

Directory

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ACCOMMODATION

Cuban accommodation runs the gamut from CUC\$10 beach cabins to five-star resorts. Solo travelers are penalized price-wise, paying 75% of the price of a double room.

In this book, budget means anything under CUC\$40 for two people. In this range, *casas particulares* are almost always better value than a hotel. Only the most deluxe *casas particulares* in Habana will be anything over CUC\$35, where you're assured quality amenities and attention. In cheaper *casas particulares* (CUC\$15), you may have to share a bath and will have a fan instead of air-con. In the rock bottom places (*campismos*, mostly), you'll be

lucky if there are sheets and running water, though there are usually private baths. If you're staying in a place intended for Cubans, you'll compromise materially, but the memories are guaranteed to be platinum.

The midrange category (CUC\$40 to CUC\$80) is a lottery, with some stylish colonial hotels and some awful places. In midrange hotels, you can expect air-con, private hot-water bath, clean linens, satellite TV, a restaurant and a swimming pool – although the architecture's often uninspiring and the food not exactly gourmet.

Unsurprisingly, the most comfortable top-end hotels cost CUC\$80 and up for two people. These are usually partly foreign-owned and maintain international standards (although service can sometimes be a bit lax). Rooms have everything that a midrange hotel has, plus big, quality beds and

PRACTICALITIES

- The most common electricity voltage is 110V, 60 cycles, but you'll also find 220V. Side-by-side sockets with different voltage are usually labeled, but always ask. The sockets are suited to North American-style plugs with two flat prongs.
- Commercial laundries are rare. Most *casas particulares* have a machine you can use or there's always hand washing.
- *Granma*, *Juventud Rebelde* and *Trabajadores* are the three national papers. *Bohemia* and *Temas* are two of the best general-interest magazines (in Spanish).
- There are 69 radio stations and three TV channels. Radio Habana (www.radiohc.cu) is broadcast worldwide on the shortwave band; most hotels have satellite.
- Like electricity, the common system is NTSC, but videos are sold in various formats.
- Cuba uses the metric system, except in some fruit and vegetable markets where the imperial system takes over.

BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

linens; a minibar; international phone service; and perhaps a terrace or view. Habana has some real gems.

Factors influencing rates are time of year, location and hotel chain (in this book the chain is always listed after the hotel to give you an idea of what standard/services to expect). Low season is generally mid-September to early December and February to May (except for Easter week). Christmas and New Year is what's called extreme high season, when rates are 25% more than high-season rates. Bargaining is sometimes possible in *casas particulares* – though as far as foreigners go it's not really the done thing. This is not Morocco. The *casa* owners in any given area pay generic taxes and the prices you will be quoted reflect this. You'll find very few *casas* in Cuba that aren't priced between CUC\$15 to CUC\$35, unless you're up for a long stay. Prearranging Cuban accommodation is difficult, but not impossible.

The following chains and Internet agencies offer online booking and/or information:

Casa Particular Organization (www.casaparticular.cuba.org) Reader recommended for prebooking private rooms.

Cubacasas (www.cubacasas.net) Excellent site for *casa* recommendations and general Cuba information.

Cubalinda.com (www.cubalinda.com) Habana-based, so it knows its business.

Gran Caribe (www.grancaribe.cu)

Islazul (www.islazul.cu)

Sol Meliá (www.solmeliacuba.com) Also offers discounts.

Vacacionar (www.dtcuba.com) Official site of Directorio Turístico de Cuba.

Campismos

Campismos are where Cubans go on vacation. There are more than 80 of them sprinkled throughout the country and they are wildly popular (an estimated one million

Cubans use them annually). Hardly 'camping,' most of these installations are simple concrete cabins with bunk beds, foam mattresses and cold showers. Campismos are the best place to meet Cubans, make friends and party in a natural setting.

Campismos are ranked either *nacional* or *internacional*. The first are (technically) only for Cubans, while the latter host both Cubans and foreigners and are more upscale, with air-con and/or linens. There are currently a dozen international campismos in Cuba ranging from the hotel-standard Aguas Claras (Pinar del Río) to the more basic Puerto Rico Libre (Holguín). In practice, campismo staff may rent a *nacional* cabin (or tent space) to a foreigner pending availability, but it depends on the installation, and many foreigners are turned away (not helpful when you've traveled to a way-out place on the pretext of getting in). To avoid this situation we've listed only international campismos in this book.

For a full list of all the country's campismos (both *nacional* and *internacional*), you can pick up an excellent Guía de Campismo (CUC\$2.50) in any Reservas de Campismo office.

As far as international campismos go, contact the excellent **Cubamar** (☎ 7-66-25-23/4; fax 7-33-31-11; www.cubamarviajes.cu; cnr Calle 3 & Malecón, Vedado) in Habana for reservations. If you're adamant to try winging it in a *campismo nacional* try the provincial Campismo Popular office to make a reservation closer to the installation proper (the details of these offices can be found in the relevant regional chapters). Cabin accommodation costs from CUC\$10 to CUC\$20 per bed. Prices at the plush cabins of Villas Aguas Claras (Pinar del Río Province; p198) and Guajimico (Cienfuegos Province; p268) are higher.

Cubamar also rents mobile homes (campervans) called Campertours, which sleep four adults and two children. Prices are around CUC\$165 per day (but vary according to type, season and number of days required) including insurance (plus CUC\$400 refundable deposit). You can park these campers wherever it's legal to park a regular car. There are 21 campismos/hotels that have Campertour facilities giving you access to electricity and water. These are a great alternative for families.

Renegade cyclists aside, few tourists tent camp in Cuba. Yet, the abundance of beaches, plus the helpfulness and generosity of Cubans make camping surprisingly easy and rewarding. Beach camping means insanely aggressive *jejenes* (sand fleas) and mosquitoes. The repellent sold locally just acts as a marinade for your flesh, so bring something strong – DEET-based if you're down with chemicals. Camping supplies per se don't exist; bring your own or improvise.

Casas Particulares

Private rooms are the best option for independent travelers in Cuba and a great way of meeting the locals on their home turf. Furthermore, staying in these venerable and often family-orientated establishments will give you a far more open and less-censored view of the country with its guard down, and your understanding (and appreciation) of Cuba will grow far richer as a result. *Casa* owners also often make excellent tour guides.

You'll know houses renting rooms by the green triangle on the door marked *Arrendador Inscripto*. There are thousands of *casas particulares* all over Cuba and places such as Viñales, Trinidad and Camagüey have 300 or more in a tight vicinity. From penthouses to historical homes, all manner of rooms are available from CUC\$15 to

CUC\$35. Although some houses will treat you like a business paycheck the vast majority of *casa* owners are warm, open and impeccable hosts.

Government regulation of *casas* is intense and it's illegal to rent private rooms in resort areas. Owners pay CUC\$100 to CUC\$250 per room per month depending on location; plus extra for off-street parking, to post a sign advertising their rooms and to serve meals. These taxes must be paid whether the rooms are rented or not. Owners must keep a register of all guests and report each new arrival within 24 hours. For these reasons, you will find it hard to bargain for rooms. You will also be requested to produce your passport. Penalties are high for infractions, and new regulations have recently restricted *casas* to two people (excluding minors) per room and only two rooms per house. Without a marriage license, travelers with Cuban spouses or partners will have a hard time finding accommodation. Most *casas particulares* are very strict about not letting *jineteras* (a woman who attaches herself to male foreigners for monetary or material gain; the exchange may or may not involve sex) back to the rooms, and they'll always assume a Cuban partner is a *jinetera/o* – unless you can prove otherwise.

Due to the plethora of *casas particulares* in Cuba it has been impossible to include

MISIÓN MILAGROS

Misión Milagros (Miracle Mission) is the unofficial name given to a pioneering medical program hatched between Cuba and Venezuela in 2004 that offers free eye treatment for impoverished Venezuelans in Cuban hospitals. By the end of 2005 more than 150,000 Venezuelans had been successfully treated for eye ailments caused by cataracts, glaucoma, diabetes, and other diseases, and, as a result, the program had been extended to at least 10 other Latin American and Caribbean countries including Guyana and Bolivia.

In order to participate in Misión Milagros foreign patients are first diagnosed and selected in their home country before being flown free of charge to Habana for treatment. Here advanced laser technology is able to correct easily-rectified eye disorders and restore obscured or diminished vision within a matter of hours. Allowed time to convalesce in comfort after the operation, newly-sighted patients are given complimentary accommodation in a variety of Cuban hotels and are bussed around for free on a special fleet of Chinese-made Astro buses.

At the time of writing, a large number of tourist hotels were temporarily out of action due to the Misión Milagros program. These included: the Neptuno-Triton, Copacabana, El Megano, Panamericano, Acuario, and El Viejo y El Mar hotels (all Habana); Hotel Pasacaballo (Cienfuegos); Hotel Camagüey (Camagüey); Hotel Sierra Maestra (Bayamo); Hotel Costa Morena, Gran Piedra and Club Bucanero (Santiago Province); Hotel Guantánamo (Guantánamo); and Hotel Guancayabo (Manzanillo). Call ahead to check on updates.

even a fraction of the total in this book. The ones chosen are a combination of reader recommendations and local research, and are listed in alphabetical order. That said, there are plenty of other excellent options around if you have the time and inclination to look.

Hotels

All tourist hotels and resorts are at least 51% owned by the Cuban government and are administered by one of five main organizations. Islazul is the cheapest and only mixed accommodation option that rents to both Cubans and foreigners (at different prices). Although the facilities can be variable at these establishments and the architecture a tad Sovietesque, Islazul hotels are invariably clean, cheap, friendly and, above all, Cuban. They're also more likely to be situated in the island's smaller provincial towns. One downside is the blaring on-site discos that often keep guests awake until the small hours. Cubanacán is a step up and offers a nice mix of budget and midrange options in both cities and resort areas. The company has recently developed a new clutch of affordable boutique-style hotels in attractive city centers such as Sancti Spiritus, Baracoa, Remedios and Santiago. Gaviota manages higher-end resorts including glittering Playa Pesquero which, with 900-plus rooms, is Cuba's biggest hotel, though the chain also has a smattering of cheaper 'villas' in places such as Santiago and Isla de la Juventud. Gran Caribe does midrange to top-end hotels, including many of the all-inclusives in Habana and Varadero. Lastly Habaguanex is based solely in Habana and manages most of the fastidiously restored historic hotels in Habana Vieja. The profits from these ventures go toward restoring the Unesco site. Because each group has its own niche, throughout this book we mention the chain to which a hotel belongs to give you some idea of what to expect at that particular installation. Except for Islazul properties, tourist hotels are for guests paying in Convertibles only. Cubans who are not legally married to foreigners (and have the papers to prove it) are technically not allowed to stay in tourist hotels. The reason for this – it is argued – is to control prostitution (which resurfaced with a vengeance once US dollars were legalized in

1993). Despite the banning of the dollar in November 2004, the prostitution trade has seen no sign of abating.

At the top end of the hotel chain you'll often find foreign chains such as Sol Meliá and Superclubs running hotels in tandem with Cubanacán, Gaviota or Gran Caribe – mainly in the resort areas. The standards and service in these types of places are first class.

ACTIVITIES

As the biggest (and the best!) Caribbean country, with 5746km of coastline, Cuba is known for all things aquatic: scuba diving, snorkeling and deep-sea fishing especially. On land, erosion over the ages has created more than 20,000 caves and a 6km valley blanketed with weird pin-cushion hills – prime spelunking and rock-climbing turf. Lots of unexplored corners mean cyclists, horseback riders, backpackers and other independent traveler types will find kilometers of wide open road beckoning exploration.

Any gear you can donate at the end of your trip to individuals you meet along the way (headlamps, snorkel masks, fins etc) will be greatly appreciated.

Caving

Cuba is riddled with caves – more than 20,000 and counting – and cave exploration is available to both casual tourists and professional speleologists. The Gran Caverna de Santo Tomás (p211), near Viñales, is Cuba's largest cavern with over 46km of galleries; Cueva de los Peces (p253), near Playa Girón, is a flooded cenote with colorful snorkeling; and the Cueva de Ambrosio (p234) and Bellamar (p225), both in Matanzas, have tours daily.

Caving specialists have virtually unlimited caves from which to choose. With advance arrangements, you can explore deep into the Gran Caverna de Santo Tomás or visit the Cueva Martín Inferno (p268), with the world's largest stalagmite. Also ask about San Catalina near Varadero, which has unique mushroom formations. Speleodiving is also possible, but only for those already highly trained. Interested experts should contact Angel Graña, secretary of the **Sociedad Espeleológica de Cuba** (☎ 7-209-2885; angel@fanj.cult.cu) in Habana. The **Escuela**

Nacional de Espeleología (☎ 8-77-10-14), in Moncada just at the entrance to the Caverna de Santo Tomás, is another good resource for professionals.

Cycling

Riding a bike in Cuba is *the* best way to discover the island in close-up. Decent roads, wonderful scenery and the opportunity to get off the beaten track and meet Cubans eye to eye make cycling here a pleasure whichever route you take. For more mellow pedalers, daily bike rentals can often be procured at various hotels, resorts and cafés for a going rate of approximately CUC\$3 a day.

Diving

Cuba has superb scuba diving suitable for all levels and interests. There are more than 30 dive centers throughout the island managed by the likes of **Marinas Gaviota** (www.gaviota-grupo.com), **Cubanacán Náutica** (www.cubanacan.cu) or **Cubamar** (www.cubamarviajes.cu). Though equipment does vary between installations, you can generally expect safe, professional and often multilingual service with these operators. Environmentally sensitive diving

is where things can get wobbly, and individuals should educate themselves about responsible diving (see below).

Dives and courses are comparably priced islandwide from CUC\$30 to CUC\$45 per dive, with a discount after four or five dives. Full certification courses are CUC\$310 to CUC\$365 and 'resort' or introductory courses cost CUC\$50 to CUC\$60. Because of the US embargo laws, PADI certification is generally not offered in Cuba; instead, you'll likely receive ACUC (American Canadian Underwater Certification) credentials.

The most popular diving areas are María la Gorda (Pinar del Río; p203), Playa Girón (on the famous Bay of Pigs; p255), Playa Rancho Luna and Guajimico (both in Cienfuegos; p267 and p268 respectively), Cayo Coco (Ciego de Ávila; p318), Playa Santa Lucía (Camagüey; p335) and Guardalavaca (Holguín; p363). Varadero (p234) has more than 30 dive sites, but only one with shore access. The quality sites around Playa Girón and Cienfuegos are good areas for first timers. Dedicated and advanced divers will want to check out the stellar underwater conditions around Isla de la Juventud (p188) – popularly considered to be

RESPONSIBLE DIVING

Please consider the following tips when diving and help preserve the ecology and beauty of reefs:

- Never use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother organisms.
- Practice and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time within them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave organisms high and dry. Take turns inspecting the interior of a small cave.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells or to loot marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks).
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed fish.
- Minimize your disturbance of marine animals. *Never* ride on the backs of turtles.

the best on the archipelago, if not the best in the Caribbean – and the pristine area of Jardines de la Reina (p318).

Fishing

Cuba's finest deep-sea fishing for sailfish, swordfish, tuna, mackerel, barracuda and shark is along the northwest coast where the fast-moving Gulf Stream supports prime game fishing. Facilities for sport anglers exist at Habana (p149), Playas del Este (p165), Varadero (p235), Cayo Guillermo (p320), Bahía de Naranjo (p363) and Isla de la Juventud (p190). Shore casting for bonefish and tarpon is practiced off the south coast at Jardines de la Reina (p318).

Fly fishing is superb in vast Ciénaga de Zapata (p253) in Matanzas, where enthusiasts can arrange multiday catch-and-release trips. You can cast for *trucha* (largemouth bass) at Laguna Grande (p202), Laguna de Tesoro (p251) and Laguna del Leche (p316). Embalse Zaza and the Río Agabama (p292) are two more anglers' paradises.

Hiking & Trekking

While Cuba's trekking potential is enormous, the traveler's right to roam is severely restricted by badly-maintained trails, poor signage, lack of maps, and rather draconian restrictions about where you can and cannot go without a guide.

All of the best routes, including the three-day Pico Turquino summit (p427); the Cueva las Perlas stroll in Península de Guanahacabibes (p203); flat-topped El Yunque (p445), Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt (p446); and the various hikes around Las Terrazas (p217) in Pinar del Río are (technically) guide-only affairs.

If you want to hike independently, you'll need patience, resolve and an excellent sense of direction. It's also useful to ask the locals in your casa particular. Try experimenting first with Salto del Caburní and other trails in Topes de Collantes (p304), or the various hikes around Viñales (p209).

Rock Climbing

The Viñales valley (p204) has been described as having the best sport rock climbing in the western hemisphere. There are more than 150 routes now open (at all levels of difficulty, with several 5.14s) and

the word is out among the international climbing crowd, who are creating their own scene in one of Cuba's prettiest settings. Independent travelers will appreciate the free reign that climbers enjoy here.

Though you can climb here year-round, the heat can be oppressive, and locals stick to an October to April season, with December to January being the optimum months. For more information, visit the **Cuba Climbing** (www.cubaclimbing.com) website or contact **Aníbal Fernández** (anibalpiaz@yahoo.com), president of the national climbing club.

Snorkeling

You don't have to go very deep to enjoy Cuba's tropical aquarium: snorkelers will be thrilled with treasures along the south coast from Playa Larga (p253) to Caleta Buena (Matanzas; p255) and around Cienfuegos (p267), Playa Jibacoa (Habana Province; p174) and along the Guardalavaca reef (Holguín; p363). In Varadero, daily snorkeling tours sailing to Cayo Blanco (p234) promise abundant tropical fish and good visibility. If you're not into the group thing, you can don a mask at Playa Coral (p235), 20km away.

Good boat dives for snorkeling happen around Isla de la Juventud (p188) and Cayo Largo (p189) especially, but also in Varadero (for sunken wrecks and reef; p234) and in the Cienfuegos (p267) and Guajimico (p268) areas. If you anticipate spending a lot of time snorkeling, bring your own gear as the rental stuff can be tattered and buying it in Cuba will mean you'll sacrifice both price and quality.

BUSINESS HOURS

Cuban business hours are hardly etched in stone, but offices are generally open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday. Cubans don't take a siesta like in other Latin American countries, so places normally don't close at midday. The exception is provincial museums (which also keep late-night hours – an interesting time for an art crawl). Museums and vegetable markets are usually closed Monday.

Post offices are open 8am to 6pm Monday to Saturday, with some main post offices keeping later hours. Banks are usually open from 9am to 3pm weekdays, closing at noon on the last working day of each

month. Cadeca exchange offices are generally open 9am to 6pm Monday to Saturday, and 9am to noon Sunday.

Pharmacies are generally open 8am to 8pm, but those marked *turno permanente* or *pilotos* are open 24 hours.

In retail outlets everything grinds to a halt during the *cambio de turno* (shift change) and you won't be able to order a beer or buy cigarettes until they're done doing inventory (which can take anywhere from 10 minutes to one hour). Shops are usually closed after noon on Sunday. The earlier in the morning you attend to whatever tasks you have (banking, car rental, immigration, flight confirmations etc), the better.

For businesses reviewed in this guide, opening hours are not listed unless they deviate from standard opening times.

CHILDREN

Children are encouraged to talk, sing, dance, think, dream and play, and are integrated into all parts of society: you'll see them at concerts, restaurants, church, political rallies (giving speeches even!) and parties. Travelers with children will find this embracing attitude heaped upon them, too.

In Cuba there are many travelers with kids, especially Cuban Americans visiting family with their children; these will be your best sources for on-the-ground information. One aspect of the culture here parents may find foreign (aside from the material shortages) is the physical contact and human warmth that is so typically Cuban: strangers ruffle kids' hair, give them kisses or take their hands with regularity, which may be odd for you and/or your child. For more general advice, see Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children*.

Practicalities

A lot of simple things aren't available in Cuba or are hard to find, including baby formula, diaper wipes, disposable diapers, crayons, any medicine, clothing, sun block etc. On the upside, Cubans are very resourceful and will happily whip up some squash and bean baby food or fashion a cloth diaper. In restaurants, there are no high chairs because Cubans cleverly turn one chair around and stack it on another, providing a balanced chair

at the right height. Cribs are available in the fancier hotels and resorts, and in casas particulares one will be found. Good baby-sitting abounds: your hotel concierge or casa owner can connect you with good child care. What you won't find are car seats (or even seat belts in some cases), so bring your own from home.

The key to traveling in Cuba is simply to ask for what you need and some kind person will help you out.

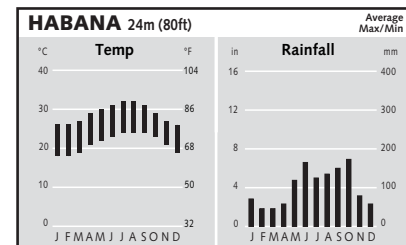
Sights & Activities

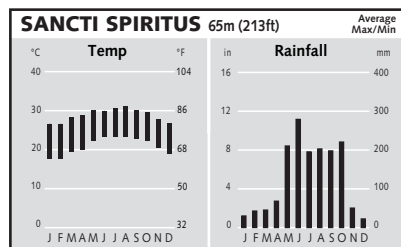
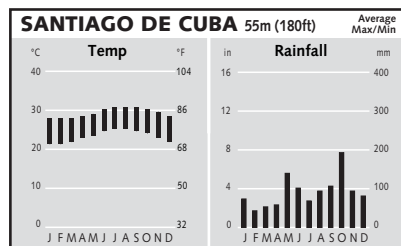
Like any great city, Habana is terrific for kids (see p115). It has kids' theater and dance, two aquariums, two zoos, a couple of great parks and some massive playgrounds. Resorts are packed with kids' programs, from special outings to designated kiddie pools. Guardalavaca has the added advantage of being near many other interesting sights such as the aquarium at Bahía de Naranjo (p363). Parque Baconao in Santiago de Cuba (p421) has everything from old cars to dinosaurs and is a fantasy land for kids of all ages.

Other activities kids will groove on include horseback riding, baseball games, cigar factory tours, snorkeling, miniature golf, and exploring caves, the waterfalls at El Nicho (p269) and Topes de Collantes (p304).

CLIMATE CHARTS

Cuba is hot, with humidity ranging from 81% in summer to 79% in winter. Luckily the heat is nicely moderated by the gentle Northeast Tradewinds and the highest temperature ever recorded on the island was less than 40°C. Beware of cold fronts passing in the winter when evening can be cool in the west of the island. Cuba's hurricane season (June to November) should also be considered when planning; see When to Go (p21) for more.





COURSES

Cuba's rich cultural tradition and the abundance of highly talented, trained professionals make it a great place to study. Officially matriculating students are afforded longer visas and issued a *carnet* – the identification document that allows foreigners to pay for museums, transport (including colectivos) and theater performances in pesos. Technological and linguistic glitches, plus general unresponsiveness, make it hard to set up courses before arriving, but don't worry: you'll be able to arrange everything once you arrive. In Cuba, things are always better done face-to-face.

Private one-on-one lessons are available in everything from *batá* drumming to advanced Spanish grammar. Classes are easily arranged, typically for CUC\$5 to CUC\$10 an hour at the institutions specializing in your interest. Other travelers are a great source of up-to-date information in this regard.

While US citizens can still study in Cuba, their options shrank dramatically when George W Bush discontinued people-to-people (educational) travel licenses in 2003.

Language

The largest organization offering study visits for foreigners is **UniversiTUR SA** (☎ 7-55-56-83, 7-55-57-94, 7-55-55-77; agencia@universitur.com;

☎ Calle 30 No 768-1, btwn 41 & Kohly, Nuevo Vedado). UniversiTUR arranges regular study and working holidays at any of Cuba's universities and at many higher education or research institutes. Its most popular programs are intensive courses in Spanish and Cuban culture at **Universidad de la Habana** (see Habana chapter p104 for details). UniversiTUR has 17 branch offices at various universities throughout Cuba, all providing the same services, though prices vary. While US students can study anywhere, they must arrange study programs for the provinces (except Habana or Matanzas) through Havanatur (p92).

Students heading to Cuba should bring a good bilingual dictionary and a basic 'learn Spanish' textbook, as such books are scarce or expensive in Cuba. You might sign up for a two-week course at a university to get your feet wet and then jump into private classes once you've made some contacts.

Culture & Dance

Dance classes are available all over Cuba, although Habana and Santiago are your best bets. Institutions to try include the **Casa del Caribe** (Map pp394-5; ☎ 226-64-22-85; fax 226-64-23-87; Calle 13 No 154, Vista Alegre, 90100 Santiago de Cuba), the **Conjunto Folklórico Nacional** (Map pp106-7; ☎ 7-830-3060; Calle 4 No 103, btwn Calzada & Calle 5, Vedado, Habana) and the **Centro Andaluz** (Map p100; ☎ 7-863-6745; fax 7-66-69-01; Prado No 104, Centro Habana). See the individual chapters for details.

Art & Film

Courses for foreigners can be arranged throughout the year by the Oficina de Relaciones Internacionales of the **Instituto Superior de Arte** (Map pp106-7; ☎ 7-208-8075; isa.cubarte.cult.cu; Calle 120 No 1110, Cubanacán, Playa, Habana 11600). Courses in percussion and dance are available almost anytime, but other subjects, such as the visual arts, music, theater and aesthetics, are offered when professors are available.

Courses usually involve four hours of classes a week at between CUC\$10 and CUC\$15 per hour. Prospective students must apply in the last week of August for the fall semester or the last three weeks of January for spring. The school is closed for holidays throughout July and until the third week in August. The institute also accepts

graduate students for its regular winter courses, and an entire year of study here (beginning in September) as part of the regular five-year program costs CUC\$2500. Accommodation in student dormitories can be arranged.

The **Escuela Internacional de Cine, Televisión y Video** (☎ 650-3152; fax 650-33-53-41/51-96; Apartado Aereo 4041, San Antonio de los Baños, Provincia de La Habana) trains broadcasting professionals from all over the world (especially developing countries). Under the patronage of novelist Gabriel García Márquez, it's run by the foundation that also organizes the annual film festival in Habana. The campus is at Finca San Tranquilino, Carretera de Vereda Nueva, 5km northwest of San Antonio de los Baños. Prospective filmmaking students should apply in writing in advance (personal inquiries at the gate are not welcome).

Study Abroad Programs

One of the best study abroad programs is offered by the **School of International Training** (SIT; ☎ 802-257-7751, toll free 888-272-7881; www.sit.edu/studyabroad). This credit-earning, semester-long program combines course work with independent study emphasizing politics and culture. This program costs around CUC\$14,000, including everything but your bar tab, and is fully licensed.

CUSTOMS

Cuban customs regulations are complicated. For the full scoop see www.aduana

islagrande.cu. Travelers are allowed to bring in personal belongings (including photography equipment, binoculars, musical instrument, tape recorder, radio, personal computer, tent, fishing rod, bicycle, canoe and other sporting gear), gifts up to a value of the equivalent of US\$250, and 10kg of medicine in its original packaging. Those over the age of 18 may import 2L of liquor and one carton of cigarettes.

Items that do not fit into the categories mentioned above are subject to a 100% customs duty to a maximum of CUC\$1000.

Items prohibited entry into Cuba include narcotics, explosives, pornography, electrical appliances broadly defined, global positioning systems, prerecorded video cassettes and 'any item attempting against the security and internal order of the country,' including some books. Canned, processed and dried food are no problem, nor are pets.

Exporting art and items of cultural patrimony is restricted and involves fees, paperwork and forethought. See Exporting Artwork (p140) for details. You are allowed to export 50 cigars duty-free.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Cuba is generally safer than most countries, and violent attacks are extremely rare. Petty theft (eg rifled luggage in hotel rooms, or unattended shoes disappearing from the beach) is common, but preventative measures work wonders. Pickpocketing is also preventable: wear your bag in front of you on crowded

SAFETY TIPS

Most travel advisories classify Cuba as a low-risk country though crime is purportedly on the increase. Basic travel advice includes the following:

- Beware of bag-snatching and petty theft especially in tourist areas.
- Remove all valuable items from checked-in luggage and consider having it shrink-wrapped (there's a service available at Habana airport).
- Take care when driving on Cuban roads.
- Take out comprehensive travel and medical insurance before you depart.
- Monitor national and international weather updates particularly during the hurricane season.
- Stay clear of all illegal drugs.
- Check with your home bank whether your credit card will be accepted in Cuba. If not, bring sufficient funds in cash/traveler's checks.
- Keep away from military zones/restricted areas.

buses and at busy markets, and only take what money you'll need to the disco.

Begging is more widespread than any other crimes and is exacerbated by tourists who amuse themselves by handing out money, soap, pens, chewing gum and other things to people on the street. Sadly, many Cubans have dropped out of productive jobs because they've found it is more lucrative to hustle tourists or beg than to work. It's painful for everyone when beggars earn more money than doctors. If you truly want to do something to help, pharmacies and hospitals will accept medicine donations, schools happily take pens, paper, crayons etc, and libraries will gratefully accept books. Hustlers are called *jinetes/as* (male/female touts), and can be a real nuisance. For more information, see the boxed text, p397.

Annoyances include travel agents promising services they can't deliver and *tiradores* (masturbators) who frequent dark places, especially movie theaters. If you're sensitive to smoke, you'll choke in Cuba, where even in hospitals surgeons are lighting up.

Despite the many strides the Cuban Revolution has made in stamping out racial discrimination, traces still linger and visitors of non-European origin are more likely to attract the attention of the police than those that look obviously non-Cuban. Latin, South Asian or black visitors may have to show passports to enter hotels and other places from which ordinary Cubans are barred (under the pretext that they think you're Cuban). Likewise, racially mixed pairs (especially black-white couples) will usually encounter more questions, demanding of papers and hassle than other travelers.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Cuban Embassies & Consulates

Australia Consulate-General (☎ 61-2-9698-9797; fax 61-2-8399-1106; PO Box 2382, Strawberry Hills, NSW 2012)

Belgium Embassy (☎ 32-2-343-0020; fax 32-2-344-9691; Robert Jonesstraat 77, 1180 Brussels)

Canada Consulate-General (☎ 416-234-8181; fax 416-234-2754; Suite 401, 5353 Dundas St W, Etobicoke, Ontario M9B 6H8); Consulate-General & Trade Commission (☎ 514-843-8897; fax 514-982-9034; 1415 Av des Pins Ouest, Montréal, Québec H3B 1B2); Embassy (☎ 613-563-0141; fax 613-563-0068; 338 Main St, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 1E3)

France Consulate (☎ 49-228-3090; Kennedy Allee 22, 53175 Bonn); Embassy (☎ 33-1-45-67-55-35; fax 33-1-45-66-80-92; 16 rue de Presles, 75015 Paris)

Germany Embassy (☎ 49-30-9161-1811; Stavanger Strasse 20, 10439 Berlin)

Italy Embassy (☎ 39-6-574-2347; fax 39-6-574-5445; Via Licina No 7, 00153 Rome)

Mexico Embassy (☎ 52-5-280-8039; fax 52-5-280-0839; Presidente Masarik 554, Colonia Polanco, 11560 Mexico, DF)

Netherlands Consulate (☎ 31-10-206-7333; fax 31-10-206-7335; Stationsplein 45, 3013 AK Rotterdam); Embassy (☎ 31-70-360-6061; fax 31-70-364-7586; Scheveningseweg 9, 2517 KS, La Haya)

Spain Embassy (☎ 341-359-2500; fax 341-359-6145; Paseo de la Habana No 194, Pinilla 28036 Madrid)

UK Embassy (☎ 44-020-7240-2488; fax 44-020-7836-2602; 167 High Holburn, London WC1 6PA)

USA Cuban Interests Section (☎ 202-797-8609/10; fax 202-986-7283; 2630 16th St NW, Washington, DC 20009)

Embassies in Cuba

Most embassies are open from 8am to noon on weekdays.

Australia See Canada.

Austria (Map pp146-7; ☎ 7-204-2825; fax 7-204-1235; Calle 4 No 101, Miramar)

Belgium (Map pp146-7; ☎ 7-204-2410; fax 7-204-1318; Av 5 No 7406, Miramar)

Canada (Map pp146-7; ☎ 7-204-2517; fax 7-204-2044; Calle 30 No 518, Playa) Also represents Australia.

Denmark (Map p100; ☎ 7-33-81-28; fax 7-33-81-27; 4th fl, Paseo de Martí No 20, Centro Habana)

France (Map pp146-7; ☎ 7-204-2308; fax 7-204-0335; Calle 14 No 312 btwn Avs 3 & 5, Miramar)

Germany (☎ 7-33-25-69; fax 7-33-15-86; Calle 13 No 652, Vedado)

Italy (Map pp146-7; ☎ 7-204-5615; fax 7-204-5661; Av 5 No 402, Miramar)

Japan (Map pp146-7; ☎ 7-204-3508; fax 7-204-8902; Miramar Trade Center, cnr Av 3 & Calle 80, Playa)

Mexico (Map pp146-7; ☎ 7-204-7722; fax 7-204-2666; Calle 12 No 518, Miramar)

Netherlands (Map pp146-7; ☎ 7-204-2511; fax 7-204-2059; Calle 8 No 307, btwn Avs 3 & 5, Miramar)

New Zealand See UK.

Spain (Map p100; ☎ 7-33-80-25; Cárcel No 51, Habana Vieja)

Sweden (Map pp146-7; ☎ 7-204-2831; fax 7-204-1194; Calle 34 No 510, Miramar)

Switzerland (Map pp146-7; ☎ 7-204-2611; fax 7-204-2729; Av 5 No 2005, btwn Avs 20 & 22, Miramar)

UK (Map pp146-7; ☎ 7-204-1771; fax 7-204-8104; Calle 34 No 708, Miramar) Also represents New Zealand.

USA (Map pp106-7; ☎ 7-33-35-51; US Interests Section, Calzada, btwn Calles L & M, Vedado)

GOVERNMENT TRAVEL ADVICE

The following government websites offer travel advisories and information on current hot spots.

Australian Department of Foreign Affairs (☎ 1300 139 281; www.smarttraveller.gov.au)

British Foreign Office (☎ 0845-850-2829; www.fco.gov.uk)

Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs (☎ 800-267 6788; www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca)

US State Department (☎ 888-407 4747; http://travel.state.gov)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

For more information on these and other festivals and events, visit www.afrocuba.com/festivals.htm.

January

Liberation & New Year's Day Big street parties countrywide and dozens of outdoor concerts in Habana on January 1.

Birthday of José Martí Pridelful observances include book launchings and cultural performances. Held January 28.

Feria Internacional del Libro Impressive two-week book fair with concerts, readings, book launches and sales. Starts in the last week of January; moves from Habana across the country in February.

FolkCuba (second half of Jan) A major festival unfolds at Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba biannually during the second half of January.

March

Fiesta de la Toronja (Grapefruit Festival) Held on Isla de la Juventud every March. Pucker up for this one.

April

PerCuba (Festival Internacional de Percusión) Bang your drum at Habana's annual thump-fest held during the third week of April.

Baseball playoffs (Location varies) Two weeks of top ball playing excites fans of all ages.

May

Día de los Trabajadores May Day (May 1) means massive rallies held in Plazas de la Revolución countrywide.

Romerías de Mayo Rap, rock, poetry and dance take over Holguín in one of Cuba's most popular events. Held during the first week of May.

Festival Internacional de Guitarra Axe masters flock to Habana for loads of concerts during the second week of May.

Feria Internacional Cubadisco Second week of May in Habana. Like the Cuban Grammys, with so many stellar concerts you won't be able to choose.

June

Festival Internacional Boleros de Oro Third week of June. International bolero stars move crowds to tears in Habana, Santiago de Cuba and elsewhere.

July

Festival del Caribe, Fiesta del Fuego Raucous week-long festival celebrating Caribbean dance, music and religion in Santiago de Cuba. Held during the first week of July.

Day of the National Rebellion Celebrates the July 26, 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks in a different province each year.

Carnaval, Santiago de Cuba The country's biggest and best; held during the last week of July.

August

Festival de Rap Cubano Habana Hip Hop Everyone's bustin' rhymes in this wildly successful international event, held midmonth.

September

Benny Moré International Music Festival Held in the village of Santa Isabel de las Lajas (birthplace of Benny Moré) every alternate September. In homage to the incomparable Barbarian of Rhythm.

October

Festival Internacional de Ballet Tremendous event packed with performances morning, noon and night; held midmonth every other year.

November

Bienal de la Habana Habana's art extravaganza showcases Cuba's best contemporary art for three months; held every other year.

December

Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano First week of December. This prestigious film festival features hundreds of screenings.

Festival Internacional de Jazz Straight ahead, be-bop, Latin, far out or funkified: whatever type of jazz, it happens here. Held during the first week of December every other year.

Las Parrandas December 24 in Remedios. Extravagant fireworks and floats make this one of Cuba's most outrageous festivals.

FOOD

It will be the very rare meal in Cuba that costs over CUC\$25. In this book, restaurant

listings are presented in the following order: budget (meals for under CUC\$5), midrange (meals for CUC\$5 to CUC\$10) and top end (meals for over CUC\$10). Before you dig in, check out the detailed information in the Food & Drink chapter (p76).

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

While Cuba can't be called a queer destination (yet), it's more tolerant than many other Latin American countries. The hit movie *Fresa y Chocolate* (Strawberry and Chocolate) sparked a national dialogue about homosexuality, and Cuba is pretty tolerant, all things considered. People from more accepting societies may find this tolerance too 'don't ask, don't tell' or tokenesque (everyone has a gay friend/relative/co-worker, whom they'll mention when the topic arises), but what the hell, you have to start somewhere and Cuba is moving in the right direction.

Machismo shows an ugly face when it comes to lesbians (the idea that a woman can't be satisfied by a man just doesn't jive with most Cuban males' world view) and female homosexuality has not enjoyed the aperture of male homosexuality. For this reason, female lovers can share rooms and otherwise 'pass' with facility. However Jurassic you might find that, it's a workable solution to a sticky problem. There are occasional *fiestas para chicas* (not necessarily all-girl parties, but close); ask around at the **Cine Yara** (Map pp106-7; ☎ 832-9430; cnr Calles 23 & L, Vedado, Habana).

Cubans are physical with each other and you'll see men hugging, women holding hands and lots of friendly caressing. This type of casual touching shouldn't be a problem, but take care when that hug among friends turns overtly sensual in public.

HOLIDAYS

The Cuban calendar is loaded with holidays, but there are only a few that might affect your travel plans; among them are December 25 (not declared an official holiday until after the Pope visited in 1998), January 1, May 1 and July 26. On these days, stores will be closed and transport (except for planes) erratic. On May 1, especially, buses are dedicated to shuttling people to the Plazas de la Revolución in every

major city and town and you can just forget about getting inner-city transport.

July and August mean crowded beaches and sold-out campismos and hotels.

INSURANCE

Insurance pays off only if something serious happens, but that's what insurance is for, so you'd be foolish to travel without cover. Outpatient treatment at international clinics designed for foreigners is reasonably priced, but emergency and prolonged hospitalization get expensive (the free medical system for Cubans should only be used when there is no other option).

If you're really concerned about your health, consider purchasing travel insurance once you arrive at **Asistur** (☎ 7-33-85-27, 7-867-1315; www.asistur.cu; Paseo de Martí No 212). It has two types of coverage. For non-Americans the policy costs CUC\$2.50 per day and covers up to CUC\$400 in lost luggage, CUC\$7000 in medical coverage and CUC\$5000 each for repatriation of remains or jail bail. For Americans, similar coverage costs CUC\$8 per day and provides up to CUC\$25,000 in health care costs, plus CUC\$7000 to repatriate remains or evacuate you.

It's strongly recommended that you take car insurance for a variety of reasons; see p475 for details.

INTERNET ACCESS

With state-run telecommunications company Etecsa re-establishing its monopoly as service providers, Internet access is available all over the country in Etecsa's spanking new telepuntos. You'll find one of its swish, air-conditioned sales offices in almost every provincial town and it is your best point of call for fast and reliable Internet access (though with a 56k telephone modem patience is sometimes required). The drill is to buy a one-hour user card (CUC\$6) with scratch-off *usuario* (code) and *contraseña* (password) and help yourself to an available computer. These cards are interchangeable in any telepunto across the country so you don't have to use up your whole hour in one go.

The downside of the Etecsa monopoly is that there are few, if any, independent cybercafés outside of the telepuntos and many of the smaller hotels – unable to afford the

service fee – have had to dispense of their computers. As a general rule most four- and five-star hotels will have their own Internet cafés although the fees here are often higher (sometimes as much as CUC\$12 per hour).

As Internet access for Cubans is restricted, you may be asked to show your passport when using a telepunto (although if you look obviously foreign, they won't bother). On the plus side the Etecsa places are open long hours and not often that crowded.

LEGAL MATTERS

Cuban police are everywhere and they're usually very friendly – more likely to ask you for a date than a bribe. Corruption is a serious offense in Cuba and typically no one wants to get messed up in it. Getting caught out without identification is never good; carry some around just in case (a driver's license, a copy of your passport or student ID card should be sufficient).

Drugs are prohibited in Cuba though you may still get offered marijuana and cocaine on the streets of Habana. Penalties for buying, selling, holding or taking drugs are serious, and Cuba is making a concerted effort to treat demand and curtail supply; it is only the foolish traveler who partakes while on a Cuban vacation.

IN CUBA YOU HAVE TO BE...

- 18 years old to vote
- 14 years old to have heterosexual sex if you're female
- 18 years old to drive
- 16 years old to buy cigarettes or liquor

MAPS

Signage is awful in Cuba so a good map is essential for both drivers and cyclists alike. The comprehensive *Guía de Carreteras* (CUC\$6), published in Italy, has the best maps available in Cuba. The *Guía* has a complete index, a detailed Habana map and useful information in English, Spanish, Italian and French. Handier is the all-purpose *Automapa Nacional*, available at hotel shops and car-rental offices.

The Instituto Cubano de Geodesia y Cartografía (aka Ediciones GEO) publishes several excellent maps including the 2002 *Mapa Turístico La Habana* (1:25,000) and the *Mapa Turístico Cuba*. You can buy these maps at www.cubamapa.com.

The best map published outside of Cuba is the Freytag & Berndt 1:1.25 million *Cuba* map. The island map is good, and it has indexed town plans of Habana, Playas del Este, Varadero, Cienfuegos, Camagüey and Santiago de Cuba.

MONEY

This is a tricky part of any Cuban trip and the double economy takes some getting used to. Two currencies circulate in Cuba: Convertible pesos (CUC\$) and Cuban pesos (referred to as *moneda nacional* and abbreviated MN). Most things tourists buy are in Convertibles (eg accommodation, rental cars, bus tickets, museum admission and Internet access). At the time of writing, Cuban pesos were selling at 24 to one Convertible, and while there are many things you can't buy with *moneda nacional*, using them on certain occasions means you'll see a bigger slice of authentic Cuba.

Making things a little more confusing, euros are accepted at the Varadero, Guardalavaca, Cayo Largo del Sur, and Cayos Coco and Guillermo resorts, but once you leave the resort grounds, you'll still need Convertibles. For information on costs, see p22.

The best currencies to bring to Cuba are euros, Canadian dollars or pounds sterling (all liable to a 10% commission). The worst is US dollars and – despite the prices you might see posted up in bank windows – the commission you'll get charged is a whopping 20% (the normal 10% commission plus an extra 10% penalty – often not displayed). At the time of writing, traveler's checks issued by US banks could be exchanged at branches of Banco Financiero Internacional, but credit cards issued by US banks could not be used at all.

Cadeca branches in every city and town sell Cuban pesos. You won't need more than CUC\$10 worth of pesos a week. In addition to the offices located on the maps in this book, there is almost always a branch at the local agropecuario (vegetable market). If you get caught without Cuban pesos and

are drooling for that ice-cream cone, you can always use Convertibles; in street transactions such as these, CUC\$1 is equal to 25 pesos and you'll receive change in pesos. There is no black market in Cuba, only hustlers trying to fleece you with money-changing scams (see p114).

ATM & Credit Cards

When the banks are open, the machines are working and the phone lines are live, credit cards are an option – as long as the cards are not issued by US banks. The downside is that you'll be charged the equivalent of a whopping 11.25% commission on every transaction. This discourages most people using them for anything but emergencies.

Cash advances can be drawn from credit cards but the commission's the same. Check with your home bank before you leave as many banks won't authorize large withdrawals in foreign countries unless you notify them of your travel plans first.

ATMs are good for credit cards only and are the equivalent to obtaining a cash advance over the counter. In reality it is best to avoid them altogether (especially when the banks are closed) as they are notorious for eating up people's cards.

Contrary to what some people might tell you, debit cards do not work in Cuba.

Cash

Cuba is a cash economy and credit cards don't have the importance or ubiquity that they do elsewhere in the western hemisphere. Although carrying pure cash is far riskier than the usual cash/credit-card/traveler's-check mix, it's infinitely more convenient. As long as you use a concealed money belt and keep the cash on you or in your hotel's safe deposit box at all times, you should be OK.

It's better to ask for CUC\$20/10/5/3/1 bills when you're changing money as many smaller Cuban businesses (taxis, restaurants, etc) can't change anything bigger (ie CUC\$50s or CUC\$100s) and the words 'no hay cambio' resonate everywhere. If desperate you can always break big bills at hotels.

Denominations & Lingo

One of the most confusing parts of a double economy is terminology. Cuban pesos are

called *moneda nacional* (abbreviated MN) or pesos Cubanos or simply pesos while Convertible pesos are called *pesos convertibles* (abbreviated CUC) or often just simply...pesos. Sometimes you'll be negotiating in pesos (Cubanos) and your counterpart will be negotiating in pesos (Convertibles). It doesn't help that the notes look similar as well. Worse, the symbol for both Convertibles and pesos Cubanos is \$. You can imagine the potential scams just working these combinations.

The Cuban peso comes in notes of one, five, 10, 20, 50 and 100 pesos, and coins of one (rare), five and 20 centavos, and one and three pesos. The five-centavo coin is called a *medio*, the 20-centavo coin a *peseta*. Centavos are also called *kilos*.

The Convertible peso comes in multi-colored notes of one, three, five, 10, 20, 50 and 100 pesos and coins of five, 10, 25 and 50 cents and one peso.

Tippling

If you're not in the habit of tipping, you'll learn fast in Cuba. Wandering *son* septets, parking guards, ladies at bathroom entrances, restaurant wait staff, tour guides – they're all working for hard-currency tips. Musicians who besiege tourists while they dine, converse or flirt will want a Convertible, but only give what you feel the music is worth. Washroom attendants expect CUC\$0.05 to CUC\$0.10, while *parqueadores* (parking attendants) should get CUC\$0.25 for a short watch and CUC\$1 for each 12 hours. For a day tour, CUC\$2 per person is appropriate for a tour guide. Taxi drivers will appreciate 10% of the meter fare, but if you've negotiated a ride without the meter, don't tip as the whole fare is going straight into their wallets.

Tipping can quickly *resuelvan las cosas* (fix things up). If you want to stay beyond the hotel check-out time or enter a site after hours, for instance, small tips (CUC\$1 to CUC\$5) bend rules, open doors and send people looking the other way. For tipping in restaurants and other advice, see the Food & Drink chapter (p80).

Traveler's Checks

While they add security and it makes sense to carry a few for that purpose, traveler's checks are a hassle in Cuba although they

work out better value than credit cards. Bear in mind that you'll pay commission at both the buying and selling ends (3% to 6%) and also be aware that some hotels and banks won't accept them (especially in the provinces). The Banco Financiero Internacional is your best bet for changing Amex checks, though a much safer all-round option is to bring Thomas Cook.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Good film is expensive (CUC\$7 for a roll of 24 Kodak Gold prints) and developing is terrible and costly (CUC\$0.35 a shot). Photo Service is the biggest chain in Cuba and they develop film and sell supplies, but anyone serious about photography should bring their own. Similarly, whatever offers you may find to develop digital film, it is best done when you arrive home.

Most Cubans love to have their pictures taken and will happily pose if you ask '¿puedo tirar una foto?' (Can I take a photo?). Photos are treasured, so you might offer to send along copies.

POST

Letters and postcards sent to Europe and the US take about a month to arrive. While *sellos* (stamps) are sold in pesos and Convertibles, correspondence bearing the latter has a better chance of arriving. Postcards cost CUC\$0.65 to all countries. Letters cost CUC\$0.65 to the Americas, CUC\$0.75 to Europe and CUC\$0.85 to all other countries. Prepaid postcards, including international postage, are available at most hotel shops and post offices and are the surest bet for successful delivery. For important mail, you're better off using DHL, located in all the major cities; it costs CUC\$55 for a two-pound letter pack to Australia, or CUC\$50 to Europe.

The Cuban post has a well-organized *telegrama* (telegram) system whereby messages can be sent from any post office to any address in the country. A nostalgic, economical way to communicate (it costs about CUC\$1.15 for 100 words), this is also how to contact people who don't have phones. Every post office has a telegram window.

SHOPPING

Cigars, rum, music and anything with Che Guevara on it are quintessentially Cuban

souvenirs. The *guayabera*, a snappy, pleated men's shirt that's Cuban for formalwear, is all the rage from Prague to Vancouver. All of these items (and more) can be purchased in hotel and souvenir shops, but if you want the best selection and price, go to specialist stores.

Egrem is the state recording company and its studio shops in Habana (p153), Holguín (p356) and Santiago de Cuba (p415) have fantastic CD selections. ARTex, a more general souvenir store, also sells CDs.

As an icon, Che is on everything from shot glasses to watch faces (look for the limited-edition Swatch at the Habana airport), and *ferias* (artisan fairs) in Varadero (p242) and Habana (p139) have a wide selection of all things Che. You can also buy coral and tortoise-shell treasures at these fairs, some quite lovely, but it's best if you don't: these items, plus shells, many plants and reptiles are protected under Cites (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species). These environmental protection rules prohibit individuals from importing or exporting such items.

You can also buy 'artwork' at these fairs, most of it tourist kitsch, but sometimes you'll find something that strikes you. You shouldn't have a problem exporting this type of art under Cuban patrimony rules, but you might. To avoid disappointment at the airport, you should assume that any artwork that cannot fit in your luggage will be confiscated if you don't have the correct documentation. If you've bought an original painting or sculpture from an official store, the only documentation you'll need is the receipt. If you've purchased a piece of art on the street or directly from the artist, you'll need an export certificate (see p140). Antiquities are also subject to patrimony restrictions.

Cuba has some fabulous antiques and every town has a *casa de comisiones*, literally 'commission house,' where people put up their heirlooms for sale. These shops sell everything in Cuban pesos. Good vintage clothing is also available.

Cigars

The best Cuban cigars are completely hand-rolled and packed in sealed, stamped cedar boxes. There are 42 different types and sizes of Habana cigars, classified as fine,

medium or thick. A single brand can come in several different sizes, and the same size category can refer to various types of cigars of other brands. The most common types are Mareva (129mm), Corona (142mm) and Julieta (178mm). Choosing the right cigar requires a degree of knowledge, and connoisseurs will be very familiar with the varying tastes and styles.

Cuba's flagship brand is the spicy Cohiba, created in 1966 for diplomatic use (it's still gifted in the highest political circles) and only available to the general public since 1982. Named for the original Taíno word for tobacco, it comes in 11 medium to strong types. The five numbered varieties of Montecristo are among Cuba's most popular cigars. Before he quit smoking in 1989, President Castro's favorites were Corona Grande Montecristo and Cohiba Espléndidos. Medium-flavored Punch cigars were designed for export to the UK as far back as 1840. Another classic is the stronger Partagás, rolled in Habana since 1845. The milder Romeo y Julieta was invented in 1903 by a globetrotting Cuban. Other mild brands include Quintero and Rafael González.

The five main tobacco-growing areas are Vuelta Abajo and Semi Vuelta (around San Cristóbal; both in Pinar del Río), Partido (around San Antonio de los Baños), Remedios (west of Sancti Spiritus), and Oriente (north of Ciego de Ávila, south of Bayamo and south of Mayarí). Most export-quality cigars are made from Vuelta Abajo or Partido tobacco.

Black-market cigars sold on the street are mostly scams (sealed boxes filled with sand or the lowest grade one-peso cheroots), but if you act like you know what you're doing, you might at least get quality fakes. Examine the individual cigars to make sure they're tightly rolled without any tiny air pockets or protuberances. The cigar should be soft when squeezed gently between your fingers. The covering should be smooth as silk, and all cigars in the box should have a uniform shape, though color can vary slightly. The cigars should be pungent. The litmus test is to put the lighting end in your mouth and puff in and out with care: the outer leaf should 'breathe.' If not, it's probably a counterfeit made from waste tobacco swept from factory floors, which have no draw

and are impossible to smoke. Occasionally, stolen genuine cigars are available on the black market for a quarter of what they'd cost in the shops, but this is the exception.

Unless you know cigars well, it's advisable to pay more to be sure of what you're getting. Also, an official sales receipt from a shop eliminates the possibility of problems with Cuban customs. Some marketeers offer fake receipts but customs officers spot them easily. Visitors are allowed to export CUC\$2000 worth of documented cigars per person. Amounts in excess of this, or black-market cigars without receipts, will be confiscated (Cuban customs is serious about this, with an ongoing investigation into cigar rings and more than a half million seizures of undocumented cigars annually). The tax-free limit without a receipt is two boxes (50 cigars) or 23 singles of any size or cost. Of course, you can buy additional cigars in the airport departure lounge once you've passed Cuban customs, but beware when entering other countries of your limits. (Mexican customs in Cancún, for instance, conducts rigorous cigar searches.) If you traveled without a license to Cuba, US customs will seize any tobacco you have upon entering; licensed travelers are permitted to bring the equivalent of US\$100 worth of cigars into the US. (Imitation Cuban cigars sold in the US contain no Cuban tobacco.)

La Casa del Habano (www.habanos.net) is the national cigar store chain, where the staff is well-informed, there's a wide selection and sometimes a smoking lounge.

Smokers on a budget can buy smokable Selectos cigars in bodegas for a peso each.

TELEPHONE

The Cuban phone system is still undergoing some upgrading, so beware of phone number changes. Normally a recorded message will inform you of any recent upgrades. Most of the country's Etecsa telepuntos have now been completely refurbished which means there's a spick-and-span (and air-conditioned) phone/Internet office in almost every provincial town.

Mobile Phones

Cuba's two mobile-phone companies are **c.com** (☎ 7-264-2266) and **Cubacel** (www.cubacel.com). While you may be able to use your

own equipment, you have to prebuy their services. Cubacel has more than 15 offices around the country (including at the Habana airport) where you can do this. Its plan costs approximately CUC\$3 per day and each local call costs from CUC\$0.52 to CUC\$0.70. Note that you pay for incoming as well as outgoing calls. International rates are CUC\$2.70 per minute to the US and CUC\$5.85 per minute to Europe.

Phone Codes

To call Cuba from abroad, dial your international access code, Cuba's country code (☎ 53), the city or area code, and the local number. In this book, area codes are indicated under city headings. To call internationally from Cuba, dial Cuba's international access code (☎ 119), the country code, the area code and the number. To the US, you just dial ☎ 119, then 1, the area code and the number.

To place a call through an international operator, dial ☎ 09, except to the United States, which can be reached with an operator on ☎ 66-12-12. Not all private phones in Cuba have international service, in which case you'll want to call collect (reverse charges or *cobro revertido*). This service is available only to Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, France, Italy, Mexico, Panama, Spain, UK, US and Venezuela. International operators are available 24 hours and speak English. You cannot call collect from public phones.

Phonecards

Etecsa is where you buy phone cards, send and receive faxes, use the Internet and make international calls. Blue public Etecsa phones accepting magnetized or computer-chip cards are everywhere. The cards are sold in Convertibles: CUC\$5, CUC\$10 and CUC\$20 and pesos: three, five and seven pesos. You can call nationally with either, but you can call internationally only with Convertible cards. If you are mostly going to be making national and local calls, buy a peso card as it's much more economical.

The best cards for calls from Habana are called Propia. They come in pesos (five- and 10-peso denominations) and Convertibles (CUC\$10 and CUC\$25 denominations)

and allow you to call from any phone – even ones permitting only emergency calls – using a personal code. The rates are the cheapest as well.

Phone Rates

Local calls cost five centavos per minute, while interprovincial calls cost from 35 centavos to one peso per minute (note that only the peso coins with the star work in pay phones). Since most coin phones don't return change, common courtesy asks that you push the 'R' button so that the next person in line can make their call with your remaining money.

International calls made with a card cost from CUC\$2 per minute to the US and Canada and CUC\$5 to Europe and Oceania. Calls placed through an operator cost slightly more.

TIME

Prior to October 2004 Cuba was on UTC/GMT minus five between October and April and UTC/GMT minus four (daylight saving time) between April and October – the same as New York or Washington. But at the end of that month the government decided not to move the clock back one hour. Consequently Habana is currently on UTC minus four (daylight saving time) year-round, ie in the summer it's in the same time zone as New York while in the winter it's one hour ahead. As with everything in Cuba – including the time – this situation could change. And in 2006 the government announced that it would revert back to the old system in the fall.

TOILETS

Look for public toilets in bus stations, tourist hotels or restaurants, and gas stations. It is unlikely you'll meet a Cuban who would deny a needy traveler the use of their bathroom. In public restrooms there often won't be water or toilet paper and never a toilet seat. The faster you learn to squat and carry your own supply of paper, the happier you'll be. Frequently there will be an attendant outside bathrooms supplying toilet paper and you're expected to leave CUC\$0.05 or CUC\$0.10 in the plate provided. If the bathrooms are dirty or the person doesn't supply paper, you shouldn't feel compelled to leave money.

Cuban sewer systems are not designed to take toilet paper and every bathroom has a small waste basket beside the toilet for this purpose. Aside from at top-end hotels and resorts, you should discard your paper in this basket or risk an embarrassing backup.

TOURIST INFORMATION

At the time of writing, **Infotur** (www.infotur.cu), Cuba's official tourist information bureau, had offices only in Habana (Habana Vieja, Miramar, Playas del Este, Expocuba, the José Martí airport) and Ciego de Ávila (in the city and at Jardines del Rey Airport, Cayo Coco). Travel agencies, such as Cubanacán or Cubatur, can usually supply some general information.

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Cuba's inclusive culture translates to disabled travelers, and while facilities may be lacking, the generous nature of Cubans generally compensates. Sight-impaired travelers will be helped across streets and given priority in lines. The same holds true for travelers in wheelchairs, who will find the few ramps ridiculously steep and will have trouble in colonial parts of town where sidewalks are narrow and streets are cobblestone. Elevators are often out of order. Etesca phone centers have telephone equipment for the hearing impaired and TV programs are broadcast with closed captioning.

VISAS & TOURIST CARDS

Regular tourists who plan to spend up to two months in Cuba do not need visas. Instead, you get a *tarjeta de turista* (tourist card) valid for 30 days (Canadians get 90 days), which can be easily extended for another 30 days once you're in Cuba. Those going 'air only' usually buy the tourist card from the travel agency or airline office that sells them their plane ticket (equivalent of US\$15 extra). Package tourists receive their card with their other travel documents.

Unlicensed tourists originating in the US buy their tourist card at the airline desk in the country through which they're traveling en route to Cuba (equivalent of US\$25). You are usually not allowed to board a plane to Cuba without this card, but if by some chance you are, you should be able to

buy one in Aeropuerto Internacional José Martí in Habana – although this is a hassle (and risk) best avoided. Once in Habana, tourist card extensions or replacements cost another CUC\$25. You cannot leave Cuba without presenting your tourist card, so don't lose it. You are not permitted entry to Cuba without an onward ticket. Note that Cubans don't stamp your passport on either entry or exit; instead they stamp your tourist card.

The 'address in Cuba' line should be filled in, if only to avoid unnecessary questioning. In the old days, travelers entering the address of a casa particular or the cheapest hotel risked facing a hassle and/or compulsory on-the-spot reservations in a state-run hotel. This has largely been relaxed and as long as you are staying in a legal casa particular or hotel, you shouldn't have problems. Staying at a lover's or friend's house (which you can do, but it requires special paperwork at immigration) does not qualify.

Business travelers and journalists need visas. Applications should be made through a consulate at least three weeks in advance (longer if you apply through a consulate in a country other than your own).

Visitors with visas or anyone who has stayed in Cuba longer than 90 days must apply for an exit permit from an immigration office. The Cuban Consulate in London issues official visas (£32 plus two photos). They take two weeks to process, and the name of an official contact in Cuba is necessary.

Extensions

For most travelers, obtaining an extension once in Cuba is easy: you just go to an *inmigración* (immigration office) and present your documents and CUC\$25 in stamps. Obtain these stamps from a branch of *Bandec* or *Banco Financiero Internacional* beforehand. You'll only receive an additional 30 days after your original 30 days, but you can exit and re-enter the country for 24 hours and start over again (some travel agencies in Habana have special deals for this type of trip; see p92). Attend to extensions at least a few business days before your visa is due to expire and never attempt travel around Cuba with an expired visa. Nearly all provincial towns have an immigration office (closed Wednesday, Saturday

and Sunday) though the staff rarely speak English and they aren't always over-helpful. Try to avoid Habana's office if you can as it gets ridiculously crowded.

Baracoa (Map p439; Antonio Maceo No 48; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri)

Bayamo (Map p375; Carretera Central Km 2; ☎ 9am-noon & 1:30-4pm Tue & Thu-Fri) In a big complex 200m south of the Hotel Sierra Maestra.

Camagüey (Map pp324-5; Calle 3 No 156 btwn Nos 8 & 10, Reparto Vista Hermosa; ☎ 8am-11:30am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri, except Wed)

Ciego de Ávila (Map p312; cnr Chicho Valdés & Antonio Maceo; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon & Tue, 8am-noon Wed-Fri)

Cienfuegos (Map p260; ☎ 52 10 17; Av 46 btwn 29 & 31)

Guardalavaca (Map p362; ☎ 3-0226/7) In the police station at the entrance to the resort. Head here for visa extensions; there's also an immigration office in Banes (p365).

Guantánamo (Map p433; Calle 1 Oeste btwn 14 & 15 Norte; ☎ 8:30am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Thu) Directly behind Hotel Guantánamo.

Habana (Map pp106-7; cnr Calle Factor al final & Santa Ana, Nuevo Vedado) This office is specifically for extensions and has long queues. Get there early. It has no phone, but you can direct questions to immigration proper at ☎ 203-0307.

Holguín (Map p350; General Marrero & General Vázquez; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) Arrive early – it gets crowded here.

Las Tunas (Av Camilo Cienfuegos, Reparto Buenavista) Northeast of the train station.

Sancti Spiritus (Map p288; ☎ 2-4729; Independencia Norte No 107; ☎ 8:30am-noon & 1:30-3:30pm Mon-Thu)

Santa Clara (cnr Av Sandino & Sexta; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-3pm Mon-Thu) Three blocks east of Estadio Sandino.

Santiago de Cuba (Map pp394-5; ☎ 69 36 07; Calle 13 No 6, btwn Av General Cebrero & Calle 4; ☎ 8:30am-noon & 2-4pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri) Stamps for visa extensions are sold at the Banco de Crédito y Comercio at Felix Peña No 614 on Parque Céspedes.

Trinidad (Map p294; Julio Cueva Díaz; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Thu) Off Paseo Agramonte.

Varadero (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 39; ☎ 8am-3:30pm Mon-Fri)

Entry Permits for Cubans & Naturalized Citizens

Naturalized citizens of other countries who were born in Cuba require an *autorización de entrada* (entry permit) issued by a Cuban embassy or consulate. Called a *Vigencia de Viaje*, it allows Cubans resident abroad to

visit Cuba as many times as they like over a two-year period. Persons hostile to the revolution or with a criminal record are not eligible.

The Cuban government does not recognize dual citizenship. All persons born in Cuba are considered Cuban citizens unless they have formally renounced their citizenship at a Cuban diplomatic mission and the renunciation has been accepted. Cuban Americans with questions about dual nationality can contact the Office of Overseas Citizens Services, Department of State, Washington, DC 20520.

Licenses for US Visitors

In 1961 the US government imposed an order limiting the freedom of its citizens to visit Cuba, and airline offices and travel agencies in the US are forbidden to book tourist travel to Cuba via third countries. However, the Cuban government has never banned Americans from visiting Cuba, and it continues to welcome US passport holders under exactly the same terms as any other visitor.

Americans traditionally go to Cuba via Canada, Mexico, the Bahamas, Jamaica or any other third country. American travel agents are prohibited from handling tourism arrangements, so most Americans go through a foreign travel agency. Travel agents in those countries (see p469) routinely arrange Cuban tourist cards, flight reservations and accommodation packages.

The immigration officials in Cuba know very well that a Cuban stamp in a US passport can create problems. However, many Americans request that immigration officers not stamp their passport before they hand it over. The officer will instead stamp their tourist card, which is collected upon departure from Cuba. Those who don't ask usually get a tiny stamp on page 16 or the last page in the shape of a plane, barn, moon or some other random symbol that doesn't mention Cuba.

The US government has an 'Interests Section' in Habana, but American visitors are advised to go there only if something goes terribly wrong. Therefore, unofficial US visitors are especially careful not to lose their passports while in Cuba, as this would put them in a very difficult position. Many

Cuban hotels rent security boxes (CUC\$2 per day) to guests and nonguests alike, and you can carry a photocopy of your passport for identification on the street.

There are two types of licenses issued by the US government to visit Cuba: general licenses (typically for family members, artists and academics) and special licenses (for journalists on assignment, for foreign officials based in the US, and occasionally on humanitarian grounds). In 1995 the list of permissible travel was expanded to include educational and cultural exchanges, but George W Bush discontinued this license category in 2003, cutting off 70% of the travel that had been deemed 'legal.' Cuban Americans may visit relatives in Cuba once every three years with a general license. Such permits are never issued for the purpose of business travel or tourism.

For more information, contact the **Licensing Division** (☎ 202-622-2480; www.treas.gov/ofac; Office of Foreign Assets Control, US Department of the Treasury, 2nd fl, Annex Building, 1500 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Washington, DC 20220). Travel arrangements for those eligible for a license can be made by specialized US companies such as Marazul or ABC Charters (see p473). License holders are only allowed to spend US\$100 per person per day for land arrangements.

Under the Trading with the Enemy Act, goods originating in Cuba are prohibited from being brought into the US by anyone but licensed travelers. Cuban cigars, rum, coffee etc will be confiscated by US customs, and officials can create additional problems if they feel so inclined. Possession of Cuban goods inside the US or bringing them in from a third country is also banned.

American travelers who choose to go to Cuba (and wish to avoid unnecessary hassles with the US border guards) get rid of anything related to their trip to Cuba, including used airline tickets, baggage tags, travel documents, receipts and souvenirs, before returning to the US. If Cuban officials don't stamp their passport, there will be no official record of their trip. They also use a prepaid Cuban telephone card to make calls to the US in order to avoid there being records of collect or operator-assisted telephone calls.

Since September 11, 2001, all international travel issues have taken on new im-

port, and there has been a crackdown on 'illegal' travel to Cuba. Though it has nothing to do with terrorism, some Americans returning from Cuba have had 'transit to Cuba' written in their passports by Jamaican customs officials. Customs officials at major US entry points (eg New York, Houston, Miami) are onto backpackers coming off Cancún and Montego Bay flights with throngs of honeymoon couples, or tanned gentlemen arriving from Toronto in January. They're starting to ask questions, reminding travelers that it's a felony to lie to a customs agent as they do so.

The maximum penalty for 'unauthorized' Americans traveling to Cuba is US\$250,000 and 10 years in prison. In practice, people are usually fined US\$7500. Since George W Bush came into the White House, the number of people threatened with legal action has more than tripled and it's likely to go higher still. More than 100,000 US citizens a year travel to Cuba with no consequences. However, as long as these regulations remain in place, visiting Cuba certainly qualifies as soft adventure travel for Americans. There are many organizations, including a group of congresspeople on Capitol Hill, working to lift the travel ban (see www.cubacentral.com for more information).

VOLUNTEERING

One of the most rewarding ways to experience Cuba is by volunteering. International labor brigades have a rich history in Cuba and each year teams of between 50 and 200 *brigadistas* (workers) from around the world arrive to work in solidarity with Cuba. The Venceremos and Antonio Maceo Brigades (US), the Juan Rius Rivera Brigade (Puerto Rico), the Ernesto Che Guevara Brigade (Canada), the José Martí Brigade (Western Europe), the Nordic Brigade (Scandinavia) and the Southern Cross Brigade (Australia and New Zealand) are among them.

Volunteering involves three challenging weeks doing agricultural or construction work alongside Cubans. There's also a full program of activities, including educational and political events and visits to factories, hospitals, trade unions and schools. Entertainment is provided at the camp and excursions to the beach and places of interest are organized.

Participants pay their own airfare to Cuba, plus food, accommodation and excursion fares. For more information see Habana chapter p116.

WOMEN TRAVELERS

In terms of personal safety, Cuba is a dream destination for women travelers. Most streets can be walked alone at night, violent crime is rare and the chivalrous part of machismo means you'll never step into oncoming traffic. But machismo cuts both ways, with protecting on one side and pursuing – relentlessly – on the other. Cuban women are used to *piropos* (the whistles, kissing sounds and compliments constantly ringing in their ears), and might even reply with their own if they're feeling frisky. For foreign women, however, it can feel like an invasion. Like any cross-cultural situation, if you want to travel in Cuba, you'll have to come to terms with it somehow.

Ignoring *piropos* is the first step. But sometimes ignoring them isn't enough. Learn some rejoinders in Spanish so you can shut men up. '*No me moleste*' (don't bother me), '*esta bueno yá*' (all right al-

ready) or '*que falta respeto*' (how disrespectful) are good ones, as is the withering 'don't you dare' stare that is also part of the Cuban woman's arsenal. Wearing plain, modest clothes might help lessen unwanted attention; topless sunbathing is out. An absent husband, invented or not, seldom has any effect. If you go to a disco, be very clear with Cuban dance partners what you are and are not interested in. Dancing is a kind of foreplay in Cuba and may be viewed as an invitation for something more. Cubans appreciate directness and as long as you set the boundaries, you'll have a fabulous time. Being in the company of a Cuban man is the best way to prevent *piropos*, and if all else fails, retire to the pool for a day out of the line of fire and re-energize.

Traveling alone can be seen as an invitation for all kinds of come-ons, and solo women travelers will not have an easy time of it. Hooking up with a male traveler (or another woman, at least to deflect the barrage) can do wonders. Marriage proposals will come fast and from all corners, as matrimony is an easy way to emigrate for Cubans who want out.

Transport

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GETTING THERE & AWAY

ENTERING THE COUNTRY

Whether it's your first time or 50th, descending low into José Martí international airport, over rust-red tobacco fields, is an exciting and unforgettable experience. Fortunately, entry procedures are straightforward, as long as you have a passport valid for six months, an onward ticket and your tourist card filled out (be sure to put something in the 'Address in Cuba' space; see Visas p464).

THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and the ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

Outside Cuba, the capital city is called Havana, and this is how travel agents, airlines and other professionals will refer to it. Within Cuba, it's almost always called Habana or La Habana by everyone. For the sake of consistency, we have used the latter spelling throughout this book.

Flights, tours and rail tickets can be booked online at www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services.

AIR Airports & Airlines

Cuba has 11 international airports and more than 60 carriers serving the island. Most travelers fly into Aeropuerto Internacional José Martí in **Habana** (HAV; ☎ 7-33 56 66), Aeropuerto Juan Gualberto Gómez in **Varadero** (VRA; ☎ 045-24 70 15) or Aeropuerto Antonio Maceo in **Santiago de Cuba** (SCU; ☎ 022-69 10 14). Travelers on package tours might fly into **Holguín** (HOG; ☎ 024-46 25 12), **Ciego de Ávila** (AVI; ☎ 033-26 66 26), **Cayo Largo del Sur** (CYO; ☎ 046-34 82 07) or **Aeropuerto Jardines del Rey** (CCC; ☎ 30 82 28).

The national airline of Cuba is **Cubana de Aviación** (www.cubana.cu). Its modern fleet flies major routes and its airfares are usually among the cheapest. However, overbooking and delays are nagging problems you may well encounter. In addition, the airline has a zero tolerance attitude towards overweight luggage, charging stiffly for every kilogram above the 20kg baggage allowance. In terms of safety, Cubana's reputation precedes it (it had back-to-back crashes in December 1999, with 39 fatalities), but it hasn't had any incidents since. Still, you might want to check the latest at www.airsafe.com.

AIRLINES FLYING TO/FROM CUBA

Aerocaribbean (7L; ☎ 7-832 7584; www.aerocaribbean.com; Airline Bldg, Calle 23 No 64, Habana)

Aeroflot-Russian International Airlines (AFL; ☎ 7-33 32 00; www.aeroflot.com; hub Moscow; Airline Bldg, Calle 23 No 64)

Aerpostal (LAV; ☎ 7-55 40 00; www.aerpostal.com; hub Caracas; Hotel Habana Libre, cnr Calle 23 & Calle L)

Air Canada (ACA; www.aircanada.com; hub Montréal; Airline Bldg, Calle 23 No 64)

DEPARTURE TAX

Everyone must pay a CUC\$25 departure tax at the airport. It's payable in cash only.

Air Europa (AEA; ☎ 7-204 6905/6/7/8; www.air-europa.com; hub Madrid; cnr Av 5 & Calle 76, Miramar)

Air France (AFR; ☎ 7-66 26 42; www.airfrance.com; hub Paris; Airline Bldg, Calle 23 No 64)

Air Jamaica (AJM; ☎ 7-66 24 47; www.airjamaica.com; hub Montego Bay; Hotel Meliá Cohiba, Paseo btwn Calles 1 & 3)

Air Transat (TSC; ☎ 1-877 872 6728; www.airtransat.com; hub Montréal)

Copa Airlines (CMP; ☎ 7-33 15 03; www.copaair.com; hub Panama City; Airline Bldg, Calle 23 No 64)

Cubana (CU; ☎ 7-834-4446; www.cubana.cu; hub Habana; Airline Bldg, Calle 23 No 64)

Iberia (IBE; ☎ 33 50 41; www.iberia.com; hub Madrid; cnr Calles 23 & P, Miramar)

Lacsa (LRC; ☎ 7-33 31 14; www.grupotaca.com; hub San José, Costa Rica; Hotel Habana Libre, cnr Calles 23 & Calle L) Also represents Taca.

LanChile (LAN; ☎ 7-831-6186; www.lanchile.com; hub Santiago de Chile)

Martinair (MPH; ☎ 7-33 43 64; www.martinair.com; hub Amsterdam; cnr Calles E & 23, Vedado)

Mexicana de Aviación (MXA; ☎ 7-33 35 33; www.mexicana.com.mx; hub Mexico City; Airline Bldg, Calle 23 No 64) Also represents the regional carrier Aerocaribe.

Skyservice (SSV; ☎ 1-416-679-8330; www.skyserviceairlines.com; hub Toronto)

US CITIZENS & CUBA

In conjunction with the US embargo against Cuba, the US government currently enforces a 'travel ban,' preventing its citizens from visiting Cuba. Technically a treasury law prohibiting Americans from spending money in Cuba, it has largely squelched leisure travel for more than 45 years.

The 1996 Helms-Burton Bill, which was signed into law by President Clinton on March 12, 1996, imposes *without judicial review* fines of up to US\$50,000 on US citizens who visit Cuba without US government permission. It also allows for confiscation of their property. In addition, under the Trading with the Enemy Act, violators may face up to US\$250,000 in fines and up to 10 years in prison. Although fines were only occasionally levied when Clinton was in the White House, the number of individuals fined since Bush came into office has more than tripled, and Bush's administration has been granting far fewer licenses too. The author and publisher of this guide accept no responsibility for repercussions suffered by US citizens who decide to circumvent these restrictions. You are strongly encouraged to visit www.cubacentral.com to inform yourself of the latest legislation on Capitol Hill.

Supporters of the embargo argue that travel to Cuba supports a 'communist dictatorship.' Lonely Planet believes that travel promotes positive, humanistic, cross-cultural exchanges and where and how you travel is an individual decision. Many Cubans depend on the tourist trade to survive, and by using the information in this book, travelers can spend their money in ways that benefit ordinary Cubans.

Virgin Atlantic (VIR; ☎ 7-204-0747; www.virginatlantic.com; hub London Gatwick)

Tickets

Since Americans can't buy tickets to Cuba and can't use US-based travel agents, a host of businesses in Mexico (p471), Canada (below) and the Caribbean (p470) specialize in air-only deals. They sometimes won't sell you the first leg of your trip to the 'gateway' country for fear of embargo-related repercussions. When booking online or if an agency requires financial acrobatics to steer clear of US embargo laws (which sometimes happens), be sure to confirm details, take contact names and clarify the procedure. You will need a Cuban tourist card and these agencies should arrange that. Except during peak holiday seasons, you can usually just arrive in Mexico, Jamaica or whatever gateway country and buy your round-trip ticket to Cuba there.

The choice for non-Americans is varied, straightforward, cheap and accessible. Often, an air-and-hotel package deal to one of the beach resorts works out cheaper than just airfare alone.

Canada

Cubana flies to Habana from Montréal four times weekly (via Cayo Coco, Varadero or Cayo Largo). From Toronto, Cubana flies

CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motorized travel generates carbon dioxide (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow travelers to offset the level of greenhouse gases they are responsible for with financial contributions to sustainable travel schemes that reduce global warming – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, support the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: www.lonelyplanet.com.

to Habana three times weekly, with a Varadero stopover once a week. Lacsá (the good Costa Rican carrier) also has several weekly flights from Toronto and Montréal to Habana. Air Canada is another option. Mexicana flies from Vancouver to Habana via Mexico City five times weekly.

You might find a cheaper fare, though, with the reliable charter lines Air Transat and Skyservice, flying weekly from Toronto and Montréal to almost all international airports in Cuba. Some of these flights operate only from mid-December to April, when Canadian flights go directly to Cuba from as far afield as Vancouver and Halifax.

Unfortunately, 'open jaw' ticket arrangements, which allow you to fly into one airport and out of another, are usually not available. The maximum stay on most Canadian charters is 28 days. If you wish to stay longer than that, the price soars. Flight dates cannot be changed and there are heavy cancellation penalties. Always be sure to compare the price of a tour package as it may be only a few hundred dollars more and airport transfers, accommodation, and often meals will be included.

The following are reliable agencies selling packages and air-only tickets:

A Nash Travel (☎ 905-755 0647, toll free 800-818 2004; www.anashtravel.com)

Alba Tours (www.albatours.com)

Go Cuba Plus (www.gocubaplus.com)

Netssa (☎ toll free 866-504 9988; www.netssa.com) Last-minute flight specials, plus multilingual staff.

STA Travel (☎ 888-427-5639; www.statravel.ca)

Caribbean

Cubana has flights to Habana from Nassau, Fort de France, Kingston, Montego Bay, Pointe-a-Pitre and Santo Domingo. The Cuban regional carrier Aerocaribe flies between Port au Prince, Haiti, and Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, to Santiago de Cuba weekly, and Santo Domingo and Grand Cayman to Habana weekly.

Air Jamaica (www.airjamaica.com) flies from Montego Bay and Kingston to Habana daily, with numerous convenient connections from the US. Air Jamaica also has a liberal baggage policy, often allowing you to bring oversized and overweight luggage without problems.

The agency **Cubalinda.com** (www.cubalinda.com) is a Habana-based online agency sell-

ing gateway tickets from Mexico and the Caribbean.

From the Bahamas, Cubana flies daily between Nassau and Habana; the Cuban tourist card and the US\$15 Nassau airport departure tax should be included in the ticket price, but ask. Due to US embargo laws, these agencies may not accept online payment or credit card guarantees with cards issued by US banks or their subsidiaries. The financial rigmarole for Americans (mailing certified checks, paying in cash or wiring funds through Western Union for example) may not be worth the time and energy if that's the case. Check on the payment system before settling on the Bahamas as a gateway. Nassau bookings can be made through the following companies:

Havanatur Bahamas (☎ 1-242 393 5281/2/3/4; fax 393 5280) Offices in the Bahamas.

Majestic Holidays (☎ 1-242 342 322 2606; www.majesticholidays.com) Offices in the Bahamas.

San Cristóbal Travel (☎ toll free in US & Canada 866-510 7756; www.sancristobaltravel.com) Offices in Canada and Habana.

Europe

Continental Europe is a good gateway to Cuba. Virgin Atlantic fly twice weekly to Habana (Thursday and Sunday) out of London's Gatwick Airport while Air Europa flies into Habana daily from Barcelona, Bilbao, Las Palmas, London, Madrid, Milan, Paris and Rome. Iberia flies to Habana from Madrid four times weekly and connects through most European capitals; check out their reasonable fares with a maximum three-month stay. Air France arrives from Paris-Charles De Gaulle five times a week.

From Amsterdam, Martinair has twice weekly flights to Habana and one flight weekly to both Varadero and Holguín. It's possible to book Martinair flights into one Cuban airport and out of the other: convenient if you want to travel overland without backtracking. Also look into Air France and Iberia flights from Amsterdam, connecting through Paris or Madrid.

From Russia, Aeroflot flies from Moscow-Sheremetyevo to Habana.

Cubana flies to Habana from Copenhagen, Las Palmas, London, Madrid, Milan, Moscow, Paris-Orly and Rome. Other Cubana flights go from Madrid, Milan, Paris-Orly and Rome to Santiago de Cuba.

London to Holguín and Milan to Cayo Largo are also served. Most operate only once or twice a week, except Habana-Paris, which runs three times weekly. Cubana sometimes offers reduced last-minute fares. There are Cubana offices all over Europe, including **Rome** (☎ 06 700 0714; fax 06 700 0688), **Paris** (☎ 01 53 63 23 23; fax 01 53 53 23 29), **Madrid** (☎ 91 758 9750; fax 91 541 6642) and **London** (☎ 020 75 37 79 09).

The following European-based agencies can help arrange your details:

Guamá Havanatur (☎ 917 82 37 85) In Madrid.

Havanatur Holanda (☎ 104-12 73 07) In Rotterdam.

Havanatur UK (☎ 01707-646 463; www.havanatur.co.uk) In Hertfordshire, England.

Havanatur Italia (☎ 02-676 0691; www.havanatur.it)

Havanatur Paris (☎ 01 48 01 44 55; fax 01 48 01 44 50; www.havanatur.fr)

Journey Latin America (☎ 020-8747-3108; www.journeylatinamerica.com) Based in Britain, this is a professional company which usually has good deals.

Sol y Son Moscú (☎ 095 931 9964; sol-y-son@mtu-net.ru) Sells Cubana flights from Moscow.

Sol y Son Roma (☎ 06-4470 2320; www.it.solysonviajes.com) Handles Cubana flights from Italy.

Traillfinders (☎ 020-7938-3366; www.trailfinders.com) Offices throughout the UK.

Mexico

Mexico is a direct and convenient gateway to Cuba, with many flights to choose from. Both Cubana and Aerocaribe (the regional airline of Mexicana de Aviación) fly from Cancún to Habana daily. Cancún itself is easily accessible on cheap charter flights, and Aerocaribe connects with Mexicana flights from many US cities. If space is available, you can buy same-day tickets to Habana at the Cubana and Aerocaribe offices in the Cancún airport.

Mexicana also has frequent flights from another dozen cities to Habana including Mexico City, Mérida and Tijuana. Cubana flies to Habana from Mexico City daily.

From Mexico City to Habana, a round-trip fare will cost around US\$450, from Cancún about US\$275. Mexicana has reservations offices in **Mexico City** (☎ 5-448-0990; 1-800-502-2000; www.mexicana.com) and **Cancún** (☎ 98-87-4444). Mexicana offices in the US are prohibited from booking these flights.

Cubana also has offices in **Mexico City** (☎ 5-250 6355; fax 5-255 0835) and **Cancún** (☎ /fax 98-86 0192).

Also check these agencies:

Acuario Tours (☎ Acapulco 74-85 6100, Mexico City 5-575-5922; www.acuariotours.com)

Divermex (☎ 99 88 84 23 25; www.divermex.com)

Sol y Son México (☎ 98 87 70 17; www.mx.solyson.viajes.com)

Taino Tours (☎ 5-259 3907; www.tainotours.com.mx)

South & Central America

From Caracas, Venezuela, Aeropostal flies to Habana five times weekly. Cubana flies from Caracas to Habana six times weekly. Book in Caracas, through **Ideal Tours** (☎ 2-793 0037/1822; idealtours@cantv.net) or go straight to **Cubana** (☎ 2-12 286 8639; cubana@intercon.net.ve).

Cubana flies to Habana from Bogotá, Buenos Aires and São Paulo. There's also a weekly flight from Buenos Aires to Cayo Coco and Varadero. Cubana has offices in **Buenos Aires** (☎ 1-326 5291; cubana@tounet.com.ar); **Quito** (☎ 2-54 49 30; cubana@hoy.net); and **Bogotá** (☎ 1-610 5800; solyson@colomsat.net.co).

Cubana flies to Habana from San José, Costa Rica, and Guatemala City twice weekly and Panama City three times a week. Lacsá (Líneas Aéreas de Costa Rica) has

flights to Habana from San José, Guatemala City and San Salvador several times a week. Copa Airlines also has frequent flights between Central America and Cuba.

The Cuban regional airline Aerocaribbean flies from Managua to Habana weekly.

SEA

Thanks to the US embargo, which prohibits vessels calling at Cuban ports from visiting the US for six months, few cruise ships include Cuba on their itineraries. Many companies also canceled Cuba cruises after September 11, 2001, which is odd, because there really is no place safer. European lines however, tired of being locked out, are starting to trickle in. A specialist travel agent will be able to tell you what cruise ships currently call at Cuban ports.

Access by private yacht or cruiser is easy, and there are numerous harbors around Cuba. This book is not intended to replace a comprehensive cruising guide.

There are no scheduled ferry services to Cuba.

TOURS

A quick Internet search delivers scads of tours focusing on the beach, culture, the environment, adventure, cycling, bird-watching, architecture, hiking, you name it... Note that many outfitters anxious to sell packages to Americans aren't always providing 'legal' travel; Americans are still subject to Treasury laws; see the **Department of the Treasury** (www.treas.gov) website for details (type the word 'Cuba' into site search engine). Persons holding US passports will find agencies handling 'air-only' packages on p469 and tours for US-license holders following.

US

United States citizens eligible for a US government 'license' to visit Cuba should contact **Marazul Charters Inc** (☎ 305-263-6829, toll free 800-223-5334; www.marazulcharters.com), which books charter flights direct from New York and Miami to Habana.

ABC Charters (☎ 305-871 1260, toll free 866-422 2247; www.abc-charters.com), with flights from Miami to Habana, Santiago de Cuba or Holguín, has been recommended for its user-friendliness.

Since the people-to-people educational exchange license was revoked in 2003, some of the most rewarding tours from the US have been scuttled – for now. Contact the following for their current tour status:

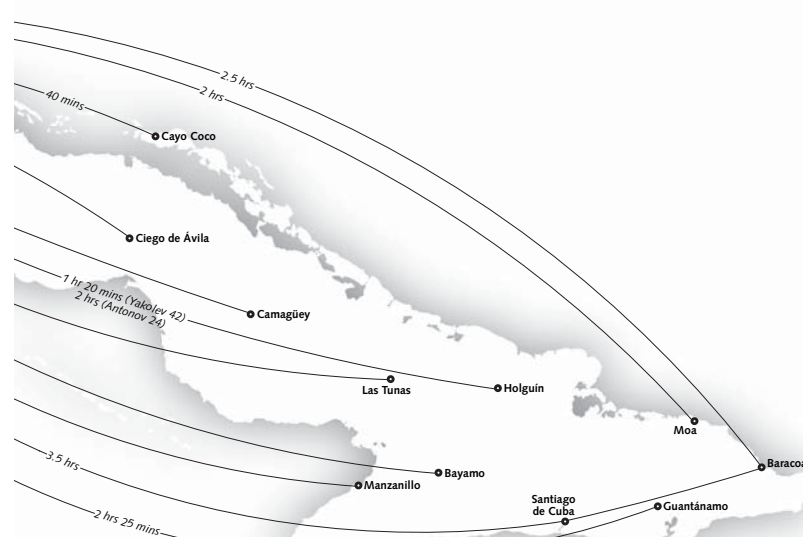
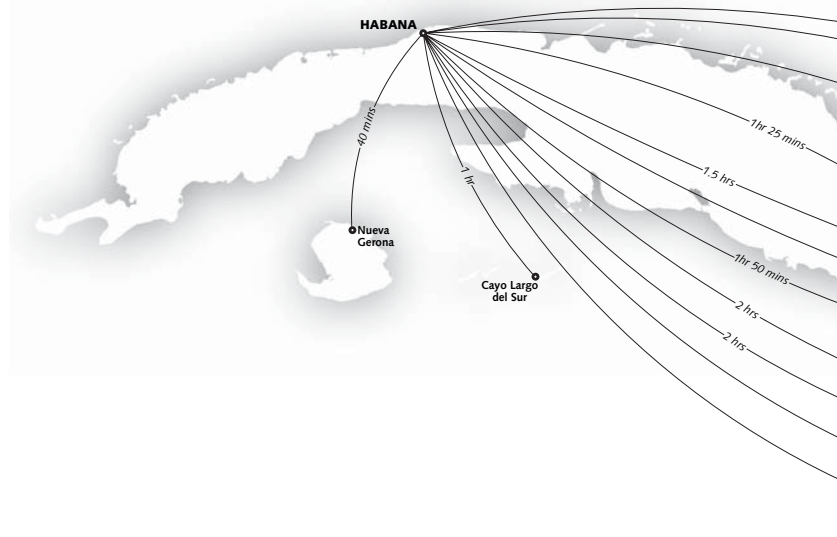
Center for Cuban Studies (☎ 212-242 0559; fax 212-242 1937; www.cubaupdate.org) Arranges trips through universities.

Global Exchange (☎ 415-255 7296, 800-497 1994; fax 415-255 7498; www.globalexchange.org)

GETTING AROUND

AIR

Cubana de Aviación (www.cubana.cu) and its regional carrier Aerocaribbean have flights to La Habana, Baracoa, Bayamo, Camagüey, Cayo Largo del Sur, Ciego de Ávila, Guantánamo, Holguín, Isla de la Juventud, Manzanillo, Moa and Santiago de Cuba. One-way flights are half the price of round-trip flights and weight restrictions are strict (especially on Aerocaribbean's smaller planes). You can purchase tickets at most hotel tour desks and travel agencies for the



same price as at the airline offices, which are often chaotic. Sol y Son is Cubana's own travel agency and is known for its customer service and efficiency.

Old cars aren't the only stars. **Aerotaxi** (☎ 832-8127; cnr Calle 27 & M, Vedado) flies 50-year-old Antonov 2s (propeller airplanes) around the country to a variety of destinations. You have to rent the entire plane for approximately CUC\$500 per day. You may also encounter Yakovlev YAK 42s, jet airplanes that often run on the Habana-Camagüey/Holguín/Santiago de Cuba air routes and are a good deal faster than the older propeller-driven Antonovs.

BICYCLE

Cuba is a cyclist's paradise, with bike lanes, bike workshops and drivers accustomed to sharing the road countrywide. Spare parts are difficult to find and you should bring important spares with you. Still, Cubans are grand masters at improvised repair and though specific parts may not be available, something can surely be jury-rigged. *Poncheros* fix flat tires and provide air; every small town has one.

Helmets are unheard of in Cuba except at upscale resorts, so you should bring your own. A lock is imperative as bicycle theft is rampant. *Parqueos* are bicycle parking lots located wherever crowds congregate (eg markets, bus terminals, downtown etc); they cost one peso.

Throughout the country, the 1m-wide strip of road to the extreme right is reserved for bicycles, even on highways. It's illegal to ride on sidewalks and against traffic on one-way streets and you'll be ticketed if caught. Road lighting is deplorable and it's not rec-

BRINGING YOUR BICYCLE

Cuba has no problem with travelers bringing in bikes, though customs may ask you to open the box just to check what's inside. If they ask you if you intend to leave the bike in Cuba, just say no. Policies vary wildly across airlines and even within the same carrier as to how you should pack your bike and how much it will cost. Your best bet is to call your carrier two weeks before you travel and arrive extra early for your flight.

ommended you ride after dark (over one third of vehicular accidents in Cuba involve bicycles); carry lights with you just in case.

Trains with *coches de equipaje* or *bagones* (baggage carriages) should take bikes for around CUC\$10 per trip. These compartments are guarded, but take your panniers with you and check over the bike when you arrive at your destination. *Viazul* buses also take bikes.

Purchase

Limited selection and high prices make buying a bike in Cuba through official channels unattractive. Better to ask around and strike a deal with an individual to buy their *chivo* (Cuban slang for bike) and trade it or resell it when you leave. With some earnest bargaining, you can get one for around CUC\$30 – although the more you pay, the less your bones are likely to shake. Despite the obvious cost savings, bringing your own is still the best bet by far.

Rental

At the time of writing, official bike-rental agencies exist only at El Orbe in Habana (for rates see p143), at the major beach resorts (CUC\$2 per hour or CUC\$15 per day) and in Viñales (CUC\$6 to CUC\$8 per day). Bikes are usually included as a perk in all-inclusive resort packages.

Don't worry if there are no official bike-rental outlets; no matter where you are, you'll find someone willing to arrange a private rental. The going rate is CUC\$3 to CUC\$7 per day.

BUS

Bus travel is generally a viable, dependable option. **Viazul** (www.viazul.com) is the best option with punctual, air-conditioned coaches to destinations of interest to travelers, while Astro, which has just imported a new fleet of modern Chinese-made buses, goes to Cuba's every corner. *Viazul* is a Convertible service for tourists and well-heeled Cubans, and you can be confident you'll get where you're going on these buses. They cost more, but have daily departures and they're a good place to meet other foreigners.

Astro sells passage to Cubans in pesos and tourists in Convertibles, so the journey is more interesting and you'll meet lots of locals this way (trucks are another great

way to make friends; see p479). If you plan on taking Astro buses, check ahead of time as there's never any printed schedule and only two tickets per bus are available for foreigners on each departure. There are theoretically different classes of buses, but really, whatever shows up is what you take. Foreigners with a *carnet* (p454) pay for Astro tickets in pesos. Many services only run on alternate days.

Going from east to west, the bus departures are very inconvenient, with buses leaving in the middle of the night.

There's also a new Havanatur transfer bus that runs daily Viñales–Soroa–Habana, Viñales–María La Gorda, Viñales–Trinidad and Viñales–Cayo Levisa routes (see p208).

Astro (☎ 7-870 3397 Habana) Serves every major and minor town in the country; useful for getting off the beaten track and between towns not served by *Viazul*, including Manzanillo, anything west of Bayamo and the north coast east of Varadero to Baracoa.

Viazul (☎ 7-881 1413, 7-881 5652, 7-881 1108; www.viazul.cu) Routes are Habana–Viñales, Habana–Varadero, Habana–Trinidad, Habana–Holguín, Varadero–Trinidad, Habana–Santiago de Cuba, Trinidad–Santiago de Cuba and Santiago de Cuba–Baracoa. Depending on the route, these buses also stop in Pinar del Río, Santa Clara, Cienfuegos, Ciego de Ávila, Sancti Spiritus, Camagüey, Las Tunas, Holguín, Bayamo or Guantánamo. They take online reservations, but take those with a grain of salt.

Costs

Viazul always costs more than Astro, but the difference is marginal and gets even more negligible the further you travel. As Astro seats are more limited and less comfortable than *Viazul*, they are best used to get to the places where *Viazul* doesn't penetrate, eg north coast, Manzanillo or west of Pinar del Río. From Habana to Santiago de Cuba, passage costs CUC\$42/51 with Astro/*Viazul*.

Reservations

Reservations with *Viazul* are advisable during peak travel periods (June to August, Christmas and Easter) and on popular routes (Habana–Trinidad, Trinidad–Santa Clara and Santiago de Cuba–Baracoa). *Viazul* out of Baracoa is almost always booked, so reserve an advance seat on this service and arrange through-reservations if you intend to connect in Santiago de Cuba to points north and west.

Since it's advisable to double check on Astro services before you intend to travel, and only two seats are reserved for foreigners, you might as well make a reservation while you're at it.

CAR Driver's License

Your home license is sufficient to rent and drive a car in Cuba.

Fuel & Spare Parts

Gas sold in Convertibles (as opposed to peso gas) is widely available in stations all over the country (the north coast west of Habana being the notable exception). Gas stations are often open 24 hours and may have a small parts store on site. Gas is sold by the liter and comes in *regular* (CUC\$0.75 per liter) and *especial* (CUC\$0.95 per liter) varieties. Rental cars are advised to use *especial*. All gas stations have efficient pump attendants, usually in the form of *trabajadores sociales* (students in the process of studying for a degree).

While you cannot count on spare parts per se to be available, Cubans have decades of experience keeping old wrecks on the road without factory parts and you'll see them do amazing things with cardboard, string, rubber and clothes hangers to keep a car mobile.

If you need air in your tires or you have a puncture, use a gas station or visit the local *ponchero*. They often don't have measures so make sure they don't over-fill them.

Insurance

Rental cars come with an optional CUC\$10 per day insurance which covers everything but theft of the radio (which you'll need to put in the trunk of the car at night). You can choose to decline the insurance, but then the refundable deposit you must leave upon renting the car (in cash if you don't have a credit card issued by a non-US bank) soars from CUC\$200 to CUC\$500. If you do have an accident, you must get a copy of the *denuncia* (police report) to be eligible for the insurance coverage, a process which can take all day. If the police determine that you are the party responsible for the accident, say *adiós* to your deposit.

Rental

Renting a car in Cuba is very straightforward and you can usually be signed up and fitted out in well under an hour. You'll need your passport, driver's license and refundable CUC\$200 deposit (in cash or non-US credit card). You can rent a car in one city and drop it off in another for a reasonable fee, which is handy. If you're on a tight budget, ask about diesel cars – some agencies stock a few and you'll save bundles in gas money considering a liter of regular gas is CUC\$0.95 while a liter of *petroleo* (diesel) is CUC\$0.45. Note that there are very few rental cars with automatic transmission.

If you want to rent a car for three days or fewer, it will come with limited kilometers, while contracts for three days or more come with unlimited kilometers. In Cuba, you pay for the first tank of gas when you rent the car (CUC\$0.95 per liter) and return it empty (a suicidal policy that sees many tight-fisted tourists running out of gas a kilometer or so from the drop-off point). Just to make it worse, you will not be refunded for any gas left in the tank. Petty theft of mirrors, antennas, taillights etc is common, so it's worth it to pay someone a Convertible or two to watch your car for the night. If you lose your rental contract or keys you'll pay a CUC\$50 penalty. Drivers under 25 pay a CUC\$5 fee, while additional drivers on the same contract pay a CUC\$15 surcharge.

Check over the car carefully with the rental agent before driving into the sunset as you'll be responsible for any damage or missing parts. Make sure there is a spare tire of the correct size, a jack and lug wrench. Check that there are seatbelts and that all the doors lock properly (be particularly thorough with the Micar agency).

We have received many letters about poor/nonexistent customer service, bogus spare tires, forgotten reservations and other car rental problems. Reservations are only accepted 15 days in advance and are still not guaranteed. While agents are usually accommodating, you might end up paying more than you planned or have to wait hours until someone returns a car. The more Spanish you speak and the friendlier you are, the more likely problems will be resolved to everyone's satisfaction (tips to the agent might help). As with most Cuban travel, always be ready to go to Plan B.

Road Conditions

And you thought driving in Cuba would be easy? Think again. Driving in Cuba isn't just a different ballpark, it's a different sport. The first problem is there are no signs – almost anywhere. Major junctions and turn-offs to important resorts/cities are often not indicated at all. Not only is this distracting, it's also incredibly time-consuming. The lack of signage also extends to highway instructions. Often a one-way street is not clearly indicated or a speed limit not highlighted, which can cause problems with the police (who won't understand your inability to telepathically absorb the road rules), and road-markings are non-existent everywhere.

Repair-wise the Autopista, Vía Blanca and Carretera Central are generally in a good state, but be prepared for roads suddenly deteriorating into chunks of asphalt and unexpected railroad crossings everywhere else (especially in the Oriente). Rail crossings are particularly problematic as there are hundreds of them and there are never any safety gates. Beware: however overgrown the rails may look you can pretty much assume that the line is still in use. Cuban trains, rather like their cars, defy all normal logic when it comes to mechanics.

While motorized traffic is refreshingly light, bicycles, pedestrians, ox carts, horse carriages and livestock are a different matter. Many old cars and trucks lack rearview mirrors and traffic-unaware children run out of all kinds of nooks and crannies. Stay alert, drive with caution and use your horn when passing or on blind curves.

Driving at night is not recommended due to variable roads, drunk drivers, crossing cows and poor lighting. Drunk driving remains a troublesome problem despite a government educational campaign. Late night in Habana is particularly dangerous, when it seems there's a passing lane, cruising lane and drunk lane.

Traffic lights are often busted or hard to pick out and right-of-way rules thrown to the wind. Take extra care.

Road Rules

Cubans drive how they want, where they want. It seems chaotic at first, but has its rhythm. Seatbelts are supposedly required

ROAD DISTANCES (KM)

Camagüey	210																			
Ciego de Ávila	318	108																		
Cienfuegos	540	330	222																	
Guantánamo	161	371	479	701																
Habana	744	534	426	254	905															
Holguín	71	209	317	539	182	743														
Las Tunas	82	128	236	458	243	662	81													
Matanzas	684	474	366	194	845	105	683	602												
Pinar del Río	906	696	588	416	1067	162	905	824	267											
Sancti Spiritus	394	184	76	151	555	354	393	312	294	516										
Santa Clara	473	263	155	67	634	276	472	391	217	438	590									
Santiago de Cuba	117	550	435	657	84	861	138	199	801	1023	511	590								
	Bayamo	Camagüey	Ciego de Ávila	Cienfuegos	Guantánamo	Habana	Holguín	Las Tunas	Matanzas	Pinar del Río	Sancti Spiritus	Santa Clara								

and maximum speed limits are technically 50km/h in the city, 90km/h on highways and 100km/h on the Autopista, but some cars can't even go that fast and those that can go faster still.

With so few cars on the road, it's hard not to put the pedal to the floor and just fly. Unexpected potholes are a hazard, however, as are police. There are some clever speed traps, particularly along the Autopista. Speeding tickets start at CUC\$30 and are noted on your car contract; the fine is deducted from your deposit when you return the car. When pulled over by the cops, you're expected to get out of the car and walk over to them with your paperwork. An oncoming car flashing its lights means a hazard up ahead (usually the police).

The Cuban transport crisis means there are a lot of people waiting for rides by the side of the road. Giving a *botella* (a lift) to local hitchhikers has advantages aside from altruism. With a Cuban passenger you'll never get lost, you'll learn about secret spots not in any guidebook and you'll meet some great people. There are always risks associated with picking up hitchhikers; giving lifts to older people or families may reduce the risk factor. In the provinces, people waiting for rides are systematically queued by *los amarillos* (roadside traffic organizers; see p197) and they'll hustle the most needy folks into your car, usually an elderly couple or pregnant woman.

FERRY

The most important ferry services for travelers are from Surgidero de Batabanó to Nueva Gerona, **Isla de la Juventud** (☎ 62-8-5355) and from Habana to **Regla** and **Casablanca** (☎ 7-867-3726). These ferries are generally safe, though in 1997 two hydrofoils crashed en route to Isla de la Juventud. In both 1994 and 2003, the Regla/Casablanca ferry was hijacked by Cubans trying to make their way to Florida. The 2003 incident involved tourists, so you can expect tight security.

HITCHHIKING

The transport crisis, culture of solidarity and low crime levels make Cuba a popular hitchhiking destination. Here, hitchhiking is more like ride-sharing. Traffic lights, railroad crossings and country crossroads are regular stops for people seeking rides. In the provinces and on the outskirts of Habana, *los amarillos* (see p197) organize and prioritize ride seekers and you're welcome to jump in line. Rides cost five to 20 pesos depending on distance. Travelers hitching rides will want a good map and some Spanish skills. Expect to wait two or three hours for rides in some cases. Hitchhiking is never entirely safe in any country in the world. Travelers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. People who do choose to hitch will be safer if they travel in pairs and let someone know where they are planning to go.

LOCAL TRANSPORT

Bici-Taxi

Bici-taxis are big tricycles with a double seat behind the driver and are common in Habana, Camagüey, Holguín and a few other cities. In Habana they'll insist on a CUC\$1 minimum fare (Cubans pay five or 10 pesos). Some bici-taxistas ask ridiculous amounts. The fare should be clearly understood before you hop aboard. By law, bici-taxis aren't allowed to take tourists (who are expected to take regular taxis) and they're taking a risk by carrying foreigners. Bici-taxi rules are more lax in the provinces and you should be able to get one for five pesos.

Boat

Some towns such as Habana, Cienfuegos, Gibara and Santiago de Cuba have local ferry services. Details of these are provided in the respective chapters.

Bus

Very crowded, very steamy, very challenging, very Cuban – guaguas (local buses) are useful in bigger cities. Buses work fixed routes, stopping at *paradas* (bus stops) that always have a line, even if it doesn't look like it. You have to shout out '¿el último?' to find out who was last in line before you showed up. You give this call when the next person arrives and then you know exactly where you fall in line, allowing you to go have a beer until the bus shows up.

Buses cost from 40 centavos to one peso; the camello (Habana Metro bus) will cost 20 centavos. You must always walk as far back in the bus as you can and exit through the rear. Make room to pass by saying 'permiso,' always wear your pack in front and watch your wallet.

Colectivos & Maquinas

Colectivos are taxis running on fixed, long-distance routes, leaving when full. They are generally pre-1959 American cars that belch diesel fumes and can squash in at least three people across the front seat. State-owned taxis that charge in Convertibles hanging about bus stations are faster and usually cheaper than the bus. State-owned peso taxis and private peso taxis (*maquinas*), are prohibited from taking foreigners (except the *carnet*-carrying kind).

Horse Carriage

Many provincial cities have *coches de caballo* (horse carriages) that trot on fixed routes and cost one peso.

Taxi

Tourists are only supposed to take taxis that charge in Convertibles, including the little yellow coco-taxis. Car taxis are metered and cost CUC\$1 to start and CUC\$1 per kilometer. Taxi drivers are in the habit of offering foreigners a flat, off-meter rate that usually works out very close to what you'll pay with the meter. The difference is that with the meter, the money goes to the state to be divided up; without the meter it goes into the driver's pocket. Coco-taxis are not metered, can hold three people and cost CUC\$0.50 per kilometer.

TOURS

Of the many tourist agencies in Cuba, the following are the most useful:

Cubamar Viajes (☎ 7-66 25 23/24; www.cubamarviajes.cu) Rents campismo cabins and mobile homes (caravans).

Cubanacán (☎ 7-208 9479; www.cubanacan.cu) General tour agency that also has divisions called Cubanacán Náutica (scuba diving, boating and fishing) and Turismo Y Salud (surgery, spas and rehabilitation).

Cubatur (☎ 7-33 41 55; fax 7-33 40 37)

Ecotur (☎ 7-41 03 06/08; fax 7-53 99 09)

Gaviota (☎ 7-204-4411; www.gaviota-grupo.com)

Havanatur (☎ 7-204 0993; www.havanatur.cu) Works with Marazul Tours in the US.

Paradiso (☎ 7-832 9538/9; paradis@paradiso.artex.com.cu) Multiday cultural and art tours.

San Cristóbal Agencia Receptora (☎ 7-861 9171; fax 7-860-9585)

TRAIN

Cuba was the sixth country in the world to get a railway (before Spain even) and, as a result, it is proud of its extensive network – however antiquated it might be. Public railways operated by Ferrocarriles de Cuba serve all of the provincial capitals and are a great way to experience Cuba if you have time and patience. As a Cuban traveler said '80% of the trains are late and the other 20% are cancelled.' While train travel is safe, the departure information provided in this book is purely theoretical. Getting a ticket is usually no problem as there's a quota for tourists paying in Convertibles. The most useful

routes for travelers are Habana–Santiago de Cuba and Habana–Santa Clara.

Foreigners must pay for their tickets in cash, but prices are reasonable and the carriages, though old and worn, are fairly comfortable, offering lots of local color. The bathrooms are foul. Watch your luggage on overnight trips and bring some of your own food. Vendors come through the train selling coffee (you supply the cup).

The Hershey Train is the only electric railway in Cuba and was built by the Hershey Chocolate Company in the early years of the 20th century; it's a fun way to get between Habana and Matanzas (see p163).

Classes

Trains are either *especial* (air-con, faster trains with fewer departures); *regular* (slowish trains with daily departures); or *lecheros* (milk trains that stop at every dinky town on the line). Trains on major routes such as Habana–Santiago de Cuba will be *especial* or *regular* trains.

Costs

Regular trains costs under CUC\$3 per 100km, while *especial* trains cost closer to CUC\$5.50 per 100km. The Hershey Train is priced like the *regular* trains.

Reservations

In most train stations, you just go to the ticket window and buy a ticket. In Habana, there's a separate waiting room and ticket window for passengers riding in Convertibles. In La Coubre train station and in Santiago de Cuba there's the handy Centro Único de Reservas in the center of town. Be prepared to show your passport when purchasing tickets. It's always wise to check beforehand at the station for current departures because things change.

Services

There are overnight *especial* trains between Habana and Santiago de Cuba on alternate days (861km, 12½ hours, CUC\$30). Train No 1 leaves Habana daily at 6:05pm, passing Santa Clara (9:55pm), and Camagüey (1:48am), before reaching Santiago de Cuba at 6:35am. Train No 2 leaves Santiago de

Cuba daily at 5:05pm, passing Julio Antonio Mella (6:05pm), Camagüey (9:45pm), Guayacanes (12:01am), and Santa Clara (1:55am), before reaching Habana at 6:00am.

The above schedules are only an approximation of what should happen.

Some other train routes that may be of interest to travelers include Pinar del Río–Sábalo, Habana–Matanzas, Habana–Cienfuegos, Habana–Sancti Spiritus, Habana–Holguín, Habana–Manzanillo, Santa Clara–Morón–Nuevitas, Cienfuegos–Santa Clara–Sancti Spiritus, Camagüey–Nuevitas, Camagüey–Bayamo, Bayamo–Manzanillo, Manzanillo–Bayamo–Santiago de Cuba, and Santiago de Cuba–Holguín. Many additional local trains operate at least daily and some more frequently. Additional information is provided in the regional chapters of this book.

TRUCK

Camiones (trucks) are a cheap, fast way to travel within or between provinces. Every city has a provincial and municipal bus stop with *camiones* departures. They run on a (loose) schedule and you'll need to take your place in line by asking for *el último* to your destination; you pay as you board. A truck from Santiago de Cuba to Guantánamo costs five pesos (CUC\$0.20), while the same trip on Astro/Viazul buses costs CUC\$3/6.

A reader traveling by truck enthused:

Camion traveling was the best way to meet regular people and usually fairly fast. There is a camaraderie between *camion* travelers that I didn't find on buses. One hundred sweaty people locking arms, swerving through the mountains in an open air truck...ah, I'll take that any day over a crowded (and more expensive) bus.

Sometimes terminal staff tell foreigners they're prohibited from traveling on trucks. As with anything in Cuba, never take the word 'no' as your first answer. Crying poor, striking up a conversation with the driver, appealing to other passengers for aid, etc usually helps.

Health

Dr David Goldberg

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From a medical point of view, the Caribbean islands are generally safe as long as you're reasonably careful about what you eat and drink. The most common travel-related diseases, such as dysentery and hepatitis, are acquired by the consumption of contaminated food and water. Mosquito-borne illnesses are not a signifi-

cant concern on most of the islands within the Cuban archipelago.

Prevention is the key to staying healthy while traveling in Cuba. Travelers who receive the recommended vaccines and follow commonsense precautions usually come away with nothing more than a little diarrhea.

BEFORE YOU GO

Since most vaccines don't produce immunity until at least two weeks after they're given, visit a physician four to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the 'yellow booklet'), which will list all the vaccinations you've received. This is mandatory for countries that require proof of yellow fever vaccination upon entry. Cuba doesn't require yellow fever vaccination, but it's a good idea to carry your yellow booklet wherever you travel.

Bring medications in their original, clearly labeled containers. A signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical conditions and medica-

tions, including generic names, is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity.

INSURANCE

If your usual health insurance doesn't cover you for medical expenses abroad, consider getting extra insurance; see p458 and check the Travel Services/Insurance section on www.lonelyplanet.com for more information. Find out in advance if your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures. (In many countries, doctors expect payment in cash.)

Should you get into trouble healthwise and end up in hospital call **Asistur** (@ 7-866-8527; www.asistur.cu) for help with insurance and medical assistance. The company has regional offices in Habana, Varadero, Cienfuegos, Cayo Coco, Camagüey, Guadalupe and Santiago de Cuba.

MEDICAL CHECKLIST

- acetaminophen (Tylenol) or aspirin
- adhesive or paper tape
- antibacterial ointment (eg Bactroban; for cuts and abrasions)
- antibiotics
- antidiarrheal drugs (eg loperamide)
- antihistamines (for hay fever and allergic reactions)
- anti-inflammatory drugs (eg ibuprofen)
- bandages, gauze, gauze rolls
- DEET-containing insect repellent for the skin
- iodine tablets (for water purification)
- oral rehydration salts
- permethrin-containing insect spray for clothing, tents and bed nets
- pocketknife
- scissors, safety pins, tweezers
- steroid cream or cortisone (for poison ivy and other allergic rashes)
- sunblock
- syringes and sterile needles
- thermometer

INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice on the Internet. For further information, the Lonely Planet website (www.lonelyplanet.com) is a good place to start. The World Health Organization publishes a superb

THE MAN SAYS...

It's usually a good idea to consult your government's travel health website before departure, if one is available:

Australia (www.smarttraveller.gov.au) Follow the link to Travel Health.

Canada (www.travelhealth.gc.ca)

UK (www.dh.gov.uk) Follow the links to Policy and Guidance and Health Advice for Travellers.

USA (www.cdc.gov/travel)

book called *International Travel and Health*, which is revised annually and is available online at no cost (www.who.int/ith). Another website of general interest is the **MD Travel Health website** (www.mdtravelhealth.com), which provides complete travel health recommendations for every country and is updated daily.

FURTHER READING

If you're traveling with children, Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* may be useful. The *ABC of Healthy Travel*, by Eric Walker et al, is another valuable resource.

IN TRANSIT

DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Blood clots may form in the legs (deep vein thrombosis) during plane flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. The longer the flight, the greater the risk. Though most blood clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, some may break off and travel through the blood vessels to the lungs, where they could cause life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain in the foot, ankle or calf, usually – but not always – on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and difficulty breathing. Travelers with any of the symptoms noted above should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent the development of DVT on long flights, you should walk about the cabin, perform isometric compressions of the leg muscles (ie flex the leg muscles while sitting), drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol and tobacco.

RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

No vaccines are required for Cuba, but a number are recommended:

Vaccine	Recommended for	Dosage	Side effects
Chickenpox	Travelers who've never had chickenpox	2 doses 1 month apart	Fever; mild case of chickenpox
Hepatitis A	All travelers	1 dose before trip; booster 6-12 months later	Soreness at injection site; headaches; body aches
Hepatitis B	Long-term travelers in close contact with the local population	3 doses over a 6-month period	Soreness at injection site; low-grade fever
Rabies	Travelers who may have contact with animals and may not have access to medical care	3 doses over a 3-4 week period	Soreness at injection site; headaches; body aches
Tetanus-diphtheria	All travelers who haven't had a booster within 10 years	1 dose lasts 10 years	Soreness at injection site
Typhoid	All travelers	4 capsules orally, 1 taken every other day	Abdominal pain; nausea; rash

JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones, resulting in insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag try to drink plenty of (nonalcoholic) fluids and eat light meals. Upon arrival, get exposure to natural sunlight and readjust your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. Their main side effect is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger, which works like a charm for some people.

IN CUBA

AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

The Cuban government has established a for-profit health system for foreigners called **Servimed** (☎ 7-24-01-41), which is entirely separate from the free, not-for-profit system that takes care of Cuban citizens. There are more than 40 Servimed health centers across the island, offering primary care as well as a variety of specialty and high-tech services. If you're staying in a hotel, the usual way to access the system is to ask the manager for a physician referral. Servimeds accept walk-ins. While Cuban hospitals provide some free emergency treatment for foreigners, this should only be used when there is no other option. Remember that in Cuba medical resources are scarce and the local populace should be given priority in free healthcare facilities.

Almost all doctors and hospitals expect payment in cash, regardless of whether you have travel health insurance. If you develop a life-threatening medical problem, you'll probably want to be evacuated to a country with state-of-the-art medical care. Since this may cost tens of thousands of dollars, be sure you have insurance to cover this before you depart. See p458 for insurance options.

There are special pharmacies for foreigners also run by the Servimed system, but all Cuban pharmacies are notoriously short on supplies, including pharmaceuticals. Be sure to bring along adequate quantities of

all medications you might need, both prescription and over-the-counter. Also, be sure to bring along a fully-stocked medical kit.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES Dengue (Break-bone) Fever

Dengue fever is a viral and mosquito-borne infection found throughout the Caribbean. A major outbreak of dengue fever, centering on Habana and resulting in more than 3000 cases, was reported from November 2001 through to March 2002. Since then, an aggressive government program has all but eradicated dengue from the island. See also p484 for information on avoiding mosquito bites.

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is the second most common travel-related infection (after traveler's diarrhea). It occurs throughout the Caribbean, particularly in the northern islands. Hepatitis A is a viral infection of the liver that is usually acquired by ingestion of contaminated water, food or ice, though it may also be acquired by direct contact with infected persons. The illness occurs throughout the world, but the incidence is higher in developing nations. Symptoms may include fever, malaise, jaundice, nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain. Most cases resolve without complications, though hepatitis A occasionally causes severe liver damage. There is no treatment.

The vaccine for hepatitis A is extremely safe and highly effective. If you get a booster six to 12 months after the first vaccine, it lasts for at least 10 years. You really should get this vaccine before you go to Cuba or any other developing nation. Because the safety of the hepatitis A vaccine has not been established for pregnant women or children under the age of two, they should instead be given a gamma globulin injection.

Hepatitis B

Like hepatitis A, hepatitis B is a liver infection that occurs worldwide but is more common in developing nations. Unlike hepatitis A, the disease is usually acquired by sexual contact or by exposure to infected blood, generally through blood transfusions or contaminated needles. The vaccine is recommended only for long-term travelers (on

the road more than six months) who expect to live in rural areas or have close physical contact with the local population. Additionally, the vaccine is recommended for anyone who anticipates sexual contact with the local inhabitants or a possible need for medical, dental or other treatments while abroad, especially if a need for transfusions or injections is expected.

The hepatitis B vaccine is safe and highly effective. However, a total of three injections are necessary to establish full immunity. Several countries added the hepatitis B vaccine to the list of routine childhood immunizations in the 1980s, so many young adults are already protected.

Malaria

In the Caribbean, malaria occurs only in Haiti and certain parts of the Dominican Republic. Malaria pills aren't necessary for Cuba.

Rabies

Rabies is a viral infection of the brain and spinal cord that is almost always fatal. The rabies virus is carried in the saliva of infected animals and is typically transmitted through an animal bite, though contamination of any break in the skin with infected saliva may result in rabies. Rabies occurs in several of the Caribbean islands, including Cuba. Most cases in Cuba are related to bites from dogs, bats and wild animals, especially the small Indian mongoose.

The rabies vaccine is safe, but a full series requires three injections and is quite expensive. Those at high risk of rabies, such as animal handlers and spelunkers (cave explorers), should certainly get the vaccine. In addition, those at lower risk of animal bites should consider asking for the vaccine if they are traveling to remote areas and might not have access to appropriate medical care if needed. The treatment for a possibly rabid bite consists of rabies vaccine with rabies immune globulin. It's effective, but must be given promptly. Most travelers don't need rabies vaccine.

All animal bites and scratches must be promptly and thoroughly cleansed with large amounts of soap and water, and local health authorities must be contacted to determine whether or not further treatment is necessary (see Animal Bites, p484).

Typhoid

Typhoid fever is caused by ingestion of food or water contaminated by a species of salmonella known as *Salmonella typhi*. Fever occurs in virtually all cases. Other symptoms may include headache, malaise, muscle aches, dizziness, loss of appetite, nausea and abdominal pain. Either diarrhea or constipation may occur. Possible complications include intestinal perforation, intestinal bleeding, confusion, delirium or (rarely) coma.

The typhoid vaccine is usually given orally, but is also available as an injection. Neither vaccine is approved for use in children under two. If you get typhoid fever, the drug of choice is usually a quinolone antibiotic such as ciprofloxacin (Cipro) or levofloxacin (Levaquin), which many travelers carry for treatment of diarrhea.

Other Infections

BRUCELLOSIS

Brucellosis is an infection of domestic and wild animals that may be transmitted to humans through direct animal contact or by consumption of unpasteurized dairy products from infected animals. In Cuba, most human cases are related to infected pigs. Symptoms may include fever, malaise, depression, loss of appetite, headache, muscle aches and back pain. Complications may include arthritis, hepatitis, meningitis and endocarditis (heart valve infection).

FASCIOLIASIS

This is a parasitic infection that is typically acquired by eating contaminated watercress grown in sheep-raising areas. Early symptoms may include fever, nausea, vomiting and painful enlargement of the liver.

HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS has been reported in all Caribbean countries. Be sure to use condoms for the purposes of safe sex.

LEPTOSPIROSIS

Acquired by exposure to water contaminated by the urine of infected animals. Outbreaks often occur at times of flooding, when sewage overflow may contaminate water sources. The initial symptoms, which resemble a mild flu, usually subside uneventfully in a few days, with or without

treatment, but a minority of cases are complicated by jaundice or meningitis. There is no vaccine. You can minimize your risk by staying out of bodies of fresh water that may be contaminated by animal urine. If you're visiting an area where an outbreak is in progress, as occurred in Cuba in 1994, you can take 200mg of doxycycline once weekly as a preventative measure. If you actually develop leptospirosis, the treatment is 100mg of doxycycline twice daily.

TRAVELER'S DIARRHEA

To prevent diarrhea, avoid tap water unless it has been boiled, filtered or chemically disinfected (with iodine tablets); only eat fresh fruits or vegetables if cooked or peeled; be wary of dairy products that may contain unpasteurized milk; and be highly selective when eating food from street vendors.

If you develop diarrhea, be sure to drink plenty of fluids, preferably an oral rehydration solution containing lots of salt and sugar. A few loose stools don't require treatment, but if you start having more than four or five stools a day, you should start taking an antibiotic (usually a quinolone drug) and an antidiarrheal agent (such as loperamide). If diarrhea is bloody, persists for more than 72 hours or is accompanied by fever, shaking chills or severe abdominal pain, you should seek medical attention.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

Animal Bites

Do not attempt to pet, handle or feed any animal, with the exception of domestic animals known to be free of any infectious disease. Most animal injuries are directly related to a person's attempt to touch or feed the animal.

Any bite or scratch by a mammal, including bats, should be promptly and thoroughly cleansed with large amounts of soap and water, followed by application of an antiseptic such as iodine or alcohol. The local health authorities should be contacted immediately for possible postexposure rabies treatment, whether or not you've been immunized against rabies (see p483). It may also be advisable to start an antibiotic, since wounds caused by animal bites and scratches frequently become infected. One of the newer quinolones, such as levofloxacin (Levaquin), which many travelers

carry in case of diarrhea, would be an appropriate choice.

Spiny sea urchins and coelenterates (coral and jellyfish) are a hazard in some areas. Some stings (eg from a Portuguese man-of-war) can produce a bad reaction and if you start to feel nauseous/faint you should seek medical treatment.

Heatstroke

To protect yourself from excessive sun exposure, you should stay out of the midday sun, wear sunglasses and a wide-brimmed sun hat, and apply sunscreen with SPF 15 or higher, with both UVA and UVB protection. Sunscreen should be generously applied to all exposed parts of the body approximately 30 minutes before sun exposure and should be reapplied after swimming or vigorous activity. Travelers should also drink plenty of fluids and avoid strenuous exercise when the temperature is high.

Insect Bites & Stings

Because of an aggressive program of mosquito control, mosquito-borne illnesses are usually not a concern in Cuba. However, outbreaks of dengue fever (p482) have occurred in the recent past, so you should be aware of the means of preventing mosquito bites, if necessary. If dengue or other mosquito-borne illnesses are being reported, you should keep yourself covered (wear long sleeves, long pants, a hat, and shoes rather than sandals) and apply a good insect repellent, preferably one containing DEET, to exposed skin and clothing. Do not apply DEET to eyes, mouth, cuts, wounds or irritated skin. Products containing lower concentrations of DEET are as effective, but for shorter periods of time. In general, adults and children over 12 should use preparations containing 25% to 35% DEET, which usually lasts about six hours. Children between two and 12 years of age should use preparations containing no more than 10% DEET, applied sparingly, which will usually last about three hours. Neurologic toxicity has been reported from DEET, especially in children, but appears to be extremely uncommon and generally related to overuse. DEET-containing compounds should not be used on children under age two.

Insect repellents containing certain botanical products, including eucalyptus and

soybean oil, are effective but last only 1½ to two hours. Products based on citronella are not effective.

For additional protection, you can apply permethrin to clothing, shoes, tents and bed nets. Permethrin treatments are safe and remain effective for at least two weeks, even when items are laundered. Permethrin should not be applied directly to skin.

Water

Tap water in Cuba is not reliably safe to drink. Vigorous boiling for one minute is the most effective means of water purification.

You may also disinfect water with iodine pills. Instructions are included and should be carefully followed. Or you can add 2% tincture of iodine to 1L of water (five drops to clear water, 10 drops to cloudy water) and let it stand for 30 minutes. If the water is cold, longer times may be required. The taste of iodinated water may be improved by adding vitamin C (ascorbic acid). Iodinated water should not be consumed for more than a few weeks. Pregnant women, those with a history of thyroid disease, and those allergic to iodine should not drink iodinated water. See p78 for more treatment options.

A number of water filters are on the market. Those with smaller pores (reverse osmosis filters) provide the broadest protection, but they are relatively large and are readily plugged by debris. Those with somewhat larger pores (microstrainer filters) are ineffective against viruses, although they remove other organisms. Follow the manufacturers' instructions carefully.

TRAVELING WITH CHILDREN

In general, it's safe for children to go to Cuba. However, because some of the vaccines listed previously are not approved for use in children (or during pregnancy), travelers with children should be particularly careful not to drink tap water or consume any questionable food or beverage. Also, when traveling with children, make sure they're up-to-date on all routine immunizations. It's sometimes appropriate to give children some of their vaccines a little early before visiting a developing nation. You should discuss this with your pediatrician.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

You can get sanitary items in Cuba, but they are usually more expensive than in Europe/North America/Australia and they are not always readily available (eg easy to find in Varadero, but not quite so easy in Bayamo). Advice: bring a good supply of your own. If pregnant while traveling, see above.

TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

The following table lists some traditional remedies for common travel-related issues:

Problem	Treatment
Jet lag	Melatonin
Motion sickness	Ginger
Mosquito bite prevention	Eucalyptus and/or soybean oil

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