**Travel Tips and Packing Info – Cuba, 2024**

**Currency**

The local currency is the Cuban peso (CUP). Convertible pesos (CUC) have been discontinued and are not accepted anymore. US dollars are widely accepted while Canadian currency is not. The current value is $87 CUP for $1 CAD approximately (it fluctuates). At the hotels, payments are accepted only with Visa/MasterCard credit cards from Canadian banks (US banks not accepted due to the embargo). Payments outside the tourist areas are in local Cuban pesos (CUP) or in USD. We recommend bringing US dollars, since they can be used for payments without the need to exchange money at the airport or at a bank, which can be very time-consuming for groups (hotels no longer offer money exchange services, new rule). If you exchange money for Cuban Pesos, you won’t be able to exchange any leftover pesos back at the end of your stay, but any leftover USD can be exchanged back to CAD at home. Credit cards are accepted at hotels and high-end restaurants and stores; but not at many local restaurants, small shops, markets and some tourist attractions. Bring some USD cash for souvenirs, lunches, small purchases and tips (coins are not accepted, only bills of any denomination in good condition). ATM machines are not reliable in Cuba.

**What will I need to pay for?**

The program has prepaid most expenses. Remaining for individual payment will be 2 lunches ($15 USD each), Entrance Fee for Havana Jazz Club ($15USD), optional activities, tips, and personal expenses (like bottled water, phone calls/WiFi, snacks, souvenirs, etc.). We recommend that you bring enough US dollars in cash to cover these expenses. You can keep your money in a safety deposit box. Paying for lunches at local restaurants can be a very time-consuming process for groups if each student pays individually (preparing individual bills and getting change for each person). It is suggested that chaperones collect the cash from students and prepay the lunches to our Havana office Manager at the beginning of the stay, so he can make payments on behalf of the group and keep the process fast and efficient, so there are no delays getting to activities after lunch.

**Tipping**

A $2.00 tip per person is adequate for wait staff at local restaurants for lunch, but tips are not required for buffet-style meals included at the hotel. It is traditional for each person to contribute $3 per day toward the guide, and $1.50 per day toward the driver. This should be collected by the group leader and gifted at the end of the program. The driver is often the forgotten asset. It is the driver who ensures that there is gas ahead when we need it, that there are spare tires, the vehicle is clean and maintained, and that we get where we are scheduled to be. It is also tradition, and appropriate, that if a person provides private or personal services that they be paid. Cubans are very generous people, please be careful what you ask for, a book, a drive some place, etc. Your wishes may be granted at a disproportional cost to our Cuban colleagues who will find it very difficult to replace the book gifted or the gas used.

**Weather**

It is going to be hot during the day. May through October is the rainy season, the evenings are warm and humid and it will rain heavily for a short period most afternoons, the average temperature is approx. 32c. November through April is the dry season and the average temperature is approx. 27c.

**Baggage Allowance**

Sunwing Airlines’ baggage allowance is one free piece of checked baggage weighing a total of 23kg/50 lbs. (overall dimensions must not exceed 158 cm/62 inches), plus one carry-on at a cost of $50 roundtrip (must not exceed 20 x 16 x 9 inches and 5 kg/11 lbs.), plus one free personal item (must not exceed 16 x 10 x 6 inches; like a purse, a small musical instrument, or a laptop. Under seat sizing). Excess baggage fees will apply for second checked pieces and oversized/overweight bags. These extra fees have been factored into our budget but it is **ESSENTIAL that students DO NOT have excess weight or size when packing. If your personal suitcase does not meet the above guidelines, we will not take it on the plane!** We hope to be bringing donations to our Cuban hosts. More details on that below. This means each of us will be required to use some of our luggage space for these items. When travelling internationally it is prudent to lock bags before check-in. Theft from suitcases is common throughout the world; not just in Cuba.  You should ensure that all valuables such as jewelry, camera equipment, cell phones, medications, passports, money, etc. are carried in your hand luggage where risk of theft is minimal.

**Optional Gifts**

We would like to bring donations for our Cuban hosts. It is challenging for Cubans to get access to many different items, and it is very meaningful if we can bring them specific donations as a thank you for hosting us. **We are requesting a few parents help in organizing and gathering these supplies! Please reach out to us asap if you are able to help!** Below is some information from our tour company on the types of items to bring and logistics of getting them into the country. We have more information to share with the parent group that helps organize this to make sure it is meaningful and manageable.

If you wish to present a gift/donation to the Cuban schools, we suggest bringing the following music related items: Music scores, mouth pieces for wind instruments, reeds for clarinets/saxophones, repair kits, music notation paper, rotor, valve and key oil, slide grease, drum heads, acoustic guitar strings, inexpensive flash drives/USBs, etc.  For donations to community centres we recommend personal hygiene items (deodorant, soap, shampoo/conditioner, toothpaste/toothbrush, razors/shaving cream, body lotion, and inexpensive cosmetics/nail polish); or school and art supplies; or used summer clothing/shoes/ undergarments/dance leotards/tights; or multivitamins and over-the-counter medications like Tylenol, Advil, Aspirin, Aleve, Voltaren, flu/cold medicine, Polysporin; inexpensive reading glasses of different frame sizes and power (1.25 – 3.25).  The Cuban people appreciate these gifts, but they should be presented as a group to the Cuban group leader rather than passed out randomly.  Bring what you can and distribute the items among the participants’ baggage.  Please avoid bringing stuff in big bags/boxes, since Cuban customs may consider them commercial shipments and impose duties on them.  Please note that each person is allowed to bring $50 worth of gifts/donations duty-free, and that any gifts/donations are still subject to the airline’s baggage allowance, so don’t bring too much or you may incur excess baggage charges. Your Cuban guide can help you put together gift packages when you arrive and let you know the proper protocol.

**Medications**

Bring any medicines you are likely to need. While there is an excellent health care system in Cuba it will be extremely difficult to find certain medicines in the countryside. Any prescription medications must have the prescription information on them.

**Vaccinations**

No vaccinations are required for travel to Cuba at this time.  Please contact your doctor for information on any optional vaccinations that may be available for travel to the Caribbean.

**Food and Water**

There is a variety of food, although it may look different than what you are used to. Most meals are buffet-style, so you can pick and choose what you like. There are no North American style fast food restaurants in Cuba. Special dietary requirements can be accommodated; however, in the case of life-threatening allergies, participants should bring EpiPens/medications and additional appropriate food to supplement what is locally available. Vegan and Gluten-free options are limited in Cuba, so bring snacks from home. **Meals are not included on board the flights**. We will have time in Vancouver Airport to purchase food to bring on the plan. You can also pack food from home in your carryon. **We recommend drinking bottled water only, which is available everywhere for purchase ($2-$5 depending on the bottle size).**

**Electricity**

Cuba operates with a 110 volt system like in North America in most cases. Many of the outlets will be for old style 2 prong plugs (not 3 prong grounded or 2 prong polarized), so buy the required adaptors otherwise appliances such as battery chargers and amps cannot be used.

**Cell Phones/Internet**

Smart phones/tablets should be used for emergencies only, since roaming charges are very high in Cuba. Internet access is limited, there is no high-speed internet and mobile data and Wi-Fi networks are scarce and very slow. There are phone/WiFi cards available for purchase at the hotel ($5 - $10 approximately depending on how many hours of use are purchased). We recommend contacting your carrier to find out if they offer data plans for Cuba and the costs if you plan to use electronic devices.

**Emergency Contacts**

Canada-Cuba Sports & Cultural Festivals Toronto Office – 1 800-818-8840

Canada-Cuba Sports & Cultural Festivals Havana Office – (011-537) 204-4622

Canadian Embassy in Havana – (011-537) 204-2516

In Cuba dial 106 for Police, 104 for Medical Assistance, 105 for Fire Department

**What is there to buy?**

Cuban arts and crafts. By European and North American standards original art is reasonable priced, if we see it and can arrange export papers, this is often the best purchase. There are often worthwhile books and music. Souvenirs are universal and include the usual t-shirts, hats and kitsch. Post cards seldom arrive home or do so many months later.

**Packing List**

Instrument and music!! (you laugh, but every tour we have done, at least one student has forgot!)

Folding music stand – if you don't have one, OKM will provide one for you

Bathing suits

Clothes for hot weather, lots of T-shirts

Sunscreen!

Hat, baseball caps

Flip-flops, sandals

Face cloth

Comfortable shoes for walking

Sunglasses

Glasses/contact lenses and cleaning solution

Hair dryer, flat iron

Shampoo/conditioner and soap (hotels provide soap, but you may prefer your own brand)

Toothpaste and toothbrush

Female hygiene products

Small packages of facial tissues (toilet paper substitute when outside of hotel)

Insect repellent (important!)

Aspirin/Tylenol, Peptobismol, Imodium

Battery powered travel alarm clock

Individual water bottle

Snacks

English/Spanish dictionary or translation app

Containers of liquids, non-solid food and personal items in your carry-on must be **100 ml/100 g (3.4 oz) or less**. All containers must fit in one **clear, resealable** plastic bag no more than 1L in capacity. The bag must be transparent so screening officers can easily see the contents.

Please note that electronic cigarettes are banned in Cuba and cannot be brought into the country in either checked or carry-on baggage. They are also banned as per OKM rules.

Items listed as prohibited by law by [Transport Canada](https://can01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Ftc.canada.ca%2Fen%2Faviation%2Faviation-security&data=05%7C01%7CMMikaty%40sunwing.ca%7C8a9e9702bb3e4f714f4008da87905276%7C6aba11147da14a48abde031041a66553%7C0%7C0%7C637971351164540354%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=1GH24uqmxmI4KgBqkqQWIpY0EjAjIVUp2QTcVJBdqlk%3D&reserved=0) and the [CATSA](https://can01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.catsa-acsta.gc.ca%2Fen%2FwhatcanIbring&data=05%7C01%7CMMikaty%40sunwing.ca%7C8a9e9702bb3e4f714f4008da87905276%7C6aba11147da14a48abde031041a66553%7C0%7C0%7C637971351164540354%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=DqqhBDghv0jq8XWsDxlloD%2FW7SdrXJK95oVyzXLJ784%3D&reserved=0) are not permitted on board or in checked baggage under any circumstances.

Living standards and practices at the destination and standards and conditions there with respect to the provision of utilities, services and accommodation may differ from those found in Canada.

The most important thing to bring is patience, a commitment to flexibility and recognition that things in Cuba are different than they are at home. Cuba suffered greatly when the socialist bock collapsed and is slowly emerging. Although life for the majority is less rigorous than in much of the Caribbean and Latin America, life is hard. Cubans are by and large cultured, well educated, healthy and hospitable. Consider that poverty is relative and infrastructure absorbs tremendous resources to maintain and modernize. However, if the objective of your travel is a rich cultural experience, you will not be disappointed.