



## Where in the World Is Cuba?

*Hola* (OH-lah) from Cuba! That's how we say "hello." I'm Isa, and this is Luis, my best friend. We're your tour guides. Welcome to our island country. Look at a map and you'll see that our country is shaped like a *caimán* (kye-MAHN). That's a small alligator. Its head juts out into the

Atlantic Ocean, and its tail points toward Mexico.

Cuba is located in the Caribbean Sea, off the coast of North America. It's the largest island in the Caribbean. There is a lot to show you. ¡*Vámonos* (VAH-moh-nohs)! Let's go!

### Fast Facts:

- Cuba covers 42,804 square miles (110,862 square kilometers).
- The island lies 90 miles (145 km) south of Florida.
- Cuba is part of a chain of islands called the West Indies.
- About 4,000 smaller islands surrounding the island of Cuba are part of the country.
- Cuba has more than 200 rivers, many of which dry up during the dry season.
- Cuba's nearest neighbors are the United States, Mexico, the Bahamas, and the island of Hispaniola. Hispaniola is home to two countries: Haiti and the Dominican Republic.





## Home Sweet Home

Our home is Havana, Cuba. Both of us live in the same apartment building. Luis lives with his parents in one apartment. I live down the hall in an apartment with my mom, grandparents, aunt, and cousins. For a long time, the Cuban government did not allow people to buy or sell homes. So, most Cubans lived with their parents and other family. But the law recently changed. My *madre* (MAH-dray, mom) is saving to buy us our own home!



Giant blue barrels hold extra water for the times when the water system shuts down.

We spend a lot of time outside riding bikes and playing baseball.

Luis's grandparents live in the country, where they farm. His *abuela* (ah-BWEH-lah, grandmother) is strict about manners. She makes sure we always say "*por favor*" (por fah-VOR, please) and "*gracias*" (GRAH-see-ahs, thank you). She's also a great cook! Luis's *abuelo* (ah-BWEH-loh, grandfather) says she makes the best *empanada* (ehm-pah-NAH-dah) in all of Cuba!

Apartment building in Camagüey



Some Cubans live in small houses. But there are also many apartment buildings. The government built them many years ago. At times, life is challenging in the apartments. Nearly everyone has electricity and running water. Sometimes we lose electricity and our water pumps stop working—maybe for days!—because the government doesn't have enough funds. We plan ahead by filling water tanks and buying candles if we can. But hotels and restaurants for tourists usually have electricity and water all the time.

## Getting Creative

Things are often in short supply in Cuba. Certain foods, such as vegetables or beef, are rarely available. When a car or bike breaks down, we don't always have new parts to fix it. So when times get tough, we get creative. For example, people here know how to keep car engines running for decades. My mom still drives my great-grandfather's car! And we never waste anything if we can help it. Every object has another use, from using a food can for storage to turning old toothpaste tubes into a new purse.





## Let's Eat!



In Cuba, we rarely eat in restaurants because we can't afford the prices. Instead, we prefer to gather at someone's home and make a party of it. Most fruits and vegetables are not always available or affordable. But one exception is plantains. These are common and delicious! The plantain looks a lot like a banana. My mom cuts it into thin slices and fries it. Yum! We call this dish *chicharritas* (chee-chah-REE-tahs). Thick slices are

called *tostones* (tohs-TOH-nehs). They are a popular snack. In the early summer, we get a particularly tasty treat—mangoes! This is when mangoes are ripe. We look forward to having a sweet, juicy mango at this time all year.

We also eat a lot of corn, black beans, and rice. Beef is very rare and highly prized. But chicken is sometimes eaten, especially in *arroz con pollo* (AH-rohz kohn POH-yoh), rice with chicken.



Preparing supper is a family affair. One task we all share is cleaning the rice. Like many supplies and services in Cuba, the government sells us rice at low prices. This is to keep food more easily affordable. In many other countries, the rice is cleaned before being packaged and sold in the store. This can be expensive. To save money, the government buys rice that hasn't been cleaned. So, each evening, we sit together and pick out pebbles

and other bits from the rice. Then we rinse and cook it. As we work, we talk, joke, and gossip about our day. In a big family, it can get pretty loud!

Coffee is a major crop here. Adults drink *café con leche* (kah-FEH kohn LEH-cheh)—coffee with warm milk. It's delicious! Speaking of delicious, *flan* (FLAHN) is a favorite dessert. This sweet custard has a glaze of candied sugar.