

Plan an Exposure Visit to Cuba

Country of Cuba

Since the fall of the U.S.-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in 1959, Cuba has been a one-party Communist state. Since 1959 the country has been led by led by Fidel Castro and—since February 2008—by his successor, younger brother Raul.

In spite of more than 40 years of U.S. sanctions and the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, Cuba has achievements in human development superior to much of Latin America and the Caribbean, and indicators in health and education are comparable to countries in the global North like Canada and the United States. In spite of these positive achievements for the people Cuba faces challenges including food security constraints, vulnerability to natural disasters, trade restrictions, low investment and a limited domestic economy.

The Cuban government exercises rigorous control over virtually all aspects of Cuban life through the Communist Party and its affiliated mass organizations, the government bureaucracy, and the state security apparatus. Media is also tightly controlled.

With the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in the early 1990s, Cuba experienced a period of austerity and hardship that resulted in a 35 percent loss in its gross domestic product. To address that crisis, the Cuban economy was restructured and gradually opened to the international market by means of new foreign joint ventures in tourism, mining, and oil and gas production. Cuba's attention to environmental protection during that period was notable for a country pulling itself out of a severe economic crisis. Cuba has forged new trading relationships with Latin American countries and China.

Cuba offers a vibrant culture, rich tradition, and a friendly and generous people.

General Comments about Travelling in Cuba

Cuba is a tropical Island of about 750 square miles and is a beautiful mix of mountain ranges and plains. There are over 200 bays and 289 sun-drenched beaches. Main ports are located in the provinces of Cienfuegos, Havana, Manzanillo, Mariel, Matanzas, Nuevitas, and Santiago de Cuba. Cuba is well known for its social advances, particularly in the areas of health and education. It is one of the safest countries in which to travel. While Spanish is the official language, English is widely spoken—but don't count on finding fluent English speakers everywhere!

Visas

A valid Canadian passport is required. The passport must be valid for at least six months beyond the date of your expected departure from the country.

When individuals or groups come to Cuba to visit churches and church-related groups, a religious visa is required (about CDN\$100/person). The visas will be arranged by the partner in Cuba.

You will also need to have in hand cash (about CUC25 or CDN\$30) for an exit visa payable at the airport when you leave.

The United Church has several partners in Cuba, and itineraries are cooperatively planned so groups can visit with more than one of them. However, for visa purposes, one partner will play the primary hosting role.

Currency

The currency in Cuba used by visitors is the convertible peso (CUC). You can exchange any foreign currency for CUCs, but it is easiest to use CDN dollars. A premium is charged for exchanging U.S. dollars.

It is possible to use Interac and credit cards, but availability is limited. It would be wise to plan on paying cash for most purchases.

Health and Safety

Check current inoculation requirements and recommendations by visiting International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers (IAMAT) (www.iamat.org/country_profile.cfm?id=152).

When travelling in the tropics it is important to remain hydrated. But don't drink the tap water. The host organization will provide purified water for you. Unless water is marked "potable," assume it is not safe to drink. You should bring your own water bottle.

Organizations Welcoming Groups

Three United Church partners in Cuba offer excellent opportunities for groups looking for an education and exposure trip that will change the way they understand faith and life:

- the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Center
- the Evangelical Theological Seminary
- the Christian Center for Reflection and Dialogue

All three offer basic programs but will also work with groups to design a program that meets specific learning goals.

Visiting the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Centre in Cuba

"The most important thing that can be built is a new mindset"

—Daisy Rojas Gomez, Coordinator of Solidarity Programs

Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Center (CMLK) is an ecumenical organization that had its birth at Ebenezer Baptist Church. The two organizations share space in an area near the centre of the city of Havana.

The agency uses "popular education" techniques to work with people and communities so that they can become active agents for change. The staff develop workshops and other presentations for use in communities on topics such as poverty, health, and gender issues, identifying a central theme each year.

Exposure Programming

Well experienced in receiving mission groups, the CMLK begins each visit with a basic orientation to the Cuban reality. That includes

- learning about the history, economics, and global context of modern Cuba
- understanding the story of the church's presence in Cuba and its relationship with the state
- experiencing the life and culture of the Cuban community
- visiting schools, cooperatives, Christian base communities, and worship services
- visiting rural communities where the work of the CMLK has enabled change

Programs include a combination of hearing, seeing, touching, doing, and reflecting. Staff will advise and help shape itineraries based on the visiting group's learning goals and interests.

While most programs are based in Havana where the centre is located, a portion of the visit can take place outside the city. That will increase the costs of transportation, and outings should be for several days to be worth it.

Groups are accompanied by a program coordinator from CMLK and a translator. Recommended length of stay is 10–12 days. Recommended group size is 12 and should not exceed 25. Smaller groups are better when translation is required.

Youth-to-youth encounters can be organized in cooperation with Ebenezer Baptist Church. Multi-generational groups can be accommodated within the constraints of the facilities but be aware if itineraries need to be separated there may be additional costs for accompaniment and translation.

A limited number of groups wanting to include a work project in their experience can be accommodated in August and September. Groups will be trained to work on a CMLK sponsored work projects. Visitors are only permitted to work for half a day at a time. The other half will be taken up with learning and exposure activities.

Accommodation, Meals, and Transportation

There is accommodation on site at the CMLK in Havana. Rooms are dorm style, each with six bunk beds. Bathrooms are shared between two rooms. Simple but plentiful and tasty food is prepared and served on the premises.

Transportation to and from the airport is provided. Other transportation needs, based on the activities planned, can be accommodated. Advance notice is required. The cost depends on the number of activities and distance.

Fees

For budget purposes, depending on itinerary, plan for an individual in a 10-person, 10-day basic program paying between \$600 and \$700 for expenses in Cuba (including translator, accompaniment, basic transportation, food, and accommodation). International air fare, visa expenses, and health insurance costs need to be added. Costs will increase if several activities outside Havana are planned. Two sample itineraries will give you a flavour of the kind of program CMLK offers:

	<i>Sample 1</i>		<i>Sample 2</i>
Day 1	Arrive and settle in	Day 1	Arrive and settle in
Day 2	Orientation	Day 2	Orientation
Day 3	Visit a doctor's office to learn about the Cuban health system		Session on human rights
	Visit a seniors group		Tour Museum of the Revolution
	Visit with a Christian base community in Mariano	Day 3	Havana City tour
Day 4	Visit to Panama School for Children with Disabilities		Visit to Ministry of External Affairs
	Free Afternoon		Visit a doctor's office to learn about the Cuban health system
	Evening dance class		Discussion on HIV/AIDS in Cuba
Day 5	Presentation on faith and praxis	Day 4	Evening at Afro-Cuban dance performance
	Presentation on Afro-Cuban religion		Session on economy
	Evening at Afro-Cuban dance performance	Day 5	Visit to Canadian consulate
Day 6	Tour of CMLK community development projects		Tour Museum of Literacy
	Worship at Ebenezer Baptist Church	Day 5	Outing for jazz music
	Presentation on the history of Cuban-Canadian relations		Visit to a cooperative
	Ballet or concert	Day 6	Visit Federation of University Students
	Dinner at family-run restaurant		Reflection time at John Lennon Park
Day 7	Conversation with CMLK staff from the socio-theological program	Day 6	Dinner at family-run restaurant
	Tour of Museum of the Revolution		Depart to Varadero
	Documentary film and discussion	Day 7	Visit country market
Day 8	Varadero Beach—lunch with United Church partner		Meet with Federation of Cuban Women
	Overnight in Matanzas	Day 7	Varadero Beach
Day 9	Conversations with partners in Matanzas		Return to Havana
	Meeting with National Assembly of People's Power about the Cuban electoral system	Day 8	Cultural activity
	Meeting with Canadian diplomats		Session on church-state relations in Cuba
	Reflection on current Cuban reality	Day 8	Visit to National Assembly
	Farewell party		Evaluation
Day 10	Return to Canada	Day 9	Evening visit to Artist and Writers Union Project
			Return to Canada
Day 11			

For more information about CMLK visit their website (www.cmlk.com).

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Visiting the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cuba

The Evangelical Theological Seminary sits high on the edge of the small coastal city of Matanzas about 1.5 hours outside the city of Havana. The campus has several historical buildings and a terraced organoponic garden that provides fresh fruits and vegetables for the seminary, area schools, hospitals and surrounding communities.

Students from many Christian traditions and Latin American countries train at the seminary. The students are trained in traditional disciplines such as preaching, Bible study, church history ethics, and gender studies, but also become involved in community service during field placements. Visiting these projects can become part of the experience of education and exposure groups who visit the seminary. As well, groups that visit during the school year will have an opportunity to share in the lively and dynamic worship life of the seminary and meet with students and professors.

Exposure Programming

Visits to the seminary always begin with a general orientation to Cuban reality and the work of the seminary. Based on the learning goals of your group, the faculty of the seminary with other local experts can provide learning opportunities on themes such as women in Cuba, family life in Cuba, economy, Afro-Cuban religions, empire, ethics, and ecumenism.

Local musical groups are happy to visit in the evening to provide a taste of popular Christian music, popular music, or Afro-Cuban music. The seminary choir is also renowned. A trip and stayover in Havana is accessible from Matanzas. While in Havana groups may visit a local congregation for Sunday worship, tour the old city, and enjoy the rich, cultural heritage of Cuba. From Matanzas the beaches of Varadero are readily accessible, where other United Church partners can be visited.

Groups are accompanied by a translator at all times.

Accommodation, Meals, and Transportation

The seminary has one dormitory building dedicated to visiting groups. Air conditioned rooms are dorm style with several beds in each room. Some rooms have a private bathroom, some shared facilities. The centre can accommodate 40–60 people. Recommended length of stay is 10–12 days. Recommended group size is 12–15. Smaller groups are better when translation is required. Communal meals are provided in the dining room at set times. Food is plentiful and good.

The seminary can arrange for accommodation in Havana. Modest rooms at a hotel are roughly CDN\$50–\$60 per room and include breakfast. Other meals will need to be at restaurants. Dorm style rooms with shared bathrooms are available at The Presbyterian Church of Luyano for about CDN\$30 per day.

In Varadero, accommodation can be arranged with The Presbyterian Church. Dora Valentin Memorial, located in Varadero, has a guest house and a retreat house. Groups can be accommodated between other programs. Simple, plentiful and good meals are available on site.

The seminary has several vehicles including a bus for transporting groups. Your group will be met at and returned to the airport. Other transportation needs can be arranged in advance. The cost will depend on activities off campus and distances involved. The seminary can accommodate retreats and self-directed sabbaticals as well. It is closed during the month of August.

Fees

For budget purposes, depending on itinerary, plan for an individual in a 10-person, 7-day basic program paying between \$500 and \$600 for expenses in Cuba (including translator, transportation from and to the airport, food, and accommodation at the seminary). International air fare, visa expenses, and health insurance costs need to be added. Costs will increase if several activities requiring travel are planned.

For more information about the seminary, visit their website (<http://cuba-theological-seminary.com>).

Visiting the Christian Center for Reflection and Dialogue

The Christian Center for Reflection and Dialogue (CCRD) is located in Cardenas, about two hours outside Havana and 15 minutes from the Varadero Beach. Cardenas is a city of about 100,000 people.

As well as facilities in the city, CCRD also runs an organic farm in the countryside. As a retreat centre, CCRD runs programs for people from all over Cuba on topics such as church and society, a holistic vision of Christianity, HIV/AIDS accompaniment, care of creation, and creating a culture of peace. CCRD also runs a critical outreach program to seniors, providing a daily meal to over 100 elderly people living on their own.

The organic farm is a key project for the centre. Established to provide fresh produce for the centre itself and for workers coming from impoverished areas in the village, it is now able to supply produce to local schools, hospitals, and facilities for the elderly. It uses biological controls for pests and natural organic fertilizer. The centre also offers workshops where local people are taught to how to preserve produce for use throughout the year.

Exposure Programming

CCRD can host groups for 8- to 10-day stays through to much longer programming. Some groups working on a specific project have stayed for as long as 45 days.

A translator is provided for groups.

Accommodation, Meals, and Transportation

At the centre in Cardenas, CCRD can accommodate up to 56 people in dorm style rooms accommodating two or three people with attached bathrooms. Rooms have either air conditioning or fans. The first floor has eight wheelchair accessible rooms with private bathrooms. (These rooms have a slightly higher cost).

Simple, plentiful, and delicious meals are served on the premises.

The centre owns several vehicles, including a large bus, available to meet the transportation needs of groups.

The educational centre has a library that is open to the public as well as those staying at the centre.

CCRD is closed for the week of Christmas, Holy Week, and the second half of August.

Fees

For budget purposes, depending on itinerary, plan for an individual in a 10-person, 7-day basic program paying between \$500 and \$600 for expenses in Cuba (including translator, transportation from and to the airport, food, and accommodation). International air fare, visa expenses, and health insurance costs need to be added. Costs will increase if several activities requiring travel are planned.

On a fee-for-service basis, CCRD can arrange for cultural shows and guest speakers.

Two sample itineraries will give you a flavour of the kind of program offered by CCRD.

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<i>Sample 1</i>		<i>Sample 2</i>	
Day 1	Arrive in Havana, travel to Cardenas	Day 1	Arrive in Havana, travel to Cardenas
Day 2	Orientation with CCRD staff members Visit to projects (e.g., biogas plant, housing projects, seniors' residences)	Day 2	Orientation with CCRD staff members Session on history of Cuba Tour city of Cardenas including visit to Art Gallery
Day 3	Session on history of Cuba Work day at organic farm Visit to Center of Social and Educational Services to see programming for children and elderly	Day 3	Meet staff at organic farm Session on ecology (biogas plant, green energy, organic agricultural, beyond oil based economy) Session with CCRED sexuality and sex education staff
Day 4	Evening reflection session Day trip to Pedro Betancourt Church Evening of traditional Cuban dance	Day 4	Visit Evangelical Theological Seminary, Matanzas Travel to Havana Evening in Havana
Day 5	Sunday worship at local Presbyterian Church Meeting with church youth group Beach at Varadero	Day 5	Free morning Historical tour of Havana Ballet or theatre
Day 6	Travel to Havana Meet with social services organization and visit a project Visit with youth of the Presbyterian church of Luyano Tour of Museum of the Revolution Visit to Cabana and Cannon Ceremony	Day 6	Free day in Havana Ballet, theatre, or show in evening
Day 7	Visit with youth from Ebenezer Baptist Church Visit CMLK and visit projects Return to Cardenas	Day 7	Sunday worship at Luyano Presbyterian Church Return to Cardenas Work on organic farm Sessions on health and education systems Cuban dance lesson
Day 8	Work on organic farm Visit children's programs Afro-Cuban music night	Day 8	Day trip to grave of Che Guevara in Santa Clara Visit museum, carnival, return on antique train Session with Coordinator of urban pastoral accompaniment at CCRD Afro-Cuban dance show
Day 9	Meet with church leaders Picnic lunch at organic farm, horse back riding	Day 9	Day trip to beach and lagoon
Day 10	Visit Evangelical Theological Seminary, Matanzas Tour Kairos Center for Arts and Liturgy Visit museum	Day 10	Farewell event at CCRED
Day 11	Return to Havana and Depart for Canada	Day 11	Worship at local church
		Day 12	Return to Havana and Depart for Canada
		Day 13	

For more information about CCRD, visit their website (http://ccrd.org/ingles_index.html).