

2015 Florida to Cuba Trip

FAQ:

Q: Who are you guys?

A: We are Anthony Perea and Galin Hernandez, a couple of pilots that enjoy taking interesting Caribbean flying trips. We have coordinated 5 yearly Caribbean Fly-In's ranging between 3 airplanes to over 10. But most importantly we are NOT a commercial operation. We have never charged any fees in our previous five annual Caribbean trips and have always volunteered our services. Nevertheless, this year since the trip is a bit different and there is much paperwork to be completed and many calls to Cuba to be made we will be charging a small fee of \$150 per airplane to cover all this. Premier One Aviation will charge this fee.

Anthony is pilot with over 2,500 hours. He is a senior executive for a British financial services firm in Miami, Florida. He is also the former founder and owner of Premier One Aviation a flight school that operated for four years at Kendall Tamiami Airport before it was sold and the name changed. Premier One Aviation still exists today as an aviation consulting firm and is solely owned by Anthony Perea

Galin is a pilot with more than 2,500 flight hours. Galin is retired from the U.S. Air Force Reserves, where he held the rank of Lt Colonel, and most recently retired as a senior officer with the U.S. Customs Service.

Galin's wife Millie accompanies us and documents the trip with many photos and videos.

Q: How is this trip different from your other Caribbean trips?

A: This trip will be very different from the others due to the regulatory aspect and complex coordination that is required with the Cuban government.

Q: Have you been to Cuba?

A: Galin and I and two other passengers visited Cuba on Sept 4th for a few days. During this trip Cuban Civil Aviation officials met with us. We've made the contacts and now have the experience to do this second trip to Cuba.

Q: What is the estimated cost?

A: Your biggest expense, by far, will be the aviation fees. These fees will average between \$350 - \$400 per plane. The fees will cover handling, flight dispatch, landing, parking, aeronautical, customs and immigration fees up to two crewmembers. Passengers will be charged separately a \$25 airport tax fee. All fees are paid on departure only. Fuel is extra and not included.

Your second biggest expenses will be your hotel and additional activities we will be partaking in. We will be staying at the Colina Hotel in the Vedado area in Havana. This hotel is a simple 2 star hotel but is located in a very strategic location that will allow us to walk to most restaurants and areas of interest in the Vedado area. The hotel is usually booked by Europeans and has very good reviews. It is not a luxury hotel and offers the basics. Other areas like Old Havana are only a 10-minute taxi ride. The Colina Hotel is providing us with a rate of \$66 CUC per night

(\$198 US for three nights) and the rate includes breakfast. We recommend that you budget about \$100 per day per person.

Q: Under what category will we be visiting Cuba?

A: For a U.S. Citizen to legally travel to Cuba he must fall under one of the 12 exemptions. Each one of these exemptions is highly controlled and has specific requirements that must be met for the exemption to apply. Our trip will be a cultural visit to Havana, Cuba in your airplane under a "People-to-People" education category license. This category requires that an organization or private firm act as a sponsor. Premier One Aviation will be the sponsor.

Q: What do we do for transportation back and forth from the airport?

A: Transportation to and from the airport is \$30 per car. I am looking at hiring a bus if the price is about the same. More details on this will be provided later.

Q: What will our itinerary be:

Fri Dec 4 – Fly from North Perry (KHWO) to Key West (KEYW) then on to Havana (MUHA)

Fri Dec 4 - Visit to Havana Center and Havana Control Tower (to be confirmed).

Sat Dec 5 – Cultural activities to include visiting Old Havana and interacting with local artists.

Sun Dec 6 – Cultural activities to include visiting Hemingway Museum and interacting with local artists.

Due to the nature of the license category there must be local "interaction" with artists, day-to-day Cubans, students, etc. We will have flexibility with this itinerary. This category will also require that we have a local guide on the ground in Havana. I am coordinating this and will provide more info later. This additional fee will be paid directly to the guide but should not be more than \$100 for two days. I am working on combining it with the bus to and from the airport. Stand-by for more info.

Q: Do I need to carry a large amount of cash? Are credit cards accepted?

A: There are two different currencies in Cuba and foreign currency is not officially accepted anywhere. Cuban citizens use the Cuban Peso ("CUP") while foreigners are required to use the Cuban Convertible Peso ("CUC"). The exchange rate for the CUP is 25 to 1 (in other words, 25 CUP's equal one CUC) while the exchange rate for CUC is 1 to 1. There are many places known as "CADECA's" to exchange foreign currency for CUC's. There is a 13% fee for exchanging US Dollars for CUC's. So before we left the U.S. we converted our dollars to Euros. Then in Cuba, we converted the Euros to CUC's avoiding the 13% US Dollar exchange fee. U.S. credit and bank debit cards normally do not work in Cuba but US banks are slowly allowing their cards to work in Cuba. But since it is difficult to determine if your card will work in Cuba it is best for you to make sure you carry enough cash for your entire stay. All aviation services in Cuba must be paid for in CUC's. The aviation fees to be paid during the last day can be paid in USD but they will charge the 13% exchange fee.

Euros can be purchased through your bank but they can require up to 10 days to order and deliver them. Another option, which usually offers better rates, is using a currency exchange house to convert your USD to Euros. There are many in downtown Miami.

Q: Hopefully some couples (not just a bunch of fellows)?

A: There are always a few couples in the group and Galin's wife always goes.

Q: Do we need 12" N Number for the trip?

A: Yes, but they do not have to be permanent. Duct Tape or Temporary Vinyl will do just fine.

Q: How difficult to get through Cuban customs?

A: Not hard at all. We will have a personal handler / representative that will take us through the process. She will also be handling our departure to Key West on Monday.

Q: What about US Customs on the return in Key West?

A: You will need the US Customs sticker (\$27.50) and passports ahead of time.

A passport card is not valid for GA flights within the Caribbean so you are required to have a passport. Give at least 8 weeks for these to be done. An EAPIS account with US Customs is required but that can be done in a few days at the most. We basically all go through Customs together as a group anyways.

Q: Do we need to apply for any permits or forms ahead of time? How far in advance that we need to do?

A: Premier One Aviation will handle all landing permit requests. You are not allowed to land in Cuba without a landing permit. Most likely they will issue one landing permit for the entire group.

Q: Do I need to be instrument rated? Can we expect to fly VFR from Florida to Cuba?

A: Cuba has a requirement that you must be on an instrument flight plan to land in Cuba. They will make some exceptions and the Director of Civil Aviation – Flight Permits agreed to consider granting a few exceptions to our group. Therefore, we will request a few VFR exceptions but these are not guaranteed.

Q: What charts do we need?

A: We recommend getting the Caribbean low level IFR charts. Jeppessen carries these charts. The attached charts for Jose Marti Havana Airport will contain the necessary charts.

Q: What digital charts are you using?

A: So far we are only aware of Jeppessen having the Cuba charts. Foreflight does not carry them yet.

Q: Will we need an International Cell phone plan?

A: Your US cell phone service will not work in Cuba. Anthony has a Cuba SIM card for his phone which he purchased during his last trip and this will be necessary to call back US Customs in Key West on Monday and notifying them of our arrival time one hour before.

Q: Will Internet Wi-Fi be available?

A: Cuba just recently opened itself to public Wi-Fi. There are numerous Wi-Fi hotspots close to our hotel. You will need to purchase an Internet access card that will cost about \$3.00 for one hour.

Q: What kind of clothing should we bring with us?

A: During your stay in Cuba you will mostly be in Shorts, T-shirts and comfortable shoes. There will be a day you may wish to be in slacks and Polo shirts if attending an evening show. December also usually brings cooler weather in the evenings so you may wish to pack a light

Q: What toiletries do I need to bring with me?

A: You will not find a Walgreens or CVS equivalent in Cuba. Therefore you must bring with you any medication for your stay. Allergy, Tylenol, Pepto Bismol medication is also recommended. Also recommend bringing one towel in case the hotel does not change them daily. Would also recommend bringing napkins or tissue. Public restrooms are clean but usually do not carry toilet paper !

Q: What survival equipment should we carry?

A: FWIW: Galin flew for US Customs in the Caribbean and with the Civil Air Patrol on over water patrols for many years. He often flew over water in his airplane having done many trips to the Caribbean, Key West, Cozumel and Cancun.

He recommends the following:

Take some kind of water survival training (dunker) if you can. With Customs he took mandatory water survival training every year so he has a good idea of what to expect. There were a few things he learned about water survival that opened his eyes.

The 1st thing is that if you have to ditch, you will probably want to get out of the airplane as soon as possible. That means that if the survival gear isn't strapped to your body you probably won't have it when you leave the airplane. I know I will not go back into a possibly sinking airplane to remove anything once I am out. So if the airplane sinks, that mandatory expensive ELT installed in the airplane and your raft will go down with it. Once under water the ELT signal will not be picked up by anybody.

That is why it is recommended to have your survival gear and any personal ELT with GPS capability and any Marine VHF Radio strapped to your life vest. You want to minimize the amount of time it takes rescuers to find you, hopefully within 24hrs. Remember, if it is strapped to your body it is survival gear. Everything else is camping gear.

Each person should determine how much survival gear they feel comfortable with bringing. There is no right or wrong answer. In the past pilots have used sophisticated life vests, six person life rafts, portable ELT's, portable PLB's (personal locator beacons), track me gadgets for having relatives follow your flight online, etc, etc. This is a personal choice and each person should determine what they are comfortable with. We will not provide you with a minimum or maximum list of equipment you'll need. But if you have questions feel free to ask.

Q: Will there be tie-downs, ropes, chocks at the Havana Airport?

A: There are no tie-downs available. Plan to bring chocks to secure your plane. During our recent trip the chocks were sufficient.

Q: Can I talk about politics with other Cubans?

A: Cuba is a communist country going through many changes. We don't recommend that you engage in any political conversations with Cubans nor criticize their government. We are traveling on an educational / cultural license and should focus on cultural and educational topics.

Q: Can I take photographs of everything?

A: As far as we know the only prohibition is taking photos of military installations. We will not be visiting any so this should not be an issue.