1. Everyone says it is illegal to travel to Cuba. Is this trip legal?

Yes, this trip is 100% legal. Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo is operating this educational program under the general license authorized by the office of foreign assets control (OFAC). This program differs from more traditional trips in that every hour must be accounted for. Each day has been structured to provide meaningful interactions with Cuban people or educational or cultural programming. Please note that Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo intends to fully comply with all requirements of the general license. Travelers must participate in all group activities. Each individual is required to keep a copy of their final program which could be requested by OFAC officials at any point in the next five years.

2. Can I tell US customs or immigration that I am traveling to Cuba?

Yes, because this trip is licensed and therefore legal, it is appropriate for you to say to customs or immigration that you are going, or have been, to Cuba.

3. How will customs and immigration know that the trip is licensed?

It is essential that you take with you on the trip a copy of your itinerary and the letter from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo authorizing you to travel to Cuba. Each person will receive these prior to the trip’s departure and it is essential to have both of these in your hand luggage as you may be required to show them at the airport.

4. What will my Cuban visa look like?

Your Cuban visa is actually a tourist card which will be included with your final documents. It is a loose card, (i.e., it is not stamped in your passport) which you will present on arrival to the immigration official in Cuba. It is divided into two parts and it is ESSENTIAL that you retain the second part which will be returned to you by the Cuban immigration official. The second part is your exit card and you need to be sure to keep this in a safe place. You will need it to leave Cuba.

5. What is the weight restriction on my luggage?

The charter company, Cuba Travel Services, flying LAX to Havana have very specific regulations regarding luggage and weight restrictions which are outlined as follows:

First Checked Bag: $35.00  
Second Checked Bag: $60.00  
Third Checked Bag and more: $95.00 per bag.

Bags more than 70 lbs will not be permitted. Carry-on limited to 1 per person, limit 20 lbs per carry-on, additional weight is subject to check-in and fee. Carry-on subject to carrier overhead size restrictions, subject to check-in fee if not overhead compliant.
For boxes and miscellaneous items, the pricing for each box and/or irregular sized baggage is charged at $4.00 per pound.

Participants are responsible for their own overweight luggage charges, so please be aware of your luggage limits. Please note that the weight restrictions on flights to Cuba are VERY strictly enforced. You will pay the excess luggage fee directly to charter company in the United States and this must be paid in cash as they do not accept credit cards.

When returning from Cuba to Los Angeles, there is no charge to check-in your luggage and excess luggage charges are rarely enforced.

Please note that it is possible that the luggage policy and charges might change. Your final documents will alert you to any changes.

6. What will the weather be like?

The best months to travel in Cuba are from late October through April. Temperatures do vary during these months with November, March and April being the warmest months when you can expect temperatures ranging from 70-80 degrees. It tends to be cooler from December to early February and temperatures can sometimes drop to below 60 degrees in January. We recommend looking at a website like www.wunderground.com before traveling to get accurate up-to-date information.

Rain can happen at any time but you are most likely to experience it in October, early November and January.

It’s always useful to travel with a small travel umbrella or a very light-weight rain jacket.

7. What kind of dress code should we pack for?

The dress code is casual during the day. Slacks and long shorts are fine for women. We recommend comfortable walking shoes.

We have planned a few special dinners and you may want to consider bringing something dressier for these events. A jacket for men is optional and is not required or expected.

8. What is the best form of money to bring to Cuba?

On January 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2015, the revised regulations regarding travel to Cuba authorize the use of credit or debit cards issued by a U.S. financial institutions. It will likely take some time for U.S. and Cuban financial institutions to work out the complicated details so you should plan on only being able to use cash. However, bring your credit card just in case.

While credit cards from other countries are accepted, it is important to note that many establishments in Cuba do not accept credit cards from any country. We recommend that all travelers, regardless of the country you are traveling from, bring with you sufficient U.S. dollars to convert to Cuban currency to cover your trip.

It is close to impossible to exchange traveler’s checks.
The best form of money is CASH. The ONLY permissible form of currency in Cuba for all non-Cubans is called CUC – the Cuban Convertible Currency. Please note it is currently not possible to use dollars in Cuba, but you can change your dollars for CUCs in Cuba.

9. Where can I exchange money and how does the exchange transaction work?

While technically possible to exchange money on arrival at the airport, in order to avoid long lines, your local guide will arrange for the group to be taken to a convenient place to exchange money. Please note that the exchange desks at the hotel are open at variable hours but usually are open from 9am to 5pm, sometimes closing for an hour at lunch time. Occasionally, the exchange desks run out of CUCs but if this happens, your local guide will arrange for you to go to an alternative exchange place.

Please note that you will need your passport to change cash, so be sure to bring it with you when changing money.

Please note that while the U.S. dollar and CUC are on par with one dollar being equivalent to one CUC, the dollar is subject to a 10% exchange surcharge above and beyond the normal transaction fees. When you give $100 you can expect to receive about 87 CUCs.

One way to avoid the surcharge is to bring Canadian dollars or Euros, rather than U.S. dollars. By doing this, and taking into account the exchange fees that you will be charged on acquiring Canadian dollars or Euros, you will probably be ahead by about 5% than if you had changed U.S. dollars. You will need to decide if the savings are worth the extra effort required.

10. How much money should I bring?

This is always a hard question to answer since it depends on what you are planning to buy. We generally recommend between $500 and $1,500 per person, depending on what you plan to purchase.

Here are some guidelines based on U.S. dollar rates (remember you will be making these payments in CUCs, not dollars). Lunches and dinners average between $25 and $40 for a good meal, but take note that most meals are included already.

One drink is included with each meal – additional drinks run about $3-$8.

Taxis rarely cost more than $15 to $20.

You can buy original art in Cuba for amounts ranging from $10 to $30,000. Some of the artists in Cuba can arrange for you to wire payment into an account in Europe or Canada, but certainly not all of them.

An evening at the Tropicana is about $100.

Tipping is usually 10%-15%. Again, all regularly anticipated tipping is included in the program. Please refer to the tipping guidelines in your final packet for more information.

11. What about carrying around large amounts of cash?

The hotel has a safe available in your room or at the front desk. We highly recommend using these for extra cash and your passports.
12. What are the hotels like?

**Havana-Paseo Habana**

The Paseo Habana is located on a quiet street in Havana’s Vedado neighborhood and is a short walk to Malecon and local restaurants. Paseo Habana has basic rooms that are equipped with air-conditioning, T.V., and private bathrooms. There is a small meeting center, restaurant, and lounge bar. Although it is considered a good hotel, we recommend coming with low expectations of what it is like. It is a European 3-star hotel.

Please call us if you have any concerns about what to expect. We want everyone to feel prepared.

**Almost all hotels in Cuba are noisy and we HIGHLY recommend bringing good ear-plugs with you if you are sensitive to noise.**

13. What is the electricity in Cuba and the plug size?

As odd as this may seem – there are two voltages in Cuba – both 110V and 220V. The Paseo Habana hotel has 110V and uses American style outlets. Outside Havana, hotels generally use 110V and an American-style plug. However, it varies so we recommend bringing an adaptor (plan on an adaptor for a European-style outlet) and make sure that whatever you are using has dual-voltage for 110 and 220V.

Please take note that if you have an electrical item that has a 3-prong plug, you will need a 3-prong adaptor as no outlets in Cuba take the 3 prong-plugs (the third prong being the grounder that helps protect against electric shock.)

14. Do the rooms have hair-dryers and irons in them?

Yes, the hotels in Havana have hair-dryers in the bathrooms. However, they are the kind that are attached to the wall and are quite low in their heat and power output. Bring your own if you are particular about having a powerful hair-dryer.

The Paseo Habana has irons by request from housekeeping.

15. Can we watch CNN in Cuba?

In Havana it will be possible to watch CNN on the television in your hotel room. On some occasions you may experience interference.

16. What are the roads and buses like?

Roads are surprisingly good in Cuba and because there are relatively few cars in the country, travel is usually smooth without traffic delays. The buses we use are comfortable with air-conditioning and large picture windows.

17. Can I drink the water and what about ice?

We recommend drinking bottled water which is usually available. However, please note that supplies are inconsistent and sometimes stores do run out. Rest assured that Distant Horizons will provide bottled water on the bus and one drink is included with each meal. All restaurants count a bottle of water as an included drink.
You may purchase additional bottles at local markets or stands. You will find the bottled water in your hotel room’s mini bar to be rather expensive. Your local guide will show you where to buy water.

Please note Cubans drink water from the tap, and the water is considered safe. Drinking bottled water is advised, but not mandatory.

In the hotel and in the restaurants chosen on your program, all ice is made from filtered and purified water.

18. Is it safe to eat salads and other foods that may have been rinsed with local water?

Overall, Cuba is a healthy country where a great deal of emphasis is placed on teaching about hygiene. Many Cubans drink the water directly from the tap. It is rare for travelers to get sick from eating food. Eating salads and fruit is generally safe. However, each person is different, and if you do have a sensitive stomach, you are advised to exercise caution when choosing what to eat.

19. Should I bring gifts to people in Cuba?

As you know, Cuba has been denied access to many world markets and as a consequence has a shortage of many things. People are very appreciative of gifts, including pens, small samples of cosmetics, vitamins, aspirin, soap, shampoo, toothpaste, baseball hats and t-shirts (old and new).

20. Who would I give these to?

You will see that the Cubans are very friendly and you may, for example, have a wonderful taxi-driver or waiter in a restaurant that you would like to thank discreetly by giving them a small gift. We recommend NOT giving out gifts to some of the people who are often outside of the hotel or handing out gifts in a group setting which may cause other Cubans nearby to crowd around you.

21. Can I use my cell phone in Cuba?

Both Sprint and Verizon Communications now offer roaming wireless service in Cuba which means that as long as your individual Sprint or Verizon plan permits, you are able to make and receive calls and texts while in Cuba. Plans may vary so if you do have Sprint or Verizon Communications, we recommend contacting your carrier to verify that your plan does cover roaming in Cuba and to inquire about your plan’s roaming charges.

Currently Sprint and Verizon are the only U.S. telecommunications companies to offer roaming services. With the recent relaxed regulations, we are hopeful that additional U.S. telecommunication companies will offer roaming wireless service as well and will keep you informed of any changes.

For those of you who do not have Sprint or Verizon as your carrier, it will not be possible to use a locked U.S. cell-phone in Cuba. It is possible to purchase a local cell phone for about $100 and rent a SIM card for $3 per day. The charge to make a call to the U.S. is about $1.90 per minute. There is no charge to receive calls from the U.S., but it is not possible to send or receive text messages from or to the U.S. To make or receive a local call within Cuba, the cost is about $0.60 per minute.

Alternatively, if you have an unlocked cell phone from the U.S., you can rent just a SIM card for $3 a day with the same per minute charges as above.
When you rent the phone or SIM card, you can put money on the phone then. It can be topped up by purchasing phone cards sold at most hotels and at special shops. If you are interested in doing this, your tour director can tell you exactly where to go at the airport or in the city.

Please note that sometimes stores run out of phones and SIM cards.

22. Is it easy to receive or send faxes or make telephone calls from Cuba?

It is relatively easy to send and receive faxes at the hotel in Havana. However, please note that there are no AT&T, MCI or Sprint access numbers from Cuba. You can only dial direct. The rate to call the United States from the hotel is about $3.00 a minute. It is also possible to buy telephone cards and use these in one of the many phone boxes in Cuba. The per minute rate at phone boxes is about $1.40. Sometimes it may take dialing a number two or three times before you make a connection.

Please remember that it is possible that telephone access and rates could change.

23. What about e-mail?

The Paseo Habana does have wifi and a computer in the lobby area, however you do need to purchase an internet card from the front desk.

Do not plan on being able to access the internet in your hotel outside of Havana. However, there are now WIFI hotspots in Cuba. To view some of the hotspots now available, please visit the following website. 
http://www.etecsa.cu/?page=internet_conectividad&sub=wifi. To access the internet at one of these hotspots, you must purchase a NAUTA internet card for 2-3 CUC for one hour and follow the instructions on the back of the card. Your tour guide can assist you with obtaining this card but please be warned, there are often long lines and cards are in short supply. Recently, entrepreneurial Cubans have been buying the cards in bulk and for a small “fee” will sell you a card right at the hotspot which will save you a lot of time!

Please be warned that internet access is often very slow and frustrating in Cuba.

24. What about elevators?

On this itinerary there may be several buildings with smaller elevators where we may ask the more physically fit travelers to walk up three to five flights of stairs. There will occasionally be buildings between three to five stories with no elevators. It is not unheard of to encounter elevators that do not work so we recommend that any person traveling to Cuba be able to walk up at least three flights of stairs without difficulty.

25. Are taxi cabs easy to get and how do I recognize them?

There are plenty of “official” taxis in Cuba and they are easily identified by the taxi sign attached to the roof of each car. These taxis have meters, but please be sure that they turn them on when you enter the taxi. Sometimes, even though the taxis have meters, the taxi-drivers prefer to agree on a fixed rate. This is fine as long as the fare is a fair one. A typical taxi fare from Old Havana to Vedado for example should be about 8 CUCs one way. All charges are in CUCs.

There are also plenty of “unofficial” taxis. These are often quite fabulous 1950s cars. It is quite safe to use these but we recommend setting a fare that you both agree on before you depart as they do not have meters. The fare will be in CUCs. You will see the “unofficial” taxis at the same taxi stands as the official taxis.
26. Am I restricted in what I can bring into and back from Cuba?

**Traveling to Cuba:** You are not permitted to bring GPS devices into Cuba. If brought into Cuba, these devices will be confiscated. However, it should be noted that Kindles, I-Pads, laptops, and cell phones with GPS on them are still permitted.

**Returning to the U.S.:** U.S. visitors to Cuba can now bring home a total of $400 worth of goods acquired for personal use and of that, $100 worth may be any combination of cigars, rum, and other alcoholic products. Travelers may still buy as much original Cuban artwork, music, and books as they want and bring it back to the U.S.; which may still be subject to the duty that is generally levied on any goods exceeding the value of $800.

Please note that large long umbrellas that do not fit in your luggage may be confiscated at the Havana airport.

27. Can I bring back cigars, coffee or rum?

Yes, U.S. visitors to Cuba can now bring home $100 worth of any combination of cigars, rum, and other alcoholic products.

28. Can I purchase and bring back art from Cuba, and how do I pay for Cuban art?

Yes, you are legally allowed to purchase Cuban art and bring it to the U.S. Information and informational materials such as books, films, artworks, posters, photographs, tapes, CDs and certain artwork are statutorily exempt from regulation under the Trade Embargo and may be transported freely. Original paintings, drawings, pastels, engravings, prints, and sculptures are all allowed.

You can buy original art in Cuba for amounts ranging from $10 to $30,000 for a large original piece by Jose Manual Fors or Los Carpinteros. Usually, for art pieces priced at about $400 or more, the Cuban artist who made the piece can arrange for you to wire payment into an account in Europe or Canada so that it’s not necessary for you to bring a large amount of cash to purchase their works. The artist will allow you to bring the piece of art back to the U.S. and will request that you wire your payment immediately upon returning. However, we cannot guarantee that all artists are able to facilitate such an arrangement, and you should be prepared to bring sufficient cash if you think you are likely to be making such purchases. The more established the artist is, the more likely he or she is to have an account overseas. Most artists selling in small shops in Old Havana will not have accounts overseas.

In an instance where you are able to wire funds when you return home, please ensure you get the bank wire information directly from the artist. While this is a legal transaction, we recommend that you do not mention the word “Cuba” in the wire documentation as it may raise unnecessary red flags and stall the process.

Please note that a piece of art with a value of $100 or more should always be accompanied by an export license. The Cuban artist who is selling you the piece is aware of this and it is his/her responsibility to provide this document to you. Generally they cannot provide it at the point of purchase, but will bring it to the hotel that day or the next day. This makes buying a major piece of art on the last day of the trip problematic, so be warned.
29. Should I be concerned about safety?

Cuba is a relatively safe country, but like any country we recommend that you exercise caution and take care in crowded situations. As the country has suffered economically in the last few years, we have seen a slight increase in crime. Do not leave wallets visible from pockets and always be aware of where your valuables are. Be sure to use the safe in the hotel room. In addition, there have been occasional reports of suitcases being tampered with and it is not clear to us whether this is taking place in Miami or Havana but we recommend securing any checked-in luggage with TSA approved locks. Please note that reports of damaged locks and suitcases have also been reported. As an extra precaution, we recommend not putting valuables in checked luggage.

30. What is the service like in Cuba?

Be prepared for slow BUT warm and pleasant service. Do not be surprised if your fax takes a few hours to send, the last telephone card was just sold or your coffee order takes 20 minutes to reach you. This is Cuba – you will be surrounded by beauty, great spirit and warmth… enjoy it.