



## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Cuba is an archipelago of two main islands, Cuba and Isla de la Juventud (“Isle of Youth”), and about 1,600 keys and islets. With a total area of 42,803 square miles (110,860 square kilometers), Cuba is nearly as large as Pennsylvania. Cuba lies about 90 miles (145 kilometers) south of the United States. Low hills and fertile valleys cover more than half the country. Mountain ranges divide the country into western, central, and eastern regions. Pico Turquino, the highest mountain peak, rises to 8,320 feet (1,974 meters). Tropical forests in the east contrast with central prairies and western hills and valleys, where the royal palm is the dominant tree.

Cuba’s subtropical climate is warm and humid. The average annual temperature is 75°F (24°C). Cuba experiences a dry season from November to April and a hotter wet season from May to October. About two-thirds of all precipitation falls in this latter season, when hurricanes are also frequent.

**History.** Prior to the 1492 arrival of Christopher Columbus, Cuba was inhabited by three indigenous groups, the largest and most advanced being the Taíno. In 1511, a Spanish colony was firmly established; by 1535, the enslaved native population had been wiped out. Havana, founded in the early 1500s, became the capital and a gathering point for Spanish treasure fleets.

In 1762, Havana fell into British hands for a short period until it was returned to Spain in exchange for Florida the following year. Beginning in the 18th century, African slaves were brought to Cuba to work on plantations. In the 19th century, sugar production became the basis of the economy. Despite numerous rebellions, and unlike much of Latin America, Cuba remained in Spanish hands. The various uprisings culminated in the Ten Years’ War (1868–78), which ended

after the loss of 200,000 lives but did not bring independence to the island.

José Martí, Cuba’s national hero, led another revolt in 1895 but died early in the struggle. International protests over Spain’s treatment of Cuba led to U.S. involvement and the 1898 Spanish-American War. Cuba gained independence, but it was not official until the end of U.S. occupation in 1902. Other occupations (1906–9, 1912) were based on the Platt Amendment to Cuba’s constitution, which allowed U.S. intervention to maintain stability. In 1934, the United States canceled the amendment, receiving a 99-year lease on Guantánamo Bay—territory still held by the U.S. military.

U.S. investment was crucial to the Cuban economy through the 1950s, and sugar remained the chief export. In 1952, a military coup, led by Fulgencio Batista, established a dictatorship that increased corruption and turmoil. Popular opposition was organized into a rebel movement under the leadership of Fidel Castro. After a two-year guerrilla war, Castro overthrew Batista, who left the country in 1959.

Extensive economic and social change took place after the revolution. Agrarian reform, nationalization of industry and banking, creation of rural cooperatives, and other reforms were part of Castro’s socialist-oriented path of development. These measures clashed with U.S. interests, and Washington responded by breaking off relations and imposing a trade embargo that is still in effect.

Cuba enjoyed support from communist governments throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Economic growth was steady, and important advancements were made in education, public health, and social security. However, the dissolution of the socialist bloc in the early 1990s seriously harmed Cuba’s

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economy and standard of living. The government responded by promoting tourism, slowly building diplomatic relations with other countries, welcoming more international investment, and liberalizing some economic policies, though some of these economic reforms have been reversed in recent years. In July 2006, Castro temporarily stepped down from power for health reasons, resigning permanently in February 2008. His brother, Raúl Castro, took his place.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Cuba's population of nearly 11.4 million is growing annually at about 0.25 percent. Three-fourths of the people live in urban areas; Havana has more than 2 million residents. Cubans of white Spanish descent comprise about 37 percent of the population, while 11 percent is of African ancestry. Another 51 percent is of mixed heritage. The remaining 1 percent is of Asian origin. The Cuban culture is highly integrated because each ethnic group influences society in a variety of ways (such as through food, music, and architecture). Approximately one-fifth of all Cubans are younger than age 15. Nearly a million Cuban Americans live in Florida.

**Language.** Spanish is Cuba's official language. Slight accent and pronunciation differences exist among Cuba's three main regions. Many words, expressions, and idioms are unique to Cuban society and are not used in other Spanish-speaking countries. Some examples are *pelotear* (to pass the buck), *amarillo* (traffic official), and *pedir botella* (to ask for a ride, or to hitchhike). English is a required course in schools and is popular among people interested in the tourism industry (many tourists speak English even if they are not from an English-speaking country).

**Religion.** Largely because of its history of Communism, Cuba has been among the least religious of all Latin American countries. Society is highly secularized, and most people show no preference for organized religion. While nearly half of the people have been baptized in the Catholic Church, very few practice the religion. However, recent years have seen growth in most congregations and a revival of religious devotion. The change began with a 1991 amendment to a policy that had excluded persons with religious beliefs from the Communist Party. Economic struggles have also contributed to the renewed interest in religion. The pope's 1998 visit encouraged many young people to explore religious issues and improved communication between religious leaders and the government. However, Catholic administrators continue to face many governmental restrictions.

Tenets of Catholicism are often combined with ideas from African religions to form a belief system known as *Santería*. Cuba also hosts a number of Protestant churches, including the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. Spiritualism, emphasizing communication with the dead, and *brujería* (witchcraft) are practiced by small groups. To operate in Cuba, churches must register with the government and satisfy rules of association. The division between church and state is strictly maintained.

**General Attitudes.** Cubans are friendly, warm, communicative, enthusiastic, and hospitable. It is uncommon to meet a Cuban who is not outgoing and fond of festivals, music, and dancing. The Cuban sense of humor allows residents to joke about almost anything, even hardships. This does not mean that Cubans are shallow or cavalier, but that they generally face difficulties with a positive attitude. In hard times, they look to friends and family for support. While many Cubans

love their country, the difficulties of building a life in relative poverty breed complex emotions. Young people are increasingly confused by contradictions between what they are taught about their society and their daily experiences.

Despite troubles, Cubans are patriotic and value their national dignity. They are often impassioned in their opinions and will argue their convictions with energy. Men especially like to debate the economy, international politics, and baseball. Cubans have a casual view of time. Punctuality and schedules are not stressed. The joy of an event is considered more important than its duration.

**Personal Appearance.** Most people prefer lightweight, casual clothing. Cleanliness is important. Women of all ages wear slacks, jeans, short skirts, blouses, and canvas shoes or sandals. Dresses are worn at more formal events. Men wear long pants, jeans, and shirts or T-shirts in everyday situations. More formally, they may wear a *guayabera*, a traditional square-cut shirt. Shorts are popular in urban areas and at the beach, especially among younger people. Primary and secondary school students wear uniforms, as do students in medical colleges.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Men greet with a handshake and *¿Qué tal?* (How are you?). They often shake hands with everyone when entering a home or greeting a group. Most women kiss each other once on the cheek and offer a verbal greeting. Kissing on the cheek is also common between friends of the opposite sex, especially among younger people. Greetings between strangers are brief; friends spend a short time talking about their families or health.

Common verbal greetings include *Buenos días* (Good morning), *Buenas tardes* (Good afternoon), and *Buenas noches* (Good evening). *Adiós* (Good-bye) is also a typical greeting when people pass on the street. When parting, people may say *Hasta luego* (So long), *Chao* (Bye), or *Nos vemos* (See you). People usually address others by first name, or they may use a professional title without a surname. Strangers frequently use *Compañero/Compañera* (Comrade), *Señor* (Mr.), and *Señora* (Mrs.). Nicknames are common among friends, acquaintances, and coworkers.

**Gestures.** Cubans use hand gestures while talking to reinforce ideas and emotions, making conversation rather lively. A common adage says that a Cuban with his hands tied will be unable to talk. It is not considered rude to interrupt during conversation. Maintaining eye contact while talking is important, especially in formal situations. Lack of eye contact may communicate insincerity or spite. People stand close when talking, often touching or tapping each other when making a point. One beckons by waving fingers inward with the palm down. Beckoning people with the palm up is a hostile gesture.

**Visiting.** Cubans are extremely social, and visiting in the home is common. Friends also socialize on the street, while waiting in lines, and at gatherings in neighborhoods and work centers. Daytime visits are often unannounced but welcome. They may be long or short, without too much concern for schedules. Weekends and holidays are the most popular times to visit. Hosts usually offer guests something to drink, such as black coffee or a soft drink. Declining such offers is not impolite. If visitors arrive at mealtime, hosts politely offer to share the meal, but guests respectfully decline and leave.

When rural people visit urban friends, they may take a gift of food; urbanites visiting in rural areas may offer money to help pay expenses related to their stay. Cubans enjoy inviting

friends over for an evening meal or party. Such socializing is casual, and guests often bring small gifts of rum, wine, or food to be consumed during the evening. However, the practice of hosting friends has become less common because of evening energy blackouts and shortages of food and other supplies.

**Eating.** A light *desayuno* (breakfast) usually includes a cup of black coffee and bread with various topping and spreads. In the interest of health, many Cubans are making efforts to include fruits and cereals in their breakfasts. Most workers and students eat *almuerzo* (lunch) at work or school. The family gets together for *comida* (dinner), the most important meal. Table manners vary from home to home. Generally, however, diners keep hands above the table, and pleasant conversation accompanies meals. Hosts expect to offer guests second helpings, but guests may decline. Except for expensive restaurants operated out of private homes, all restaurants are state owned. Ordinary citizens rarely eat at restaurants because of the high prices. People do enjoy snacks sold by street vendors.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** Cubans maintain strong family ties. The nuclear family is standard, but many households include grandparents as well. Extended family members often build homes near one another to remain close. When adult children marry, they usually live with a parent until they can obtain housing, which is in short supply. Cuban women are active participants in the workforce. They represent the majority of the country's specialists and hold leading government and administrative posts. However, traditional values strongly influence family roles, so women are also responsible for most household chores and child care. Younger couples are beginning to share more responsibilities in the home. As in most Latin American countries, a person bears two family names. The last name is the mother's family name; the second-to-last name is the father's family name and the person's surname.

**Housing.** Because of shortages in construction materials, the country is able to build only half of the 100,000 new homes needed each year. The government strictly controls all property. Cubans are allowed to buy new houses from the government or exchange homes of similar sizes with each other, but the traditional buying and selling of homes is prohibited. The average family owns a small house or an apartment. Most houses are built from concrete blocks or bricks to withstand hurricanes. Homes in Havana or other major cities often share common walls, have two bedrooms, and a small patio. Houses located in city outskirts tend to have large gardens. In rural areas and coastal villages, houses are made of wood with asphalt or ceramic tile roofs. Some one-room houses are made from palm tree wood and leaves, with cement or mud floors.

All major utilities are available; however, electricity and water are rationed and rarely accessible all day. While about 85 percent of Cubans are homeowners, 40 percent of homes are in average or poor condition. A home that has undergone unauthorized modifications or is deemed too large for its occupants can be seized or its occupants fined. Because maintenance materials are scarce, most house exteriors have gone unpainted for years and repairs are difficult. Furniture is nearly impossible to replace and as a result tends to be old and shabby.

**Dating and Marriage.** Young people have many opportunities to socialize. Couples usually meet at school, parks, youth parties, dances, music festivals, beach outings, and movies. Most people marry in their twenties. A civil ceremony is held in an urban "wedding palace" and is followed by a small family

party. An increasing number of couples are also having church ceremonies. Common-law marriages are becoming more prevalent because of changes in social conventions and the high cost of weddings.

**Life Cycle.** During her pregnancy, a woman is given special treatment. When she delivers the baby, family and many friends come to see the newborn. Children often are given multiple names, which come from the names of the child's parents, grandparents, and good friends. However, these names are often replaced with a nickname in everyday conversation. Though most Cubans are Catholic in name only, baptism and the First Communion are still carried out. At 12, children tend to be given more responsibilities. At 18, they officially become adults and can serve in the military or get a job.

Upon a death, a viewing may be held in the family's living room. Funerals are well attended by family and friends, who may stay all night with the family of the deceased, visiting, telling stories, and drinking hot chocolate or coffee. The following day everyone attends a eulogy for the deceased held in the cemetery where the burial takes place.

**Diet.** The Cuban diet is based on foods grown locally. *Arroz y frijoles* (rice and beans) is the traditional staple meal. When made with red beans the combination is called *congris*; when it contains black beans it is known as *moros y cristianos*. Rice is served at most meals, along with a dish such as potatoes, *boniatos* (sweet potatoes), *yuca* (cassava), *plátanos* (plantains), or tomatoes. Eggs are eaten boiled, fried, or cooked as an omelette (called a *tortilla*). Corn is the basis of many foods, including *harina de maíz* (cornmeal).

Roast pork, currently a luxury, is the favorite meat and is eaten on special occasions. Seafood is eaten in coastal areas. Tilapia, a freshwater fish found in Cuba's numerous reservoirs, is also popular. Favorite tropical fruits—mangoes, avocados, guavas, oranges, lemons, pineapples, and papayas—are eaten in season. Sweets (often homemade) usually are eaten as desserts or snacks; ice cream is popular but is in short supply.

**Recreation.** Sports are highly developed in Cuba. The most popular sport is baseball. Boys begin playing in leagues by age seven. Adult, college, and professional competition is well organized. Boxing, basketball, swimming, volleyball, and cycling are widely enjoyed. Girls enjoy sports in school, but women usually do not play sports. Dominoes is a national pastime, played by males of all ages (especially the retired) in front of homes and practically everywhere else. Cubans dance at discos, go to music festivals or movies, watch videos or television, and converse with each other.

**The Arts.** Music and dance are essential to Cuban culture. The people's Spanish and African heritage creates unique rhythms and sounds. Cuban jazz and salsa have spread throughout the world. Maracas, guitars, bongos, trumpets, and the *tres* (a small instrument similar to a guitar) are used to play the *son*, a genre of music that gave birth to the mambo. The cha-cha, which originated in Cuba, and *bolero* are still popular dances.

In the past, art and literature were outlets for political commentary. Late-19th-century writer and revolutionary José Martí promoted independence from Spain in his works. Now the arts are largely controlled to prevent antigovernment sentiment. However, the number of independent libraries that contain previously censored books is on the rise.

**Holidays.** Liberation Day (1 Jan.) commemorates the revolution of 1958 and 1959; it is preceded by New Year's Eve (31 Dec.) festivities. Other holidays are Labor Day (1 May), Anniversary of the Attack on the Moncada Garrison in Santiago de

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Cuba in 1953 (26 July), and Beginning of the War of Independence from Spain (10 Oct.). Mother's Day (second Sunday in May) is also celebrated.

Generally, religious holidays are not officially recognized but may be celebrated with feasts and religious services. Christmas Day is an exception; it became a national holiday in 1998, after Pope John Paul II's visit to the island. Christians attend special services during the Christmas season, Holy Week, and Easter. A holiday may honor both Catholicism and *Santería*. For instance, St. Lazarus's Day (17 Dec.) honors both the Catholic saint and the African god Babalú Ayé. A chapel near Havana dedicated to St. Lazarus and Babalú Ayé draws tens of thousands of pilgrims annually. St. Barbara's Day (4 Dec.) venerates a Catholic martyr and the African goddess Changó. And *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* (8 Sept.) honors Cuba's patron saint and the African goddess Ochún.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** Cuba is a socialist state, and its constitution regards the Communist Party as the leading force of society. The country has 14 provinces and 1 special municipality (Isle of Youth). Legislative authority is vested in the National Assembly of People's Power. Special commissions nominate approved candidates to run for the Assembly, which has 614 seats. Opposition parties are illegal. The National Assembly elects from its membership the Council of State as the sitting legislature. Cuba's president (currently Raúl Castro) is both chief of state and head of government. Executive authority is vested in the Council of Ministers, whose members are appointed by the National Assembly upon the proposal of the chief of state. Municipal and provincial assemblies deal with local affairs. The voting age is 16.

**Economy.** After trade links with the Soviet bloc dissolved in the early 1990s, declining living standards and a large wave of attempted emigration led the Cuban government to liberalize some economic policies. It opened free markets for produce and crafts; promoted some self-employment; reorganized some state enterprises; granted 2.6 million hectares of state land to farming cooperatives; increased soybean production to boost protein consumption; and established joint ventures with foreign firms in tourism, mining, communications, and construction. Mexico and Canada are Cuba's most important trading partners. Economic growth has been modest, hampered by natural disasters, the global economic downturn, and the continued U.S. embargo on goods.

Agriculture employs about 20 percent of the labor force. The main crops are sugarcane, tobacco, coffee, rice, grain, vegetables, and citrus fruits. Exports include sugar, nickel, tobacco, cement, and fruit. Tourism is eclipsing sugar production as the largest source of revenue. The labor force is mostly skilled: three-fourths of all workers have a secondary or higher education. However, people lack opportunities and resources to fully achieve personal goals. Cubans cannot employ other Cubans in private businesses. The official currency is the Cuban *peso* (CUP) and the *convertible peso* (CUC). Until 2004, the U.S. dollar was not only legal but also the preferred currency for most Cubans. The U.S. government still prohibits all but Cuban Americans from sending dollars to Cuba. Remittances from Cuban Americans allow about half of all Cubans to access goods not otherwise available.

### POPULATION & AREA

Population ..... 11,394,043 (rank=73)  
Area, sq. mi. .... 42,803 (rank=103)  
Area, sq. km. .... 110,860

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index\* rank ..... 51 of 177 countries  
Adjusted for women ..... 49 of 156 countries  
Real GDP per capita ..... \$6,000  
Adult literacy rate ..... 99% (male); 99% (female)  
Infant mortality rate ..... 6 per 1,000 births  
Life expectancy ..... 76 (male); 80 (female)

**Transportation and Communications.** In cities, people travel by bicycle or on crowded buses. Taxis are scarcely used. In the countryside, horse-drawn carts are widely used. Trains and buses travel between cities. An extensive highway system connects all parts of the country, but many roads are in disrepair. Motorcycles are more common than cars, and fuel is rationed. Strict laws regulate moving from one province to another.

The telephone system is undergoing modernization; few homes outside Havana have phones. Media operations, including a well-developed film industry, are owned and controlled by the state. Most homes have televisions. There are more than 50 radio stations and several television stations. Several weekly newspapers are published, but a paper shortage restricts circulation. A lack of freedom of press is another hardship faced by Cuban journalists. Postal and telegraph services cover the entire country.

**Education.** The state provides free primary, secondary, technical, and higher education to all citizens. Education is mandatory between ages five and twelve (kindergarten through the primary level). More than 90 percent of children continue with secondary education. Most teenagers attend boarding schools. Graduates of secondary school may take college entrance exams or go to a technical training institute. Cuba averages one teacher for every 45 inhabitants. Preschool is available in urban areas. Special schools educate the mentally or physically challenged, and there are schools for students gifted in sports and the arts. Cuba has about 50 centers of higher education. Despite a shortage of basic supplies such as textbooks and paper, no child is without schooling.

**Health.** Cuba has some three hundred hospitals. A similar number of clinics provide various services, including maternity and infant care. Family doctors are assigned to serve each community, large and small. Despite a shortage of medicines and other supplies, Cuba's average life expectancy and infant mortality rates are the best in Latin America. Many childhood diseases have been eradicated through massive vaccination campaigns. More than 20 medical schools and other institutions train healthcare workers.

## AT A GLANCE

**Contact Information.** Cuba Tourist Board in Canada, 1200 Bay Street, Suite 305, Toronto, Ontario, M5R 2A5, Canada; phone (866) 404-2822; web site [www.gocuba.ca/en/index.asp](http://www.gocuba.ca/en/index.asp). Office of Foreign Assets Control, U.S. Department of Treasury, 1500 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20220; phone (202) 622-2520; web site [www.ustreas.gov/ofac](http://www.ustreas.gov/ofac).

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