

# Trinidad Bonus Section

Trinidad is a small town, located on the south coast of Cuba, near the midpoint of the island. It is one of the oldest towns in Cuba, with a history dating back more than 500 years. The town is very well preserved, with mostly original architecture, tight, winding streets, paved with cobblestones, and a picturesque surrounding of hills, valleys, farms and even a nearby beach. It is one of the most popular excursion destinations for tourists visiting Havana.

State organized bus tours, usually lasting a day or two are offered by many Cuban tour operators and can be purchased in most hotel lobbies. Official excursion prices range from about 200 CUC to over 400 CUC per person, depending on the duration and itinerary of the trip. With a little bit of planning, you can organize your own Trinidad excursion for considerably less. If you are eager to view a charming, old world town that has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1988, then Trinidad is the place to go.

## Getting From Havana to Trinidad

### Taking the Bus

Despite being 365 kilometers (225 miles) away from Havana, it is relatively easy to get to Trinidad, even for a novice traveler. You can easily take the Viazul bus service, which operates daily routes from Havana to Trinidad. If you book ahead of time, you will have no problem getting a seat. The Viazul bus terminal in Havana is located at the corner of Avenida 26 and Avenida Zoologico, in the Nuevo Vedado neighborhood. You can book your tickets directly at the terminal, and it is advised to book at least a few days before traveling. An even better option is to book and pay for your tickets online, at [www.Viazul.com](http://www.Viazul.com). On the day of travel, you simply arrive at the bus terminal 30 minutes before your departure time to check your bags (if you are traveling with luggage) and you will soon be seated in a modern, air conditioned bus, making your way towards your destination. The bus ride costs 25 CUC per person and the trip takes about 6 hours. The bus makes stops at most major towns along the way to drop off and take on new passengers. This is the main reason for the extended trip duration. Once in Trinidad, the bus terminal is just beside the town center, within easy walking distance to most popular locations.

### Hire a Taxi

Hiring a taxi to get you from Havana to Trinidad is more expensive than taking the bus, but the advantage is that you can set your own departure schedule and your travel time is reduced significantly, with most taxis making the direct trip in 4 hours or less. Your taxi options are varied and depend on what kind of trip you want to experience and how many other passengers you are traveling with. Taxis always charge by the carload, so it is more affordable to share the ride with other tourists and split the fare accordingly.

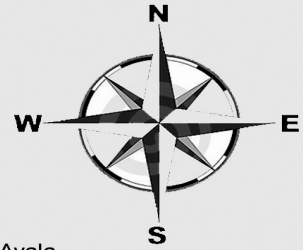
A yellow, air conditioned, modern taxi car will usually make the trip from Havana to Trinidad for about 160 CUC. This is the most convenient option for most people. Shared between 4 passengers, this would only be marginally more expensive than the Viazul. There are also old American car taxis which do the trip for roughly the same price. The disadvantage with these vehicles is that they are not air conditioned, and the windows are usually rolled all the way down for the duration of the trip, for ventilation. For a long distance trip like this, it can become unpleasant. Furthermore, as these vehicles are old, there is an increased risk of breakdown on the highway. If you are traveling

as a larger group, you can also consider hiring a minibus to take your group to Trinidad. An air conditioned minibus can usually seat 10 to 14 passengers and the trip price ranges from 220 CUC to 300 CUC total.

### Finding A Taxi

It is likely that any taxi you see in Havana would be willing to quote you a price to drive to Trinidad. If you are looking for a better deal, a good place to search is near the Viazul terminal in Havana (corner of Avenida 26 and Avenida Zoologico, in the Nuevo Vedado neighborhood). There are usually dozens of taxis waiting outside the bus station anxious for long distance fares. If you are traveling alone, these drivers will even help to find other tourists to share the ride and the cost.

If you are planning your trip to Trinidad ahead of time, you can book your taxi online, at [www.BestCubaGuide.com/Taxis](http://www.BestCubaGuide.com/Taxis). The website offers some of the lowest prices available with many different vehicle and trip options. A modern, air conditioned taxi, from Havana to Trinidad, with up to 4 passengers, is only 160 CUC, with door to door pickup and drop-off. In low season the price is even lower.

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## Exploring the Town of Trinidad

### Old Town

The Trinidad town center is commonly referred to as the Old Town. It is very easy to identify and most foreigners who visit Trinidad spend most of their time in this area. The streets are paved in uneven cobblestones. The houses and buildings are almost all hundreds of years old. This was the first part of the town which was constructed when the area was originally settled, over 500 years ago. It has been well preserved and over the years many of the buildings have been carefully restored. There are strict preservation laws enacted by the Cuban government to ensure that any renovations to the buildings within this area maintain the architectural integrity of the original structures. Effectively, the Old Town is a giant museum, and this is what makes it such a strong tourist draw. The Old Town is also gated off to vehicle traffic. Only walking and biking is permitted.

The streets in the Old Town are tight and winding, to a foreigner it can seem chaotic. Despite the small overall area of this neighborhood (less than 500 meters in diameter) it is very easy to become disoriented and lost. This plan was by design, in order to confuse and impede pirates, which regularly invaded the town throughout the 17th century.

The Old Town is built on a gently sloping hill. At the center of town, located near the top of the hill, is the Plaza Mayor, the central town square. The plaza is surrounded by dozens of historically significant buildings, most of which have been converted to museums. If you enjoy history, you will find this an ideal location to explore. In front of the plaza is the imposing Church of the Holy Trinity (Iglesia Parroquial de la Santísima Trinidad). To the right of the church (one block north of the plaza) is the Church and Convent of Saint Francis (Iglesia y Convento de San Francisco). This church, with its tall, brightly painted bell tower is one of Trinidad's most recognizable landmarks, prominently featured on advertisements and postcards, as well as on Cuba's 25 cent CUC coin. Also in the area you will see several outdoor street fairs where local sellers have set up stalls selling crafts, linens, souvenirs and clothes.

### Eastern Trinidad

Walking south-east, out of the gated Old Town, you will soon be entering a decidedly poorer area. Although the streets are still paved with cobblestones, you will notice cars driving over them and a lot fewer tourists. Most of the houses in this area maintain the same architecture as those in the Old Town, but lack restoration.

This neighborhood of eastern Trinidad is a great area to explore if you want to get away from the tourist crowds and see how the locals live. The most prominent attraction in the area is the Iglesia de Santa Ana, facing a large square (Plaza Santa Ana). The church is in ruins, but there is a small museum and restaurant/bar nearby. The square has historical significance, as the former location of a large Spanish prison.

The streets in eastern Trinidad all gently slope away from the Old Town and towards the ocean, which, on a clear day, can be seen in the distance. The small port town of Casilda, located about 4 kilometers south of Trinidad, connected by a small highway, can also be seen.

### New Town

If you are entering Trinidad by taxi or bus, then the first neighborhood that you will likely pass

through is the New Town. As the name suggests, this area is composed of mostly newer buildings, which are not as architecturally ornate as anything in the rest of the city. If you do not have a fixed destination in mind when arriving in Trinidad, it is common for taxi drivers to drop you off at the Parque Central Cespedes. This is a small plaza, located in front of the Iberostar Grand Hotel Trinidad, (one of the most prominent hotels in the city). This area is generally considered as the border between the New Town and the beginning of the Old Town.

While there is not much of historic importance located in the newer part of town, it can be a good place to explore and people watch, as this is where the vast majority of locals live and spend their days. Street food vendors and small paladares also line the main streets in this area and prices for food and drinks are a fraction of what you will pay in the Old Town. If only for that, it is well worth spending some time in this neighborhood.

**Note:** Trinidad's street hustlers (jineteros) are notorious for their brazenness, persistence and organization. The situation is far worse here than anywhere else in Cuba, including Havana. It is highly advisable to be suspicious of anybody you meet on the street offering you assistance or advice relating to bars, restaurants, entertainment options or casas particulares. They almost certainly have an angle where they will be able to scam a bit of money out of you by the end of the day. Although these scams are generally harmless and petty, they can be tedious, time consuming and off-putting. One of the most common scams occurs when tourists have just arrived in the town and are searching for their pre-booked accommodations. Hustlers wait at the Viazul terminal and greet unsuspecting tourists, as they exit the bus. They explain, usually in well spoken English, that they were sent by the casa owner to escort the tourist directly to their casa. Inevitably, if you follow one of these hustlers, you will arrive at an entirely different casa than that which you booked, and the hustler will always make a healthy commission from your misfortune. The hustlers are so well versed in their trade that they sometimes even scam Cuban taxi drivers who might get lost in Trinidad's winding streets, convincing the drivers to drop off tourists at the wrong casas. Always confirm that the casa you are staying in, is in fact the actual casa that you made reservations for. And, if you meet somebody at the bus station who claims to be sent from your casa landlord, never tell them your name and casa details first. If they were genuinely sent from the landlord to escort you to the casa, make them confirm your details first.

## Casas Particulares in Trinidad

As Trinidad is a very popular tourist destination, and has been for many years, there is an abundance of good casas particulares throughout the town. In the historic center of Trinidad many of the rental units are located inside historic mansions. These mansions retain most of their old world architectural details, including stone columns, vaulted ceilings, wooden beams and moldings, and expansive inner courtyards allowing natural light and fresh cross breezes to flow. In these mansions, while you have a private room with its own locking door, you will often share the common areas of the house with the landlords and other guests.

Outside of the town center, the rental properties tend to be newer. These casas are often independent rooms or apartments, where you receive the key to the front door and can come and go in complete privacy.

Regardless of the age of the casa particular, they almost always have air conditioned bedrooms with modern, en-suite bathrooms. Furthermore, most casas have rooftop terraces which offer picturesque views of the city and surrounding mountains.

There are enough casas in Trinidad that a reservation is usually not necessary. You can simply arrive in the town, walk around for a few minutes and locate a suitable place to stay. The rental properties are all clearly marked with signs above their doors. Even if one landlord does not have vacancy, they will quickly call up friends and find a nearby place for you to stay.

If you want to book accommodations ahead of time, you can search online. There is also a good selection of rental properties on the website [www.BestCubaGuide.com](http://www.BestCubaGuide.com)

Note: You might arrive in Trinidad and wonder why there are so many elegant mansions in such a small town, located rather far from Havana. While the abundance of tourism is currently driving the Trinidad economy, there are also some very important historical factors for the high relative wealth in the region. As one of the earliest settlements in Cuba, and surrounded by fertile farmland, Trinidad was the nexus for the island's early sugar industry. Years later, pottery and clay tile manufacturing boosted economic activity. And in present day, tobacco processing is a major industry throughout the area.

## Getting Around

Trinidad is a rather small town, less than 2.5 kms (1.5 miles) wide. The easiest way to get around the main areas is on foot. Within the historic center, no cars are permitted, so walking is the norm. Bikes are also used, but given that the streets are paved in rounded cobblestones, biking can be challenging (most casas particulares can arrange bike rentals at a cost of about 3 to 5 CUC per day). Even walking on the cobblestones can get tiring, and as such, many streets have a narrow cement sidewalk along the side, which, despite being crowded, is often the best option.

In the newer parts of town, the streets are asphalt and accommodate bikes and cars. Bicycle taxis are abundant and can take you from one end of town to the other for about 3 CUC.

If you have a bike, you can easily use it to get to visit some of the interesting locations outside of the main town (these are listed on the following pages). Yellow taxis are also plentiful and are the quickest way to visit places on the outskirts of town. There are also some communal taxis which operate routes to the local attractions. While these are cheaper than yellow taxis, they can be difficult to locate. Lastly, there are tour buses which have regular routes from Trinidad to the surroundings. Mostly these are reserved for foreigners who have booked excursion packages.

Sometimes there are extra seats available at affordable fares. You can visit one of the many tourist information offices located throughout Trinidad or ask your casa landlord for help in making the reservations.

There is also a restored steam train which operates in the area. This will be discussed in the following section.

### **Interesting Places to Visit and Things to do in the Surround Areas**

**Casilda** - This is a small port town located about 5 minutes driving distance south of Trinidad. You can easily get there by taxi, bike or walking. The town overlooks the Bay of Casilda, which is a popular area for snorkeling and a good place to find an outfitter, if you want to go sport fishing. The town itself is modest, although there are a few rental properties and a couple of restaurants. Casilda is a good place to stay if you want to experience Trinidad from a less touristy perspective, while also being closer to the ocean.

**Playa Ancon** - On the other side of the Bay of Casilda is the lovely Playa Ancon beach. The beach is located on a long archipelago that shields the bay. The road leading to the beach, from Casilda, sweeps around the bay. All told, Playa Ancon is about 10 minutes driving distance from Trinidad. You would be able to bike there in about 30 minutes. The beach is sandy, wide, and about 8 kms (5 miles) long. There are three large resort hotels along the beach, located at about the midpoint of the archipelago. But on either side of those hotels, there are vast expanses of relatively secluded beach, offering tranquility and seclusion. It is very easy to find a hidden, private area on Playa Ancon, and you could easily spend a day in the sun, sand and surf without seeing another person.

**Valle de los Ingenios** - East of Trinidad you will find the sprawling Valle de los Ingenios (Valley of the Sugar Mills). Originally, this area was the epicenter of Cuba's sugar-trade economy. Currently, the lush valley is spotted with the ruins of dozens of sugar mills, abandoned sugar warehouses and historic colonial manors and slave dwellings. The best way to see the valley is with a horseback riding tour which your casa landlord will be able to organize. Prices are approximately 20 CUC for 5 to 6 hour tour, covering most important sightseeing locations.

**El Mirador Restaurant** - About 5 kms (3 miles) east of Trinidad, along the Circuito Sur highway, is the El Mirador restaurant / bar. The establishment is perched on a hill and offers 360 degree views of the Valle de los Ingenios (Valley of the Sugar Mills). Drinks are cheap and food is moderately prices, but it is completely free to simply walk up the long flight of stairs to the restaurant and enjoy the views of the valley from the open terrace. It will definitely give you some perspective on the grandiosity of the area and the importance that sugar production once had for Cuba's economy.

**Antique Train** - A fun way to experience the valley is to take a ride on the antique steam train. The train departs from Trinidad and slowly makes its way through the valley, going through several tunnels and over a few iron bridges, eventually stopping at the famous Manaca Iznaga estate and the hacienda Guachinango, which will be discussed in the next section. Although a ride on this antique engine is enjoyable, the train is highly unreliable. The train has scheduled departures every day, leaving Trinidad at 9:30am and returning at 2pm. This changes often, due to breakdowns and weather events. Round trip tickets costs 10 CUC and can be purchased directly at the train station in Trinidad, located at the intersection of Calle Antonio Guterres and General Lino Perez, in the western end of the town.

**Manaca Iznaga Estate** - Continuing east, along the Circuito Sur highway a further 10 kms from the El Mirador lookout, you will find the Manaca Iznaga estate. The 18th century plantation was owned by Pedro Iznaga, one of the richest men in Cuba who made his fortune mostly in slave trafficking. The estate is well preserved and one of the most popular sightseeing destinations in the area. The

main draw is the Iznaga Tower, which is 45 meters tall. It was used to oversee the slaves in the plantation and as a symbol of the Iznaga family's power and wealth. Originally the tower had a large bell at the top. This bell is now on display at the base of the tower. The cost to walk up to the top of the tower is 1 CUC. The colonial Iznaga estate house faces the tower and has been converted into a restaurant. Also on the estate grounds are some slave dwellings in original condition. Most of the small houses beside the estate were former slave dwellings which have since been renovated and are currently occupied by town locals. The antique steam train has a stop just beside the estate.

**Hacienda Guachinango** - This is a well preserved plantation ranch-house which currently operates as a restaurant. It is located in the valley, about 2 kms away from the Manaca Iznaga estate. It is surrounded by lush farmland and there is a small river (Rio Ay) that winds through the surrounding fields. The antique steam train stops directly in front of the house every morning. You can easily walk to the Manaca Iznaga estate, along the train track, in about 30 minutes.

**Topes de Collantes** - About 5 kms northwest of Trinidad, connected by the Circuito Sur highway, is the massive Topes de Collantes natural reserve park which encompasses the Escambray Mountain range. Within the park, the main attractions are caves, waterfalls, clear blue lakes and rivers and there is ample opportunity for hiking and to see indigenous plants and wildlife. Given the unpredictable weather in the mountains and the steep sloping roads, special vehicles are required to drive to the highest attractions in the park. Certain taxi drivers will offer to make the trip for an additional fee, but breakdowns are common. It is best to visit with an organized excursion. Accommodations within the reserve are also available, at a reasonable cost.

## Trinidad Nightlife

**Casa de la Musica** - An outdoor music and dance venue, located on a steep, sloping street, just off the Plaza Mayor in the Old Town. Drinks are cheap and the music plays day and night. There are tables and chairs scattered around, and many people simply sit on the steps leading up the hill. The atmosphere is very relaxed and offers a good chance to meet up with locals and practice your dance steps. There is no entrance fee. Just walk around and enjoy yourself.

**Casa de la Trova** - Located one block east of the Plaza Mayor, this indoor music and dance hall hosts nightly shows with popular Cuban musical groups. There is a large outdoor terrace, usually filled with locals and tourists. The entrance fee is 1 CUC for foreigners.

**Disco Ayala** - Located about 6 blocks northeast of the Plaza Mayor, on a small hill, beside the Hotel Las Cuevas, just on the outskirts of town. Disco Ayala is a large nightclub built inside a natural cave. Enjoy salsa and reggaeton as you dance the night away in this cavernous setting. The entrance fee is 3 CUC and includes 1 drink.



## Top Ten Cuba Tip List!

1) Always negotiate prices. As a foreigner in a relatively poor city, most of the local merchants will see you as a cash machine. If you are taking a taxi, buying a bike, browsing souvenirs or renting a casa particular; whenever you request a price for a product or service, vendors will immediately throw out a high number. Do not feel shy about making a low counter offer. You can sometimes save 50% or more. Most importantly, don't worry about walking away from a vendor if the asking price for something is too high. This tactic will almost certainly sway the seller to become more reasonable, as most vendors hate losing sales.

2) In conjunction with tip #1: If you act like a tourist, you will be treated like a tourist. If you walk down a busy tourist street wearing a novelty panama hat and Che Guevara t-shirt, speaking English loudly and carrying a large SLR camera, every *jinetero* in Havana will approach you to strike-up a conversation. It's not necessarily a bad thing, but you will be hounded by money-seekers constantly. Regardless of your color, nationality or language, you are far more likely to blend in as a local if you simply dress modestly, similarly to how you would dress on a daily basis in your home country.

3) Be safe. The best way to do this is to exercise caution and common sense. A general rule is that if you would not do something in your own country, then you should not risk doing it in Cuba either. For foreigners, the risk of running into trouble increases dramatically when heavy drinking is involved. Moderation and good judgment will help you avoid most hassles and ensure a problem free trip.

4) Use Moneda Nacional. Most Cubans receive their salary in Moneda Nacional and this is the most common currency used. There is no reason that you cannot use it as well. For some goods and services you will have no choice but to use CUC. This is especially the case in a large city like Havana. But this should be the exception and not the rule. If you make an effort to only buy things which are priced in MN you will save a lot of money. Furthermore, you will immerse yourself in the Cuban lifestyle, since you will be visiting the same stores and shops as locals.

5) Treat yourself to a good, sit down meal every day. While you can survive well in Havana by simply eating street food, it is a good idea to have something slightly more fulfilling at least once per day. A full meal at a restaurant only costs about 4 CUC, and the generous serving of healthy food will give you the energy that you need to explore every inch of Havana. Despite being delicious, most street food in Cuba is simply filled with empty carbohydrates and provides little nutrition.

6) Appreciate the culture. Cuba is really different from a lot of other places in the world. You will especially notice this if you are from a modern, western country. In Cuba, people have different attitudes towards money, family, community and entertainment. Observing the locals and making a few friends will really help you to understand the Cuban way of life.

7) Keep an open mind and let go of any pre-conceived notions about Cuba or Havana. Contrary to some claims, everything is not all about politics. The average Cuban is well-informed of the broad themes affecting their country and the world. At the same time, they are probably far less concerned with these matters than you would think. While the most vocal members of society will immediately share their opinions, that does not mean that they speak for everybody. If you talk to a variety of regular people, you are sure to gain a clearer perspective.

8) Explore everything. Most guidebooks provide lists of hundreds of different tourist attractions to visit. While these places can help you learn history and facts, they give you almost no insight into

daily life. The best way to discover Cuba is to leave your map at home and simply get lost as you wander around. Cuban culture is very open, and you are almost guaranteed to meet people and see fascinating things as you walk around. In Havana, this is especially true. If a door is unlocked, you should consider that an invitation to enter.

9) Don't get bogged down by small problems. In Cuba, inconveniences are normal. Buses will break down, reservations will be changed, lines will be long. The sun will burn you. The weather will make you sweat and the mosquitoes will make you itch. In Havana particularly, you might even get scammed out of a few dollars, despite your best efforts to avoid it. Don't take these problems personally; they happen to foreigners and locals alike. Don't allow them to sour your trip, or your image of the country.

10) Enjoy the cheap entertainment. There are a lots of fun things to do in Havana, and most of them are either completely free, or cost just a nominal price. If the average local, earning just \$30 per month, can find ways to have fun, then you can surely keep yourself entertained on a tight budget. Don't always expect to go someplace specific and engage in a particular activity for amusement. In Cuba, the greatest pleasures come from relaxing and interacting with interesting people. Consider this an opportunity to slow down your life and enjoy the moment, rather than simply jumping from one plan to another.