

Plan a Sabbatical in 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 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 C\$100/person). The visas will be arranged by the partner in Cuba. You will also need to have in hand cash (about CUC25 or C\$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 Canadian 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

Two United Church partners in Cuba offer excellent opportunities for sabbatical study and reflection: the Evangelical Theological Seminary and the Christian Center for Reflection and Dialogue.

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 those who visit the seminary.

Programming

The seminary can accommodate retreats and self-directed sabbaticals. Please contact them directly to find out about programming possibilities.

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. Communal meals are provided in the dining room at set times. Food is plentiful and good. The seminary is closed during the month of August.

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.

Programming

CCRD can host programs for 8- to 10-day stays through to as long as 45 days.

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

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