

## Cuba travel tips

I visited Cuba for two weeks as a tourist in January, 2015. This information is based on my impressions from that trip.

*Quick note: I avoid staying in resort-style hotels and going on package tours; my tastes run towards Airbnb-style, personalised accommodations and cosy bed-and-breakfasts, so if you're inclined towards the former, your experience is likely to be different when it comes to accommodation.*

### **Internet access and communications**

Prior to arrival, I attempted to plan my itinerary and book simple bed-and-breakfast accommodation online. This turned out to be prohibitively difficult, especially for accommodation outside Habana- websites tended to be buggy, and none offered instantaneous online bookings. At best, I was allowed to send an email request to the owners of accommodations, and then had to wait several days for a reply, which often stated that no rooms were available. Hence, I made a booking for a place in Habana and left the rest of the planning to fate.

Upon arrival, I soon realised that this situation is a direct result of the highly restricted internet access that Cubans endure. Locals have minimal access to the internet as connection is limited to a very few cafes and hotels (typically with rather slow speeds, and with too few computers to meet the needs of the waiting tourists). In Habana, one can access the internet at Hotel Park Central, in the computer room near to the business centre desk, for 8 CUC per hour. In Trinidad, there is an Internet café in a dessert shop in the middle of town.

The cost of online access in these rare places is far too high for most locals to afford (though prices are normal by international standards). Foreigners who move to Cuba can apply to have an internet connection in their home- those who do so are among the few people who have that luxury.

Local people have hardly any opportunities to obtain reliable information from the rest of the world. The few 'libraries' that exist consist merely of a few shelves of books about the revolution- mostly badly-produced propaganda, and all stridently in support of the government. There are few TV and radio channels available, and are all state-run.

People rely heavily on face-to-face or telephone communication. We're so used to arranging things online; in Cuba, it's like the 70s or 80s, before email and the internet were widespread.

### **Commerce**

There is very little commerce; most of the restaurants and hotels are state-run and businesses are taxed and regulated so heavily that it becomes onerous to run one. However, there are exceptions in the form of privately-rented accommodation called casas particulares (when a family rents out one of the

rooms in their home), and privately run restaurants ('paladars') which operate out of a home. Dinner at a restaurant typically ranges from 12 to 30 CUC per person. Restaurants may close fairly early, and food options are limited after 10 pm in smaller places (e.g. Trinidad, Varadero). The casas ('houses') are required by law to remain open every day of the year, and are heavily taxed and regulated, with centrally administered books for accounting checks. Nonetheless, it is highly profitable for families who would otherwise be entirely dependent on their miniscule salaries.

## **Accommodation**

Despite the difficulty (or near-impossibility) of booking accommodation online in advance of your trip, finding accommodation is a breeze once you are clued into the system. The key is to rely on old-fashioned forms of communication: word-of-mouth and telephone. It is possible to arrange accommodation on the fly or upon arrival in most places, including small towns like Vinales. Many local people (from Viazul bus drivers, Cubatour employees, and owners of casas particulares) have contacts whom they can call.

For example, if you are travelling from one city to another, you can ask your transport provider to help you find accommodation- this works well as long as you are not overly picky or have something very specific in mind. More likely than not, you will have the option of viewing a place, and if it is not suitable, the owners can phone other accommodation providers to make further arrangements. In fact, upon arrival by bus in some villages, a flock of local home owners promptly gathered around the bus, with pictures of their rooms and houses in hand, clamouring for visitors.

All casas particulares have to display a sign outside their door, indicating that they are open for business (as stated above, one of the regulations imposed on home renters is that the room has to be available 365 days a year). The sign on the door is colour coded: blue for foreign visitors; red for locals. If the idea of having to sort through eager home owners at the bus stop does not appeal to you, that shouldn't be a problem, as it is also possible to walk around town, and knock on doors which display the sign that indicates that they have a room. As long as you are not arriving somewhere in the dead of the night, you will probably be able to secure a place, somewhere.

My experiences with casas particulares have all been positive (I stayed at casas particulares in 5 different places- in Habana, Playas del Este, Vinales, Trinidad, and Varadero). They were all well-maintained, very cosy and welcoming, and down-to-earth. Nothing excessively fancy or modern. They often offer meals for an additional fee; the best food I had during the trip (indeed, one of the best meals I have had in my life) was home-cooked, at a casa particular. Budget around 5 CUC for breakfast at a casa particular.

## **Currency**

There are two currencies officially in use- the CUP (Cuban peso) is for local people; the CUC is generally for foreigners who make payments in touristy areas- for restaurants, accommodation, etc. The CUC is worth over 20 times the CUP. Local Cubans receive salaries and make payments in their local shops in the CUP, while tourists make most payments in CUC. Some shops state both prices on the label; others do not. For tourists who are not familiar with the system, it is not unusual to unwittingly pay in CUC when the real price is in CUP- and people may not tell you. Don't hold it against them- the average monthly salary in the country is US\$16 (incredible but true). One of my hosts was a school teacher and made around US\$12 per month. This means that if a tourist were to give someone 1 CUC, that's like two days' salary.

Imagine what a disincentive it is, particularly for people who work in the tourist industry or who have some contact with foreigners, to carry on in a 'normal' job, when they see tourists flagrantly spending several months' Cuban salary on a meal, or being oblivious to the fact that they are overpaying by a factor of 10 or 20. The way I see it, the best approach is to promote the trickle-down economy, helping local people by staying in *casas particulares*, giving tips whenever possible, and thereby offering some additional financial support while allowing them to continue working in government-paid jobs.

ATM machines are few and far between. Bring cash into the country and use currency exchange offices instead of relying on your cards. Try to avoid bringing US dollars, as an additional tax is levied on the transaction from US dollars into local currency. Euros, Canadian dollars, and Pounds are widely accepted at the currency exchange offices, with no additional tax. When changing foreign currency into local CUCs, ensure that notes are clean and neat, as those with tears or markings may be rejected. Request notes of small denominations, as 3 to 5 CUC is ideal for most day-to-day transactions. People often do not have much change and may be reluctant to accept larger notes.

## **Scams**

Due to the major discrepancy between currencies, it becomes profitable for scam artists to operate in touristy areas. A common tactic is for a local couple to approach tourists with the claim that a famous band is performing for free at a nearby restaurant or club. The scammers work in tandem with the club, charging exorbitant prices for drinks, and splitting the profits. That sort of thing is very common, but mostly harmless, beyond a slight dent in the wallet.

## **Transport and safety**

There are vintage cars everywhere, mostly American cars from the 50s ('Yank tanks'), and Soviet cars, as well as some newer Japanese models. The old cars are incredibly well-maintained, with fresh coats of paint and continual replacement of parts. No matter how nice a car looks, it is sure to have numerous dents and dings on the surface, which have been carefully hammered back into shape, because the owners cannot buy new replacements- they have to make do with repairing the existing parts. Hence, these superb vintage cars bear a strong

resemblance to toy cars that have experienced some wear and tear. In places like Habana, people offer rides in the cars for a fee, zipping along the ocean front with a pack of happy tourists.

It is easy to arrange for taxi transport, through a few phone calls- similar to arranging accommodation. Local people have phone numbers for transport providers and drivers. It is also possible to take the buses provided by the ViaAzul company, though obtaining tickets requires some maneuvering. It is possible to purchase them online, but this must be done well in advance. Failing that, you can visit the local ticket office (preferably early in the day) and pick up a ticket, or put your name down on a waiting list if demand is high. Once you have paid, make sure to turn up at the bus station an hour in advance of departure, as requested by the company, or risk losing your spot to someone on the waiting list.

The island is extremely safe- one of the safest places I've ever been in (including Singapore and Tokyo). There are relatively few foreigners and outsiders, besides tourists, so locals know each other and share a sense of 'comradeship.' Decades ago, the government made it compulsory for most vehicles to pick up hitchhikers on sight- this was a way of sharing resources such as cars. Today, the rule is still in place and one sees workers lining the streets in the evenings, waiting for a lift home. Outside each town, along the main traffic arteries, there stands an official in uniform, with a queue of hitchhikers behind.

Horse-drawn carriages, trishaws, cars, and moto-taxis are all mixed together on the roads. People drive very carefully and politely- I have rarely encountered such care and courtesy on the roads. I rode a scooter on several occasions, to allow freedom of movement and independence of a taxi driver, and it was superb. Cars give you a wide berth, often moving to the other side of the road entirely (onto the lane for oncoming traffic as long as it is clear), rather than squeezing near to you as they overtake.

It is hard to rent scooters and cars, due to limited availability and high demand. Show up at the rental office around opening time, and be patient. Speak Spanish if you can, and after initially being told that the equipment is sold out, be prepared to wait for more information (e.g. the locations of other rental places; the time and date at which the rented-out vehicle is due for return; when to come back). There may be only one scooter available for rent at each office, despite widespread demand (e.g. in both Trinidad and Varadero, I rented what was apparently the only scooter available, through a combination of luck and patience). If it is not possible to rent something that day, it might be available on another day.

## **Immigration**

Customs does not allow food products such as fruits into the country- if you bring an apple, for example, it will be confiscated.

25 CUC per person has to be paid upon exiting the country.