

Cuba: La Isla Prohibida - The Forbidden Island

By Alexandra Smith

I. Getting In, Getting Out

It is illegal for American citizens to travel to Cuba. It is possible – but difficult and time-consuming – to acquire a tourist, humanitarian or work visa, but the vast majority of the estimated 100,000 Americans who go to Cuba do so illegally.

Fines range from \$3,000-25,000 and up to ten years in jail.

So how do people do it without getting caught? Simple: fly in and out of another country. Popular ports of entry include Mexico, Canada, Jamaica, Costa Rica and the Bahamas. Still, the process isn't seamless.

- You can't purchase your ticket online. Your credit card will be blocked if you try.
- Instead, travelers must purchase their tickets in person at whatever port of entry they depart from (I bought my ticket to Havana at one in the morning at Tijuana).
- Though you won't get a Cuban stamp in your passport, you will have to explain at the American border why you have a double stamp from Mexico (or wherever you illegally flew in and out of).
- Most important: DO NOT attempt to bring anything back from Cuba! Souvenirs are out of the question. The number one reason people get caught is because customs officials find a Cuban cigar or bottle of Havana Club in their suitcase.

II. Money

Cuba uses two currencies: one for locals, the peso, and one for tourists, the convertible peso, or CUC. Cuban pesos are worth very little; roughly five cents. Note: the Raul Castro-led government is working to eliminate the dual-currency system.

Though technically tourists are only supposed to use the tourist currency, you can easily change your CUCs for pesos at a *cambio*. There are many venues (primarily street vendors) that charge in pesos, and you can find great deals by spending in pesos. But watch out for the "ambitious" waiter who claims that your pizza actually costs 15 CUCs – always ask before you order!

Another tricky part of visiting Cuba as an American: your credit cards won't work there (though good luck finding a store that takes credit cards in the first place) and more importantly, your ATM card won't work either. And because there is no American embassy there, if you run out of cash – and cash is truly your only option – you're, well, screwed. Hey, this isn't Cancun. Traveling to Cuba is a risk and adventure!

III. Accommodations

There are plenty of nice hotels in Cuba, particularly in tourist areas such as Habana and Veradero, but a more popular option, especially among budget minded tourists, and/or those in search of a more authentic experience, is to rent a room from a family's home. *Casa particulares*, as they're called, are not only incredibly inexpensive (about \$20-\$35/night), they allow the visitor a glimpse into the life and home of an average Cuban.

IV. Food

At the risk of editorializing, the food in Cuba is... not so good. Or more accurately, it's not very exciting – but that's what happens when your cook only has about ten staple ingredients to work with. Your dining experiences will be predictable, if nothing else.

- Breakfast: eggs, fruit, bread
- Lunch and dinner: chicken or fish (fried or grilled), rice, beans, fried plantains, and whatever vegetables can be scraped together into a 'salad' (think cabbage, carrots and tomatoes, on a good day)
- Dessert: ice cream
- Other options: pizza or hamburgers from street vendors. Peso pizza is a cheap but reliable option

V. Culture

Cuba is, quite simply, unlike anywhere else on the planet. A closed, communist country for the past fifty years, the world and many of its cultural and technological developments have passed it by. Your taxi will be a 57 Chevy coupe. Your *casa particular* will have a black and white TV, a rotary telephone... and little else. Internet access is available – at heavily guarded, tourist-only hotels and cafes – but largely unavailable to the Cubans themselves.

In many ways, being insulated from the outside world lends Cuba a certain charm. No cell phones, few billboards (except those that read *Viva la Revolucion*) and no ads featuring American celebrities hawking watches or soda. In fact, no anything from anywhere other than Cuba. Good luck finding a Coca-Cola.

But Cuban culture is vibrant and cheerful. The government puts a high premium on the arts, subsidizing training for dancers, artists and musicians. You can find a concert, salsa dance-off, art exhibition or impromptu *besbol* game around every corner. Music and dance in particular play an enormous role in Cuban life. Salsa classes are readily available for those who want to dance with the locals.

While Cuban life is far from perfect, and few would argue that the current regime is oppressive and undemocratic, there are many things to enjoy and admire about the Cuban lifestyle. Things move slowly here – some would say they don't move at all – and there's always time for a mojito, a nice cigar and a game of chess.