

HOW
TO DO

CUBA

Colonial mansions with crumbling facades. Mojitos and big, fat cigars. Revolutionary billboards, salsa and sandy beaches — you've seen them all in your travel fantasies. Now let expert **Claire Boobyer** show you how to make the dream a reality...



String fellow:
walking past a
mural of the Cuban
flag in Santiago



W

ith its cigar-smoking rebels, sparkling seas, vintage vehicles, potent music, and locals who survive on their wits and humour, Cuba will almost certainly steal your heart. But like so

Precious metal: above, sculpture of Che Guevara on Havana's Revolution Square; right, classic car on the historic Paseo de Martí

many seducers, this tropical island, shaded a Socialist red on the map, is complicated. It's at once gorgeous and falling apart; ridiculously rich in culture, but short on basic goods and common conveniences. (Cuba's not for you if you need Instagram connection 24/7; or if you don't handle train cancellations well; or if you come over shaky when you can't find a breakfast latte with soya milk.)

The island's a little longer than the UK and packs in a lot of encounters and experiences, so you'll need two weeks to do it justice. For us, that means seeing the highlights and a bit more: the capital Havana; lush Viñales Valley; Trinidad and Santiago cities; and the distant east – jungly Oriente is Cuba's best-kept secret and you won't regret stretching your time. Anxious about bypassing urbane Santa Clara and coastal Cienfuegos towns? You'll get more colonial grandeur and sexier beaches on the route mapped out here.

Delays and safety concerns make domestic flights a bad idea and car hire is expensive and convoluted. Instead, do as most travellers do and take cross-country coaches or hire a car and driver. Pack patience, flexibility, your sense of humour and your glad rags. Cuba's infectious magic will knock you sideways before you even sip a Mojito. From cutting-edge art and hip-swivelling music to wild beaches, colonial hotspots and brilliant B&Bs, here's how to pack it all in...

EASY BOOKING

When it comes to accommodation, you can be spontaneous – just book your first few nights to get started. B&Bs, indicated by an upside-down blue anchor image on front doors, abound on the island. Go ahead and knock. Cuba Junky's offline app assists (cuba-junky.com).

Days 1-3 Hot-right-now Havana

Havana is utterly beautiful. Not quite the starlet she once was, perhaps, but her 500-year-old bone structure is still there, in primped-up plazas and swanky mansions. The city is Cuba's political and cultural capital and, more prosaically, has the biggest airport for arrivals. Most flights touch down in time for dinner and cocktails, and in the land of rum and sugar, you'd be nuts not to take advantage. From the airport, Havana is 40 minutes by taxi (£20) via a flipbook of socialist billboards. Few places on Earth offer stays in such splendour for such great value – think Spanish colonial romance meets Art Deco (for hotels, see page 109). Havana is a city on the up, and you'll find its coolest creative types on the rooftop at El del Frente (O'Reilly 303). Come and dine alfresco, then slip into speakeasy-feel Cero Habana (Aguir 209). Prefer >

Favourite five Food spots

Long gone are the days when ration-book food fuelled Cuba. New business rules have revolutionised dining, with smart tables, farm food and stylish cafes. You'll find Cuba's tastiest food in private restaurants, known as *paladares*

● **Otra Manera, Havana:** This glam converted '50s home is

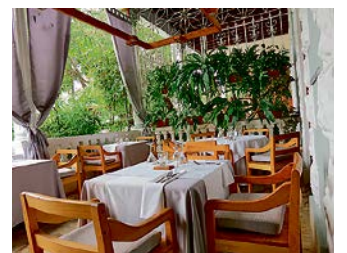
the capital's best restaurant, serving fresh seafood platters accompanied by an expert wine list (00 53 7203 8315, otramanera lahavana.com; mains about £10).

● **Restaurant Cuajani, Viñales:** Outstanding fresh tomatoes, goat's cheese salads, and pumpkin and ginger risotto – the finest food south of Havana, in a pretty setting (Carretera El Moncada km 2.2, Dos Hermanas; 00 53 5882 8925; mains about £9).

● **La Cocina de Ortíz, Baracoa:** Ineldis Ortíz cooks exquisitely fresh Baracoa food: red tuna with mango sauce; tender wreckfish in coconut sauce; and Baracoa chocolate and raisin brownies (Rafael Trejo 15; mains about £8).

● **Grados, Havana:** Chef Raulito Bazuka has revived forgotten island recipes, such as lamb marinated in Pru, an eastern Cuban herbal brew (Calle E 562, between 23 & 25; 00 53 7833 7882; mains about £11; pictured).

● **Baracoando, Baracoa:** There's no better vegan and vegetarian joint on the island than Aristides Smith's hurricane-wrecked home (Flor Crombet 9; 00 53 2164 4008; set vegetarian platters £6).



Valley high: Trinidad and the Valle de los Ingenios. Opposite, clockwise from top left, musician in Santiago; Havana's Fábrica de Arte Cubano club; Trinidad streets scene; Viñales tobacco fields; Mojitos at El del Frente bar; fishing off Havana's Malecón

WARNING

Expect to meet *jineteros*: hustlers trying to make an extra buck on cars, hotels and cigars. They're harmless, and 'No, gracias' should be deterrent enough. Cubans don't mess with tourists because the punishments are severe.

somewhere more established? Anyone with a guidebook will know about Ernest Hemingway's favourite bars. By all means take a stool at his Daiquiri spot, El Floridita (Obispo 557), and drink in the long, classy bar and live music along with your £4.50 cocktail. But avoid La Bodeguita del Medio (Empedrado 207), which does the city's worst Mojito.

The plundered loot of Spain's Latin American empire was funnelled through Havana for more than 200 years, via the so-called treasure fleets. And the silver cascading through the Atlantic-facing city needed protection – with forts mostly built by African slaves – to defy those pirates of the Caribbean. Havana's wealth was later bolstered by sugar exports, and profits were invested in handsome bricks and mortar. Now those Old Havana streets are made for walking, between Unesco-protected Baroque churches, bougainvillea-draped portals, lofty mansions, muscular fortresses and kerbside cafes. The four main plazas – Catedral, Armas, Vieja and San Francisco – are highlights. Devote time to the plush presidential-palace-turned-Museum of the Revolution (Refugio 1; £6), which charts Cuba's history of rebellion. In the Museum of Fine Arts, opposite (www.bellasartes.co.cu; £4), take a guided tour (£2.50) of the Cuban collection (make for the avant-garde and contemporary art floors). Artsy types

can go further with a curator-guide (Sussette Martínez; sussem@gmail.com; from £30pp per half day), visiting artists' home-studios: maybe see a Cadillac converted into a submarine, or a Che Guevara 'Turin' shroud.

Wherever you're going, grab a rickshaw-style bicycle taxi for speed (from £3). Havana's *almendrón* taxi system – classic cars running fixed routes – has disintegrated somewhat. Now, you'll pay £4.50-£7.50 for taxis for journeys of up to 4km. The hop-on-hop-off circulating red tourist bus (£7.50) is for people with plenty of time.

Shimmy along for matinee rumba at tight, sweaty and untouristy El Jelengue de Areito (San Miguel 410; £3) in Centro Habana, a dilapidated residential zone. After dinner, look out for the green light bulb on Calle 11 marking under-the-radar La Casa de la Bombilla Verde, to hear live *nueva trova* music (en-gb.facebook.com/lacasa delabombillaverde). Your next address is the city's Fábrica de Arte Cubano (www.fac.cu; £1.50) for challenging photography, singer-songwriters, avant-garde dance and the chance to mingle with Cuban entrepreneurs amid three bars, a restaurant and cigar lounge. Do this lot and you'll have captured Cuba's political, social and cultural zeitgeist. You can sleep when you get home.

Take the strain off your feet on your last day in Havana and make your way through Centro by bicycle-

taxi for a window onto street life – having first bought a cigar factory ticket, available from any hotel (£7.50). The H Upmann Factory tour reveals one of the world's most aromatic and elaborate crafts (San Carlos & Peñalver; mornings only, Mon-Fri). Buy cigars from official 'Habanos' stores only (on the street, you might get fakes made of dried banana). There is a Habanos branch selling smokes and rum around the corner, so pick up a Ron Santiago, aged 11 or 12 years, while you're there.

If cigars aren't your bag, try a farm-to-table cooking class at organic paradise Finca Tungasuk (tungasuk.com; £30pp) in buried-in-the-bushes Caimito, 40 minutes from Havana. Or make like Rihanna in Havana and hire a Cadillac with driver (malecon663.com; from £23/hr). Explore the two castles defending the Bay of Havana, then motor to the leafy, artsy El Vedado district, home to wedding-cake mansions, top *paladares* (private restaurants), bars and music venues. After snapping the monumental Plaza de la Revolución, step into Christopher Columbus Cemetery (£4) for the largest communion of marble angels in Latin America (see a husband's devotion embodied in bronze, stone and Lalique glass at Catalina Lasa's tomb). In the golden hour before sunset, cruise up and down Havana's seaside boulevard, the Malecón, with its hymn to fabulous, colourful architectural eclecticism. >

Favourite five Music venues

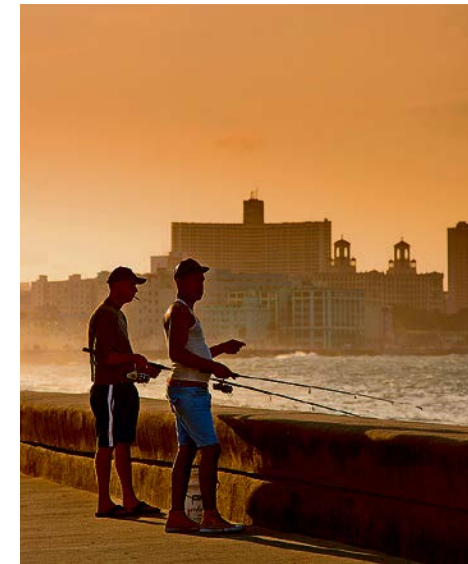
The bedrock of the island is its seductive sounds: from jazz, *timba* (pimped up salsa), rumba and politicised *nueva trova*, to body-shaking reggaeton, with its vulgar lyrics, and Afro-Cuban *son* music. The best places are in Havana, but there's top talent in Santiago, too. Matinees run from about 5pm; late-night acts start at 11pm. Prices range from £1 to £7.50.

- **Club 1830, Havana:** For hot salsa bands, dance to the door of this alfresco seaside club (Malecón & 22).
- **Café Teatro Bertolt Brecht, Havana:** A smokin' hot basement haunt. Dedicate Wednesday nights to Robertico Carcassés and fusion band Interactivo (Calles 13 & 1).

● **Diablo Tun Tun, Havana:** *Nueva trova* singer-songwriter Ray Fernández brings down the house during his Thursday matinee (Casa de la Música de Miramar, Calle 20, corner of 35).

● **La Zorra y el Cuervo, Havana:** A Brit-style red phone-box door leads to this intimate basement jazz club (Calles 23 & O, Vedado; pictured).

● **Casa de la Trova, Santiago de Cuba:** Pitch up for old-time *son* musicians playing matinees; bands get livelier in the evenings (Heredia 208).



Clear winner: idyllic
Maguana Beach,
north of Baracoa



Toast your time in Havana with a Daiquiri at the roof bar of the Kempinski hotel (kempinski.com); you'll have a great view of curlicued motifs on theatres and museums. Partygoers should end the night dancing salsa in front of a live band at alfresco Club 1830 (see page 103). In the Old Town, music-crawl the bars of Calle Obispo: La Lluvia de Oro is a winner for its old-time looks and live bands. Lured by the late-night billings at the city's two Casa de la Música clubs? Be warned, they can get a bit raunchy.

Days 4-5 Verdant Viñales

Rise early for Viazul's 9am coach to Viñales, 180km west of Havana. You'll want as much time as transport allows in the town and its lush valley (for coach and accommodation details, see page 108). Unesco-protected Viñales Valley is a vision of velvet-green mountains – *mogotes* – rising from palms, tobacco plants and ruddy red soil tilled by oxen and plough. Besides the country air, its greatest draws are the organic food, Mojitos at sunset, horse-riding and rock-climbing. And you'll see much

better valley sights than those tipped in the guidebooks on a walk with a guide from the Visitors' Centre (close to Hotel Los Jazmines; 8.30am-5pm; £8pp). Otherwise, stroll around a private *mogote* with farmer Omar from Casa Omar y Mayra (casaomarymayra@gmail.com; £8pp), or ask your B&B to help you hire horses for a guided ride to the unspoilt Valley of Silence (from £4/hr). In town, Patio del Decimista, on the main street, regularly hosts the band Sol del Valle – its leader plays the recorder through his nose. Swap valley sunsets the next day for tangerine-coloured starfish at Cayo Jutías, a sparkling white beach that's an easy day-trip with one of the travel agencies on the small main strip (£16). Or hire a taxi to take you to the tobacco farm of Hector Luis Prieto. He does a superb tour and creole lunch for a bargain £8pp (hectorfinca.com). The insatiable could squeeze in both by private taxi.

Days 6-7 Trinidad: colonial splendour

There's no quick fix to reach Trinidad, but it's a must-visit for its pistachio- and cinnamon-coloured homes, dreamy

palaces, sexy salsa, and coppery horses ridden by *mangón* (*very* good-looking) cowboys trotting through town. Viazul's daily bus from Viñales takes nine-and-a-half hours (or rent a car; see page 108). But if you're prepared for a little organised chaos, you can keep it to six or seven hours by taking collective taxis. Vintage vehicles pick up passengers from Viñales B&Bs and drive them to a highway restaurant; you could then be shifted to another vehicle and redirected to Trinidad. It sounds like a jumbled plan, but go with it – you'll never be stranded in Cuba.

Trinidad was central to Cuba's 19th-century sugar boom, and its wealthy sugar barons enshrined egos in stone: palaces embellished with all the finest furniture, frescoes and chandeliers money could buy. You can sleep amid the grandeur at some of the small city's finest homes (see page 109). The next day, gain full immersion by just wandering. A cluster of music venues, all within a cocktail stick's throw of each other, makes flirting with each one a cinch. Top dazzler is Casa de la Trova (Echerri 29; £1), a traditional colonial home with live bands and a patio for dancing. If you know the moves, wait at the edge for a

partner to approach. If you're a learner, standby, too. It's the only way to improve and Cubans are accommodating.

Morning light spills over Trinidad in a golden sheen. Photographer Julio Muñoz has been capturing life there for years. His easy manner and contacts make his street-photography tour a nuanced introduction beyond the city's Unesco-protected chocolate-box facade (photo. trinidadphoto.com; £20). Later, climb the observation tower at the Cantero Palace history museum (Desengaño 423; £1.50), where a central fountain once sprinkled eau de cologne for the ladies and gin for society gents. Look out for the faces of Trinidad's elderly folk exquisitely carved into abandoned door pieces at the gallery of Lázaro Niebla Castro (Real 11).

Days 8-10 Sights and salsa in Santiago

Santiago is steeped in history, humidity and a rocking music scene. With African, Haitian and Jamaican roots, its vibe is more Caribbean than Havana's. To get there from Trinidad, don't spend a day on Viazul's direct route >

SAFETY

Cuba is very safe. True, females of all ages (even those accompanied by men) will receive a deluge of attention via *piropos* (chat-up lines). But it's all benign, mostly called out in passing and never threatening. To deflect attention, don't counter or make eye contact.

Pep up the package

So you've booked a resort holiday? We know the best day-trips you can take, and how to line them up...

● **From Varadero:** There's really *nada* to see in Varadero's waters, which is why you should take a dive or snorkel trip to the south coast's Bay of Pigs (below, top), where easy immersions reveal a huge coral wall and wrecks of US craft from the 1961 invasion. It's easiest to sort via your hotel; all offer these excursions.

● **From Cayo Santa María:** Head to pretty, colonial Remedios (which hosts a Christmas Eve firework festival) and Santa Clara, home to Che Guevara's tomb and other Che sites; transport is complicated, so book the hotel tour.

● **From Gardens of the King:** Stay put, and learn to kitesurf at Cayo Guillermo (below, bottom). The most experienced instructors work for havanakiteboarding.com, not bookable through hotels. Lessons start at £60/hr; kit rental from £45.

● **From Guardalavaca, north of Holguín:** Chirpy Gibara, a weathered seaside town 50km west, hides caves for walking and diving. Experienced diver Arturo Rojas offers two dives from £85pp, including equipment; transport extra ([facebook.com/pg/AquaCuba](https://www.facebook.com/pg/AquaCuba); acave61@nauta.cu).



(12hr 50min); instead take a £30–£35 taxi to Sancti Spiritus (about one hour north) and catch the 3.10pm bus or an overnighter (9.10pm and 1.50am; 10hr 20min).

Don't pack all the sights into your first day – plan a siesta, breaks on the Casa Granda hotel terrace (iberostar.com) or coffee at museum cafe Casa Dranguet ([facebook.com/pg/CasaDranguet](https://www.facebook.com/pg/CasaDranguet)). Explore highlights of the 500-year-old historic core on foot: the first governor's mansion (£1.50) and the Bacardí museum (£1.50), then walk to the Moncada Museum charting Fidel Castro's rise to power (£1.50).

Start the night at funky alfresco chess cafe, Café Ajedrez (Felix Peña & Enramada), with its nightly live bands, followed by evening ensembles at Casa de la Trova (Heredia 208), and a storming end-of-night salsa shiver at Bar Claqueta (Félix Peña, between San Basilio & Heredia), close to the cathedral. Next day, swap city for country and hire a car and driver through Out of the Box (outofthebox.cu; from £36pp) or your B&B. Plan to take in glorious Avenida Manduley mansions in the Vista Alegre district, Fidel Castro's tomb at magnificent marble Santa Ifigenia Cemetery (£2.50), and impressive Unesco-protected El Morro Castle (£4) at the mouth of Santiago Bay. Time your visit for the sunset cannon-firing ceremony. Fancy carnival? Come in July, prepared for stifling temperatures.

Days 11-14 Baracoa: beautiful beaches

Baracoa is spellbinding. Some of the world's smallest species of bird, frog and bat live here, as does the rainbow-coloured hyper-local natural beauty the polymita snail. These small wonders inhabit the coconut palms, cocoa trees, coffee bushes and pine forests of this Atlantic region. When Christopher Columbus first glimpsed the wild beaches and green slopes in 1492, he wrote there was 'so much beauty that I can find no words to describe it'.

A Viazul bus from Santiago at 7.40am can get you to this tropical enclave in time for lunch. Climb the hill to Hotel El Castillo for lush views of anvil-flat mountain El Yunque, and map out the following days' plans. For wild beach exploration, head south, going off-piste on hired bikes (baracoabikerental.com; £8) or in a cab (£20 return). At Manglito Beach, sink into an Adirondack chair with a beer, and order fresh seafood from Tato's food shack (mains about £6). If you've swerved the Mojito hangover from dancing salsa at Baracoa's small Casa de la Trova (Maceo 149), hike up through palms the next day to El Yunque's summit (£13 with Ecotur at Hostal 1511, Ciro Frías 26). The views of the nibbled Atlantic coastline – a jade-green forest hemline against a peacock-blue sea – are awesome. After that you'll want relaxation. You can find it at Maguana, the cutest beach corner in Cuba, a rugged 22km north of Baracoa. Book your last night or two at Casa Carlos (see page 109), to share a secluded cove with one other house, and splash about in aquamarine sea. Do nothing more than order a seafood feast from fisherman-owner Carlos and plot your next holiday in Cuba.

Then grit your teeth, book a cab to Baracoa's bus station (£20), and catch the 1pm coach all the way back to Havana (17hr 30min). (That's unless you book an open-jaw flight home with Thomas Cook; it departs from Holguín – maybe seven hours' drive from here; see overleaf.) If you squeezed in a dip in the area's glassy River of Honey, legend says you'll return to Baracoa. You know you will. ▶

SHORTCUT

It's not easy to find cultural listings, but these will help: suenacubano.com/cartelera/; lapapeleta.cult.cu; noticiasdesantiagodecuba.com/category/cartelera-cultural/; havanaviptours.com/13599/havana-vip-nightlife-app.

Sitting pretty: clockwise from top left, Havana locals on Plaza de la Catedral; mural on Santiago de Cuba's Revolution Square; roof terrace of the Kempinski hotel, Havana; Viñales Valley

Get me there

Go independent

Virgin Atlantic flies to Havana from Gatwick from £677. **Thomas Cook Airlines** flies from Manchester to Varadero from £550 return; and from Gatwick and Manchester to Holguín (near Gibara) from £430, and to Cayo Coco (near Cayo Guillermo) from £400. It often works out cheaper to fly indirect; you can get Havana returns with **Air Europa** via Madrid (from £683), **Iberia** via Madrid (from £563), **Air France** via Paris (from £674), and **KLM** via Amsterdam (from £674). Flying via European hubs only adds a few hours to the flight journey; find deals and compare fares at travelup.com or expedia.co.uk. Visa requirements and legal compliance make it complicated to fly via the USA.

Get around

Most travellers use punctual cross-country **Viazul** coaches (viazul.com) — the national bus line **Astro** doesn't accept foreigners. Online tickets can be bought at least seven days before travel (Havana to Viñales, for instance, costs £9). Multiple collective taxis use anything on wheels — from Ladas to converted hearses and farm trucks — to serve the entire country. Driving is fast and seatbelts are absent. For long routes, prices are generally the same

Key phrase:
Quieres bailar?
= Wanna dance?

Must try: Nutty,
honey-stuffed
cucuruchos

Must buy: Silky
Selección de
Maestros rum

per person as Viazul fares. Private modern taxis (you can hail or use ranks) with seatbelts and air-con are more expensive — Havana to Viñales costs £60; meter usage is rare. Cars with drivers can be hired anywhere at short notice (from about £7.50 an hour in Havana); ask at your B&B. Don't hire a vintage car for a long journey — they're uncomfortable and few have air-con.

Hiring your own car will get you off the beaten track (nose at the gate to Guantánamo Bay; explore Hershey's Cuban chocolate town), but rental is costly (from £55 a day including insurance and unlimited mileage), availability an issue and accidents a

headache. Road signage is atrocious, so if you're taking the plunge, use detailed offline map **Galileo**, and look for the **Guía de Carreteras** road map in tourism offices. For more details, see cuba.travelnetwork.com/car-rental-cuba.

Where to stay

HAVANA Boutique hotel **La Loma del Angel** offers sublime romance and unrivalled service in Old Havana (lomadelangel.com; doubles from £274, B&B). **Economía 156** is an elegant Old-Havana townhouse turned into a *casa particular* (economia156.com; doubles from £108, B&B).

VINALES **Casa MogoteArt** is a rural hideaway (airbnb.co.uk/rooms/23166351; doubles from £48, B&B).

Casa Deborah y Juan Carlos (airbnb.co.uk/rooms/16414169; doubles from £19, B&B) has garden rooms and is run by an enchanting family.

TRINIDAD At hacienda **Finca Kenia**, expect horses, antiques, fine food and a flourishing garden (fincakenia.com; doubles from £77, B&B).

SANTIAGO With an eye for glorious Spanish colonial style, Juan Martí runs the wonderful **Terraza Pavo Royal** (cubacasas.net/cities/santiago/Juan; doubles from £23, B&B).

BARACOA Rooms at **Villa Paradiso** (villaparadisobaracoa.com; doubles from £20, B&B) have panoramic Bay of Honey views. **Casa Carlos** (airbnb.co.uk/rooms/17417994; from £13, sleeping four) is a clapboard cottage on a secret beach.

Go with the experts

Havana-based and -run **Cuba Private Travel** (cubaprivatetravel.com) has more than 15 years' experience of organising high-quality travel to Cuba. Its two-week, tailor-made holiday

with a guide-driver, bespoke tours, and luxury B&B accommodation, costs from £1,716pp, excluding international flights. Alternatively, group-tour operator **G Adventures** (gadventures.co.uk) has the 16-day Cuba on a Shoestring itinerary from £1,149pp, excluding flights. **Journey Latin America** (journeylatinamerica.co.uk) has a 14-day self-drive holiday from £2,322pp, B&B, including return flights, car hire and excursions, and accommodation in some of Cuba's best hotels and homestays.

When to go

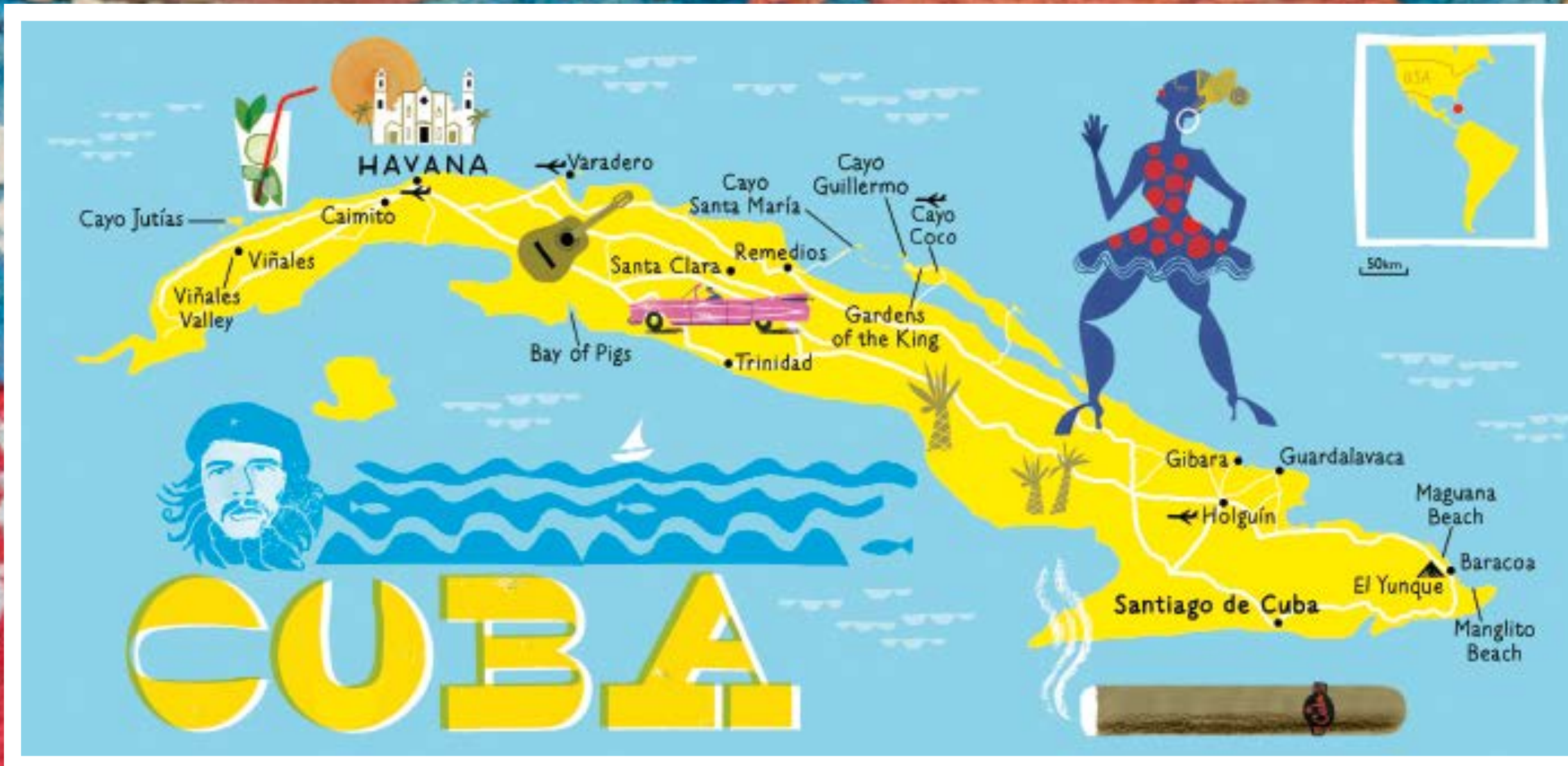
The weather is hot and dry from November to April. From May, humidity climbs and the rainy season begins. July and August are stiflingly hot and are carnival months. The hurricane season runs from June to November.



Local's tip

Ariel Causa, co-founder of restaurant website and app AlaMesa

'Snack on *malanga* (root veg fritters) and *tostones* (plantain chips). And try *mamey* milkshakes, made from local fruit.'



Further information

The internet is accessed by wi-fi scratch cards (75p-£1.50/hr) available from your B&B or, if you speak Spanish, from individuals on kerbs and street-side chairs (though strictly speaking, it's not allowed). Cuba has 3G but you'll need a Cuban SIM; they're £30 at **Etecta** offices all over the island, including £7.50 of calls, data packages and scratch cards. Buy **Cubacel** cards for call top-ups at **Etectas**, street kiosks or online via ding.com.

All tourists need a tourist card, sometimes erroneously called a visa. **Virgin Holidays** sells its passengers 30-day tourist cards (£15) at Gatwick. The cheapest

online provider, **cubavisas.com**, charges £24, including delivery. Allow a week to apply. Cuba is a cash economy and uses two currencies: the convertible peso for most transactions (about 80p to CU\$1); and the Cuban peso for Havana's collective taxis and local snacks (CUP\$1 is about 30p). Take as much cash (sterling) as you feel comfortable with. ATMs and bureaux de change (**Cadeca**) are widespread, but card withdrawals incur hefty bank charges. On arrival in Havana, exchange cash at **Cadeca** in Departures. Don't bring any cards connected to US banks.