

# Ciego de Ávila Province



Scooped out of the former Las Villas and Camagüey territories, Ciego de Ávila is a modern province with profoundly traditional roots. Nowhere else in Cuba are the cultural affiliations as deeply embedded as they are here. From the Haitian voodoo liturgies practiced in Venezuela, to the red-and-blue *caringa* dance that enlivens rural Majagua, to the impromptu game of English cricket by West Indian immigrants in Baraguá, the images of eclectic rural life are as captivating as they are colorful.

The province's agricultural economy is dominated by sugarcane, cattle-ranching and citrus-fruit production, with the Ciego de Ávila pineapple well known islandwide for its all-round quality and sweetness. Luminous Laguna de Leche is Cuba's largest natural lake containing copious amounts of fish, and providing a freshwater fishing haven for armies of foreign anglers. Further east on the reclaimed Isla Turiguano, water-based activities give way to land antics as cowboys showcase their skills at one of the country's liveliest rodeos.

Ciego's biggest international draw-cards are Cayo Coco and Cayo Guillermo, two previously uninhabited keys situated 35km off the province's north coast. Flown in on charters from Canada and Europe, travelers to these flat, mangrove-covered islands are bussed from the airport to one of a dozen swanky new hotel complexes where organized activities are all part of the package. For some visitors the place feels about as Cuban as a passing cruise ship. Others lap up the luxury of the all-inclusive deal.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Branch Out**  
Uncover the traditions and festivals of Majagua (p311)
- **Scuba Cuba**  
Dive from a live-aboard in the secluded Archipiélago de los Jardines de la Reina (p318)
- **Cheap Sleep**  
Pay peanuts to stay at Sitio La Güira (p318) on Cayo Coco and rub shoulders with the all-inc crowd
- **City of Porches**  
Blow the dust off the understated delights of Ciego de Ávila (opposite)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 33

■ POPULATION: 413,447

■ AREA: 6910 SQ KM

## History

The area now known as Ciego de Ávila Province was first prospected by Spanish adventurer Pánfilo de Narváez in 1513, who set out to explore the expansive forests and plains of the north coast, then presided over by a local Indian chief called Ornofay. Integrating itself into the new Spanish colony of Cuba in the early 1500s, the province got its present name from a local merchant, Jacomé de Ávila, who was granted an *encomienda* (indigenous workforce) in San Antonio de la Palma in 1538. A small *ciego* (clearing) on Ávila's estate was put aside as a resting place for tired travelers heading east-west and it quickly became a nexus point for a burgeoning settlement.

Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries the northern keys provided a valuable refuge for buccaneering pirates fresh from their lucrative raids on cities such as Habana and Puerto Príncipe. Two hundred years later a buccaneer of a different kind arrived, in the shape of American writer Ernest Hemingway, who played his own game of cat-and-mouse tracking German submarines in the waters off Cayo Guillermo.

During the Independence Wars in the latter half of the 19th century, the area was infamous for its 67km-long Morón-Júcaro defensive line, better known to historians as La Trocha. Characterized by its sturdy military installations and manned by a voluminous force of up to 20,000 men, the defense system was built up by the ruling Spanish administrators in the 1870s and designed to stop the marauding *Mambises* (19th-century rebels) from forging a passage west.

## CIEGO DE ÁVILA

☎ 33 / pop 104,850

Ciego de Ávila is Cuba without the wrapping paper, a no-frills provincial city that has long served as a kind of halfway house for travelers heading east on the Carretera Central. You'll find few colonial buildings of note here, and even fewer tourists. Christened 'the city of porches' for its colonnaded shop fronts, Ciego de Ávila was founded in 1840 and quickly became an important processing center for the region's lucrative sugarcane industry. While not quite in Habana's league, many of the city's neoclassical buildings –

including the 500-seat Teatro Principal – were financed by a local socialite named Angela Hernández Viuda de Jímenenz, a rich widow who harbored ambitions to create a cultural mecca, à la Trinidad, in her home town.

## Orientation

The streets of Ciego de Ávila divide between Norte (north) and Sur (south) at Independencia. Marcial Gómez marks the transition from Este (east) to Oeste (west). This is important to remember, as the cardinal points are often part of an address. The Carretera Central turns into Chicho Valdés as it cuts across town.

## Information

### BOOKSTORES

**Bookstore** (Independencia Oeste No 153) On the corner of Simón Reyes.

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Etcsa Telepunto** (Agüero No 62; per hour CUC\$6; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Three terminals.

### MEDIA

**Radio Surco** Broadcasting over 1440AM and 98.1 FM.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**General Hospital** (☎ 22 24 29; Máximo Gómez No 257) Not far from the bus station.

### MONEY

**Banco de Crédito y Comercio** (☎ 22 31 09; Independencia Oeste No 152) On the corner of Simón Reyes.

**Banco Financiero Internacional** (☎ 26 63 10; cnr Joaquín Agüero Oeste & Honorato del Castillo)

**Bandec** (☎ 22 23 32; cnr Independencia Oeste & Maceo)

**Cadeca** (☎ 26 66 15; Independencia Oeste No 118 btwn Maceo & Simón Reyes; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-12:30pm Sun)

### POST

**DHL** (☎ 26 20 96; cnr Chicho Valdés & Marcial Gómez)

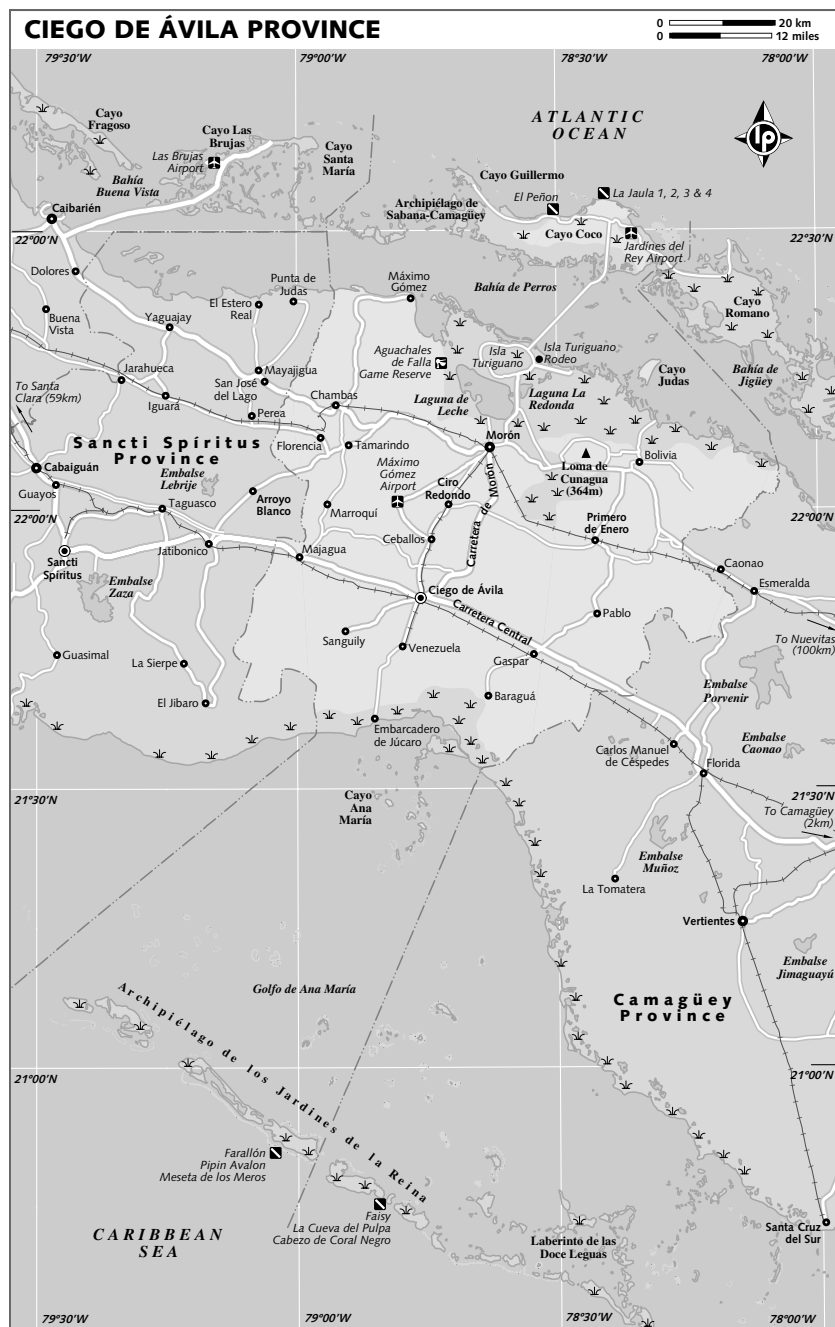
**Post office** (cnr Chicho Valdés & Marcial Gómez)

### TELEPHONE

**Etcsa Telepunto** (Agüero No 62; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Havanatur** (Calle Libertad btwn Maceo & H Castillo; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)



## DAY-TRIPPER

Ciego de Ávila Province boasts a surprising number of interesting day trips for those not averse to a bit of do-it-yourself (DIY) planning. Start your search in Ciego de Ávila's helpful Infotur office (see below).

Situated 18km east of Morón on the Carretera de Bolivia, the **Loma de Cunagua** (☎ 9am-4pm) is an eye-catching 364m hill that sticks up like a giant termite mound from the flat plains of the northern coast. A haven for bird-watchers, the Loma's verdant tree-covered slopes are crisscrossed by trails and provide excellent opportunities for horseback riding and hiking. It's easily reached in a car or taxi, and there's a restaurant on the hill's summit and qualified biologists are on hand to lead guided walks through the area's lush wilderness.

Another option to get back to nature is in the undulating hills surrounding the towns of **Florencia** and **Chambas** in the province's northwest corner. There are various excursions here including a visit to a tobacco farm, a rodeo show, and a trip on a motorboat to an island in the middle of a lake called Liberación de Florencia. Transport in this region is scant, but there are accommodation options at the **Campismo Boquerón** (☎ 6-9318) in the foothills of the Sierra de Jatibonico where horseback riding and swimming in a nearby river are highlights. Ask at the Infotur office for more details.

**Infotur** (☎ 20 91 09; Doce Plantas, cnr Honorato del Castillo & Libertad, ☎ 9am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Sun) Cuba's premier information outlet offers advice on less-heralded attractions.

**Oficina de Jardines del Rey** (Máximo Gómez Oeste No 82; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) General information, plus an interesting map showing the past, present and future development on the keys. It's on the corner of Maceo.

## Sights & Activities

Manageable and friendly, Ciego de Ávila engenders a leisurely pace and the switched-on staff at the Infotur office can pass on plenty of recommendations. Check out **Parque Martí** first – with the inevitable monument to José Martí (1925) – around which is the 1911 **Ayuntamiento** (City Hall; no visitors), now the provincial government headquarters and the **Museo de Artes Decorativas** (☎ 20 16 61; cnr Independencia & Marcial Gómez; CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon & Tue, 8am-10pm Wed-Sat, 8am-noon & 6-10pm Sun). This thoughtful collection can be seen in 45 minutes and has quirky items from a bygone age, such as a working Victrola (Benny Moré serenades your visit), antique pocket watches and ornate canopy beds with mother-of-pearl inlays. A CUC\$1 tip gets you a super guide (in English or Spanish). The only other notable building is the grand **Teatro Principal** (☎ 22 20 86; cnr Joaquín Agüero Oeste & Honorato del Castillo), built in 1927.

If you have time, you could visit the **Centro Raúl Martínez Galería de Arte Provincial** (Calle

Independencia Oeste No 65 btwn Honorato del Castillo & Maceo; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon & Wed, 1-9pm Thu & Fri, 2-10pm Sat, 8am-noon Sun), where works by Cuba's papa of pop art are on permanent display, along with many new works by local artists. Or visit the **Parque Zoológico** (Independencia Este; admission free; ☎ Tue-Sun).

The **Museo Provincial** (☎ 22 87 07; Jose Antonio Echevarría No 25; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat) is located across the train tracks in a former school building marked 'Instituto de Segunda Enseñanza'. The exhibits here recount the student struggle against Fulgencio Batista. A plaque marks the **site of the constitutional court** (cnr Independencia & Agramonte) held on June 14, 1952 by students and workers protesting Batista's coup d'état.

There's a tobacco factory, **Fábrica de Tabacos El Sucre** (cnr Libertad & Maceo) in town, though tours are normally group-only. Ask at the Havanatur office and you may be able to tag along.

From October to April, ask about baseball games at the **Estadio José R Cepero** (☎ 22 82 83; Máximo Gómez), northwest of the center.

## Festivals & Events

Every November, in the rural town of Majagua, 25km to the west, the population splits into two teams – one red and one blue – to re-enact an old *caringa* dancing competition played out to a background of traditional *guajiro* (country) music. This colorful spectacle is known as the **Fiesta de los Bandos Rojo y Azul**.

## CIEGO DE ÁVILA

INFORMATION		SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		EATING	
Banco de Crédito y Comercio	1 B3	Ayuntamiento	13 B4	El Rápido	25 B3
Banco Financiero Internacional	2 B4	Centro Raúl Martínez Galería	14 B4	Empresa Cubana del Pan	26 A3
Bancol	3 B4	de Arte Provincial	15 A3	La Estrella Azul	27 B3
Bookstore	4 B3	Constitutional Court Site	(see 9)	La Vicaría	28 D4
Cadeca	5 B3	Doce Plantas	(see 9)	Mercado Agropecuario	29 A3
DHL	(see 12)	Estado José R. Cepero	16 A2	Panadería Doña Neli	(see 9)
Etesa Telepunto	6 B4	Fábrica de Tabacos El Surco	17 B3	Restaurante Don Pepe	30 B3
General Hospital	7 D4	Museo de Artes Decorativas	18 B4	Restaurante El Colonial	31 B3
Havanatur	8 B3	Museo Provincial	19 A3	Solaris	(see 9)
Infotur	9 B3	Parque Zoológico	20 C4	Supermercado Cruz Verde	32 B4
Inmigración	10 B4	Teatro Principal	21 B4		
Oficina de Jardines del Rey	11 B3				
Post Office	12 B4				
		SLEEPING		DRINKING	
		Hotel Ciego de Ávila	22 B2	La Confronta	33 B4
		Hotel Santiago-Habana	23 B4	La Fontana	34 B3
		Hotel Sevilla	24 B4	Restaurante Moscú	35 B4
				ENTERTAINMENT	
				Casa de la Cultura	36 B3
				Casa de la Trova Miguel	
				Angel Luna	37 B3
				Cine Carmen	38 B3
				Cine Iriando	39 B4
				Discooteca Colibrí	40 B3
				La Cima	(see 23)
				La Macarena	(see 24)
				Sala Fiesta Galaxia	41 B4
		SHOPPING		TRANSPORT	
				Photo Service	42 B4
				Bus Station	43 D4
				Cubana	44 B4
				Ferro Omnibus Bus Station	45 A4
				Oro Negro	46 D4
				Taxis	47 A3
				Transtur	(see 22)

## Sleeping

**Hotel Santiago-Habana** (Islazul; ☎ 22 72 62; cnr Chicho Valdés & Honorato del Castillo; s/d low season CUC\$22/30, high season CUC\$27/36) This is an option in the town center with 76 rooms favored by vacationing Cubans; it's a basic bed-down. Disco Centro Nocturno La Cima is on the top floor.

**Hotel Ciego de Ávila** (Islazul; ☎ 22 57 72; Carretera a Ceballos; s/d low season CUC\$26/34, high season CUC\$29/38; P, ♿, ♿) Bus tours usually stay at this modern four-story hotel. Others won't likely find a need to drop in except to visit the Batanga Disco, rent a car, or eat at the CUC\$2.50 breakfast buffet (not bad; decent coffee), which is free for guests. Rooms are rough around the edges but the service is friendly and it's a 2km walk into town.

**Hotel Sevilla** (☎ 22 56 03; Independencia Oeste No 57 btwn Maceo & Honorato de Castillo; s/d CUC\$39/42) This elegant building just off Parque Martí, dates from 1929 and had a facelift in 1999. Some rooms have balconies, but none have hot water. The open bar on the 3rd floor offers great views, and the ground-floor restaurant, decorated in a classic old-fashioned style is a fine, inexpensive dining option.

## Eating

### RESTAURANTS

**La Estrella Azul** (cnr Máximo Gómez & Honorato del Castillo) Brand new restaurant with various set dishes for CUC\$1.50 each. Quite possibly the cheapest quality food in town.

**La Vicaría** (☎ 26 64 77; Carretera Central; ☎ 8am-midnight) It's hard to go wrong with this national chain, known for its tasty, affordable food and professional, even efficient (!) service. This outlet near Máximo Gómez, across from the bus station, is particularly good, with a full meal of juicy pork steak, fries, salad, soda and ice cream costing CUC\$4.

**Yisan** (Carretera Central btwn Calles 8 & 13; ☎ Wed-Mon) Chow Mien and fried rice with a mysterious Cuban twist. Don't arrive expecting dim sum at this cheerful Ciego Chinese joint, though the price is right and the service quick enough.

**Restaurante Don Pepe** (☎ 22 37 13; Independencia Oeste No 103 btwn Maceo & Simón Reyes; ☎ 8-11:45pm Wed-Mon) A bartender named Eladio invented the Coctel Don Pepe (two shots of orange juice, 1.5 shots of white rum, and half a shot of crème de menthe, stirred) here back in the day. They're still serving them, along with the good old pork and chicken dishes found everywhere. There's live music nightly.

**Restaurante El Colonial** (☎ 22 35 95; Independencia Oeste No 110; ☎ 6-11:30pm) For the regular pig and *pollo* (chicken), this is the place. It's located in a big house in the center of town with a nice courtyard.

**El Rápido** (☎ 26 61 16; cnr Libertad & Castillo; ☎ 24hr) When in doubt seek it out. This branch sells good yogurt and claims to be open 24 hours.

**Solaris** (☎ 22 21 56; H Castillo btwn Independencia & Libertad) Enthusiastically recommended by the locals, this city-center joint, upstairs in the Doce Plantas building, gives good views and has a menu of *comida internacional* (international cuisine). Ask for the special Solaris cocktail.

## GROCERIES

**Mercado agropecuario** (Chicho Valdés Oeste btwn Agramonte & Calle 1) There's a vegetable market located in a blemished part of town below the overpass.

**Supermercado Cruz Verde** (cnr Independencia & Máximo Gómez; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) Sells groceries.

For bread, it's either **Panadería Doña Neli** (Parque Martí), in the northeastern corner of Doce Plantas, which charges in Convertibles, or **Empresa Cubana del Pan** (☎ 22 58 40; cnr Independencia & Agramonte) in pesos.

## CASAS PARTICULARES - CIEGO DE ÁVILA

Ciego has some decent, well-signposted casas particulares and not much demand.

**Belkis de Caridad Jiménez** (☎ 22 46 09; Carretera Central No 76 btwn Maceo & H Castillo; r CUC\$15; ♿) Situated right on Ciego's and Cuba's main artery.

**Gladys Luis Marrero** (no phone; Calle Independencia No 205 btwn Onelio Hernández & Cuarta; r CUC\$20; ♿) Nice independent place with patio, TV, perks; near the hospital.

**Leonarda Guitierrez** (☎ 20 27 22; Honorato del Castillo No 64 btwn Chicho Valdés & Joaquín Agüero; r CUC\$15-20; ♿) Friendly, knows other casas particulares if you're stuck.

**María del Carmen** (☎ 20 12 02; cnr Honorato del Castillo & Independencia; r CUC\$20; ♿) Central; rents room in apartment.

**Miriam Marzabal Gómez** (☎ 20 32 95; Marcial Gómez No 58 btwn Joaquín Agüero & Chicho Valdés; r CUC\$20; ♿) Spacious, comfortable rooms with TV and patio.

## Drinking

**Restaurante Moscú** (☎ 22 53 86; Chicho Valdés No 78; ☎ 6-10pm Tue-Thu) Walk left, past the scale model of the Kremlin, and down a fluorescent-lit hall. Push through the door in the back and step into the hushed red hues of (what else?!) the Moscú lounge.

**La Confronta** (cnr Máximo Gómez & Agüero) If you're tired of the mojito/daiquiri monopoly, this place has a bar that sells 25 different types of cocktails and is open all day.

**La Fontana** (☎ 20 21 79; cnr Independencia & Antonio Maceo; ☎ 6am-2:30pm & 4pm-midnight) Ciego's famous coffee institution was undergoing renovation at the time of writing, but caffeine-starved locals have been talking enthusiastically about a re-opening soon. Check at your casa particular for updates.

## Entertainment

**Sala Fiesta Galaxia** (cnr Chicho Valdés & Maceo; ☎ 10pm-2am Tue-Sun) Ciego heats up at this al fresco peso disco with dancing nightly and Sunday rap *peñas* (performances; 2pm).

**Casa de la Trova Miguel Angel Luna** (Libertad No 130) Located on the corner of Simón Reyes; Cuban folk-singing is the staple here.

**Casa de la Cultura** (☎ 22 39 74; Independencia No 76 btwn Maceo & Honorato de Castillo) This place



usually has something interesting on; for further information on events be sure to check the *cartelera* (culture calendar) out front.

If you're in the mood to catch a film, try **Cine Carmen** (☎ 22 33 87; Maceo No 51), on the corner of Libertad, with big screen and video offerings daily (don't miss the big movie projector spilling film on the Libertad side of the building), or **Cine Iriondo** (☎ 22 33 04; cnr Joaquín Agüero Oeste & Maceo).

There's disco fever in the hotels: **Pisco Centro Nocturno La Cima** (☎ 22 72 62; Hotel Santiago-Habana, cnr Chicho Valdés & Honorato del Castillo) and **La Macarena** (☎ 22 56 03; Hotel Sevilla, Independencia Oeste No 57 btwn Maceo & Honorato de Castillo). If Karaoke's your thing, exercise your lungs at **Discoteca Colibrí** (cnr Máximo Gomez & H Castillo; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 10pm-3am).

## Shopping

**Photo Service** (Maceo No 9 btwn Joaquín Agüero & Independencia) This store will service all your basic camera needs.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Ciego de Ávila's Máximo Gómez Airport (airport code AVI) is 10km northwest of Ceballos, 23km north of Ciego de Ávila and 23km south of Morón. **Cubana** (☎ 3-2525/4; Chicho Valdés btwn Honorato del Castillo & Antonio Maceo) has weekly flights to Habana (CUC\$78 one way, 1½ hours).

International flights arrive daily from Canada, Argentina, France, the UK and Italy.

### BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 22 24 07; Carretera Central), situated about 1.5km east of the center, has Astro buses to Camagüey (CUC\$4), Habana (CUC\$19), Manzanillo (CUC\$14) and Niquero (CUC\$17).

Tickets for these buses are sold in Convertibles at the regular ticket window, but most long-distance Astro buses are already full once they reach Ciego de Ávila. Colectivos (collective taxis) located outside the station leave occasionally for Sancti Spiritus or Camagüey (CUC\$20 for the car to either). Colectivos to Habana charge CUC\$80.

Viazul has daily services to the following destinations:

Destination	Cost (one way)	Travel time (hours)	Departs
Habana	CUC\$27	7	6:35pm, 1am, 5:35am
Santiago de Cuba	CUC\$24	9	4:30pm, 10:10pm, 4:30am, 10:45am
Trinidad	CUC\$6	3	4:15am

The Santiago de Cuba departure also stops at Camagüey (CUC\$6, one hour 35 minutes), Las Tunas (CUC\$13, four hours 25 minutes), Holguín (CUC\$17, five hours 40 minutes) and Bayamo (CUC\$17, seven hours). The Habana bus stops at Sancti Spiritus (CUC\$6, two hours) and Santa Clara (CUC\$9, three hours 20 minutes). For Viazul tickets, see the *jefe de turno* (shift manager); the office is right near the normal ticket window.

### TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 22 33 13) is six blocks southwest of the center. Ciego de Ávila is on the main Habana-Santiago line. There are nightly trains to Bayamo (CUC\$11, seven hours), Camagüey (CUC\$3, two hours 10 minutes), Guantánamo (CUC\$17, 9½ hours), Habana (CUC\$16, 7½ hours), Holguín (CUC\$11, seven hours), Manzanillo (CUC\$12, 8½ hours) and Santiago de Cuba (CUC\$15, 9¼ hours). Different train numbers run on alternate nights, so check the latest timetable before you leave. There

are three trains daily to Morón (CUC\$1, one hour).

### TRUCK

Private passenger trucks leave from the Ferro Ómnibus bus station adjacent to the train station. They might take you to Morón, Camagüey or Jatibonico.

## Getting Around

### CAR & MOPED

The **Carretera a Morón gas station** (Carretera de Morón) is just before the bypass road, northeast of the center. The **Oro Negro gas station** (Carretera Central) is near the bus station.

You can park safely in front of the Hotel Santiago-Habana overnight.

The following companies offer vehicle rental:

**Havanautos** Hotel Ciego de Ávila (☎ 26 63 45' Carretera a Ceballos); airport (☎ 26 63 15)

**Transtur** (☎ 26 62 29; Hotel Ciego de Ávila) Rents mopeds for CUC\$24 a day, not including gas.

### TAXI

A taxi ride to the airport will cost around CUC\$12; bargain if they're asking more. There's a **taxi stand** (Fernando Callegas btwn Independencia & Libertad) by the railway line.

## MORÓN

☎ 335 / pop 59,194

Morón is a well-ordered, if unremarkable, town about 40km north of Ciego de Ávila via a flat road through endless fields of sugarcane. Founded in 1643, two centuries before Ciego de Ávila, it's called the 'Ciudad del Gallo' (City of the Cock) for a verse

about a cock that continued to crow after being de-feathered. Locals love pointing out the eye-catching bronze rooster perched on a pedestal at the entrance to the Hotel Morón; it's a town mascot. Compact and easy-going, Morón is a plausible base for day trips to the beaches at Cayo Coco and is a favorite among fishermen and hunters who make a beeline for Laguna de Leche.

## Sights

Strolling through Morón's easy-to-navigate town center is enough for a short morning's distraction. Shoehorned in among the busy sidewalks and peeling colonnades, the most notable sight is the **Museo de Arqueología y Historia** (Calle Martí; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-noon & 6pm-10pm) which has two floors, the upper of which is given over to the history of the city itself. There is a *mirador* (lookout) on the roof with a good view out over the town.

## Sleeping

Thankfully there are sufficient private homes in Morón (see opposite), because the state-run scene isn't very inspiring.

**Carrusel Morón** (Cubanacán; ☎ 3901; Av de Tarafa; s/d low season CUC\$28/36, high season CUC\$33/42; ☎ ☎ ☎) Presently this modern-ish, four-story hotel at the south entrance to town is the only place in Morón accommodating groups. A useful location for Cayo Coco-bound traffic, but the facilities aren't anything to write home about. Package tourists are the main clientele with the odd stray fisherman thrown in for good measure. The pool is a rare highlight; nonguests can ask

### CASAS PARTICULARES – MORÓN

**Felicia Jiménez Rodríguez** (☎ 5-3863; Martí No 197A btwn Callejas & Libertad; r CUC\$25; ☎) On the main drag. Hot water and meals available.

**Gina Margarita Sierra** (☎ 5-3798; Callejas No 89 btwn Martí & Castillo; r CUC\$20; ☎ ☎) Big room, independent entrance leads to covered patio, small garden, meals.

**'Hospedaje Liberluz' – Carlos Manuel Baez** (☎ 3440; Libertad No 148 btwn Luz Caballero & Padre Cabo; r CUC\$20)

**Tamara Companioni Medina** (☎ 5-3630; Martí No 247 btwn Serafín Sánchez & Sergio Antuña; r CUC\$20; ☎ ☎) Central; meals served.

### THE WORLD'S OLDEST MAN

The inaugural meeting of the 120 Club – an organization promoting healthy living for Cuba's most elderly citizens – was in February 2005. It was here that the Castro government, always keen to extol the benefits of its groundbreaking free healthcare system, declared that it had uncovered the world's oldest living person.

The character in question was Benito Martínez, a loquacious and remarkably spry ex-road laborer from a small community of local farmers located near the town of Ciego de Ávila in central Cuba.

Martínez, according to popular legend, was born in Cavaillon, Haiti in the year 1880 and migrated to Cuba via a steamship in 1925 where he worked for a while on the ranch of Angel Castro, Fidel's father.

Despite the fact that no official records exist of Benito's birth, Cuban experts have said that they believe him to be at least 119, thus supplanting the current official world-record holder, an Ecuadorian woman aged 116.

about day passes. Maintain low expectations for the restaurant and you might be pleasantly surprised.

## Eating

**Las Fuentes** (☎ 5758; Martí No 169 btwn Agramonte & Libertad; ☎ 11am-11pm) The surest bet for a solid meal in Morón is this place, you can get everything from a nice salad to grilled lobster. Fish dinners start at CUC\$5 if you can't face another dose of fried-to-a-cinder chicken.

**Las Delicias** (☎ noon-midnight) Across the street from Fuentes is a clean, friendly peso place with proteinlike chicken soup or egg sandwiches for two pesos.

**Paraíso Palmares** (Martí No 382) This restaurant has standard chicken fare with the obligatory *arroz congris* (rice and beans).

**Cafetería Mi Café** (Martí No 294 btwn Calleja & S Sánchez; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat) is for coffee junkies and the hollowed out shell of the **Coppelia** (cfr Callejas & Martí) for those seriously addicted to ice-cream.

On the self-catering front there's **Doña Neli-Dulcería** (Serafín Sánchez No 86 btwn Narciso López & Martí) for bread and pastries and **La Mina de Oro** (Calle Martí) for groceries.

## Entertainment

**Casa de la Trova Pablo Bernal** (Calle Libertad No 74 btwn Martí & Narciso López) This venue is frequented by local folk singers and musicians.

**Batanga Disco** (☎ 3901; Carrusel Morón, Av de Tarafa; ☎ 9:30pm-2am) This is a favorite of young locals starved for action.

## Getting There & Away

Five buses a day leave from the hectic **train station** (☎ 3683; cfr Martí & JF Poe) for Ciego de Ávila. You might be able to convince a collective taxi parked in front of the station to do this trip, but most are wary of carrying foreigners. Trains depart for Santiago de Cuba (CUC\$22, alternate days) via Ciego de Ávila (CUC\$1, twice daily) and Camagüey (CUC\$4, twice daily). The line from Santa Clara to Nuevitas also passes through Morón via Chambas. A coche motor railcar to Habana (CUC\$24, 6½ hours) operates on alternate days.

## Getting Around

The roads from Morón northwest to Caibarién (112km) and southeast Nuevitas (168km) are both good.

**Havanautos** (☎ 5-2115; Av de Tarafa s/n) is between Carrusel Morón and Hotel Perla del Norte. **Transtur** (☎ 2222; Carrusel Morón, Av de Tarafa) rents mopeds. **Micar** (☎ 5-5245; Los Balcones Commercial Center, cfr Av de Tarafa & Línea) has fancy autos.

The **Servi-Cupet gas station** (☎ 24hr) is near Carrusel Morón.

## NORTH OF MORÓN

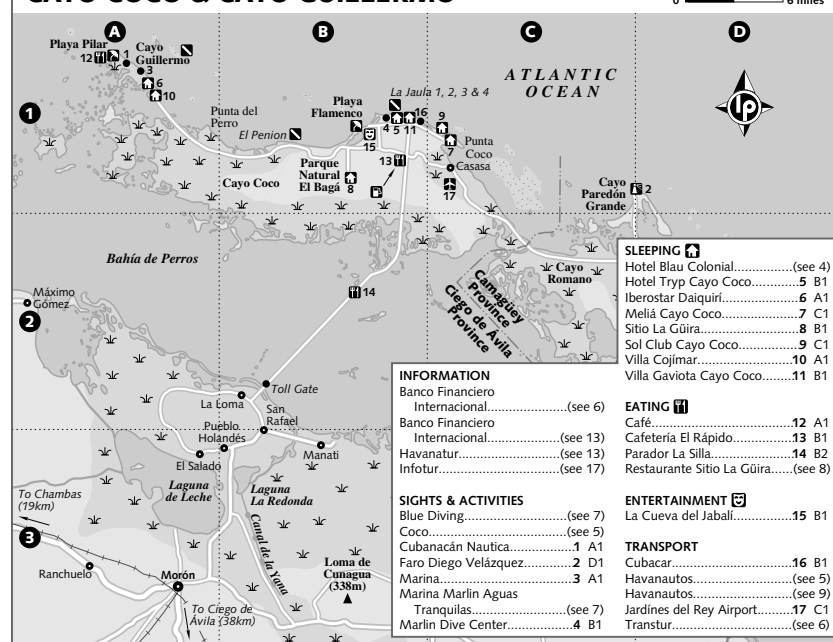
Measuring 67 sq km, the **Laguna de la Leche** (Milk Lake) a few kilometers north of Morón, is named for its reflective underwater lime deposits and is the largest natural lake in Cuba. Accessed from the south via a link road from Morón (3km) the lake is popular among budding anglers who flock here to take advantage of its abundant stocks of carp, tarpon, snook and tilapia. Situated on the southern shoreline you'll find **La Atarraya** (☎ 5-5351), a restaurant specializing in fish dishes, as well as an entertainment venue known as **Cabaret Cueva** (☎ 5-2239) You can rent boats here as well. Every year Laguna de Leche is the venue for the **Morón Aquatic Carnival**. The area has also twice hosted the **Jardines del Rey F-1 speedboat competition**.

There's terrific fishing for largemouth bass and trout at the **Marina Fluvial La Redonda** on Laguna La Redonda, 18km north of Morón, off the road to Cayo Coco. The mangroves surrounding this 4-sq-km lake are prime romping grounds for freshwater fish and the per-square-kilometer density of trout here is greater than anywhere in Cuba. Four/eight hours of fishing costs CUC\$40/70 or a boat trip without rods costs CUC\$16. There's a nice bar-restaurant combo here if you only want to stop for a drink with a lake view. Try the house specialty, a fillet of fish called *calentico* – great with ketchup and Tabasco.

The **Aguachales de Falla Game Reserve** is a hunting area containing seven natural lakes and abundant flocks of pigeons, ducks and doves. If you really feel the urge, you can take the Hemingway tour to its natural conclusion (Papa loved firing guns at feathered targets).

**El Pueblo Holandés**, a small community with 49 red-roofed, Dutch-style dwellings, is on a hill next to the highway, 4km north of La Redonda. It was built by Celia Sánchez in 1960 as a home for area cattle workers. It's

## CAYO COCO & CAYO GUILLERMO



an interesting blip on the landscape, but not worth a detour.

In rodeo-land Cuba is right up there with the Calgary Stampede and one of the island's best cattle fests can be seen at **Isla Turiguano** on the road out of Morón, a kilometer or two before the Cayo Coco checkpoint. Cowboys, bulls, horses and lassos are in evidence every weekend at around 2pm for exciting 90-minute *espectáculos* (shows). Alternatively you can drop by for a look at the animals any time. There's a small bar out front.

## CAYO COCO

☎ 33

Cayo Coco is Cuba's fourth largest island and the main tourist destination after Varadero. Situated in the Archipiélago de Sabana-Camagüey, or the Jardines del Rey as travel brochures prefer to call it, the area north of the Bahía de Perros (Bay of Dogs) was uninhabited before 1992 when the first hotel – the Cojimar – went up on adjoining Cayo Guillermo. The bulldozers haven't stopped buzzing since.

While the beauty of the beaches on these islands is world famous, Cayo Coco pre-1990 was little more than a mosquito-infested mangrove swamp. French corsair Jacques de Sores was one of the earliest visitors, fresh from successful raids on Habana and Puerto Príncipe and he was followed in 1752 by the island's first landowner, an opportunistic Spaniard named Santiago Abuelo Castañeda. Between 1927 and 1955 a community of 600 people scraped a living by producing charcoal for use as domestic fuel on the island, but with the rise of electrical power after the revolution this too died.

Since 1988, Cayo Coco has been connected to the mainland by a 27km causeway slicing across the Bahía de Perros. There are also causeways from Cayo Coco to Cayo Guillermo in the west and to Cayo Romano in the east. The impact of these synthetic barriers on the environment has been severe. Circulation of seawater and marine life in the fragile coastal areas has been effectively blocked, to varying degrees, and waters east of the Cayo Coco causeway

are deprived of nutrients. On top of this are the blocks placed on Cubans from entering Cayo Coco as tourists themselves. The notion of so-called 'tourist apartheid' is one of modern Cuba's most prickly issues and in some respects Cayo Coco, with its carefully policed entry checkpoints and relative isolation from the rest of the country, is the worst offender.

### Information

Euros are accepted in all the Cayo Coco and Cayo Guillermo resorts.

**Banco Financiero Internacional** At Servi-Cupet.

**Clinica Internacional Cayo Coco** (☎ 30 12 15)

Provides medical treatment, and is located next to Villa Gaviota Cayo Coco.

**Havanatur** (☎ 30-1329) This travel agency is at Servi-Cupet. There's a small, handy store (read: insect repellent) and an El Rapido too.

**Infotur** (☎ 30 91 09) There's a helpful office at the Jardines del Rey airport.

### Sights

**Parque Natural El Bagá** (☎ 30 10 63; admission CUC\$12) is a surprisingly successful reclamation project that has converted Cayo Coco's former airport into a 769-hectare natural park. Included in a 45-minute guided trail are a *mirador*, a canal trip, a pleasant beach and – just when you thought it was getting good – a reconstructed native village (with shows). An area of dense mangroves and lapping waves is

also excellent for its bird-watching, with flamingos in regular attendance.

East of Cayo Coco, a road crosses Cayo Romano and turns north to Cayo Paredón Grande and **Faro Diego Velázquez**, a 52m-working lighthouse that dates from 1859. The caretaker might let you up; if not, enjoy the fine beaches.

### Activities

The **Marina Marlin Aguas Tranquilas** (☎ 30 13 24), near the Hotel Meliá Cayo Coco, offers deep-sea fishing outings for CUC\$250 for four hours.

The **Marlin Dive Center** (☎ 30 12 21), on the west side of Hotel Tryp Cayo Coco, is accessible via a dirt road to the beach. Scuba diving costs CUC\$30, plus CUC\$5 for gear. The open-water certification course costs CUC\$365, less in low season. The diving area stretches for over 10km and there are six certified instructors with the capacity for 30 divers per day. **Blue Diving** (☎ 30 81 79; enzoblue@ip.etecsa.cu; Hotel Meliá Cayo Coco) and **Coco** (☎ 30 13 23; Hotel Tryp Cayo Coco), both with Cubanacán Náutica, offer similar services. Dive masters are multilingual and there are live-aboard options here.

### Sleeping BUDGET

**Sitio La Güira** (☎ 30 12 08; cabaña shared/private bath CUC\$20/25) Cayo Coco's one cheap accommodation option is situated on a

small farm 8km west of Servi-Cupet. It rents two rooms sharing a bath and a couple of Cuban *bohíos* (thatched huts) with private bath. A reasonable restaurant and bar are on the shady grounds and horseback riding is available. It's a mellow place until 11:30am when resort crowds pour in; the plethora of animals and extensive grounds make this a good budget place to take the kids. It's a hike (or a horseback ride) to the beach.

### TOP END

Cayo Coco's all-inclusive resorts are policed pretty diligently. Unless you're wearing the 'access-all-areas' plastic wristband, think twice about sneaking in to use the toilets at any of these places. Room rates are all-inclusive.

**Hotel Blau Colonial** (r from CUC\$130; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Formerly known as the Guitart Cayo Coco, this landscaped resort was the island's first hotel when it opened in 1993 (ancient history by Cayo Coco standards). The hotel gained notoriety in 1994 when gunmen from the right-wing Cuban exile movement, Alpha 66, opened fire on the building in a blatant act of provocation. Fortunately no one was hurt. Refurbished under new management in 2003, the Blau now sparkles afresh and gets rave reviews from its mainly Canadian clientele.

**Meliá Cayo Coco** (☎ 30 11 80; r from CUC\$132; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This resort on stellar Playa Las Coloradas at the eastern end of the hotel strip, was erected in 1999 by the Spanish Meliá hotel chain. The sweet bungalows perched in the lagoon have porches and lots of sun. There are tons of romantic pockets here and the rooms are muted, tasteful and comfortable.

**Villa Gaviota Cayo Coco** (Gaviota; ☎ 30 21 80; s/d/tr low season CUC\$75/100/120, high season CUC\$75/150/170 ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) An amiable low-key place, Villa Gaviota has friendly service and a degree of intimacy missing from most of the larger resorts.

**Sol Club Cayo Coco** (☎ 30 12 80) Next door to Meliá Cayo Coco, this is a family version of the same dreamscape for marginally cheaper rates.

**Hotel Tryp Cayo Coco** (Cubanacán; ☎ 30 13 11; r from CUC\$170; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Part of a sprawling complex (there are 502 rooms here), this resort is the older, humbler cousin to the other Meliás here. A long

pool meanders through the complex and there's snorkeling in the clear waters in front of the resorts. There's a disco, a Banco Financiero Internacional branch and Clínica Internacional here, but they're accessible only to hotel guests.

### Eating

All of the large resorts here are all-inclusive, so there are few nonhotel restaurants.

**Cafetería El Rápido** (Servi-Cupet gas station; ☎ 24hr) This fast-food place on the roundabout at the entrance to Cayo Coco has cheap drinks and snacks 24 hours a day.

**Restaurant Sitio La Güira** (☎ 8am-11pm) This restaurant has a varied menu with big, fresh sandwiches for CUC\$1.50, shrimp plates for CUC\$12 and a full bar.

Floating almost on the shallow Bahía de Perros, Parador La Silla is a thatched-roof snack bar halfway along the causeway into Cayo Coco.

### Drinking & Entertainment

**La Cueva del Jabalí** (☎ 30 12 06; admission CUC\$5; ☎ Tue-Sat) For those bored of the all-inclusive floor show, this is the only independent entertainment venue in Cayo Coco. It's 5km west of the Tryp complex, in a natural cave. The place features a cabaret show and it's free all day to visit the bar.

### Getting There & Around

Opened in 2001, Cayo Coco's **Aeropuerto Internacional Jardines del Rey** (☎ 30 91 65) boasts a new 3000m-runway facility that can process 1.2 million visitors annually. Weekly flights arrive here from Canada, Mexico, Spain, the UK, Germany, and more. There's a twice-daily service to and from Habana (CUC\$105) with **Aerogaviota** (☎ 7-203-0686).

Cayo Coco is the LA of Cuba. There are no public buses and walking is barely possible as all the resorts are so strung out. To get there, independent travelers may be able to hitch a ride out of Morón with other tourists or a Cuban worker. Don't forget, once you leave the road and enter onto the causeway proper, there's a checkpoint (where they'll turn back any unauthorized Cubans), and a CUC\$2 toll.

You can rent a car or moped at the following places on Cayo Coco:

**Cubacar** (☎ 30 12 75) On the second roundabout between the Meliá and Tryp complexes.

### LOS JARDINES DE LA REINA

Los Jardines de la Reina are a 120km-long mangrove and coral island system situated 80km off the south coast of Ciego de Ávila Province and 120km north of the Cayman Islands. The local marine park measures 3800 sq km with virgin territory left more or less untouched since the time of Columbus. Commercial fishing in the area has been banned and, with a permanent local population of precisely zero inhabitants, visitors must stay on board a two-story seven-bedroom houseboat called **Hotel Flotante Tortuga** (☎ 339-8104) or venture in from the port of Embarcadero de Júcaro on one of two yachts, the six-cabin *Halcon* or the four-cabin *Explorador*.

The flora consists of palm trees, pines, sea grapes and mangroves, while the fauna – aside from tree rats and iguanas – contains an interesting variety of resident birds including ospreys, pelicans, spoonbills and egrets. Below the waves the main attraction is sharks (both whale and hammerhead) and this, along with the pristine coral and unequaled clarity of the water, is what draws in divers from all over the world.

Getting to Los Jardines is not easy – or cheap. The only company currently offering excursions is the Italian-run **Avalon** (www.avalons.net). One-week dive packages which include equipment, six nights of accommodation, a guide, park license, 12 dives and transfer from Embarcadero de Júcaro, cost in the vicinity of CUC\$1500. Another option is to sail with the Windward Islands Cruising Company departing from Trinidad (for details, see p302).

**Havanautos** Sol Club Cayo Coco (☎ 30 12 28) Hotel Tryp Cayo Coco (☎ 30 13 11)

## CAYO GUILLERMO

Just west of Cayo Coco is 13-sq-km Cayo Guillermo, a much smaller coral key connected to Cayo Coco by a causeway. The mangroves off the south coast of Cayo Guillermo are home to pink flamingos and pelicans, and there's a great diversity of tropical fish and crustaceans on the key's Atlantic reef.

Cayo Guillermo is probably the number-one sport fishing destination in Cuba. The deep-sea fishing facilities are unequalled, and several freshwater lakes on the mainland are within commuting distance.

A Banco Financiero Internacional branch and Transtur rental car office are on the premises of Iberostar Daiquirí (right).

### Activities

The **Marina** (☎ 30 17 38; fax 30 16 37) at Sol Club Cayo Guillermo offers deep-sea fishing for mackerel, pike, barracuda, red snapper and marlin on large boats that depart from a pier right at the hotel. It's CUC\$250/450 for a half-/full day, and you can keep some of the fish. A professional dive center charging CUC\$35 a dive is also here. It is best to go directly to the pier and book the dive in person. Note that trips are cancelled when it's too windy. **Cubanacán Náutica** (Melia Cayo Guillermo ☎ 30 16 27; Sol Club Cayo Guillermo ☎ 30 17 60) has two dive centers running dives for CUC\$35.

This was a favorite fishing spot of writer Ernest Hemingway, who mentioned Cayo Guillermo in his book *Islands in the Stream*. The best beach here (and possibly on the islands as a whole) is **Playa Pilar**, named after Hemingway's boat. It's a lovely, unspoiled beach at the far western end of this key where you can sail and snorkel.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Iberostar Daiquirí** (Gran Caribe; ☎ 30 16 50; r from CUC\$95; P ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This hotel has 312 rooms in a series of three-story buildings, all brightly painted like Las Vegas casinos – there's no accounting for taste. Extensive gardens are a bonus. Also check out the kids' packages.

**Villa Cojimar** (Gran Caribe; ☎ 30 17 12; s/d all-inclusive low season CUC\$81/115, high season CUC\$102/145; P ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The oldest hotel on the Sabana-Camagüey archipelago opened in 1992 and comprises of a rather fetching collection of bungalows in a quiet beachside location. The advertising blurb refers to it as a 'Cuban-style hotel', but the only Cubans you're likely to meet are the people who make your room up.

There's a kicking café at Playa Pilar where you can get an espresso for CUC\$0.50.

### Getting There & Around

Access information is the same as for Cayo Coco (see p319). Unless you're on a tour, the usual way to get here is by rental car. **Transtur** (☎ 30 11 75) has offices at the Iberostar Daiquirí.