

more cruise reviews

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I have just returned from a week sailing around Cuba onboard the *Celestial Crystal*. As an avid cruiser and a 1st time visitor, I was naturally drawn to the idea of seeing Cuba by ship. I knew very little about Cuba and this cruise program, and was very intrigued to learn more.

Unlike me, the *Celestial Crystal* is no stranger to the island nation. She has been cruising to Cuba for 3 years, bringing guests to this island of warm hospitality, salsa music and cigars. The company enjoys a monopoly of being the only cruise line to sail from Cuba to Cuban ports... but not for long.

And Americans are already arriving in droves - the Cruise Director reports that on average, 50% of Celestial's pax are Americans, with Canadians being 30%, and the remainder international. All Americans are obligated to participate in People To People - a paid program that includes excursions with various educational experiences and onboard lectures on Cuban history and culture led by Cuban professors and historians. This is the only way Americans are able to visit Cuba.

All of the American guests I spoke to onboard said they wanted to see Cuba before it changes - according to one guest: "before there is a Starbucks at every corner and Hilton hotels everywhere". And some repeat visitors have already noticed changes even within one year - the use of cell phones is now widespread and many buildings have now been repainted and remodelled. One Canadian is already lamenting: "Give it a couple more years and Havana will commercialize into San Juan". Another surprising comment I heard a number of times was that Americans wanted to see Cuba before more Americans arrive.

No matter the reason, Cuba is a destination best visited by cruise ship, as it allows a port hopping experience that would be otherwise unfeasible by land. Canadians have always loved Cuba, but most go to all-inclusive resorts. *Celestial Crystal* offers a great alternative to enjoy more than a beach holiday - I visited Havana, Maria La Gorda, Cienfuegos and Santiago de Cuba in one week (plus Montego Bay). Each port came with an included excursion which gave insight to Cuba's intriguing history from the Spaniards' arrival in the 1490s, the cultivation and export of tobacco in the 1600s, to Fidel Castro's Revolution in 1959. Architecture and classic car buffs are in heaven here, with beautiful specimens in every city, on every street.

Best of all, the bland Cuban resort food that I always hear about is nowhere to be found onboard ship! I was pleasantly surprised at the variety of menu items offered at all meals, accompanied by attentive and efficient service - another great selling feature to add to the standard list of benefits of cruising. With thawing relations between the U.S. and Cuba, cruise lines are eagerly jostling for position to serve this emerging market. More cruise options will no doubt be available in the coming years. But if your clients want to see Cuba before the changes, now is the time.

Celestial Crystal's 3rd season in Cuba is ending this month but its 4th season will start a month earlier in November 2016, and according to ship's staff, will be a year round program. An all-inclusive package is available through Transat Holidays, with air, transfers, cruise, beverage package, excursions and gratuities.

Ming Tappin is a cruise veteran with over 20 years' experience in the industry and has sailed on 38 cruises and counting. Based in Vancouver, Ming is Owner of www.yourcruisecoach.com.



Celestial Crystal offers a great way to see Cuba.



Architecture buffs take note (and a big memory card!) - fascinating buildings line every street.



Food onboard the Celestial Crystal is top notch.



Included tours such as Revolution Square in Santiago de Cuba provide insight into Cuban history.



Ming enjoying a Havana city tour in a classic American car - a must do.