Explore the essentials of Cuba on a trip that will take you to the heart of the island and to the most sought-after paradieses of the Caribbean

A holiday in Cuba is a safe bet, especially if you start off with a visit to Havana, including a tour of Old Havana and its surroundings. All seasoned with mojitos, daiquiris, jazz tunes and, of course, joie de vivre. The capital is great fun and you’ll have a wonderful time discovering its oldest side and its modern counterpart. This trip will take you to the heart of the island, to Santa Clara and Remedios, where you’ll meet the true Cubans. You’ll enjoy hanging out with the locals and chatting about anything and everything. Near here, Sancti Spiritus and Trinidad are awaiting you with open arms. They’re like chalk and cheese: one shy and laid-back, and the other volcanic and passionate. And it’s in Trinidad where you’ll have the chance to visit one of Cuba’s most famous beaches: Playa Ancón. It’s simply stunning and will seduce you the minute your toes touch the warm sand. What’s more, its historical quarter will hypnotise you both day and night, which is when the Trinidadians come together to party until the small hours. The surroundings of Trinidad also cherish amazing natural treasures. The most striking is the Topes de Collantes Nature Park, which practically enshrines the outstanding El Nicho waterfall. Nature also rewards you with places like Cienfuegos, which provides access to the Montemar Grand Park, on the Zapata Peninsula. It’s the largest swamp on the island and the perfect place to spot crocodiles, snorkel off its Playa Larga, or simply enjoy a day among hundreds of natural species. A packed trip where you can unwind, explore and have great fun... all on a once-in-a-lifetime holiday. And everything at your own pace, because thanks to your rental car, you rule the roost.

Departures:
from October 2020 till September 2021

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Departments:
Havana, Santa Clara, Sancti Spiritus, Trinidad, Cienfuegos and Playa Girón.

Categories:
Family.

Day 1: City of origin - Havana

Flight departure from the city of origin to Cuba. After the necessary arrivals and customs formalities (which can take up to two hours), you can pick up your rental car and start discovering the pleasures of the capital of this Caribbean country. Unearth the secrets that Havana cherishes! A short stroll through the Old Town will give you an insight into one of the best-preserved colonial quarters in Latin America. Overnight stay in Havana.

Day 2: Havana

Your first day in Havana will make you realise that you’re in a city with pure magic, fiery passion and oodles of charm. Whatever time you get up, you’ll see that there’s always life here and always something to do. Old Havana is the heart of the city and the ideal place to start your visit. Depending on where your hotel is located, you can leave your rental car there and wander around on foot, but if you’re further away from the centre, we recommend parking around Avenida del Puerto and then exploring the Old Town on foot. The Basilica of San Francisco de Asís and its plaza are a great place to start off. They’re also near the Havana Rum Museum, Plaza Vieja and the Luz Caballerro Park. You’ll enjoy walking around here because you’ll soak up the essence of Havana and discover everyday life in the city. A short stroll away are Plaza de Armas, the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception, its plaza, and - of course - the "Bodeguita del Medio". This is a bar with heaps of tradition when it comes to making mojitos, so - even though some say it has become a tourist attraction - we suggest heading there for the first mojito of the day. The heat will already be kicking in by this time of the day in Havana, so a refreshing drink won’t go amiss. After this, seek out the best-known santera priestess in the area. You’ll instantly recognise her thanks to her colourful appearance and the "cigar" perennially attached to her mouth, and she’ll gladly tell you what the future holds for
you. Before lunch, head back to the car and drive to Central Park and El Capitolio. As an aperitif, nothing better than a strawberry daiquiri at "Floridita", a place that transcended Cuban borders thanks to Ernest Hemingway, a very frequent client during his stay on the island. For lunch, there's nowhere better than at a "paladar". Not all are the same, so check out reviews from other travellers and you're sure to find a great one. A "paladar" is a restaurant run by a family and not by a company, so the service tends to be much friendlier and the food is homemade. The secret lies in choosing the right one. After lunch, you can drive along the Malecón to the United States Embassy and the Tribuna José Martí, while making sure to stop at "Coppelia" to experience one of the most appetising homemade ice creams on planet Earth. You'll find this parlour in the district of El Vedado and it's out of this world. As well as being simply enormous, it serves a vast array of flavours, making it very difficult to choose what to order. After your ice cream-induced bliss, you can pop over to the Plaza de la Revolución, return to the Malecón to admire the sunset, see how the 'habaneros' live it up after dark so you'll also be close to the La Cabaña fortress to experience the 9 p.m. o'clock cannon-firing ceremony. When it's over, have some dinner and then listen to some live jazz at clubs such as "La Zorra and El Cuervo", where this music genre is experiencing a revival thanks to the talent and panache of young Cuban musicians. If you want to dance to Caribbean beats and the latest international music, nothing better than at nightclubs like Delirio Habanero or La Fábrica de Arte Cubano. Overnight stay in Havana.

Day 3: Havana - Santa Clara - Remedios - Santa Clara

You'll have walked a good few miles yesterday, so today you'll actually appreciate some time sitting down in the car. A wonderful day lies ahead today. We recommend leaving Havana first thing in the morning to be able to drive in daylight for the whole day. As you'll know, driving in Cuba at night isn't advisable due to the lack of lighting on the roads, so set off for Santa Clara aware that you'll be on Autopista 1 for almost four hours, without stops. The motorway is a dream from most drivers. There isn't usually much traffic, and in some sections there are up to four lanes in each direction. Of course, don't put your foot down too much because there are speed controls throughout the journey. Keep your eyes on the road, too, as you'll come across bicycles, pedestrians and animal-driven vehicles. This is your first day driving in Cuba, so take it easy. That said, the drive is amazing. Put on some Cuban music, wind down the windows and enjoy driving alongside stunning classic cars. The motorway doesn't pass through many towns as such, so you'll have to take a slight detour to visit everything you want. Admire the landscape, very different from the one you're used to seeing back home, and take advantage of any chance to meet the Cubans. They're marvellous people and will prove this at all times. You'll notice that outside Havana the approach to tourists is much more natural and laid-back. Our proposals for today, although it's more important to arrive in Santa Clara before dusk, include a stop at Jaguey Grande, in Matanzas, and maybe even a detour to Lajas and Marta Abreu then back to the motorway via Ranchuelo. From here, you'll be very close to Santa Clara. The capital of the Villa Clara province forms part of the history of Cuba and the Revolution. Not just because here lies the world's most famous Argentinian doctor (a certain Che Guevara), but also because it witnessed the downfall of the Batista Regime in 1958 and, in fact, you can visit the barracks used by soldiers of the dictator's army before waving the white flag to Che's men. But calculate well how long you spend in Santa Clara now, as you've still got your visit to Remedios ahead. The best idea is to take in the essentials of Santa Clara - Plaza de la Revolución and the museum and monument to the Tren Blindado. After lunch, head over to Remedios to tour the town and make your way back in daylight. If you manage your time well, you'll still have a few hours to stroll around Santa Clara again before going to sleep. To help you plan your day, there are 44 kilometres between Santa Clara and Remedios. Times that by two, for the return trip, and set aside two hours to explore the town. It's famous for being the gateway to Cayo Santa María, but there's much more to it than just that. Its main square, Plaza Martí, is wonderful and you can stroll through the old quarter, which enshrouds the plaza in a marvellous colonial atmosphere. The Church of San Juan Bautista is only a few minutes away, as is the Parrandas Museum. If you're travelling in December, you'll be in luck because you can enjoy these carnival-like street parties in first person but, if not, you ask a villager to explain the area's quintessential fiesta to you, then you're sure to have a friend for life. Back in Santa Clara, drive along Avenida Marta Abreu to the Leoncio Vidal Park. Make sure you take a photo alongside the statue of Che with a child. What's more, there are alfresco theatre performances here, and every Thursday and Sunday, the municipal orchestra plays on the stage in the park. If you want to soak up the best of Santa Clara nightlife, make sure you pay a visit to El Mejúnje, which will show you how Cubans let their hair down in this part of the island. Overnight stay in Santa Clara.

Day 4: Santa Clara - Sancti Spiritus - Trinidad

There was quite a bit of motorway driving yesterday, so today we suggest heading towards Sancti Spiritus on the so-called Carretera Central highway. This will take you through Placetas and Cabaiguán before arriving. You'll be on the road for approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes (almost 78 kilometres), so you can drive at a leisurely pace. When you get to Sancti Spiritus, look closely at the town because it's the twin sister of Trinidad, today's final destination. Its appearance is similar and equally charming, but it's particularly nice because you'll hardly find any other tourists here. The original Cuban atmosphere still reigns tight here, as the island's opening up to tourism has yet to make a dent on the town. You can stroll through the old quarter, which ensouls the plaza in a marvellous colonial atmosphere. The Church of San Juan Bautista is only a few minutes away, as is the Serafin Sanchez Park. You'll see that it's always teeming with people, which is because it's one of the few places with public WiFi. But the most attractive area of Sancti Spiritus starts on Avenida 26 de Julio. This avenue provides access to several museums and Plaza Honorato, a really quaint little square. Once you've seen the town, you can head over to Trinidad on the Carretera 12 road. Of course, you can stop off en route to see the Zaza Reservoir, the largest man-made lake on the island. It's not a natural beauty as such, but it's interesting to see the catches it rewards to lovers of freshwater fishing. If you're a fan of fishing, you really shouldn't miss out on this visit. And then next stop is Trinidad. You'll have the whole day to explore the town tomorrow, so head down to Playa Ancón now. It's simply heaven on earth. Stretching as far as the eye can see, it boasts white sands and turquoise waters. Palm trees provide natural shade for beachgoers. If you're OK with time, you can go snorkelling or diving surrounded by fish and coral reefs. Admire the sunset and head back to Trinidad, which is less than 20 minutes away. Any recommendations? You can explore the old town, centred around Plaza Mayor. Don't worry if the four architectural gems in the square are closed, as you'll definitely end up here again tomorrow. Nearby are some of the city's most iconic restaurants, so you can dine around here and check out Trinidad's nightlife before retiring to your hotel. Overnight stay in Trinidad.

Day 5: Trinidad and surroundings

Depending on the time you got to bed yesterday, you can have a well-deserved lie-in or head out to explore Trinidad. You're in Cuba, so don't expect the city to come to life too early. Starting the day out in Plaza Mayor will give you the chance to discover the Municipal Historical Museum, the Museum of
Cuba: Route through the Pearl of the Caribbean, tailor-made by car

Colonial Architecture, the Church of the Santísima Trinidad and the Romantic Museum. If you don’t want to enter any of these sights, make sure at least you see them from the outside. The multicoloured facades of the houses here are in themselves a true spectacle. It's so great to amble through the pedestrianised centre (and also the non-pedestrianised streets) and admire the kaleidoscope on public show. The atmosphere in the city is outstanding. Similar to the one you found in Sandi Spiritus, but livelier and more vivacious. People from Trinidad love living in the street, cycling everywhere and selling their wares at outdoor markets. So, take a break from the road today and wander around the winding streets. One of the best experiences of a trip to Cuba is to rub shoulders with the locals, sparking up conversations with them over an ice-cold beer or two. Many of them are highly-educated people and with a gift of the gab, so a great time is always on the cards. As for excursions, there are a host of interesting ones in the vicinity of Trinidad. Besides Playa Ancón (which we mentioned in yesterday's suggestions), nearby attractions include the Topes de Collantes Nature Park and the Sierra de Escambray, probably the best place in Cuba for hiking. Even though the road isn't the best on the island, it will give you access to natural pools that are always a great option for cooling off (some charge for the pleasure, though). Another option outside Trinidad is the Valle de los Ingenios, east of the city on the Carretera 12, where you can walk through the miles and miles of sugarcane plantations. They still retain the traditional method of harvesting the cane and you can observe the production process. It is very interesting indeed. If the sun still hasn't gone down, you'll have another chance to admire the sunset at Playa Ancón. And if you saw it yesterday, it doesn't matter. Every day here is special. You can keep the night going for as long as you want at the Casa de la Musica, located on the famous steps near Plaza Mayor. There's an amazing atmosphere all through the night, with Cubans and tourists mingling in a very entertaining fusion. Overnight stay in Trinidad.

Day 6: Trinidad - Cienfuegos

We suggest departing from Trinidad on the Carretera 152 (and not the 12 as usual) to cross the Topes de Collantes Nature Park and visit El Nicho, its most memorable attraction. This is a drive of just over 100 kilometres, so it’s not a particularly demanding route. To make the day even more interesting, you could listen to songs by Bartolomé Maximiliano Moré Gutiérrez, better known as Benny Moré. This star of Cuban music was one of the leading figures of mambo and son cubano, and one of the greatest ambassadors of Cienfuegos. “Qué bueno baila usted” or “Bonito y sabroso” are just a couple of our suggestions for the drive. His vocal power will blow you away. In fact, his name is lent to a biennial music festival held in Cienfuegos in the month of September which is unparalleled on this side of Cuba. You can venture into the Topes de Collantes Nature Park to the sound of Moré (admission to park not included), a huge green lung that is home to a large number of endemic species. Get ready to spot over a hundred species of birds, deer, the smallest species of frogs on the planet... You’ll love it, especially when you get to El Nicho, a waterfall that words struggle to define. Bring your swimwear and a towel, as you won’t be able to resist the call to take a dip in its waters. That said, you can’t bathe in El Nicho itself as it’s a protected area, but just a stone’s throw away are several pools and waterfalls for your enjoyment. Once you’re done, you can drive over to today’s final destination. Forget about the hustle and bustle of Trinidad, as Cienfuegos is poles apart. You’ll be leaving behind a buzzing city for a much calmer and laid-back area, but just a stone’s throw away are several pools and waterfalls for your enjoyment. Once you’re done, you can drive over to today’s final destination.

Day 7: Cienfuegos - Montemar Park - Havana

About 200 kilometres along the central highway separate Cienfuegos from Havana. The most obvious route could take you to Playa Girón, La Caleta Buena, Guama and then Havana. However, you’re more than likely to take a detour out to Montemar Grand Park, on the Zapata Peninsula. (Note: Admission not included). This is the best day of the week for nature and diving lovers, as the largest wetland in the area is awaiting. It is accessed via Australia. Yes, you read that right! There’s a sugar-producing village called Australia, which is the gateway to the wildest wetland in the whole of Cuba. We’re talking about more than 4,000 square kilometres of swamps, mangroves and forests full of life. They’re brimming with endemic birds, species that migrate from the United States and others native to the island. There are said to be more than 190 different birds in the Park, along with manatees, native crocodiles and the ever-curious Cuban gar, a fish with an alligator’s head. There are several trails within the Montemar Park, and it’s best to get information in Australia itself, where you can hire a guide if needs be. These guides will take you to the most popular places, but also (if you wish) to areas suitable only for the most intrepid travellers, given that there are swamps difficult to navigate. The Ciénaga de Zapata is one of them. What’s more, the Zapata Peninsula offers alternatives such as Boca de Guamá, a replica of Polynesia with a fascinating crocodile farm. Scuba diving and snorkelling enthusiasts will find their paradise off Playa Larga, right in the so-called Bay of Pigs. This heavenly bay is ideal for any type of diving thanks to its great visibility and rich marine flora and fauna. It’s also perfect for canoe fishing and fly fishing, so it has attractions for everyone. There’s a two-hour drive between Playa Larga and Havana, some 175 kilometres on the motorway, so work out when you’ll have to drag yourself out of the sea to get to the capital before the sun goes down. Remember that driving in Cuba without the aid of sunlight is quite tricky, so it’s much safer to calculate times well to minimise risks. Overnight stay in Havana.

Day 8: Havana - City of origin

Arrival at the airport with enough time to drop off your rental car and flight back to the city of origin. Night on board.

Day 9: City of origin

Arrival. End of the trip and our services.

Services included in the trip

- Return flight.
- Stay in selected hotel in Havana.
- Selected meal plan in Havana.
- Stay in selected hotel in Santa Clara.
- Selected meal plan in Santa Clara.
- Stay in selected hotel in Trinidad.

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Selected meal plan in Trinidad.
Stay in selected hotel in Cienfuegos.
Selected meal plan in Cienfuegos.
Rent-a-car.

Services NOT included

- Visa to enter in Cuba.
- Possible toll charges.

Important remarks

- Triple rooms in Cuba are generally rooms with twin beds or a double, in which a folding bed is installed to accommodate the third person. Due to the inconvenience this causes, we advise against using this option as far as possible.
- Driving through Cuba: 1. Driving through Cuba is relatively easy, as traffic tends to be light and the roads - with the odd exception - are in a good state, although lanes are not always marked out. There are very few signs and the use of maps or GPS is essential. 2. Another important factor when timing your journey is street lighting. It's usually non-existent or very sporadic, so driving during the day is one of the best decisions you can make on the island. 3. In Cuba, the vehicle stock is different from other places in the world. Cars from the 1950s will whizz past you all the time, somewhat surprising until you realise that they have brand new engines and not the originals. You should also be alert on main roads and even motorways, because you'll definitely come across bicycles or carts pulled by donkeys or horses. 4. Remember that police controls (by the Policía de Tránsito) are frequent and they'll fine any conduct that break the Cuban Traffic Code. 5. As for petrol, it's best to fill up the tank at each major destination to avoid the risk of heading to a petrol station en route and finding it closed. 6. Driving on the outside lane isn't the done thing, so don't despair, keep patient and learn to live with it. 7. Speed limits: 50 km/h in built-up areas; 60 km / h on a dirt track, 90 km / h on roads and 100 km / h on the highway. 8. Please check with your international vaccination centre about the recommended healthcare measures in Cuba. 9. The proposed excursions and tours for each day are purely suggestions, as you can tailor the trip to suit your times, tastes and needs. 10. A credit card is considered a guarantee, so sometimes you will need one for check-in at hotels. 11. Hotels usually have cots available. Otherwise, babies will have to share a bed with an adult. 12. To pick up your rental car, you'll need a credit (not debit) card in the name of the person who made the booking, who must also be the named driver of the vehicle.