



Cuba

Colonial squares, old sea forts, tobacco valleys, rumba and son, and the largest island in the Caribbean.

AT A GLANCE

Facts to know

CAPITAL

Havana

POPULATION

About 9.4 million (official estimate for 2025, down from about 11.2 million in 2012)

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

Spanish

CURRENCY

Cuban peso (CUP). The Cuban convertible peso (CUC) was withdrawn in 2021

AREA

About 110,000 km² (official figure 109,884 km²)

GOVERNMENT

One-party socialist republic. The constitution names the Communist Party of Cuba as the leading force of society and the state

HIGHEST MOUNTAIN

Pico Turquino, 1,974 m, in the Sierra Maestra

LONGEST RIVER

The Cauto, about 343 km, in the southeast

NEIGHBOURS

None by land. Across the sea: the Bahamas (about 22 km to the north at its closest), Haiti (78 km east), Jamaica (148 km south), the United States (Key West, about 150 km north) and Mexico (210 km west). The United States holds a naval base at Guantánamo Bay under a lease that Cuba regards as illegal

DRIVES ON THE

Right

CALLING CODE

+53

A 45-minute trip to Cuba

Everything you need is in this pack. No preparation beyond printing. Adapt the timing to your group.

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| 0 to 5 min | Welcome. Show the map page and find Cuba together. Ask: who has been there, or knows someone from there? |
| 5 to 15 min | Read the facts at a glance, then three moments from the story:
4000 BC: First people settle Cuba; 1898: The USS Maine sinks in Havana harbour; 2015: Cuba and the United States restore relations. |
| 15 to 25 min | At the table: talk about Ropa vieja and Moros y cristianos. Idea: bring a small taste (bread, cheese, fruit, tea) if your kitchen can help. |
| 25 to 30 min | Say it like a local: practise "Buenos días" (Good morning, hello), "Buenas tardes" (Good afternoon), "Buenas noches" (Good evening, good night). Everyone says them together. |
| 30 to 40 min | Quiz: read the questions aloud, or play the big-screen version at https://worldstroll.com/countries/cuba/group . No scores needed. |
| 40 to 45 min | Talk about it (questions page), then stamp or sign everyone's passport page. |

You will need

- This printed pack (one per table, or one each)
- Pens for the quiz
- Optional: a world map or globe, a small tasting, music from the country

Cuba and its cities



- Havana (Havana (La Habana province)): Old Havana and its fortresses, The Malecón seafront, El Capitolio, inspired by the US Capitol
- Santiago de Cuba (Santiago de Cuba province): Castillo de San Pedro de la Roca, The Moncada Barracks, The Basilica of El Cobre nearby
- Camagüey (Camagüey province): Maze-like old streets, Large clay water jars called tinajones, The Ignacio Agramonte monument
- Santa Clara (Villa Clara province): The Che Guevara Mausoleum, The Armoured Train monument, Its central park
- Trinidad (Sancti Spíritus province): Cobbled streets and the Plaza Mayor, The Valle de los Ingenios, Mansions from the sugar era
- Cienfuegos (Cienfuegos province): Its historic centre, The bay and seafront promenade, The Pearl of the South nickname
- Matanzas (Matanzas province): Its many bridges, Danzón and rumba, Poets and theatre
- Pinar del Río (Pinar del Río province): Tobacco farms, The Viñales Valley nearby, Its first name, Nueva Filipinas
- Baracoa (Guantánamo province): The oldest Spanish town in Cuba, A visit by Columbus in November 1492, Alejandro de Humboldt National Park nearby
- Varadero (Matanzas province): More than 20 km of white sand, Caves and small offshore

cays, Trips to Matanzas and the Zapata Peninsula

A short history of Cuba

Cuba's story runs from ancient island peoples and the Taíno, through four centuries of Spanish rule built on sugar and slavery, to long wars of independence, a republic shaped by its powerful northern neighbour, and the revolution of 1959 that put the island at the centre of the Cold War.

4000 BC First people settle Cuba

People first settled Cuba around 6,000 years ago, arriving from South or Central America. Much later, around 1,700 years ago, the ancestors of the Taíno arrived from South America. The Taíno grew crops, made pottery and smoked tobacco, a habit the Spanish later carried to Europe.

1492 Columbus reaches Cuba

On 27 October 1492, during his first voyage, Christopher Columbus sighted Cuba and landed the next day. He claimed the island for Spain.

1511 The Spanish found Baracoa

Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar founded Baracoa, near the eastern tip of the island, in 1511. It was the first Spanish settlement in Cuba and its first capital. The Taíno were forced to work for the settlers, and within a century most had died from disease and harsh treatment.

1519 Havana is founded on its harbour

San Cristóbal de la Habana was first founded on the south coast and moved in 1519 to its present site on a deep natural harbour. Havana became the stopping point for Spanish treasure fleets sailing home, and forts and walls were built to protect it.

1762 The British capture Havana

During the Seven Years' War, a British force besieged and captured Havana in 1762. Britain handed the city back to Spain in 1763 under the Treaty of Paris.

1868 The Ten Years' War begins

On 10 October 1868 the sugar planter Carlos Manuel de Céspedes freed his slaves and proclaimed Cuban independence. The war that followed lasted ten years and ended in 1878 without independence.

1886

Slavery is abolished

Hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans had been brought to Cuba to work on sugar plantations. Slavery was finally abolished by Spanish royal decree on 7 October 1886, making Cuba one of the last places in the Americas to end it.

1895

José Martí dies in battle

A new war of independence began on 24 February 1895. The poet and writer José Martí, who had organised it from exile in New York, was killed in battle at Dos Ríos on 19 May 1895. He is remembered as Cuba's national hero.

1898

The USS Maine sinks in Havana harbour

On 15 February 1898 the American warship USS Maine exploded and sank in Havana harbour. The cause is still debated, but the event helped lead to the Spanish–American War that April. Spain lost, and gave up Cuba at the end of 1898.

1902

Cuba becomes an independent republic

After a period of US military rule, Cuba became the independent Republic of Cuba on 20 May 1902. Under the Platt Amendment the United States kept the right to intervene in Cuban affairs, and in 1903 it leased Guantánamo Bay as a naval base.

1953

Rebels attack the Moncada Barracks

On 26 July 1953 a small group of rebels led by Fidel Castro attacked the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba. The attack failed, but it is widely seen as the start of the Cuban Revolution, and Castro named his movement after the date.

1959

The revolutionaries take power

After rebel columns captured Santa Clara at the end of 1958, President Fulgencio Batista fled the country on 1 January 1959. Rebel columns reached Havana within days, and Fidel Castro arrived there on 8 January. The new government nationalised land and businesses and moved closer to the Soviet Union.

1961

The Bay of Pigs invasion fails

On 17 April 1961 about 1,400 Cuban exiles, trained and funded by the US government, landed at the Bay of Pigs on the south coast. Cuban troops and militias defeated them within three days.

1962

The Cuban Missile Crisis

In October 1962 the United States discovered Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. For 13 days the world stood close to nuclear war, until the Soviet Union agreed to remove the missiles in exchange for a US promise not to invade Cuba.

1991

The Special Period begins

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Cuba lost most of its trade and aid. In the years of shortage known as the Special Period, food and fuel became scarce and the economy shrank by about a third.

2015

Cuba and the United States restore relations

In July 2015 Cuba and the United States reopened embassies in each other's capitals after more than 50 years, and in 2016 Barack Obama visited Havana. From 2017 the United States reversed much of this opening, and the US trade embargo, in place since the early 1960s, remains.

What people eat in Cuba

Cuban cooking grew mostly from Spanish food, with African, Taíno and Caribbean influences. Rice and black beans are the heart of almost every meal, cooked together or side by side, with plantains, yuca (cassava) and slow-cooked pork or beef. Garlic, cumin, oregano and bay leaves are the main seasonings. A traditional meal is not served in courses: everything comes to the table at the same time. Food rationing has been part of Cuban life for decades, and it limits how often many Cuban families can cook these dishes.

Ropa vieja

All of Cuba (brought by settlers from the Canary Islands)

Beef slow-cooked until it falls apart into strands, then simmered with tomato, onion, peppers and garlic. It is one of Cuba's national dishes and is usually served with rice, black beans and fried plantains.

Moros y cristianos (Moros)

All of Cuba

White rice and black beans cooked together in one pot with a base of onion, garlic and peppers, seasoned with cumin, oregano and bay leaf. In the east of the island, a similar dish made with red beans is called congrí.

Picadillo

All of Cuba

Minced beef cooked with onion, peppers, garlic, cumin, oregano and tomato sauce, with green olives, capers and often raisins. It is served over white rice, or used to fill pastries and stuffed potato balls called papas rellenas.

Vaca frita

All of Cuba

Flank or skirt steak that is slow-cooked, shredded, then fried until crisp at the edges and topped with soft onions and a squeeze of lime. It is served with rice and black beans.

Arroz con pollo

Popular all over Cuba and Latin America

Chicken and rice cooked together in one pot with onion, peppers, garlic and tomato, coloured yellow with saffron or annatto.

Tostones (Chatinos or tachinos)

All of Cuba and the Caribbean

Thick slices of green, unripe plantain fried once, flattened, then fried again until crisp and golden. They are salted and eaten like crisps, often dipped in mojo, a garlic and citrus sauce.

Frijoles negros

All of Cuba

Black beans slowly cooked with onion, garlic, cumin, oregano and a dash of vinegar until thick and velvety. They are served over white rice, or made thinner as black bean soup.

Pastelitos de guayaba

All of Cuba, and Cuban cafés abroad

Crisp, flaky puff pastries filled with sweet guava paste, sometimes with cream cheese too, and brushed with a sugary glaze. Savoury versions are filled with seasoned minced beef. They are eaten at any time of day, often with a small coffee.

Flan (Flan de huevos)

All of Cuba (from Spain)

A smooth baked egg custard with a layer of golden caramel, turned out of its mould so the caramel runs down the sides. Cuban cooks also make versions with coconut, guava or pumpkin.

Café cubano (Cafecito)

All of Cuba

A small, strong, very sweet espresso. The first drops of coffee are whipped with sugar into a pale foam called espumita, which sits on top of the cup. For breakfast, many Cubans drink café con leche, coffee with hot milk, with buttered toasted bread.

Mojito

Havana

White rum, lime juice, sugar and fresh mint, topped with crushed ice and soda water. In Cuba the mint used is usually a local kind called yerba buena, with a light, citrus-like scent.

Daiquiri

Eastern Cuba, near Santiago de Cuba

White rum shaken with fresh lime juice and sugar and served very cold. Bartenders in Havana later refined the drink and made it world famous.

Cuba libre

Havana, around 1900

Light rum and cola over ice with a squeeze of lime. It became popular soon after 1900, when bottled cola first arrived in Cuba from the United States.

GOOD MANNERS

At the table

- A traditional meal is not served in courses: rice, beans, meat and plantains all come to the table at the same time.
- Rice and black beans are part of almost every lunch and dinner, either cooked together as moros or served side by side.
- Private family-run restaurants are called paladares. They were first allowed in the 1990s, grew in number after reforms in 2010, and are popular with visitors.
- Sharing a small, very sweet coffee is an everyday social ritual. For breakfast, café con leche comes with buttered toasted bread.
- Food is rationed and many ingredients are scarce, so a dish on the menu may not be available. Be patient and understanding if a restaurant has run out.

Moros y cristianos

White rice and black beans cooked together in one pot with a base of onion, garlic and peppers, seasoned with cumin, oregano and bay leaf. In the east of the island, a similar dish made with red beans is called congrí.

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 1 green pepper, finely chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, crushed
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 bay leaf
- 400 g cooked black beans (1 tin), with 250 ml of their liquid or water
- 200 g long-grain white rice, rinsed
- 250 ml water or stock
- 1 teaspoon salt and a splash of vinegar

Method

1. Heat the oil in a heavy pan and gently fry the onion and pepper for 8 minutes until soft. Add the garlic, cumin and oregano and cook for 1 minute.
2. Add the black beans with their liquid, the water or stock, the bay leaf, salt and vinegar, and bring to the boil.
3. Stir in the rice, turn the heat down to very low and cover with a tight lid.
4. Cook for about 20 minutes, without lifting the lid, until the rice is tender and the liquid is absorbed.
5. Leave to rest for 5 minutes, remove the bay leaf, fluff with a fork and serve.

Picadillo

Minced beef cooked with onion, peppers, garlic, cumin, oregano and tomato sauce, with green olives, capers and often raisins. It is served over white rice, or used to fill pastries and stuffed potato balls called papas rellenas.

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 1 green pepper, finely chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, crushed
- 500 g minced beef
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 bay leaf
- 250 ml tomato passata or tomato sauce
- 60 ml dry white wine (optional)
- 12 pimento-stuffed green olives, halved, and 1 tablespoon capers
- 2 tablespoons raisins (optional)
- Salt and pepper, and white rice to serve

Method

1. Heat the oil and fry the onion and pepper gently for 8 minutes until soft. Add the garlic and cook for 1 minute.
2. Add the beef and cook, breaking it up with a spoon, until it is browned all over.
3. Stir in the cumin, oregano, bay leaf, tomato and wine, and simmer for 15 minutes.
4. Add the olives, capers and raisins and cook for 5 more minutes. Season to taste.
5. Remove the bay leaf and serve over white rice.

Tostones

Thick slices of green, unripe plantain fried once, flattened, then fried again until crisp and golden. They are salted and eaten like crisps, often dipped in mojo, a garlic and citrus sauce.

Ingredients

- 2 green (unripe) plantains
- Vegetable oil for frying
- Salt
- For the garlic dip (mojo): 3 garlic cloves, crushed, 3 tablespoons olive oil, juice of 1 lime and 1 orange, a pinch of salt

Method

1. Cut off the ends of the plantains, slit the skin lengthwise and peel it away. Cut into slices about 2.5 cm thick.
2. Heat about 2 cm of oil in a deep frying pan over medium heat. Fry the slices for 3 to 4 minutes, turning once, until pale gold. Lift out onto kitchen paper.
3. Press each slice flat to about 1 cm with the bottom of a glass or a small plate.
4. Fry the flattened pieces again for 2 to 3 minutes until crisp and golden. Drain and sprinkle with salt. Take care with the hot oil and never leave the pan alone.
5. For the dip, warm the garlic gently in the olive oil for 1 minute, take off the heat and stir in the citrus juice and salt. Serve with the hot tostones.

Flan

A smooth baked egg custard with a layer of golden caramel, turned out of its mould so the caramel runs down the sides. Cuban cooks also make versions with coconut, guava or pumpkin.

Ingredients

- 150 g sugar and 3 tablespoons water, for the caramel
- 4 eggs
- 1 tin (397 g) sweetened condensed milk
- 1 tin (410 g) evaporated milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- A pinch of salt

Method

1. Heat the oven to 160 °C (140 °C fan). Put the sugar and water in a small pan over medium heat, without stirring, until it turns a deep golden caramel. Pour it at once into a 20 cm round dish and tilt to coat the bottom. Hot caramel burns badly, so take great care.
2. Whisk the eggs, then whisk in both milks, the vanilla and the salt until smooth. Pour through a sieve into the dish.
3. Cover with foil and stand the dish in a roasting tin. Pour hot water into the tin to come halfway up the sides.
4. Bake for about 60 minutes, until the flan is set but still wobbles slightly in the middle. The eggs are fully cooked when it is set.
5. Cool, then chill for at least 4 hours. Run a knife around the edge, put a plate on top and turn it over quickly so the caramel pours over the flan.

Mojito

White rum, lime juice, sugar and fresh mint, topped with crushed ice and soda water. In Cuba the mint used is usually a local kind called yerba buena, with a light, citrus-like scent.

Ingredients

- 10 fresh mint leaves, plus a sprig to garnish
- Juice of 1 lime
- 2 teaspoons caster sugar
- 50 ml white rum (or leave it out for an alcohol-free version)
- Crushed ice
- Soda water

Method

1. Put the mint, lime juice and sugar in a tall glass.
2. Press gently with a muddler or the end of a wooden spoon, just enough to bruise the mint, not shred it.
3. Add the rum and stir until the sugar dissolves.
4. Fill the glass with crushed ice and top up with soda water.
5. Stir once and garnish with a mint sprig. Please drink alcohol responsibly.

Useful phrases

Buenos días

BWEH-nohs DEE-ahs · Good morning, hello

Buenas tardes

BWEH-nahs TAR-dehs · Good afternoon

Buenas noches

BWEH-nahs NOH-chehs · Good evening, good night

¿Cómo está?

KOH-moh ehs-TAH (in Cuba often KOH-moh eh-TAH) · How are you? (polite)

Mucho gusto

MOO-choh GOOS-toh · Pleased to meet you

Por favor

por fah-VOR · Please

Muchas gracias

MOO-chahs GRAH-syahs · Thank you very much

Con permiso

kohn per-MEE-soh · Excuse me, may I pass?

Disculpe

dees-KOOL-peh · Excuse me, sorry

¿Habla inglés?

AH-blah een-GLEHS · Do you speak English?

No entiendo

noh en-TYEN-doh · I don't understand

Más despacio, por favor

mahs dehs-PAH-syoh por fah-VOR · More slowly, please

¿Cuánto cuesta?

KWAN-toh KWEHS-tah · How much does it cost?

¿Dónde está el baño?

DOHN-deh ehs-TAH el BAH-nyoh · Where is the toilet?

¿Dónde está la Cadeca?

DOHN-deh ehs-TAH lah kah-DEH-kah · Where is the exchange office?

La cuenta, por favor

lah KWEN-tah por fah-VOR · The bill, please

¡Buen provecho!

bwen proh-VEH-choh · Enjoy your meal!

¡Salud!

sah-LOOD · Cheers! (literally 'health')

¡Qué chévere!

keh CHEH-veh-reh · How great!

Things you might not know

1. The main island of Cuba is about 1,250 km long. It is the largest island in the Caribbean and the 17th-largest island in the world.
2. The bee hummingbird, native to Cuba, is the smallest known bird in the world. It is only about 5 to 6 cm long.
3. Cuba's national bird is the Cuban trogon, or tocororo. Its red, white and blue feathers match the colours of the Cuban flag.
4. Pico Turquino, Cuba's highest mountain, is the only place in Cuba where snow has been officially recorded. It last fell in February 1900.
5. The Cauto, about 343 km long, is the longest river in Cuba and in the whole Caribbean.
6. Isla de la Juventud, Cuba's second-largest island, was called the Isle of Pines until 1978. Tales of the pirates who once used it are thought to have fed into Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island.
7. The writer Ernest Hemingway lived at Finca Vigía, a farm about 24 km from Havana, for much of the 1940s and 1950s. He wrote *The Old Man and the Sea* during those years in Cuba.
8. Baseball is Cuba's most popular sport. It has been the most played sport on the island since the 1870s, when Cuba was still a Spanish colony.
9. The Cuban chess player José Raúl Capablanca was world chess champion from 1921 to 1927.
10. In 2015 Cuba became the first country in the world validated by the World Health Organization for eliminating mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis.
11. The national anthem, 'La Bayamesa', was first performed in 1868 during the Battle of Bayamo, in the first war of independence.
12. The Buena Vista Social Club, a group of veteran Cuban musicians, took its name from a 1940s members' club in Havana. Its 1997 album made traditional Cuban son famous around the world again.
13. Cuba has one of the oldest populations in Latin America, because of low birth rates and the emigration of many young people.
14. From 1915 until about 1960, one Cuban peso was worth exactly one US

dollar.

TALK ABOUT IT

Questions for the group

- Have you ever been to Cuba, or has someone in your family? What do you remember?
- Have you ever tasted Ropa vieja or Moros y cristianos? What is a dish you remember from a trip?
- The Cuban Missile Crisis (1962). Do you remember hearing about it? Where were you then?
- The Special Period begins (1991). Do you remember hearing about it? Where were you then?
- Have you seen Old Havana, in person or in pictures? Which famous place would you most like to see?
- If you could spend one day in any city of Cuba, which would it be and why?

QUIZ

How well do you know Cuba?

Circle the right answer. The answers are on the last page.

1. Alejandro de Humboldt National Park is named after a scientist from which country?

- A) Germany
- B) Spain
- C) France
- D) Sweden

2. Which fortress guards the entrance to Havana harbour?

- A) Che Guevara Mausoleum
- B) Basilica of El Cobre
- C) Castillo de los Tres Reyes del Morro
- D) Castillo de San Pedro de la Roca

3. As of 2026, how many places in Cuba are on UNESCO's World Heritage List?

- A) 17
- B) 5
- C) 13
- D) 9

4. Snow has been officially recorded on Pico Turquino, the highest mountain in Cuba.

- A) True
- B) False

5. The hurricane season in Cuba runs from June to November.

- A) True
- B) False

6. The American warship USS Maine exploded and sank in Havana harbour in February 1898.

- A) True

B) False

7. Which city is called the 'City of Bridges' and the 'Athens of Cuba'?

- A) Matanzas
- B) Baracoa
- C) Camagüey
- D) Santa Clara

8. What is Cuba's second-largest city?

- A) Trinidad
- B) Camagüey
- C) Santa Clara
- D) Santiago de Cuba

9. Which sport is the most popular in Cuba?

- A) Boxing
- B) Basketball
- C) Football (soccer)
- D) Baseball

10. Tostones, a favourite Cuban side dish, are made from which ingredient?

- A) Sweet potatoes
- B) Ripe mangoes
- C) Green plantains
- D) Corn dough

11. In Cuba, what is a 'guagua'?

- A) A market stall
- B) A bus
- C) A bicycle
- D) A cigar

12. Isla de la Juventud, Cuba's second-largest island, was known until 1978 by which name?

- A) Isla Mujeres
- B) Isle of Pines
- C) Cayman Brac
- D) Hispaniola

Quiz answers

1. A) Germany

Germany. The park is named after the German scientist Alexander von Humboldt, who visited Cuba in 1800 and 1801.

2. C) Castillo de los Tres Reyes del Morro

The Castillo de los Tres Reyes del Morro, begun in 1589, stands across the harbour mouth from Old Havana. San Pedro de la Roca guards Santiago Bay, El Cobre is a church and the mausoleum is in Santa Clara.

3. D) 9

As of 2026 Cuba has 9 World Heritage Sites, including Old Havana, Trinidad and the Valle de los Ingenios, the Viñales Valley and Alejandro de Humboldt National Park.

4. True

True. Pico Turquino is the only place in Cuba where snowfall has been officially recorded. It last fell in February 1900.

5. True

True. Hurricanes can strike from June to November, bringing floods and cutting power, water and flights.

6. True

True. The Maine sank on 15 February 1898. The cause is still debated, but the event helped lead to the Spanish–American War that April.

7. A) Matanzas

Matanzas has seventeen bridges over three rivers, and its poets earned it the name Athens of Cuba.

8. D) Santiago de Cuba

Santiago de Cuba is the second-largest city after Havana. Camagüey is third, Santa Clara fifth, and Trinidad is a small colonial town.

9. D) Baseball

Baseball is Cuba's most popular sport, followed by football. It has been the most played sport on the island since the 1870s.

10. C) Green plantains

Tostones are slices of green plantains, fried, flattened and fried again until crisp. In Cuba they are also called chatinos or tachinos.

11. B) A bus

In Cuba a guagua is a bus. The word came from the Canary Islands and is said to imitate the sound of a horn.

12. B) Isle of Pines

It was called the Isle of Pines (Isla de Pinos) until 1978. Hispaniola, Isla Mujeres and Cayman Brac are islands belonging to other countries.

Cuba visa page

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