

# CUBA

## *A Birding Journey Through A Cultural Landscape*

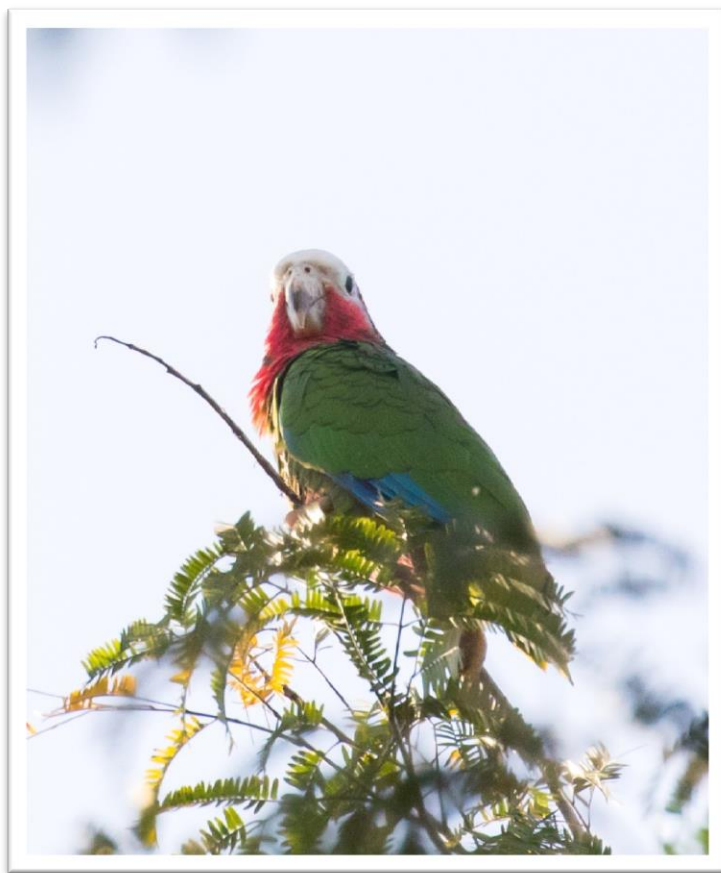


Our second **Nature Travel Specialists** people-to-people birding tour of Cuba has a slightly revised itinerary compared to our first Cuba trip. We've added two locations, changed the order of where we go, and added extra days to journey at a more relaxed rate. Our cultural content has increased with no diminishing of our birding and nature time. We're also using more particulares and paladares, small private accommodation places and restaurants operated by local Cubans (most hotels and restaurants used by international visitors and many Cubans are Government-run). These are always wonderful opportunities to directly interact with the Cubans, and also to reward them for their business acumen. Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean and supports an incredible variety of habitats from interior tropical forests, montane forests, to extensive wetlands and mangroves. Lying only 90 miles from Miami, Cuba boasts 372 species of birds, about 23 of them endemic, with several more that we'll see likely future splits resulting in endemism for the Cuban form. The date and locations visited are designed to give us the maximum opportunities to see and learn about Cuba's birds while sharing knowledge and skills with the Cuban people during our stay.

Leading our exclusive tour is ornithologist, educator, and extraordinary birding guide **Arturo Kirkconnell**. Arturo is the bird curator at the National Museum of Natural History of Cuba. His curriculum vitae includes 77 scientific papers and he is the author of two books: *A Field Guide to the Birds of Cuba* (available in both English and Spanish with more information in the Spanish edition), and *A Birdwatchers' Guide to Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and the Caymans*. At present he is working on another project, *The Birds of Cuba*, that will be published by the British Ornithologists Union's BOU Checklist Series. Arturo has been leading birding tours in his native Cuba since 1988 and is the most sought after guide in the country. Our cultural Guide is Gustavo Perez, who has a wealth of knowledge about Cuban history, politics and general life, much of it discussed from his own life's experiences. And just to ice the cake, he's also an accomplished birder. Once again our overall group leader is Andrew Haffenden, making his third trip to Cuba in 18 months.

As a People to People program tour we continuously engage participants with the warm, friendly people of Cuba in addition to our strong emphasis on birds, nature and culture. You will experience Cuba in a most personal way, through the eyes of the Cubans. We meet with local biologists and naturalists as we visit reserves and other nature areas where Cuban endemic species as well as

specialty bird species are located. We also visit local farmers, art galleries and have other cultural opportunities to exchange our experiences and ideas of the US so as we learn about Cuba, the Cubans learn about us. Most restaurants feature musicians, as the arts are considered a real career in Cuba so are fostered and supported. We often get the chance to discuss the music with them, sharing our different experiences and perspectives. Our meetings and interactions with all the people we meet along the way, from Professors to farmers to everyday Cubans serve to promote two-way understanding and insight to Cubans from people who live outside the Cuban borders and to bring skills and knowledge to local Cubans to improve their life within Cuba.



Cuban Parrot

## Cuba Itinerary 2017

### Day 1 – Saturday, April 22: US/Santa Clara

We arrive in Santa Clara, pass through immigration and customs, exchange money then board our bus to visit the Che Guevara memorial. Along the way we're likely to see our first Cuban endemic,



Cuban Blackbird, and non-endemics such as Smooth-billed Ani. The Memorial is a very interesting series of exhibits, and Gustavo's knowledge in addition to what we are seeing will help us understand the background to the Revolution; in addition our own perspectives will be valuable for Gustavo. We then drive to Cayo Coco, about 3.5 hours away, one of several cays in the Jardines del Rey Archipelago off the central north coast. A 17 mile long causeway gets us onto the cay,



and we are likely to make several stops along it for shorebirds, waders and even flamingos. This evening Arturo will give us an overview of the natural history of Cuba, especially the status of endemic birds, and efforts being made to conserve them and Cuba's natural environment in general. This will enable an informative interchange between our Cuban guides and tour members' own experiences in the US.

### Day 2 – Sunday, April 23: Cayo Coco

We spend today birding around Cayo Coco, starting off early at the Disco (Jubali) Cave for Key West Quail-dove and a number of endemics, including the northern race of Zapata Sparrow, Cuban



Gnatcatcher, Oriente Warbler, Cuban Tody and near endemic Cuban Emerald among others. Non-endemics include Zenaida Dove, the Cuban race of Western Spindalis, one of the brightest colored, Mangrove Cuckoo and Greater Antillean Grackle. We'll visit several areas for other



endemics such as Cuban Green Woodpecker, waders and many others. We should be able to find resident West Indian Whistling-duck on a small lake near our hotel. We will also visit a market where local artisans and craftspeople sell goods. As they speak at least some English, our wandering around provides opportunities to interact with these entrepreneurial Cubans.



## Day 8 - Monday, April 24: Paredón Grande/Cayo Guillermo

An early breakfast this morning then we depart to Paredón Grande, with its famous black and yellow lighthouse. This area is another endemic high point, with Cuban Bullfinch and Cuban Vireo being in our sights. This is also the best place to find the extremely restricted Bahama Mockingbird, and also Thick-billed



Vireo, also restricted to just part of the archipelago. Zapata Sparrow, Cuban Gnatcatcher and Oriente Warbler are also here, and of course the ever-present and active Cuban Emerald. We return to our hotel for lunch and some free time, or more local birding, then



later in the afternoon head west to Cayo Guillermo, with American Flamingo being our main target. But we'll see many other birds as well, likely including a range of waders and shorebirds, the endemic Cuban Black Hawk, Antillean Palm-swift, Crested Caracara, Greater Antillean Grackle, LaSagra's Flycatcher and a number of our own warblers, colored up and about to leave for the US and Canada.



## Day 9 - Tuesday, April 25: Cayo Coco/Camagüey

After some early morning mop-up birding and photo opportunities around Cayo Coco we head back over the causeway then drive to Camagüey, about three hours away in east central Cuba. As on all our drives our guides will be on the alert for birds, and we'll



also stop to visit some villages along the way. Our cultural guide Gustavo takes the opportunity offered on these drives by

telling us about Cuban life in his inimitable style. One of the fascinating aspects of Cuba is the ingenuity of the people in the face of shortages of nearly everything. The variety of transport seen throughout the island speaks testament to this. Camagüey, Cuba's third largest city with 300,000 residents, has a nice town square, and a walk along the main street reveals many shops for locals, with everything from shoes to large appliances. This is a slice of non-tourist Cuba, as it is not on the usual international visitor's route, and not polished up to attract them. English is heard little among the adult population, though children learn it in school. We'll turn in early tonight as we want to make a very early start tomorrow to be ready shortly after dawn in the best area for the near-endemic Palm Crow and endemic Fernandina's Flicker, two often difficult to find birds.



### Day 5 – Wednesday, April 26: La Belen and Najasa area

The area we will be exploring today is open country with many palm groves and a mixture of semi-deciduous woods on foothills at low elevations. About 120 species of



birds have been reported in the area, a number of which are difficult or impossible to find elsewhere in Cuba. Cuban Palm Crow, Giant Kingbird and Fernandina's Flicker center in our radar, along with localized Plain Pigeon. Endemics Cuban Parakeet, Cuban Parrot, Bare-legged Owl, and Cuban Pygmy-owl, plus regional endemic Cuban Crow are also here.



On our previous trip we had the opportunity to compare Loggerhead and Giant Kingbirds side by side. We overnight again in Camagüey, once again engaging with ordinary Cubans to share aspects of our lives in each of our countries.

### Day 6 – Thursday, April 27: Camagüey/Trinidad/Cienfuegos

Today is our least birdy day, with a greater emphasis on culture and countryside, as we have a long drive to Trinidad, about five hours. However we will take all day to do this, allowing for plenty of stops for both birds – West Indian Woodpecker is widespread through here, as are Greater Antillean



Grackle, Smooth-billed Ani, Great Lizard-cuckoo and the white-fronted Cuban form of American Kestrel.

Throughout the tour we'll be checking the sky, posts and open trees for endemic Gundlach's Hawk, similar enough to Cooper's Hawk to make birders glad the latter



does not occur in Cuba! As we head east we'll pass through cities,

towns and villages, in mostly rolling farmland. We'll stop for birding using Arturo's knowledge, and arrive in the small city of Trinidad for a possibly latish lunch, depending on the birding. Trinidad is a very attractive historical city, with many Spanish style, pastel-painted buildings. It has more the air of Antigua de Guatemala and Granada in Nicaragua, though not as grand, than other Cuban



cities. We'll take the opportunity to walk around, poking our heads into shops, including the ration stores, well-known but little understood outside Cuba. We'll also visit a chapel of the fastest growing religion in Cuba,



Santeria, which was developed under the guise of Catholicism, but is an African-derived religion that does not believe in an afterlife, rather doing things for others in this life is its goal. As an act of cleansing to purity new adherents spend the first year clothed



exclusively in white. After our time on Trinidad we visit a coffee farm to meet with the owner and some of his family, learn about coffee growing and especially discuss the relationship of Cuban farmers with the Government, including land ownership, transfer, who they can sell their crop to and similar issues. This is always a fascinating time, and we can buy coffee direct from the farm, which is strongly suggested as this farm grows some of the best coffee in Cuba. We then drive to Cienfuegos, a very different city to Trinidad, where we overnight.

### Day 7 – Friday, April 28: Cienfuegos/Bermajas/Playa Larga

We make a relatively early start and drive to Bermejas, about an hour away, picking up Reserve Manager Orlando in his village along the way. Bermejas is a



nationally significant fauna reserve of dry thick scrub, palm trees and wetter forest on ridges. We'll take our first shot at the Bee Hummingbird on some favorite food shrubs in a very small village, then enter the reserve where a hide has been



built on one of the tracks. The area is a stronghold for several Cuban endemics, and the hide is our best place to see a great one



– Blue-headed Quail-dove - and we may also see the other endemic, Gray-fronted; in fact all four quail-doves are possible here as both Ruddy and Key West are here as well. Another endemic frequently seen here is Cuban Parakeet; Bare-legged Owl, Cuban Tody and Cuban Trogon are reliable as is Cuban Pewee, and Cuban Pygmy-owl and Cuban Parrot are often seen. Cuban Vireo, Zenaida Dove and Western Spindalis are other likely species. After our time in the reserve



we continue southwest, reaching the coast and the Caribbean Sea at the town of Girón at the southeast corner of the Bahía de Cochinos, better known to most in the US as the infamous or famous, depending on your outlook, Bay of Pigs. We'll see, and stop for photographs of, signs extolling the Cuban success here in defeating the American, or rather Cuban-American, invasion.



This was not only a success for Cuba, but is lauded as the first defeat of Yankee imperialism in Latin America. From Girón we swing north along the eastern shore of the bay to its northernmost point, the village of Playa Larga, where we overnight in a particulare for three nights. Our lunch at a local paladare will be followed by a talk by Dr Frank Medina,

the Director of the Zapata National Park, part of the Ciénaga de Zapata Biosphere Reserve. Zapata Swamp is the largest and best preserved and protected swamp in the entire Antilles, and is home to

many endemic plants, birds and other animals, including the extremely endangered Cuban Crocodile. After the talk and question and answer period we'll check into our accommodation, then start birding in this rich area. Tonight and another nights we'll check a couple of spots for the nearly mythical Stygian Owl, and we'll also look for other night birds such as the former Greater Antillean Nightjar, now split resulting in another endemic, Cuban Nightjar.

#### **Day 8 – Saturday, April 29: Playa Larga area**

The Zapata Swamp is rich in birds – it supports 20 of Cuba's 23 or so endemics - so once again endemics will be high on our list. The second race of Zapata Sparrow is usually reliable here, and though patience is required for this shy species, Zapata Wren is also usually encountered here. Gundlach's Hawk breeds here, and both endemic Red-shouldered and near endemic Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds (the island of Hispaniola is its other location) should be seen here. Cuban Oriole is often seen in flowering shrubs and trees, including in built-up areas. There's also an area nearby that's usually good for Grey-fronted Quail-dove and White-crowned Pigeon,



though the latter are reliable on Cayo Coco as well. As we have a number of areas within easy reach, and a number of birds are harder to see in the thick swamp and forest we've devoted two days to Zapata, giving us both much better chances of seeing everything, and having time for both careful study and getting photographs. One day we'll visit the home of a local, whose yard attracts hummingbirds due to her planting of preferred food species. Both Bee Hummingbird and Cuban Emerald frequent her yard,



the Bee Hummers actually feeding from flowers while being held by her. The photographers can park themselves here while we look around elsewhere, returning to pick them up later. We'll also learn more about the Bay of Pigs invasion at a small museum and talk with the staff there about this and other aspects of Cuban and American life.

#### **Day 9 – Sunday, April 30: Playa Larga area**

We continue to explore the birds and natural world of Zapata, and learn more about our Cuban neighbors, as they do of us. There's even time to go for a swim in The Bay of Pigs.

#### **Day 10 – Monday, May 1: Playa Larga/Havana/Viñales Valley**

After breakfast we leave Playa Larga and head to the Viñales region in Pinar del Rio province, a little under four hours away. Today is May Day/ Labour Day/International Workers' Day, and one of the most important dates on Cuba's calendar. Around half a million people will gather at the Jose Marti Memorial and Revolution Square after marching from near downtown. Although it starts early, if possible we will try to take in some aspect of this event and the May Day celebrations as we pass through Havana anyway. If we can't, the if it is open we'll visit Finca Vigía, Ernest Hemingway's house on the outskirts of Havana. The Viñales valley is another area rich in birdlife and with some of the best landscape in Cuba. We'll make a stop along the way at a lake that is good for ducks, grebes,



kingfishers and other waterbirds. The prime landscape feature of the region are the mogotes, outcrops of limestone karst forming hills ranging from about 50ft to 1000ft. They are usually steep sided and often domed, due to a hard, weathered limestone cap and softer limestone sides. Caves are found throughout the mogotes, including shallow open ones where one can see stalactites while driving the roads. We'll spend two nights here to have time to enjoy the area, and get our bird list up. Viñales is Cuba's best tobacco growing area, so we'll take advantage of this by meeting a grower on his farm and learning about the production of both tobacco and its main end product in Cuba, cigars.



### Day 11 – Tuesday, May 2: Viñales Valley

We'll continue to see many of the birds we may have seen elsewhere, including Trogon, Tody, Bullfinch, Blackbird, Green Woodpecker and the stunning Red-



legged Thrush, which like the Western Spindalis is particularly colorful in Cuba. At the same time we'll also be searching for some likely new ones, including Cuban Grassquit and Cuban Solitaire. The Solitaire, a rather drab bird, is usually not difficult to find by call, but much harder to see



even when close. Its call sounds like what you might get if you crossed a Northern Mockingbird with a Wood Thrush, and is quite ventriloquial. As it prefers densely foliated trees and stays still, it can be a frustrating beast indeed. But we have plenty of time, and should be successful.



We'll be going to a number of locations with opportunities, but especially Cueva de los Portales adjacent to Parque Nacional La Guira. This large cave in a mogote is both scenic and historic; Che Guevara used it as the headquarters of his army during the



Cuban Missile Crisis, and it is now national monument. During the less active middle part of the day we'll visit a tobacco farm, where we'll meet with the owner to see production, drying and generally discuss life for a Cuban tobacco farmer. We'll also have the opportunity to watch cigars being rolled and cut, and we can buy them direct from the farm. Afterwards we continue our birding journey, with Cuban Green Woodpecker and Yellow-faced Grassquit likely to cross our path.



## Day 12 – Wednesday, May 3: Viñales/Las Terrazas/Havana

This morning we start to make our way to Havana, but we are not yet finished birding and discovering the many aspects of Cuba and meeting our Cuban hosts along the way. We'll stop at the



community of Las Terrazas, which was one of the first places in Cuba to turn towards tourism. It has a long history prior to this, starting off in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as a community of exiled Haitian French. However their agricultural



practices destroyed the environment and by mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the area was abandoned. Wealthy Cubans took possession, and built grand estates. A century later the Cuban government transferred the land to poor Cubans, but deforestation continued. Eventually

the Government stepped in again, and from this arose the reforestation and sustainable tourism model that we'll see on our visit. Las Terrazas is part of the Sierra del Rosario Biosphere Reserve,



with a little over 12,000 acres actively managed as part of Las Terrazas and a further 50,000 acres protected as a biological reserve. The reserve has about 120 bird species reported so far, plus endemic orchids and other plants. During our morning here we'll be looking for some of these, and



learning more about Las Terrazas itself, considering one of the most successful reforestation efforts



anywhere. This is a very good area for Cuban Trogon – nobody ever gets tired of seeing Cuba's national bird, surely the most beautiful of all the trogons - Cuban Trogon, Cuban Pewee, West Indian Woodpecker, Cuban Pygmy Owl, Cuban Western Spindalis and many others. We'll also have lunch here, probably to the song of the Trogon. We continue to make our way to Havana, arriving later in the day at famous Revolution Square and the José Martí Memorial for a walk in

the square, then continue on to our hotel for two nights.

### Day 13 – Thursday, May 4: Havana

Today we explore Havana, founded in 1519, full of both restored and decaying old buildings, arts, music and people – over two million live here, about 20% of Cuba's total population. Old Havana is



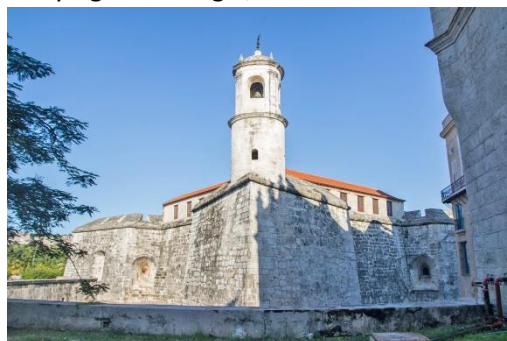
not just a tourist area, but a living one, with homes and schools. Flanked by forts and churches, the narrow streets and four historic plazas make for easy walking around Habana Viejo, the old



part of the city contained within the old city walls, parts of which still remain. And, of course, there are the American vintage cars. We'll enjoy a walking tour, learning of the history both old and recent, including the hotel Hemingway stayed in before buying Finca Vigía, and his favorite bar,



Bodeguita del Medio. And speaking of bars, we'll have lunch at Sloppy Joes, the origin of the sandwich – and still selling it – and the most famous bar in Havana when Cuba was a weekend place for visiting Americans ranging from movie stars to mobsters.



We'll also visit the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes with a superb collection of mostly modern Cuban art, and they may be time to visit the Museum of the Revolution for those who would like to. We make

time to visit the artisan and artist market, a huge affair housed in a wharf warehouse. Unlike at many such markets, everything has to be made in Cuba, and other than t-shirts and similar most are not factory produced. While there are plenty of the typical and tacky souvenirs ranging from the ubiquitous Che-emblazoned t-shirts to fridge magnets seen in other countries, there's some great artwork, often with the artist in attendance, and other worthy



purchases. And it's not just for tourists, many of the people wandering around are Cubans, who buy things for their homes and clothing for their children here, among other things. Although we'll have transport back to our hotel, it is strongly suggested to join together in groups of three or four and take an 1950's American car for a one hour tour, which will go



to places we didn't get to, including Lennon Park and areas outside the old city for a true understanding of Havana. The tours are about an hour, and you'll be dropped back at the hotel. A walk along the famous Malecón is also a tradition with Habaneros, as long as the wind isn't blowing seawater over the edge, which it does regularly.



### Day 14 – Friday, May 5: Havana/US

At time of writing flight times from Havana to US gateways had not been announced, and they will vary with airlines. Some participants will certainly depart in the morning, allowing connections to home cities, though some may opt to spend most of this day in Havana and take an afternoon flight. Regardless, we say adios amigos to our newly made friends, Havana and Cuba today and transfer to the airport, where important last minute purchases can be made, such as Havana Club Rum (must be stowed in your checked bag after arriving in the US before taking a connecting flight to a home airport) and maybe cigars. Prices are basically the same as elsewhere, and it's a way to use up remaining Cuban Pesos, which are worthless outside Cuba.



*All photos are copyright and taken while on tour by Andrew Haffenden except Blue-headed Quail-dove, taken by David Beebe while on our tour. Map courtesy Wikicommons.*

## TOUR DETAILS

The pace of the tour is “busily relaxed.” We’re out and about pretty much all the time, with some mid-day break times at Cayo Coco and Playa Larga. Some days, eg in Camagüey we are out all day, with lunch at restaurants along the way and on several days we have drives of 3-5 hours. Naturally we’ll have breaks along the way for both rest stops and birding. We have a comfortable bus, and will have water and snacks on board. While we will try to keep to a usual US lunchtime, that may not always be possible. We will mostly have early mornings (it is a birding tour!), a couple very early with a box breakfast in the field, but we don’t have any late hotel arrival nights. Accommodation ranges from possibly pretty poor – in Cuba at times we have to take what the Government tourism body assigns, and this can change at the last minute – to nice particulares, which are private residences or 6 or 8 room hotels and very good 4 or 5 star hotels. When staying at particulares the group may be split up. There’ll be plenty of walking on this tour, but mostly on level and even roads and trails, and at an easy pace. Generally we don’t walk for very long, or very far, so there’s nothing that could be described as hiking. Anyone with normal ambulatory ability should be fine.

The quality of meals varies in Cuba. Generally we will have fresh, tasty and healthy (Cuban food is organically grown) food including seafood. Red meat and pork is in shorter supply. Occasionally we will have a below par meal especially where we stay in a regional Government operated hotel which may be the case in Camaguey and Cienfuegos. The experience with and ability to provide for special diets, such as gluten-free or severe allergies is very restricted, so participants in these categories will see their choices restricted and are advised to bring some suitable foodstuffs, such as gluten-free products, from home with them. A number of participants with such dietary restrictions have traveled to Cuba with only minor inconvenience.

Cuba lies just south of the Tropic of Cancer, so expect daytime temperature to reach about 85 daily, and night time to be about 70. Rainfall is likely on 5 or 6 days of the trip, but just as showers. Humidity generally hovers around 75%. Expect it to be sunny for much of the day most day, though cloudiness and possibility of rain will increase towards the end of the tour.

Date: April 22 to May 5, 2017

Cost: \$3970 based on 10 participants. Lower numbers will attract a small surcharge. A single supplement is available, please enquire.

### Included in tour cost

- all meals from dinner Day 1 to breakfast on departure day (some flights may be too early to take advantage of this) including one soft drink or beer with lunch and dinner, and snacks and water along the way (except at the Cayo Coco hotel which is all-inclusive resort)
- All lodging
- Transfers on arrival and departure and all internal transport when on group itinerary
- Accompanying US leader and Expert Birding Tour Leader throughout tour, Cultural Guide plus local guides as required
- Entries
- Tips at restaurants and for bellboys

### Not Included

- International flights
- Entry visa and exit tax (included in international air ticket)
- Airport transfers when not on group itinerary
- Items of a personal nature such as non-included drinks, laundry, snacks, phone calls etc
- Tips for leaders and driver, and for housemaids.