

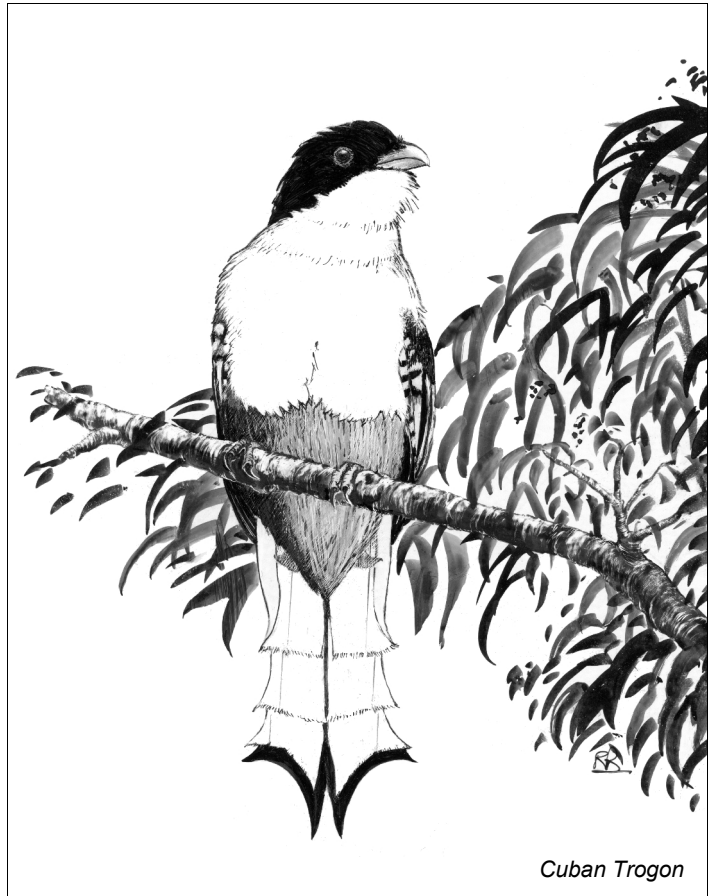
CUBA

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 specialties such as Great Lizard-cuckoo, Greater Antillean Grackle and Western Spindalis, there are some twenty eight bird 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. 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. Western Cuba has some spectacular scenery and lush montane forest. Then we spend four nights within the Cienaga de Zapata Biosphere Reserve, by the infamous Bay of Pigs. Heading eastwards along very quiet highways through open grassland and savannah we reach the World Heritage site of Trinidad. The road north leads to the delightful cays and coral islets of the north coast. Finally we leave the cays westwards to our last stop in old Havana.

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 super fast 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 visit.

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 three nights in San Diego de los Banos 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.

ZAPATA PENINSULA

Cienaga de Zapata National Park is quite simply Cuba's premier birding location. The area embraces a variety of habitats from swamp to open dry forest, from sea shore to moist tropical forest. However not all our target birds are easy to find and our guide will become invaluable as we explore all likely habitats for hidden gems. These include Cuban Black Hawk, Ferdinandina's Flicker, Cuban Green Woodpecker, Cuban Nightjar, Bare-legged Owl and more.

Open forest is home to the Bee Hummingbird, the world's smallest bird. Drier forest hosts no less than four species of quail-doves including the shy and very beautiful Blue-headed Quail-dove. Waterways and marshes hold Limpkin amongst a large variety of wetland birds, but our main quarry in this habitat will be the elusive Zapata Wren, found only here in these marshes and nowhere else in the world. Even the area around our accommodation in Playa Larga village offers good birding, including Cuban Parrot, Cuban Oriole and the hugely impressive Stygian Owl.

We will spend four nights at this special birding location, made famous in 1926 when three species new to science were discovered within the space of a few months: Zapata Rail, Zapata Wren and Zapata Sparrow. It will be quite a delight to sit back in a rocking chair, looking out over the pristine beaches of the Bay of Pigs as the sun goes down, Cuba Libre in hand!

CAYO COCO

Moving on, it is a three hour journey to the historic town of Trinidad, for an overnight stay. After a little culture and relaxation we will head north to a series of cays, low-lying coral islands connected to the mainland by a long causeway. But the cays are not just tropical beaches; they have important wildlife habitats including mangroves, tidal mudflats, littoral scrub and also patches of dwarf woodland.

We will have two nights at a resort on Cayo Coco where coastal lagoons, mangroves and thickets all produce rich habitats for birds in a very picturesque setting. There are a variety of specialities to search for: Zapata Sparrow, here of a distinct form compared to that elsewhere in Cuba, Cuban Gnatcatcher, Bahama Mockingbird, Oriente Warbler, Thick-billed Vireo. Offshore Brown Pelicans and Laughing Gulls are common and superb photographic opportunities await, even for those with small digital cameras. Other likely species include American Flamingo, Magnificent Frigatebird, Cuban Black Hawk, Roseate Spoonbill and a full array of the American herons. A host of waders are also likely; Least Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs alongside Lesser Yellowlegs, Wilson's and the diminutive Piping Plover on beaches, plus Stilt Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitchers and Willets. Just across the road from our hotel a small lagoon hosts a few West Indian Whistling-duck, a largely nocturnal creature and difficult to connect with anywhere in the Caribbean. We will thoroughly explore Cayo Coco, Paredon Grande and Cayo Guillermo whilst here, and our all inclusive hotel also offers the chance to relax and enjoy the benefits of a tourist hotel. If you have had enough of bird watching after a morning venture, then this is the perfect place to while away a restful afternoon with a book and what's more, the drinks are already paid for!

LA HABANA

From Cayo Coco we will set off after breakfast on the long drive westwards to Havana. Here we will arrive in the late afternoon at our downtown hotel set in the old quarter of Havana. On our final day on the island we will explore the old

city, Havana Vieja, home to the largest collection of colonial Hispanic architecture in Latin America. The vibrant street life and the sounds of Cuban Son Music are set against a backdrop of amazing architecture along the sweeping *Malecón* promenade. Turkey Vultures circle overhead whilst ancient Oldsmobile, Buick and stretch Lada taxis cruise around. We will enjoy a late afternoon meal before leaving for the airport and taking our overnight flight home.

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 three nights at Mirador de San Diego, four nights in a casa particular (Cuban guesthouse) at Playa Larga, Zapata, one night in the Iberostar Hotel in Trinidad, two nights at Sol Cayo Coco resort, and a final night at the Hotel Inglaterra in Havana. 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. Cuban food is non-spicy and rather plain outside the cities, though mostly locally grown and organic.

PRICE INCLUDES

All birdwatching excursions with a Bird Holidays leader plus an English-speaking Cuban guide throughout, supplemented by bird specialists at the main sites, full-board accommodation (starting with dinner on 17th, ending with lunch on 28th), 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 flights are available 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.

12 nights including one overnight flight:	17th to 29th January 2019
Principal leader:	Lance Degnan
Local guide:	at each site we will use the services of a very good local guide
Maximum group size:	10 clients with one leader and local guides
Cost with discount (if you book before 4th October 2018):	£3950 per person sharing (£290 single supplement)
Full Cost:	£4100 per person sharing
Deposit:	£1000 per person