

TREE INSTITUTE TRIP TO CUBA WITH MARC MINNO, JULY 2024

Tuesday 7/2/2024

Arrive in Havana and drive to Matanzas

From Jose Marti International Airport in Havana we will drive along the northern coast of Cuba, passing many popular beaches, to the City of Matanzas. Travel distance is about 70 miles. Matanzas is the birthplace of the danzón and rumba music and dance traditions. This beautiful area was originally home of the Taíno people, but they were killed or enslaved by Spanish soldiers and colonists from the Canary Islands in the late 1600s. Later, slaves from Africa were imported to work in the extensive sugar cane fields. Matanzas has seventeen bridges that cross the three local rivers and is known as “The Athens of Cuba” for its poets.

Wednesday 7/3/2024 Matanzas

On this day we will explore coastal, mountain, and serpentine scrub habitats in the vicinity of Matanzas. This rich variety of habitats will likely offer many interesting plants, birds, and butterflies for us to find. Also of interest, this region has caves, mineral springs, and a classic lighthouse at Punta Maya.

Thursday 7/4/2024 Drive to Cienfuegos with a stop at San Miguel de los Baños

We will drive from Matanzas to Cienfuegos on the southern coast, a distance of about 110 miles. The historic center of Cienfuegos is a UNESCO World Heritage site. The city was founded in 1819 and is known as “The Pearl of the South”. Many beautiful buildings here date to the early 1800s.

On the way we will explore mountain habitats at San Miguel de los Baños. Back in the day, this town at the top of a mountain was a retreat for the wealthy to escape the lowland summer heat and was also known for the healing properties of its mineral water baths. There are a number of neoclassical style buildings in the town, although many are in disrepair. The Balneario San Miguel, with its Islamic-style turrets, is especially beautiful. We will explore local forests and trails around the town.

Friday 7/5/2024 Drive to Topes de Collantes with a stop at Cienfuegos Botanic Garden

Cienfuegos will be our base from which to explore and coastal habitats and the Escambray Mountains to the east for several days.

Around 1880, a wealthy business man from Boston, Edwin F. Atkins, acquired the Soledad Sugar Estate located about 10 miles east of Cienfuegos. The Atkins family made their money from sugar grown in Cuba. The Soledad estate became his winter retreat. Mr. Atkins donated money to Harvard University to set up a research facility at Soledad to study and improve sugar cane varieties and production. After Atkins died Harvard assumed control of the property via a 99 year lease and developed the Soledad estate into a botanic garden for the study of tropical plants. The Cuban government took over authority in 1961 and continues to maintain the garden. The garden has collections of palms and other tropical plants from around the world.

The Escambray Mountains are an isolated geographic feature on the south central coast of Cuba located between Cienfuegos and Trinidad. These mountains are the second highest in Cuba and have many endemic species for which we will be searching.

Saturday 7/6/2024 Drive to Topes de Collantes National Park

Topes de Collantes (Collantes' Highs) is about 2,600 ft above sea level. We will explore its mountain forests for orchids, birds, and butterflies, such as the Cuban Dark Calisto.

Sunday 7/7/2024 Topes de Collantes National Park

We will continue to explore the Escambray Mountains along trails through the National Park. Who knows what treasures we will find?

Monday 7/8/2024 Drive to Playa Ancon near Trinidad

Today we will drive east along the southern coast about 50 miles from Cienfuegos to a beach resort near Trinidad. This city was founded in 1514 and became an important port for the export of sugar. Today tobacco and tourism are the economic drivers. The historic city center is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Playa Ancon, where we will be staying, is on a narrow arm of land protecting Bahía de Casilda. There are beautiful beaches and coastal habitats to explore or you may want to go SCUBA diving or snorkeling in the clear blue waters.

Tuesday 7/9/2024 Drive to Playa Larga with a stop at Medicinal garden

We will drive about 80 miles westward from Playa Ancon to Playa Larga at Bahía de los Cochinos (Bay of Pigs). On our way, near Cienfuegos, we will tour a medicinal plant garden. Bay of Pigs is the site of the failed invasion by CIA backed Cuban exiles against the Castro revolution. There is a history museum featuring stories and items of the battle in nearby Playa Girón. Playa Larga is the gateway to the IUCN Ciénaga de Zapata Biosphere Reserve. There are also sandy beaches and coastal forests to explore.

Wednesday 7/10/2024 Zapata Swamp at Playa Larga

Playa Larga will be our base from which to explore the Zapata Swamp for several days. Today we will visit the Las Salinas Wildlife Sanctuary part of the Zapata Biosphere Reserve. This area has mangrove forests, shallow ponds, and salt flats (salinas). Here, an expert bird guide will find with us many shore and water birds such as flamingoes. We are also likely to see the Bee Hummingbird – the smallest bird in the world - in Playa Larga and maybe a Cuban Pygmy-Owl in a nearby coastal forest.

Thursday 7/11/2024 Zapata Swamp at Playa Larga

Today our expert guide will help us search for some of the rarest birds in the world – the Zapata Wren, Zapata Rail, and Zapata Sparrow – all endemic to this region of Cuba, the Zapata Swamp Wildlife Sanctuary. The Sanctuary is a miniature Everglades with sawgrass marshes and tree islands. We will also tour a farm for the endemic Zapata Crocodile.

Friday 7/12/2024 Drive to Havana -tour of old city -

Saturday 7/13/2024 Havana- Hemingway House- art market-

Sunday 7/14/2024 Havana - Escaleras de Jaruco

About 15 miles to the southeast of Havana there is a limestone ridge called Escaleras de Jaruco. We visited this area in June 2023 and found many rare butterflies including one never previously reported from Cuba. The tropical forest here is also alive with birds such as the Lizard Cuckoo.

Monday 7/15/2024 Check out- Botanic Garden- airport