

CUBA AND MEXICO – MARCH 2017

OVERVIEW

Tour Date: 19 March 2017 – 13 April 2017

Tour Duration: 26 days

Tour Cost (\$AUD): \$14,750

Single Supplement (\$AUD): \$3,550

To visit Cuba is to step back in time and we invite you to do just that on this exhilarating 26-day tour, which also takes in the highlights of Mexico, from the ancient Mayan ruins of Chichen Itza and Palenque, to the world's largest capital, Mexico City.

Our tour begins in Mexico City. From here we head into the mountains, we take a thrilling jet-boat ride through the Sumidero Canyon before visiting the beautiful colonial town, San Cristobal de las Casas. From here we travel to the jungle ruins of Palenque before continuing to another great Mayan site, the great ruins of Chichen Itza. We finish our stay in Mexico at the lush seaside resort of Cancun before flying onto Cuba. There's no time like the present to visit Cuba, a unique island almost trapped in a time-warp. Who knows what lies in store for this fascinating island in the future? With US-Cuba relations thawing after more than 50 years in the cold, the window of opportunity to visit this fascinating country before it changes, is closing. Unlike many tours to this remarkable destination, we cover the entire island from Pinar del Rio and the enchanting capital, Havana, to Santiago de Cuba at the country's eastern tip. En-route we take in Che Guevara's adopted hometown, Santa Clara, and the fabulous World Heritage-listed town of Trinidad.

Tour Fitness Level: Moderate

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TOUR ITINERARY

19/03/2017 Sydney – Los Angeles – Mexico City (D)

Check in at your chosen airport for the domestic flight to Sydney. Connect onto the international flight to Mexico City via Los Angeles. Crossing the International Date Line, we arrive in Mexico City on the same day.

Depart Sydney Qantas QF 11, 11.50

Arrive Los Angeles 06.35

Depart Los Angeles Aero Mexico AM 631, 09.15

Arrive Mexico City 14.50

On arrival in Mexico City we transfer to our hotel.

Gran Hotel Cuidad de Mexico Zocalo

Mexico City

20/03/2017 Mexico City (BLD)

We spend the whole day sightseeing in the world's largest city. Among the attractions are the Museum of Anthropology, the National Palace and the great cathedral.

21/03/2017 Mexico City (BLD)

Today we head 50km outside the capital to the ancient Aztec city of Teotihuacan, the site of the huge Pyramids of the Sun and Moon. Teotihuacan was once Mexico's largest city and dates back to AD 150. It is considered to be the country's most important archaeological site.

22/03/2017 Mexico City – Tuxtla – San Cristobal (BLD)

This morning we transfer to the airport for our flight to Tuxtla Gutierrez.

Depart Mexico City Aero Mexico AM 553, 09.50

Arrive Tuxtla Gutierrez, 11.27

On arrival in Tuxtla we board our bus for the journey to San Cristobal and soon begin to head along the Grijalva River valley. Entering the spectacular Sumidero Canyon we board power boats for an exhilarating ride on the Rio Grijalva. After lunch we continue on our journey, driving through picturesque scenery as the road weaves through the mountains before descending to San Cristobal. A small colonial town 2,150m above sea level, San Cristobal is set in a beautiful pine-clad valley surrounded by Indian villages. It was largely undiscovered by travellers until the mid-1960s.

Hotel Mansion del Valle

San Cristobal

23/03/2017 San Cristobal (BLD)

Today we explore the mysterious Tzotzil and Tzeltal Indian villages. Despite savage repression, the Indians have shown a fierce determination to survive and maintain their cultures and traditions. We visit a family workshop to see the locals working on magnificent embroidered garments and blankets. Back in San Cristobal we have time to visit the colourful markets.

24/03/2017 San Cristobal – Palenque (BLD)

This morning we begin our four hour drive through the mountains to Palenque, stopping en route at the remarkable waterfalls of Agua Azul. The falls are situated in a beautiful jungle setting with dozens of white cascades thundering into turquoise pools.

Hotel Mision Palenque

Carretera Catazaja-Palenque

25/03/2017 Palenque – Villahermosa – Merida (BLD)

Early this morning we head directly to the magnificent Mayan site of Palenque. Surrounded by lush jungle, these great ruins are stunningly preserved. Built entirely without the use of metal tools, pack animals or the wheel, this lost city is particularly significant for its architectural inventiveness and detailed epigraphic record: in fact the Temple of Inscriptions is the site's most impressive structure. After fully exploring Palenque we drive to Villahermosa for the short flight to Merida.

Depart Villahermosa Hahn Air H1 2909, 15.50

Arrive Merida 17.20

On arrival we transfer to our hotel where we also have dinner.

Hotel Mision

Merida, Yucatan

26/03/2017 Merida (BLD)

With its narrow streets and shady parks, the delightful city of Merida is ideal for exploring on foot – and we begin our walking tour after breakfast. Today is Sunday and the centre of Merida is closed to traffic, with families enjoying the vibrant market and party atmosphere. The colonial architecture is superb and Merida is also famous for producing some of the world's finest Panama hats.

27/03/2017 Merida – Chichen Itza – Cancun (BLD)

This morning we begin our journey through the Yucatan Peninsula stopping en-route to explore the extraordinary ruins of Chichen Itza. Ruled by the Mayans from the 6th to the 10th century, Chichen Itza is one of the largest and best maintained archaeological sites in Mexico. The stunning El Castillo pyramid, which dominates the centre of the site, is voted one of the seven modern Wonders of the World. After our visit we continue east towards the coast arriving in Cancun late afternoon.

Hotel Park Royal

Cancun

28/03/2017 Cancun (BLD)

Lapped by the turquoise waters of the Caribbean Sea, Cancun has pure white beaches, formed by fossilised micro-organisms rather than sand. Today we have a full day at leisure to relax and enjoy this holiday resort.

29/03/2017 Cancun – Havana (BD)

This morning is at leisure before transferring to the airport for our flight to Cuba.

Depart Cancun Cubana de Aviacion CU 153, 15.35

Arrive Havana 18.00

After completing Cuban customs and immigration formalities we transfer to our hotel.

Hotel Parque Central

Havana

30/03/2017 Havana (BLD)

This morning we begin to explore this fascinating city with a tour of old Havana (Habana Vieja). We visit Plaza de Armas and the cathedral before taking in the handicraft markets and enjoying a stroll through the narrow, cobbled streets of the old city. After lunch at the Morro Fortress we tour the new part of the city in 1950s American open-topped cars, visiting the Plaza de la Revolucion and the university.

31/03/2017 Havana – Pinar del Rio – Havana (BLD)

No visit to Cuba would be complete without an excursion to the 'tail' of the island, which is in the shape of a shark. This region, Pinar del Rio, is the westernmost province and contains some spectacular scenery. The beautiful Vinales Valley is the finest tobacco-growing area in the world, and, after lunch, we visit a cigar factory and meet the workers before returning to Havana for dinner.

01/04/2017 Havana (BLD)

Today we head out of central Havana to the delightful fishing village of Cojimar, a 'pilgrimage' for fans of Ernest Hemingway. While living here in the 1940s and '50s, the great author wrote *The Old Man and the Sea* – a simple but profound story that was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1953, and saw Hemingway receive the Nobel Prize in Literature a year later. After lunch we return to Havana for some leisure time before dinner.

02/04/2017 Havana – Bay of Pigs – Cienfuegos (BLD)

After breakfast we leave Havana for Cienfuegos via the Bay of Pigs – a large isolated inlet on Cuba's southern coast. It was here that the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion was launched shortly before midnight on 16 April 1961. A group of some 1,500 Cuban exiles, trained and financed by the CIA, came ashore at the Bay of Pigs in an attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro and his revolution. This afternoon the story of the failed operation unfolds and later we continue on to Cienfuegos.

Hotel La Union

Cienfuegos

03/04/2017 Cienfuegos – Trinidad (BLD)

Known locally as Perla del Sur (Pearl of the South), Cienfuegos traverses a wonderful natural bay and is one of Cuba's glittering gems. Architecturally, this UNESCO city is one of the most interesting and eclectic of all Caribbean settlements and its sense of pervading tranquility contributes to its considerable allure. After lunch we travel through vast sugar cane plantations and mountainous countryside of the Sierra del Escambray, where sheer-walled limestone cliffs are covered in magnificent bougainvillea. Finally we reach Trinidad, the jewel of Cuba's colonial cities. Fantastically preserved, this charming town is a national monument with no modern buildings, few cars and old cobbled streets.

Iberostar Hotel

Trinidad

04/04/2017 Trinidad (BLD)

This morning we take a tour of this fabulous town, visiting the main square and the markets. The afternoon is at leisure.

05/04/2017 Trinidad – Santa Clara – Camaguey (BLD)

After breakfast we leave Trinidad and drive to the national park of Topes de Collantes. We transfer to 4WD vehicles and drive into the Guanayara Reserve, an area rich in flora and fauna. A local guide takes us on a fascinating walk through the forest where we may be lucky and see the exquisite Cuban hummingbird. Continuing through the mountains, we reach Santa Clara, the adopted city of the great revolutionary, Che Guevara. This was the site of one of the most important battles of the revolution and an impressive mausoleum houses Guevara's remains. After a tour of the city we head south to Camaguey.

Hotel Gran

Camaguey

06/04/2017 Camaguey – Bayamo (BLD)

This morning we enjoy a walking tour through the warren of delightful winding alleys and hidden plazas of Camaguey. After lunch we drive to Bayamo – the ‘city of horsecars’. An entirely easy going city that defies its proud historical background as the foundation of Cuban independence, Bayamo is ringed with marvellous colonial edifices. This truly is Cuba trapped in time.

Royalton Hotel

Bayamo

07/04/2017 Bayamo – Santiago de Cuba (BLD)

After breakfast we continue our journey south to one of the most beautiful cities in the Caribbean, Santiago de Cuba. Due to its remote location, few travellers visit this irresistible cosmopolitan city. Known as the home of rum and revolution, Santiago is the second-largest city on the island. It has a rich racial mix, producing some of the most exciting architecture, music and art in the Caribbean.

Hotel Casa Granda

Santiago

08/04/2017 Santiago de Cuba (BLD)

In the morning we explore both the old quarter and the new part of this lovely city, visiting delightful plazas, parks, the Moncada Museum and the magnificent Morro Castle on the cliffs overlooking Santiago Bay. This afternoon we visit El Cobre, the most important shrine for Cubans and most famous church in the country, which is lodged in the foothills of the Sierra Maestra near the old copper mines that give it its name. Pilgrims from all over Cuba come here to pay their respects and ask for protection.

09/04/2017 Santiago de Cuba – Havana (BLD)

After an early breakfast we transfer to the airport for our flight back to Havana.

Depart Santiago Cubana de Aviacion CU 987, 08.30

Arrive Havana 09.55

On arrival in Havana we continue to explore the city and enjoy lunch in a local restaurant. Later we transfer to our hotel.

Hotel Parque Central

Havana

10/04/2017 Havana – Mexico City – Los Angeles (B)

This morning we have some free time before transferring to the airport for our flight to Los Angeles via Mexico City.

Depart Havana Aero Mexico AM 452, 16.15

Arrive Mexico City 18.29

Depart Mexico City Aero Mexico AM 630, 21.15

Arrive Los Angeles 23.30

On arrival in Los Angeles we transfer to our hotel.

Crowne Plaza Los Angeles Airport

Los Angeles

11/04/2017 Depart Los Angeles (B)

After breakfast we embark on a tour of some of the notable sights of Los Angeles including Hollywood Boulevard and the famous ‘Walk of Fame’. After a relaxing day in the ‘City of Angels’ we transfer to the airport for our flight back to Australia.

Depart Los Angeles QF 12, 22.25

12/04/2017 In flight

As we head back towards Australia we cross the International Date Line.

13/04/2017 Arrive Sydney

Arrive Sydney 08.25

On arrival in Sydney we transfer to the domestic terminal for the flight to our chosen Australian city.

CUBA AND MEXICO

If I am coming from Perth or any other major capital city in Australia, will it be possible to overnight in Sydney before the journey to Mexico City?

Yes. We find many of our guests choose this option, in order to start the journey from Sydney to Mexico City refreshed. We use a good hotel at Sydney airport. Just let our consultants know if you want to take up this option and we will make the booking on your behalf.

What is the journey time from Sydney to Mexico City?

Total travelling time is approximately 21 hours, which includes the time on the ground in Los Angeles.

Is personal security a problem in Mexico and Cuba?

Generally security is not a big problem. However we remind our guests of the need to take sensible precautions. These include not wearing ostentatious jewellery, not showing or counting money in public, and not going to certain areas at night. Basically it's a case of using common sense, particularly in large cities.

What is the currency for this tour and how much spending money will I need?

The best currency for Mexico is USD, and Euros for Cuba. It is possible to change USD into local currency in Cuba, however it can be very expensive as a 10% surcharge is applied on top of the usual exchange fee. There is no such charge for Euros. Because almost everything is included, we would suggest an amount of US\$300 and €300 per person as being ample for the whole month-long journey. However, if you're a keen shopper and like to buy lots of gifts and souvenirs, you may require more.

Are credit cards acceptable?

Credit cards are acceptable for purchases throughout the tour, however Diners and American Express are not accepted in Cuba. ATMs are available for cash withdrawals in most of Mexico and in Havana, but can be hard to find in other Cuban towns. However we don't recommend relying solely on these as the main source of funds – we suggest taking some cash in both Euro and USD.

Do I need vaccinations for this journey?

There are no mandatory vaccinations for this tour, however we recommend you visit your doctor for the most current information. Tetanus should always be up to date.

Is the water safe to drink en-route and what is the general standard of hygiene?

We strongly advise against the drinking of tap water on the entire journey and advise travellers to drink only bottled water. This is easy to obtain everywhere. The standard of hygiene is surprisingly high along the entire route but we also recommend the use of hand sanitiser before each meal and occasionally during the day, as we will be handling local money and visiting public places.

What is the climate like at this time of the year?

The climate is very pleasant at this time of year along the route. The temperature range is generally between 20 and 32 degrees during the day, but can be quite cool in the evenings, dropping as low as 7 or 8 degrees in the mountain regions. Our pre-departure information booklets will provide weather tables for each location.

Do I need visas on this tour?

An Australian passport holder will need a visa for Cuba and this is included in the tour cost. No visa is required for Mexico. For the USA, each traveller must apply online for the USA Visa Waiver Program prior to travel, at <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/esta>. The cost of the Visa Waiver is \$14 USD and is valid for two years.

A lot of companies have many expensive optional extras on their tours. Do you?

We don't believe in a lot of expensive 'optional tours'. Our itineraries are designed to make the best possible use of time and to include all the must-see sights, plus additional surprises. Therefore practically everything is included in the tour cost.

What is the standard of hotels like on this tour?

We endeavour to use centrally located hotels throughout. The hotels on this trip are generally rated between 4 and 5 star and are of a high standard. In smaller regional areas where there are fewer hotels, and particularly in Cuba, we use the best available.

Are internet facilities available en-route?

Internet facilities are available at most of the hotels we use and in all major centres. In addition there are many internet cafes located near to the hotels. However in the country areas there is limited or no internet access.

Do mobile telephones work?

Telstra and Optus mobiles work throughout most of the journey. You will need to ensure you have global roaming and a tri-band phone. Contact your service provider for further details.

How much should we tip the guides and porters?

There is no need to tip guides or porters as all tipping and gratuities are included in the tour cost.