

Cuba Natural History Tour

February 23 – March 5, 2018

Special Tour for North Durham Nature

Escorted by Ecologist James Kamstra



Perhaps best known as a sun destination, Cuba is also a great place to experience the natural side of the Caribbean. With natural ecosystems ranging from mangrove swamps, rainforest clad mountains, sawgrass marshes and semi-deciduous forest, the island harbours a wide range of wildlife including 25 species of endemic birds and many more reptiles and amphibians. Culturally Cuba is unique with its music, architecture and history. This tour is designed to sample the main habitats in the western half of Cuba to see as many of the wildlife species as possible, as well take in some cultural features.

GUIDE INFORMATION:



James Kamstra your tour leader, is an ecologist and naturalist who has travelled widely in the Caribbean and Central America. He has guided many nature tours to Latin America including Belize, Costa Rica, Panama, Guyana and Trinidad. James has been fascinated by many facets of nature since he was a boy particularly birds, reptiles, insects and plants. He will share his broad understanding of the region's flora and fauna having studied tropical ecology. James works as an ecologist / environmental consultant examining the impacts of various developments on the natural environment. A knowledgeable Cuban naturalist will also accompany the group in all areas.

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ITINERARY

Day 1 (23-Feb-18). Arrive Havana

Transfer from airport to a local family house in Havana. Meet the leader and settle in. An evening introduction to Cuban geography, natural history and the tour will be presented.

Overnight: Hotel Copacabana or similar Meals: none

Day 2 (24-Feb-18). Viñales National Park

This morning we'll have an early start for our drive to Pinar del Rio Province, west of Havana. Before leaving Havana, we'll drive by the Colon Cemetery and stop at Revolution Square. Along the way, we'll travel through fertile farmland of sugar cane and market gardens that slowly give way to tobacco farms. These areas are dominated by Cuba's national tree, the Cuban Royal Palm.

The local tobacco grown here is used for the famous Cuban cigars said to be the best in the world. We'll visit the Cigar Factory in Pinar del Rio, the town of Viñales and the private Caridad Tropical Garden, which features diverse tropical fruits and exotic trees. We will have time to explore this bustling Cuban market town and perhaps meet some of the locals. This will be a great introduction to the Cuban way of life that the beach tourists seldom see.

We will explore Viñales National Park. This park is located in the Sierra de los Organos, a region dominated by surreal limestone knolls with vertical walls and rounded tops, formed during the Jurassic period. As we wander the rocky trails, we'll look for ancient tree ferns, endemic snails and termite nests. This is also a good area to find endemic birds such as the Cuban Solitaire and Cuban Trogon, Cuba's national bird. If conditions permit, near sunset, we will visit a cave just as the resident bats are leaving it for their nightly activities.

Overnight: Homestay in Vinales Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 3 (25-Feb-18). Viñales National Park

Nature walk along the San Vicente Trail in Viñales National Park in the morning to see more of the spectacular forest with its diverse structure and some of the birdlife adapted to it. Lunch will be at Mural de la Prehistoria Restaurant where local artists have painted a rock face with prehistoric creatures. Afternoon opportunity to leisurely explore the valley on our own.

Overnight: Homestay in Viñales Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 4 (26-Feb-18). La Güira National Park

Our destination for today is La Güira National Park in the Sierra del Rosario Mountains. This area is known as the 'rainbow of Cuba', because of its above average rainfall. We'll enjoy a morning excursion at Hacienda La Cortina, which is now a derelict estate within the park. The relic buildings and ruins slowly being re-colonized by the natural vegetation, adding to the ambience. As well as interesting plant life this is a good site to see the endemic Olive-capped Warbler.

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After lunch, we'll visit the Soroa's Orchidarium, operated by the University of Pinar del Río, to see some of the epiphytic orchids in their natural surroundings. A variety of Cuban birds can also be viewed on the grounds. We'll arrive at our hotel in time for dinner and this evening we plan to do some star-gazing in the clear mountain air. After dark we will search for Cuba's endemic owls, namely the Bare-legged Owl (Cuban Screech-Owl) and Cuban Pygmy Owl.

Overnight: Hotel Soroa, Sierra del Rosario or similar

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 5 (27-Feb-18). Sierra del Rosario

After breakfast, we will set off for the Reserva Sierra del Rosario, Cuba's first Biosphere Reserve. Introduced forestry practices were so successful here that they became a model for similar forestry schemes in other parts of the Cuba and the world. We will hike along one of the many trails and visit a restored 18th century coffee plantation, formerly owned by French coffee planters from Haiti, who fled to Cuba after the slave revolts. As we marvel at the spectacular view, we will listen for the echo of the cooing song of the beautiful Cuban Trogon on the hillside below. This area also offers the very best opportunity to see the rare and endemic Gundlach's Hawk.

In the afternoon, we will visit the village of Las Terrazas, a model commune village. Return to our hotel.

Overnight: Hotel Soroa, Sierra del Rosario or similar

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 6 (28-Feb-18). Parque Natural Ciénaga de Zapata

Today we'll take the Autopista from Soroa to Playa Giron. Although this entails several hours driving, we will break up the journey with several stops. Along the way, we'll have lunch at Pio Cua restaurant. Our destination is the fabled Zapata Swamp, which occupies the Zapata Peninsula and is renowned as the largest wetland in the insular Caribbean, which is similar in many ways to the Florida Everglades. Our home for the next two nights will be at Playa Larga, on the Bay of Pigs. We will visit a rehabilitation and breeding centre for the rare and threatened Cuban Parrot and the crocodile farm at La Boca. This breeding and research facility is sponsored by the World Wildlife Fund and is also involved in rehabilitation efforts for the endangered Cuban Crocodile.

In the afternoon we'll explore Bermejas, searching for many endemic bird species, including the diminutive Bee Hummingbird. Other specialties to search for here include the distinctive Fernandina's Flicker and the Gray-fronted Quail-Dove.

Overnight: Homestay in Playa Giron or Hotel Playa Giron or similar

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch,

Dinner

Day 7 (01-Mar-18). Parque Natural Ciénaga de Zapata

In the morning we will explore Soplillar to see some of the forest species. We will have lunch at La Cuevas de los Peces, a quaint restaurant located next to a sea cave pool filled with multihued fish. Blue-headed Quail Doves often can be seen near the restaurant. Then we'll take an afternoon drive to explore Las Salinas del Brito Fauna Reserve on the Zapata Peninsula. The road makes its way through savannahs, mangrove thickets and hardwood hammocks. This 3,000 km² wetland is one of the most important staging and wintering areas for

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migratory birds in the Caribbean basin. The mudflats support large numbers of egrets, various waterfowl and shorebirds, as well as American Flamingos. We will likely see the Cuban Black Hawk here and there is a chance of seeing the rare endemic Fernandina's Flicker.

Later, we will have time to swim and snorkel in the warm, clear waters of the Bay of Pigs. We will return to our hotel in time to stroll along the beach and enjoy the sunset.

Overnight: Homestay in Playa Giron or Hotel Playa Giron or similar Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 8 (02-Mar-18). Cienfuegos / Trinidad

This morning we set off for the picturesque colonial port city of Trinidad.

Along the way we'll stop in Cienfuegos to stretch our legs and experience the architecture of the streets and squares of the French-style city. Also we will make a stop at the nearby Soledad Botanical Gardens near Cienfuegos.

Founded in 1514, Trinidad was the third Spanish settlement in Cuba and it retains a historic collection of restored, single-story buildings topped by curvaceous clay-tiled roofs enclosed by cobblestone streets. The area around Trinidad, called the Valle de Los Ingenios, was home to many sugar mills and was the source of Cuba's prosperity in the early 1800s. The ruins of many of the old mills still dot the countryside and the entire area has been designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Overnight: Ecotur Lodge

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 9 (03-Mar-18). Topes de Collantes

A full day tour to Topes de Collantes, a nature reserve in the heart of the Escambray Mountains. These mountains in the south central part of the island rise to over 900 m above sea level. They are covered with lush tropical rainforest with verdant tree ferns on the north slope and a drier semi-deciduous forest on the south slope with endemic flora and wildlife. Nature walk will include an option to hike to Caburni Fall or we will explore the easier Guanayara trail observing wildlife along the way.

Overnight: Ecotour Lodge

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 10 (04-Mar-18). Trinidad – Havana

Today we will travel back to Havana and once arriving there, have the rest of the day at leisure.

Overnight: Hotel Copacabana or similar

Meals: Breakfast only

Day 11 (05-Mar-18). Depart Havana

Transfer to the airport. If scheduled flight allows it, we'll visit the Morro Castle en route.

Meals: Breakfast only.

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TOUR COSTS

\$2,690 USD based on per person twin
Single supplement: add \$350

The land cost can be paid in either USD or CAD equivalent
A 2% discount is available for payments made by cheque (excluding air ticket)

AIR:

Option 1: \$850.76 CAD (including taxes)
AIR CANADA: Toronto/Havana (non-stop)
Air Canada 1874G 23FEB YYZHAV SS1 755A 1130A
Air Canada 1875G 05MAR HAVYYZ SS1 1230P 400P

Option 2: \$759.66 CAD (including taxes)
DELTA AIRLINES: Toronto/JFK/Havana (one stop)
Delta 4100W 23FEB YYZJFK SS1 600A 750A Delta 448W 23FEB JFKHAV SS1 940A 135P
Delta 648W 05MAR HAVATL SS1 235P 438P Delta 4142W 05MAR ATLYYZ SS1 750P 1009P

DEPOSIT: \$500 (land) + 100% air

Deposits are due by November 3. On that day, if there are sufficient travellers to go ahead, then the \$500 deposit will be charged along with 100% of the air ticket payment.
The flight cost will be based on your choice and availability at time of reservation.

Air flight pricing is in CAD.

Included in Price:

- English-speaking nature tour guide, air-conditioned coach, all transfers, entrance fees to protected areas, as well as every service described in the program.
- All meals as indicated in itinerary
- In case of hotel unavailability, we will provide similar standard hotels in the area according to availability
- Airport transfers included on the itinerary are meant to be for the whole group, considering all pax are arriving and departing on same flights. Private airport transfers are NOT included.

NOT included in Price: Drinks at meals, insurance, tips and porters service.

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