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Strategies for Seeing Cuba

**la bodeguita del
Medio**



**restaurante
El Patio**



**museo de
Arte Colonial**



**galería
Victor Manuel**

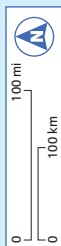


**centro
Wifredo Lam**



Catedral





Cuba is a large island and although there's little traffic on the roads, some journeys will take longer than anticipated due to the serious lack of decent road signs. Even with a good road map, you'll almost certainly need to stop and ask directions. A good phrasebook, a pen, and paper may be useful if you don't speak Spanish. Here are some strategies to help you enrich your time and travels.

Rule #1: Weigh up the pros and cons of car rental

Cuba is served by an efficient tourist bus service, Viazul, which provides daily services linking key towns across the island. It's reasonably priced and comfortable, but take a sweater for night journeys due to the air-conditioning. To travel anywhere beyond these key points, you need to hire a car or rent a taxi. Hiring a car allows greater freedom and flexibility. Gas stations have increased in number and official parking lots are available for overnight parking. Travelers will need the Guía de Carreteras (a map guide), available to buy from Infotur (see p 105) in Havana. See p 165 for information about Cuban hitchhikers.

Rule #2: Allow for down time

Don't cram your days full of activities. Cuba is a tropical country and the heat can be intense, especially between 1pm and 3pm. Coupled with the fact that you may have unexpected bureaucracy to tackle, always have a Plan B. If you're on

the road and thinking about a lunch break, it's better to pull over at the first roadside restaurant/gas station you see because it may be the only one for miles. These places aren't somewhere to linger; they're purely (limited) refreshment stops.

Rule #3: Time your visit right

Cuba's cultural calendar is positively bursting with possibilities. If you're a party animal, brave the suffocating heat of Santiago in July. If you're a movie fan, visit in December. For cigar aficionados, a festival takes place in February, when the tobacco fields are also in bloom. The coolest months are between December and March, and to escape a capitalist Christmas, come for a winter break; Christmas is low-key in Cuba. For more on the festival calendar, see p 159.

Rule #4: Decide whether to hotel-hop or stay in one place

Cuba is a large country but some of the region's most popular stops are relatively close to one another. By choosing a base for several days and exploring the surrounding area on day trips, you save time checking in and out of rooms. However, if you wish to explore from beach resorts such as Cayo Santa María, Cayo Coco, and Guardalavaca, you will need a car. Or it may be more relaxing to

Car rental.





Playa Guardalavaca.

book accompanied tours with the hotel's tour desk.

Rule #5: Take children into account

The displays of many of Cuba's museums don't engage young visitors, a problem not helped by a lack of English-language signage. Cuba's

greatest appeal for children is its street life, nature, and beaches. You would do well to plan for variety on your vacation. Remember to stock up on bottled water wherever you go; children dehydrate faster than adults. Many *casa particular* (private rooms for rent) owners are very accommodating to travelers with children. ●

Know Where You're Going

Hard currency is desperately sought-after in Cuba, and hustlers, known as *jineteros*, are usually one step ahead of the game. *Jineteros* meet incoming buses with the names of tourists they've gleaned from friends inside the bus company. They then tell the visitors that a reservation at a specific *casa particular* (private rooms for rent) has been canceled or that they're taking them to that *casa*, when in fact they're heading to a different one altogether. If you trust your confirmed reservation at a *casa*, make sure you know the exact address and location, and distrust touts who direct you elsewhere. False name boards have even been attached to unlicensed *casas*. Some *jineteros* have arrived at *casa* doors with unsuspecting tourists, pulled out a false set of keys and announced 'Oh, the owner isn't here because the door's locked'. The *jinetero* then takes visitors to his or her friend's house and earns commission. Car drivers are also approached by pedestrians and bicycles 'offering help'. If you accept help to find your way to a *casa* or *paladar* (restaurant in a private home), a CUC\$5 commission will be added to your bill.