

Destination: Cuba - Travel Restrictions Eased

Written by Karah Van Kammen
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By Kelly Potts

If Cuba is on your bucket list of places to visit, you might want to go sooner rather than later.

Many travel restrictions have been lifted as of Jan. 27, allowing U.S. tourists the ability to visit the country under the category of Educational Travel.

Americans must be on a tour operated by an established U.S. company and the itinerary must be structured as a People-to-People program, which was implemented in 1999 by President Clinton.

One of the perks for traveling to Cuba - the authenticity. Cuba is one of the only countries that has no U.S. restaurants or businesses on its soil. Travelers who desire a more authentic experience should plan a trip while it remains relatively unspoiled.

Cuba's semi-subtropical climate averages 77 to 78 degrees and can be divided into two seasons – wet (May-October) and dry (November-April). Bring a light jacket or sweater, good walking shoes and a fold-up umbrella for occasional downpours.

Cubans are commonly described as being outgoing, friendly, fun and welcoming. A variety of activities entice visitors, including fishing, scuba diving, shopping and museums. Visitors will be transported back in time as well-maintained Chevys and Fords from the 1950s ferry tourists throughout Old Havana.

Cuba also boasts the lowest crime rate of any country in Latin America, and its cities are relatively free from street dangers. Purse snatching and pick pocketing occur but pose little risk for attentive travelers.

To enter Cuba, you must have a passport that is valid for at least six months after your trip. Americans also are required to have a visa, or a "tourist card." Since April 2010, the Cuban government requires all travelers to Cuba have medical care and evacuation coverage under an approved plan.

The flight from Miami to Havana takes about 45 minutes, although scheduled flights between the U.S. and Cuba have not yet begun. Visitors can bring home up to \$400 worth of goods acquired in Cuba for personal use, including no more than \$100 worth of alcohol or tobacco products.

For information regarding the U.S. Sanctions against Cuba or answers to frequently asked questions, visit the U.S. Department of Treasury's website at <https://www.treasury.gov/>.

If you want to go to Cuba, AAA travel experts offer three key tips:

- **Money:** Keep in mind that credit cards and debit cards issued by U.S. banks cannot be used in Cuba. Until ATMs are available, you'll need to bring enough cash with you to last you for the duration of your stay. Travelers can bring U.S. dollars into the country and exchange them into Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC).
- **Phones and Internet:** On average, calling from a tourist hotel costs \$2.50 per minute. Some cell phone carriers have entered into agreements in Cuba, so call your carrier for information. WiFi and Internet service in Cuba is limited. Most tourist hotels in Havana and other large cities have a computer or small business center, where you can pay for Internet usage by the minute or hour.
- **Toiletries:** Medicines and toiletries are in short supply and can be very expensive. Bring everything that you typically use, including insect repellent; sunglasses; sunscreen; a basic first aid kit; pocket packs of tissues and antibacterial hand gel (many public facilities are lacking in or charge for toilet paper and soap); film; extra batteries; and a copy of your passport.

Because of the relative newness of Cuba travel from the United States, it's best to work with a trusted travel agent, like AAA Travel, to plan your trip. As a full-service travel agency, AAA works with a variety of vendors, including Tauck, Alexander and Roberts and Member Choice Vacations to offer tours to Cuba.

For more information, visit AAA.com/travel.

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