PACK LIGHTLY

HAVANA TO SANTIAGO, CASH IN HAND

Cuba

How to move through Cuba on paper money, patience, and a working plan for the parts that do not work like anywhere else.

p. 07 Why your card will not work here, and what to bring instead

p. 35 The 12 categories that let US travelers in legally

p. 15 Where the music is real and where it is a show for the bus tour

37 PAGES USD PRICES TOURIST CARD REQUIRED EDITION 2026.07

Start here

the shape of a Cuba trip, what it costs, what to sort first


HABANA VIEJA, COLONIAL CORE

Cuba runs on a different clock than the rest of the Caribbean. Habana Vieja's colonnades and 1950s Chevrolets sit a few hours from Trinidad's cobbled colonial streets and Vinales' tobacco valleys, but getting between them means booking ahead, carrying cash, and accepting that the internet is not always there. None of this makes the country hard to enjoy. It makes it a place that rewards a plan over improvisation, and pays that plan back with live son music on a Trinidad rooftop and classic cars idling on the Malecon at dusk.

The shape of a trip

Most visitors land in Havana, spend three to four days on Habana Vieja and the Malecon, then head west to Vinales for tobacco country or east along the colonial spine through Cienfuegos and Trinidad. Two weeks covers Havana plus one region well; three reaches Santiago de Cuba.

What a day costs

A budget day runs about 50 USD: casa particular room, paladar meals, local transport, one activity. Mid-range doubles that to roughly 100 USD with private guesthouses and organized day trips. Both numbers assume cash, since cards rarely help here.

Sort before you fly

Buy the tourist card, confirm your OFAC category if traveling from the US, and bring more cash than feels comfortable. There is no ATM backup plan that reliably works for foreign visitors, so this step is not optional.


1950S CHEVROLET, THE MALECON

CASA PARTICULAR BREAKFAST

HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

Contents

tap a line to jump straight there

01 The country 04

02 Where to go 08

03 What to do 16

04 Routes and itineraries 19

05 When to go 23

06 Practical 25

07 Safe and smart 29

08 Tools, print cards, sources 32

QUICK JUMPS

Cash, connectivity, and the rules 07

The soundtrack and the century that made it 15

Do's and don'ts 31

01

The country

The route worth flying for, the scores behind the trip, and the cash-and-connectivity rules that shape everything else in Cuba.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Your trip on one page 05

Cuba at a glance 06

Cash, connectivity, and the rules 07

Your trip on one page

14 days recommended · 45 to 190 USD/day · best Nov to Apr

A first Cuba trip works best as a loop: Havana for the cars and the colonial core, west to Vinales for tobacco valleys and slower days, then back through Havana or east along the coast to Cienfuegos and Trinidad for music and colonial architecture without the resort crowd. Varadero sits off that loop entirely, a beach strip best treated as its own separate trip.

THE ROUTE

Havana day 1-4
→ 2.5h bus or taxi →
Vinales day 5-6
→ 4-5h colectivo →
Cienfuegos day 7-8
→ 1.5h drive →
Trinidad day 9-11
→ 4-5h Viazul →
Havana (return) day 12

BUDGET PER DAY

Backpacker	52 USD
Standard	100 USD
Comfort	200 USD

BOOK FIRST

01	Flights, 6 to 8 weeks out	Aviasales
02	Casas particulares, 2 to 3 weeks out	Booking.com
03	eSIM, install before departure	Saily

BEST MONTHS

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec

best: dry, warm, low storm risk · shoulder: rain increases, prices drop · hurricane season, worst Sep-Oct

Cuba at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

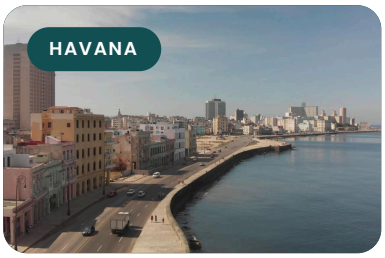
Tourist infrastructure	45
Safety	75
Budget friendly	70
Nature	70
Food and drinks	60
Culture	90

Budget travel	50 USD/day
Mid-range	100 USD/day
Luxury	200 USD/day

CULTURE · CITY · BEACH · NATURE

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-07

SIX FRAMES OF THE TRIP













Cash, connectivity, and the rules

how money and internet actually work here

Cuba is a cash economy for visitors, full stop. US-issued cards do not work at all, and cards from most other countries fail often enough that nobody should rely on one. Euros are the easiest foreign currency to change, though the informal exchange rate moves and can differ sharply from the official one. Internet comes through ETECSA wifi hotspots in parks and hotel lobbies, paid for with Nauta scratch cards or a tourist SIM, not through an always-on data plan. US travelers face an additional layer: tourism is not a legal reason to visit, so a trip has to qualify under one of 12 OFAC-authorized categories.

Bring more cash than the trip length suggests

Budget the full trip in cash plus a buffer for unplanned days, since there is no reliable ATM backup for foreign cards. Euros are the most exchangeable currency; US dollars incur a penalty rate at official exchanges.

Expect internet, not data

Wifi lives in designated hotspots: parks, plazas, hotel lobbies. Buy Nauta cards at an ETECSA office or a tourist SIM on arrival, and plan around offline stretches rather than fighting them.

US travelers need a category, not a visa waiver

Most use Support for the Cuban People, which requires a full daily schedule of activities with locals and avoiding entities on the US Cuba Restricted List. Keep receipts and an itinerary; US law requires records for five years.

This shapes where you stay and eat

Casas particulares (private guesthouses) and paladares (private restaurants) put money directly with Cuban families and sidestep restricted state-run hotels and venues. They are also, in most cases, simply better than the state alternative.

MORE ON THE SITE

The full country hub sits at the Cuba hub, and the day-by-day breakdown of what things cost is in the Cuba travel budget guide.

02

Where to go

Six regions, one loop and one outlier. Pick the colonial spine over the beach strip unless the beach strip is the whole point.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Havana 09

Vinales 10

Trinidad 11

Cienfuegos 12

Santiago de Cuba 13

Varadero 14

The soundtrack and the century that made it 15

Havana

colonial capital · 4 nights minimum · year-round



Skip this. The fixed hour-long classic car circuit every hotel desk pushes. A 20-minute ride along the Malecon gets the same photo for a third of the price.

Habana Vieja earns the UNESCO listing: restored plazas, balconied streets, and a density of architecture that rewards two full days of walking before the guidebook checklist even matters. Vedado adds the university, the Malecon at sunset, and a more residential pace. Convertible-top Chevrolets are everywhere and mostly overpriced for what they are, a photo op with a fare attached.

Habana Vieja core

Plaza Vieja, Plaza de la Catedral, and the restored colonnades. Walk before the checklist.

The Malecon

The seawall promenade at sunset. Locals gather here more than at any museum.

Vedado

University of Havana, a slower residential pace, and the city's better paladares.

Classic cars

Everywhere, and mostly overpriced. Agree the fare and the route before you get in.

GO DEEPER

The full Havana write-up ranks the neighborhoods and sights in more detail.

Vinales

tobacco valley · 2 nights · best Nov-Apr



MOGOTES OVER TOBACCO FIELDS

Skip this. The group jeep tours that stop at three overlapping viewpoints. A half-day horse ride with a farm family covers the same valley with more context and fewer people.

Limestone mogotes rise out of red tobacco fields west of Havana, and the town runs almost entirely on casa particular stays and horseback or hiking tours into the valley. It is the clearest look at rural Cuba on a standard itinerary: working farms, cigar rolling demonstrations, and a pace that slows down fast once you arrive.

The mogotes

Limestone karst formations that define the valley's skyline; best seen from a farm-side vantage.

Cigar rolling demonstrations

Working farms show the process start to finish; buy direct rather than from a street tout.

Horseback and hiking tours

The valley on foot or horse, with a farm family, beats a jeep on every measure.

Las Terrazas

An eco-village and rainforest day trip east of Vinales, on the way back toward Havana.

READ ON City picks in the Vinales write-up, and the day trip east in the Las Terrazas guide.

Trinidad

colonial gem · 2 nights minimum · year-round



Skip this. Staying only one night. Trinidad after the tour groups clear out, around 6pm, is a different and better town.

The best-preserved colonial town in Cuba: cobblestone streets, pastel facades, and Plaza Mayor lit up most nights with live music spilling out of open doorways. Playa Ancon sits 12 kilometers south for a beach day that does not require leaving the region. Two nights is the minimum to see the town properly and catch it after the day-trip buses leave.

Plaza Mayor

The historic center, live music spilling from open doorways most nights.

Casa de la Musica

An open-air stage off the plaza, no ticket required, most nights of the week.

Playa Ancon

A beach day 12 kilometers south, no need to relocate for it.

Cobblestone streets

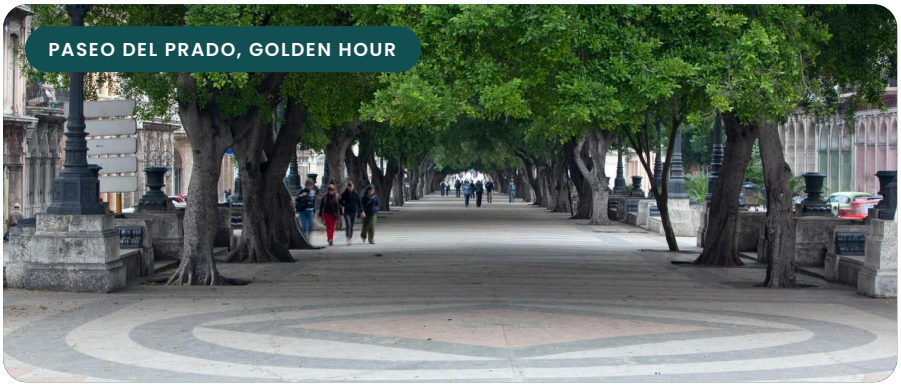
Pastel colonial facades, best walked slowly after the day-trip buses leave.

GO DEEPER

The full Trinidad write-up covers sugar-trade history and the beach day in more detail.

Cienfuegos

bayfront city · 1-2 nights · year-round



PASEO DEL PRADO, GOLDEN HOUR

Skip this. Adding more than two nights unless the bay itself is the draw. The historic core is walkable in half a day.

A French-founded port city on a wide bay, with neoclassical architecture along Paseo del Prado that looks more European than the rest of Cuba. It works best as a one or two-night stop between Vinales and Trinidad rather than a destination on its own, but the waterfront promenade at golden hour is worth the detour.

Paseo del Prado

Neoclassical facades along the promenade, most European-looking street in the country.

The bay at golden hour

Wide, calm water and a waterfront walk worth the stop on its own.

French colonial core

The historic center is walkable in half a day, then move on.

Between Vinales and Trinidad

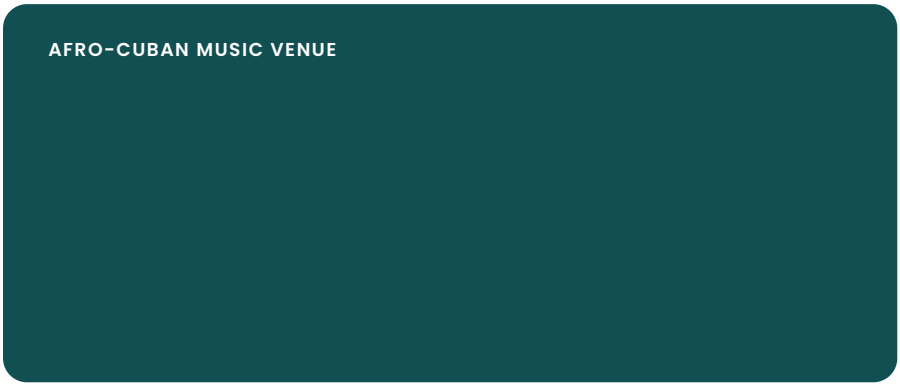
Its natural role on the loop: a stopover, not a destination.

GO DEEPER

The full Cienfuegos write-up covers the bayfront walks in more detail.

Santiago de Cuba

music heartland · 2-3 nights · best on 10+ day trips



Skip this. The whole detour if the trip is under 10 days total. The distance from Havana eats too much of a short itinerary.

Cuba's second city and the birthplace of son, with a livelier and more Afro-Cuban musical scene than Havana's more tourist-facing venues. It sits far east, a 12 to 14-hour bus ride or a short domestic flight from Havana, which is why most first-time visitors skip it. Worth the extra days on a two-week-plus trip, not on a one-week one.

Son montuno's birthplace

The root of salsa came out of these eastern hills; the live scene still shows it.

Casa de la Trova

A trova institution, priced for the price of a mojito rather than a ticket.

Getting there

12 to 14 hours by bus, or a short domestic flight from Havana.

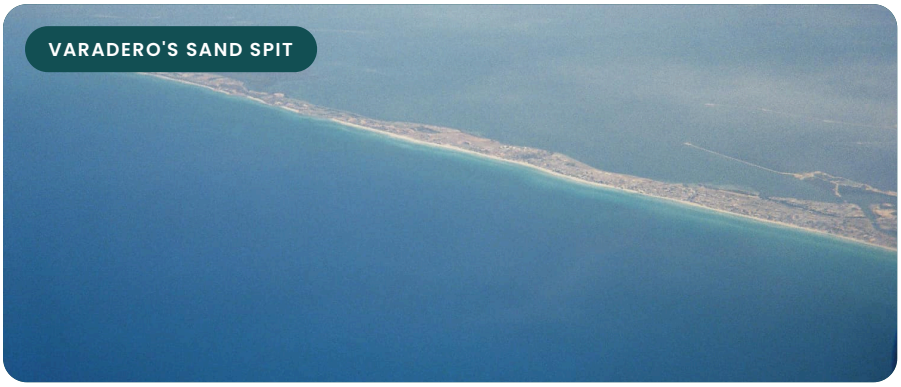
Worth it on longer trips

Add it on a two-week-plus itinerary; skip it on a one-week one.

READ ON The full Santiago de Cuba write-up, and the flight logistics in the domestic flights guide.

Varadero

resort strip · beach-only add-on · year-round



Skip this. If the trip's goal is Cuba itself. Book it only as a standalone beach week, not as a stop on a culture-focused route.

A 20-kilometer sand spit lined with all-inclusive resorts, good for a beach-only add-on and genuinely excellent white sand. It is also the least representative part of the country: a separate economy, separate infrastructure, and minimal contact with the Cuba described everywhere else in this guide.

20 kilometers of sand

Genuinely excellent white sand, densely lined with all-inclusive resorts.

A separate economy

Resort infrastructure runs apart from the rest of the country; minimal overlap.

Snorkel and reef access

Reef trips run direct from the resort strip; book on the ground.

Book it as its own trip

Not as a stop on a culture-focused route through the rest of Cuba.

READ ON The full Varadero write-up, dive sites in the Cuba diving guide, and the wider keys in the islands of Cuba guide.

photo: Wikimedia Commons

The soundtrack and the century that made it

music, revolution, and the streets that carry both

Havana's restored colonial core was built on Spanish colonial wealth, fell into decades of decay after 1959, and has been rebuilt block by block since Habana Vieja earned UNESCO status. That history sits directly behind the music: son and trova grew out of the same eastern towns as the 1950s political ferment, and the 1959 revolution reshaped who owned the venues where Cubans played it. The result today is a country where live music is not a tourist add-on but the default soundtrack of an evening out.

Son, trova, and where they still live

Son montuno, the root of salsa, came out of Santiago de Cuba's eastern hills. Trova's ballad tradition still plays in small Havana and Trinidad clubs most nights, often for the price of a mojito rather than a ticket.

Buena Vista Social Club, thirty years on

The 1997 album put aging Havana musicians back on stage worldwide. Some of the original venues still book live acts, though most touring bands now play for visiting audiences rather than local ones.

Colonial wealth, revolutionary neglect, careful restoration

Spanish colonial trade built the plazas and cathedrals; decades of limited investment after 1959 left many facades crumbling; a UNESCO-backed restoration since the 1980s has brought blocks back one at a time, still ongoing.

Where to hear it without the tour-bus version

Fabrica de Arte Cubano in Havana mixes galleries with live sets in a former cooking-oil factory. Trinidad's Casa de la Musica runs an open-air stage off Plaza Mayor most nights, no ticket required.

SEE ALSO Venue context in the Havana write-up and the Trinidad write-up.

03

What to do

What the paladar kitchens actually cook, and the fast facts worth carrying in your pocket.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Cuban food, honestly 17

Tips and fast facts 18

Cuban food, honestly

paladares over state menus, every time

Cuban food carries the scars of decades of rationing and import shortages, and state restaurants still reflect that: thin menus, inconsistent stock. Paladares, privately run since regulations loosened, are where the actual cooking happens, family kitchens turning out the same dishes with real seasoning and fresh ingredients. Rice and beans anchor most meals, pork shows up constantly, and rum closes the night.



Ropa Vieja ROH-pah bee-EH-hah

10-20 USD · paladares, everywhere

Shredded, slow-braised beef in tomato sauce, the closest thing to a national dish. Cheaper at a casa particular dinner than at a restaurant table.



Moros y Cristianos MOH-rohs ee krees-tee-AH-nohs

4-8 USD · standard side

Black beans and rice cooked together, often included with a main course rather than charged separately.



Congri kohn-GREE

4-7 USD · Santiago, Trinidad area

The eastern-Cuba cousin of moros y cristianos, made with red beans instead of black.



Lechon Asado leh-CHOHN ah-SAH-doh

8-16 USD · Sunday special

Slow-roasted whole pig, the centerpiece of celebrations and a common Sunday paladar plate.



Tostones tohs-TOH-nehs

3-6 USD · street snack

Twice-fried green plantain, salted and served as a side or a stand-alone snack.



Cuban Sandwich SAHND-weech koo-BAH-noh

4-8 USD · tourist menus

Ham, roast pork, cheese, and pickles pressed on Cuban bread. A Miami-diaspora invention more than a Havana staple; expect it on tourist menus, not everyday ones.

GO DEEPER

The full dish-by-dish breakdown, including rum, sits in the Cuban food and drinks guide.

Tips and fast facts

the short list that saves the most friction

None of this is complicated once it is written down. The friction in Cuba is almost always a missing piece of preparation rather than a real obstacle, so this page collects the pieces that matter most before you leave the hotel each morning.

CAPITAL	LANGUAGE	TIMEZONE	POWER PLUGS
Havana	**Spanish**	**CST**	**Type A, B**
colonial core, coast	little English outside hotels	UTC-5	110V and 220V both in use

EIGHT THINGS WORTH KNOWING BEFORE DAY ONE

- [ ] Download Maps.me offline before arrival. Google Maps and navigation fail without cell service.
- [ ] Bring a cash stash that never touches your wallet. Keep 50 to 100 USD separate for emergencies.
- [ ] Buy Nauta wifi cards at ETECSA offices or hotels, then log on through park and plaza hotspots.
- [ ] Book Viazul intercity buses two to three days ahead online. Seats sell out fast in high season.
- [ ] Use small USD bills, 1 to 5, for tipping, market stalls, and street food. Large bills draw attention.
- [ ] Stay in Havana, Vinales, Trinidad, or Santiago de Cuba for the clearest contrast between regions.
- [ ] Haggle gently at markets and with unofficial taxi drivers, but keep the negotiation low-key.
- [ ] Pack every medication you might need. Cuban pharmacies run bare more often than not.

NAUTA WIFI CARD QUEUE

VIAZUL BUS TERMINAL

04

Routes

The loop drawn as a map, a 7-day version for a first taste, and the 12 to 14-day version Cuba actually needs.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The loop as a map 20

7 days: Havana and Vinales 21

12-14 days: to Trinidad and Santiago 22

The loop, as a map

bus and colectivo west, longer legs east

The core loop runs on Viazul buses and shared colectivos, cheap and bookable a few days ahead. Santiago de Cuba sits far enough east that it needs its own extension, by long bus or a short domestic flight, not a day trip from the loop.



core loop, bus or colectivo · optional extension, long bus or flight · schematic, not to scale

WHAT EACH LEG COSTS TO BOOK

Havana to Vinales Viazul bus or taxi · 2.5h **~12 USD**	**Vinales to Cienfuegos** shared colectivo · 4-5h **~35 USD**	**Cienfuegos to Trinidad** private car or bus · 1.5h **~15 USD**
Trinidad to Havana Viazul bus · 4-5h **~25 USD**	**Havana to Santiago de Cuba** long bus · 12-14h **~50 USD**	**Havana to Santiago de Cuba** domestic flight **~120 USD**

fares: indicative one-way per person, cash only, book Viazul seats 2-3 days ahead in high season

7 days: Havana and Vinales

the shortest trip that still makes sense

Seven days is the floor for a first Cuba trip: enough for Havana to click and one region beyond it, not enough for the colonial spine east. Book the tourist card and OFAC paperwork before this week starts, not during it.

1	**Arrive Havana** HAV · day zero	Land, change euros at a CADECA, settle into a casa particular. An early Malecon walk before dinner.
2	**Habana Vieja on foot** full day	Plaza Vieja, Plaza de la Catedral, the colonnades. A 20-minute classic car ride at sunset, not the full circuit.
3	**Vedado and live music** university district	University of Havana, a slower paladar lunch, trova set at night at Fabrica de Arte Cubano.
4	**Bus to Vinales** 2.5h · afternoon in the valley	Viazul or taxi west, casa particular check-in, an easy walk into the tobacco fields before dark.
5	**Vinales valley** horseback tour	A half-day horse ride through a working farm, cigar rolling demonstration, mogote views.
6	**Return to Havana** bus back	A second pass through Habana Vieja markets and galleries, less rushed than day one.
7	**Last night, Havana** departure	Fabrica de Arte Cubano or a Plaza Vieja rooftop before the flight home.

Confirm the OFAC category and buy the tourist card before this week starts. Neither can be sorted on the ground.

Swap day 6 for Cienfuegos if the tobacco valley was enough Vinales, and you want one more town on the way back.

12 to 14 days: to Trinidad and Santiago

the route Cuba actually needs

Cuba rewards more days than most Caribbean itineraries: the distances are longer, the pace is slower, and Santiago de Cuba only makes sense once the rest of the loop is already covered. Fourteen days is the recommended length; this route covers it end to end.

1-3	**Havana** HAV · colonial core	Habana Vieja, Vedado, the Malecon at sunset, one live music night at Fabrica de Arte Cubano.
4-5	**Vinales** tobacco valley	Tobacco fields on horseback, cigar rolling demonstration, a farm-stay night if one is available.
6-7	**Cienfuegos** bayfront stopover	Paseo del Prado, the neoclassical core, a staging point before the day trip south.
8-9	**Trinidad** colonial streets	Plaza Mayor live music, cobblestone streets, a Playa Ancon beach day 12 kilometers south.
10-12	**Santiago de Cuba** domestic flight or long bus east	Afro-Cuban music venues, Casa de la Trova, the birthplace of son on its own turf.
13-14	**Return to Havana** final night	Flight or bus back, one final Habana Vieja evening before departure.

→ Three weeks or more: extend with Varadero as a separate beach add-on, not folded into the culture loop.

Under 10 days total: drop Santiago de Cuba and swap it for a second night in Trinidad instead.

FULL DAY-BY-DAY VERSIONS Online: the 14-day route and the 28-day route for a slower trip.

05

When to go

Dry season versus hurricane season, and the shoulder months worth trading rain for lighter crowds.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Three seasons, one clear window 24

Three seasons, one clear window

Nov to Apr is the answer for most trips

November through April is the dry season and the best window: lower humidity, minimal rain, and the peak months for live music festivals in Havana and Santiago. May through October brings heat, daily humidity spikes, and the Atlantic hurricane season running June through November, with the highest storm risk in September and October. Shoulder months either side of the dry season trade a little rain for lighter crowds and cheaper casa rates.

Best: Nov–Apr

DRY SEASON

Dry, warm, and the safest window against tropical storms. Peak live music festival months in Havana and Santiago.

Shoulder: May, Oct

BETWEEN SEASONS

Rain increases but crowds and casa prices drop. A reasonable trade for a quieter trip.

Avoid: Jun–Sep

HURRICANE SEASON

Peak humidity and storm risk, worst in Sep-Oct. Build flexibility into any booking made in this window.

Public holidays and Santiago de Cuba's Carnival cluster around July and January; check dates if festival timing matters.

Traveling Jun-Sep anyway: keep transport bookings flexible and monitor storm tracking in the week before departure.

SEE ALSO

Festival dates in the Cuba public holidays guide.

06

Practical

What a day costs in cash, what goes in the bag, and how to get between towns without a car of your own.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Casa particular versus state hotel 26

What goes in the bag 27

Getting around, and where to stay 28

Casa particular versus state hotel

what a day costs, itemized, cash only

Casas particulares run cheaper and better than the state alternative almost every time, and the money lands directly with a Cuban family instead of a state-run venue. These three receipts show a day at each spending level, all cash, all captured against the same 2026 pricing.

A DAY IN CUBA

* backpacker *

casa particular room	25.00
street breakfast	2.00
paladar lunch	6.00
street dinner	5.00
local transport	3.00
one activity	12.00
rum, evening	4.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~52 USD**

pack-lightly budget data · 2026-07

A DAY IN CUBA

* standard *

private casa, en-suite	50.00
casa breakfast	incl.
paladar lunch	12.00
paladar dinner, with drinks	18.00
private taxi rides	10.00
guided day trip, split	8.00
live music cover	2.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~100 USD**

pack-lightly budget data · 2026-07

A DAY IN CUBA

* comfort *

boutique hotel, half	90.00
hotel breakfast	incl.
restaurant lunch	25.00
dinner, good table	35.00
private driver, half day	30.00
private guide, half day	incl. above
rum flight, two	20.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~200 USD**

pack-lightly budget data · 2026-07

All three columns assume cash. There is no card fallback if the daily total runs short.

06

SEE ALSO

A longer breakdown by category sits in the Cuba travel budget guide.

What goes in the bag

cash stash, offline maps, and medication first

Three items matter more here than in most countries: a separate cash reserve, offline maps downloaded before arrival, and every medication you might plausibly need. Cuban pharmacies run bare more often than not, and there is no reliable backup for any of the three once you land.

DOCUMENTS AND MONEY

- [ ] Passport, valid 6+ months, plus the tourist card (usually bought at the gate)
- [ ] Cash for the full trip plus a buffer, mostly euros, some USD for penalty-rate exchanges
- [ ] A separate cash stash of 50 to 100 USD that never touches your daily wallet
- [ ] OFAC-authorized travel category documentation and receipts (US citizens)
- [ ] Travel insurance card. Cuba requires proof of insurance for entry

CLOTHING, HEALTH, AND TECH

- [ ] Lightweight, breathable shirts and pants (humidity is high)
- [ ] Sturdy walking shoes for colonial-town cobblestones
- [ ] High-SPF sunscreen, reapplied often in tropical sun
- [ ] Prescription medications in original bottles, doubled if possible
- [ ] First-aid basics: bandages, antibiotic ointment, antidiarrheal
- [ ] Insect repellent (dengue and mosquitoes are present)
- [ ] Offline maps downloaded before arrival (Maps.me)
- [ ] Headlamp or small flashlight (blackouts happen outside Havana)
- [ ] Universal power adapter and a portable battery
- [ ] Reef-safe sunscreen and water shoes for a beach or snorkel day

GO DEEPER The full season-by-season list in the Cuba packing list, what to wear where in the dress code guide, and the shot schedule in the vaccinations breakdown.

Getting around, and where to stay

Viazul buses and colectivos, casas over hotels

Viazul is the tourist bus network: cheap, air-conditioned, and bookable online a few days ahead in high season. Shared colectivos (private cars running a fixed route) fill the gaps Viazul does not cover and often run faster. Renting a car is possible but expensive and paperwork-heavy; most visitors do better on buses, colectivos, and the occasional private taxi.

Havana

casa 25 USD mid 50 USD comfort 90 USD

Habana Vieja for the colonial core on foot, Vedado for a quieter residential base near the university. Check what a room costs around Habana Vieja before you commit; the dorm scene runs through Hostelworld.

Trinidad

casa 25 USD mid 50 USD comfort 90 USD

Stay inside the colonial core, a short walk from Plaza Mayor, over the newer edges near the bus terminal. Book two nights minimum. See what the old town is charging tonight, or check the dorm scene on Hostelworld.

Mid-range casas and boutique hotels across every region, with free cancellation while your plans are still moving.

Find Stays on Booking.com

CAR RENTAL: WRITTEN ADVICE, NOT A BOOKING LINK

Rent early if you want a self-drive option; fleets are small and book out fast in high season. Cuba drives on the right. Fuel shortages are common and can affect a rental as much as a Viazul schedule, so build slack into any driving plan rather than a tight itinerary.

SEE ALSO

Route and airline options in the domestic flights guide.

07

Safe and smart

Low violent crime, real logistical friction. Where the two get confused, and the short list of do's and don'ts that keeps a trip simple.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Safety, honestly 30

Do's and don'ts 31

Safety, honestly

low violent crime, real friction around scarcity

Violent crime against tourists is low, and Cuba scores well among Caribbean destinations for physical safety. The real friction points are logistical rather than dangerous: running short of cash with no ATM backup, losing internet access at an inconvenient moment, and fielding persistent jineteros, street hustlers steering tourists toward specific paladares or casas for a commission. None of these are safety risks. All of them are worth planning around.

Jineteros and steered recommendations

Politely decline unsolicited restaurant or casa suggestions from strangers on the street; they are usually paid referrals, not genuine tips.

Petty theft in tourist areas

Standard city precautions apply in Havana and Varadero: bag awareness in crowded plazas, no valuables left visible in a parked car.

Scarcity, not danger

Menu items running out, pharmacies with limited stock, and fuel shortages affecting bus schedules are common. Build flexibility into transport bookings rather than tight connections.

Medical care and insurance

Cuba requires proof of travel insurance for entry, and public hospitals vary widely in equipment. Confirm a policy that covers medical evacuation before departure.

TOOLS THAT HELP

Cross-check a specific area against the Travel Safety Map, and compare policies with the Travel Insurance Comparison tool.

Do's and don'ts

the short list that keeps a Cuba trip simple

Ten things that matter. The first few save the trip from running out of money or signal; the rest keep it running smoothly on the ground.

DO

Bring all the cash you need in advance

Euros and USD work best. Exchange at official casas de cambio, CADECA, not on the street.

DO NOT

Rely on credit cards or ATMs

Many decline even with a cash-side account behind them. Cards are a backup, never a plan.

DO

Book casas particulares

Better value and a more authentic stay than the state hotel alternative, almost every time.

DO NOT

Expect fast or reliable internet

Plan activities without depending on connectivity; wifi is a hotspot, not a data plan.

DO

Carry a Nauta wifi card

Use public parks and hotel lobbies for internet. Download maps offline before arrival.

DO NOT

Photograph military or government sites

Police, government buildings, and strategic locations are off-limits without permission.

DO

Keep receipts if you are a US citizen

Document your OFAC-authorized travel category alongside payment and flight records.

DO NOT

Overpay jineteros for tours or transport

Agree on a price in CUP or USD beforehand; a firm no ends most street pitches quickly.

DO

Use Viazul buses for intercity travel

Book seats ahead online; they fill up fast, especially on the Havana to Trinidad run.

DO NOT

Assume a US dollar card works anywhere

Bring cash from home or exchange euros on arrival; do not build a backup plan around plastic.

07

RELATED

Full etiquette and money context back on the cash and connectivity page.

08

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide was built from, the cut-out cards for your wallet, the questions that come up most, and how this guide is funded.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Take the live tools with you 33

Print cards: cut, fold, take 34

Frequently asked questions 35

A note on the links, and sources 36

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same Cuba data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

Cuba: 52 USD/day backpacker, 200 USD/day comfort.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/



Country Map

Every stop in this guide mapped, from Vinales to Santiago.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/country-map/



Visa Checker

Tourist card rules and OFAC categories checked by passport.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/visa-checker/



What to Eat and Drink

Ropa vieja from 10 USD, plus every dish in this guide priced.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/local-food-and-drinks/

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale · credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

SPANISH · ESSENTIALS

Hello	hola
Thank you	gracias
Yes / No	si / no
How much?	cuanto cuesta?
I would like...	quisiera...
Where is the bathroom?	donde esta el bano?
Sorry / excuse me	perdon
Help!	ayuda!

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EMERGENCY · CUBA

Police	106
Fire	105
Ambulance	104

My casa host: _____

Address: _____

Insurance #: _____

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live Cuba hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.

pack-lightly.com/cuba/

Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is back at the casa.

Ask your casa host to write the address in Spanish on the back. Drivers read a hand-written address faster than a screen.

Frequently asked questions

the eight questions that come up before every Cuba trip

Can US citizens travel to Cuba?

Yes, but only under one of 12 OFAC-authorized categories. Tourist travel alone is not allowed. Categories include family visits, humanitarian work, and educational exchanges. Keep receipts and documentation to prove your category.

Will my credit or debit card work?

Unlikely. US-issued cards do not work at all. Non-US cards often fail even with a PIN. Bring USD or euros in cash and exchange at official CADECA offices for the best rates.

Is there wifi or cell service?

Poor and unreliable. Buy a Nauta wifi card and use public hotspots: plazas, hotels, malls. Download offline maps, guides, and entertainment before you arrive.

Is it safe to travel to Cuba?

Yes, generally. Petty theft happens in Havana and tourist areas. Avoid walking alone late at night, keep valuables hidden, and use licensed taxis. Violent crime against tourists is rare.

What currency should I bring?

USD or euros in cash. Exchange at CADECA offices, not tourist shops or taxis. Keep small bills, 1 to 20, for tipping and street transactions.

Do I need a visa or tourist card?

A tourist card (tarjeta del turista) is required for all visitors. Most airlines sell these at the gate for 25 to 30 USD. US citizens must also have OFAC authorization.

When is the best time to visit?

November to April. Dry season, warm (70-80F), fewer hurricanes. May through October is hot, humid, and hurricane season; prices run higher in winter.

What should I eat?

Ropa vieja, moros y cristianos, lechon asado, tostones, and Cuban sandwiches. Paladares serve the best food. Avoid street meat unless you see it cooked fresh in front of you.

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Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured July 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

A note on the links, and sources

disclosure · why this guide is free · where the numbers come from

This guide is free because some of the booking links inside it are affiliate links. When a reader books a stay, a flight, or an eSIM through one of those links, the merchant pays Pack Lightly. The reader pays the same price either way.

The pick comes before the partner. A stay area or a booking platform is chosen for the trip it makes, and where a partner link exists for it that link is used; where none does, the plain link still points there. Varadero is still called the least representative region even though it is the easiest one to book, and casas particulares keep the recommendation over state hotels even where no partner link exists for the casa itself.

Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

Partners linked in this edition: **Aviasales · Booking.com · Saily · Hostelworld · Stay22 · via Travelpayouts**

SOURCES

1. Country scores and cost estimates: pack-lightly country-comparison dataset, 2026-07.
2. Budget figures: pack-lightly budget-calculator category pricing, captured 2026-07.
3. Entry rules: Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs consular portal and US Treasury OFAC Cuba travel categories, retrieved 2026-05.
4. Climate and best-time bands: pack-lightly best-travel-time dataset, 10-year seasonal averages.
5. Pack Lightly Cuba cluster pages, retrieved 2026-07: hub · budget · food · vaccinations.

What changed in edition 2026.07: first release on the v2 design standard. Next planned update: January 2027. Not covered here: cruise arrivals, medical tourism, and group-tour logistics.

Links can outlive a print run. If one stops working, the live version of every page in this guide sits under pack-lightly.com/cuba.

This file is versioned; the edition is on the cover. The next planned update replaces this file at the same download.