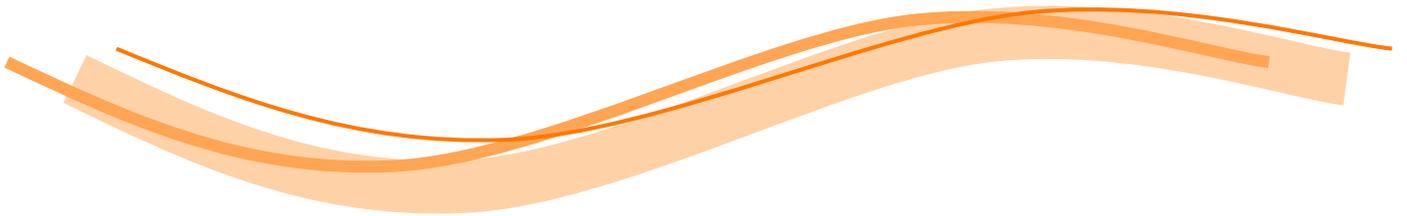




TRANSAT HOLIDAYS & SOL MELIA CUBA





SOL MELIA CUBA RESORTS

Sol Melia, the world's largest resort hotel chain, offers the widest choice of resorts in Cuba for family friendly resorts, romantic getaways, larger groups or picture perfect wedding spots.

Transat Holidays and sister company Nolitours offer direct flights to five Cuban destinations and feature Sol Melia Cuba's fabulous resorts. Ask your travel agent for the Nolitours and Transat Holidays brochures which feature Sol Melia Cuba hotels in:

- the nature lover's paradise of Cayo Santa Maria
- popular and lively Varadero
- the soft white sands of Cayo Coco and Cayo Guillermo
- and hot, hot, hot Holguin.

Cayo Santa Maria

Untouched beaches of fine pearly sand, crystal clear blue waters and a vast variety of exotic flora and fauna make Cayo Santa Maria a nature lover's paradise.

Melia Cayo Santa Maria Resort

Our prize hotel this week is the 4 ½ Star Melia Cayo Santa Maria - directly on a pristine sand beach. Exclusive to Transat Holidays, this popular adults only (16+) resort has its rooms spread out amongst twenty seven two storey buildings. There are two à la carte restaurants (Italian and Mediterranean) and your all inclusive offers two à la carte dinners per week as well as 24 hr snacks and unlimited selected international drinks.

Melia Las Dunas Resort

The 4 ½ Star Melia Las Dunas from Nolitours is directly on the beach in Cayo Santa Maria. This hotel is a fantastic choice for a fun filled vacation with family and friends, with plenty of activities. Check out the Kid's Free offer! There are four à la carte restaurants (Seafood, International, Italian and Grill) and your all inclusive offers three à la carte meals per week, 24 hr snack and unlimited selected international drinks as well as activities, nightly entertainment and admission to the disco.

Both these resorts offer free wedding and honeymoon packages.

Varadero

The superb white sandy beaches of Varadero span a total length of over 18 km, and Cubans rightly claim that they are the loveliest in the country. The calm, clear waters range in colour from turquoise to deep blue, with a million and one shades in between.

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	<p>Tryp Peninsula Varadero Resort Exclusive to Transat Holidays, the 4 ½ Star Tryp Peninsula Varadero is also right on the beach. This enchanting plantation-style hotel offers junior suites in twenty 2 and 3 storey villas, surrounded by lush vegetation. There are two à la carte restaurants (Italian and International) well as 24 hr snack and unlimited selected international drinks and admission to the disco. This resort also offers free Honeymoon packages and Kid's Free offer.</p>
<p>Sol Melia Cuba - Background</p>	<p>Sol Meliá is the Spanish hotel and resort chain founded by Gabriel Escarrer Juliá in 1956 in Palma on the Mediterranean island of Mallorca in Spain. It is the leading Spanish hotel chain in both the city and resort markets, the third largest hotel chain in Europe, and the twelfth largest hotel chain in the world. Sol Meliá is also the world leader in resort hotels and number one in the ranking in Latin America and the Caribbean. The company has 313 hotels with 76,900 rooms in 27 countries on 4 continents under its Meliá Hotels, TRYP Hotels, Sol Hotels and Paradisus Resorts brands. (as at Feb 2010)</p> <p>The group has 24 hotels in Cuba with 8116 rooms and was the first foreign company to put its name on a Cuban property.</p> <p>Worldwide, their numbers are staggering: Number of stays: 24,600,000 35,000 employees 81,282 hotel rooms</p> <p>Sol Meliá received the Business and Society Foundation award, the highest of their kind in Spain for corporate Community Involvement projects.</p>
<p>Brands</p>	<p>Meliá Hotels & Resorts, and their sister Gran Meliá Hotels and Meliá Boutique Hotels, include Sol Meliá's range of first class city hotels and leisure resorts located all over the world. The prestige earned by Meliá Hotels & Resorts world-wide confirms the success of a product designed to satisfy the most discerning guests. Luxury, highly personalized service and magnificent locations in first class cities and resorts, are just some of the many attractions of the 4* and 5* Meliá hotels & resorts.</p> <p>Tryp Hotels - Excellent value for money, functional and modern facilities and very comfortable rooms. If the hotel also helps you out with your work by providing spacious meeting rooms and the latest in modern technology, while also letting you visit some of the most beautiful cities at the weekend, then here's what you've been looking for: a TRYP hotel.</p> <p>Sol Hotels - Not even the tiniest problem is allowed. Only a hotel with the experience of the Sol brand behind it can guarantee you a great holiday.</p>

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	<p>If you've still not tried it, do it now and choose from amongst the more than 100 Sol hotels all over the world.</p> <p>Paradisus' luxury five-star "all-inclusive" hotels are renowned worldwide. With superb locations, in exotic, privileged destinations, they blend carefully into the surrounding countryside surprising you day after day with something new. Characterized by their original styles of architecture and unique settings, the Paradisus 'eco-resorts' also stand out from the rest for their wide range of cuisine and extensive, professionally organized programs of entertainment.</p>
History	<p>Founded in 1956.</p> <p>At only 21 years of age, Gabriel Escarrer Juliá began to lease and operate his first hotel: the Altair Hotel in Palma de Majorca (Spain). It was the first European hotel company certified with ISO 9002</p>
Destinations in Cuba	<p>Sol Melia Cuba has resorts in a range of destinations throughout Cuba:</p> <p>Varadero Santiago de Cuba Isla de Juventud Holguin – Playa Esmeralda Havana Cayo Santa Maria Cayo Guillermo Cayo Coco</p> <p>Two especially recommended resorts in the group are detailed below:</p>
Melia Cayo Santa Maria Resort	<p>The Meliá Cayo Santa María All Inclusive Resort is set in 12 hectares of grounds, alongside almost 400 metres of white, sandy beach. It owes its name to Santa María, one of the small islands in the Jardines del Rey archipelago. A spacious, white sandy beach, crystal-clear, turquoise waters, lush vegetation and abundant fauna have made it a Biosphere Reserve and one of the most exotic locations in the Caribbean.</p> <p>It offers a picturesque environment, friendly and personalized service and well-appointed facilities. An 18 years + resort, it is the ideal vacation destination for couples and friends looking for a relaxing time in the sun.</p> <p>The resort has 360 rooms and offers facilities for incentives groups and a special wedding and honeymoon program. It's a perfect complement for an unforgettable holiday and is only 90 minutes from Santa Clara airport. Address: Cayo Santa María, Caibarién, Villa Clara, Cuba. Telephone: (5342) 350200 - Fax: (5342) 350550 Website: http://www.solmelia.com/solNew/hoteles/jsp/C_Hotel_Description.jsp?codigoHotel=5982</p>
Accommodation	<p>There are 27 Bungalows set in 12 hectares of grounds with almost 400m of beach, offering a total of 360 rooms, including 32 double rooms with</p>

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	<p>magnificent ocean views, 2 luxurious Suites and 3 rooms for the disabled</p> <p>Junior suite: Air-conditioning • 1 king-size or 2 single beds • Full bathroom • Hairdryer • Satellite TV • CD/MP3 player • Telephone • Coffee-maker • Mini-bar • In-room safe • Iron and ironing board • Balcony or terrace and some have ocean view</p>
<p>Services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3 Swimming pools with free sunbeds and sunshades - Daytime and evening entertainment programme, including Cuban cookery, Spanish and dancing classes, various workshops, ecological tours, bike trips, games, chess, (water) aerobics, stretching, yoga, pool tables, and tennis at the Sol Cayo Santa Maria - Water Sports Centre, shared with the Sol resort, offers catamarans, kayaks, paddle boats, snorkelling and windsurfing (all included); fishing, motor boats and scuba diving (charges apply) - Gym with sauna and whirlpool at the Sol Cayo Santa María - Massages - Unlimited premium drinks - 24 hour room service - Free & A la Carte Wedding and Honeymoons programs - Diving Centre with 36 different dive locations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Free courses for diving beginners - ACUC instructors PADI certified <p>Program for ecological excursions</p> <p>Weddings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal coordinator for all wedding details - Room upgrade - Amenities put in room daily - Legal service for Weddings and Renewal of Vows - Guaranteed private Check-in and late Check-out - Gift for the bridal couple in the room upon arrival
<p>Dining</p>	<p>There are four restaurants:</p> <p>1. Casa Da Vinci Vacationers will enjoy the excellent service and wide array of Italian and international specialties of this beautifully decorated restaurant.</p> <p>2. El Almirante Located by the beach, where bathers can enjoy a tasty snack without leaving the beach</p> <p>3. El Portuario Exquisite Mediterranean cuisine magnificently served in a stunning natural setting.</p> <p>4. Santa María del Mar Elegantly decorated, this restaurant is ideal for couples and families who prefer select international cuisine.</p>

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	As part of the Living Around programme, you can also dine at the Italian or Cuban Restaurant at the Sol Cayo Santa María, or dance the night away in the Fun Pub Disco.
Spa	Prepare your body and relax your mind through Sol Melia's hydrotherapy circuit while enhancing the benefits of the treatments selected. Experience a truly revitalizing sensation thanks to their hydrotherapy treatments. Spa (Salus per Aquam), a traditional water ritual practiced by Roman and Greek cultures, was based on alternating a heat phase with a cold phase, followed by relaxation and hydration to stimulate and reinvigorate the body.
Tryp Peninsula Varadero	This enchanting plantation-style hotel offers 591 spacious junior suites located in twenty 2 and 3-storey villas surrounded by lush vegetation and directly on a pristine white-sand beach. It's approximately 49 km from the Varadero airport. Website: http://www.solmeliacuba.com/cuba-hotel/tryp-peninsulavaradero
Accommodation	Junior Suite: air-conditioning • full bathroom • TV • in-room safe • 1 king-size or 2 3/4 beds • hairdryer • CD player • coffee-maker • iron • balcony or terrace • maximum occupancy 3 adults (or 2 adults, 2 kids)
Services	Swim-up bar • Disco • Snorkelling • Pedal boat • Windsurfing • Banana boat • Kayaking • Tennis • Pool table • Gym • Sauna • Steam bath • Mini-golf Also: Spanish lessons, dancing classes and cocktail mixing lessons. There's a Baby Club (ages 0 to 4) and Kids' Club (ages 5 to 12) together with a playground. Babysitting is available at an additional charge after 7 pm, subject to availability.
Dining	Restaurants including 2 à la carte (Italian and International) • Snack bar that offers delicious crepes and fondue dinners in the evenings
Spa and Gym	Gym, esthetical and therapeutic massages, hydro massage, sauna and Turkish bath, unisex beauty salon for all ages.
Melia Las Dunas	Melia Las Dunas 5* All Inclusive Resort is located in Santa María cay which is part of Jardines del Rey archipelago. A wide strip of white sand, crystal clear waters of blue turquoise color, wild green vegetation and a rich variety of endemic fauna makes this region, declared Reserve of Biosphere ranks as one of the most exotic areas of the whole Caribbean. There are two separate areas in this resort: one for families and the other for couples. The resort is just 10 km from the National Airoport Las Brujas and 110 km from the International Airoport Abel Santa María.

TRANSAT HOLIDAYS & NOLITOURS IN CUBA	Transat Holidays and sister company Nolitours offer five Cuban destinations and many of Sol Melia Cuba's fabulous resorts. They feature Sol Melia Cuba hotels in the nature lover's paradise of Cayo Santa Maria ; popular and lively Varadero ; the soft white sands of Cayo
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	<p>Coco and Cayo Guillermo - and hot, hot, hot Holguin. Ask your travel agent for the Nolitours and Transat Holidays brochures.</p> <p>Weekly direct flights to all these destinations in Cuba are the start of your vacation. With added leg room in Economy class, advanced seat selection at your fingertips, onboard duty free shopping, the Air Transat Kids' Club to keep your children entertained, the best on-time performance and best aircraft reliability in Canada - you can depend on Air Transat. And with Air Transat's Club Class you enjoy exclusive privileges such as wider, more comfortable leather seats, even more legroom, a selection of gourmet meals and fine wines, priority check-in, baggage service and boarding.</p> <p>If you are looking for a golf vacation – look no further. Golf packages, free golf, golf discounts and Transat Holidays' golf offer at selected Paradisus resorts is sure to please even the most avid golfers. Golfers will enjoy free rounds of golf at the Varadero Golf Club, designed by Les Furber when staying at the Paradisus Princesa del Mar and the Paradisus Varadero.</p> <p>If you are planning a wedding, honeymoon or to renew your vows Nolitours and Transat Holidays feature resorts in Cuba that offer affordable wedding and renewal of vows packages. These include the essential elements of the important day as well as free honeymoon packages that pamper newlyweds with gifts such as champagne bottles, room upgrade, breakfast in bed and much more.</p> <p>Nolitours and Transat Holidays also have vacations where you can spend some quality time with your family in the sun. And Cuba is a safe, "family friendly" destination. With plenty of resorts offering activities and services for all age groups, it's a great way for all generations in the family to enjoy their stay and reconnect. Kids' Clubs, babysitting services, Kids free promotions and single parent specials are among the ways you can take full advantage.</p>
<p>Transat Background</p>	<p>Transat is now the largest tour operator in Canada, and is at the core of the vertical integration process developing and marketing vacation products as well as flights to destinations in the South and Europe. The company acts as a master craftsman in assembling different components of leisure travel: air transportation, passenger transfers from airport to hotel, accommodation, recreational and cultural activities, meals, cruises, and much more.</p> <p>As an industry leader, Transat Holidays offers departures from many Canadian cities including: St. John's, Halifax, Moncton, Fredericton, Montreal, Quebec City, Ottawa, Hamilton, Toronto, Brandon, Regina,</p>

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	Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, Victoria, Comox, Abbotsford, Prince George and Kelowna.
Mission	Transat Holidays offers quality vacation packages to a wide variety of destinations. Each season, the company presents a wide selection of quality products, in order to meet the diversified needs of Canadian travellers. In keeping with their mission, their employees aim to exceed vacationers' expectations in order to maintain their position as a market leader. They see their role, ultimately, to turn holiday dreams into reality: making the vacation experience one of the most memorable ever.
Products	Packages, Cruises, Hotels, Flights, Tours, Car Rentals & Train Travel. With a choice of over 300 hotels located in more than 50 destinations and a complete line of itineraries offered in partnership with the most prestigious cruise lines, all products offered by Transat Holidays are subject to a rigorous standard review.
Wider Seats	Air Transat has added more legroom on all their aircraft, making the journey to and from your destination even more comfortable.
Air Transat Upgrades	Air Transat have just introduced its new Economy Class meal service on sun destination flights, beginning December 1, 2009. As part of its ongoing efforts to provide clients with the best possible service, Air Transat has upgraded its onboard service. Passengers flying south will now be welcomed onboard with a glass of champagne, while early morning passengers will be greeted with a mimosa. The meal service has also been improved. The airline will now offer passengers a more complete meal tray, including a choice of two hot meals, a complimentary glass of wine and dessert.
Awards	2009 Agent's Choice Awards: Transat Holidays ranked number one for a third year in a row by Canada's travel agents according to the results of the Agents' Choice Awards, a survey carried out by Canadian Travel Press and Travel Courier.
Current Brochure	Transat Holidays Cuba: Sun 2009-2010 brochure Nolitours Cuba: Sun 2009-2010 brochure Features resorts in Varadero, Holguin, Cayo Santa Maria, Cayo Guillermo and Cayo Coco Flights are on Air Transat and flight time is around 3.25 hrs
Air Transat Kids Club	To ensure that your family vacations are fun and unforgettable from beginning to end, Air Transat has created Kids Club so that young passengers can really enjoy themselves while onboard an Air Transat flight. It is designed to make air travel a fun experience for young travellers (and for their parents!). Even before the doors of the plane are closed following boarding, every child receives a small bag containing all sorts of surprises and games. The more fun they have, the easier the flight. Furthermore, children who are members of Air Transat Kids Club enjoy certain exclusive privileges. Members of the Air Transat Kids Club will enjoy several benefits that the

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	<p>whole family can share. You can check in at a special "Air Transat Kids Club Members" counter. Thanks to these special counters located in major Canadian airports where Air Transat flies, checking-in is quicker than before. At check-in, special tags will be placed on your baggage; as a result, your baggage gets priority treatment.</p>
Transat Club Class	<p>Enjoy exclusive privileges such as complimentary seat selection, wider, more comfortable leather seats, a choice of gourmet meals and fine wines, priority check-in, baggage service and boarding.</p>
Option Plus	<p>This Economy class option includes many priority privileges and services including priority check-in, priority baggage handling, an extra 10kg baggage allowance and even champagne.</p>
Hurricane Policy	<p>Transat Holidays provides you with true peace of mind. Vacationers can now travel secure in the knowledge that their sun holiday will be protected should a hurricane warning affect their destination (Florida, Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America). Transat Holidays' Hurricane Policy is available free of charge to its passengers and is automatically applied for departures between June and November. Passengers can choose from one of the following four options:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Travel at a later date Passengers who choose to travel at a later date can do so at no additional cost. Travel must be completed on or before December. The destination, hotel and room category must remain the same. 2. Travel to another destination Passengers who choose to travel to another destination can do so by selecting another Transat Holidays destination that is not at risk of a hurricane. Travel must take place within four weeks of the original departure date. In the event the package price is higher than the original booking, the passenger will be responsible for paying the difference. 3. Travel to the booked destination Passengers who want to continue travelling to the booked destination may do so, provided Transat Holidays is still operating at the destination. A refund will not be issued if this option is taken. 4. Cancel with a full refund Passengers, who choose NOT to travel, may cancel with a full refund (excluding travel insurance costs, if purchased).
Transat and Sustainable Tourism	<p>Transat recognizes the prime importance of the environment, host communities, cultural diversity, and their relationships with their employees, customers and partners. Tourism has become one of the world's leading industries. Society and communities reap the benefits, and, each year, hundreds of millions of travellers discover new countries</p>

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	<p>and cultures. Transat is firmly committed to the responsible development of the tourism industry, and has adopted the following definition of sustainable tourism: “Sustainable tourism entails respect for nature, as well as for host communities and their values; it combines positive socio-economic benefits for local populations with an enriching experience for travellers.”</p> <p>Transat has embarked on a number of major projects under the auspices of its Sustainable Tourism Executive Committee, chaired by Lina De Cesare, Transat Co-founder and President, Tour Operators. All are connected in some way to the three pillars of sustainable tourism: the environment, respect for local communities and protection of their culture; and the economy, i.e., the potential and importance of tourism as a development factor.</p> <p>The issue of the environment, as far as Transat’s own facilities are concerned, is a clear and basic target. Their environment committees have implemented concrete initiatives with regard to recycling, conservation of resources, the disposal of obsolete electronic equipment, and raising employee awareness. Air Transat, which proved its forward-looking approach by adopting a strict fuel-management system in 2003, has since begun developing an environmental management system that could lead to an ISO 14001 certification in the future. To find out more, consult the Transat and the Environment sections at their website.</p>
<p>Gift Certificates</p>	<p>Here’s your chance to make a loved one’s dream come true. With Transat gift certificates you can offer the beauty, excitement, and wonders of the world: the South with its heavenly beaches and endless sunshine, or just a rental car.</p> <p>Travel gift certificates are always appreciated, and they are appropriate for all occasions, whether for a wedding, anniversary, graduation, or simply to show you care.</p> <p>Transat gift certificates are valid on all Air Transat, Nolitours, or Transat Holidays products in our brochures. They can be redeemed at a travel agent’s office at the time of reservation.</p> <p>To order your gift certificates call 1-800-322-6649.</p>
<p>Transat Excursions in Cuba</p>	<p>Cayo Santa Maria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jeep Safari from Cayo Santa Maria to discover the Cuban countryside, visit a farm and horseback ride - Guided tour to Santa Clara, its history and museums, plus cigar making - Catamaran adventure, including snorkeling and lobster picnic on an untouched tropical island <p>Varadero</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visit the town of Trinidad, a UNESCO World Heritage site and the most

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	<p>picturesque town on the island</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Havana Historia: Tropicana Show, Havana tour and cigar making - Rambo Tour: ride in a 6-wheel truck to Guanayara Farm Natural Park, then hike through the mountains to El Rocio Waterfall and swim there. <p>Holguin</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gran Safari: visit the Guayabo Waterfalls which are the highest in Cuba, tour the rainforest and visit a coffee plantation - Santiago de Cuba: see the fortress of Castillo El Morro, a World Heritage Site guarding the harbor of this historic city. - Crucero del Sol: Catamaran to coral reefs, snorkel and swim with the dolphins at Bahia Naranjo
<p>Special Deals with Sol Melia Cuba</p>	<p>Transat currently has some very special deals at the Melia Cayo Santa Maria this winter (as at 26 Feb 2010):</p> <p>\$699 for 7 night all inclusive departing Toronto 18 & 25 March 2010</p> <p>Transat also currently has some very special deals at the Tryp Peninsula Varadero this winter:</p> <p>\$1039 for 7 night all inclusive departing Montreal 5 March 2010</p> <p>- Kids Deal at Tryp Peninsula Varadero: One child under 13 stays and eats free (from May 1 to Oct. 31, 2010 inclusively)</p>

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DESTINATION	<p>CUBA</p> <p>Cuba is unlike any other place on earth. What draws people to this fascinating Caribbean island is much more than beaches, sun, and cheap drinks, though there are plenty of all three for those who want them. One of the last Communist nations left, it doesn't suffer from the drab and desultory demeanor of its disappeared peers. Cuba's rich culture, unique political history, and continued survival through ongoing economic hardship make it one of the most eye-opening countries that travellers can still discover.</p>
Location	<p>Cuba is the largest Caribbean island, between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean. It lies 145 km south of Key West, Florida, between the Cayman Islands and the Bahamas, to the west of Haiti, and northwest of Jamaica.</p> <p>Formed by over 4,000 keys, islets and islands, Cuba covers 110,922 square kilometers of terrain, encompassing luxuriant vegetation with a huge variety of flora and fauna, virgin islands, grottoes, caves, mountains, forests and over 280 beaches.</p> <p>Havana, the capital, was declared a World Heritage City by UNESCO in 1982 in recognition of its concentration of historic buildings.</p>
Geography	<p>111,000 square km, 4,200 coral cays and isles, 1,250 km long, 30-100 km wide, with 7,000 km coastline.</p> <p>Pico Turquino is the highest mountain at 1974 meters</p>
Name	<p>Columbus named it Juana, the first of several names he successively applied to the island. It eventually became known as Cuba, from its aboriginal name, Cubanascnan.</p>
Population	<p>Nationally 11.2 million, with Havana having more than 2 million</p>
Language	<p>Spanish; English is widely spoken in the resorts and in Varadero</p>
Currency	<p>One Canadian Dollar = 25 CUP or Cuban Pesos (26 February 2010) One Canadian Dollar = 0.91 CUC or Cuban Convertible Pesos (26 February 2010)</p> <p>There are two currencies circulating in Cuba, Cuban Pesos (CUP) and Cuban Convertible Pesos (CUC). Prior to November 2004 US dollars were in wide circulation on par with the CUC, but the government discontinued that and they are no longer used.</p> <p>CUC is the currency most tourists will use in Cuba. It is how you will pay for hotels, official taxis, entry into museums, meals at restaurants, cigars, rum, etc. Conversion into CUC can be done at exchange houses (casa de cambio, or cadeca). These are located in many hotels and in other places throughout the cities. CUC are valued at 24 times the value of CUP. Tourists are permitted to import or export a maximum of CUP 100 or CUC 200 at any one time.</p>

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	<p>CUP are also known as local Pesos and Moneda Nacional (National money). There is a limited range of goods that can be bought for local pesos, and these are transactions carried out in agricultural markets or from street vendors. Fruits, vegetables, fresh juices and snacks from street vendors are among the things CUP can buy. Because the products that can be purchased with CUP are limited, it is not a good idea to change more than CUC 5-10 into CUP at a time, as the CUP will last for a good while.</p> <p>Note that Amex, MasterCard MBNA and Visa Citibank credit cards are not accepted in Cuba and US dollars are not accepted for exchange in official outlets.</p>
Tipping	American dollar notes are always appreciated if you receive good service
Government	Socialist republic, but Fidel Castro has created his own brand of more pragmatic Socialism
Documentation	Passport and tourist card (included in package tours) Departure tax is 25 CUCs
Time zone	Eastern Standard Time
Health	Cuba's health and education facilities are more accessible to the average citizen than those of many richer countries, including the U.S. Life expectancy: 76 years; literacy: 96%
Safety tips	Cuba is generally a very safe country; strict and prominent policing, combined with neighborhood watch style-programs keep the streets safe from violent crime. Nonetheless, a certain degree of common-sense and caution is advisable, especially in major cities. In my personal opinion and experience, Cuba is the safest destination in the Caribbean today.

CLIMATE	
General climate	Wet season is May to Oct; temp averages 26 degrees in Jan and temperatures are sub-tropical year-round
Today's weather	24 degrees Centigrade and sun and clouds (27 February 2010)
Best time to visit	November to April

GETTING THERE	
Flying time	3.5 to 4 hours from Montreal and Toronto
Cities	Havana: 2.5 million people, faded glory, 1950's cars, swinging nightlife; "a rhythm all of its own: halfway between the easy tempo of a sleepy tropical resort and the feverish pace of a metropolis" Founded 1514: "the jewel of the Spanish colonies"; UNESCO world Heritage Site; 1898-1902 ruled by US;

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Highlights:

Old Havana is a walkers paradise;
Catedral de la Havana – baroque façade;
Plaza de la Cathedral - Is perhaps the most beautiful square in the Caribbean which is surrounded by examples of the finest baroque architecture in the country
Castillo de la Real Fuerza – oldest colonial fortress in the Americas;
Museo de la Ciudad – former Palace of the Captains General;
Malecon – seawall meeting place;
Hemmingway – El Floridita 180 yrs old, birthplace of daiquiris, ‘papa especial’: double 3yr rum, lemon, crushed ice;
247 museums;
Nightlife: Tropicana Cabaret;
Restaurant: El Meson – on roof of Castillo, Cuban cuisine and cabaret

Varadero: Varadero is a privileged enclave on the west coast of Cuba, with over 20 kilometers of superlative beaches sheltering caves and virgin keys whose crystalline waters conceal more than 40 different kinds of coral, fish, lobsters, shrimp, crabs and turtles. This beautiful destination has excellent connections and a vast range of leisure and entertainment options, making it the ideal spot for a relaxing and enjoyable vacation in the heart of the Caribbean.

History: Siboney Indians, Cubanacan nation, Cueva de San Ambrosio: 50 drawings at tip of peninsula, discovered in 1961;

1928: Mansion Xanadu – Cary Grant, Ava Gardner;

1900-1920: wooden houses;

Museo Municipal – Varadero history with English captions;

Establecimiento Tabaquero – cigar factory, 20 tobacco craftsmen;

Parque Josone – flamingos, macaws and rowboats;

Scuba – 3 clubs \$60 Playa Giron intro 2 hrs;

Horseriding – Casa del Valle, Valle Yumuri near Matanzas;

Cardenas – 15km from Varadero, architectural jewel, Museo Oscar

Maria de Rojas – eclectic: shrunken heads and snails;

Shopping: cigars, ceramics, art;

Delfinario – 8 dolphins, 5 born there, 3 shows;

Cuevas de Bellamar – discovered in 1861, 45 mins, La Fuente del Amor

Sailing ship to Cayo Blanco from Marina Chapelin \$65 seafood lunch, snorkeling

Santa Clara: Santa Clara is a pretty city set amid green hills. The capital of the province of Villa Clara; it was founded in 1689 as San Juan de los Remedios.

Overlooking the Parque Leoncio Vidal, the Museo de Artes Decorativas occupies a magnificent colonial house built around 1740. Transformed

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over the centuries, it was restored in 1820 and again in 1980. The museum has some extraordinary items, including an armoire built entirely without nails and a washbasin from the days when there was no running water.

The memory of Che Guevara permeates the town of Santa Clara. Located a little over 2 kilometres west of Parque Leoncio Vidal, the Plaza de la Revolución is dedicated to the famous Argentine guerrilla who fought fiercely alongside Fidel Castro to overthrow Batista in the late 1950s. A gigantic statue of Che Guevara dominates this plaza, the site of major political and cultural rallies in Santa Clara. Built in 1988 to commemorate the Guevara-led Battle of Santa Clara, this 7-metre high bronze sculpture is the work of Cuban artist Delana; the gigantic stone pedestal upon which it rests is more than 10 metres high.

Below this monument, anyone interested in this almost mythical Argentine revolutionary will not want to miss the Museo Memorial Nacional Comandante Ernesto Che Guevara. Inaugurated on December 28, 1988, it traces Che's life from his childhood up to his death, including his trips through Latin America, his stay in Mexico during which he met an exiled Fidel Castro, the landing of the Granma on the coast of Cuba, and his revolutionary experience in the Sierra Maestra. The museum is well documented, and displays a number of Che's personal items, including his uniforms, hand-written letters as well as many photos.

The door that faces the entrance to the museum leads to the **Mausoleo del Che**, where lie the remains of Che and the 13 Cubans who were killed with him in Bolivia. An eternal flame shines in this solemn and touching shrine.

Following Che Guevara's footsteps in Santa Clara also requires a visit to the **Monumento del Descarrilamiento**, Acción y Toma del Tren Blindado, which recounts the decisive battle led by Che Guevara against an armoured train carrying Batista's forces on December 28, 1958. Four of the train's 22 cars can be viewed at the monument.

The Museo de Artes Decorativas also offers classical music concerts. The museum is recognized as Santa Clara's most important centre for classical music.

The Casa de la Cultura Juan Marinero is Santa Clara's community cultural centre. At the entrance, a small art gallery exhibits works by contemporary artists from the region. This beautiful house, built in 1927, is the site of many cultural activities. Shows and concerts are held here regularly.

Shopping is a rare diversion in this region of the country, but you can still head to Calle Independencia, open only to pedestrians starting at Calle Maceo. Most of the shops are intended for local residents, including Santa Clara's biggest bookshop.

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	<p>Santiago de Cuba: Set on the seaside, near the island's eastern tip, Santiago de Cuba is the country's second-largest city. Vibrant, tropical, and often sweltering, Santiago is the country's liveliest cultural showpiece, outside of Havana. With a population just under a half-million people, Santiago is a world apart, with a unique history and rhythms all its own.</p>
Distances	<p>Varadero to Havana: 144 km Santa Clara to Havana: 270 km</p>
Buses	<p>There are 30,000km of paved road. Probably the nicest way to get around Cuba is on the Víazul buses. These are well-staffed and luxurious air-conditioned buses with toilets, big comfy seats, and lots of leg room. Refreshments are provided. Víazul buses are mostly used by foreigners and rich locals. You'll need to book your ticket a day before departure to secure your seat; you may not get a ticket if you just show up right before departure.</p>
Trains	<p>Standard gauge: 4,226 km of which 140 km is electrified</p>
Car Rental, Taxis	<p>Car rental starts from CUC 65 per day (including insurance) plus the cost of a full tank of gasoline. The refundable deposits start around CUC 200. Rental cars are for the most part fairly new, imported European or Asian models. Collective taxis often use pre-1959 US cars.</p>
Regions	<p>Central Cuba is an area rich in both historical and natural attractions. It is home to several wonderful colonial-era cities, as well as isolated and pristine beaches. Heading east from Matanzas into Cuba's central heartland you first hit Villa Clara province, which is devoted largely to sugar cane, citrus, and tobacco farming and cattle ranching. The provincial capital, Santa Clara, a lively university town, is often called "Che Guevara's City" and features an impressive monument and plaza dedicated to the fallen revolutionary. To the north of Santa Clara lie the tiny and well-preserved colonial-era city of Remedios, and the jaw-droppingly beautiful beach resort destination of la Cayería del Norte. Abutting Villa Clara to the south is Cienfuegos province. The city of Cienfuegos is affectionately known as La Perla del Sur (The Southern Pearl). Cienfuegos is a busy port city with a pretty, colonial-era center and the country's second-longest seaside promenade, or Malecón. Cienfuegos is connected to Trinidad by a pretty coastal highway, and is definitely worth a visit on a loop trip around the region.</p> <p>The province of Sancti Spíritus is the only one in Cuba to count two of the original seven villas (towns) in Cuba among its offerings. The colonial gem Trinidad, tucked in the southwest corner of the province, is the highlight of a visit to the central section of the country, or all of Cuba for that matter. The provincial capital, Sancti Spíritus, isn't a great deal larger than Trinidad, and though it is more ramshackle and rough around the edges, lacking Trinidad's remarkable collection of perfectly</p>

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	<p>preserved architecture, it is still worth a visit to see its couple of colonial highlights.</p> <p>Cuba's Northeast Coast: The extraordinary, powdery beaches of Cayo Coco and Cayo Guillermo, the cays that lie off the mainland and jut into the deep blue of the Atlantic Ocean, are the primary attractions of Ciego de Avila province. It is a remote area, but one with the infrastructure and natural gifts that make it perfect for idyllic sun, sand, and sea holidays. The namesake provincial capital Ciego de Avila and other towns and cities in this province hold few attractions for visitors. A little farther east, predominantly flat low-lying Camagüey province, southeast of Ciego de Avila, is the largest in the country, though it is also the least densely populated. It occupies the widest swath on the island, 120km from the Atlantic coast to the Caribbean coast. Camagüey, the provincial capital, is Cuba's third-largest city, after Havana and Santiago de Cuba, and is a relatively undiscovered colonial gem of a city that is worth exploring.</p> <p>El Oriente: Prior to the 1959 Revolution, the eastern half of Cuba was a single province, straightforwardly called "El Oriente," or the East. Most Cubans still refer to everything east of Camagüey - a region much more scenically and historically interesting than most of central Cuba - as El Oriente, even though it is now composed of the distinct provinces of Holguín, Granma, Santiago de Cuba, and Guantánamo. The region is less known and visited than the west, but every bit as rewarding for travelers (and perhaps more so). The farther east you go, the more emphatically Caribbean it feels. The region's remarkable landscapes include the north coast's exuberant banana and coconut groves, densely wooded peaks of the Sierra Maestra, and tropical rainforest on the east coast.</p>
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<p>ACCOMMODATION TYPES</p>	<p>Everything from five star international resorts to the B&B equivalent in Cuba called casas particulares. In general, the rooms and homes are kept very clean, while the furnishings and amenities are quite simple. The rates average between \$8 and \$20 per person, and meals are often available at very reasonable prices.</p>
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<p>TARGET GROUPS</p> <p>Kids</p>	<p>If you've got kids in Varadero, you might want to head to the Parque de Diversiones, a small amusement park in Varadero that has the types of rides and booths you might find at a county fair. Near the Marina Chapelín, on the ocean side of the road, you'll find the Delfinario. Open daily from 8am to 5pm, this attraction offers a 40-minute show by trained dolphins about four times daily. Admission is</p>
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	\$10 per person; it's \$5 extra to take photos, and 55 CUC for a 15-minute swimming session with the dolphins.
Teens	<p>If all the activities at the resorts are not enough, there is a large swath of the eastern end of the Varadero peninsula is protected as the Parque Ecológico Varahicacos. There are some gentle paths through the scrub forests here, and you can visit a series of small caves, some of which contain ancient indigenous pictographs.</p> <p>If your family is adventurous, try the Jungle Tour, which is a fast and furious trip through the mangroves aboard sit-on-top motorized watercraft.</p> <p>Sign up for a day-cruise on one of the many sailboats operating out of Varadero. These cruises head out to nearby cays, and include some snorkeling time, as well as lunch either on the boat or on some private little island beach.</p>
Romance	Old Havana has to be one of the most romantic cities on earth...
Honeymoons & Weddings	The major resorts are all able to create magical wedding events – involve your travel agent at the early planning stage.
Seniors	<p>The nicest spot to visit in "downtown" Varadero is the Parque Josone, a beautifully maintained little city park with cool shady grounds and gardens. There are paths winding around and over little lakes with fountains, several restaurants and food stands, and the park is dotted with gazebos and park benches.</p> <p>The old colonial city of Trinidad is a perfect day excursion from many of the island resorts.</p>

UNIQUES	<p>Fábrica de Tabaco Partagas, Havana: Founded in 1845, this is Cuba's largest and perhaps most renowned cigar factory, producing around 5 million cigars a year.</p> <p>If you want a bird's-eye view of things, the Centro Internacional de Deportes Aéreos, off a little side road across from the Marina Dársena, offers parachute jumps and ultralight flights. Tandem parachuting costs \$150 per person. Ultralight flights run \$30 to \$300, depending on the length of time</p>
Surprising	<p>Santería is a folk religion of African deities combined with Catholic saints; Cubans are open about it and happy to tell you more.</p> <p>Guantanamo Bay: the US forced Cuba to accept a US lease in 1903 which can be ended only by abandonment or mutual agreement.</p>
History	<p>History is important in Cuba, so I have expanded this section for a fuller account of Cuba's intriguing past...</p> <p>In 1492 Columbus said of Cuba " I have never seen a more beautiful country..."</p> <p>It's thought that humans first cruised from South America to Cuba around 3500 BC. Primarily fishers and hunter-gatherers, these original</p>

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inhabitants were later joined by the agriculturalist **Taino**, a branch of the **Arawak Indians**. Christopher Columbus sighted Cuba on 27 October 1492, and by 1514, Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar had conquered the island for the Spanish crown and founded seven settlements. When captured Taino chief and resistance fighter **Hatuey** was condemned to die at the stake, he refused baptism, saying that he never wanted to see another Spaniard again, not even in heaven.

Cattle ranching quickly became the mainstay of the Cuban economy. Large estates were established on the island under the *encomienda* system, enslaving the Indians under the pretext of offering instruction in Christianity. By 1542, when the system was abolished, only around 5000 Indians (of an estimated 100,000 half a century before) survived.

Undaunted, the Spanish imported African slaves as replacements. British troops invaded Cuba in June 1762 and occupied Havana for 11 months, importing more slaves and vastly expanding Cuba's trade links. In 1817, Spain's long-standing monopoly on tobacco ended, which raised prices, encouraging the crop's expansion. Tobacco quickly became one of the island's most important products. Sugar had also become a major industry, as American independence in 1783 created new markets, and the 1791 slave uprising in Haiti eliminated Cuba's biggest sugar-producing competitor. By 1820 Cuba was the world's largest sugar producer.

After the great liberator, **Simón Bolívar**, led Mexico and South America to independence, Cuba and Puerto Rico were the only remaining Spanish holdings in the Western Hemisphere. Spanish loyalists fled the former colonies and arrived in Cuba in droves. Even they, however, began demanding home rule for the island, albeit under the Spanish flag. In October 1868, planter **Carlos Manuel de Céspedes** launched Cuba's First War of Independence. After 10 years and 200,000 deaths, the rebels were spent and a pact was signed granting them amnesty.

Meanwhile, a group of Cuban rebels exiled to the USA began plotting the overthrow of the Spanish colonial government. Among their ranks was **José Martí**, a respected journalist and critic of US policy, as well as an important poet and the author of the best-known Cuban song of all time, *Guajira guantanamera*. Martí and his military commander, General Máximo Gómez, landed on eastern Cuba in 1895; within days Martí, conspicuous on his white horse, was shot and killed in a skirmish with Spanish soldiers. His martyrdom earned him the permanent position of Cuba's national hero.

Gómez and rebel leader Antonio Maceo pushed westward, burning everything in their path. Spain came down hard, forcing civilians into *reconcentración* camps and publicly executing rebel sympathizers. These methods effectively reestablished Spanish control, but Cuba's agriculture-based economy was in ruins. The Spaniards adopted a more

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conciliatory approach, offering Cuba home rule, but the embittered populace would agree to nothing short of full independence. José Martí had long warned of US interest in Cuba, and in 1898 he was proved right. After years of reading lurid (and often inaccurate) tabloid tales about Cuba's Second War for Independence, the American public was fascinated with the island. Although everything was quiet, newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst told his illustrator not to come home just yet: 'You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war.' In January 1898 the US warship Maine, anchored outside Havana harbor, exploded mysteriously. All but two of its officers were off the ship at the time. The **Spanish-American war** had begun.

Spain, weakened by conflict elsewhere, limped to battle, trying to preserve some dignity in the Caribbean. They nearly beat future US president Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders (though they'd had to leave their horses on the mainland) in the Battle of San Juan Hill. The USA's vastly superior forces eventually prevailed, however, and on December 12, 1898, a peace treaty ending the war was signed. The Cubans, including General Calixto García, whose largely black army had inflicted dozens of defeats on the Spanish, were not invited.

The USA, hobbled by a law requiring its own government to respect Cuban self-determination, could not annex Cuba outright, as it did Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines. In 1903, the USA built a naval base at Guantánamo Bay that is still in operation today.

By the 1920s US companies owned two-thirds of Cuba's farmland, imposing tariffs that crippled Cuba's own manufacturing industries. Discrimination against blacks was institutionalised. Tourism based on drinking, gambling and prostitution flourished. In 1933 Morales was overthrown in a coup, and army sergeant **Fulgencio Batista** seized power. Over the next 20 years Cuba crumbled, and its assets were increasingly placed into foreign hands. On January 1, 1959, Batista's dictatorship was overthrown after a three-year guerilla campaign led by young lawyer **Fidel Castro**. Batista fled Cuba for the Dominican Republic, taking with him US\$40 million of government funds.

Castro was named prime minister and began reforming the nation's economy, cutting rents and nationalizing landholdings larger than 400 hectares. Relations with the USA, already shaky, deteriorated when he nationalized US-owned petroleum refineries that had refused to process Venezuelan oil. The Americans retaliated by cutting Cuban sugar imports, crippling the Cuban economy, and the CIA began plotting devious ways to overthrow the revolutionary government.

In 1961, 1400 CIA-trained Cuban expats, mainly upper-middle-class Batista supporters who had fled to Miami after the revolution, attacked the island at the **Bay of Pigs**. They were promptly captured and ransomed back to the US for medical supplies. The following week,

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	<p>Castro announced the 'socialist nature' of the revolutionary government, and its relationship with the Soviet Union flourished, who provided food, technical support and, of course, nuclear weapons. The October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis is said to be the closest the world has ever come to nuclear conflict.</p> <p>The missiles were shipped back to the USSR, and the USA declared an embargo on Cuba. Castro and his Minister of Economics, Che Guevara, began actively supporting guerilla groups in South America and Africa, sending troops and advisers to assist socialist insurgencies in Zaire, Angola, Mozambique, Bolivia (where Guevara was killed) and Ethiopia. The US response was to support dictators in many of those countries.</p> <p>In December 1991, the Cuban Constitution was amended to remove all references to Marxism-Leninism, and economic reforms began. In 1993, laws passed allowing Cubans to own and use US dollars, be self-employed and open farmers' markets. Taxes on dollar incomes and profits were levied in 1994, and in September 1996 foreign companies were allowed to wholly own and operate businesses and purchase real estate. These measures gradually brought the economy out of its post-Soviet tailspin. The US responded by stiffening its embargo with the Helms-Burton Act, ironically solidifying Castro's position.</p> <p>In July of 2006, Fidel Castro handed off the reins of government for the first time in 47 years. The reins were not passed far. In fact, Fidel turned over the day-to-day chores of governing to his younger brother Raúl Castro, who was already the head of the Cuban armed forces and the head of Cuba's Communist party.</p>
Books	Frommer's Cuba – a comprehensive guide to the country.
1000 Places to see before you die	<p>Cuba's Jazz Festival – mid Feb in Havana</p> <p>La Habana Vieja – Havana's Old Quarter</p> <p>Hemingway's Hangouts – La Floridita and La Bodeguita del Medio</p>
Must Sees	Havana, Trinidad, the countryside, the people
SPORTS ACTIVITIES	<p>Baseball is the national sport. Cuba's amateur players are considered some of the best in the world, and the premier players are aggressively scouted and courted by Major League Baseball. The regular season runs November through March, and playoffs and the final championship usually carry the season on into May. Most major towns and cities have a local team. Some of the consistently better teams include Pinar del Río, Sancti Spíritus, Santiago de Cuba, Santa Clara, and of course Havana's Industriales. It's usually easy to buy tickets at the box office for less than 5 Cuban pesos, or ask at your hotel and perhaps they can get you tickets in advance.</p> <p>If you want to bring presents for the locals, you can't go wrong with any baseball equipment!</p>

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Golf	The country's only regulation 18-hole golf course is the Varadero Golf Club (www.varaderogolfclub.com). The course is a relatively flat resort course, with lots of water, plenty of sand, great views, and almost no rough. Greens fees are \$60 for 18 holes
Fishing	There's fabulous deep-sea sport-fishing for marlin, sailfish, tuna, dorado, and more off of most of Cuba's extensive coastline, while the Zapata Peninsula and Cayo Largo del Sur may just be some of the best and least exploited bone-fishing spots left in the hemisphere. The mountain lake and resort of Hanabanilla is getting good grades as a freshwater ground for widemouth and black bass. A half-day of fishing should cost between CUC\$150 and CUC\$400, while a full day can run between CUC\$300 and CUC\$1,400, including gear and lunch, depending on the size of the boat and number of fishermen. There's a broad network of state-run marinas all around Cuba; the greatest number are run by Cubanacán (tel. 7/208-6044; www.cubanacan.cu) and Gaviota (tel. 7/66-9668; www.gaviota-grupo.com). All offer sport fishing charters
Hiking	Walking along Havana's Malecón: your best bet is to start in Habana Vieja and work your way toward the Hotel Nacional in Vedado. Take your time to stop and sit on the sea wall for a spell, and be sure to talk to some of the locals on your way. If you time it right, you will reach the Hotel Nacional in the late afternoon - a good time to grab a cool drink and enjoy the setting sun from their "Compass Card" outdoor terrace. Hiking Pico Turquino: Pico Turquino, tucked within the celebrated Sierra Maestra National Park, is the highest peak in Cuba at just under 2,000m. The trail to the summit is swathed in cloud forest and tropical flora. Mountaineers in good physical condition can do the 15km round-trip journey in a day, but most camp overnight below the summit. The panoramic views of the coast and Caribbean Sea are breathtaking.
Cycling	With a local reliance on bicycles for everyday transportation and a relatively well-maintained road network serving a small motor vehicular fleet, Cuba is a great country to tour by bicycle. There are very few operations renting decent bikes in Cuba, so it may be best to bring your own. There are also specialist tour companies who organize biking holidays in Cuba: try Holiday-n-Adventure (1877-415-4329)
Diving	There are fabulous scuba diving and snorkeling opportunities on the coral reefs, ocean walls, and ancient wrecks that lie just off Cuba's coasts. María la Gorda, Isla de la Juventud, Playa Larga, Playa Girón, and Los Jardines de la Reina are widely considered the absolute top scuba-diving destinations. You will also find perfectly acceptable dive opportunities and operations in Varadero, Cayo Coco, Cayo Guillermo, Guardalavaca, and Cayo Largo del Sur

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CULTURE	
Music	<p>Buena Vista Social Club; rumba; jazz; salsa; son</p> <p>Cuba has a strong tradition in the performing arts. Cuban musicians, playing in a range of styles, are world-renowned. The Cuban National Ballet (tel. 7/855-3084; www.balletcuba.cu) has been garnering international accolades for decades, under the seemingly eternal direction of Alicia Alonso.</p> <p>The Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (Cuban National Folklore Group) hosts the weekly <i>Sábado de la Rumba</i>, a mesmerizing show of Afro-Cuban religious and secular dance and drumming. The 2-hour shows are presented every Saturday at 3pm, at El Gran Palenque, Calle 4, between Calzada and Avenida 5 in Vedado.</p>
Museums	<p>Museo de la Ciudad, Havana: Old Havana's preeminent museum displays colonial-era art and artifacts. It's worth the price of admission alone to stroll the rooms, outdoor courtyards, and interior veranda of the former Palacio de los Capitanes Generales (Palace of the Captain Generals), which houses the museum.</p> <p>The National Fine Arts Museum fills three floors of this square-city-block building, and the design - with a central courtyard and zigzagging ramped stairwell - can make navigating the upper floors confusing, so allow yourself plenty of time, and be prepared to get mildly lost inside. An extensive collection of Cuban art and sculpture is on display at the newly renovated main building here. Modern masters like Wifredo Lam, Raúl Martínez, Amelia Peláez, and Rene Portocarrero are well represented. The international collection is now housed in a recently restored early-20th-century gem of a building.</p>
Festivals	<p>The Havana Jazz Festival, each February, organised by Chucho Valdés, is an internationally renowned event that consistently attracts an excellent line-up, with performances at venues around the city. Cuban music enjoyed a worldwide boost in popularity due to the success of the Buena Vista Social Club, and rightly so. Cuban son was a precursor to salsa and much excellent Latin jazz emanates from this sunny Caribbean island.</p> <p>What better place for a jazz festival than Havana, with its rich musical heritage and unique atmosphere? The Hotel Rivera acts as the festival headquarters, while the Casa de la Cultura Plaza, Teatro Nacional de Cuba, Teatro Amadeo Roldán, Teatro Mella and Teatro Karl Marx also host performances</p> <p>Carnival Santiago de Cuba July/Aug: in the intense heat of summer, Santiago de Cuba explodes with the island's best carnival, an evocative celebration of the city's Afro-Caribbean roots. Ripe with rumba music, conga processions, booming percussion, fanciful floats, and wild costumes, it's a participatory party.</p>

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<p>ATTRACTIONS</p>	<p>Trinidad - The best-preserved colonial city in Cuba, in the shadow of the Escambray mountains, Trinidad was not even linked by road to the rest of the country until the 1950s. Declared a national monument by the Cuban government this city is very much as it was four centuries ago, the beauty of its baroque architecture and cobblestones squares harking back to a bygone era when Trinidad was a key player in the Caribbean slave trade. There are many interesting things to see (e.g Guamuhaaya Archaeological Museum, Plaza Mayor, Church of Santa Ana, Calle Simon Bolivar....) but the most impressive of all Trinidad's many museums is Trinidad Municipal Museum and a visit to the Taller Alfarero, a large ceramics workshop where traditional techniques are still used is also worthwhile.</p>
<p>Beaches</p>	<p>Varadero is Cuba's premier beach resort destination, and it ranks right up there with the best in the Caribbean. If you're looking for a well-run all-inclusive resort loaded with amenities and activity options, Varadero is a good choice, with a 21km stretch of nearly uninterrupted beach. If you prefer less commercialized beach destinations, consider the various Cayo destinations along the north coast.</p>
<p>Wildlife</p>	<p>Bird-Watching in the Zapata Peninsula: A dedicated (and lucky) bird-watcher might be able to spot 18 of Cuba's 22 endemic species in the swamps, mangroves, and wetlands of the Zapata Peninsula. In addition to the endemics, ornithologists and lay bird-watchers can spot over 100 other varieties of shore birds, transients, and waterfowl in this rich, wild region. Other top bird-watching destinations include La Güira National Park, as well as the areas around Cayo Coco and Cayo Guillermo and Baracoa.</p> <p>Cayo Largo: In the Archipiélago de los Canarreos, off the south coast, 177 km southeast of Havana; 38 sq km, 26 km long, 2 km wide; glittering white sands faced by turquoise waters; 200 shipwrecks in the area, shallow coral reefs; wildlife: turtles, iguanas, cranes, flamingos, bee hummingbirds; Playa Paraiso – nude beach; Cayo Iguana – home to 100's of friendly iguanas</p>
<p>Parks</p>	<p>Gran Parque Natural Montemar: 4500 sq km, Peninsula de Zapata, vast wetland of mangroves, 160 birds species, 31 reptiles, 12 mammals, manatee sea-cows, hummingbirds, flamingos, parrots, Apr/May red land crabs swarm in their 10,000's</p> <p>The Viñales Valley: This broad, flat valley is punctuated by a series of limestone karst hill formations, or mogotes. The views from the small mountains surrounding the valley are spectacular. The area offers great opportunities for hiking, mountain biking, bird-watching, and rock climbing, as well as caves to explore.</p> <p>Sierra del Rosario Biosphere Reserve: (100 km west of Havana) The mountainous region between Havana and Pinar del Río is another</p>

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	<p>prime destination in the country's budding eco-tourism industry. With both the Sierra del Rosario Biosphere Reserve and La Güira National Park, as well as eco-tourism projects in Soroa and at Las Terrazas, the area offers a wealth of opportunities to explore the flora and fauna of Cuba's inland mountain forests. Add the sulfurous mineral springs of San Diego de los Baños into the mix, and you've got the perfect recipe for some nature-based rest and relaxation. Declared a UNESCO biosphere reserve in 1985, the 25,000-hectare (nearly 62,000-acre) Sierra del Rosario encompasses a mountainous area of rapidly recovering secondary tropical deciduous forests, cut with numerous rivers and waterfalls. Nearly 100 species of birds can be spotted here, including over half of Cuba's 22 endemic species.</p>
Gardens	<p>Parque Josone in Varadero is a beautifully maintained little city park with cool shady grounds and gardens.</p>
Castles/Forts	<p>Castillo de la Real Fuerza, Havana: a well-preserved 16th-century fort sits within a broad cloverleaf moat. This is the oldest fort in Havana, and the oldest surviving fort in the hemisphere. It was a failure, built too small and too far from the harbor entrance to be of much use, but crossing over the old drawbridge and walking around the ancient stone battlements gives a great sense of history.</p>

OTHER ACTIVITIES	
Shopping	<p>Highlights of Cuban craftsmanship include articles made from leather, vegetable fibers, wood, stone, metal and coal as well as traditional clothing such as Cuban hats and "guayaberas", beautifully cool, comfortable shirts made from pure linen, and select Cuban tobacco products such as Havana cigars.</p> <p>There are nine shopping centers in Varadero where beautiful examples of Cuban craftsmanship can be found as well as delicious local produce. They are generally open from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m</p>
Markets	<p>Havana: The biggest and best street market in Havana features three narrow rows of stalls stretching over a full city block. It's open daily from 10am to 6pm in Habana Vieja on Calle Tacón, between Calles Empedrado and Chacón. In addition to the typical arts and crafts and souvenir T-shirts, you'll find scores of local painters selling their wares.</p> <p>Varadero: There are several outdoor arts and craft markets around Varadero; the best, Artesanía, is at Avenida 1 and Calle 12. The Plaza de los Artesanos is also good. ARTex has stores at each of these sites, as well as at Avenida 1 and Calle 35. At each you will find a broad collection of trinkets, T-shirts, musical instruments, posters, and CDs.</p>
Nightlife	<p>Tropicana, Havana: This is the original and still reigning cabaret show in Cuba. The Tropicana has been at it for over 60 years and it shows no signs of slowing down. The sea of lithe dancers, the exuberance of their costumes, and the sheer excess of it all is worth the trip. It all occurs</p>

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	<p>under the stars in the shadow of tall overhanging trees. There's a second Tropicana in Matanzas for visitors to Varadero, and another in Santiago.</p> <p>El Gato Tuerto, Havana: The mood is dark and bohemian, although the decor mixes Art Deco and kitsch in equal measure. The nightly show usually features three or four distinct acts, which can range from sultry boleros to up-tempo jazz. A storyteller, poet, or comedian might perform between sets.</p> <p>La Zorra y El Cuervo, Havana: This is Havana's best jazz club, and that's saying a lot. The vibe is mellow and unpretentious in this compact basement club, but the music and acts are usually culled from the best Cuba has to offer.</p> <p>Habana Café, Havana and Varadero: Mix the Tropicana with a Hard Rock Cafe, and Habana Café is more or less what you'd get. The floor show is a mix of cabaret-style dance numbers and slightly burlesque comedic bits, all anchored by a top-notch big band. After the show, the dance floor swings and writhes for hours</p>
Casinos	None in Cuba – unlike pre-Castro days!

CUISINE	
Food	<p>Cuban cuisine is influenced by Spanish, African, indigenous and other cultures. The national dish is ajiaco, a stew of assorted root vegetables cooked with pork, poultry or beef. Other typical dishes are lechón (roast pork), fried green plantains (tachinos, chatinos or tostones), black beans, congrí (rice with red beans), moros y cristianos (rice with black beans), picadillo a la habanera (ground beef in tomato sauce), roast chicken and tamales among others. The Cuban sweet tooth ensures that each meal includes dessert.</p>
Wine	<p>Cuban national cocktails include the Cuba Libre (rum and cola) and the Mojito (rum, lime, sugar, mint leaves, club soda and ice). If you request a rum in a small country restaurant do not be surprised if it is only available by the bottle. Havana Club is the national brand and the most popular. Expect to pay \$4 for three year old white rum or \$8 for seven year old dark rum.</p> <p>Cristal is a light beer and is available in "dollar" stores where Cubans with CUCs and visitors may shop. Cubans prefer the Bucanero Fuerte, which at 5.5% alcohol is a strong (hence the "fuerte") darker beer. Both Cristal and Bucanero are brewed by a joint venture with Labatts of Canada, whose beer is the only Cuban beer sold in CUC.</p> <p>In nearby Cardenas is the Arrechabala Rum Factory, where the brand Havana Club was born and where present-day Varadero and Buccanero rums are made. Tours of the factory are given daily between 9am and 4pm; admission is \$3.</p>
Restaurants	The best restaurants are within the major resorts, but good food will also be found in paladares (locally owned restaurants in private homes).

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	Restaurants in Varadero: Mi Casita – Cuban style seafood; El Bodegon – Creole cooking; La Casa de Antiguiedades – best in town; Nightlife: La Cueva de Pirata – Latin music; Casa du Pont – quiet piano bar and gorgeous views
MORE INFO	
Brochures	Transat Holidays Sun 2009-2010 Nolitours Sun 2009-2010
Websites	www.transatholidays.com www.nolitours.com www.solmeliacuba.com www.gocuba.ca
HOTEL PRIZE PARTNERS	Melia Cayo Santa Maria and Tryp Peninsula Varadero – see Sol Melia Cuba section above.
AIRLINE PRIZE PARTNER	Air Transat
Flight details	Transat has many flights from across Canada to Cuba. Here's the weekly line-up from Toronto and Montreal for 2009-2010: Cayo Coco: 6 flights Montreal; 7 flights Toronto Santa Clara: 9 flights Montreal; 6 flights Toronto Holguin: 8 flights Montreal; 3 flights Toronto Varadero: 13 flights Montreal; 15 flights Toronto Flight times are 3 to 4 hours.
PERSONAL EXPERIENCES	Several trips to Cuba including visits to: Havana, Varadero, Holguin, Cayo Largo, Cayo Coco and Trinidad

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