



Cuba - Pearl of the Antilles

The magic that is Cuba is not only found in its rich historic upheavals, eclectic architecture, live music and colourful multi-ethnic people, but also in off-the beaten track destinations that will take us from the white sands of the northern beaches to the rugged mountains where revolutionary folklore and endemic species will make our holiday an amazing experience.

Trip Length: 18 days / 17 nights

Minimum 8 guests / Maximum 14 guests



March #April

Included meals marked each day. B = Breakfast, L = Lunch, D = Dinner

Cuba is 'out-there', 'in-your-face', 'rhythmic', and an 'out-of-this-world showpiece', proud of its origins and people. Cuba can snub the world and still hold on to its culture and heritage and welcome visitors as if they are family.

It is part of a chain of islands in the West Indies, divided into two parts. Cuba is part of the Greater Antilles that also includes Hispaniola, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. The Lesser Antilles (or Caribees) includes a large arch of smaller islands to the south-east and south. 'Antilles' is from the Portuguese words 'ante' meaning 'before', and 'ilha', an old form of their word for 'island'.

Christopher Columbus claimed Cuba for Spain in 1492 when it was the realm of the Arawakan-speaking, Taino people who had displaced even earlier inhabitants. It became the Spanish empire's most important source of raw sugar in the 18th century and later earned the name 'Pearl of the Antilles'. Spain retained rule of Cuba until 1898, even though it had to fight several costly and difficult independence movements. The United States and Cuban forces may have won the Spanish-American War, but Cuba soon gained formal independence although it remained overshadowed by neighbouring United States. Today's Cuba is a multi-ethnic nation, home to people of many different countries and backgrounds.

On this adventure odyssey we'll take in the island from east to west. Starting in Santiago de Cuba, we'll crisscross the land; share its powerful history; walk in its unsurpassed natural environments, and enjoy the locals who define the island, until we touch down in Havana, Cuba's exotic capital.



Downtown Havana

Day 1: Sunday 28 March Arrive Santiago de Cuba (D)

We'll get to our accommodation and spend what is left of the day relaxing or touring in Cuba's cultural capital and second largest city. It's capital of the province of the same name. The majestic Sierra Maestra is our backdrop and the Caribbean Sea our neighbour. Spanish conquistador, Diego Velázquez founded Cuba's fifth village on July 25 1515. The Spaniards brought with them colonial architecture and began Cuba's rebellious history. Fire destroyed the settlement in 1616, and it was immediately rebuilt. There is a distinctive Afro-Caribbean culture throughout the city and it is where the music genre of salsa and son originated. Its dusty, noisy, rhythmic and sensuous streets are vibrantly alive and overseen by grand cathedrals. At 6.00 pm we will meet up with the **Take A Walk** group and our Cuban guide will brief us about the island and our upcoming trip as we share a welcoming dinner.



Day 2: Monday 29 March Santiago de Cuba (B)

Let's wake up and start our journey. We'll have a city tour in Santiago, the most Caribbean of the Cuban cities. History, tradition, passion, music, noise and heat will accompany us as we immerse ourselves in Cuban culture. Here, we're closer to Haiti and the Dominican Republic than to Havana, so no wonder Santiago is a city set apart from other Cuban cities, steeped in its own culture and entrepreneurial and rebel influences. Cuba is a nation of free enterprise, democratic aspiration, and even pro-Americanism. About 30% of Cuban workers are in the private sector. They are called 'cuentapropistas', meaning 'people who work for themselves'. Don Facundo Bacardí based his first-ever rum factory in Santiago.



Sierra Maestro Range

Day 3: Tuesday 30 March Sierra Maestra Mountain Range (B, L)

3 hours walking, 6 km return, Grade moderate, carrying a day pack

It's a 6.00 am get away to catch our bus bound for the town of Bartolomé Masó, named for a Cuban politician who was a military patriot for Cuban independence and later became President of the 'Republic in Arms'. We will be talking history and nature with a local guide. From town it's a zippy 4 x 4 jeep ride to Santo Domingo village and on to Pico Turquino National Park, home to the highest mountain in Cuba. Then it's to Alto del Naranjo, where we will start our hike to the headquarters of Fidel Castro's guerrillas. Castro established the remote and camouflaged camp in 1958 after being on the run in the mountains for a year. The views over the Plains of Granma are superb and something to be embedded in your memory. After lunch at a local place, we'll have free time to relax and take a swim in La Plata River, before returning to Santiago and having the evening to ourselves.

Day 4: Wednesday 31 March Santiago - Baracoa (B, L, D)

Drive time: 5 hours

We're on the road by 9.00 am and break the long drive with a stop at a lookout where we have panoramic views of Guantanamo Bay and the US naval base. The Spanish chose the excellent harbour of Guantánamo Bay when they took control of Cuba. US Marines landed with naval support during the 1898 invasion. We'll have time for a beach stop, a relax and our picnic lunch before continuing on to Baracoa, the oldest and most isolated of Cuba's cities. Christopher Columbus visited in 1492, and it was founded by Spanish conquistador Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar in 1511 as he conquered and governed Cuba on behalf of Spain. Baracoa's green foliage and mountainous backdrop is a stark contrast from the arid landscape of Guantánamo's south coast. The city continues to recover from the ravages of Hurricane Matthew that struck in 2016. After a short city tour we'll be treated to lunch at a local restaurant.



Baracoa, Yunque-Bay and El Yunque (The Anvil)



Day 5: Thursday 1 April El Yunque de Baracoa (B, L)

5 hours walking, 10 km return, Grade challenging, carrying a day pack

We leave at 8.00 am to tackle El Yunque de Baracoa (translated in English to 'The Anvil'), a 575 m table mountain, 7 km west of Baracoa. The mountain was considered sacred by the pre-Colombian Taino inhabitants. We will be crossing Duaba River at the beginning and on our return. Water level is normally knee high, so take sandals or reef shoes and a towel to dry your feet. Going through farmlands at first and forest later, it is a challenging trek to the top, with the last hour being the steepest. You'll need sturdy shoes and plenty of water. Once on top, you will not see the gods, but the impressive view of the surrounding areas. On the way back, there's a possibility for a swim in Duaba River. Upriver there are waterfalls, but depending on the group's ability and the time left there may or not be time to continue on to them. This will be left to the discretion of our local guide. We'll be treated to a late traditional lunch at a farmer's house. Back to Baracoa for a free evening.

Day 6: Friday 2 April Alexander Von Humboldt National Park (B, L)

4 hours walking, 7 km return, Grade moderate, carrying a day pack

An 8.00 am start to travel to World Heritage listed Alexander Von Humboldt National Park. It is named for the German scientist who visited Cuba in 1800 and 1801. He described Cuba as a 'kind of Caribbean Galapagos where contradictory curiosities exist side by side'. We will have a local guide to explore one of Cuba's most beautiful areas and one of the most diverse tropical islands on earth. Many underlying rocks are toxic to plants so species have adapted to survive these hostile conditions. This unique process of evolution has resulted in the development of many new species. Animals once thought extinct have even been rediscovered in Humboldt. Other endemic plants and animals are protected in one of Cuba's best preserved areas. Again we'll endure multiple river crossings, so bring your water sandals and a towel. We may have time for a swim in the Taco River. We'll have a late lunch at a farmer's house before returning to Baracoa.



Day 7: Saturday 3 April Baracoa - Camagüey (B, D)

Drive time: Because of road conditions this trip may take up to 10 hours

We're on the road by 8.00 am for a long drive to Camagüey, Cuba's third-largest city. This beautiful colonial city hosts colourful squares, winding streets and many churches. It is the stronghold of the Catholic faith in Cuba. The city's well-preserved historical centre was made Cuba's ninth UNESCO World Heritage listed site in 2008. Other Cubans refer to Camagüey people as 'agramontinos', after local hero Ignacio Agramonte, a courageous Cuban revolutionary, who played an important role in the Ten Years' War (1868 - 1878). Agramontinos are well-known for their resilience and for doing their own thing in the face of adversity. Some even say being Cuban is a pride, but being a Camagueyana is a privilege.



Valley of the Sugar Mills

of Independence and the Spanish-Cuban-American War most mills were destroyed and the focus of sugar-growing in Cuba shifted to the west. Some sugar is still grown in the valley, although today the emphasis is on the combined UNESCO World Heritage listing of Trinidad's historic centre and the valley. Sierra del Escambray, farming fields, palms and faded colonial ruins are the back-drop of this often imagined scene of Trinidad. Bird-watchers with their cameras and binoculars come from all over, and party-goers raise hell to the music and glittering costumes that is Trinidad. The evening is yours to explore.

Day 9: Monday 5 April Trinidad (B)

1.5 hours walking

We'll gather at 9.00 am for our walking tour in Trinidad's historic centre. Trinidad was one of the first Spanish-founded towns and it grew quickly and wealthily due to sugar cane production, healthy cattle herds, tobacco farming and the African slave trade. All this wealth funded extravagant palaces, large plazas, and colourful colonial homes for rich plantation owners. Trinidad is the best preserved old colonial city in central America. Cobblestone streets lead to Plaza Mayor, the main square surrounded by 1850s grand colonial buildings. All form a great backdrop to 1950s cars, frozen in time. Live music, fresh sugar cane juice, locals who like to share their heritage, and horse-drawn carriages add to the ambience of Trinidad. It's also known as 'the sleeping beauty', as every corner has a potential discovery and setting for a photograph. We'll have free time to check out the local markets and museums. Museo Romántico, in the restored Palacio Brunet mansion, and Museo de Arquitectura Colonial display relics from the town's sugar-producing era. Iglesia de la Santísima is a 19th century cathedral with a vaulted ceiling and carved altars. You may opt for a trip to Trinidad's beach, but the evening is yours to enjoy as you wish.



Trinidad's main street - palm trees, arches and cobblestones

Day 8: Sunday 4 April Camagüey - Trinidad (B, D)

Drive time: 4 hours

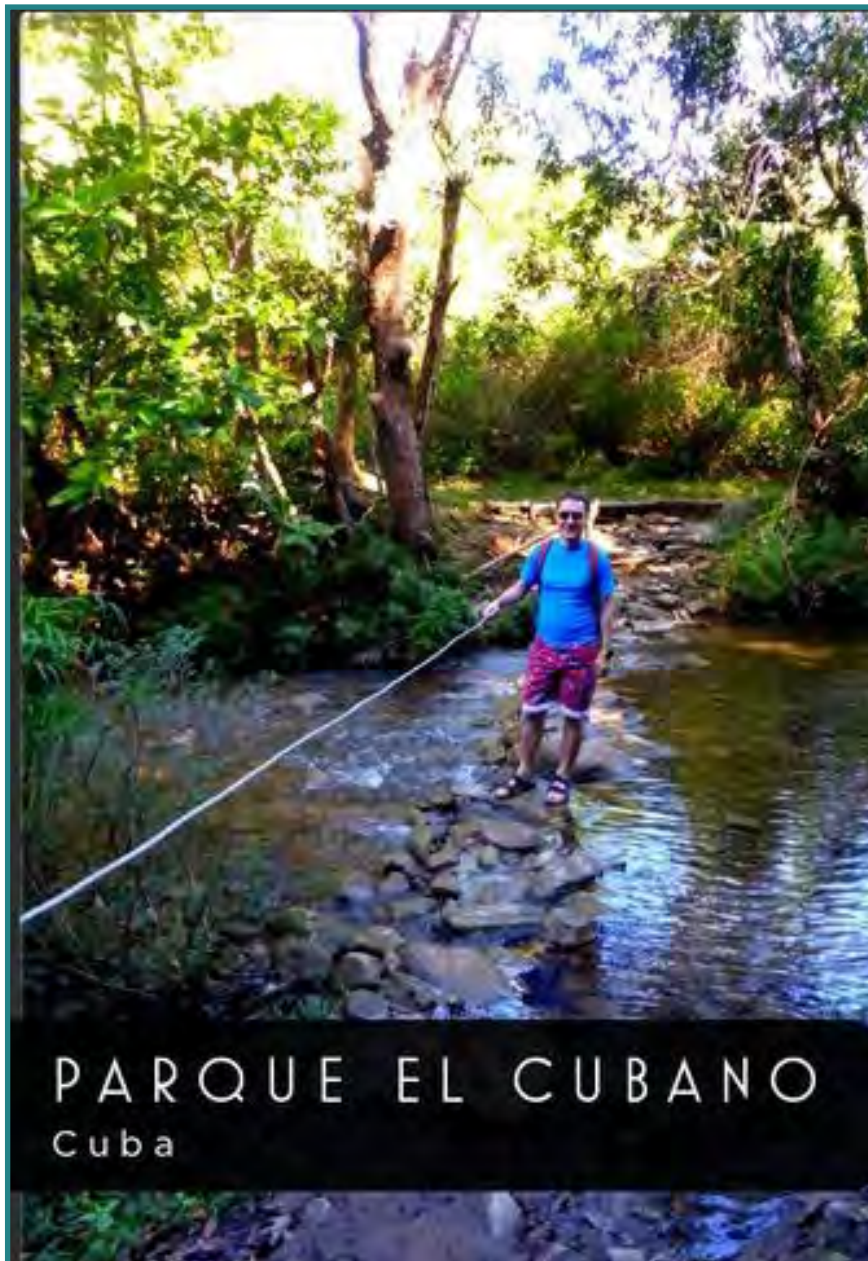
We don't start the day until 9.00 am when we hop on rickshaws (bicycle taxis) for a hop-on hop-off tour in Camagüey. Then it's off to Trinidad in central Cuba where we'll break the journey with a stop in Valle de los Ingenios, the Valley of the Sugar Mills, a series of three interconnected verdant valleys, about 12 km outside Trinidad. This is where Trinidad's immense wealth was realised. Dozens of ruined sugar mills, warehouses, slave quarters, machinery, manor houses and a functioning steam train from the 19th century are reminders of this prosperous time. During the War

Day 10: Tuesday 6 April Topes de Collantes National Park (B, L)

Drive time: 1 hour

3.5 hours walking, 5 km, Grade moderate, carrying a day pack

On the way to the park we will stop at a lookout point for panoramic views of Guamuhaya mountain range. Situated in these mountain ranges, Topes de Collantes is a nature reserve park in the Escambray Mountains, Cuba's second-largest mountain range and with the best network of hiking trails in Cuba. The name also refers to the third highest peak in the reserve and a health resort founded by dictator Fulgencio Batista for his sick wife. The jungle-clad isolated forests harbour a myriad of vines, ferns and striking epiphytes. These ranges were also a base and hideout for revolutionary and counter-revolutionary groups in the late 1950s. From the lookout, our mountain truck will collect us and take us and our local guide to the start of our hiking trail in Guanayara Park. We do have the possibility of a swim in the Guanayara River before returning to Trinidad for a free evening.



Day 11: Wednesday 7 April Parque El Cubano (B)

4 hours walking, 7.2 km, Grade easy to moderate, carrying a day pack

It's another 8.00 am departure to this protected, pleasant park just outside Trinidad. Huellas de la Historia Trail will lead us to the refreshing Javira Waterfall dropping into a natural, icy pool, another invitation to jump in for a dip and a respite from the often hot and sticky city. Almost every taxi driver, tourist tout, donkey handler and bike-riding kid in the city shout 'El Cubano' to tourists as they offer the best prices to transport them to this natural wonder. There's a farm-style restaurant (ranchón) that serves catfish (pez gato) from the on-site fish farm. We'll return to Trinidad for another free evening.

Day 12. Thursday 8 April Trinidad - Soroa (B)

Drive time: 7 hours (almost 400 km)

We depart at 9.00 am for another long road trip, this time to Soroa, often referred to as the 'rainbow of Cuba'. Soroa is the closest mountain resort to Havana, Cuba's capital. This natural area of tall trees and orchids, and a tiny settlement receives more than 1300 mm of rain annually. Originally owned in the 19th century by Frenchman Pierre Soroa, a coffee plantation merchant, one of his descendants created the park for his own retreat in the 1920s. Following the revolution, the lush, natural landscape was developed for tourism and is now considered a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO.

Day 13. Friday 9 April Las Terrazas (B)

4 hours walking, 7 km, Grade moderate, carrying a day pack

At 8.00 am we'll leave for the Las Terrazas complex, an experimental ecovillage. A local guide will give us a general briefing about the area and then we'll hike la Serafina trail. After walking along the western slope of the Valle del Río San Juan, for about a kilometre we'll reach a vantage point where we can appreciate the picturesque Las Terrazas community. There is a variety of vegetation including evergreen forests and wide plain plants, and animals and birds along the route. You may even spot Cuba's national bird, the tocororo. The hike descends and ends at the ruins of the 19 century French coffee estate, Santa Serafina, along the banks of the San Juan River. Coffee plantations sprang up with the French influence and presence following the Haitian Revolution in 1791. We'll return to Soroa for the night.



Day 14. Saturday 10 April Soroa - Viñales (B)

Drive time: 2 hours to Pinar, then 30 minutes to Viñales

A shorter drive today will take us to Viñales. We'll leave Soroa at 9.00 am and on the way we'll get to visit a cigar factory in Pinar del Rio city. It won't be everyone's cup of tea, but a trip to Cuba wouldn't be the same if you didn't see how they make their famous cigars. This area in western Cuba is where Cuba's finest cigar tobacco is grown. PDR (Pinar del Rio) cigars are noted for their boutique charm and flavours of coffee, cocoa and pepper. Once we reach Viñales, we can enjoy a free afternoon and evening.



Viñales Valley

Day 15. Sunday 11 April Viñales National Park (B, D)
4 hours walking, 6 km, Grade easy, carrying a day pack

We're off at 9.00 am with our local guide for a hike in Viñales Valley. Beautiful landscapes of soaring pines and dramatically rounded and steep-sided limestone cliffs (mogotes) surround the valley of tobacco plantations and traditional farms and villages, in one of Cuba's most special natural settings. The 11 km x 5 km valley, set in Sierra de los Órganos mountain range,

was awarded UNESCO World Heritage listing in 1999. The area is noted for its excellent hiking and rock climbing routes. We'll head on back to Viñales for a free afternoon where we can discover the main street lined with colorful colonial-era wooden houses bedecked with porches, or visit the Municipal Museum, that explores the region's history, or maybe take a stroll through the orchid and palm-filled sprawling Casa de Caridad Botanical Gardens, before dining at a local restaurant.

Day 16. Monday 12 April Viñales - Havana (Habana) (B)

Drive time: 2.5 - 3 hours, approximately 183 km

It's time for our final road trip - this time to the city of Havana. The country's capital is complex, contradictory, confusing, creative, sensuous, a bit daunting, and at the same time quintessentially what Cuba is about. Havana is free from restraints and audaciously employs its own rules. Two independence wars, a revolution and a US trade embargo have not dampened the spirit and survival of true Havanans - products of piracy, colonialism and even mobster rule. Havana's streets beat to the drum of salsa, glittering costumes, raw energy and electricity. Don't question this city - just immerse yourself in it... We'll check out modern Havana on a tour that takes in all things new. Art comes naturally to most Cubans and you'll see it splashed by rollers and brushes on city buildings or displayed more conservatively in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. Cafes and bars add their mark to the city - some are trendy and creative while others are more sedate and add small touches of their US neighbour and USSR connections to the mix. Havana is ours for just a moment...

Day 17. Tuesday 13 April Havana (B, D)

It will have been a blast of colour, music, history and fun but sadly this will be our last day on this mystical and magical island. Our day will start at 9.00 am with a walking tour in Havana's historic centre. Here, a mix of Spanish architecture prevails and is evident in its museums, forts and cathedrals. This carefree city, embossed with cobblestone streets and a population of over two million people has a history that is sometimes dark but forever rich. We'll have a free afternoon - why not take a drive in one of the colourful vintage, convertible cars before joining in the farewell dinner?

Day 18. Wednesday 14 April Depart Cuba (B)

Our adventure ends after breakfast and you will be free to travel some more in Cuba; leave for home, or continue on to other destinations. You're sure to take a little of Cuba with you, as well as leaving part of yourself on the Caribbean's largest island.



Havana's Spanish Architecture

What's Included in Cuba

- Air-conditioned road transport with driver.
- Baggage transfers once we start our trip.
- Local English speaking full-time guide, and local guides for all hikes except El Cubano (Day 11).
- An Australian **Take A Walk Adventures** leader for the complete trip.
- 17 nights twin share accommodation in casa particulares. The phrase, casa particulares means private accommodation or private homestays, very similar to a bed and breakfast. They are homes where the owners have prepared rooms to rent to tourists. They are clean, well located houses with friendly hosts. All have private bathrooms, air conditioning and hot water. The hosts pride themselves on great breakfasts. Extra cost applies for single rooms. Every effort will be made to accommodate the group in the one house. At times, depending on the size of the group, it may be necessary to use an additional house close by. If this should happen we will use a central house as our headquarters and meeting point.
- All meals as noted (B, L, D). Where we include lunches on some less-travelled routes, our guides suggest that in places where meals are not easy to arrange, we will take the best option available. In places where meals are easy to arrange, you will have the freedom to choose or do your own thing at your own cost. Light lunches will be easy to arrange. Most included lunches will be served late and they are usually really adequate. There may not be any need for you to purchase dinner unless your appetite indicates you need more, and then that can be easily arranged at your cost. Just remember to take plenty of snacks if you feel you need to top up before lunch.
- Transport to the start of walking trails, and to our accommodation, or support vehicle; eg. Guanayara Park.
- 4 x 4 jeep ride to Santo Domingo village and on to Pico Turquino National Park.
- Entrance fees to all national parks; cultural visit to Valle de los Ingenios; walking tours in Santiago, Trinidad and Havana's historic centre. Entrance to Las Terrazas complex and to the cigar factory, Pinar del Rio city.
- Rickshaw ride for a hop-on hop-off tour in Camagüey.
- One litre of bottled water per day.



Cuban Cuisine - something for everyone...

What's Not Included in Cuba

- Round trip airfare from Australia to Cuba, or from or to any other destination.
- Transfers to and from airports and lodgings.
- Any lodging prior to or after the tour dates.
- Entrance fees to museums, and sites of interest not included in the itinerary,
- All personal trekking equipment (including backpacks and trekking poles).
- Extra meals not noted and all trail snacks.
- Extra bottled water in addition to the one litre provided per day. This can be bought at our hotels or at shops along the way. A water purification tablet or unit is a handy device to take to Cuba. Please refer to the Cuban gear list for water treatment options.
- Alcohol, soft drinks and mineral water.
- Payment to use toilet facilities at coffee shops or petrol stations is usually a tip placed in a bowl in the washroom. Toilet paper is often not supplied, so bring your own.
- Medications and personal first aid kits.
- Personal expenses and other services like laundry, or additional accommodation, especially if you can't participate in the scheduled itinerary for any reason.
- Travel and accident insurance.
- Tipping for local guides on the city walks and for those on the trekking component - Sierra Maestra, el Yunque, Alexandre Von Humboldt, Guanayara, Las Terrazas and Viñales.
- Bus drivers, cab drivers, bellhops, maids and wait staff all expect a gratuity in Cuba - but please be discreet and not showy.
- Tips for our main guides and bus drivers is usually organised as a group thing.



Learning from the Local Guides

Other General Information

- In Cuba it is difficult to determine the level of hotel stars! Stars are not the norm in Cuba. We will sometimes stay in well-located, clean casas and is a chance to enjoy Cuba's friendly local hosts. Breakfast is usually traditional consisting of what the locals eat. Don't expect a swimming pool to cool off in the casas - just find somewhere to relax in whatever cool breeze you can find.
- If the days' are hot, some may consume up to 4 litres of water per day.
- Alcohol is readily available throughout the island in licensed hotels and supermarkets.
- There is 3G WiFi access in Cuba, however signal strength may vary from place to place.
- Charging your devices' batteries should not be a problem in most casas. Most modern casas and hotels have 110 / 220 V dual voltage sockets.
- Cuban time - breakfast is usually served from 7.00 to 10.00 am (unless we need it earlier), lunch from 12.00 md to 3.00 pm, and dinner from 6.00 pm to 9.00 pm.
- Your place on this trip will be confirmed upon receipt of your booking form and \$500 deposit.

To ensure the safety and the wellbeing of the group, please bear in mind the itinerary may be altered for reasons beyond our control such as weather and trail conditions, and road or park closures. The final hiking selection is at the discretion of our local tour leaders.

This itinerary is a living document. Please ensure you download the latest version before confirming travel plans.

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