

# CUBA

*colourful, extraordinary, fascinating (and that's just the birds!)*



This slim, 780 mile long island is the largest in the Caribbean, and has all the attractions you would expect from the region: sunshine, white beaches, tropical forests and a laid back way of life.

But there is so much more to this unique island. Firstly there are the birds. In addition to the various Caribbean specialities such as Great Lizard-cuckoo, Greater Antillean Grackle and Western Spindalis, there are more than twenty five species which exist only on Cuba. From the spectacular curl-tailed Cuban Trogon to the smallest bird in the world, the Bee Hummingbird, the endemic bird life is wonderful and, mostly, quite easy to see. Wintering North American wood warblers, ranging from colourful Northern Parulas to stripy-headed Worm-eating Warblers are an avian bonus. Palm Warbler, known locally as 'Common Warbler', can be found all over the island at this time of year.



*Cuban Trogon*

Secondly, there is the culture. Cuba remains a colourful version of communism, with huge billboard images of heroes such as Che Guevara, reminding visitors of its turbulent past. There is a downside, of course, for many local people live in poverty, shops are empty and goods are not available. Consumerism has not arrived in Cuba, while Havana appears frozen in the 1950's, with gloriously crumbling Spanish architecture and the famous vintage American cars still in daily use. The history and influences are puzzling and contradictory, but, like the bird life, always fascinating.

We start our tour in Pinar del Rio Province in the verdant west of the island. Then we spend a night in Havana before heading eastwards along very quiet highways to a completely different habitat on the coral islets of the north coast. From the cays we travel to the palm groves of Belen Reserve via Camaguey, before heading back west to the Gran Parque Natural Montema, more commonly known as Zapata, by the Bay of Pigs.

Cuba is in a state of change, as the US embargo on trade is finally being lifted. Do not expect supermarkets stuffed with products from all over the world or superfast wifi just yet, rather locally grown food and traditional ways of life. Many folk believe the old Cuba may soon be 'upgraded' beyond recognition. Cuba is unique, exceptional and memorable, and now is the time to go.

## ITINERARY

### SAN DIEGO DE LOS BAÑOS

After arriving at Jose Marti Airport, in south west Havana, we will drive west directly to our first hotel. We will have two nights in San Diego de los Baños to explore this rural area of lush forest and limestone outcrops. The nearby La Guira Park and Cueva de los Portales are good for local specialities which include Scaly-naped Pigeon, Cuban Solitaire, Cuban Bullfinch and Yellow-headed Warbler. Stands of Caribbean

Pines are the home of Olive-capped Warblers. Travelling through the countryside we will see traditional farmers eking out a living from the land. We may perhaps spot a roller. Not one of the avian variety, but a woman rolling one of the famous handmade cigars on her thigh. We will look for our first Antillean Palm Swift, West Indian Woodpecker, White-crowned Pigeon, Cuban Trogon, Cuban Pygmy Owl, the Cuban sub-species of Red-legged Thrush and the jewel-like Cuban Tody. There is even an outside chance of the rare

Gundlach's Hawk, whilst American Redstarts, Northern Parulas and Red-legged Honeycreepers will probably find us.

### LA HABANA

From Los Banos we will set off for an afternoon in Havana. Here we will get a taste of the Cuban son music, the vibrant street life and the amazing architecture including such landmarks as the replica White House and the sweeping *Malecón* promenade. Turkey Vultures circle overhead whilst ancient Oldsmobile, Buick and stretch Lada taxis cruise around.

We will have a Cuban-style evening meal and stay overnight in this famous, World Heritage city.

### CAYO COCO

After a dose of culture we will head east, to the cays. This is a beautiful area of low-lying coral islands along the northern coast which was developed for beach tourism, and where foreigners on package holidays were once kept away from the 'real' Cuba. But the cays are not just tropical beaches; there are mangroves, tidal mudflats, littoral scrub and dwarf woodland on the islands.

We will have two nights at a resort, spending our time birding at a relaxed pace for a new set of specialities, including Cuban Gnatcatcher, Oriente Warbler, Cuban and Thick-billed Vireos and Zapata Sparrow. Our hotel is on Coco but we will also visit the uninhabited cay, Paredon Grande. We can expect Neotropic Cormorant, Brown Pelican, Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night Herons, Pied-billed Grebe, American Wigeon, West Indian Whistling-duck, Osprey, Laughing Gull and Royal Tern. Semipalmated Plover, Killdeer, Willet, Stilt Sandpiper and numerous other passage waders refuel here.

### CAMAGUEY AND LA BELEN

On day seven we leave the idyllic cays behind, driving across the impressively long causeway inland to Camaguey for lunch. We will take a short look around this historic city before continuing on to Belen, for two nights. We will stay on a working ranch with a simple rural lodge near unspoilt lowland forest interspersed with palm groves. This is where we will search for the highly localized Cuban Palm Crow, the rare Cuban Parakeet, Plain Pigeon, Cuban Grassquit and the massive-billed Giant Kingbird along with commoner species such as Red-tailed Hawk and Cuban Emerald.

### ZAPATA PENINSULA

We will then drive back westwards, passing fields of sugar cane (sugar was once the only export). We will settle into our hotel at Playa de Larga for four nights. As well as having Cuban Parrot, Cuban Crow and plenty of other birds in the grounds, this hotel is centrally placed to cover Zapata, the most diverse birding region on the island. The Cienega de Zapata National Park, Salinas de Brito and other excellent sites are close at hand. The local guides keep tabs on the birds and will be invaluable in locating Cuban Black Hawk, Bee Hummingbird, Fernandina's Flicker, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Cuban Nightjar, Bare-legged and Stygian Owls, Zapata Wren and more. We will make a special effort to see the four species of secretive quail-doves, as they are particularly magnificent birds.

Brackish lagoons attract Caribbean Flamingo, Anhinga, Reddish Egret, Roseate Spoonbill, American White Ibis, Wood Stork, Clapper Rail, Caspian and Royal Terns, Black Skimmer, Short-billed Dowitcher and Least Sandpiper.

Woodland patches are temporary home to plenty of migrant wood warblers including Black-and-white, Swainson's and Black-throated Blue Warblers.

### CLIMATE AND PACE

We can expect dry, sunny weather throughout with only a low chance of rain. Cuba often feels humid. If the weather turns especially hot we will birdwatch the mornings and late afternoons, thus avoiding midday when birds can be quiet. Our tour involves easy walking on the flat almost everywhere.

### ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD

Full-board accommodation is provided, with two nights at Mirador de San Diego, one night at Hotel Armadores de Santander, Havana, two nights at Sol Cayo Coco resort, two nights at Finca La Belen Ranch and four nights in chalets at Playa de Larga, Zapata. Accommodation is of a good/medium standard and all bedrooms have en suite bathrooms. Cuban hotels are perfectly clean and comfortable but we must make it clear that the services are not on a par with modern western standards. Lunch will normally be at the hotel or restaurant, but occasionally we may take a picnic. Cuban food is non-spicy and rather plain outside the cities, though mostly sustainable and organic.

### PRICE INCLUDES .....

All birdwatching excursions with expert leader plus an English-speaking Cuban guide throughout, supplemented by bird specialists at the main sites, full-board accommodation (starting with dinner on 24<sup>th</sup>, ending with lunch on 5<sup>th</sup>), soft drinks at meal times, bottled water throughout, transport by coach, reserve entrance fees, and international flights. We also include your Cuban Tourist Card which functions as a visa.

### WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED

Travel insurance. Personal items, laundry, alcoholic drinks (except at Sol Cayo Coco which is all-inclusive).

### INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

Return flight from most UK airports to Havana (via Amsterdam) using the scheduled services of KLM. Outbound flight departs early morning, return flight arrives back mid-afternoon. Direct flights are also available from London Gatwick with Virgin Atlantic, at similar times.

<b>12 nights</b> including one overnight flight:	<b>24<sup>th</sup> Nov. to 6<sup>th</sup> Dec. 2016</b>
<b>Principal leader:</b>	<b>Roger Barnes</b>
<b>Local guide:</b>	<b>at each site we will use the services of a very good local guide</b>
<b>Maximum group size:</b>	<b>10 clients with one leader and local guides</b>
<b>Cost with discount (if you book before 11<sup>th</sup> August 2016):</b>	<b>£3090 per person sharing (£220 single supplement)</b>
<b>Full Cost:</b>	<b>£3240 per person sharing</b>
<b>Deposit:</b>	<b>£600 per person</b>