

# HEALTH – PACKING – GIFTS

## HEALTH

**Health Insurance in Cuba:** Your US-based insurance policy generally does not work in Cuba. Instead, Cuba requires visitors to obtain Cuba-specific medical insurance, and a temporary policy will be automatically included in the cost of each passenger's fare. ***Passengers must retain their boarding pass during their stay in Cuba.*** The boarding pass will serve as evidence of the insurance policy should any emergency medical services be required during the trip.

**Hospitals in Cuba:** Health Professionals in Cuba are generally regarded as highly skilled. The challenge Cubans face is a lack of medicine (both prescription & over-the-counter) and the latest diagnostic equipment. While most Cubans are treated in community-based hospitals, foreigners are encouraged to visit a clinic designed for foreigners for non-emergency health issues. The health professionals at this clinic in Havana speak English, and we have had good experiences there.

**Over-the-counter medicines and basic first aid:** Standard over-the-counter medicines are NOT AVAILABLE in Cuba. For your comfort and convenience, you should pack anything you'd like to have including: pain medication, anti-diarrheal, decongestants, suntan lotion, anti-itch cream, antibiotic ointment, band-aids, contact solution, etc. Of course, we will also have a first-aid kit available to our guests.

**Prescription Medicines:** Pack a sufficient quantity of any prescription medication you require. You are encouraged to carry the medicine in the original container, accompanied with a script. We also encourage you to ***keep the medicine in your carry-on luggage*** to mitigate the possibility of theft or loss. Replacement medicine will be very hard to find in Cuba. Please guard these items carefully. Many travelers like to bring ***Ciprofloxacin (Cipro)***, an antibiotic that is often used to treat traveler's diarrhea. If you are interested in this medicine, make an appointment with your general physician, discuss your concern, and ask for a prescription.

**Vaccines and Concerns in Cuba:** Visit the CDC website to learn about diseases in Cuba: <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/cuba/>. The zika virus is active in Cuba. To protect against mosquito bites, clients are encouraged bring 100% DEET products and to wear long pants and long sleeve shirts.

## PAPERWORK AND DOCUMENTATION

- **Passports:** Take a photo of your passport and keep it on your phone. Ideally, you should also print a copy of your passport and keep it separate from your original document. You can safely leave your passports in your rooms while moving through Havana, though some of you may opt to have it on you at all times. It's personal preference.
- **Driver's License:** If you'd like to leave your passport in your room, consider carrying your Driver's License. This should be sufficient ID for authorities (FYI...no one on our trips have ever been asked to present ID). More importantly, the ID would be helpful in a medical emergency.
- **Visa:** In the airport you will receive a Cuba-issued Tourist Visa. You need to guard this small document and produce it when we leave Cuba. Replacements are not easy to obtain. We recommend that you leave this with your passport in your room.
- **Boarding pass:** Your Airline boarding pass also serves as your *Proof of Health Insurance* in Cuba. You should store this with your visa (and passport?), and will need to easily locate it in the case of a non-emergency visit to a health clinic.

## PACKING

**Baggage:** Needs to be updated

**Souvenirs:** Make sure you leave room in your bags for any souvenirs you wish to bring back. We will meet several artists on our trip. You are welcome to purchase their paintings/sculptures. While anything packed in your baggage will clear Cuban customs without trouble, artwork too big to pack (paintings rolled in a tube, for example) will be examined in the airport and assessed a small tax. In my experience, this tax is less than \$10. For some tourists, the fear of this tax creates anxiety (I hear people talking about it in the markets and in the airport). Really, it is a trouble-free process if you are prepared for it!

**Clothing Advise:** Cubans are less likely to wear shorts than American's who are on vacation. That said, shorts are perfectly acceptable while touring the streets of Cuba. In the evenings, when going to nightclubs and restaurants, Cubans tend to be fashionable. In general, Cubans are very fashionable! Be sure to have some nice clothes to wear to evening concerts. The weather in January is lovely, with highs generally in the low to mid 80s. Cold fronts bring highs in the upper 70s. Evenings can get cool, especially near the water. You will want to pack a light jacket or sweater, especially if you tend to get chilly in the evening. Of course, rain is always possible, so consider a rain jacket or umbrella, as well.

**Additional Clothing Advise for Santería Ceremonies:** If you are interested in attending a Santería ceremony, this may be a possibility. For this, men should have long pants; light colors are best; no T-shirts; black is inappropriate. Women should similarly wear some conservative clothing: No short skirts; no spaghetti straps; light colors are best; black is inappropriate.

**Phones/Computers/Tablets:** Your phone (voice and texting) *may* work in Cuba, but don't count on it! Check with your provider to find out costs (my plan with Verizon charges \$2.99/minute). Unless something has changed in the last year, ***data is not available!*** My advice is to turn your phone off and do not try to connect with the outside world! Hot spots are available in Cuba but are not convenient. There are two hotspots located very near where we are staying in Havana, but you will need an internet card that is very difficult to purchase. My recommendation, leave your phone in your apartment (and bring a cheaper camera). If you need to access the internet, the best option is to go to the Iberostar Hotel (about ½ mile from our house) and buy an Internet card (2CUC/Hour or 10CUC/5 hours). You can log on with your phone, tablet, or computer. The Internet in the hotel is pretty slow and gets disrupted regularly. But, it does work! And for when you want to reach home, you can use your phone for calls, but it is expensive (depending upon your personal phone plan).

Any Phone Apps you might want while in Cuba, download them ahead of time. A *very useful* tool is Google Maps. Download the maps for Havana, Trinidad, and Viñales. While Google Maps typically uses data, you can *download maps for use offline*. Do this several days before you travel so that the process goes smoothly! Also consider downloading Spanish-English for Google's Translate app.

**Packing Guide:** For your convenience, here are some thoughts to help you pack for your trip!

- Bathing Suit & Beach Towel (You will have a towel provided in your home. But, the homeowners request that you not bring it to the beach)
- Water bottle (We will provide water for the entire trip. Ideally, we provide 5-liter bottles that you can use to refill your personal water bottles.)
- Sunglasses (These not only protect you from the sun, but from the dust and particles that are in the air.)
- Extra pair of glasses / contacts / contact solution
- Sunscreen
- Hat
- Hair Scarf (optional, but you will have a tour in a convertible)
- Pancho, rain coat, umbrella
- Alarm clock
- Toiletries (toothpaste, toothbrush, etc...)
- Soap/Shampoo
- Hand Sanitizer (always good to carry with you when in Cuba)
- Flip-Flops for around the house. Floors are *always* hard (tile, concrete). Cubans *always* wear footwear in their homes.
- Feminine hygiene products (hard to find in Cuba)
- Cuba's electrical grid is, for the most part, 110 Volts. Electric razors, chargers, & blow-dryers should work fine. Many rooms also have 220 outlets.

- Cheap camera (good idea to leave your very expensive phones in your rooms and carry a cheaper camera), DSLR camera for photography-lovers, & extra memory cards if you don't have a computer to dump your photos.
- Spanish-English dictionary (You can also download Spanish on google translate before you leave the United States. You will not be able to access the internet easily to download anything.)
- Plastic bag for soiled clothes
- Tissues
- Small zip-lock quart size baggies to hold toilet paper while in town (many public toilets do not have toilet paper (or even toilet seats!) Sometimes an attendant will hand you a small amount of toilet paper. Even in these instances, it is sometimes nice to have your own. I always grab some when I leave the house.
- Ear plugs (when the music gets too loud in clubs! And maybe for sleeping. Sometimes there will be parties nearby and the walls are thin!)
- Book to read during down time.
- Make a photocopy of your passport and keep it separate from your passport.
- Money belt & some way to carry cash in Cuba. Don't carry your wallet with ID and credit cards everywhere you go. They are useless, and you might lose them.
- Good walking shoes. The best way to see Havana and Trinidad is by foot. Also, you'll have the option to take a couple dance classes.
- A second pair of shoes as your first pair may get dirty.
- Sweater, sweatshirt, jacket, or fleece. Something warm. Wear it on the plane if you don't want to pack it. Also, even if it is cold in the US, try not to bring your winter coat.
- Medicines (mentioned above)
- Bug Spray (mentioned above)
- Small flashlight (sometimes the power goes out and you might need this)

**GIFTS:** As you know, Cuba is embargoed by the United States. For Americans, the embargo amounts to a travel ban. But, for Cubans it is much more disruptive! The embargo prohibits US-based companies from doing business with Cuba. It also prohibits international corporations that do business in America from doing business in Cuba. This makes it very hard for Cuba to purchase goods abroad, from getting loans and investments from international sources, and from working with multi-national banking institutions. As a result, many Americans like to bring gifts to Cuba when they travel, to directly benefit locals. Of course, you are not expected to bring gifts. But if you'd like to, I have gathered some thoughts/ideas. In addition to what I have below, I have sent a few notes to my friends in Cuba to find out what kind of specific gifts they need. As I get responses (maybe as late as mid-December), I'll forward these correspondences.

- Good soaps
- Toothpastes
- Disposable razors
- Deodorants
- Good toothbrushes & Toothpaste

- Creams for inflammation (arthritis)
- Band aids
- Antacid pills
- Pepto Bismol, Kaopectate, Immodium AD
- Vitamins (all kinds)
- Advil (Ibuprofen) & Tylenol (Acetaminophen). Not aspirin, (they have that)
- Cold medicine (all kinds)
- Decongestants
- Old cellphones (they know how to unlock them and make them work). It is almost impossible to buy a cell phone in Cuba. Be sure the phone works on a GSM network (not CDMA). Basically, AT&T phones are good. Verizon phones typically are not. The phone needs to have a removable SIM.
- Clothing of any kind
- Art supplies for children
- Games and balls for children
- We will visit an artist's community. I've been asked to see if we can bring any acrylic paints for painting on canvas: yellow, red, blue, and black are best!
- Portable Solar Powered LED Lantern Tent Light Bulb Rechargeable Emergency Lamp for Outdoor Indoor Camping Reading Lighting, White
- Batteries AA / AAA
- Towels,
- Mosquito repellent
- Reading glasses from the Dollar Store
- FOOD PRODUCTS: Sardines, tuna, tomato paste, Canned chick peas cans, jello, pudding
- FOOD PRODUCTS (much less important, but still very nice) Snacks, Candy & Chocolates. There are so few snacks in Cuba. I often bring some Dove chocolate and hand them out.

## MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS

**Alcohol:** Alcohol is readily available in Cuba, and is much more visible than in the US. There are no open container laws meaning it is permissible to drink in public, on the streets, at the beach, nearly anywhere. It is also legal for passengers in a car to have an open beverage. Just note that you may want to ask for 'no ice' in your drinks.

**Marijuana:** Marijuana is available in Cuba. But it is *very illegal*, and could land you in a Cuban prison for an extended period. Zero tolerance. Do not accept or seek out drugs while in Cuba.

**Sexuality:** Cubans are very open about sexuality. Women are often the subject of cat-calling. The men are not particularly aggressive and generally move on after one or two comments.

Prostitution is visible and is generally tolerated. Politely decline any offers and the women or men will generally pass on.

**Politics:** In general, Cubans like Americans. Many Cubans have family living in the United States, and will often talk about their US-based family in their conversations. When the US embassy was opened a few years ago, they were elated. I suspect that they are disappointed by our current administration's efforts to discourage business and travel with Cuba. Cuba is a communist nation. Please respect that Cubans love their country, and that many have a positive view of their leaders and their communist/socialist system. It is best not to talk politics. But, if you do, keep an open mind and try to enjoy and appreciate their perspective! FYI: Our guide is a verbal supporter of the communist government and system. It is very interesting to hear his viewpoint and experience his pride in the 1959 Revolution.

**Food Safety:** In restaurants, avoid ice and don't drink water other than from an unopened water bottle. Avoid fresh vegetables, especially leafy greens, and fresh squeezed fruit juices (because of the water added to the fruit juices). You safely can eat fruits that have peels, like pineapple, papaya, and bananas. The food provided in our homestay, including fresh vegetables and fruit juices, is carefully prepared to help reduce the potential of stomach issues.