

Snappy Guide

ROUTES FOR INDEPENDENT TRAVELLERS



2-3 WEEKS HOLIDAY

CUBA

WHAT IS IN IT?

- ▶ **First page tips:** our top reasons to go

- ▶ **Itineraries:** a number of recommended itineraries of where to go and what to see in 2 or 3 weeks.

- ▶ **Our planning tips:** key information and planning tips to help you decide on a holiday destination.

- ▶ **The people:** a page with our take on the people, culture, and your possible interaction.



Travelyard Snappy Guides

Snappy Guides are short introductions and suggested itineraries to a number of countries on a number of continents. You're probably a bit like us: busy with work and can only go away for 2 or maximum 3 weeks at a time. You want to go somewhere different, are looking for an adventure rather than a lie-down and are flexible and up for a challenge. You want to be wowed by spectacular landscapes, learn about new cultures and have life-changing experiences to boot.

Considering where to go, when the world offers so much choice, can be overwhelming, time-consuming and difficult. Buying numerous guidebooks can be expensive and daunting because there is simply too much information to wade through.

The Travelyard Snappy Guides aim to fill the gap between wondering where to go and buying the full-sized guidebook to your chosen destination.

We therefore aim our guides at those with up to three weeks of holiday who:

1. are not sure where to go and need some inspiration; and/or
2. want to know the best places to go and what to do in a 2 to 3 week visit.

What Is Travelyard?

Travelyard is our yard - the place where we, two people who are mad about travelling, write and think about travelling when we are not actually in mid flight. Previous 9-5 jobs got in the way so we departed for 2 birthdays to explore the world further. We were so inspired by the possibilities that we want to encourage more people to spend those hard-earned 2 to 3 week annual holidays going off the beaten track.

Travelling to less frequented destinations is easy – you just need common sense, an open, inquisitive mind and a sense of adventure.

Why Should You Trust Our Recommendations?

We are consummate planners. We always want to see the best possible in the time available in each country we visit. Of course it would be nice to see everything in a given country but that is difficult without several years never mind 2 to 3 weeks. What you read is, however, only our view based on our experience and what we have learned from others who have been to the same destination.

1

Our first tips on Cuba

Consider going to Cuba if:

- ▶ You want to see a country that seems to be stuck in the 1950s (but hurry, things are changing fast)
- ▶ You are fascinated by culture - this one is special
- ▶ You want to combine relaxation on a beach or in a nice hotel with a window into a fascinating and distinctive culture
- ▶ You are an Ernest Hemingway fan and/or like your mojitos
- ▶ You want to dance the salsa – or at least take photographs of others doing so - at 11am on the streets of Santiago de Cuba

Don't even think of going to Cuba if:

- ▶ You are fussy about your food. Cuba is not renowned for fine dining.
- ▶ You can't cope with car fumes and dirt. Old cars and low-grade fuel leave their mark on air quality in larger towns and cities
- ▶ You can't do without your Western luxuries for a couple of weeks. You won't find any of your usual treats in the thinly stocked shops
- ▶ You are a political conservative who will be offended by anti-American government propaganda. (The people will greet any American travellers as they would anyone else.)



What made Cuba special for us:

- ▶ The faded and dilapidated grandeur of old colonial Havana;
- ▶ Seeing the omni-present reminders of the iconic revolutionistas Che Guevara and Fidel Castro and see how the regime has survived 50 years since revolution;
- ▶ The 1950s cars that are kept on the road through sheer determination, the music and the people.
- ▶ Staying in casas particulares (private houses). It is the best way to really meet Cubans – and normally offers the best of Cuban food.

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Snappy itineraries

Set out below are a number of itineraries for your 2 to 3 week holiday in Cuba that we think are fantastic. We give brief details about each town or activities on the itinerary where we first mention them. If they appear again in later itineraries they are not described again and you need to look back for the relevant details.

ITINERARY 1

FROM HAVANA TO THE COUNTRYSIDE, THE BEACH AND EVEN SOME DIVING

2 weeks

If you only have 2 weeks, want to spend time in Havana, check out the countryside and laze about on the beach, this one is perfect for you. The beach is undeveloped, laid back and with few mod cons: perfection?

Day 1 Arrive in Havana



Havana

This vibrant, attractive city is unlike any other. Colonial buildings, faded to the point of collapsing (about 300 do each year), beautifully restored old 1950s motors, 'camel' buses that look like a mix between a cattle truck (and are frequently packed as such) and a shipping container with windows, music and colour. Watch and soak in the atmosphere, whether it's wondering down the 8km Malecon along the coast, sipping a beer in the sensitively restored squares of the old town - Habana Vieja (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), standing speechless in the Plaza de la Revoluci3n with its monuments, ministries and huge Che Guevara mural, or spending hours in the fascinating Museo de la Revoluci3n.

Day 2 Explore Havana

Day 3 Havana

Day 4 Havana

Day 5 Drive east to Pinar del Rio and then on to a hotel at Viñales

Pinar del Rio

Pinar is a relaxed city in the centre of Cuba's main cigar growing region. It's fun to visit a tobacco farm, especially in harvest time (January- March)

Viñales

27km from Pinar is the attractive village and beautiful landscape of Viñales. Known for its green valleys with haystack-shaped hills scattered about. It's a great place to relax and there is good walking and riding in the surrounding countryside.

Day 6 Explore Viñales

Day 7 Viñales

Day 8 Drive to Maria La Gorda

Maria la Gorda

Named after a memorable marooned Venezuelan prostitute, there is just one hotel here providing simple but clean and modern accommodation along the palm tree-lined beach. It is renowned for its diving and snorkelling. You can either eat in the bar or in the buffet dining room, which feels a bit like good school dinners but adds to the unique Cuba atmosphere, best described as simple and relaxed. Like everywhere else in Cuba, get here before the end of the communist regime and rampant commercialisation sets in. When we visited the coral had been badly damaged by a hurricane but nature repairs itself rapidly. The hurricanes often arrive in September and October.

Day 9 Maria La Gorda

Day 10 Maria la Gorda

Day 11 Maria la Gorda

Day 12 Long drive back toward Havana stopping overnight in Soroa

Soroa

Soroa is a mountain resort 95km west of Havana. It is known for its rain and the resulting lush greenery and orchids. It's relaxing to visit the Orquidareo where you might be shown around by a knowledgeable orchid professor hoping to augment his salary with a tip. The 350 species of orchids bloom in winter (November-April). Nearby is good walking and a waterfall where you can swim.

Day 13 Relaxing start to the day in Soroa, drive back to spend last night in Havana

Day 14 Fly home

ITINERARY 2

FROM BUSTLING HAVANA TO HUSTLING (BUT BEAUTIFUL) TRINIDAD

2 weeks

This 2 weeks itinerary takes you from the bustling streets of the capital to the pretty, well preserved town of Trinidad where you can also spend a bit of time on the beach.

Day 1 Arrive in Havana

Day 2 Havana

Day 3 Havana

Day 4 Havana

Day 5 Drive to the pleasant town of Sancti Spíritus for 2 nights, stopping at Santa Clara en route. If you leave Havana late consider staying overnight in Santa Clara and doing a day trip to Sancti Spíritus from Trinidad.

Santa Clara

Santa Clara is the final resting place of the legendary revolutionary Ernesto Che Guevara and a group of his men killed by US-backed gorillas in Bolivia in 1967. There is also a monument and a small museum with photographs and other Che memorabilia, much of which you will have seen at the Museo de la Revolución in Havana.

Day 6 Relax in and explore Sancti Spíritus

Sancti Spíritus

A small pretty, relaxed, untouristy market town with colonial squares, churches and winding streets. It's 86km from Santa Clara.



Day 7 One hour drive to Trinidad (70km). Stay in either Trinidad or the neighbouring village of La Boca

Trinidad

This beautiful UNESCO World Heritage Site is packed with tourists (and hustlers). If you stay in Trinidad you will be able to feel its vibe better after the tourist buses have left. It is a very attractive small colonial town where the town folk live in attractively coloured houses. Go slightly outside the tourist triangle, and you'll find boys playing football in the streets, mules tethered outside houses and life continuing unfazed by the tourist hordes.



Playa Ancon

The reason for the buses in Trinidad is Playa Ancon, a purpose-built tourist resort 12 km from Trinidad. It's traditionally been a popular package destination for Canadians but also now an increasing number of Britons.

Wanting a couple of days rest we decided to splash out but it was a bit uninspiring and too institutional and bleak for our tastes. We then moved to La Boca, a few kilometres up the coast for a couple of days in a casa particular and wished we had gone sooner.

Day 8 Explore Trinidad

Day 9 Relax on the beach at La Boca

La Boca

La Boca is a tiny village 4km from Trinidad. There are a number of licensed houses offering accommodation and fresh seafood meals and a couple of small beach cafes. There's not much there which is probably why we loved staying. It's a good base from which to explore Trinidad; you can even walk there in about 40 minutes.

Day 10 Trinidad/ La Boca

Day 11 Walking day in the Topes de Collantes or day trip to Cienfuegos

Topes de Collantes

Close by is the health resort town of Topes de Collantes. Hills, forests and walks are the main attractions.

Cienfuegos

A busy port and industrial centre, there is also some interesting 19th century architecture. The drive along the coast from Trinidad is interesting.



Day 12 Last day of relaxing.

Day 13 Drive back to Havana and spend your last night drinking mojitos and listening to Cuban music.

Day 14 Fly home

ITINERARY 3

FROM HAPPENING HAVANA TO SWINGING SANTIAGO DE CUBA

3 weeks

This is a 3-week itinerary from Havana, via the last resting place of Che Guevara, to Cuba's second city of Santiago de Cuba - famed for being more laid back and having an even more lively music scene than the capital. These two cities are 884km apart.

Day 1 Arrive in Havana

Day 2 Havana

Day 3 Havana

Day 4 Havana



Day 5 Drive to Santa Clara, the last resting spot of Che Guevara, and then on to Sancti Spiritus where you spend the night, unless you arrive late, in which case spend the night in Santa Clara.

Day 6 Havana

Camaguey

Camaguey is Cuba's third largest city retains a pretty town centre, with squares, parks and colonial buildings.

Day 7 Explore Camaguey

Day 8 Drive on to Santiago de Cuba

Santiago de Cuba

Where else can you dance the salsa to live bands at 11am? There are musical institutions all over central Santiago de Cuba and a real feeling of creativity, music and culture. Old palaces, museums, a beautifully restored fort overlooking the sea and various connections to revolution whether against the colonial Spanish or the most recent with its legendary figures and cult personalities will keep you busy.

Day 9 Explore Santiago de Cuba

Day 10 Santiago de Cuba

Day 11 Santiago de Cuba

Day 12 Santiago de Cuba

Day 13 Explore the surrounding countryside or coast or drive to Guantanamo.

Guantanamo

Only 86km from Santiago doesn't offer much to see. Its infamous sprawling US naval base can be viewed from the 320m Mirador de Malones. Great place to demonstrate – but best to do it inside the car where no-one can see you.

Day 14 Drive back to Camaguey - spend the night

Day 15 Drive on to Trinidad

Day 16 Explore Trinidad

Day 17 Spend the day relaxing on the beach close to la Boca

Day 18 Trinidad/ la Boca

Day 19 Trinidad/la Boca

Day 20 Drive back to Havana.

Day 21 Fly back home



ITINERARY 4

CUBAN HIGHLIGHTS

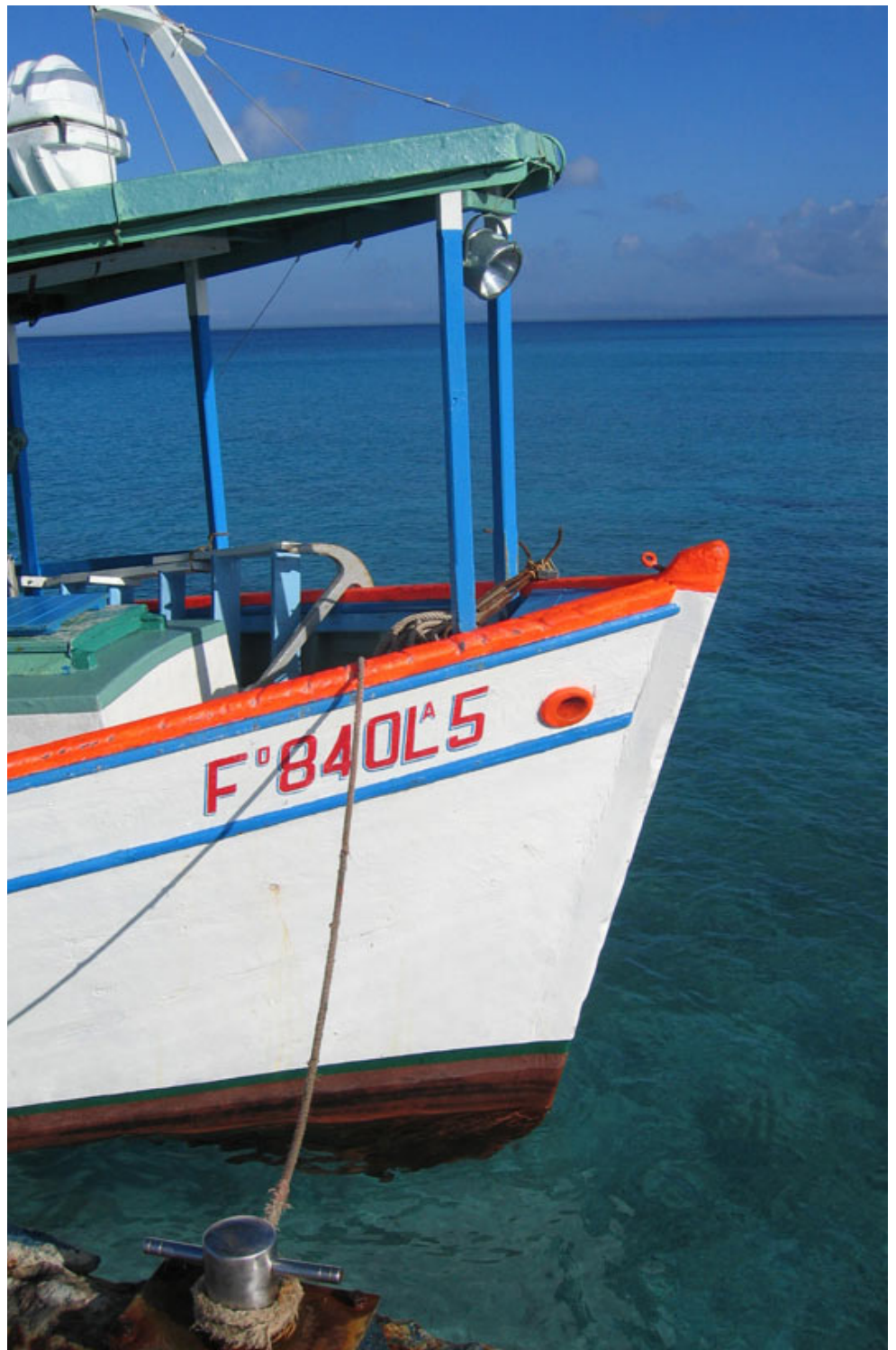
3 weeks

This is a 3-week itinerary which takes in most of the highlights of Cuba and involves driving the length of the island and more (1250km plus). It is do-able but can be tiring and so if you get more time off, try to stretch this itinerary giving yourself longer wherever you feel like it. When you are not on the “autopista” you will be driving single file and if you get behind an ox cart distances can take longer to cover than you think.

Day 1	Arrive in Havana
Day 2	Havana
Day 3	Havana
Day 4	Drive to Viñales
Day 5	Go on a walk or horse ride around the haystack hills in Viñales
Day 6	Continue to Maria la Gorda
Day 7	Relax on the beach in Maria la Gorda
Day 8	Maria la Gorda
Day 9	Maria la Gorda
Day 10	Drive to Soroa
Day 11	Drive to Santa Clara, the last resting spot of Che Guevara and then on to Sancti Spiritus
Day 12	Spend the morning exploring Sancti Spiritus and continue to Camaguey where you spend the night
Day 13	Drive to Santiago de Cuba



Day 14	Explore Santiago de Cuba
Day 15	Santiago de Cuba
Day 16	Santiago de Cuba
Day 17	Drive to Camaguey, spend the night before continuing to Trinidad
Day 18	Arrive in Trinidad
Day 19	Explore Trinidad
Day 20	Drive back to Havana
Day 21	Fly home



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Our planning tips

1. Best area
2. Best time
3. A bed for the night
4. Transport
5. Visas
6. Money
7. Phoning mum
8. Don't get sick
9. Women travellers
10. Irritating things
11. The right bible

1. Best area

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean and has 5746 km of coastline, with a number of good natural harbours, bays and beaches. Cuba has beautiful but not spectacular scenery - 75% of the country is fairly flat and fertile, used for cattle and crops. The east of the island is mountainous. There are no large rivers or lakes. You visit Cuba for its culture and society, or possibly its beaches. It is difficult to select highlights but for us the towns of Havana and Santiago de Cuba (884km apart) are both fantastic, unique experiences. The simple, peaceful beach life at Maria la Gorda was also very special. Trinidad (Unesco World Heritage Site) and its surrounding beaches and countryside are very popular – deservedly so. As you will see in "Itineraries" below there are various possible combinations of ways to visit these places and more.

2. Best time

Cuba lies within the Northern Hemisphere. Temperatures shift little from summer to winter and the average temperature is 25.5 C.

Summer = May to October: the rainy season

Hurricane Season = June to November (the worst being September – October)

Winter = November to April = dry sunniest season

Havana and Pinar del Rio in the South West are hit most by hurricanes. The east of the island is a little warmer than the west.

The high tourist season is generally December to April, though Cubans take their holidays in July and August so some areas will also become more crowded then.

3. A bed for the night

Budget/Middle range - Casas particulares are people's family homes licensed by the Cuban authorities to accept foreigners. They are generally the cheapest and best value for money places to stay. They vary in quality but we stayed in a number of very comfortable ones, many with en suite bathrooms. They charge around US\$26 per night per room (usually including breakfast). Most also encourage you to eat dinner, which cost us about US\$8 – US\$10 per head (usually for 3 courses).

Expensive/Luxury - International quality hotels can be found in Havana, Santiago de Cuba and other tourist hotspots, particularly the beach resorts aimed at foreign tourists such as Playa Ancon close to Trinidad and Varadero. Expect to pay

Should you book ahead? It can be a hassle to book all accommodation and can reduce flexibility. We have never had a problem finding accommodation on arrival. It is advisable in high season or when attending a festival. We always recommend booking the first place you stay in. You could then book the next place a day or two before you depart the current location.

4. Transport

We really recommend hiring a car in Cuba. There is no better way to feel the pace of the country and see how ordinary Cubans live and get about, especially if you're willing to pick up hitchhikers on their way to and from work. It also gives you complete freedom and allows you to see more of the country than travelling by bus. Do not drive after dusk. We did once, and the experience of dodging other cars, bicycles, children, live stock – all of whom lay equal claim to the road – with no street light in sight while trying to find a casa particular in a town with no street names was probably one of the most hair-raising driving moments ever.

Buses do operate between the main cities but are not always well maintained or very frequent. Cuba is 1250km long, and the paved Carretera Central stretches for 1119km from Pinar del Rio to Guantanamo (Havana to Santiago de Cuba is 884 km). This 2-lane road is an 8-lane autopista between Pinar del Rio to just after Sancti Spiritus. Always book your car in advance; we met some very disappointed tourists. If travelling by bus in high season - especially Cuban holiday season - don't think you will necessarily get on the bus you want. Buy your tickets as soon as you can.

5. Visas



You need to have a tourist card to stay in Cuba for less than 4 weeks. These are usually issued by travel agents or the airline from whom you buy your flight ticket. Officially to obtain one you need to book the first 3 nights' accommodation. Your travel agent may even tell you that you have to do this through them, which is not true. As it is difficult to book a casa particular from abroad many people find themselves splashing out on fairly expensive (US\$100 plus per night) accommodation. If you like taking risks and want to save money you could obtain the tourist card and write the name of an expensive hotel into the address section. This should be ok but we are not guaranteeing you won't meet an overly officious official.

Passports must be valid for at least 6 months from entry.

Check the latest rules before travelling.

6. Money

Currency

Two currencies operate in Cuba:

the Cuban peso (also called moneda nacional) – for use by Cubans; and
the convertible peso (equal in value to the US\$) – for tourists.

Until 2004 the US dollar was the common tourist currency, but the island's policy has since changed and holders of the greenback are now in fact penalised by a much higher exchange commission. But the situation is bound to change again, so check before you leave. The Cuban peso can be difficult for tourists to get of hold of and we found it virtually impossible to spend except on public transport and the odd food stall. Most shops, however 'untouristy', seemed to expect the convertible peso.

What to take

Our tip: every country we have travelled to (last count approaching 70) has had ATMs in key towns and cities which accepted our debit cards. NOT CUBA. Therefore this is the one country where traveller's cheques or credit cards are essential. Due to friction with the US - when we were there commission rates were higher for changing travellers cheques issued by US companies such as American Express and Citibank. The commission on using credit cards was high so we suggest only using them to withdraw cash in banks.

Bargaining

Cuba is not a bargaining nation. Fixed prices are the order of the day - even when hotels seem empty.

7. Phoning mum

Phone

International and national phone calls are easy to make from the blue card telephones in the street (buy a card from hotels, post offices) or in Etecsa telephone centres found in larger towns. International access code is 00 53.

Internet

We only found internet facilities at large international hotels, with connections frequently not working and charges were relatively high.

8. Don't get sick

Rumours encountered?

Cuban food is bad and not always well cooked- someone we met in Havana had managed to pick up a light dose of food poisoning on day 1.

Reality? - no problems encountered by us or our 2 travel companions.

Where did we eat? Places recommended in guidebooks, by locals or travellers

Where did we not eat? Cheap looking roadside food stalls.

What didn't we eat or drink? Tap water, locally brewed alcohol, unpeeled uncooked fruit and vegetables.

Vaccinations

Check with a doctor what are currently recommended. The minimum is likely to include up-to-date tetanus, polio, typhoid and hepatitis A.

Nutrition

A balanced diet helps the body fight infection - viral and bacterial. It can be difficult to eat healthily so we recommend taking multi-vitamins.

9. Women travellers

Cubans would love to experience a foreigner's wealth - at least for a night and ideally would like to get out of the country. We did get attention from Cuban men who hoped that you would go out on a date or at least pay for their entrance to a dance club. A friend fell in love with a Cuban (10 years younger than herself) and unsuccessfully tried to get him out of the country. Prostitution is rife in Cuba. If you are a woman of colour travelling with a pale Anglo Saxon male you may well come in for a bit of hassle until people realise you are foreign and not Cuban.

10. Irritating things

Cuba has the reputation of being a safe country. There are of course pickpockets but this is not as common as in many other countries. The biggest annoyance is hustlers. Street musicians may corner you until you pay over a \$, beggars young and old will want money, pens, sweets. It is difficult to resist but giving in only encourages it more. When wages are so low a doctor could earn less than a beggar.

11. The right bible

We and our friends tried:

Rough Guide Cuba: good but not as thorough as the Lonely Planet

Lonely Planet Cuba: we thought this was excellent

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Get to know the people



Ancestry

The indigenous Indians were treated as slaves by Spanish colonialists and few survived their working conditions past the late 1600s. Instead 800,000 West African slaves were brought in to build Spanish Cuba and work in the mines. Currently about 60% of the population are white, mostly descended from the Spanish, 12% are black and the remaining are “mulatto” or mixed blood.

Lifestyles

More than half of Cuba’s population is involved in agriculture, though there is a sizeable mining industry and tourism is also growing in importance. About 20% of Cuban farmland is cultivated by private farms. Many are small scale and involved in more lucrative crops like tobacco and coffee. The remainder is split between state owned farms and subsistence-like cooperatives. Cubans are very proud of their education and health systems. With near 100% literacy, low infant mortality rates and high life expectancy, they have good reason. The problem is the lack of school books, equipment and medicines.

Traditions

Cuban arts and culture has been promoted and funded. Artists are respected and traditional music and dance encouraged:

Music: is deeply rooted in Cuban culture and is a mix of Spanish and African rhythms. Cuban “son” (country ballads) when combined with other Latin music developed into “salsa” in the 1960s. Such ballads are still sung all over Cuba and you will find it difficult to avoid troubadours and their guitars on the streets of Havana.

Dance: Many well known dance styles originated in Cuba. The rumba was an energetic African dance which in the 1930s developed into the dance known today. When jazz and big bands were added mambo developed. It wasn’t just the Cuban African community behind musical innovation, the Spanish population invented a slow sensual dance during the late 1800s, which in the early 1900s in Argentina became the tango.

Politics

Once we were asked as a joke, who is the slowest bartender in the world, to which the answer was: Fidel Castro, as it has taken him 48 years to make Cuba libre. Fidel Castro is the world’s longest serving leader. Those who speak out are usually arrested and given jail terms but there are no “disappearances” as in many dictatorships. We gained the impression that Cubans are very aware of the benefits of their society in terms of education, health and low crime but would also like some of the Western wealth they hear so much about and see in tourists.

Spirituality

About 40% of Cubans are Catholic (not all practising) and there are a number of Protestant congregations. Freedom of religion is a constitutional right and church services have never been banned, although the churches are careful not to criticise the government. African spiritual beliefs have been mixed with a bit of Catholicism to form specific Afro Cuban religions which are also widely practiced- the largest of which is “Santería.” Interaction

We found most Cubans to be very friendly and helpful. Soon after hiring a car we noticed that many Cubans get around by hitching and so we started to offer lifts. We to meet many Cubans in this way though only a few spoke good English and our London-learned Spanish was very unlike the version spoken on the island. On looking for a venue for an after-dinner drink in Santiago we accidentally walked in on a medical student’s party- they insisted we stayed. We also had several chats with traffic cops after being stopped on the motorway for what they claimed was speeding. Each time after a polite but fairly insistent chat we were let off any fine. When we asked one cop how he knew we were speeding he said in Spanish “my eyes”. He didn’t have any other equipment but in our flash modern tourist car we were going substantially quicker than any of the locals.