

# MEDICC Gateways

## Frequently Asked Questions

With 20 years' experience helping US health and related professionals travel to Cuba, we know you will have questions before your trip. Below are the most common ones. If you don't see yours here, feel free to [contact MEDICC!](#) This FAQ is updated as new information becomes available.

### **I. Before You Travel: Legalities and Pre-Trip Planning**

#### **Is my travel to Cuba with MEDICC legal under US law?**

Yes. Anyone participating in a MEDICC-organized educational trip qualifies under the US Treasury Department, OFAC, General License for people-to-people travel to Cuba (as of 2016). This travel category requires you to :

- 1) sign a form that states that you qualify for one of these two travel categories, and
- 2) keep any records of travel-related financial transactions for 5 years from the date of the transaction.

You can fly directly from the United States to the island and participate fully in an exciting program of activities organized and led by MEDICC, offering you a unique and in-depth experience.

#### **How do I book my travel?**

Once you have registered for a MEDICC trip, you will be asked to make a deposit to reserve your space...MEDICC limits the number of participants to give you a richer opportunity to delve into Cuba and Cuban health care. MEDICC will then connect you with [Marazul Charters](#), the agency that will contact you to confirm and finalize your travel arrangements to Cuba. Marazul Charters is one of the oldest and most experienced US agencies licensed by the US Department of the Treasury to provide travel services to Cuba. Flights are chartered through Miami and other US cities, and many are operated by commercial US airlines. **PLEASE NOTE: In Fall 2016, commercial flights from the US to Cuba began for the first time in decades.** MEDICC is monitoring this development closely, and will provide you with detailed advice if your travel arrangements may be affected. **In any case, your travel should be booked through Marazul Charters, to ensure air as well as land package and your Cuban visa.**

#### **Do I need health insurance?**

Health insurance is included in the price of your ticket, covering your entire stay in Cuba. Proof of insurance is stamped on the back of your charter air reservation document, and a document explaining the policy is included in your travel packet from Marazul Charters. **MEDICC advises you to carry a copy of this document with you in Cuba.**

#### **Do I need a Cuban visa?**

Yes, once you pay your final Marazul Charters invoice (4-8 weeks before departure), Marazul will send you a packet containing your Cuban visa, flight reservation information, a copy of your signed travel certification, a document explaining your health insurance benefits, and Marazul's travel advice/tips. MEDICC makes all arrangements for your Cuban visa; there is no need to apply on your own.

#### **What other travel documents do I need?**

You will need a passport valid at least six months from the date of your return from Cuba. MEDICC and Marazul will provide instructions plus any other required forms you will need to complete. If you are not a US citizen, you will need a valid US visa, resident alien card, or valid ESTA status in order to travel to Cuba through the US.

#### **What clothes and other personal items should I pack?**

Cuba has warm temperatures year-round—from the 70s and 80s in “winter” months up through the 90s in the summer. No matter when you go, a light sweater or jacket is recommended for cooler nights and also air-conditioned buses and meeting rooms. “Smart/business casual” is fine for most of your visits and exchanges. Shorts and flip-flops are not acceptable at meetings or healthcare facilities—these are better left for your workout, early morning walk, or any more informal activities that may be included in your MEDICC program. It's always good to take comfortable walking shoes.

Additionally, we recommend you take all personal hygiene items, prescription medications, insect repellent, sunscreen and a compact umbrella. Under Cuban law, visitors are permitted to bring cameras, a laptop, a cell phone, as well as a Kindle and other such personal items. For details, see the [Cuban Customs](#) and [US Treasury Department \(OFAC\)](#) sites.

### **II. MEDICC People-to-People Programs : Prices & Itineraries**

### **How much does a trip cost and what does the price cover?**

MEDICC-organized people-to-people programs average \$3,500-\$7,000, the final price of each trip depending on hotel choice/availability, program activities, special needs/ requests of the group, length of stay, and whether the group travels outside Havana.

At MEDICC, we pride ourselves on the quality of our programming—a reputation we've built over two decades of organizing and conducting educational exchanges in Cuba. We are constantly finding new options for encounters with a wide variety of Cubans whose work relates to health—that's why no two trips with MEDICC are alike. And our team of experienced staff and medical interpreters will not leave you wanting for enriching, stimulating conversation during your stay.

**Your trip costs cover:** pre-trip orientation and relevant readings designed specifically for your group; roundtrip airfare from Miami to Havana; airport transfers in Havana; seven nights' accommodation plus breakfast and weekday lunches; a full schedule of activities designed with your group in mind; ground transportation for all programmed activities; an expert MEDICC representative to accompany your group; a specialized medical interpreter; daily access to Cuban medical/health sciences university faculty; a bilingual guide and bus driver; Cuban visa; and health insurance for your stay on the island.

### **What other expenses will I have?**

The following costs are not included in your invoice from Marazul: round-trip airfare to Miami from your home city (the need for all travelers to go through Miami could change with the advent of commercial flights to Cuba in Fall 2016, but even these reservations should be made through Marazul); weekend lunches and all dinners (these can be rolled into the package upon request); optional activities during evenings or other off-time in Cuba; tips to program staff, servers, hotel personnel; as well as any items purchased in Cuba or to take home (subject to the US Department of the Treasury's [OFAC regulations](#), see below). MEDICC will provide you with specific guidance, including an estimated budget, for your cash expenses during the trip.

### **How many hours of activities are scheduled in a typical day? Do I need to attend all activities?**

You can count on a full-time weekday schedule of activities. These will include onsite visits and field trips, meetings with a fascinating array of colleagues as well as with many other Cubans, and special immersion activities that allow you to get the feel of health care in Cuba. MEDICC's itineraries emphasize meaningful exchange in a variety of settings—from community gardens to family doctor offices to senior homes and non-governmental organizations. US law requires that all participants in MEDICC's programs adhere to such a full-time schedule (barring illness or emergency), and imposes on MEDICC the responsibility to ensure this. There will be some time, including early mornings, evenings and others, for you to spend on your own.

### **Are there other US legal requirements for my participation in a MEDICC program?**

Yes, each traveler is responsible for keeping a record of all trip-related financial transactions and such records shall be made available for examination upon demand for at least five years from the date of each transaction. Please see the US Department of the Treasury's [Frequently Asked Questions about Cuba \(US Department of the Treasury\)](#) for related information.

### **Can I stay in Cuba after my MEDICC group leaves?**

Participants may only stay beyond the specific MEDICC program for which they are registered if they qualify under one of [the twelve US Treasury Department / OFAC categories for legal travel to Cuba](#), and sign a separate travel certification form for the days not included in the MEDICC exchange. **PLEASE NOTE:** MEDICC cannot arrange any part of an extended stay for you, except for providing Marazul Charters with an alternate arrival or return date on your behalf, which must also appear on your registration form. MEDICC travelers arriving or departing on their own will be responsible for their own airport transfer costs. Feel free to contact MEDICC Gateways staff with any questions.

### **Does MEDICC use local guides?**

An expert MEDICC representative, fully familiar with Cuba and its health care system, will accompany you during your trip from your departure point in the US. In addition, a professor from Cuba's National School of Public Health (ENSAP) accompanies the group on all program visits to serve as a resource for you and to represent MEDICC's main institutional partner. A specialized medical interpreter will accompany the group during program hours, providing services during official meetings and subsequent conversations. Tour operators in Cuba provide a local guide and transportation throughout the trip's programmed activities.

### **How big are MEDICC groups?**

MEDICC keeps groups small (15-20 participants) so you will have ample time to ask questions and converse with the health professionals, patients, local community residents and other Cubans you meet during your stay, as well as with your fellow travelers. MEDICC representatives share insights that come from years of experience and relationships, ensuring you a unique, meaningful and unforgettable trip.

### **Is there an age minimum for traveling to Cuba with MEDICC?**

Yes. We limit participation to travelers aged 18 or older.

### **Can my organization/institution work with MEDICC to customize a people-to-people trip that fulfills our interests?**

Yes, and this is a perfect way to ensure you have the program, meet the people and go to the places most relevant to your work at home. Furthermore, traveling with people who work together often makes for special group synergy that translates into fresh approaches and innovation. To get started on designing a customized people-to-people educational exchange with MEDICC, please fill out our [Group Travel Interest Form](#). MEDICC generally schedules programs 10-18 months in advance.

## **III. Your Stay in Cuba**

### **How are US citizens typically received in Cuba?**

Cubans are some of the world's warmest hosts and this is true no matter what your national origin. Most visitors are altogether surprised at the curiosity, respect, awareness and enthusiasm Cubans have for guests from abroad. Mutual respect is a cornerstone of MEDICC's travel philosophy. MEDICC is a founding member of **RESPECT (Responsible and Ethical Cuba Travel)**, a US professional association uniting nonprofit entities, travel agents, tour operators and other travel service providers dedicated to practicing and promoting ethical and socially responsible travel to Cuba.

### **What about cash, safety and security?**

Even though it has been legal to use your US credit or debit cards in Cuba since January 2015, implementation has lagged far behind the legality; and so you will need to take all spending money to Cuba **in cash**. We recommend you purchase a money belt for this purpose. Once in Cuba, store your passport, extra cash and other important documents in the safe in your hotel room, keeping with you photocopies of your passport and your health insurance document.

Cuba, including Havana, is a relatively safe destination, especially compared to many other countries, even the US. In any case, don't abandon "street smarts": keep purses, briefcases and cameras in hand.

### **Can I take photos and video in Cuba?**

Yes! You are free to photograph whatever strikes your fancy in Cuba except military installations and police—standard practice in all countries. Ethical travel principles dictate that it's polite to ask individuals before taking their photos; in any case, you will probably be surprised at how willing Cubans are to be photographed and video-recorded. MEDICC's **Guide for Responsible Travel to Cuba** expands on this and similar issues.

### **What do I do to take care of my health in Cuba and in case of an emergency while traveling?**

We recommend that you drink only bottled water while on the island (or better yet—bring your own filter or steri-pen and help reduce plastic waste!). You are of course welcome to follow [CDC recommendations for travel to Cuba](#) if you wish. Please note that in 2016, Cuba launched a massive anti-mosquito campaign and has been successful in minimizing the number of Zika virus cases. MEDICC monitors and will update you on any emerging health concerns in Cuba.

Should you need a doctor during the trip, use the medical insurance in your travel packet (stamped on the back of your charter air reservation, and explained in a document included in the packet): many hotels have a doctor on the premises, or your MEDICC representative will accompany you to the appropriate care facility (usually emergency services at Cira García Hospital), assure language services if necessary, and will help you with follow-up (procuring prescriptions, etc.).

Most hotels have 24-hour international phone service for reaching family or friends in emergencies. Also, your MEDICC Representative carries a Cuban cell phone that friends, family, and colleagues can call, if absolutely necessary. This number will be provided to you by MEDICC prior to your departure.

Marazul Charters can be contacted from Cuba should you need to return home in an emergency. Their number (dialed from Cuba) is: 119 1 201 319 1054. Your MEDICC representative will also be available to assist you.

### **Can I bring goods or souvenirs home from Cuba?**

Under current US embargo restrictions, you may bring back \$400 worth of goods from Cuba, only \$100 of which may be alcohol or tobacco products. You may bring back an unlimited dollar amount of “informational materials” (including artwork, books, posters, and CDs or DVDs with music or films). See the US Treasury/OFAC [FAQ](#) for more information.

## **IV. Currency & Cash**

### **What is the currency used in Cuba?**

Two currencies circulate legally in Cuba: the Cuban peso (abbreviated MN or CUP) and the Convertible Cuban peso (abbreviated CUC). **Almost all goods and services visitors require are sold in hard currency CUC** (0.87 CUC = 1 USD). However, obtaining a fistful of CUP (1 CUC = 24 CUP) can be handy to buy newspapers or vegetables and fruit at the farmers’ markets, or to take a ride in one of the pre-1960 American cars working as fixed-route taxis. Plus, using CUPs will give you a much better idea of how Cuba’s double economy works at the grassroots level.

### **Can I use my ATM, debit or credit card?**

Due to US embargo restrictions, **you will not be able to use your ATM, credit or debit cards in Cuba**. Although their use was legalized by presidential authority in 2015, implementation has lagged far behind. MEDICC will update travelers on any changes in this situation.

### **Is it customary to tip in Cuba? If so, how much?**

It is usual to tip at least 10% in bars and restaurants for good service (though many establishments now include a service gratuity on the bill) and at least 2-3 CUC per day for housekeeping services at your hotel. Likewise, 1 CUC per bag for porters is customary. At the end of your stay, tips to tour operator guides and drivers, as well as to the MEDICC interpreter, are greatly appreciated. These professionals make most of their living from tips and do their best to ensure a positive experience for you while visiting the island.

### **What do I do if I run out of cash in Cuba?**

There are Western Union offices across the country where you can receive an emergency payment from family or colleagues abroad, but lines can be long, and transfers require paperwork on the sender’s end. Since it is neither convenient nor efficient for sender or receiver, we urge you to bring sufficient spending money in CASH ONLY and rely on Western Union as the very last resort. MEDICC will provide you with an estimated cash budget before departure.

## **V. Electricity, Phone & Internet Services**

### **Will my electrical items work in Cuba?**

The majority of electrical outlets in Cuba function on 110 volts and use the same two-pronged plugs as in the United States, with a few exceptions. Some of the refurbished hotels have European-style outlets that take plugs with round prongs (instead of flat). You may wish to buy an adaptor or an adaptor/converter set and bring it with you, just in case. Hotels generally **do not** have such items available for loan or purchase.

### **Will my cell phone work in Cuba?**

US cell phones that use Internet-based applications (for messaging, for example) will work in Cuba in areas where a wireless network is available, such as your hotel lobby (you will have to buy a card at hotel reception to gain access to the network). Please also check with your cell service provider; as of 2016, Verizon and T-Mobile had international roaming plans that work in Cuba, and other providers are likely to follow suit soon. MEDICC also recommends the international SIM card provider, [One SimCard](#), for renting SIM cards and phones that will work in Cuba. Arranging for a local temporary line in Cuba is simply too time-consuming and difficult for short-term visits. Finally, your MEDICC representative will carry a Cuban cell phone for emergencies—you’ll be able to share the number with your friends, family and colleagues before departure.

### **How do I call home from Cuba?**

International phone calls can be placed from your hotel and ETECSA (Cuban telephone company) offices. Or you can purchase a calling card from ETECSA which can be used in designated pay phones. And of course, if you have a roaming plan for your cellphone that works in Cuba, this is also an option. We suggest that you make “phone dates” with friends, family, and colleagues—have them call you at the hotel at designated times—it will be less costly for them to call you than for you to call them from Cuba.

**How available is Internet/WiFi access?**

It is probably safe to say that your visit to Cuba will be one of the most offline experiences in all your recent travels, and many of our participants enjoy “unplugging.” While most hotels have Internet stations and many now have wifi available for guests, service is expensive (starting at 4.5 CUC/hour up to 10 CUC/hour —cards are available in hotel lobbies) and the connection slow, relative to what most of us are used to. Internet access is also provided at many ETECSA telephone company offices in Havana. There are also an increasing number of “hotspots” in parks, Havana’s seaside drive, and other public places in Cuba, where users can connect to a wireless network for 2 CUC per hour.

