

Cuba Nature & Culture: A People-to-People Tour With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures



March 1 – 10, 2018

866.900.1146

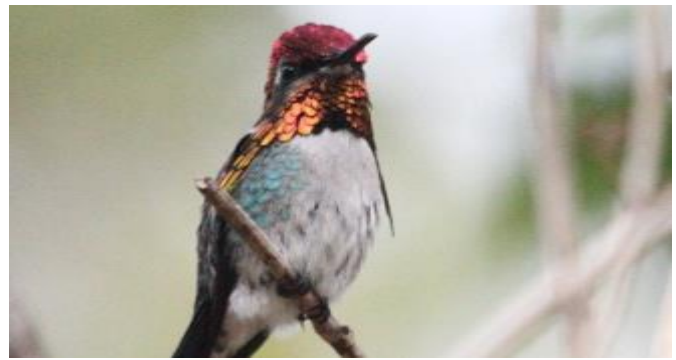
800.426.7781

520.558.1146

naturalistjourneys@gmail.com

www.naturalistjourneys.com

or find us on Facebook at
Naturalist Journeys, LLC.



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We are thrilled to feature two of our most popular leaders, Carol Simon and Howard Topoff, on this Cuba People-to-People tour. Explore Cuba with local experts and this dynamic duo on a people-to-people adventure that features Cuba's vibrant cultural life and its abundant natural history. Our Cuban guide shares history and Cuban culture, while Carol and Howard lend their special insights into animal behavior and Caribbean ecology as we travel through stunning geography, making a wide loop through rural regions before ending with time in Havana. Learn as you travel by making connections with the Cuban people – biologists, artists, dancers, teachers, and more.

Discover the countryside and historic sections of Cienfuegos, Trinidad, and Havana. Explore the Zapata wetlands, Viñales Valley, Sierra de Escambray, and Bay of Pigs. Meet locals, their families, and friends in villages. Learn first-hand how Cubans look to their future, and how they interpret their past.

Explore a wonderful variety of habitats, from tropical and montane forests to mangroves that support 28 endemic birds, plus a number of regional Caribbean specialties. This is a legal people-to-people program conducted with our permitted partner, International Expeditions.



Tour Highlights

- Learn about Cuban biology as you travel with two popular biologists, Carol Simon and Howard Topoff
- Explore Cienfuegos and Trinidad, both UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and mingle with local artisans and musicians
- Walk a trail at Topes de Collantes National Park with a local naturalist with a focus on tropical botany, keeping our eyes peeled for lizards, butterflies, and birds like Cuban Bullfinch and Cuban Trogon
- Hike with a local farmer in search of the diminutive Bee Hummingbird near the Bay of Pigs
- Learn about Cuba's exciting Korimakao Project, home to Cuba's finest musicians, dancers, and artists who travel around the country
- Visit Hemingway's home, Finca Vigia, preserved to look as it did when he left in 1960
- Drive through the scenic Vinales Valley before enjoying lunch with a local family on their organic farm
- Walk the lush orchid gardens of Soroa with staff from the University of Pinar del Rio, also a birding hotspot
- Spend a full day exploring Old and New Havana

Tour Summary

10-Day / 9-Night Cuban People to People Tour with Carol Simon & Howard Topoff

\$5290 from Miami

Airport is Miami International (MIA)

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Thurs., March 1 Arrive in Miami /

Our Cuba people-to-people travel program begins in Miami with an overnight. We stay in a modern motel with a complimentary shuttle. The hotel has a small restaurant and bar, we do not coordinate dinner this night as flights come in throughout the day and some may eat while in travel.

Accommodations at the Cambria Suites Blue Lagoon, Miami

Fri., March 2 Miami / Cienfuegos

This morning, at a breakfast brunch, we will meet up with a representative of International Expeditions, and the Cuban visa-issuing company that helps us complete final paperwork visa. Following the paperwork completion, Carol and Howard will give an introduction to Cuba's ecological significance in the Caribbean. You will have some free time then, before we take a commercial American Airlines flight to Cuba as a group, times to be announced, of late these have all been afternoon departures.

We fly into Cienfuegos and should arrive in time for a chance to see the historic city center, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Walking through the city makes for a captivating experience, with colonial buildings such as the Tomas Terry Theater.

This evening we enjoy a performance by either the Cienfuegos choir, with a chance afterwards to meet the musicians and talk to them about their training and productions.

Overnight in Cienfuegos (B,L,D)

Sat., March 3 World Heritage Sites: The Sugar Mills Valley & Trinidad

This morning we leave after breakfast to drive through the spectacular Valle De Los Ingenios — Valley of the Sugar Mills — a UNESCO Cultural Heritage Site where we see the ruined hulls of 19th Century sugar estates. During the 19th Century there were more than 40 sugar mills with elaborate estate houses here, but now most are in ruins. This is one of the most scenic locations in Trinidad, replete with natural wonders, too. Chat with villagers in Manaca Iznaga while enjoying a glass of cold mango juice.

Continue on to Trinidad, an architectural jewel proclaimed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Red tiled roofs atop pastel stucco structures line the cobbled streets. This city reflects its 16th-century past and founding by Conquistadors. Eighteenth century smugglers and pirates made frequent calls here and



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even used this port as their base of operations in the Caribbean. The wealth and importance of Trinidad continued into the 19th century, when sugar barons reigned. Experience the community and have a chance to see artist studios, visit with shop owners, and sampling local ice cream as we walk through the colonial heart of the city.

There are also Curly-tailed Lizards making their homes in rock staircases of the lovely buildings. Carol is a lizard specialist and is happy to tell you all about the lives of these creatures.

From Trinidad we continue to the Topes de Collantes for our lodgings for the night. In the late afternoon we stop at a Mirador (scenic overlook) along the winding mountain road to take in the view of all we have seen this day. *Spend two nights at Hotel Los Helechos or similar. (B,L,D)*



Sun., March 4 Topes de Collantes / Trinidad

Enjoy a spectacular morning in the Sierra de Escambray Mountains, once a stronghold of the revolution, at Topes de Collantes National Park, one of the best places to enjoy Cuba's natural beauty. Wet winds coming off the Atlantic make the north face of the mountains a refuge for plants and animals.

Today on a hike we should see a good variety, including Cuban Tody and Cuban Trogon, the national bird.

We should have a chance to see a variety of species with our expert local guide, who shares natural history highlights of this agricultural forest, a mix of native and introduced species. The loop trail we wander ends at historic homes of the region, and a small museum dedicated to coffee, along with rum, one of Cuba's main exports. After learning the history of Cuban coffee, relax over a cup while chatting with your local guide about conservation (nature and culture) efforts in the region.

After lunch at a viewpoint in the park, we visit a modern art museum, seeing pieces by important artists. This small museum holds some fantastic pieces, introducing you to artists yet unknown to American audiences. *(B,L,D)*

Mon., March 5 Zapata Wetlands / Bay of Pigs

The Zapata Peninsula encompasses a national park protecting Cuba's most important wetland area. It is also a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, closely resembling the Florida Everglades. There are 900 species of flora, 171 species of birds (18 endemics), 31 species of reptiles including the Cuban Crocodile, and several mammal species calling the Zapata Wetlands home.

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Join Orlando Ramirez, a local farmer, to search for the world's smallest bird, the Bee Hummingbird, and a type of woodpecker, Fernandina's Flicker, an endemic species that is a specialty of palm savannas. Land Crabs are prolific here, moving between the woodland and coast according to their breeding cycle. Reefs occur just offshore, evidenced by turquoise waters. At the Bay of Pigs, discuss the importance of the wetlands with a local environmentalist. Enjoy dinner at a festive local paladar. *Accommodations Hotel Playa Larga or similar (B,L,D)*

Tues., March 6

Bay of Pigs / Playa Larga / Soroa



Greet the day on the Bay of Pig's tidal shore, looking at tide pool life, or birds such as Yellow-crowned Night Heron and Black-necked Stilt. Others may want to enjoy a swim. After breakfast, we visit the nearby Korimakao Project which houses some of Cuba's finest musicians and artists, who refine their skills before traveling to remote villages to perform and teach. If they not travelling, we enjoy a practice session or demonstration by an artist. If you wish to bring art, music, and/or dance supplies, we can give them to the director.



We then set out toward the western part of Cuba, traveling to Pinar del Rio Province. We stop at a facility where Cuban Crocodiles are being raised, and where Hutia (native mammals) are on display. After a break here, we continue on to lunch at a locally owned paladar, IL Divino. Chat about the "new" Cuban economy with the entrepreneurs operating this small, private restaurant. After lunch, stretch your legs in the garden, which uses sustainable agriculture to supply the restaurant. This is also a place where senior citizens can spend the day if their working children need an assist.

We then pay homage to Ernest Hemingway while discussing his work with Cuban Hemingway specialists at his former home, Finca Vigia, preserved as it was on the day of his death. Travelers can only peer through the open windows of this museum, but the inside is arranged almost as if the home were waiting for him to return with guests. Hemingway's fishing boat, *El Pilar*, is still on the grounds. From his porch, all of Havana is in view.



From here we turn west before our own visit to Havana, for a few days in the mountains and scenic valleys. A modern road heads that way, still mainly traversed by historic autos, and other than our buses, horse and ox carts.

Spend two nights at Villa Soroa or similar (B,L,D)

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Wed., March 7 Soroa & Viñales

After breakfast, we wind our way through the Sierra de los Organos Mountains to Viñales. In Viñales you find a dramatic landscape; experiencing the commitment of local people to traditional farming methods is impressive. Sample the homegrown vegetables grown at an organic farm while meeting the family who is responsible for the land. Enjoy a boating excursion into one of the huge limestone caves running through a mogote — limestone karst outcroppings. Lush forest cloaks the features, habitat for frogs, the endemic Cuban Solitaire, the elegant Cuban Trogon and more.

Walk around the square of this picturesque town, for a chance to talk with artists, shop tenders, or the owner of an historic American car.

Finally, en route back to our hotel, stop at a tobacco farm to learn about the processes and history of Cuban cigars. You have the chance to sample a famed cigar and sip a cup of Cuban coffee if you wish. And you can purchase cigars while in Cuba if you wish, now legal to bring home.

Accommodations at Villa Soroa or similar (B,L,D)

Thurs., March 8 Soroa / Las Terrazas / Havana

This morning we meet with a local plant specialist to survey an orchid garden with staff from the University of Pinar del Rio. The garden is extensive, with well-maintained trails to help you explore. In addition to orchids you see many native plants and trees. At the top of the garden is an impressive lookout where you can meet a local musician and take in the views.



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From here, we drive towards Havana, stopping in the planned community of Las Terrazas, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve with just 1,000 residents that was founded on a green ethic. The self-contained community is surrounded by foliage thick with indigenous species, including hibiscus, teak, and ebony trees that were part of a reforestation project.

Here we meet local naturalists, business owners and farmers, and we have a chance to visit the local school. We are sure Howard will have you ready with a song to sing back to the kids after they perform one for you! Stop at Café de Maria for a cup of locally grown coffee and chat with the family who runs the business.



Then, it's off to Havana! There is so much to see here, and our local guides are able to take us to different areas of the city, navigating with ease. Take a ride in an old Cuban car along the oceanfront Malecon Avenue where Cubans like to gather, and stop to see the monuments of Revolution Square.

Spend two nights at the Parque Central or similar (B,L,D)

Fri., March 9 Havana

Havana is the center of all things Cuban, and as we stroll these streets it is like being on a movie set. Classic American cars from the 1940s and 1950s cruise wide boulevards while paint peels from glorious Spanish colonial buildings.



Stroll cobblestone streets through the atmospheric squares of Old Havana, taking in fading colonial architecture, antique American cars and the pervasive music and festive atmosphere. Along the way, call on the historic haunts of Hemingway as well as chat with locals at outdoor markets. Interact with the locals as we explore an art market. At Habana Compass Dance, a private school of dance, we attend rehearsals and meet the director. Dining is half the fun, a great way to experience the vibrant life of the city as we sample local restaurants, including a special final dinner to celebrate our journey.

Accommodations in Havana (B,L,D)

Sat., March 10 Departures

Transfer to the Jose Marti Airport for our charter flight to Miami, where you connect with flights home after 8:00 PM (B)

Please Note

Naturalist Journeys, in association with International Expedition's people-to-people program, itinerary and/or specific hotel accommodations may vary depending on license regulations or other local conditions. Remember, we are not traveling to a typical



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"tourist" destination and must plan to be flexible. Our hotels will range from basic to comfortable and you will enjoy a truly engaging experience. People-to-people legal travel does not allow for time to explore independently.

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Naturalist Journeys, committed to conservation, pays 100% of the Carbon offset for your flights.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the journey is \$5290 per person, double occupancy, single occupancy \$5995. Plus round-trip air from Miami to Havana, approximately \$400 and your Visa fee, approximately \$90. This legal People to People group is limited to 16 persons.

To join this journey, participants must apply (please request special Cuba application form from Naturalist Journeys), and once your application is accepted as part of the Cuba people-to-people program we can confirm you. Two forms must be completed and will be sent upon request, one is your Visa form. Please send the registration form to Naturalist Journeys/Caligo Ventures, with your deposit of \$600.00 made out to Naturalist Journeys (send a check or phone with credit card information).

Travel to Cuba requires flexibility. Although our program logistics are requested over a year in advance, activities and accommodations can change at the last minute due to government oversight or hotel management. The right mindset ahead of time will help ensure your enjoyment. Remember, Cuba is not up to U.S. standards on many things such as quality of hotels, food, etc. In due time these things will improve, but until such time your expectations should be in line with current Cuban policy, standards, etc.

*Fares subject to change.

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Photo Credits

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