TOUR CODE

QVC

ADVENTURESABROAD

CUBA

with Victor Romagnoli

14 days

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Day 1 *Arrive in Havana*

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Today we arrive in Havana and transfer to our hotel in the heart of the old city.*

Upon arrival in the city, the vibrancy of the people is one of the first noticeable things. Also striking is the fact that, day or night, music can be heard and most evenings, somewhere in the city, people can be found dancing in the streets. The rich history of the island is apparent in the faces of the people. They are the descendants of the Spanish conquistadores who colonised the island in the sixteenth century and African slaves brought over to work on the tobacco and sugar plantations.

Overnight in Havana. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 *Havana: City Tour*

Cuba's cosmopolitan capital was once one of the world's most prosperous ports and the third most populous city in the Americas. As La llave del Mundo (Key of the World), it saw riches from Mexico, Peru, and Manila pass through her sheltered harbour to Spain. Havana shows evidence of long neglect but her beauty shines through an amalgam of Spanish, African, colonial, communist, and capitalist influences.

Today we have a tour of Havana, including a stroll down Prado Avenue, for many years Havana's most important and impressive avenue. Built in 1772 by the government of the Marquis de la Torre, it was originally known as Alameda de Extramuros. In 1928 the avenue was remodeled into its present form. This stately thoroughfare is home to the Capitolio Nacional, the Gran Teatro de la Habana, and the Parque Central (a favourite gathering place for Cubans). It'll become evident why UNESCO declared this region a cultural and natural World Heritage Site in 1982.

Our walking tour also takes us along the main streets of Old Havana to visit the Plaza de la Cathedral, the Plaza de Armas, the Plaza de San Francisco de Asis and the Plaza Vieja. We also visit the Plaza de la Revolution and the Cabana Fortress, built after the British invasion of 1762. Later we travel to a nearby suburb to see the house in which Ernest Hemingway lived for almost 20 years.

Overnight in Havana. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 *Havana - Vinales Valley*

An early start has us leaving Havana and travelling west towards Vinales and its magnificent valley, partly reminiscent of Guilin in China because of the curious limestone mountains and rock outcroppings. Along the way we stop in Soroa

to visit a beautifully located orchid garden. We have a chance to see a tobacco plantation where the tobacco leaf is sorted (despalillo), graded, even fermented and then stored until the time is right for the leaf to be rolled. In Pinar del Rio we visit a state run tobacco factory where such brands as Cohiba, Montecristo and Romeo y Julieta cigars are made.

Overnight in Vinales. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Vinales Valley - Havana*

The Vinales Valley is considered a National Park and was recently proclaimed by UNESCO as a Natural World Heritage Site.

This morning we take a leisurely walk through the countryside passing by crops of tobacco, yucca and corn before joining up with our vehicle again. We may be able to visit a tobacco farmer's house; the inhabitants of the valley will readily invite visitors in for a visit. Later we'll visit the Jardin Botanico de Caridad, the Botanical Gardens of Caridad, a local woman who started growing local tropical plants on her property and now accepts visitors. Tamarinds, oranges, grapefruits, guava, starfruit, bananas, cocoa, lemons, cinnamon trees and a variety of decorative plants and ferns can be found in her gardens. After a guided tour of the garden, we have a chance to try some of the fruits in season.

We then go around the corner to the State-run rationing store where our guide will explain to us what the state supplies, how much, and how the system runs.

We return to Havana and have the balance of the day at leisure. Havana has some excellent museums and other worthwhile sites not covered by our sightseeing programme. Near the Parque Central is the MUSEUM OF THE REVOLUTION and MUSIC MUSEUM. Near the plaza de Armas: CASA DE AFRICA; VINTAGE CAR MUSEUM; CITY MUSEUM, CIGAR FACTORY and CATHEDRAL. There is often a flea market around the corner from the Tejadillo, behind the cathedral, close to the water. And this may be the evening to sample one of Havana's famous music venues. Your Tour Leader can help you plan your day / evening.

Overnight in Havana. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Havana - Bay of Pigs - Cienfuegos*

Today is a full day of travel, with some interesting things to see and do along the way.

We travel via the Zapata swamp, named after the unfortunate first landholder given title to the area in the 1600s. This area was very poor before the revolution but has benefited greatly with the introduction of electricity, schools, roads and clinics where none had existed before. Lake Tesoro is said to have gotten its name from the indians who supposedly threw all their treasures into the lake rather than give them up to the Spanish. Fidel Castro used to spend much of his vacation time here.

We continue after lunch to a stop at the cenote (limestone cave) just after Playa Larga. This is an inland sea-water aquarium with an amazing array of fishes that one can observe during a refreshing swim.

Also along our route are numerous stone markers, memorials to the people bombed on the road during the US invasion. The road was the only access to the beach, so most of those killed were approaching to either bring supplies or help in the fighting. We stop at the Playa Giron (Bay of Pigs) Museum where we will learn about the US/CIA involvement in the anti-Castro movement. Playa Giron was one of the two main landing beaches during the abortive US invasion.

We continue to Cienfuegos, a town settled by French emigrants' descendants more than 150 years ago.

Overnight Cienfuegos. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Cienfuegos - Sierra de Escambray - Trinidad*

Today our journey takes us to Cuba's second highest mountain range -- the Sierra de Escambray, reaching 1100 m (3,700 feet) and home to small mountain villages. The Escambray is a delight for birders and walkers alike. Slopes are swathed in Caribbean pines, ancient tree ferns, bamboo, and eucalyptus. Upon arrival we take a 60-minute truck ride into the forest to begin a walk from La Codina, an old Spanish hacienda, once part of a large Spanish coffee plantation.

We begin our easy walk with a talk on the various plants in the area and their medicinal uses, originally used to treat the plantation's slaves. We continue to the Orchid Loop, with over 25 endemic species, and then through a cave en route to La Cueva del Altar, with stunning views out over the mountains to the Caribbean Sea. We finish back at the Hacienda where we have lunch.

Later this afternoon we continue to Trinidad and check in to our hotel.

Overnight in Trinidad. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *Trinidad: Town Tour*

This morning we tour colonial Trinidad (pop: 60,000). This is a perfect relic of the early days of the Spanish colony: beautifully preserved streets and buildings and hardly a trace of the 20th century anywhere. It was founded in 1514 by Diego Velazquez as a base for expeditions into the New World and Hernan Cortes, conquistador of the Aztecs, set out from here for Mexico in 1518. The five main squares and four churches date from the 18th and 19th centuries and the whole city, with its fine palaces, cobbled streets and tiled roofs, is a national monument and since 1988 has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In 1797 there were 56 sugar mills and 12,000 slaves imported to work in the sugar cane fields. With the Industrial Revolution and the increase in sugar grown in Europe, Trinidad went into decline in the second half of the 19th century.

On the Plaza Mayor is the cathedral, Iglesia Parroquial de la Santisima Trinidad, built between 1817 and 1892. It is the largest church in Cuba and is renowned for its acoustics. On the left of the altar is a crucifix of the brown-skinned Christ of Veracruz, who is the patron of Trinidad.

The afternoon is at leisure. You may wish to head to Trinidad's excellent beaches just outside town, or continue to explore this colourful village on your own. The Casa Romantica is an enjoyable museum furnished with vintage articles.

Overnight in Trinidad. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *Trinidad - Camaguey: Town Tour*

Today we travel by road to Camaguey with a lunch stop en route.

On arrival in Camaguey we embark on a tour. The streets here are a labyrinth, designed to confuse the corsairs who had previously terrorized the town. In fact, not two streets are parallel in the city's centre. Camaguey is Cuba's third largest city, but the mass tourism that we may have encountered earlier is refreshingly absent here.

We visit the lively farmers' market and Plaza de Trabajadores. One nickname for Camaguey is the "city of plazas" so we

focus on 3 or 4 plazas as landmarks. We admire the Casa de la Cultura, with its freshly restored facade. For a donation, you can climb to the building's roof and get a good view of city. Nearby is the Soledad Church, one of the oldest in town and originally a hermitage. Our tour takes us into Plaza Maceo, pleasant with its shady spaces and charming cafes. We continue a few more blocks to the beautifully restored 18th C Plaza San Juan de Dios, aka Plaza Padre Olallo, probably the nicest in the city.

Camaguey has a famous ballet, though it's schedule is difficult to predict with any accuracy. Your Tour Leader should be able to find out about any possible performance this evening.

Overnight Camaguey. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Camaguey - Sierra Maestra - Holguin*

Referred to as the Oriente by most Cubans, this region contrasts with the rest of the island in many ways. The racial mixture is slightly different due to the influx of Haitians in the late 1700s which gives some cities a distinct Caribbean feel. Another distinctive feature is the lush green hills and mountains that rise above the humid plains. Eastern Cuba is a remote and wild paradise rarely explored by tourists.

The Oriente is the birthplace of many revolutionary heroes, as well as the starting point of both the War of Independence and Fidel Castro's initial attack on the Moncada Garrison in 1953. Castro later returned to Santiago in 1959 to accept surrender of Batista's army. When travelling the Eastern provinces you'll discover nearly every city has some type of memorial or revolutionary point of interest. Cubans are very proud of their independence and take great interest in preserving and showcasing revolutionary artifacts. Geographically, the eastern portion of the island is dominated by the lush green Sierra Maestra Mountains, rising to over 1800 m (6,000 feet), the highest peaks in Cuba.

On October 27, 1492, Christopher Columbus landed in Bariay, on the coast of Holguin, and immediately said that it was the most beautiful land ever seen by human eyes. Numerous aboriginal settlements were part of the landscape in those distant times. The trade winds blow here almost year round, creating conditions for a very pleasant temperate climate in an extraordinary setting.

On arrival we have a city tour starting in Revolution Square and a walk through the historic center, Plaza de la Marqueta, San Isidoro Cathedral, and Calixto Garced Square.

Overnight in Holguin. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Holguin - Baracoa*

Today we travel to Baracoa, Guantanamo Province. Cuba's easternmost province is approximately 1000 km (621 miles) from the nation's capital. Its environment includes everything from near-desert to regions featuring luxuriant mountain vegetation. Mountains make up almost 99 percent of the Guantanamo's territory. What we have here are rocky and calcinated areas with scarce vegetation and lots of cacti, as opposed to forests and fields of green sugar cane.

The greatest attraction in the province can be found in Nuestra Senora de la Asuncion de Baracoa, Cuba's oldest city. Founded by Diego Velasquez in 1512, the community is characterized by the amicable spirit of its citizens and the beauty of a city surrounded by abrupt coastline, luxuriant foliage, mountains and rivers. The first capital of the island, its name comes from an aboriginal term meaning "End of the Land". The city was often raised by pirates and corsairs who burned it down for the last time in 1652. In response, a solid defense system was built, including forts called La Punta, Seboruco and Malachin, as well as the Joa and Caguase towers.

This village was the first on the island to have a parochial church, made doubly attractive because not far from its entrance there was a statue of Hatuey, an Indian who became the symbol of rebellion -- and because it sheltered the cross brought to Cuban soil by Christopher Columbus in December 1492. Baracoa is one of the few Cuban villages located close to where Indo-Cubans found refuge in the mountains and managed to survive. We can actually recognize features inherited from these ancestors in today's village dwellers. Today the economy of Baracoa is based on coffee and cacao.

After a walking tour of the village, including the Cathedral and the small but informative museum, we check in to our hotel with the balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Baracoa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *Baracoa - Santiago de Cuba*

This morning we might accomplish Barracoa sightseeing deferred from yesterday due to time constraints.

After lunch we travel to Santiago de Cuba. The Spaniards established the island's first capital here after founding the village in 1514. In 1522, it officially became a city and throughout the 16th and 17th centuries it was attacked many times by pirates and corsairs, which prompted the construction of the Morro Fortress in 1640 as well as the building of other coastal defenses.

Overnight in Santiago. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 12 *Santiago de Cuba*

Surrounded by impressive mountains that link the Sierra Maestra to the sea, Santiago is a city of hills and inclined streets, with numerous places of interest and a history linked to struggles for national independence. It is also a city that brings together people of African and Spanish origin, along with descendants of emigres from the French West Indies. Thus Santiago is a veritable melting pot whose colourful identity is an outgrowth of its rich human heritage.

This morning we visit the Morro Fortress, dramatically perched over the mouth of the bay. We also visit the Santa Ifigenia Cemetery which resonates with history. On the main square we stop to visit the house of Diego Velasquez, the oldest in Cuba which dates back to the beginning of the 16th century.

Renowned for its colourful carnivals featuring Chinese trumpets, French tumbas (a kind of drum) and all sorts of revels, the city is also famous for its people, who are hospitable, cheerful, and imaginative lovers of life; in short, typical West Indians from what has been dubbed the Capital of the Caribbean.

In the afternoon we drive out to El Cobre to see the important basilica there. Santiago is the hottest city on the island, offering the most intense blue sea and the most flavourful arrays of fruit. It is also proud to be the birthplace of the daiquiri, one of most popular cocktails in the world.

Overnight in Santiago. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 13 *Santiago - Havana*

Today we fly to Havana with the balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Havana. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 14 *Depart*

Departure from Havana.

BUEN VIAJE! Meal plan: Breakfast.