

Trip Issues

Trip Logistics

Travel time from the U.S. to Cuba is approximately 30 minutes. The first night is normally spent in Havana. Travel by public transportation is not recommended. Roads from Havana to other cities are good and the trip can be completed in one day, including a stop at beautiful valleys and look-outs.

An Explore International team guide will meet the team at the Havana airport and accompany the team during the mission. The Explore International team guide will handle all transportation and accommodations.

In-country travel time depends on time of year, routes and excursions (shopping, cultural visits, home visits, etc.) planned.



Travel Formalities

PASSPORT & VISAS



If you are a US Citizen or a Permanent Resident of the United States, you will need the following documents:

- A valid US Passport (verify expiration date)
- A visa to enter Cuba (Required by Cuban Government) – We will request it on your behalf.

- 🏠 A Letter of Authorization to travel to Cuba (Required by US Department of Treasury) – We provide it, according to the law.

A valid passport is required for all foreign nationals intending to visit Cuba. The passport must be valid for at least one month beyond the date of your expected departure from Cuba.

Visitors from Canada, US and other countries may stay in Cuba for up to six months, but must check in with immigration authorities or with a tourism office in Cuba prior to the 90th day of their stay to apply for an extension.

Visa

An entry visa is required for US citizens to enter Cuba. Currently the cost is \$50 US. Visas are purchased in the airport in Havana. Each person must have a valid passport with expiration date at least 6 months beyond departure date. The visa receipt is stamped into the passport and is valid for three months. See <http://www.travel.state.gov/> for additional information related to travel to Cuba.

Foreign nationals must also carry a tourist card (or visa), or another visa (such as Religious Visas) which are provided by the Cuban government. The tourist card is generally provided by airlines, or can be obtained from a Cuban government office abroad in the case of privately organized flights. It can also be purchased at certain airports in Canada, and abroad.

Visitors are prohibited from undertaking business activities when travelling on a tourist visa.

Dual Citizenship

Cuba does not recognize dual citizenship. That is, Cuban-Canadians, Cuban-Americans and others must enter Cuba on their Cuban passport. They must also show a valid Canadian passport or US passport in order to return to Canada and US respectively.

Under Cuban law, the Government of Canada, and other countries cannot provide consular services to their nationals or to permanent residents with Cuban citizenship.

Travelers' born in Cuba (regardless of current citizenship) should contact a Cuban government office in their countries of residence to ensure compliance with Cuban regulations before going to Cuba. Failure to do so may result in being refused entry into Cuba, being detained upon entry, or being refused departure by Cuban immigration authorities.

The above information on entry and exit requirements has been obtained from the Cuban authorities. However, these requirements are subject to change at any time. It is the traveler's responsibility to check with the Embassy of the Republic of Cuba in Canada and respective countries for up-to-date information.

Itinerary

The Explore International mission trip coordinator will assist with the development of the itinerary. The trip itinerary will be developed according to the mission focus and time of year.

Luggage

Weight Restrictions In Miami

- \$2.00 per pound after the 44 pound limit
- \$20.00 for checked bag
- Unlimited weight allowed for humanitarian aid.

Weight Restrictions In Cuba

- 66 pounds of general goods allowed
- Additional 22 pounds of medicine allowed—must be in separate luggage
- \$5.00 CUC per pound after 88 pounds:
The 66 pounds and 22 pounds of medicine must be in separate luggage
- Cannot exceed \$200.00 CUC worth of weight

No piece of checked luggage may weigh more than 50 lbs. Each team member will be limited to one checked piece of personal luggage. Any additional checked piece allowed by the airline will be used to transport donated items and team supplies. Remember it is always wise to carry at least one change of clothing and medicine in your carry-on bag. Consider buying a cheap suitcase from the Salvation Army or similar store for the second bag. These can be left in Cuba, reducing the amount of return luggage.

Note: Carry-ons are not typically weighed in the U.S. as we go over to Cuba, however – they may be weighed in Havana before check-in. Do not over pack your carry-on with souvenirs for the trip home; the airline will make you take items out.

Travel Forms

Passenger's on the way to Havana will receive customs forms and maybe the visa form on the airplane. Both forms are available at the airport. The visa form must be completed and provided with the visa fee at the immigration booth. The customs form must be turned in at the customs station after retrieving luggage.

Accommodations

Explore International will reserve accommodations and meals appropriate to the mission focus. Various guesthouses (Casas Particular) usually provide the rooms for the team. These guesthouses have a bedroom and self-contained bathroom (consisting of sink, shower and flush toilet). There may or may not be hot water for the shower (varies daily). Hot water for the shower is usually provided by an instant hot water heater that is also the shower head. The guesthouses provide a towel and linens but no washcloth. If you have room in your suitcase, you may want to bring your own towel to use. Small bars of soap and toilet paper are provided.

About half of the Explore International Team members prefer to pay the extra cost and stay in regular hotels.

Gifts

Many times, Explore International Team members may want to pack small gifts to give if they will be working with a specific group of people. Group donations such as shoes, baseballs, clothing, etc. are always encouraged. Individual gifts may be given, but should be coordinated through the team leader.

At times, Cubans will make specific personal requests to team members. Please do not agree to fulfill the request; direct them to the Explore International staff. Be careful not to even answer with a noncommittal "Maybe" or "I'll see what I can do." In Cuban culture, this can be taken as a "Yes."

Currency

The currency in Cuba is Pesos (CUC). There will be opportunities to exchange money after arriving in Cuba. The current exchange rate in Cuba is approximately 1.00 CUC = \$1.25. This exchange takes place in Cuba banks against US dollars. It may be possible to cut this loss slightly by exchanging dollars for Euros or Canadian Dollars in the US prior to bringing currency to Cuba.

Older bills may not be accepted for exchange. Larger bills (\$100s) exchange better than smaller bills (\$20s & lower). Travelers' checks are not recommended because they are not readily accepted.

U.S. dollars are used to pay the entrance visa fee and the entrances to the national parks. This money should not be exchanged for Cuban Pesos.

Please note that U.S. credit cards, debit cards, money orders, or checks are not processed in Cuba and will be of no value to you.

Canadian Credit cards can be used only in a few places. There are ATMs at Havana's international airport. Make sure to notify your bank and credit card company of your international travel plans to avoid having your cards blocked.

Security

It is safe to travel in most parts of Cuba as long as you listen to the advice of your Explore International team guide. Of course, there are always certain precautions to be taken. You will also see guards at many businesses that handle cash (gas stations, restaurants, and banks). This is normal in undeveloped countries where police presence is not as prevalent as we are used to in the United States.

A potentially wonderful and rewarding experience can become disappointing for everyone if we don't follow some well proven, common-sense precautions for everyone's safety and the security of personal belongings. Use the "buddy system" and never go anywhere alone in an airport, hotel or the streets around the area where you are working or staying. Always ask your team leader for permission to leave the guesthouse without the group and agree on where you are going and when you expect to return. A group of three or more is strongly recommended.

You are traveling to Cuba with a license under a U.S. Presidential exception to a U.S. embargo which prohibits travel to Cuba by ordinary U.S. citizens. Cuba is a Communist country; there are no diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba. There is a U.S. Interest Section that functions in Cuba and which handles mostly immigration matters. This is not a U.S. Embassy.



Communication with Home

Internet is available at hotels and at some internet cafes around the Island. Internet connections are slow (Cuba still uses mostly satellite/slow connections). If you have webmail access, you will be able to check your email. Satellite capabilities throughout the Island are unpredictable. Please limit your computer usage to communication needs only. It is recommended that one team member bring a laptop.

Internet access in Cuba is notoriously expensive and slow although has improved recently as ETECSA has set up an increasing number of Telepuntos, which offers reasonable Internet access for US\$ 6 per hour. The national system requires that you buy a scratch card with user name/password, which you then enter into the terminal. The national nature of the system means that you can use any unused part of the time at any other Telepunto location.

In Havana, a number of the more upmarket hotels offer wi-fi access for US\$ 6-8 per hour. This is an incredibly popular service since it allows you to use your Blackberry/iPad/laptop and not be restricted to a Telepunto computer. The quality of service varies and will almost be slower than you expect. The best hotels for this are the Iberostar Parque Central and H2O Hotel Panorama (Although the Panorama has been more unreliable recently). The Meliá Habana and Meliá Cohíba are reliable in terms of sale of cards at least but are sometimes overwhelmed resulting in poor service.

Outside Havana, options are more limited and even though most major hotels will have their own internet cafes, the speed of access is often enough to make you dream of your old dialup connection back home!

Does Skype work in Cuba?

Skype does work in Cuba from a limited number of locations that offer wi-fi service. Periodically, attempts have been made to block this; however, it does seem to function reasonably well from hotel lobbies such as the Parque Central or the Panorama in Havana.

Will my cell phone work in Cuba?

NO...ETECSA, the national phone company, has roaming agreements with most major international carriers (excluding US carriers).

Can I purchase a Cuban SIM card to use in my own phone?

NO...you must use an "unblocked cell phone", or a Cuba-ready cell phone

Purchasing Cuba Cell Phone Service

You will need to show your passport and you will need to pay CUC 3 per day for this service. In order for your phone to be able to use the Cubacel SIM card, it will need to be unlocked and to operate on the 900 MHz frequency. You will need to simply top up your phone through purchasing pay-as-you-go Cuban phone cards, which generally retail at CUC 10 or CUC 20 per card. A Cuban cell phone may cost you around \$80.00 plus connection of the Cell phone may cost around an additional \$75.00. Talk to your Explore International advisor for less expensive options.

Preparation

We recommend that you prepare as a team and individually. Team training is essential to make sure that everyone understands the purpose, priorities and demands of the mission. It helps the team to bond and provides information on what to expect. Team members can then take time to reflect individually on God's Call to the mission field.

What to Bring

Remember you should carry at least one change of clothes and your medicine in your carry-on.

Cool and comfortable cotton clothing is a must. Avoid polyester. For church services, men usually wear long pants and casual shirts. Women may wear casual dresses or skirts and blouses. Make modesty a priority with all the clothing you bring to wear in public, in church and in the villages. A good pair of walking shoes will be your best friend. Bring sturdy work shoes. Do not go barefoot anywhere, and do not wear open-toed shoes in the rural areas. If there is a question of certain cultural requirements in dressing, please direct your questions to the Explore International mission team coordinator.

We recommend that you don't bring or wear expensive watches or other flashy jewelry. Ladies, do not wear your fine jewelry. If you have a diamond and/or large engagement ring and/or wedding ring – leave it at home. If you particularly want to wear a wedding ring, select a simple, narrow band or an inexpensive ring.

You will be allowed two (2) pieces of carry-on luggage which will contain all of your clothing and personal items. One can be a small wheeled suitcase (40 pounds maximum weight & overall dimensions - length+width+height - of 45 inches); the second one can be a backpack with an overall dimension of 36 inches (length+width+height). In addition to this you will be responsible for checking two 50-pound duffel bags.

Due to the current security guidelines, we strongly encourage you to place any liquids, gels, paste or creams into a zip-lock bag clearly marked with your name. Bring these items to your "packing party" so they can be placed in the duffel bags. Include such items as your toiletries (soap, shampoo, deodorant, hand gel, contact lens solution, and shaving cream), insect repellent and sun block.

SAMPLE CHECKLIST:

Passport & money	Bible, journal, pens
Flashlight, camera, extra batteries	Toiletries; antibacterial hand gel
Medications - malaria preventive & antibiotic (optional)	Two empty water bottles to use during the week
clothing - refer to next section for explanation	Sunglasses, hat, & sunscreen
Modest sleepwear	Modest swimwear
Insect repellent	Tennis shoes &/or work shoes
Personal snacks/comfort foods	Sandals, flip-flops, water shoes
DO NOT BRING ANY VALUABLES OR electrical appliances such as hair dryers or shavers.	DO BRING FLEXIBILITY AND PATIENCE.



Cultural Courtesy

It is important to understand, honor and respect the culture. Insensitivity and ignorance can hinder (or completely counteract) the effectiveness of the team. Remember that cultures are different. Different is not wrong or bad – just different. Flexibility is the key. Be prepared for differences and inconveniences. We must be careful not to complain or make negative comments about the Cuban people, food or customs. Our actions often speak louder than our words. Remember, we are there to share the love of Jesus, not to share the virtues of American culture.

Cubans are a friendly, loving people, more relationship-oriented or event-oriented than time-oriented. Appointments are flexible and activities are not governed by a strict timetable. This often frustrates people from the U.S. who are often time and task-oriented. When in doubt concerning proper conduct, you should consult the Explore International team guide or team leader. You would not want anything to affect your Christian testimony.

A Cuban's personal space is smaller than most of us in the U.S. are used to; everyone shakes hands when greeting and polite hugging is not uncommon. It is extremely important not to show discomfort. We may not be speaking the same verbal language, but body language is universal.

Medical information

Medical Services

Medical services in Cuba are not as easily available as in the U.S. There will be many times that we are not in range of medical facilities or doctors.

Medicines

Bring all of your prescription medicines in original packaging. Do not assume that you can get prescription medicine in Cuba. Bring non-prescription medicine (ibuprofen, etc.) as needed. Pack all prescription medicine in your carry-on.

If you are prone to carsickness, please bring appropriate medicine (Dramamine, etc.).

Immunizations

None are required for Cuba.

Emergencies

Bring any medication you will need with you. Advise the Explore International short-term mission coordinator of any special medical needs you have before you leave. If you become ill enough to need medical attention, or in case of a serious injury, your local missionary will know where and how to get help. If he or she is not available, someone from the mission team will transport you or make arrangements for you to return to the States.

Most US-based medical insurance plans will not apply in a foreign country. All missionaries must purchase traveler's medical insurance. This insurance will cover the cost of medical care and medical evacuation, if required.

How Can I Donate To Explore International's Ministries in Cuba?

You can donate via our website (see Ways to Give), or make a check payable to International and mail it to:

Explore International
PO Box 546135
Miami, Florida 33154