



Louise's Cuban Experience Private Cuba Tour Program



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Louise Kometer, her husband Max, daughter Zoe and Zoe's partner Cass spent eight days living like locals in Old Havana and Mariel. They sipped mojitos in local bars, ate what was in season and played dominoes with a local family in their back garden — “That got heated,” Louise laughs. “We were able to just melt our way into the local environment thanks to Experience Cuba,” says Max.

Day 1: Havana. Arriving in Havana. “Even the way people walk down the street has rhythm,” says Zoe, an art and photography teacher.

“There's just Cuban music everywhere. It starts spilling out of the cafes at 7am and carries on in the bars and the restaurants until after midnight. The musicians are amazing.” Amazing enough to get the whole family on the dance floor. The family's photo albums overflow with musicians on street corners, in cafes and hotels plucking harps, strumming pink guitars, flicking double basses and keeping time with bongos and maracas.

The music was all part of the romance of a visit to Cuba that Louise had always imagined. “My dad was a fan of socialism and Fidel and Che. It's been a lifelong dream to go; I had this romantic idea of Cuba but it's so much more than I imagined.”

The family spent their first night in a Spanish colonial apartment in Old Havana. “It was on the top floor with high ceilings and a wraparound balcony,” remembers Louise. “There was a beautiful dining room with furniture made by the owner's grandfather. Music was coming out of the bar below, and we followed it for mojitos, Cuba Libres and a simple dinner of baked chicken.”





Day 2: Havana. Old Havana walking tour and classic convertible car ride. “We woke with the music,” says Louise. “Then the owners arrived to cook us a breakfast of fresh fruit, eggs and coffee. It was just magic.”

Breakfast was followed by a walking tour of Old Havana in the company of Experience Cuba Tour guide, Alejandro, who just happens to be civil engineer and architect volunteering with a co-op to restore the crumbling buildings of Old Havana.

“Every day the guides brought so much knowledge that we wouldn’t otherwise have got,” says Max. “Alejandro pointed out the restorations that were being done in the traditional method, with pulley systems built out of windows to haul up wheelbarrows.”

The afternoon took the family into the modern part of Havana in a classic convertible. “They call them Frankenstein cars,” says Max. “The sanctions meant they couldn’t get parts, so there’s a real art to keeping them on the road. Across the road from our apartment they were making car doors. The lights would dim as they drained power for the tools. Wherever you go in Cuba, they’re doing whatever they can whenever they can. It’s not a nine-to-five city.”

Day 3. Havana. Hemingway Tour. A highlight of the family’s Hemingway day was an exclusive tour of Hemingway’s house, Finca Vigía. “That’s the sort of thing we were offered because we weren’t part of a busload of tourists,” says Max. “We had an exclusive insight, and we learned a lot about Hemingway and his connection to Cuba.”

Day 4. Havana. A personal adventure. Having got their bearings of Havana, the family choose to spend the fourth day exploring the city on their own. Their wanderings took them to the Almacenes San José Artisans’ Market. Cass and Zoe loaded up on art that now hangs in their home in Goolwa, South Australia. Louise treated herself to some pearl and silver earrings and a bracelet fashioned from 1952 coins.

The family also passed the El Caballero de París (the Gentleman from Paris), a statue of an articulate Spanish drifter. Before he died in 1985, the “Parisian” Gentleman himself roamed Havana in a cape, making gifts of his drawings to strangers. The beard of the bronze statue is polished gold by those who stroke it, because it is said that so doing will bring you back to Havana.



Day 5. Mariel. A taste of Cuba. Anyone reading our reviews on TripAdvisor will know that our signature excursion attracts rave reviews. For our founder, it's a highly personal experience because Mariel is her home town. "We visited a family, who told us straight away, 'My house is your house'," says Louise. "Then he opened a bottle of special cider and the day took off from there. We talked through lunch and dinner, snacked on homemade plantain chips." Music again played its part; this time with Zoe sharing some of her favourite Australian bands on Spotify. "It was like hanging out with your own family," says Zoe. "The father showed us his mango tree, which has been in the family for generations. We helped in the kitchen, and we shared their dinner table. They taught us dominoes — there are a lot of rules. We drank rum and mojitos; and it felt like we'd known them all our lives."



Day 6. Havana. Exploring more of Old Havana. A short but pleasant drive home to Old Havana then a day to revisiting what seem by now old haunts in the local neighbourhood, including favourite cafes and stuffed bookshops. More art for Cass and Zoe; more salsa dancing for the whole family.



Day 7. Havana. Rum and Cigar tour. "It's like a wine tasting but with cigars," says Louise of their tour of the cigar factory. "The cigar sommelier shows you how coffee and rum change your palate. You start with coffee then you smoke this cigar — they taught you how to light it — then a sip of rum which coats your tongue and it tastes different."



Apparently, the cigar puts a lining on your tastebuds, so you can theoretically drink more rum.”

Day 8. Havana. Departure. On the day they left Cuba, the family knew they would return to visit more of the island. It's a promise to themselves that they intend to keep.

On the one-year anniversary of their trip, they got together to relive the adventure. And in the meantime, Cass has bought himself a Cuban tres guitar, so the family can still surround themselves with the sounds of Cuba even at home in South Australia.





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Additional Itinerary Notes

It is an exciting time in Cuba with rapidly changing legislation and local conditions. Cuba has seen a massive increase in tourism, which has put a strain on local tourist infrastructure. While we will strive to operate our tours as closely to published itineraries as possible, conditions often change from one day to the next, and minor tour modifications may be necessary with no advance notice. Casa Particulares (homestays, B&B's or guesthouses) are family run businesses that are legal and formalised to provide accommodation to foreigners in Cuba. Though much nicer than general Cuban homes they can seem quite rustic and bare compared to what most international travellers are used to back home. Experience Cuba Tours utilises different categories of casas (Standard, Comfort and Select homestays and guesthouses), private self-contained apartments, villas and hotels stays, so make sure to let us know your preferences to quote accordingly. Cuba as a developing country is subject to power outages and it is common to have low water pressures in the showers and sinks. It is also common for the shower to be electric. If understanding and expectations are kept in check staying at Casa Particulares is a very personal and pleasurable way to accommodate yourself in Cuba.

The transport system in Cuba is in many ways different to anywhere else in the world. Experience Cuba Tours, as other tour operators in the island, are restricted in a large way by the local transport laws. We use privately owned transport with approved licences to provide taxi services to tourists and the state-owned transport services of TRANSTUR, the only inter-provincial taxi provider in Cuba. The privately-owned transports vary between classic vintage cars (hardtop and convertible) and more modern models of cars, all in good condition. It is not law in Cuba for cars to be fitted with seat belts and neither is it against the law to use a mobile phone while driving. This is not condoned or encouraged by Experience Cuba Tours but when travelling to other countries it is customary to abide by the local laws. Should you have any issues or concerns regarding your tour or services provided to you by Experience Cuba Tours, Tailored Journeys Pty Ltd while on your tour, you should contact the company's representative Laynet Luna immediately. We will attempt in good faith to resolve the issue. Failure to notify the company at the time may limit Experience Cuba Tour's ability to resolve the matter at a later date.

While it is hard to know what every individual's expectations might be, we do remind travellers that Cuba is in most respects a third world country and as such considerations should be made and understood.

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