be found all over the national territory. They exchange currencies (Ex. US dollar-CUC or vice versa). The acquisition of Cuban convertible peso CUC can be done with a credit card (VISA or MASTERCARD) in the banks previously mentioned. These cards are also accepted in the best commercial centers and, in the case of VISA, it is also accepted in banks' ATM. A commission is debited to your account with every drawing made.

Exchanging American dollars for CUC implies to be penalized for the application of high commissions. American Express and Diner's are not accepted in Cuban territory. It is not either possible to draw money from ATM cards. In case you lose your credit card or it is stolen, you should go to the proper office which is located at calle 23, e/ L and M, La Rampa, Vedado, right in the ground floor of Habana Libre Hotel.

HYGIENIC AND SANITARY RECOMMENDATIONS: Avoid drinking water from the tap. Even though it contains abundant chlorine, it can be contaminated with bacteria and/or parasites. Make sure to consume mineral water at every moment. Besides, you should avoid having drinks with ice. Generally, you should not consume any food in places where the lack of hygiene is obvious. It is better to consume ice creams that are sold at stores. If you eat salads you should consume them in high-level restaurants.

Recommendations to live in Cuba without any trouble

During recent history, Cuba has had to face serious economic issues that have inevitably influenced its people's behavior. The following recommendations will be useful to those who will experience "the street" in Cuba and will necessarily face Cubans who make this place (the street) their workplace.

The first thing to know is that for "Cubans of the street", tourists are a golden opportunity to make money. This rude statement gives you an idea of how you should deal with the unavoidably approach of these persons to tourists. They will try to get closer politely to help solving eventual problems or to offer some information. Sometimes, they will try to sell drugs, cigars, women, men, CUC, etc. They will also recommend private restaurants (called *paladares*) and/or private houses. They will do this very gently, yet it should be completely avoided since usually these places are illegal and they recommend them rather for the commission they receive than for the quality of the product itself.

Cigars that are offered on the streets are never the originals, though you will be told thousands of stories about their allegedly origin (a cousin, a brother or an aunt that works on the factory, etc.). Prices are so much cheaper than those of the government shops but if you seek for real "puros" keep yourself away of this product. But if quality is not essential for you, feel free to buy them. Keep in mind that you can only take 50 units out of the country without presenting the official receipt of the center where you got them.

Another offer of “the street” is related with a profitable currency exchange. If you don’t want to get conned in thousands of ways, get away and do not believe in the stories you will be told (Ex. That banks and CADECAs are closed for a week)

Important to know...

In Cuba, buying and selling any amount of drugs is severely punished by law.

Prostitution in Cuba is forbidden. Prostitutes or allegedly prostitutes are sanctioned by law, as well as those who provide them with clients. The tourist doesn’t get in any trouble as long as he isn’t accompanied by a minor of 18 years old.

Before coming to Cuba, we suggest you a visit to the customs website <http://www.aduana.co.cu> so you can be aware of the supplies that can be imported. Besides, you can also know what things can be exported or not (Ex. cigars, craftwork, art work, etc.)