

37th Southern Cross Brigade to Cuba

28 December 2019 – 17 January 2020

Information Booklet



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Intro to the info

The Southern Cross Brigade is organised by friendship societies in Australia and New Zealand, in collaboration with the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples, to strengthen international friendship and solidarity.

Participants in the Southern Cross Brigade are known as brigadistas because they are more than tourists. Brigadistas attend the brigade in solidarity with the Cuban people and their revolution in order to learn about and participate in many aspects of Cuban life. Brigadistas follow a schedule of activities that has been thoughtfully put together by staff at the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples to give them a comprehensive understanding of what the Cuban revolution stands for and how it works.

The main features of the brigade include:

- Talks on various aspects of Cuban life given by prominent Cuban speakers
- Visits to places of interest (e.g. schools, hospitals, factories)
- Light agricultural work in solidarity with Cuban workers
- Participation in cultural activities (e.g. salsa lessons)
- Visits to provincial centres, including Holguin and Santiago de Cuba
- Opportunities to explore Havana independently

The first brigade from Australia to Cuba was named the Eureka Brigade and left Australia in December 1983, returning in January of 1984. After this, New Zealanders were also invited and the brigade became known as the Southern Cross Brigade, or *Brigada Cruz del Sur* in Spanish. The 2019-20 Southern Cross Brigade will be the 37th annual brigade to Cuba from Australia and New Zealand.

In this document you will find information and tips about your upcoming brigade to Cuba. Feel free to contact us by phone or email with any questions, however it's quite likely that you'll find that the answers to your questions already lie below! Please note that this is not a Cuba travel guide – as well as reading this document thoroughly, we recommend that you also read up on Cuban culture, economy and travel tips so that you are fully prepared for your trip.

Costs

The Southern Cross Brigade costs approximately \$AU1200 in total, per person. This cost is paid in two parts.

1. There is a non-refundable registration fee of \$AU250 to be paid by 31 October to secure your place on the brigade.



This fee can be paid by EFT or cheque:

EFT:

- BSB: 062-003 (Commonwealth Bank)
- Account number: 00801160
- Account name: ACFS Sydney
- Please include your name in the reference. For example: 'Rego T. Smith'

Cheque:

- ACFS Sydney
- PO Box 764
Ashfield NSW 1800
AUSTRALIA

2. On arrival at the camp in Cuba you will need to pay a further 670 CUC (Cuban Convertible Pesos) in cash, which equates to approximately \$AU950. You must bring this cash in either Euros, Canadian dollars or Mexican pesos (for more info, see p. 5). This cost covers all accommodation, food, travel and activities for the duration of the brigade.

International flights, visas and health insurance are not included and must be arranged separately. See next section.

The cost of the brigade covers all basic necessities, however the Southern Cross Brigade recommends that each brigadista bring a *minimum* of \$AU600 spending money in a suitable currency (see p. 5 for details) for snacks, drinks, toiletries, souvenirs, personal outings and optional activities. Please bring enough extra cash to suit your travel style – for many, \$600 will not be enough. We have found that most brigadistas spend approximately \$1000 on extras. For an idea of some of the extra costs, please see the table below:

Optional Extra	Approx. cost in \$AU
Drink at the camp bar	\$2
Toiletries at the camp shop	\$2
Snacks at the camp shop	\$5
Taxi from the camp into Havana	\$50
Dinner in Havana	\$20
Souvenir t-shirt	\$5
Public toilet	\$0.25

Flights, travel insurance and visas

It is the responsibility of each brigadista to organise their own flights, visas and travel insurance. Here is a little info to get you started:



Flights

We advise booking your flights as early as possible, as flights to Cuba around the Christmas period can be expensive and fill fast.

We recommend that you do not travel to Cuba via the USA, due to the ongoing US blockade on Cuba. It's possible that you could be delayed at immigration in the USA due to unwanted attention from US officials.

Travel insurance

Since 2010, it has been a requirement of entry into Cuba that all travellers, both foreigners and Cubans living abroad, have medical insurance. To ensure that you comply with this requirement, you will need to have a travel insurance policy with a non-US company that covers medical expenses in Cuba.

Please have a hard copy of your policy ready to show the officials at Cuban immigration.

Visas

Australians and New Zealanders who wish to travel to Cuba must obtain a visa from the Cuban Embassy in their respective country. As a brigadista, you are being invited to Cuba by ICAP (The Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples), a Cuban government body. However, you will still have to apply for a Tourist Visa. Minors must have their own Tourist Visa.

The Tourist Visa can be used within one year of issue. However, once you enter Cuba, the visa is valid for a stay of 30 days. If you intend to stay in Cuba after the brigade finishes, you can organise to extend your Tourist Visa with ICAP while in Cuba. You must organise this extension while the brigade is in session, as ICAP will not be able to assist you after the brigade has finished.

The following information will be useful when filling out the visa form:

- The purpose of your visit to Cuba is to participate as a brigadista in the Southern Cross Brigade.
- Your initial address in Cuba is CIJAM (International Camp Julio Antonio Mella), which is located at Caimito Guayabal.

For Australians: For more information, please phone the Cuban Embassy on (02) 6290 2151 or visit their website at <http://misiones.minrex.gob.cu/en/australia> and find the application links for the Tourist Card on the right hand side of your screen.

For New Zealanders: For more information, please phone the Cuban Embassy on (04) 464 2210 or visit their website at <http://misiones.minrex.gob.cu/en/new-zealand> and find the application links for the Tourist Card on the right hand side of your screen.



Money

Cuba has a dual currency system:

- The Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC) has been traditionally most often used by tourists and is pinned one for one to the US dollar.
- The local currency is National pesos, which is valued at about 24 pesos to the US dollar.
- The two currencies are interchangeable, with many institutions accepting both.

Cash

The Southern Cross Brigade strongly recommends that you arrive in Cuba with enough cash for your entire time in the country. This includes roughly \$AU950 brigade payment, as well as a minimum of \$AU600 spending money. Please do not rely on the use of cards.

Please ensure you arrive in Cuba with Euros, Canadian dollars or Mexican pesos. Neither Australian nor New Zealand dollars can be exchanged in Cuba. You will not be able to change your money into CUC outside of Cuba. The Southern Cross Brigade recommends that you avoid bringing US dollars, as these incur an extra surcharge to exchange in Cuba.

There is a money exchange service at the camp where you will be staying, where you will be able to change Euros, Canadian Dollars and Mexican Pesos to Cuban Convertible Pesos. The camp also has a Security Room where cash and other valuables can be stored if you so desire. Money exchanges can also be found at the airport, in banks and some big hotels.

Before leaving make sure to convert your CUCs back to Euros, Canadian dollars or Mexican pesos, as CUCs cannot be exchanged outside of Cuba. There is a money exchange in the departures lounge at the airport, although it is best to change the majority of your money in the city, as the money exchange in the airport has been known to run out of foreign currencies.

Credit cards

A credit card is a good back up option to cash. ATMs can be found throughout Havana and other cities. There is also a credit card machine at the money exchange in the camp, where both Visa and Mastercard credit cards can often be used successfully for a cash advance. When withdrawing cash in Cuba, remember that not all ATMs in Havana dispense large denominations of money. Always check this before inserting your card.

It is very difficult for us to provide accurate information on what kinds of credit cards will or won't work in Cuba, as the situation changes year to year and is largely dependent on the state of the US blockade against Cuba. This is why we strongly recommend that you bring cash money. Credit cards issued by American financial institutions, such as American Express, are never accepted in Cuba.



Credit cards are only sometimes accepted at large establishments. Many smaller businesses, including private restaurants (paladares) and private guest houses (casa particulares), do not accept credit cards of any kind. It is best to always carry some cash to ensure you can pay for goods and services.

The Southern Cross Brigade recommends that you leave copies of your card numbers with a family member, in case of emergencies.

Debit and cash cards

Due to the US blockade of Cuba, cash cards and travel cards do not work in Cuba, while debit cards are often similarly useless. You cannot rely on these cards as a backup.

Brigade staff and volunteers

The brigade will be supported by 2 or 3 Cuban staff from the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP), a government body that focuses on international solidarity. These Cuban staff all speak English and have been working hard to coordinate and plan the brigade all year. There are many other Cubans who staff the camp where you will stay, including people working in the kitchen, the shop, the money exchange, the security room and the bar.

Each year, one brigadista is asked to be the Brigade Leader. This person should have fluent English and should be knowledgeable about the political, economic and social situation in Cuba. The job of the Brigade Leader is to liaise between the brigade members and the Cubans to ensure that all brigade members know what is happening and when. They will also be the 'go-to' person for sorting out admin issues, coordinating the Australia/New Zealand night and acting as an impromptu speech giver for the brigade. Please contact Lia Weitzel, Lead Coordinator, if you would like to put your hand up to be Brigade Leader.

There is also a team of volunteer local coordinators living in Australia and New Zealand who are responsible for brigade promotion and brigadista recruitment. It's possible you've already met some of these people! Any and all questions you have prior to leaving for the brigade can be directed towards the Lead Coordinator or your local coordinator. Their contact details can be found in the *Contact Us* section on p. 14.

Arrival in Havana

On arrival, Cuban immigration is thorough, and you may be asked several questions. For your information:

- You are travelling to Cuba as a member of La Brigada Cruz del Sur (The Southern Cross Brigade) organised by the Australia and New Zealand Cuba Friendship Societies in association with ICAP
- You are not in Cuba for a holiday, but as part of a solidarity brigade



If your flight arrives on the day the brigade begins (Saturday 28 Dec 2019), you will be met by the Cuban ICAP staff at the arrivals gate at José Martí International Airport, Havana, and be taken to the Julio Antonio Mella International Camp (CIJAM).

If your flight arrives prior to the first day of the brigade, you will be asked to meet at the ICAP building in Havana, Number 301, Calle 17 (between H & I), Vedado on Saturday 28 Dec 2019 at a time to be confirmed. The Christmas/New Year period is incredibly busy in Cuba, so you must organise your accommodation prior to arriving in Cuba. Please notify the Lead Coordinator of your accommodation details in case of a change in arrangements.

The camp

Brigadistas will spend the majority of the program staying at the Julio Antonio Mella International Camp (CIJAM), which is located 50 km out of Havana. The nearest town to the camp is called Caimito and is a pleasant 5km walk or bike ride away.

It is important to emphasise that the camp is not a five-star hotel or even a one-star hotel! There may be interruptions to the water and electricity supply. However, don't let this put you off. View it as a way of experiencing what life is like for the average Cuban. By the end of the Brigade you might even miss the camp life!

Dorms

The dorms are basic concrete brick constructions and the rooms are shared and single sex, with each dorm room holding up to 8 people. Blankets, sheets and pillows and pillow cases are provided. You will need to bring a towel.

People of the same family are normally put in the same room. If there is space in the camp, couples usually will be able to have a room to themselves but this is not guaranteed, as other brigades may be staying there at the same time as ours.

Food and water

The food at the camp is served in a canteen style, with three meals provided each day. Food is basic but will meet all your daily nutrition needs. There is no choice of menu. Breakfast is a light meal of fruit juice, bread, eggs on occasion, coffee and hot milk or yoghurt. For lunch and dinner there is fresh fruit and salad and an emphasis on rice, beans, yucca and malanga. They also serve beef, pork, chicken and some fish. It is safe to eat all the food at the camp, including the fresh fruit and vegetables.

It is not recommended to drink the tap water in the camp. However, there is a treated drinking water dispenser in the canteen and also one near the bar.



The camp has a bar which sells food and drinks. This is where brigadistas can buy Cubita coffee, pizzas, alcohol, soft drinks and bottled water at very reasonable prices; most items are 1CUC or less. The camp bar will also supply you with hot water.

Bathrooms and Washing Facilities

The bathroom facilities at the camp are very basic. There is a mix of western and squat toilets, most of which are flushed with a bucket of water. The showers are often cold. Recent improvements to the camp have seen the introduction of hot water in some shower blocks, however it is best to be prepared for cold showers. You can buy a bucket at the camp shop, fill it with hot water from the troughs outside and take it in with you to shower, if you wish. If you shower in the hottest part of the day, cold showers should not be a problem.

There are troughs outside the showers for washing clothes. We recommend bringing a universal rubber sink plug or small collapsible bucket for clothes washing, both of which can be donated to the camp if you do not want to bring them home.

Camp shop

There is a small shop at the camp where you can buy personal items, such as soap, shampoo, detergent and toilet paper, as well as gifts for friends and family, such as slogan t-shirts, Havana Club rum and Cubita coffee. They also sell biscuits, chocolates, towels, postcards, cigarettes and a small selection of books. T-shirts and bottles of Havana Club rum are cheaper at the camp than in the shops in Havana.

Valuables

The camp has a secure place to keep valuables. Money, important documents and other valuables are recorded and signed in by both the brigadista and the security officer on a receipt before the valuables are secured. You should be aware that once in the safe, valuables can only be accessed at certain times of the day, so you will need to ensure that you keep enough money on your person for a few days at a time.

Theft in the camp is rare and there are security guards on duty at all times. However, do not leave items on the bus at night or leave valuables lying exposed in your room.

Electricity

Cuba's power output is 110 volts (Australia and New Zealand use 220V). Because Cuba uses a lower voltage, it is safe to put our appliances in Cuban power sockets. Remember that this means your appliances will run at half charge – batteries may take double the time to charge as they do in Australia and hairdryers may work at half capacity, if at all. There are some 220V power points around the camp, which can be found if necessary.

You will need an adaptor. Cuban sockets generally use the North American style double flat prong, but some also use the European style with round prongs. For this reason, we recommend bringing a universal adaptor.



The Australia/New Zealand night

As a gesture of solidarity, the Australian and New Zealander brigadistas will hold an Australia/New Zealand night for the Cuban staff at the camp. The brief for this evening is quite open, but usually involves a performance of some kind and a dinner cooked by brigadistas. Be prepared to offer your skills (singing, dancing, public speaking, cooking) and if you know of any poems, songs, speeches, flags or recipes that you would like to include in this night, please bring a copy of them along with you! Remember that the availability of ingredients and kitchen utensils may be limited in Cuba.

Phone, Computer and Internet Access in the Camp and in Cuba

WiFi is not widely available in Cuba and can often be expensive. This is because Cuba is unable to use the submarine cable to the USA that connects to the global network, and so they use satellite and a cable to Venezuela for international phone and internet. Therefore, it is best to tell family and friends to expect limited contact from you during your time in Cuba.

- While staying at the camp, you will be able to access WiFi on your personal devices. Internet access while you are away from the camp cannot be guaranteed.
- There is internet access in Havana
 - o The bigger hotels offer WiFi for approximately 10CUC/hour.
 - o The national telephone provider, ETECSA, offers cheaper internet service for approximately 4CUC, but there are sometimes queues for this service.
 - o An increasing number of locations throughout Cuba now have WiFi. To access public WiFi, buy a NAUTA scratch card from an ETECSA shop. This costs \$2 per hour. The locations are easy to spot with people sitting about with their laptops and cell phones.

There are 2 or 3 pay phones at the camp with instructions in English on how to call overseas. You can purchase phone cards from the camp shop or an ETECSA outlet. It is best buy a 10 or 20 CUC card and some recharge cards from an ETECSA shop, the airport or private vendors, in case the camp shop runs out. Remember to make sure it is for convertible pesos (CUC) and not national money, and it is for making calls and not a mobile phone recharge card.

Contacting Brigadistas while they are in Cuba

Our contact in Cuba is ICAP. This organisation acts as host to Brigadistas during the time of the Brigade. Leima is the ICAP Director Asia and Oceania. Her email is director.dao@icap.cu.

Please note there is no Australian or New Zealand Embassy in Cuba (the nearest Embassy for Australians is in Mexico City), however, the Canadian Embassy in Havana deals with Australian matters in Cuba.

The camp is contactable by phone and fax on 047 319232, 047 319343, or 047 319200. Please only use these numbers in case of emergencies.



Packing list

Personal items

- Casual clothes
- A warm outfit for cooler weather
- One smart casual outfit for special events
- One work outfit for volunteer agricultural activities, including long sleeved shirt and sturdy shoes that can get dirty
- Comfortable walking shoes
- Raincoat/umbrella
- Wind proof jacket
- Swimmers and a towel
- Hat
- Sunglasses
- A water bottle
- Universal power adaptor
- A torch
- Toiletries – e.g. soap, toothpaste, shampoo, conditioner, razor blades, sunscreen
- Sanitary products (these items may be difficult to find in shops)
- A roll of toilet paper (for use in public bathrooms)
- Hand sanitiser
- Sufficient prescription medications for the duration of your journey overseas.
- A 'stopper' for diarrhoea, (Gastrostop or Loperamide)
- Antibiotics for both bladder/urinary tract infections and bowel infections
- Motion sickness tablets
- Insect repellent
- Earplugs (If you are a light sleeper, you might be bothered by late night music in the camp)
- A towel (pillowcase, sheets, pillows and blankets are provided)
- Clothes washing powder or soap, clothes pegs, elastic or nylon washing line, universal sink plug
- Any extra snacks or treats you might want, including tea bags, vegemite, peanut butter, jam, dry biscuits, dried fruits, nuts
- Small gifts for Cuban staff and new friends (optional, see next subsection on p. 11)
- Guide book. *The Lonely Planet Guide to Cuba* has maps of Havana
- A copy of your travel insurance policy
- Pens and paper, address book and diary
- A good sense of humour and desire to learn about Cuba

Anything you bring that you do not want to carry home can be donated to the camp, where it will be very much appreciated.



Gift ideas for your new Cuban friends

You will be overwhelmed with the kindness and generosity of the Cubans you meet, so you might find yourself wanting to show your appreciation with a small gift. The items on this list would be greatly appreciated:

- USBs – 4GB or more
- Pocket knives
- English/Spanish dictionaries, English (travel) phrase book, picture book of Aus/NZ.
- Big box of paracetamol
- Blu-tac and other office supplies
- Solar-powered calculators
- Guitar strings
- Aus/NZ souvenirs; t-shirts, hats, tablecloths, tea-towels, coasters, calendars etc.
- Union paraphernalia, such as t-shirts and caps
- Key-rings and other trinkets
- Sets of coloured biros/pencils for kids - gold and silver biros are especially appreciated!
- Quality dolls and toys, especially koalas, emus, kiwis, etc (no battery-operated toys)
- Photo of yourself and your family in Aus/NZ, your house, street, work place, local shop, school, etc - helps with the conversation if your Spanish isn't too hot!

Items to donate

If you have spare room in your luggage, please consider bringing items to donate to the camp. You might also consider donating cash, if you wish. The following is a list of items that would be invaluable to the Cuban staff:

- Books in English or Spanish for the camp library
- Gardening
 - o Secateurs
 - o Pruning shears
 - o Work boots
 - o Gloves
 - o Mattocks/hoes
- Carpentry
 - o Saws
 - o Saw discs
 - o Planes
 - o Jack planes
 - o Drill bits
 - o Chisels
 - o Glass cutting tools
- Plumbing
 - o Adjustable pliers/multi-grips in different sizes
 - o Shifters



- Faucets for basins and sinks
- PVC adhesive
- Silicon adhesive
- Silicon tape
- Electrical
 - Electric drills
 - Screwdrivers
 - Multimetres
 - Drill bits for drilling metal
 - Masonry bits
 - Pliers
- Masonry
 - Grinder discs
 - Tile cutters
- Laundry
 - Scrubbing brushes
 - Soap powder
 - Scissors
 - Pegs
 - Clothes lines
- Kitchen
 - Metal grater
 - Mandoline style grater/slicer
 - Potato peelers
 - Vegie/cooks knives
 - Serving spoons
 - Cooking shears
 - Egg slicers/spatulas
 - Plastic mixing bowls
 - Plastic chopping boards
 - Pot holders/oven cloths
 - Dish cloths/tea towels

Please remember to pack any knives, scissors and tools in your check-in luggage.

FAQs

Q: Do I need to speak Spanish to go on this trip?

A: No, you do not need to speak any Spanish to be able to participate in the brigade activities! There will be a Cuban translator with the group for the entire duration of the brigade.



Having said that, we do recommend learning a little bit of basic Spanish to help you get by when you're not with the group. After all, it's important to know how to ask someone if they want to dance!

Q: How do I ask someone "would you like to dance"?

A: "¿Quieres bailar?"

Q: Do I need to be a member of my local Cuba friendship society to register as a brigadista?

A: No, it's not necessary. However, brigadistas are encouraged to make contact with their local Friendship Society branch and attend a couple of meetings prior to leaving for Cuba to give them a better understanding of what to expect in Cuba and why the friendship societies exist.

Q: What will the weather be like in Cuba in January?

A: Although it is technically winter in January, you can expect most days to be pleasantly warm. However, there are occasional cold fronts and nights and early mornings can also be cool. In January in Havana, the temperature range on an average day has a minimum of 14°C and a maximum of 24°C and there is an average total monthly rainfall of 64mm.

Q: What's involved in the voluntary agricultural work?

A: This work is a token contribution completed by those who are able as a gesture of solidarity with Cuban workers. Past work activities have included picking oranges; pruning orange trees, papaya and banana palms; picking beans; planting guavas; harvesting yucca; picking tomatoes; harvesting sweet potatoes and cutting weeds with machetes. We encourage you to participate to the best of your ability. Gentler alternatives can be found for those who are less able so that they can still contribute.

Q: Do I need injections to go to Cuba?

A: Cuba is a healthy nation and it is unlikely that brigadistas will encounter any major health problems. Yellow fever, polio, malaria and diphtheria have been eradicated, while infectious diseases, including meningitis and tuberculosis, are rare.

We recommend that you organise vaccinations for Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Tetanus and Typhoid. We also recommend that you are vaccinated against yellow fever if you are travelling through countries where yellow fever still exists. Neither Australia nor Cuba will allow you past border control without a vaccination certificate if you have been in a country with yellow fever.

Q: Will I have access to health care while on the brigade?

A: Health care in Cuba is of high quality. There is a doctor and nurse at the camp and you are encouraged to visit the medical centre over any concern and not self-diagnose or self-medicate. This service is free to brigadistas.



How to reserve your place on the brigade

Please follow these steps to reserve your place on the brigade:

1. Call or email your local brigade coordinator to let us know you're interested in going on the brigade. You can find their contact details in the next section of this information booklet.
2. Arrange your flights and travel insurance.
3. Complete the Registration Form and send it to the Lead Coordinator, Lia Weitzel at southerncrossbrigade@gmail.com
4. Pay the registration fee of \$AU250 by EFT or cheque:
EFT:
 - BSB: 062-003 (Commonwealth Bank)
 - Account number: 00801160
 - Account name: ACFS Sydney
 - Please include your name in the reference. For example: 'Rego T. Smith'Cheque:
 - ACFS Sydney
 - PO Box 764
 - Ashfield NSW 1800
 - AUSTRALIA
5. Apply for your visa to enter Cuba through the Cuban consulate in your country. Let the Lead Coordinator know when your visa has been confirmed.

Contact us

Get in contact with our Lead Coordinator, Lia Weitzel, to register for the brigade and get in contact with your local Australia Cuba Friendship Society coordinator to find out more information about any upcoming brigade information sessions.

Also, find us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/southerncrossbrigade/> and on Instagram with the handle 'southerncrossbrigadetocuba'.

Lead Coordinator

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