

# Cochinito's Christmas in Cuba!

## On a Bike! Dec. 19 – 27, 2021

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### Why Bike Cuba?

Cuba is a beautiful country, relatively unspoiled by commerce or industry, and its people are welcoming, and eager to share their rich culture with visitors. When we travel through Cuba on bikes, we aren't just 'seeing' the country and its people; we are *living* it, with the Cuban people, and experiencing all that this unique culture and society have to offer.

Countryside roads in Cuba can be occasionally challenging for a road bike, but are in generally good shape, and ideally suited to the high-quality hybrids we rent in Havana. Most riding is on pavement, but dirt roads are occasionally encountered.





# Christmas in Cuba!

The trip begins on December 19<sup>th</sup> with a one-night stay in a colonial-style B&B in the historic Vedado neighborhood of the capital. The next morning we bike into the western countryside on mostly flat terrain, passing through the provincial capital of Artemisa, and stopping to explore the ruins of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century coffee plantation, before climbing into the Sierra Del Rosario mountains to reach Las Terrazas, our first overnight destination. A UNESCO-designated biosphere reserve, Las Terrazas offers jungle walks and refreshing river swimming, and we'll stay for two nights in simple B&Bs with air-conditioned bedrooms and private bathrooms. There is no town, per se, in Las Terrazas, but they do have a first-class vegan-friendly restaurant, the 'Eco-Restaurante El Romero,' that is a real treat.



Our B&B in Havana, La Casona Calzada



La Cafetal Angerona ruins



Rio San Juan, Las Terrazas



On December 22<sup>nd</sup> we continue westward, riding out of the mountains back down to the flats for a leisurely exploration of rural Cuba. Bicycles are a common mode of transportation in the countryside, and we'll undoubtedly encounter Cuban bicyclists along the route. We're well off of the touristy track all day, which heightens our opportunities to experience Cuban life and meet people. Our destination is San Diego de los Baños, a small town nestled near the entrance to La Guira National Park. We'll stay at a nice B&B, and be feasted there by the host family.



Meeting a Cuban family along the way



A feast in San Diego de los Baños

The ride out of San Diego de los Baños the next morning takes us into La Parque Guira, once the enormous estate of one of Cuba's richest landowners. This will be our shortest riding day (38 miles) but it will also be the most challenging, including some extended climbing, as well as the locally famous "El Americano," a straight, half-mile long, steeply-inclined hill that will test our strength and endurance. Along the way we'll stop at La Cueva de los Portales, a series of giant caves that Che Guevara, the commander of Cuba's western army, used as his base of operations during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The last third of the day's ride takes us into the magical landscape of los mogotes, the 'pin-cushion' mountains that rise up out of the valleys like tropically verdant mesas. Sighting our first mogotes tells us we're close to our final destination, Viñales.



El Americano



It's the end of the rainbow! We must have reached Viñales!



The Viñales Valley, a region of stunning natural beauty, is the nerve center of Cuba's tobacco economy. It's also the second location in Cuba, after the beaches of Varadero, to be opened to international tourism in the 1990s. The town of Viñales is geared to tourists, many of them young adventurers, and the main drag feels something like an international college town without a college. The town's one official outdoor discotheque is packed each night with Cubans and tourists, dancing to live music. Our B&Bs offer a more bucolic soundtrack. They're only a half mile from the town center, but are located on a dirt road that borders farmland. Viñales' main attractions, and the magnets for people around the world, are the natural landscape and the tobacco farms. During our two full days there, we will access both on horseback, visiting the farm of my good friends Pipo and Yuseli Yanes, and eating Yuseli's amazing farm-fresh food. Like his grandfather before him, Pipo is a tobacco farmer. His hand-rolled country cigars are amazing, and he'll teach us how to roll our own.



Tobacco farming



Horseback riding



Making 'Guarapo' (sugarcane juice)



Cigar rolling tips from a master

## But what about Christmas?

Actually, Cubans don't make a big deal about the day itself. But Christmas Eve? That's La Noche Buena, and an excellent excuse for a pig roast party! The evening of December 24<sup>th</sup> will find us on a Viñales farm, enjoying roast pork, arroz y frijoles negros, fresh veggies, the best rum and cigars in the world, and the company of my best friends in Cuba.



What would Christmas in Cuba be without a pig roast Noche Buena party?

The morning of December 26<sup>th</sup> we will bus back to Havana, and that evening we'll celebrate our week of adventure at a house party with my Havana friends. Last chance to get your Cuban on . . . in Cuba!



## Trip Details

The price per person, \$2250, covers eight nights of double-occupancy accommodations, one week of bike rental, a support vehicle and mechanic, all breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, all in-country transportation, and all special experiences, like horse riding in Viñales and special parties. Not included is your roundtrip airfare from the US to Havana. Airfare should be booked for arriving Havana on December 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup>, and returning to the U.S. on December 27<sup>th</sup>, unless you plan to extend your stay.

We will ride high-quality hybrid bikes. Our luggage will travel in a support vehicle, and we will be accompanied by a bike mechanic. Our longest day of riding will entail 55 miles of mostly flat terrain, and we'll be able to accommodate those who might need to be off the bike at times. We will stay in air-conditioned B&B lodgings, eat mostly home-and farm-cooked delicious meals and, most importantly, we will immerse ourselves in Cuban culture and daily life.

## About Me, 'El Cochinito'

I've traveled to Cuba over 30 times since my first visit in 2013, a life-changing experience that I knew I wanted to share with others. I led my first Cuba trip in 2014, and I've been taking people for mostly week-long tours ever since. In 2018 I incorporated bike riding into the experience, starting with day tours of Havana. In December 2019 I organized and led my first week-long bike tours in Cuba, and it was such a success and so much fun that I don't think I will ever lead another Cuba trip that isn't a bike trip.

At the heart of the tours I lead to Cuba is this simple conviction: that life is so much sweeter when we reach out in friendship, when we assume and practice the joy to be had in connecting with others. Cubans, more than any other people I've ever known, seem to know this truth intuitively. 'Mi casa es su casa' (my house is your house), 'Quieres café?' (want some coffee?), 'Y la familia, como está?' (how's the family doing?). Cubans start their conversations speaking these words, to close friends and to strangers alike. An open-hearted engagement: that's the gift I received on my first visit and on every visit since, and it's what I hope each of my clients gets to experience in abundance when they travel with me.

Un abrazo!

Robert Michelson, founder

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# Trip Maps







