

## 11 THINGS ABOUT CUBA YOU *THOUGHT* YOU KNEW

Cuba is a land like no other. Though the largest island in the Caribbean, other than its weather, Cuba has very little in common with the neighboring islands. Far from Europe, Spanish and French architecture is pervasive. Just a stone's throw from the United States, it is world apart in so many ways.

'Cuba' has been a major buzzword since President Obama's declaration that despite the current embargo, the relationship between our two nations would begin to normalize. Few truly understand the weight or meaning of these words: embargo and to normalize relations.

Having ridden the ebb and flow in the wake of both governments' attempt at normalization, it is surprising to hear the perplexity of people's beliefs. Below are a few clarifications:

- You thought:** The US Embargo against Cuba was lifted.  
**In fact,** the Embargo is very much in place. Some rules regarding financing exports and travel have eased, but continue to be regulated.
- You thought:** I can look forward to a Cuban vacation  
**In fact,** tourism for Americans is not permitted under current law. For legal travel to Cuba, one must obtain a visa. In order to be granted this visa, each passenger must fall under one of 12 categories including 'Religious,' 'People-to-People,' 'Educational,' or 'Humanitarian Projects' in accordance with OFAC (Office of Foreign Assets Control) regulations. Visitors to Cuba must then adhere to a specific itinerary
- You thought:** In order to fly to Cuba, you must depart from another country such as Mexico.  
**In fact,** you may legally fly into Cuba from many United States cities if you have obtained your Cuban visa (see #2). Currently there are several gateway cities in the US offering non-stop service to Cuba
- You thought:** having a foreign passport though living in the U.S. I don't need a Cuban visa like Americans.  
**In fact,** you will certainly need a visa if you reside in the US; it's your residence that counts, not citizenship
- You thought:** Ferries and cruise ships sail the waters between the US and Cuba.  
**In fact,** although both types of marine transportation have been declared legal, neither has become truly operational. The occasional European cruise ship docks in Havana's main harbor, but certainly an anomaly. Regardless, it's no way to experience the 'real' Cuba!
- You thought:** The folksong 'Guantanamera' emanated from our Mexican neighbors to the south.  
**In fact,** this lively tune has proud roots in this island nation and is the country's most patriotic song. The official lyrics are based on a poem written by Cuban national hero, José Martí. The catchy nature of the song lends itself to improvised stanzas, but all meanings eventually lead back to a woman from Guantánamo Bay.
- You thought:** Cigars are Cuba's #1 export.  
**In fact,** healthcare professionals, mainly doctors, have moved to the forefront of Cuban exportation. More than 37,000 Cubans are currently working in 77 countries around the world. Cuba has been sending physicians overseas since the early 1960's. A word to the wise: there is now no limit to bringing cigars back to the US for personal consumption!
- You thought:** The controversial Guantánamo Bay naval base was US territory.  
**In fact,** the US rents the area as per a contract signed in the early 1900's. The curious fact is that despite the United States paying rent for use of this area on a regular basis, Cuba has cashed but one rent check-- and that was in error! Story has it that Fidel's desk drawer is stuffed to the brim in uncashed checks.
- You thought:** Before going to Cuba, you would cash U.S. dollars into Cuban pesos at your local bank.  
**In fact,** exchange between the two country's currencies is not traded internationally outside of the island country. After arriving in Cuba, passengers are then able to exchange US dollars or other currency into CUCs, Cuban Convertible Pesos, the acceptable form of payment for goods and services. Note that for international exchange purposes 1 CUC = \$1 USD. However, there is a 10% penalty charged when exchanging US dollars that is not levied with other currencies. So, in actuality, you only receive 87 CUCs, allowing for the penalty and a 3% currency exchange fee.
- You thought:** Pharmacies might be similar to those found in the US.  
**In fact:** The few local pharmacies you'll find are very poorly stocked. Two synagogues in Havana actually house and run pharmacies open to the community at large, regardless of religion. Their shelves are kept full by donations from groups bringing urgently needed supplies.
- You thought:** You didn't need to bring much cash with you as credit cards and ATMs can now be used.  
**In fact:** The good news is that these alternative payment methods are now legal after many years of being banned. The real good news is that if you travel with Exclusive Expeditions, most things are included! The bad news: there is no infrastructure set up to accommodate credit cards and ATMs at this time. Word to the wise: although many things are considerably lower priced, bring more money than you think you'll need!

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