



The 31st Ernesto 'Che' Guevara Volunteer Work Brigade

A Project of the Canadian Network on Cuba

April 27 - May 10, 2025

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The Canadian Network on Cuba was founded in 2002 to strengthen ties between Cubans and Canadians and bring together solidarity organizations across Canada. The CNC advocates for Cuba's sovereignty and an end to the criminal U.S. blockade. We work with the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP) to develop the Che Brigade program and participate in the May Day celebrations each year.

The Ernesto 'Che' Guevara Volunteer Work Brigade first traveled to Cuba in 1993 and since then hundreds of people from across Canada and beyond have gone on the Brigade to learn about Cuba, work alongside Cubans, and witness firsthand the results and impacts of the U.S. blockade. Our mainstream media routinely chooses to portray Cuba as a failing or failed state that cannot provide for its people. Few outlets even mention the 66 year economic blockade on Cuba and the effect it has on every facet of Cuban society. Despite this, Cuba has not only survived but thrived, guaranteeing free education and childcare all the way through post-secondary school, providing direct access to healthcare practitioners within communities, and sending more doctors around the world than any other country. During the Brigade we will travel, learn, work, and share with Cubans and activists from across the globe in the name of friendship and international solidarity.

Itinerary Outline and Program Highlights

The Brigade program encompasses two weeks of cultural and artistic visits, volunteer work, conferences, workshops, block parties, educational tours, as well as meetings with union organizers, workers, and government officials. We travel by bus between 2-4 activities each day. It's a busy schedule to make the most of our time in Cuba but we incorporate free time and down time into the program too! Our program interacts with the International May Day Brigade made up of several other Brigades from around the world.

April 26 - Stay at Mar del Sur for Brigadistas arriving early (*additional cost*)

April 27 - Arrive at Varadero Airport for bus pick up, first Brigade meeting

April 28 - Official opening ceremonies of the Brigade with International May Day Brigade

May 1 - May Day Celebrations in Havana

May 4 - Travel to Villa Clara, stop at the Che Guevara Mausoleum, continue on to the province of Sancti Spiritus

May 8 - Return to Artemisa for final closing activities of the Brigade at Science Centre

May 10 - Departure to Varadero Airport, return to Canada *

**This is a rough outline of our itinerary and is subject to change.*

Program Highlights:

May Day - On May 1st we will join thousands of workers from Cuba and around the world for the celebration of International Workers Day in Havana. This is an incredible experience where we will be surrounded by the spirit of international solidarity and share in the joy of our collective strength. Very early in the morning we will bus down to Havana and witness the sun rise above the crowd.

International Night - One of the traditions of the Brigade is a celebration of many cultures at CIJAM. Each Brigade delegation, including the Che Brigade, is invited to share foods, games, music, and art from their countries and cultures. We will be given some time on the stage should we choose to do a performance, reading, etc. We'll fill our table with foods, trinkets, and art pieces from the many nations within Canada. Please consider what you may want to bring to share or display.

International Solidarity Conference - We will convene at the conference centre in Havana with the many Brigade delegations from around the world as well as trade unions and solidarity organizations from a variety of backgrounds and industries. Each year has a special theme but always focuses on international solidarity and consists of several break-out sessions. Notable organizers, government officials, and activists will join us for these panels.

Cost and Accommodations

The final cost of the Brigade will be determined based on the final program of activities and accommodations as developed by ICAP and their state travel agency, Amistur. Fees will range between \$1500-1700 CAD and you will book your flights separately. Flights range from \$700-\$1500 depending on airline, dates, and departure location (*page 6*). Health insurance is required in Cuba. If you don't have your own health insurance that covers you while traveling, you can pay an additional \$75 on your program fees for Cuban health insurance.

2025 Brigade Fees: \$1550 per person

You can eTransfer your fees to CheVolBrigade@gmail.com and you may pay in installments. **The deadline to submit your \$300 deposit will be March 15 and the rest of the program fees will be due by April 1.**

For the first week we'll stay at the Julio Antonio Mella International Camp or 'CIJAM' in the province of Artemisa 30 km outside of Havana, where thousands of Brigadistas have stayed since its founding in 1972. This camp style village was created with the purpose of welcoming visitors from around the world after the triumph of the revolution, with intent to support building an international solidarity movement. Being more than fifty years old, and suffering the same lack of resources as the rest of the island, the camp is minimalistic and quite rustic. It's still quite suitable for welcoming Brigadistas and we always make it work.

CIJAM is situated with several 'bunkies' of four to six people each. Bathrooms and showers are dorm style and the bunkies do not have air conditioning. All meals will be served in the large cafeteria building. As well, there is a small shop on the grounds of the camp as well as an auditorium for lectures, presentations, and performances and an outdoor stage area.

Wifi cards are available for purchase on the grounds to access internet connection for short periods of time but please be aware that it is common to run out of wifi access cards during our stay. Plumbing in Cuba is not as developed as ours here and clean water is a resource to be preserved like any other. Showers will need to be kept short and in some cases you may find yourself with a "bucket shower" or rag shower. You may also find that toilets need to be flushed by pouring a bucket of water into the bowl. These are just a few of the differences in living in a wealthy country such as Canada. In some years past, CIJAM has reached capacity and our Brigade has been relocated to alternative accommodations. This is often hotels or student dorms. In this case, it is possible we will have air conditioning, but folks should plan to be without it.

During the second week of our trip when we travel to the province of Sancti Spiritus we will stay in a modest local hotel in rooms of two. We will eat our meals in the hotel dining hall and sometimes at local restaurants. The cost of these meals is built into your Brigade program fees but it's recommended to bring cash for tip pools for the servers and kitchen staff. You may also want to have cash for additional snacks, drinks, and extra bottled water.

Packing and Food

Breakfast, lunch, and dinner are provided at our accommodations but you may want to supplement between meals. If you have a dietary restriction please communicate with us and plan on bringing everything you need. Vegan and vegetarian options, for example, may be limited. Because of the resource scarcities in Cuba, most of our meals consist of rice, beans and meat. We will do our best to accommodate dietary restrictions but please know that not everything is within our control. You will always have a meal, but it may be underwhelming compared to the options available here in Canada. Non-perishable snacks and things that only require hot water are easy to pack and supplement your meals with. Brigadistas have also brought spices with them.

Suggestions:

- Granola bars / trail mix
- Peanut Butter & crackers
- Protein powder or other protein mix
- Dried fruits & fruit leather
- Salt, pepper, chili flakes
- Hot sauce / condiments
- Electrolyte packets / hydration salts

We suggest getting a filtered water bottle as **the water in Cuba is not potable to Canadians**. We will need to drink bottled water throughout the trip which is another resource that can be difficult to find. We will restock at every possible opportunity but Brigadistas found filtered water bottles to be incredibly helpful last year and they are available in a variety of price ranges. We will provide bottled water throughout the trip as much as we can and Brigadistas have always been good about sharing with each other between water pick-ups. It is absolutely essential you keep yourself hydrated as the weather in Cuba during the spring will be quite hot with most days around 30 degrees. Dehydration paired with a new diet can leave you feeling ill and light headed. It's imperative we take care of ourselves throughout the trip to make sure you don't miss anything and get to enjoy every moment of the Brigade. We recommend light, loose clothing.

Brigadistas have always been generous with their donations and we encourage everyone to bring what they can to support the Cuban people. WestJet airlines offers a baggage waiver for each flyer to get one extra luggage for free to fill exclusively with donations. You may also want to consider small gifts for our hosts as well throughout the trip. Donations will be gathered collectively and distributed with ICAP's guidance to specific hospitals, schools, and communities.

Please send me a list of donations you're bringing so we can coordinate. ICAP may provide us with specific needs, particularly for use in the repair of the CIJAM facilities, and we will provide that to you as it comes.



Packing List on the next page.

The US blockade makes many items unavailable, or hard to find in Cuba, make sure to **bring with you everything that you will need during your stay in Cuba**. The list below contains suggested items that you might want to pack with you.

Essentials

- Passport (must be valid for more than next 6 months; **if not** Canadian citizen, please check Cuba VISA requirements for country of your passport, generally if one has Canadian multi-entry category visa attached to a passport, no need to apply for Cuban visa)
- Spending money - Cash, USD (for souvenirs, snacks, bottled water, tips)
- Health insurance card printed
- Towels (for beach and shower)
- Items to handwash clothes (soap, small brush, rope/twine, clothing pegs)
- Snacks (nuts, cookies, dried fruit, etc)
- Light, loose clothing such as linen
- Shoes you can walk a lot in

Medical/Health

- Medications that you generally take
- Supplements/vitamins
- Medication for gastro-intestinal issues (Pepto-Bismol, Tums, Probiotics)
- Painkillers (Ibuprofen/Aspirin, Tylenol)
- Rehydration salts/electrolyte packets
- Medication for allergies (Claritin, Benadryl)
- Hand sanitizer

Electronics

- Phone charger
- Power bank (fully charged)

- Headphones

Clothing

- Sandals/flip flops (for beach, shower)
- Swimsuit
- Shoes and clothes for volunteer work (that you don't mind getting dirty)
- Light rain jacket/rain poncho/umbrella
- Sweater, long pants for chilly nights
- Hat for sun + sunglasses
- Nicer clothes for visits to memorials or special events

Toiletries

- Extra socks and underwear
- Soap, body wash
- Shampoo, conditioner
- Toilet paper, tissues
- Wet wipes
- Menstrual care products
- Hair brush
- Toothpaste, toothbrush
- Sunscreen, sunburn lotion/aloe vera gel
- Deodorant
- Insect/mosquito repellent/tea tree oil

Other suggested items:

- Earplugs
- Flashlight
- Backpack/shoulder bag for day trips
- Gardening gloves
- Small gardening tools
- Notebook, pens, pencils

- Spices, hot sauce, condiment packets, etc.
- Filtered water bottle

Donation suggestions:

- Antihistamines
- Paracetamol/Ibuprofen/Acetaminophen
- Diabetic medication
- Condoms and other sexual health items
- Menstrual care products
- Triple antibiotic ointments
- Powdered milk, non perishable snacks
- Toothpaste, other generic hygiene items
- Cold/Flu medicine
- MultiVitamins, Prenatal vitamins
- Asthma sprays
- School supplies- pencils, erasers, sharpeners, notebooks, etc.
- Prenatal vitamins
- Batteries/Portable Chargers
- Basic repair tools- hammer, wrench, etc.
- Eyeglasses
- Kids toys
- Baseball hats
- Sports equipment- balls, baseball gloves, etc.
- Instruments/parts

Suggestions for gifts for our hosts:

- Canadian whiskey
- Maple or other candies
- Canadian artwork
- Tote Bags
- Flags and cultural items
- Lighters

Booking Flights & Extending Your Trip

Flights should be booked individually at your earliest convenience through the airline or a travel agency. Flight options can be limited and become more expensive the longer you wait. You may find that depending on where you're coming from, flights are cheaper a day or two before the Brigade begins. If this is the case and you would like to arrive early please reach out and we can assist with arranging early accommodation. Arriving after the 27th becomes more difficult to arrange due to transportation from Varadero to Artemisa. Returning early presents the same challenge. You're welcome to extend your trip on either end and if you would like assistance booking accommodations in Varadero please reach out, other accommodations and transportation will need to be planned separately.

The International May Day Brigade begins on the 25th and it may be possible to travel to CIJAM with them to begin Brigade participation early for an additional cost. Please reach out to the Brigade coordinator if you are flying on the 25th. If you are arriving on the 26th at Hotel Mar del Sur we will have a pre-Brigade gathering that evening so folks can meet each other, this is

not part of the program and you're welcome to join us on the 27th and book your own accommodations for the 26th.

Scholarship Opportunities

Each year the CNC offers one or two scholarships to peoples identifying as First Nations, Metis, or Inuit. Fundraising has begun for this year's scholarships and we would encourage everyone to share our social media posts about the scholarship. For more information and to apply you can visit our website. Donations to the scholarship fund can be transferred to CheVolBrigade@gmail.com

The Canadian Cuban Friendship Association Toronto is also sponsoring a partial scholarship for a local young person. If you're based out of Toronto and interested in applying for the CCFA scholarship please visit their website for further information.

FAQ

Can I attend only half the Brigade?

Yes. Depending on the dates you may encounter additional fees for transportation. Please reach out to the Brigade coordinator if you must travel outside of the Brigade dates.

Will there be free time?

Yes, free time is planned into the Brigade but it is not extensive as our program is packed with activities. We will make sure you have a bit of free time to explore Old Havana. For safety and liability reasons, you must remain with the Brigade group throughout the trip. Day trips elsewhere are not permitted.

Can I bring young children?

You are welcome to bring your family with you but please understand that the Brigade program is developed for adults. Our days are long and busy and there is a lot of walking throughout the trip. Some activities are also more academic or education focused in a way that is not tailored to children. Young children may become bored and restless with no opportunity to return to our accommodations. Please reach out if you intend to bring any young children on the Brigade.

Is the Brigade accessible to people with physical disabilities?

We do our best to ensure the Brigade is accessible to as many people as possible but there are some limitations beyond our control. We pack a lot into the day and we do a fair bit of walking during some activities. Our bus will have a big step to get in and out and we cannot guarantee elevator access at all places we stay and visit. We will try to be as flexible as possible so folks don't have to miss out on activities but please connect with the Brigade coordinator directly if you have any concerns.

Will I have cell service and connection to the internet?

If you want to have cell service while in Cuba we recommend connecting with your phone provider about international roaming plans. Access to wifi and Cuban SIM cards is limited. You may be able to purchase a Cuban SIM card at the airport when you arrive but we make no guarantees. You may be able to purchase time cards for wifi access at CIJAM and at our hotels. If connectivity is important to you we strongly recommend talking to your phone provider about roaming services in Cuba.

How will the power situation impact the trip?

Power outages have become increasingly more common in Cuba as it is difficult for them to import oil and gas, and most of their major generators were built in the 1990s due to the fact that generators today are made with a significant portion of U.S. materials making them unavailable to Cuba. Throughout the trip we are likely to experience this in a multitude of ways such as temporary black outs in our accommodations, low power availability for charging devices, and long trips for our bus driver in pursuit of gas for our bus. We do not recommend bringing hot tools or laptops.

Please do not hesitate to reach out with any further questions to CheVolBrigade@gmail.com!