

The
ifCuba

**Guide to Traveling
to Cuba**
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About This Guide

This guide was created by [ifCuba](http://ifcuba.com) (ifcuba.com), which brings you the latest news on technology, design, and culture in Cuba. ifCuba is produced by the [Innovadores Foundation](http://en.innovadores.us) (en.innovadores.us), a US non-profit that provides support to innovators in Cuba.

We're not a travel company, nor are we affiliated with any, but we've produced this guide as a reference for those who wish to travel to Cuba from the US independently. This guide will be updated frequently, so please be sure to contact us for the latest version at hola@ifcuba.com

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Logistics

Arranging Travel

Americans are still not permitted by US law to visit Cuba for tourism, however the US authorizes 12 categories of special purpose travel including “people to people” visits. These are considered visits for the primary purpose of engaging with ordinary Cubans. Previously, “people to people” visits needed to be arranged by a travel operator, but Americans are now authorized to plan their own custom visit that meets the requirements of the current law. You can plan your entire trip yourself, independent of a travel agent. You can book flights online, apply for a Cuban visa, arrange your accommodations through a website, and figure out transportation in advance or once you’re on the ground. There are benefits and costs to going through a tour agent, who can make the whole process a bit easier, for a price.

Beginning in September of 2016, US airlines will be able to schedule flights between the US and Cuba, but in the meantime only charter flights are available, which must be booked by a travel agent. A quick search online will identify services. We used several with good results. Visa and flights from Miami are around \$400-\$450 total and visas and flight vouchers are sent right to you. Depending on the travel agent, you may still need to book flights to Miami on a separate airline.

Travel agents can also arrange housing and transportation. It is important to note that Cuban hotels are currently booked months in advance. If you are travelling independently on shorter notice you will need to arrange private accommodations at a casa particular (see below).

Be flexible with any unexpected circumstances when you arrive in Havana. It’s part of traveling to Cuba.

Flights

Until September, direct flights from the US still need to be booked through a charter (travel agency) and only fly out of a few cities, including Miami and New York. You can book flights from the US to Cuba online, however, just not direct ones. These will be through a connecting city in another country, like Panama, on an airline based outside the US. The flights will usually come with a long layover, designed to give you ample time to leave the airport and apply for your visa at the Cuban embassy in that city (more on that below). These flights usually run around the same cost as one flight to Miami and another (through an agent) from Miami to Havana, so the choice is yours.

Visa

You have a few options for your visas:

- Book through a Cuba-focused travel agency, usually when you book your flights. They will send you your visas within two days. This is our recommended option.
- Apply for a visa in person at the Cuban embassy in DC, which takes a day or two of processing time.
- Apply through a visa expeditor, who will take your passport and apply for a visa for you at the Cuban embassy.
- Apply in person at a Cuban embassy in another country. If you book your flights through a third country, like Panama or Mexico, you can leave the airport during your layover and apply in person at an embassy. We have no first-hand experience with this option.

The Cuban visa is handwritten and isn’t stamped into your passport, so make sure not to lose it.

Housing

Book before you get there. Definitely don't just show up and hope to figure it out then.

- Hotels: Mostly built in the first half of the 20th century or earlier. Government run, but that is about to change for some. Beautiful from the outside, kind of old on the inside. Expensive, but most come with amenities like wifi. Be sure to check on this, don't assume they have it. Honestly, we've never stayed in one, but they seem alright. If you really, really need wifi access every day, this is the way to go (more on that below). Wifi will cost extra, though. These are often booked months in advance.
- Casa Particulares: If you want a real Cuban experience, and if you want to support private Cuban citizens, this is the way to go. Casa Particulares are private houses, where the homeowner has received a license from the government to rent to foreigners. This makes them perfectly legal bed and breakfasts run by private homeowners. These are great and can be easily arranged through a travel agent or via several online websites, like Airbnb, homestay, bookinghavana.com, cubisima.com, or Point2Cuba. You can get the whole place, or just the rooms that you need. Usually they'll clean your room each day and serve breakfast every morning. You can spot these places on the street by their signs—a blue upside down anchor. Red anchors mean they can only rent to Cubans.

Depending on how you book, you may pay for these options in advance with a credit card, or in person in Cuba in cash. Make sure you know which, so that you can budget appropriately and bring enough cash.

Drivers

You may want to book a driver in advance of your trip. This will run about \$80-100 a day in Havana. If you're planning on taking a multi city trip, definitely book these in advance. This can be done through your travel agent. Most visitors should avoid driving cars. If you have an accident, particularly if someone is injured, you may be held in jail until the facts are sorted out and may even be criminally prosecuted. Hire a driver and play it safe.

For travel within Havana, there are many transportation options other than a daily driver, which we'll discuss in the Transportation Section below.

Before You Arrive

Things to Bring

If you think you might need it while you're there, bring it. This goes double for any form of medication. It also includes things like toilet paper—your Casa Particular will definitely have it and your hotel most likely will, but public restrooms may not. Better safe than sorry. You might also want to bring some snacks, just in case. If you do not consume them they are great giveaways. Also, CASH (see below).

As far as electronics, the voltages are the same as in the US, so you won't fry your hair dryer. You may want to bring a converter as some hotels use European outlets, but most use US. Power can be intermittent at times, however, and blackouts are fairly common.

Supplies in Cuba can be extremely limited, and you never know what's in short supply. Pharmacies have very limited selections and are sometimes out of stock completely. Some places, particularly clubs, have a bathroom attendant who cleans up or may sell toilette tissue or towels. Keep some coins available; twenty-five centavos (cents) will be appreciated.

Money

BRING MORE THAN YOU THINK YOU NEED. There is no good way, as an American, to get more cash after you arrive in Cuba. Your ATM card won't work, and you cannot use American credit cards anywhere, nor can you get cash advances from them.

Take out as much cash in the US as you need in Cuba, and then convert it to CUC's (Cuba's dollar equivalent parallel currency) at the airport when you arrive in Havana. There will be a small service charge plus a ten percent tax on exchanges of US dollars. CUC's are accepted almost everywhere and are the preferred currency for travelers. Cuba actually has two currencies, the CUC and the CUP (Cuban pesos, also known as moneda nacional), but as a tourist you'll only need the CUC. If you want to be really clever, you can take out Euros in the US and exchange those for CUC when you arrive in Havana, which gets around the 10% penalty on dollars.

If you need to exchange more money (ie, if you didn't exchange all your dollars or Euros for CUC at the airport), you can make the exchange at several hotels in Havana. There are also exchange places called cadecas scattered throughout town which offer better rates than hotels and the airport. Best to ask your hotel or host. Or just avoid this entirely by bringing cash, exchanging it at the airport, and then exchanging back any extra when you leave.

Unless you have paid for your accommodations in advance through a service like Airbnb, you will need to pay your bill in cash. Budget for this cost as well as daily transportation, then plan for around \$100 per day per person on top of that (this will get you very far—three great meals and all you want to drink, plus incidental costs).

If you plan on getting souvenirs, add a bit more for that. As far as souvenirs, \$100 would get you one box of 25 good cigars at a state-run shop, a painting or two in the art market, five t-shirts at Clandestina, or 6 bottles of aged rum (keep in mind, you can only bring back \$400 worth of souvenirs \$100 worth of rum and tobacco products per person).

Once you have your total, add an extra 25% contingent, just to be safe. Seriously, it's a real headache if you don't bring enough money.

Health Insurance

Tickets you book through a travel agent include 30 days of health insurance in Cuba. If you are staying longer than that, you need to purchase health insurance from ESEN, the state insurance agency, for \$3 per day. If you book your tickets yourself, say through Mexico or online through American airlines, you should check if these include health insurance, as you are legally required to have it while you are in the country. If not, you can purchase the insurance at the airport when you arrive in Havana.

It's also a good idea to get evacuation insurance, in case you would need to be brought back to the US for treatment. This can be purchased online or through a travel agent.

Phone

Check with your cell provider, because in most cases, for a moderate fee, you can activate your phone for use in Cuba, but you have to do it before you leave. This may also include very limited cell data, so you can check email and send text messages. You can also rent a phone through your travel agent. If you use a Cuban phone, you can't text to the US, and vice versa, but you can make calls.

Apps and Websites

There's a couple of apps that you should download in advance. Internet is very sporadic, and these guys will help you with offline functionality and communication:

- A La Mesa: Yelp for Havana (comes with an offline-capable map).
- Conoce Cuba: Also basically Yelp for Havana, but less focused on restaurants and more on general tourism (also with an offline map)
- Ke Hay Pa' Hoy?: Translated as "what's up today?" with a focus on events in Havana. You can download a week's worth of events and refer to them offline.
- IMO: A call/messaging app that works well on low bandwidth wifi and is cheaper than making a phone call to the US. You'll need to set it up with your phone number, and anyone you're contacting in the US will need the app.

If you just need to send messages while on wifi, iMessage, Google Hangouts, WhatsApp, etc. work just fine.

Departure

If you're flying through a charter, show up around three hours early—the lines to check in are very long. At the desk, you'll usually have to pay a \$25 airport tax, which allows you to travel through the Cuban on your return trip without paying anything. You'll also have to pay a fee if your bags are above a certain weight—check with your carrier or travel agent—and you'll have to pay for checked bags. All of this will be in cash. Keep in mind that bags that you may have to check bags that would ordinarily be allowed as carry-ons.

Once You Arrive

Arrival

The airport in Havana is small and relatively easy to get through. Just have all your forms filled out on the plane and have your passport and visa ready. Baggage claim is one major exception. Depending on what other flights are arriving at the same time, you may have a wait ahead of you—sometimes as long as two hours.

Internet

You won't have access to internet for the majority of your stay in Havana. Unless you get some limited data through your cell provider, you'll have to make a point of going to places that have wifi. The good news is that you can get wifi in most of the main hotels, if you're willing to pay. Anyone can use it, but it costs more for non-guests (something like \$2/hour for guests versus \$5-10 for non-guests). Internet will be fast enough to send email, read the news, and check Facebook, but don't plan for much more than that.

It's generally easiest to buy an internet card at the hotel front desk. Cards at the desk run 2 CUC an hour for guests, but to get that rate as a non-guest you'll have to go to an Etecsa shop, which is the phone and internet utility run by the government, or buy through a reseller in one of the parks or hanging outside the hotel.

There are wifi hotspots in parks scattered throughout the city, and you can easily find them by looking for crowds of people huddled around their cellphones. There's usually someone walking around handing out internet cards ("tarjetas") for about 3 CUC an hour. This is technically illegal (you can only legally buy these at government-run Etecsa telecom stores, or at hotels), but no one's getting arrested. If you really want a real Cuban experience, go buy the cards at an Etecsa shop. Just be prepared to wait in line.

It's worth noting that many online services won't be available, particularly ones that you can pay for, due to the Embargo. For example, gmail is accessible, but Google apps for business is not. Most banking is not accessible either, nor are services like Paypal. Chat services like Skype are also difficult.

Transportation

If you're traveling in a larger group and plan to do a fair amount of hopping around the city (ie, if you're only in Havana for a few days), renting a driver for the day may be best. They'll run about \$80-\$100/day and you can book them through your travel agent, hotel, or Casa Particular owner. You don't need to rent them in advance, but you can if you don't want to worry about it when you're down there.

Otherwise, there are plenty of taxis in Old Havana and outside of hotels that you can grab for about \$30/hour, and you can always have your Casa Particular owner call one for you. So if, say, you're just going to Old Havana for the day and then going back to back to your casa particular in a different part of the city, taking two taxis is much cheaper than hiring a driver. A trip from the airport to most parts of Havana will run 25 CUC.

There are a couple different options for transportation:

- Taxis: These come in a variety of shapes and sizes, from government-run yellow cabs, to brightly colored cards from the 1950's, to the three-wheeled cocotaxis. You can easily take one of these just by talking to the driver. For a quick one-stop trip they'll charge around \$5-10. To rent one of the nice

looking 50's convertibles it will cost around \$30/hour, but worth taking once for the experience. Just negotiate the price up-front. Most of these are willing to drive you for the day, just ask.

- Daily drivers: You can hire a driver for the day, which usually runs about \$80-\$100/day. This can be arranged through your travel agent, hotel or Casa Particular owner, or you can talk to your cab driver. If you're traveling in a larger group, this is probably easiest.
- Almandrones: A good way to get around Havana if you want to feel like a local, and if you speak a little Spanish. But they're not particularly nice. It's a network of cabs that drive a set route throughout the city, sort of like small buses. They look like the tourist cabs, and you'll see them stopping to pick people. They run throughout the city, but you'll have to ask a local how to take one.
- Pedicabs: A guy on a bike, mostly available in Old Havana. A few CUC to get you from one end of Old Havana to the other.
- Buses: Avoid.

Personal Health

To avoid getting sick you'll have to be careful with what you eat and drink. Tap water isn't safe for foreigners unless it's been boiled and filtered. Most Cubans don't even drink water straight from the tap. Best to rely on bottled water during your stay. Nearly all restaurants will bring you water in an unopened bottle, and if you're ever unsure, just ask.

Fresh fruit and vegetables are also a concern if they're not washed and disinfected properly, from microbes in both the soil and the water. If you're eating at a restaurant that caters to tourists or if your casa particular serves you breakfast, the raw fruits and veggies are most likely fine to eat. If you're eating at a Cuban restaurant or preparing food yourself, best make sure everything is cooked thoroughly. This also goes for anything cold, like ice cream, unless it's pre-packaged.

If you every get sick or hurt, as a foreigner, you won't use the standard Cuban hospitals. Instead, you'll go to Cira Garcia Hospital in Miramar, which has better facilities and more supplies. If you have an issue, ask to go to that hospital, but anyone that's assisting you will most likely send you there anyway.

Safety

Cuba is one of the safest countries in Latin America. Don't be dumb, and you'll be fine. Watch out for the money change scam, where guys on the street will exchange CUC for peso and rip you off, as well as people selling fake cigars.

Uniform and plain clothes police are throughout Havana and keep down common criminal activity. The country makes a lot of money from tourism and the government doesn't want to jeopardize that. Criminals are harshly punished. That said, you should still be smart. Don't leave your bag sitting anywhere. Don't walk down dark alley by yourself at night. Don't do any drugs—not that you can easily find them in Havana. And while it's alright to illegally buy an internet card in a park, don't do anything worse than that (anything you wouldn't do in the states).

Navigating

For the rest of this guide we recommend you refer to the Havana maps at the end of this document.

Neighborhoods

The neighborhoods of Havana run roughly east-west, in the following order: Habana Vieja (Old Havana), Centro Habana (Central Havana), Vedado, and Miramar. Old Havana is the most touristy, but relatively small and walkable. Vedado has plenty of restaurants, bars and clubs and is where more of the “real Cubans” hang out. Any of them are fine to stay in, though Centro Habana is a bit chaotic and crowded, and it gets very dark at night.

The four neighborhoods you should know in Havana, east to west, are:

- **Habana Vieja:** Old Havana. This is where the pictures of all those old cars are from. The neighborhood was built in the 16th and 17th centuries and the tourists flock to it. There are a ton of things to see, food to eat, and booze to drink. If you’re interested in buying some souvenirs, check out Clandestina 99% Diseno Cubano first (more in the “Things to Do” section). At Clandestina, you can grab a map of places they recommend, which is a great list to work through.
- **Centro Habana:** to the west of Old Havana, this is at the center of the city, as the name implies. It’s not the nicest neighborhood, which means there aren’t many tourists. La Guarida (“Things to Do”) is absolutely worth checking out, it’s one of the best restaurants in the city.
- **Vedado:** Less Historic than Old Habana. More residential, but there’s plenty to do, including the Fabrica de Arte Cubano (“Things to Do”).
- **Playa/Miramar:** Playa is technically the next municipality to the west, and in Playa the first neighborhood you hit when you enter Playa after leaving Vedado is Miramar. Nice area, more residential with a lot of the embassies. Good place to find a restaurant overlooking the water, like 7 Dias or Rio Mar (“Things to Do”).

Addresses

Addresses in Havana usually start with the street name, then the number of the building, then the streets it’s between; “calle” means street and “esquina” or “esq” means corner. So “Calle O’Reilly #304 e/ Habana y Aguiar” means “304 O’Reilly St. between Habana St. and Aguiar St.” In Vedado and Miramar, the streets are numbered and lettered. Odd numbered streets run northeast to southwest, parallel the ocean, with higher numbers as you go southeast. Even numbered streets run northwest to southeast, and increase as you go southwest.

In Vedado, the numbers start on the southwest of Paseo Ave. and northeast of the avenue are the lettered streets, which go farther down the alphabet as you go northeastward (towards Habana Vieja). In Miramar, the numbers restart as soon as you cross over the bridge from Vedado. This means you need to be careful, because there are two of many even numbered streets, one in Vedado and one in Miramar. Due to the even/odd numbering systems, addresses are often closer than they appear—walking from Calle 10 to Calle 20 is actually only five blocks.

Things to Do

This is an overview of some of our favorite spots, and ones that we recommend to friends of ifCuba. It's by no means an exhaustive list, but it's not a bad start.

All of the bars/restaurants/coffee shops serve some form of food because the government only issues licenses to restaurants, but the quality varies. As such, we've broken them down into "Daytime Hangouts" that are best for lunch and relaxing, "Fine Dining" for dinner, and "Bars" for great spots to get a drink, as well as a few other categories. For the "fine dining" spots, we highly recommend making a reservation, especially for dinner.

Within each section below, the places are ordered from east to west and grouped roughly by neighborhood (ie, from Habana Vieja to Miramar and beyond). We recommend using Alamesa or Conoce Cuba to look up the address of each before traveling there.

Our favorite spots are marked with an asterisk (*)

Daytime Hangouts

1. ***O'Reilly 304:** O'Reilly #304 e/ Habana y Aguiar, Habana Vieja
A favorite of ours, a great food for either lunch or dinner, though it's sister restaurant, El Del Frente, across the street has slightly better ambiance for a dinner spot.
2. **La Paila:** Calle M e/ 25 y 27, Vedado
A little overpriced, but a relaxed outdoor spot to eat some grilled pork and drink a beer (or bucket of beer).
3. **Coppelia:** Avenida 23 esq L, Vedado
This place is well known in Cuba, as is the line. The ice cream isn't anything special, but it's definitely an experience.
4. **Café-Galeria Mamaines:** Calle L #206 e/ 15 y 17, Vedado
Cool coffee shop/bar with a wide selection of drinks. Great place to kill some time and relax.
5. **7 Dias:** Calle 14 e/ 1ra y Mar, Miramar
Nice outdoor grill overlooking the ocean. Nice for lunch, dinner or drinks, though it tends to be more of a day spot.
6. **Café Fortuna Joe:** Calle 24 esq 1ra, Miramar
Maybe a bit over-decorated, but good lunch food and drinks, and a favorite spot for Cuban locals.

Fine Dining

7. **Doña Eutima:** Callejon del Chorro # 60C, Plaza de la Catedral, Habana Vieja
Great spot for traditional Cuban food, prepared a bit upscale but not overpriced. Good for lunch as well, but best to make a reservation.
8. **El Del Frente:** O'Reilly e/ Habana y Aguiar, Habana Vieja
The sister restaurant of O'Reilly 304 and just across the street. Great food and a fantastic rooftop balcony.
9. ***La Guarida:** Concordia #418 e/ Gervioso y Escobar, Centro Habana
Nicest (and first privately owned) restaurant in Havana. The food is (comparatively) quite expensive, but well worth it. The rooftop bar is a great spot to check out as well, and doesn't require a reservation.
10. **Café Laurent:** Calle M #257 e/ 19 y 21, Vedado.
Good food, even better view, as it's at the top floor of a building near the Hotel Nacional.
11. **Café Presidente:** Calle 25 esq G, Vedado
Nice, small spot with good food on President's Avenue.

12. **El Litoral:** Malecon #161 e/ K y L, Vedado.
Small Mediterranean place on the Malecon with a killer salad bar (seriously).
13. **Mediterraneo Havana:** Calle 13 # 406 e/ F y G, Vedado
The best Italian food we've had in Havana. All the ingredients and either grown in Cuba specifically for the restaurant or imported.
14. ***El Cocinero:** Calle 26 e/ 11 y 13, Vedado; to the right of the Fabrica de Arte Cubano
Great food and a very short walk to the FAC. They have a rooftop bar area as well as a downstairs dining room.
15. **Rio Mar:** Calle 3ra #11 y Final; at the easternmost end of 3ra.
Cuban-inspired fine dining with a great view of the ocean.

Bars

16. **La Fabrica de Cerveza:** San Ignacio e/ Brasil y Muralla, Habana Vieja; on the Plaza Vieja
Mixed experiences here, but the only place in Havana where you can get anything close to craft beer, and a nice place to people watch in the Plaza.
17. **Dandy:** Teniente Rey esq Villegas, Habana Vieja
Small, relaxed bar a block away from Chancullero and across the street from Clandestina.
18. ***Chancullero:** Teniente Rey #457A e/ Bernaza y El Cristo, Habana Vieja
Cool but very small bar, good for dinner and drinks with a rooftop seating area.
19. **Sloppy Joe's:** Calle Zulueta #252 e/ Animas y Virtudes, Habana Vieja
Very touristy, but a good spot for drinks, although the service isn't great.
20. ***Sia Kara Cafe:** Barcelona # 502 esq Industrial, Habana Vieja
Great drinks, good food, and a relaxed, sort of European-hostel-bar type atmosphere. On the west side of the Capitolio.
21. **4 You:** San Lazaro #1217 e/ Mazon y Basarrate, Centro Habana
Tapas-style restaurant with good food and drinks and an open kitchen, which is rare in Havana.

Nightspots

22. **La Zorra y El Cuervo:** Calle 23 e/ N y O, Vedado
If you're looking for jazz, this is a great, relaxed spot. Entry is a bit pricey but it includes two drinks. Show up early though so you don't get seated behind the column.
23. **The Malecon**
The seawall. At night you'll see it swarming with young Cubans hanging with their friends. Not a bad place to take a walk, beer in hand. Be ready for a crowded and raucous experience on the western part near 23rd and Linea, or explore the easternmost portions for a more relaxed vibe, or check out anywhere in between.
24. ***Fabrica de Arte:** Calle 26 esq 11, Vedado
Do not leave Havana without visiting this place. It's a one-of-a-kind combination bar, nightclub, concert hall, event space, restaurant and art gallery. It's also only open Thursday-Sunday, and the line gets very long after 10pm on weekends.

Souvenirs

You can only bring back \$400 worth of goods from Cuba per person, \$100 of which can be rum or tobacco products.

25. Art: There are art galleries with original Cuban art scattered throughout the city, but if you're looking for something easy you can check out the Almacenes San Jose art market on Avenue del Puerto, on the water at the easternmost part of Havana Vieja.
26. El Escorial: Mercaderes e/ Brasil y Muralla, Habana Vieja; on the Plaza Vieja
Well-known coffee shop, good place to grab a souvenir bag of coffee and sip an espresso while people-watching.
27. *Clandestina 99% Diseño Cubano: Villegas esq Teniente Rey, Habana Vieja.
Do not leave Havana without buying a t-shirt here. Awesome design and clothing shop. Everything is made in Cuba, great place for unique souvenirs.
28. Rum: A bottle of good white rum will cost around \$5 and a bottle of aged rum will run about \$20. All supermarkets sell rum, one of the better ones is in the shopping center across from the Melia Cohiba.
29. Cigars: A good box of 25 cigars will run \$50-100 and a very good box will be over \$200. Don't buy them from anyone off the street. You can visit a cigar factory, buy them in a hotel for an upcharge, or visit our favorite spot in Miramar, Casa del Habano on 5th e/ 14 y 16.

Wifi

Hotels in Habana Vieja:

Hotel San Isabel, Saratoga Hotel, Hotel Parque Central, Hotel Inglaterra

Other hotels that are nice to sit at:

Hotel Nacional, Presidente Hotel

Public areas (use Etecsa cards):

South side of the Universidad de San Geronimo, on Obispo two blocks west of the Plaza de Armas in Habana Vieja; La Rampa, the stretch of 23rd Ave near Coppelia; park at L y 13, Vedado; park at 14 y 13, Vedado



