



# HERPING IN CUBA

## A WEST-CENTER TOUR

12 DAYS AND 11 NIGHTS

GUIDED BY: LUIS M. DIAZ

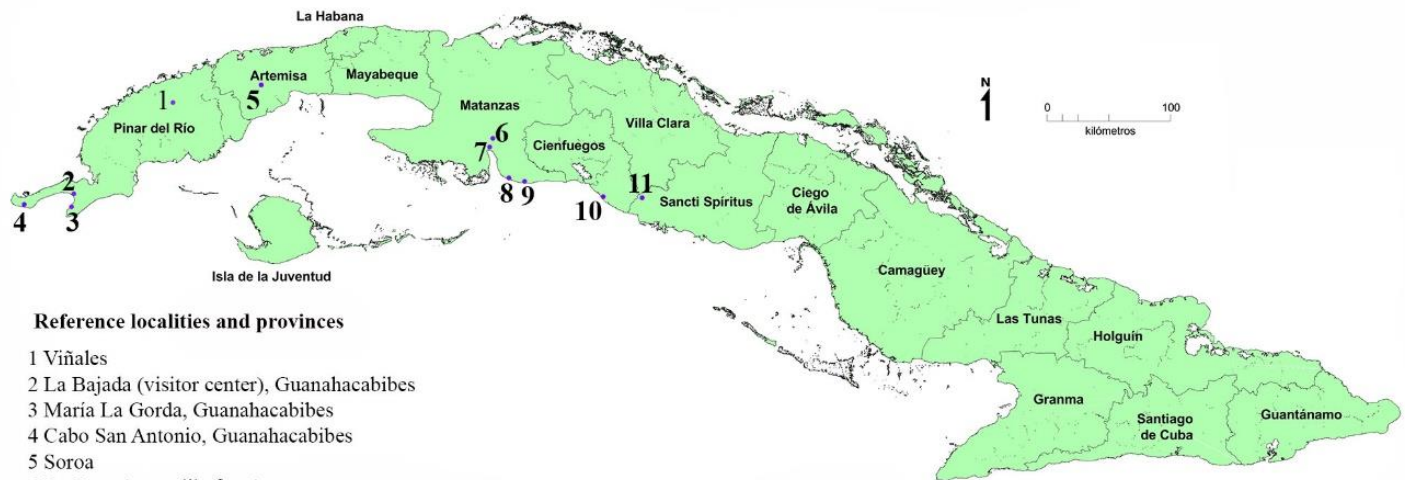
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JEFF LEMM



# Tour Introduction:

Cuba has 162 species of reptiles and 71 species of amphibians (frogs and toads only, no salamanders). Both groups have the highest levels of endemism among the vertebrates on the island (83% and 96%, respectively). In addition, there is an endemic family of worm-lizards (Cadeidae) and four endemic reptile genera (*Cadea*, *Cricosaura*, *Caraiba*, and *Arrhyton*) in Cuba. Because endemism is so high, most species have very limited distribution and are considered endangered. Amphibians and reptiles in Cuba are highly susceptible to poaching. Tour leaders will be responsible for animal handling during photographic sessions and general observation.



## Reference localities and provinces

- 1 Viñales
- 2 La Bajada (visitor center), Guanahacabibes
- 3 María La Gorda, Guanahacabibes
- 4 Cabo San Antonio, Guanahacabibes
- 5 Soroa
- 6 La Boca (crocodile farm)
- 7 Playa Larga
- 8 Girón
- 9 Caleta Buena
- 10 Guajimico
- 11 Topes de Collantes



## Day 1. Arrivals to Havana

Arrive at Havana airport. Transport by taxi (20 minutes) to Havana city, where participants will be lodged in a hotel or in a comfortable private house ("casa Particular"), depending on the client's preference, group size and availability.

This evening we will meet for a welcome dinner and talk over our plans for the forthcoming tour of this beautiful Caribbean Island.

### Havana

La Havana was founded in 1514, named after the daughter of a famous Taíno chief. Old Havana and the Fortification System was Declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1982.

## Day 2. AM Transfer to Viñales National Park; PM Herping Viñales.

Plan to be at breakfast by 6:00 AM, and please have your bags packed for departure at that time. We will load the vehicle at 6:45 AM. At 7:00 AM, we will depart for Viñales, west of Havana, two to three hours away. Along the way, we will stop to conduct the first surveys of our tour at El Campismo la Chorrera.

We plan to arrive in Viñales around lunchtime. Viñales is a delightful small town situated in a lush area of the Sierra de los Organos. This beautiful valley has a long tradition of small-scale farming, and it is not unusual to see farmers plowing fields with oxen between the colorful and distinctive limestone land features locally called "mogotes".

Viñales is one of the most beautiful landscapes of Cuba. Living within the "mogotes" are a diverse flora and fauna, including a wide variety of land snails. There is also a great number of herps. The Pinar del Río Cliff Anole (*Anolis bartschi*) is a colorful lizard with tones of blue, green and orange, which is endemic to the "mogotes". In some rivers we can find the Cuban Stream Anole (*Anolis vermiculatus*), a large anole lizard that resembles a baby crocodile. The Western Giant Anole (*Anolis*



*luteogularis*) is one of the largest anoline lizards in the West Indies. Rarely seen due to its excellent camouflage, the Western Bearded Anole (*Anolis barbatus*) at the first glance, looks like a true chameleon.

After lunch, we will begin our herping in Viñales where we expect to get species that we may have missed during the morning. About 66 species of herps have been reported here.

At night we can find many interesting herps, including: Cuban Giant Gecko (*Tarentola americana*), Broad-banded Trope (*Tropidophis feicki*), Giant Trope (*Tropidophis melanurus*), and the Cuban Giant Frog (*Eleutherodactylus zeus*). On summer nights thousands of the Pinar del Río Bromeliad Frog (*Eleutherodactylus varians olivus*) and the Cuban Two-note Frog (*Eleutherodactylus eileenae*) call high in the trees, with a sound resembling that produced by small bells. In the rivers, it is possible to observe the Caribbean Water Snake (*Tretanorhinus variabilis*) and the very common Western Cuba Giant Toad (*Peltophryne fustiger*).

Spend the night in Viñales.





### Day 3. AM Transfer to Guanahacabibes NP; PM Guanahacabibes NP

Plan to be at breakfast by 6:30 AM, and please have your bags packed for departure at that time. We will load the vehicle at 6:45 AM. At 7:00 am we will depart for Guanahacabibes National Park, a drive of about 3 and a half hours.

The Guanahacabibes Peninsula is the westernmost place in Cuba. Where the island becomes narrow at its western end lies the low-lying and ecologically rich Peninsula de Guanahacabibes. One of Cuba's most isolated enclaves, this region once provided shelter for Cuba's earliest inhabitants, the Guanahatabeys.

In 1987 this area was declared a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO – one of only six in Cuba. The reasons for protecting this area are many. The reserve's submerged coastline features a wide variety of landscapes including broad mangrove swamps, low scrub thicket vegetation and an uplifted shelf of alternating white sand and coral rock. The area's distinctive limestone karst formations are home to a plethora of unique flora and fauna including 172 species of birds, 700 species of plants, and 50 types of herps.

The Cuban Rock Iguana (*Cyclura nubila*) is quite common in Guanahacabibes and the locally endemic Cuban Eye-spot Anole (*Anolis quadricellifer*) can be found here as well. The Guanahacabibes Frog (*Eleutherodactylus guanahacabibes*) only occurs on this peninsula. Cuban Side-blotched Curlytail (*Leiocephalus macropus koopmani*) and Striped Curlytail (*Leiocephalus stictigaster stictigaster*) lizards are important taxa in the area. In the summer months, the wonderful beaches of Guanahacabibes are nesting places for at least three species of sea turtles.

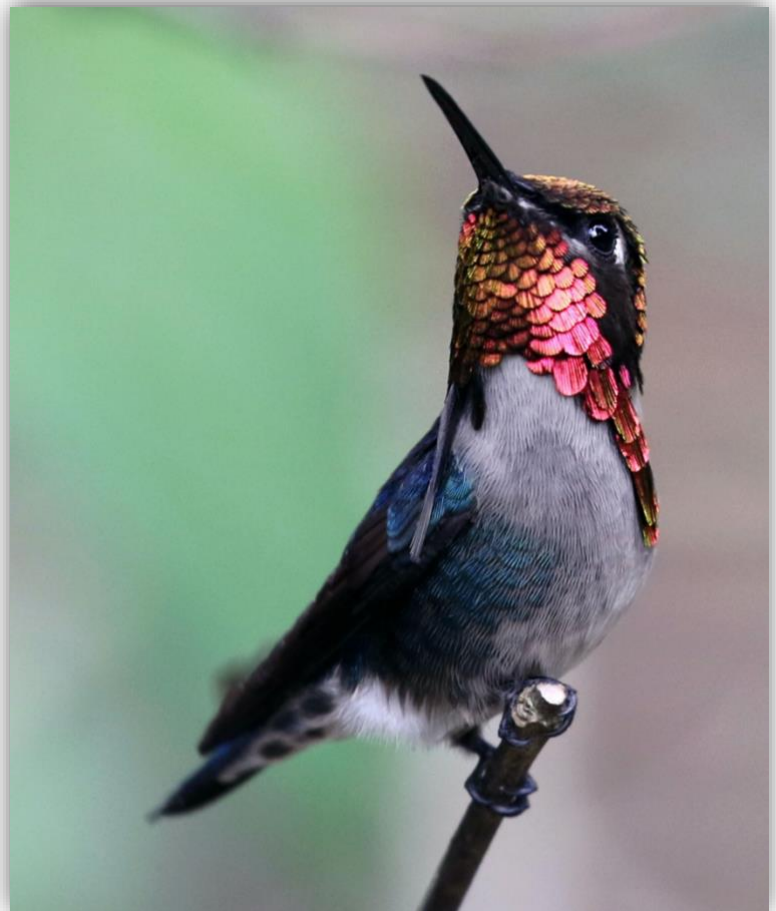


At night we will hike to some of the beaches looking for sea turtles and the chances of encountering nesting Green Sea Turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) are high. Red lighting is mandatory here, and flash-photography is not allowed. Beaches are usually guarded by volunteers and biologists as part of a long-term monitoring and research program of these endangered species.

Due to the karstic nature of Guanahacabibes proper shoes are strongly recommended. After an exciting first day in the field, we stay in Maria la Gorda in Guanahacabibes.

#### **Day 4. Full Day herping in Guanahacabibes NP**

Cuba is an island with many dwarf and giant animals. Here, the Cuban Bee-Hummingbird (*Mellisuga helenae*), the smallest bird in the world, is quite common. Other reptiles, like the Spiny Anole (*Anolis loysianus*) and the Yellow-belly Trope (*Tropidophis xanthogaster*) are more difficult to see, but also inhabit the forests of Guanahacabibes. American Crocodiles (*Crocodylus acutus*) are another target species here and we are very likely to see them from a distance in one of the local lagoons.



At night we will visit the entrance of some caves, so extra lights and special care while hiking are required. If we are lucky may see the Cuban Boa (*Chilabothrus angulifer*), the largest snake in Cuba.

Stay the night in Maria la Gorda in Guanahacabibes.

## Day 5. AM Transfer to Soroa; PM Herping Soroa

Plan to be at breakfast by 7:00 AM, and please have your bags packed for departure at that time.

Today will be our last time to explore the region of Guanahacabibes. At about 10:00 AM we will start driving back to Soroa, known appropriately as the 'rainbow of Cuba,' Soroa is a gorgeous natural area and tiny settlement 85km southwest of Havana, in the Sierra del Rosario, the easternmost and highest section of the Cordillera de Guaniguanico. The region's heavy rainfall (more than 1300mm annually) promotes the growth of tall trees and orchids.



In the afternoon we will walk around the orchid garden and see its collection of 700 orchid species (the largest collection in Cuba), many of which are endemic.

After dinner, we will continue our herp-watching. Up to four species of the genus *Tropidophis* occur in Soroa (most commonly seen are *T. melanurus*, *T. feicki*, and *T. pardalis*), and most of them are nocturnal. The Caribbean Water Snake (*Tretanorhinus variabilis*) is another species we may encounter at night. Many anoles can be found resting in the vegetation nearby the hotel.

Stay the night in Soroa.





## Day 6. Full day herping at Soroa.

Full day of herping in Soroa. This locality contains one of the more complex communities of amphibians and reptiles in Cuba, and greatly represents the western species. Soroa is a beautifully forested area, with the famous waterfall of the river Manantiales. In this locale we will attempt to find the Yellow-Striped Dwarf Frog (*Eleutherodactylus limbatus*). There is also a large population of the Cuban Stream Anole (*Anolis vermiculatus*) here and we hope to find the Cuban Spiny Anole (*Anolis loysianus*) as well. The Red-fanned Rock Anole (*Anolis mestrei*) is very common on the abundant cliffs. American Bull Frogs (*Lithobates catesbeianus*), a species introduced in the last century, are very common in the river. Interesting non-herp residents of this area include many interesting birds and Prehensile-tailed Hutias (*Mysateles prehensilis*; a kind of arboreal rodent)

Overnight in Soroa.



## Day 7. AM Transfer to Zapata Peninsula; PM Zapata Peninsula

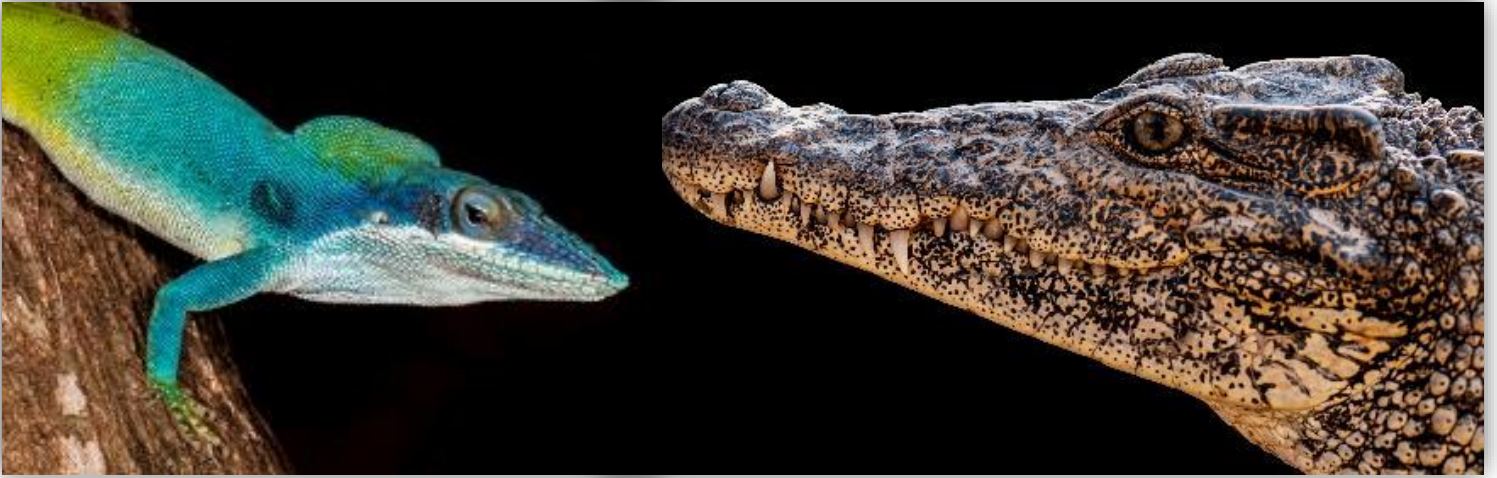
Today be packed and ready for breakfast at 7:00 am. We Hope to leave Soroa by 7:45 am.

Zapata is about 4 hours drive from Soroa. The Zapata Swamp (Ciénaga de Zapata) is one of the most important conservation areas in Cuba ,and quite possibly, one of the most important in all of the Caribbean. It is the largest swamp in the Caribbean, and over 270 bird species have been reported here, including all but three of Cuba's 28 avian endemics. In addition, about 62 species of herps have been reported from here with 51 species found only in this area.

Once in Zapata, our first target will be to find the Cuban Crocodile (*Crocodylus rhombifer*). Although it is very rare to see wil Cuban crocodiles, we will visit the Crocodile Breeding Centre, a facility created for both the Cuban Crocodile and the American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*). Here we can easily observe the Cuban Slider (*Trachemys decussata*) and the beautiful Cuban Blue Anole (*Anolis allisoni*), males of which have a gorgeous blue coloration.

Our second stop of the day will be at Cueva de los Peces, a cenote with marine fishes in the middle of the forest. This cenote connects to the ocean in underground caverns. Here we can observe the





Saw-scaled Curlytail (*Leiocephalus carinatus*) and the Cuban Striped Curlytail (*Leiocephalus stictigaster*). The Zapata Giant Anole (*Anolis luteogularis calceus*) is also frequently seen in this locality. The Cuban Ground Lizard (*Pholidoscelis auberi*) is very common here and in the building walls are geckos of the genus *Sphaerodactylus* (Ball Fingered Geckos), particularly the Ashy Geckolet (*Sphaerodactylus elegans*) and the West Caribbean Ocellated Geckolet (*Sphaerodactylus argus*).

Besides the reptiles, it is also possible to enjoy the Cuban Parrots (*Amazona leucocephala*) and many other birds that often occur around the cenote. A small diving center will give you the opportunity to visit a marvelous coral reef.

After dinner we will continue our adventure into the night where we can visit the surroundings of Playa Girón. In summer, after a good rain, toads can be heard in the distance. Two large species occur here: the Eastern Cuba Giant Toad (*Peltophryne peltocephala*) and the locally endemic Zapata Toad (*Peltophryne florentinoi*). The Zapata Toad is highly adapted for living in extremely dry coastal conditions. We will also observe House Geckos (*Hemidactylus angulatus* and *H. mabouia*), lizards that were introduced from Africa centuries ago during the slave trade.

Overnight in Zapata



## Day 8. AM Herping Zapata; Transfer To Guajimico.

After breakfast we will hike the trail to Enigma de Las Rocas. We will survey the coastal forest in search of the endemic Zapata Big-scaled Geckolet (*Sphaerodactylus richardi*), a beautifully-colored gecko. This forest is also the habitat of a different subspecies of the Cuban Giant Anole (or Knight Anole), *Anolis equestris juraguensis* and several snake species, including the Cuban Racer (*Cubophis cantherigerus*) and the Cuban Boa (*Chilabothrus angulifer*).



After lunch we will continue our journey toward Guajimico. Guajimico means 'place of the fishes' in the language of the indigenous tribes that once lived here, and the dive sites harbor some exotic marine life. All are close to the shore and six are located in a serene forest-rimmed inlet.

At night we will explore around the village for herps such as the Eastern Cuba Giant Toad (*Peltophryne peltoccephala*), the Cuban Cave Frog (*Eleutherodactylus thomasi trinidadensis*), the Cuban Giant Gecko (*Tarentola americana*) and many others.

Overnight in Guajimico





### **Day 9. AM Herping in Guajimico; Late morning Trinidad; PM transfer to Topes de Collantes**

After breakfast we will have chance to see the Slender Cliff Anole (*Anolis lucius*), the Escambray Spotted Geckolet (*Sphaerodactylus oliveri*), the Cuban Groundlizard (*Pholidoscelis auberi*), and many other reptile species. We will then make our way to Trinidad.

Trinidad is a perfectly preserved Spanish colonial settlement where the clocks stopped ticking around 1850. The city was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1988.

After a nice lunch in Trinidad, we will continue our drive to Topes de Collantes. Topes de Collantes is located in the Sierra del Trinidad, within the Macizo de Guamuhaya, in the center part of Cuba. The beautiful-crenellated hills are rich in flora and fauna, and surprisingly isolated. With the best network



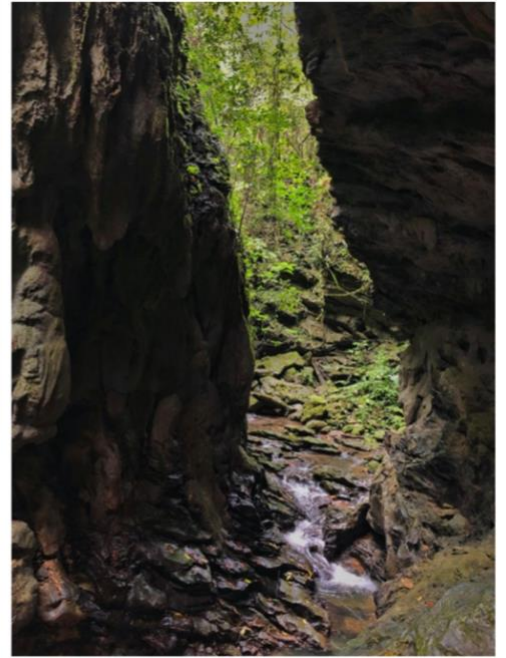
of hiking trails in Cuba, these jungle-clad forests harbor vines, ferns and eye-catching epiphytes. About 45 species of herps have been reported in this area.

This cool mountain habitat (64-73 degrees Fahrenheit at night in the summer) contains forests that are crossed by many streams which are the habitat of the central population of the Central Cuban Long-nosed Toad (*Peltophryne dunnii*). This population of endangered toad has been critically

affected by chytrid fungus and is likely close to extinction. Among the local endemics are the Escambray Twig Anole (*Anolis garridoi*), Escambray Bearded Anole (*Anolis guamuhaya*), Escambray-Blue Eye Anole (*Anolis ahli*), Escambray Grass Anole (*Anolis vanidicus*), Trinidad Flathead Frog (*Eleutherodactylus casparii*), Trinidad Groin-spot Frog (*Eleutherodactylus emiliae*), and the Cuban Grey Frog (*Eleutherodactylus greyi*).

At night we will hear the choruses of several frog species, including those of the Cuban Two-note Frog (*Eleutherodactylus eileenae*) and the Cuban Bromeliad Frog (*Eleutherodactylus varians*).

Overnight in Topes de Collantes



### **Day 10. Full day looking for amphibians and reptiles in Topes de Collantes.**

We will have breakfast at 6:30 AM, and we hope to leave the hotel by 7:00 AM.

After breakfast our next port of call will be Codina Park, a trail about 4.3 miles from Topes. Here we will enjoy a beautiful landscape and have more opportunities to find some of the local endemics, with special emphasis on the Escambray Bearded Anole (*Anolis guamuhaya*), Escambray- Blue Eye Anole (*Anolis ahli*), Escambray Grass Anole (*Anolis vanidicus*) among many others.

After a very productive morning, we will lunch in Codina, and start to make our way back to the Hotel, where we will have a few hours to relax before he head out at night.

Herping at night in the surroundings of the hotel. Overnight in Topes de Collantes





### **Day 11. AM Surveys Topes; Drive to Havana (With a Few Study Sites Along the Way)**

On this last day of the tour, we usually start a bit later in the morning. We will likely have breakfast around 8:00 AM and plan to leave between 8:30 and 9:00 AM. This will allow us to relax a bit before we begin the long drive back to Havana.

Before we leave the Topes de Collantes area, we may spend a little more time surveying sites in the area. We will have lunch at the city of Santa Clara, in Los Caneyes, where we can find common species such as the Common Brown Anole (*Anolis sagrei*), the Cuban blue-green Anole (*Anolis allisoni*), and the Cuban Green Anole (*Anolis porcatulus*).

We will arrive back in Havana in the afternoon. Overnight in Havana.



## **Day 12. Departures from Havana**

No matter the time of your departure, we have arranged transfers for the group to support getting to the airport three hours before your international flights.

### **Max / Min Participants:**

Minimum: 6 people Maximum: 15 people

### **Cost:**

\$3990.00 US per person - Double Occupancy \$320.00 US per person - Single Supplement

- This tour DOES include Lodging, Meals, Guide Fees, Entry Fees, and Local Transportation.
- It does NOT include International Flight, Baggage Costs, Insurance, Travel Visa, Alcoholic Drinks,

Snacks/Drinks (other than water), Laundry, Tips, and other personal costs.