

## Santiago de Cuba to Havana by train – December 2013

In Cuba you can only buy a train ticket at the station you're leaving from. You can get it up to five days in advance for the 860 kilometre journey from Santiago de Cuba to Havana. It's probably a good idea, as our carriage on the 'Special train' which in December 2013 left at 8.17 p.m. every third day, was quite full.



Buying the ticket is the hardest part of the journey. The station is a large modern barn down by the port, but you can't buy a ticket there. The ticket office is about a hundred metres west. No, not the first building, that's a refreshment stand. It's that white structure further on that looks like a temporary shed. You can get information at the window, but to buy your ticket you have to enter an unmarked door around the side. Here, as in any procedure to do with transportation or communications in Cuba, you will find a waiting room with a patient queue of customers. But, because we were obvious foreigners who would pay in hard currency, within a few minutes they opened a special



window for us. The process still took some time, as it involved a lot of writing and stamping by hand. You will also need your passport and 62 CUCs for a first-class ticket.



You are instructed to be at the station an hour before departure. Good advice, because you still can't get on the train until you get your ticket stamped. There was a lengthy queue at the window, so we went round the back again and the woman in the window ticked our names on her list and stamped our tickets.

The red leather seats are big and comfortable, but do not recline, so sleep is unlikely. There was a snack bar but the toilet was abominable: no paper - there never is in Cuba - but also no water, no light and no lock. The journey is uninteresting and accomplished mostly at night. Dawn arrives in Santa Clara, but from there on the scenery that can be made out through the filthy windows is unremarkable. Our train was only an hour late, making it a 15-hour journey.

Going the other way the train is scheduled to arrive in Santiago around midnight, not a good time to go looking for accommodation. We chose the Aviva bus which takes 16 hours, arrives at sunrise, costs half as much, and has reclining seats, but the air-conditioning is fierce. Dress warmly.

