

Cuba Nature & Culture

With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures



March. 9 – 17, 2021

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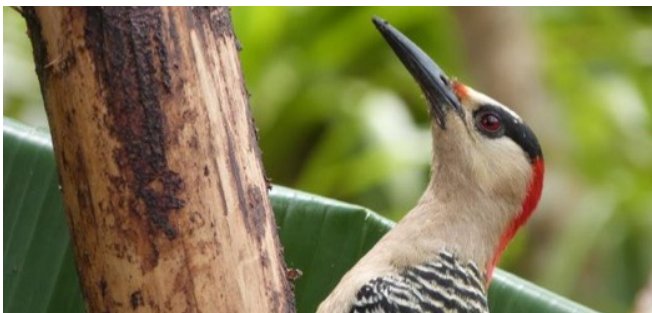
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Tour Summary

9-Day / 8-Night Cuban Culture & Birding Tour
\$4490 from Havana
Airport is José Martí International (HAV)

Tour Highlights

- 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 some of Cuba's finest musicians, dancers, and artists who travel the country staging shows for rural residents
- Visit Hemingway's home, Finca Vigía, preserved to look as it did when he left in 1960
- Drive through the scenic Viñales Valley and perhaps visit an organic farm while searching for endemics
- Walk the lush orchid gardens of Soroa with staff from the University of Pinar del Rio, famous for orchids and a birding hotspot
- Spend a full day exploring Old and New Havana

Explore with Naturalist Journeys on a Cuban nature and cultural tour, our popular adventure run each year in partnership with International Expeditions. We get rave reviews on this experience! Along with some meaningful and varied cultural experiences, this Cuba tour also has a focus on the fascinating birds and nature of this scenic island nation. There is stunning geography to view as we make a wide loop through rural regions before spending time in Havana. Meet Cuban ornithologists, biologists, artists, dancers, teachers, and more.

Discover the countryside and historic sections of Havana. Explore the Zapata wetlands, Viñales Valley's rugged limestone mogotes, Soroa, and Bay of Pigs. Meet locals, farmers and their families, and friends in different parts of the country. 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 25+/- endemic bird species, plus a number of regional Caribbean specialties. This is a legal U.S. government-licensed tour and an opportunity to participate in educational travel.

Itinerary

Tues., Mar. 9 Welcome to Cuba | Drive to Playa Larga on the Southern Coast

Our tour starts in Havana, one of the world's most vibrant cities. Today we just gather to head out into the countryside, but we return for city time at the end of our stay.

Upon arrival you go through immigration, pick up your luggage, and then pass through customs. Your guide, or a representative from our Cuban non-profit organization partner, is standing in the center of the greeting area, holding a clearly marked sign with "Naturalist Journeys" on it. We can suggest several flights for the tour start



date from different gateway cities. We do have a 2.5 hour drive to our first night's hotel in Playa Larga, so you may wish to arrive a day early; please contact us for details.

After you connect with your guide and everyone has assembled, we enjoy a short ride along the Cuban National Autopista, taking in the citrus groves, sugar cane fields, and rangeland with cattle dotting the landscape on our way to Playa Larga and the Bay of Pigs. We then check in to our lodging for the next three nights and take time to settle in. Enjoy refreshments upon arrival.

Tonight enjoy a traditional Cuban welcome dinner at Enrique's, where a national park guide and wildlife specialist discusses the area of Cuba you are visiting and what you are likely to see tomorrow.

Accommodations in Playa Larga (D)

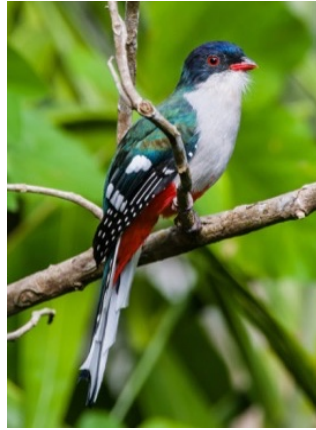
Wed., Mar. 10 Zapata Swamp National Park

After an early breakfast, we join our local guides at the nearby ranger station to explore the Zapata Swamp National Park. This pristine ecological area hosts 22 of the 26 endemic bird species of Cuba! This region was declared a biosphere reserve in 2000 and a Ramsar site in 2001. It covers an area of 628,171 hectares and is the largest and best-conserved wetland in Cuba and the Caribbean.

Depending on the weather and where the birds are, we likely start with a visit to the Salinas area of the park where wetland birds and American Flamingo abound in the expansive tidal salt flats. Returning inland, we can walk a trail through a rural area at Soplillar with the guide and likely find Fernandina's Flickers, a host of wintering warblers, and other species amongst the open country dotted by palms, pines and some deciduous trees.

The later-afternoon, after a local lunch, gives us time to enjoy a beach walk, explore the rocky reefs, or discover Cuban wildlife close to our hotel.

Accommodations in Playa Larga (B,L,D)



Thurs., Mar. 11 Zapata Swamp National Park | Marsh Birding | Korimakao Cultural Site | Optional Snorkeling

This morning we depart early with a boxed breakfast, heading to marsh habitats at another area within Zapata National Park, La Turba, where we hope to see some of the rarer Cuban specialty birds: Zapata Wren, Zapata Sparrow, and Red-shouldered Blackbird on a great adventure.

Late morning we visit the Korimako Dance troop to learn more about this fascinating community project lead by the Cuban actor Manuel Porto. Porto married a local woman and chose to call this home; for more than two decades he has taught various artistic skills to the indigenous people of the Zapata Swampland.

In the same village we get our first chance to spot a Zun-Zun. Join Orlando Ramirez, a local farmer, for a walk to find and observe the Zun-Zun, the Cuban Bee Hummingbird, which is the smallest bird in the world. Orlando has a couple of endemic flowering shrubs in his back garden that attract this species.

Later we take a short drive and skirt the shoreline to the “Fish Cave,” a cenote, and discover some of Cuba’s aquatic resources. You can rent snorkeling/scuba gear here and discover the cenote or the coral reef just across the road. Be sure to bring some water shoes; the rocks can be a bit sharp at the cenote.

Afterwards we return to our lodging for time at leisure before dinner and to prepare for tomorrow’s departure.
Accommodations in Playa Larga (B,L,D)

Fri., Mar. 12 Morning Birding at Bermijas | Playa Giron’s Bay of Pigs Museum | Scenic Drive to the Western Mountains at Soroa



We then check in to our new lodging for the next couple nights and enjoy refreshments upon arrival.

After settling in, we take a scenic drive to the apex of the tallest mountain in Soroa's Cordillera de Guaniguanico overlooking the central Artemisa Valley toward the south and the Soroa valley towards the north for a welcome dinner. Enjoy this secluded vista while chatting with some of our guides as we discuss tomorrow's activities.
Accommodations at Soroa (B,L,D)

Sat., Mar. 13 La Guira National Park | Las Terrazas | Soroa Orchid Garden

This morning, we depart early for La Guira National Park, famous for a cave that sheltered Che Guevara during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. In addition to historic significance, the park is just a lovely place to bird among forested limestone mogotes. Listen for the haunting calls of Cuban Solitaire as we look for Great Lizard Cuckoo, Cuban Vireo, mixed flocks of wintering warblers, Scaley-naped Pigeon, and more.

From here, we travel to Las Terrazas to enjoy lunch and explore Cuba's earliest coffee plantation. The Las Terrazas area is also a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve which came into being after a 1968 reforestation project. Additionally, the beautiful whitewashed village on the lake is home to many local artists, potters, and wood carvers. Our last visit yielded a very tame pair of Cuban Trogons—nice! Nearby a local farmer has done an excellent job protecting Cuban Grassquit in a wooded area with openings and we hope to spy this shy bird here.

We return to Soroa in the afternoon when cooler temperatures let us have an enjoyable walk at the Soroa Orchid Gardens, one of the finest botanical gardens in the Caribbean. Here the temperature, humidity, and protection of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve have created a 35,000 square meter "Garden of Eden" with over 20,000 different plants and 700 species of exotic orchids. Learn of how these plants flourish and how the gardens came about.

Dinner is enjoyed close to our accommodations.
Accommodations at Soroa (B,L,D)

Sun., Mar. 14 Viñales Valley & Havana

Today we venture further west into the countryside of Pinar del Rio, Cuba's western most province, with its breathtaking landscapes and the best tobacco growing areas in the world. We drive along the national autopista to the town of Viñales, a little over one-hour drive.

In store for us today is the beautiful Viñales Valley, with its the rugged mogotes and limestone karst outcroppings with caves and rivers running through, but first we take in the views from Los Jazmines lookout. The mogotes, the red soil, and the lush vegetation in perfect harmony create a magical landscape that images



fail to replicate. Several key bird species occur here in patches of pine forest, and on the limestone cliffs of the mogotes we often find Cuban Solitaire.

The Viñales Valley has been recently named as one of the 10 most breathtaking landscapes by Lonely Planet. A visit to a tobacco farm is a must to learn about the cigar making process from where it begins. The tobacco plants are in its full splendor and the farmer proudly shows us his farm and tells us about the intricacies of growing tobacco in Cuba and selling it to the only authorized buyer: the Cuban government. But first we stop in the very picturesque town of Viñales for lunch and have a chance to wander and mingle, shop, and dine at your own leisure. Your guide is on hand for interpretation or questions. Choose one of the numerous outdoor cafés that line the main avenue.

After lunch, visit a private botanical garden in Viñales that has been lovingly protected by three generations of family members. Nearby, stop at a CUC store and a bodega, which is a ration book store where locals buy subsidized goods in Cuban pesos. This is a good opportunity to understand the contrast between the two currencies and the products you can buy with each.

Mid-afternoon, we drive on to Havana. As we enter, you start to see some interesting vantage points of this 500-year-old city.

Tonight, dinner is at the iconic La Guarida Paladar (which by regulation will be at your own expense). Located in a former sugar baron's home in Central Havana, this paladar is one of the oldest and most known to the outside world and where the Oscar-nominated Cuban movie *Strawberry and Chocolate* was filmed. The chefs here are considered the fathers of "nouveau Cuban cuisine," preparing dishes such as tuna glazed with coconut, and suckling pig in a honey and orange sauce to absolute perfection. We try to arrive early to venture to the top floor bar for some interesting city scape shots. If you are tired and wish to opt out, there are simpler restaurants close to our lodgings.

Accommodations in Havana (B)

Mon., Mar. 15 Exploring Havana

Havana turns 500 years old in 2019. The rich story of the city is best understood through the countless architectural styles on display in the four main squares of Old Havana. We begin our walking tour of Old Havana in Plaza Vieja. Next, we take a very short walk through Plaza Vieja and along the meandering streets toward the Plaza de San Francisco. Afterwards, in Plaza de San Francisco, we stop to pay respects to the bronze statue of El Caballero de Paris (The Gentleman from Paris) and learn the interesting story of why he was immortalized.



From here, a short walk yields Plaza de Armas, Havana's oldest square. This is the location where Havana was founded and from the City Museum (the former Captain General's residence) to the street vendors trading authentic books and memorabilia that commemorate the Revolution; Plaza de Armas is one of Havana's greatest treasures.

Today lunch is at another favorite in Old Havana, El Del Frente Restaurant, the younger sister venue of the popular restaurant O'Reilly 304 (named after its address, as used to be the case for many paladars), which lies just across the street. Inside on the second floor there are quaint floor tiles, graffiti art, and sweet-smelling flowers while the roof top outdoor area steals the show: its views of Havana's historic architecture are simply too stunning to be missed ... but it really depends on how hot it is today. El Del Frente has amazing ceviche, tuna tataki, and other Cuban-International fusion foods that are really delicious. Its starters and unique blends of juice and cocktails are most of our guests' favorites. This lunch is at your own expense.

Our next destination is Plaza de la Catedral, the fourth of Havana's wonderful squares. The picturesque plaza usually provides an opportunity to snap a photo with local Habaneros dressed in traditional costumes.

Later this afternoon enjoy a photo tour "cruisin' the town in a classic convertible as we stop for pictures and have a look at Habaneros going about daily life. This marvelously preserved automobile from the 1950s winds its way past the recently renovated Capitol Building, the Grand Theater, and Central Park along Paseo Prado (the wide avenue separating Old Havana from Centro Havana) and continue along the Malecon by the reopened U.S. Embassy and on our way to Miramar (where the wealthy once lived during Havana's heyday).

Next, venture through Vedado neighborhood and stop at Revolution Square to see the spaces that were filled with crowds to hear speeches by Fidel and the Pope. Our ride ends at the Hotel Nacional, which sits above the sea with its enormous Cuban flag flying sentry over the property.



The Nacional's beautiful lobby has welcomed statesmen, royals and VIPs for over 85 years and many times mistresses and lovers accompanied the well-to-do, adding scandal and intrigue to the hotel's legacy. Stop to visit the famed Hall of History and tour the hotel's beautiful lobby on the way to the gardens outside where you enjoy refreshments and take in the stunning views from the terraces overlooking the sea and Havana's seaside avenue (the Malecon). Visiting Hotel Nacional lends tremendous perspective into what Havana was like during the days of Lucky Luciano and Frank Sinatra.

We then return to our lodging for time to rest and freshen up before dinner—this one again, for permit purposes, is on your own. Choose to have dinner at one of the restaurants near our lodgings or select something you'd like to sample in Havana. We make it flexible tonight night for those that wish to join a performance.

Our night owls can opt to enjoy the original music of the worldwide famous Buena Vista Social Club, which begins at 9:30 PM. These seemingly ageless musicians exude an infectious energy as they recapture the mood of the 40s and 50s, when the real social club after which the acclaimed band was named, was a melting pot of musical styles and up-and-coming stars.

Meanwhile, salsa dancers can hit the dance floor to complete a quintessentially Cuban scene. While the bulk of the show includes relatively younger musicians, each performance has an original BVSC member (who are in their 90s!) singing or playing for you. We chose the location of the original club in old town Havana, but need to ticket ahead, so good to choose this option as you register as this optional visit must be arranged in advance. Tickets are \$65 USD and cover entrance, a drink, and transportation.

Accommodations in Havana (B)

Tues., Mar. 16 Havana | Hemingway's Home

This morning we discover the wealth and prominence of Cuba through its past. In the Vedado neighborhood we discover the El Cementerio de Cristóbal Colón. The stories the tombs here tell us of the vast wealth and power different Cuban families. Each family trying to outdo one another yields tremendous works of art by some of the world's most famous sculptors in imported Italian Carrara marble. It is a city within a city, encompassing about 125 acres.



From here we travel back to Old Havana for art discovery. A visit to Havana's Fine Arts Museum, Bellas Artes, is a must for those who want to learn about the country's past through the eyes of its artists. We visit the famous Cuban modern collection and enjoy works of art that display the stunning creativity of the island nation's vibrant art community.

Next we travel to the nearby eastern suburb of San Francisco de Paula, where we visit Ernest Hemingway's estate Finca Vigía. A local Hemingway guide leads us through Hemingway's life in Cuba and shares some interesting stories. It was at Finca Vigía that he wrote much of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The novel was started at the Hotel Ambos Mundos in Old Havana, and some of it was also written in Idaho. He would later buy the property out of some of the first royalties from the book, published in 1940.

We have lunch at El Divino in the Mantilla neighborhood today. Stroll through the outdoor garden, and visit the farmer's home after a memorable dining experience. As we get back from the suburbs to Havana proper, we visit to the Centro Cultural Antiguo Almacenes de Deposito San José, the central handicraft market in Old Havana. Located in a refurbished 1800s port side warehouse, this mecca of paintings and sculptures offers any type of Cuban-made handicraft you can imagine, including paintings, guayabera shirts, woodwork, leather items, jewelry, and numerous apparitions of the highly marketable El Che.

This evening is a special treat. Dinner tonight is at Habanera. This outside dining venue is highly sought after and Cuban inspired international cuisine is a tremendous hit amongst the Cuban elite. A small band and a professional salsa couple show us how to swing and groove. We learn how to make a mojito at the bar and savor dinner with a traditional Cuban Lechón Asado (roasted pig festivity). This unique experience has been featured on the late Anthony Bourdain's *No Reservations* program, as well as *Eat the World* with Emeril Lagasse. It is served with traditional Cuban accompaniments such as congrí rice, cassava with mojo, and salad.

For interesting conversation tonight at dinner, visit with former Cuban diplomat Ariel Ricardo. He served in Washington as Cuba's official spokesperson in the late 80s and early 90s. He and your guides are open to any and all questions.

Accommodations in Havana (B,L,D)

Wed., Mar. 17 Departures

Sadly, all good things must come to an end. After breakfast, you are transferred to the airport for your return

flight. Note all international flights require a 3-hour pre-departure check-in. Make certain you have your visa you retained during arrival ready for Cuban Customs prior to departing your accommodations. (B)



Guide Dave Mehlman

Dave is a naturalist with interests in birds, migration, ecosystems and natural disturbances, plants, and gardening. He holds a PhD from the University of New Mexico. Dave worked for The Nature Conservancy for 25+ years as Director of its Migratory Bird Program. He has researched in Latin America and the Caribbean. An avid birder, Dave enjoys teaching about natural habitats and local cultures. He has published papers in scientific and popular journals.

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. A handy link for travel insurance is in the footer of each of our emails. As of January 2017 Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Travel Information

Plan to arrive at the José Martí International Airport (HAV) in Havana airport no later than 12:00 PM on March 9. Please plan your departure flights after 12:00 PM on March 17.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the journey is \$4490 DBL / \$4990 SGL per person, based on double occupancy from Havana. Cost includes 8 nights' accommodation, meals as noted in the itinerary (B,L,D), guides, transfers and park entry fees, You can opt to include tips in your invoice, too, and estimated \$300 per person. Please let us know. As in years past, the group is limited to 16 persons.

Cost excludes airfare to and from your home city to Havana, meals not mentioned in the itinerary, tips (though you can opt to include them—let us know), other expenses of a personal nature, and your Cuban tourist visa, approximately \$50 with your air ticket).

To join this journey, participants must apply (please request special application form by email), and once their application is accepted as part of the Cuba travel 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 (send a check made out to Naturalist Journeys or phone with credit card information).

Important Travel 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 helps to ensure your enjoyment. Remember, Cuba is not up to U.S. standards on many things, including 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.

This Cuba cultural and nature tour itinerary follows the guidelines set forth by the United States Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control to engage, organize, and conduct Support for the Cuban People travel to Cuba.

For years, legal travel to Cuba has been almost impossible for Americans, making this island of salsa, Colonial architecture, and Caribbean beauty a forbidden fruit for the adventurous. Regulations for travel to Cuba are evolving. Currently anyone traveling to Cuba must meet one of 12 stringent criteria (that does not include birdwatching) or adhere to an educational, Support for the Cuban People program. Your tour falls under the latter. The Cuban companies that manage travel for U.S. companies currently require that all members participate in all activities as a group. International Expeditions, our partner for this tour, has a general license by the U.S. Department of Treasury to provide Support for the Cuban People travel for U.S. citizens.

Due to permit requirements, special registration forms that include your Visa need to be completed, please request them from our office. Space on these tours is very competitive; it is important to apply as soon as you know you want to go. The Naturalist Journeys office can accept your application by fax, email scan, or mail. Prices should stay firm, but if Cuban authorities announce changes, our partner, International Expeditions, reserves that if there is an unexpected jump in price above 5%, you will have the option to forego travel if you so choose or that fee would be added. This has not happened to date, other than with the air travel portion of the journey.

**OFAC guidelines for travel under the General License to Cuba '31 CFR 515.574 - Support for the Cuban People'. (1) activities proposed are supported by IE and the Nunez Foundation that promote independent activity intended to strengthen civil society in Cuba; and (2) does not include free time or recreation in excess of that consistent with a full-time schedule.*

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