

# Travel Report: Havana, Cuba

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RED FIVE SECURITY, LLC



# Travel Report

## Havana, Cuba

Information as of 1 August 2019

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## Overview

***The main concerns for US tourists in Cuba are government surveillance and petty crime. There is high risk of government surveillance and moderate risk from crime in Havana.*** Despite rapprochement between the Cuban and US governments in the recent years, the Cuban authorities remain suspicious of Americans traveling in the country and are likely to closely monitor any on-island activities as travel to Cuba for just tourist activities is prohibited.

- The most recent travel advisory is a Level 2 (Exercise Increased Caution) due to attacks targeting employees at the U.S. Embassy in Havana, according to the US Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) as of August 2019. The US decreased the number of embassy staff as a result.
- The Cuban government does not provide reliable crime statistics for the country; however, the US Embassy in Cuba continues to receive several reports per month of non-violent crimes against tourists, according to the 2019 OSAC Report on Cuba.



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- Criminals target American travelers due to perceptions of wealth; thefts and fraud schemes often take place in tourist areas, such as beaches, hotels, restaurants, and shopping areas.

**Traffic and weather-related incidents may be an inconvenience, but are unlikely to pose a risk.** Vigilance is recommended at all times, especially on poorly maintained roads, and attention to weather evacuation warnings is important for avoiding weather-related threats.

## Background

**Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean Sea, located just 93 miles south of the Florida coast.** The country has an approximate population of 11.5 million people, with 2.1 million inhabitants in the capital of Havana.

**The United States severed diplomatic ties with Cuba and began an embargo on the country in 1961 that remains in place.** Washington and Havana began normalizing relations in December 2014 and restored diplomatic relations in July 2015—the US opened an embassy in Havana in August 2015. The embassy remains open despite US reversals of sanctions relief and loosened travel restrictions in June 2017. The US embassy drastically reduced its staff in the embassy due to mysterious attacks in 2018.

**The Communist Party of Cuba remains in power in the country.** Raul Castro took over the presidency from his brother Fidel in 2008. In recent years, the country has shifted from a socialist economic model to a public-private hybrid, as property ownership and investment increase and social welfare decreases; however, the country remains a one-party system with limited personal freedoms.

**Spanish is the official language spoken in Cuba.** Despite this, the Cuban dialect differs significantly from the versions of Spanish spoken in Spain, Mexico, and South America. The majority of Cubans speak little or no English, according to travel blogs and study abroad programs, but people in cities or tourist areas may have some knowledge of English.

**Cuba has two official currencies: the Cuban convertible peso (CUC) and the Cuban peso (CUP).** The convertible peso is pegged to the US dollar—one CUC is one USD—and worth approximately 25 times the value of Cuban pesos. **Most consumer goods are priced in convertible pesos and this is the most common currency used by visitors to Cuba.**

- US dollars are penalized with a 10 percent surcharge on all money exchange operations, so cash should be carried in euros, British pounds, or Canadian dollars, according to Frommer's, an online travel publication.
- All CADECA money-exchange kiosks and most banks in Cuba will allow free exchange of these currencies.



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Image 1: Cuban Convertible Peso

**American visitors should expect to rely on cash due to the US sanctions on Cuba and the lack of credit and debit card infrastructure in the country.** Cards from American banks will not work in Cuba due to American sanctions on the country. Visa and Mastercard credit cards issued by European banks are widely accepted at hotels, car-rental agencies, and official restaurants and shops, according to travel blogs. Many small businesses still do accept credit or debit cards although progress is being made in the country to make this infrastructure more widespread, according to travel blogs.

- The Cuban government requires that travelers declare cash amounts over USD 5,000, according to the US Department of State.
- The Cuban government charges a ten percent surcharge on all US dollar cash conversions, according to the US Department of State. This does not apply to electronic transactions or cash conversions in other currencies.

**The U.S. Embassy is located in Havana at Calzada between L and M Streets, Vedado, Havana, approximately 12.4 miles (30 minutes with normal traffic) north of the Jos José Martí International Airport.** Business hours are Monday through Thursday 0800 CDT to 1630 CDT and Friday 0800 CDT to 1530 CDT.

- Telephone: (537) 839-4100
- Emergency assistance telephone after hours: (537) 839-4100 and press 0; or (535) 280-5791 and request to speak with the duty officer.

## Restrictions for American Travelers

**Travelers to Cuba who are US citizens are subject to several restrictions by the US government.** US citizens must not engage in any business with a list of entities associated with the Cuban military, intelligence, or security services, known as the Cuba Restricted List. Travel to Cuba solely for tourist purposes is not permitted; the US government requires all US citizens travelling to Cuba self-declare one of 11 controlled categories of reasons for travelling to Cuba, such as research, performing in an athletic event, or working on humanitarian projects. Additionally, American travelers to Cuba must keep receipts and records from their trip to Cuba for five years.

- Cuba Restricted List: <https://www.state.gov/cuba-sanctions/cuba-restricted-list/list-of-restricted-entities-and-subentities-associated-with-cuba-as-of-july-26-2019/>



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- The US government banned cruise ship travel to Cuba in 2019.
- Non-US citizens must self-declare one of the 11 controlled travel categories if they are traveling to Cuba through the US.

## Transportation

***José Martí International Airport (HAV) is the main airport in the country for international visitors.*** The airport is located nine miles southwest of Havana. American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, JetBlue Airways, Southwest Airlines, and United Airlines all provide commercial flights between HAV and certain US cities through flights operated as Special Authority Charters; all of these airlines operate from Terminal 2 at HAV.

- The US and Cuba signed an agreement in February 2016 to restore commercial air traffic between the two countries, with the possibility of up to 110 US-Cuba flights daily.
- Direct flights from the United States are possible from several US locations including New York-JFK, Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and several other cities, according to travel blogs and flight websites.

***Traffic is normally light, but poorly maintained roadways, the combination of old vehicles, horse carts, buses, motorcycles, and pedestrians, and the dangerous practices by drivers pose substantial risks in Cuba.*** Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of accidental death in the country, according to the 2019 OSAC Report. Roads in Cuba are poorly maintained, and inadequate lighting and potholes are common; of the 38,000 miles of roadways in the country, only about half are paved, according to a 2015 Los Angeles Times report.

- Cuban drivers frequently place large sticks or rocks in the road to mark hazards, but these markers often become hazards themselves because they are difficult to see.
- Accidents may result in the detention of foreign drivers, regardless of who is at fault. Cuba requires a Cuban-issued driver's license and has a system in place for issuing such licenses, according to the 2019 OSAC Report.
- Police are posted on street corners of all major cities to enforce traffic laws and inspect vehicles. Authorities often issue fines to drivers that they stop for violations.

***Taxis and private cars are the best options for transport in Cuba.*** Official government-owned taxis are easy to recognize by the taxi sign attached to the roof of the car—they are also frequently yellow, similar to many American cabs. Official taxis have meters, but drivers may prefer to agree on a fixed rate prior to the trip. All fares to these taxis must be paid in CUC.

- There are also licensed classic car cabs—frequently 1950s American-made vehicles—that do not have meters. Some of these cars are government-owned and others belong to private citizens. These cabs are generally safe, but a fare



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should be agreed upon in advance.

- Viazul buses are also a good travel option, especially between major cities in Cuba. The buses are generally spacious, comfortable, air-conditioned, and clean. Tickets must be purchased in-person from the bus stop— preferably the day before any planned travel.



Images 2 and 3: Government-Owned Yellow Taxi (left) and Classic Car Taxi (right)

## Health and Safety

**Numerous U.S. Embassy Havana employees were targets of specific attacks in 2017 that caused hearing loss, headaches, fatigue, cognitive issues, and visual problems.** The attacks occurred in U.S. diplomatic residences, a long-term apartment at the Atlantic, Hotel Nacional, and Hotel Capri in Havana, according to the 2019 OSAC Report. The ultimate cause of the attacks remains unknown.

- The U.S. Embassy in Havana is operating with reduced staffing as a result of these attacks.

**The US Center for Disease Control (CDC) recently issued a Level 1 health alert that advised travelers to practice usual precautions in Cuba due to the threat of a global measles outbreak.** Mosquito-borne illnesses are also a concern in the country. Health officials have also confirmed cases of the Zika virus, Chikungunya virus and dengue fever— all transmitted by mosquitos—in the country. Dengue fever and cholera are increasingly common in Cuba, and the government is likely underreporting instances of the diseases, according to the 2019 OSAC Report.

- Unreliable health reporting by the Cuban government makes it difficult to assess medical risks.
- The CDC recommends getting vaccines for measles, typhoid, rabies, hepatitis a and b, and all routine vaccinations.
- The CDC recommends avoiding unclean food and water, using insect repellent, avoiding animals, and exercising general caution.

**Cira Garcia Hospital is the primary emergency care facility for foreigners in Havana.** Cira Garcia is operated specifically for foreign visitors and provides better quality care than most other medical facilities in the country; however, the hospital's



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capabilities are still below US standards, according to the 2019 OSAC Report. The facility operates a 24-hour emergency medical service and medical specialists may be deployed to the patient's house or hotel, or an ambulance may transport the patient to the clinic.

- Telephone: (537) 204-2811
- Cira Garcia Hospital is located at the intersection of 41<sup>st</sup> Avenue and 18<sup>th</sup> Street in Havana, approximately 11 miles (25 minutes with normal traffic) north of the José Martí International Airport.

**Visitors must pay all medical bills before leaving Cuba, all visitors to Cuba must purchase Cuban medical insurance, and many medications are unavailable.** Cuba requires all visitors to have Cuban medical insurance, which is usually included in airline ticket prices on flights originating in the United States, according to the US Department of State. This insurance reportedly can also be purchased at customs in Martí International Airport upon arrival, according to travel blogs. Bringing any prescribed medication in the original containers and in amounts in accordance with personal use is strongly advised.

**The National Revolutionary Police Force is Cuba's official law enforcement agency.** The Cuban police force faces corruption and bribery challenges— officers reportedly take bribes regularly, often after pulling over drivers for real or fabricated transgressions, according to travel blogs and security reports. Cuban law provides wide discretion for police to stop individuals, request identification, and carry out arrests and searches, according to US Department of State reports.

- While most police officers are in uniform, some may be dressed in plain clothes; however, all police carry identification.
- The local emergency number for a police response is 106, which operates similarly to 911 in the US. The emergency number for the fire department is 105.

## Crime

**Violent crime is believed to be relatively low in Cuba; however, the government does not provide public statistics on incidents.** Drug-related crimes are infrequent due to the heavy police presence. The government has strict enforcement against the illegal use, sale, and smuggling of narcotics.

- At 4.2 homicides per 100,000 people in 2012, Cuba had the third lowest murder rate in the Americas, behind only Canada and Chile, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
- There were some instances of violent crimes against US citizens in 2018, according to the 2019 OSAC Report, but travel blogs state that foreigners are rarely the targets of violent crimes.

**Visitors to Cuba are encouraged to take precautions to limit their vulnerability to**



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**theft.** Petty theft and other minor crimes remain a concern in the country, especially in tourist areas, according to news reports. Perceptions of wealth make foreign visitors a target for pickpockets and other criminals that congregate around hotels in Havana, according to the 2019 OSAC Report.

- Tourists are encouraged to secure all valuables before leaving their hotel. They are also advised to keep passports on their person when possible, rather than in a bag or purse, to prevent theft.
- Tourists are also advised to secure wallets. Spreading valuables in separate pockets or other areas of the body is encouraged to better mitigate theft.

## Government Surveillance

**Despite improving relations with the US, the Cuban government remains wary of foreign visitors; electronic and physical surveillance of foreigners' activities are likely.** The government frequently monitors individuals who it believes may be disruptive to society, according to US Department of State reports; this includes foreign visitors. The government is likely to monitor the on-island activities of Americans, including contact with Cuban citizens, and could use private activity to compromise them, according to the 2019 OSAC Report.

- Internet access is rare in the country and is largely only available at government-controlled Internet cafes. Activities on these networks are almost certainly monitored by the Cuban government.
- Recently the Cuban government has taken steps to permit the creation of private wired and Wi-Fi internet networks in homes and businesses; however, the government has a monopoly over commercial internet access.

## Civil Unrest

**Civil unrest in Cuba is rare and there is minimal risk in Havana.** Civilian demonstrations are short, as the regime responds rapidly to end the protests. However, government-organized demonstrations aimed at opposition groups have turned violent in the past, according to the 2019 OSAC Report. **Tourists are strongly advised to avoid any protests or demonstrations that may occur to mitigate the risk of being caught in a dangerous situation.**

## Natural Disasters

**Hurricanes and heavy storms are the most substantial natural disaster threats in Cuba.** Hurricane season in Cuba runs from June to November— landslides, mudslides, and service disruptions may occur due to the heavy rain. Although Cuba is near an active fault line, severe earthquakes are rare and most occur without notice.

- Hurricane Michael hit Cuba in October 2018 as a Category 2 hurricane.
- Hurricane Irma hit Cuba in September 2017 as a Category 5 hurricane. The



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- hurricane caused approximately USD 13 billion in damage and killed 10 people.
- Hurricane Sandy hit Cuba in October 2012 as a Category 3 hurricane. The hurricane caused approximately USD 2 billion in damage and killed 11 people.

***Cuba is located in an active earthquake zone.*** Strong earthquakes occur infrequently and most seismic events pass unnoticed. Cuba receives about 2,000 seismic events every year, although most are unnoticed.

- A 5.5 magnitude earthquake struck 50 miles off the southeast coast of Cuba in January 2017. There were no reports of any injuries or damage.
- A 5.1 magnitude earthquake struck about 112 miles east of Havana in January 2014. The earthquake was not strong enough to cause serious damage although rattled residents of Florida and Cuba, according to media reporting.
- A 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Cuba in May 1992, which injured 40 people and damaged more than 800 buildings, according to media reporting.

## Terrorism

***The US government rates the threat of terrorism in Cuba as low and there is minimal risk in Havana.*** However, Western governments warn of a heightened threat of terrorist attacks globally due to groups or individuals inspired or associated with ISIS and other Islamist extremist groups. **Vigilance is recommended at all times.**



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