

# Matanzas Province



For most foreign visitors Matanzas means one thing: Varadero, the 20km stretch of idyllic white sand that lures in tourists from all over the globe. The attractions for fun-seekers are hard to resist: you can skydive here, play golf, swim with dolphins, rent a motorbike, scuba dive, dance in a cave or enjoy sunset cocktails in an art deco-inspired mansion. In fact, you can do just about everything that the average Cuban can only dream about. But to suggest that Matanzas terminates at Varadero is like saying France begins and ends with St Tropez.

Made rich on the backs of slave labor and crisscrossed by sprawling plantations of gnarly citrus trees, Matanzas is Cuba's second most industrialized province after Habana with an infrastructure based on petroleum, sugar milling and fruit production. Outside Varadero the area boasts two historic cities, Matanzas and Cárdenas, along with the evocative beaches of the Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs), and the distinctive environmental Zapata Peninsula; now a protected Unesco biosphere reserve.

The Puente Bacunayagua is Cuba's highest bridge and an engineering triumph considered by experts to be one of the island's seven manmade 'wonders', while, glimmering imperceptibly in the background, the verdant Valle de Yumurí juxtaposes hardworking *campesino* (country) life with numerous undiscovered rural retreats. Further south as royal palms give way to fir trees, off-the-beaten-track travelers can explore the eerie Romanesque bathhouses of San Miguel de los Baños, a long-abandoned spa facility where strange eclectic architectural styles are embellished by blooming bougainvillea.

## HIGHLIGHTS

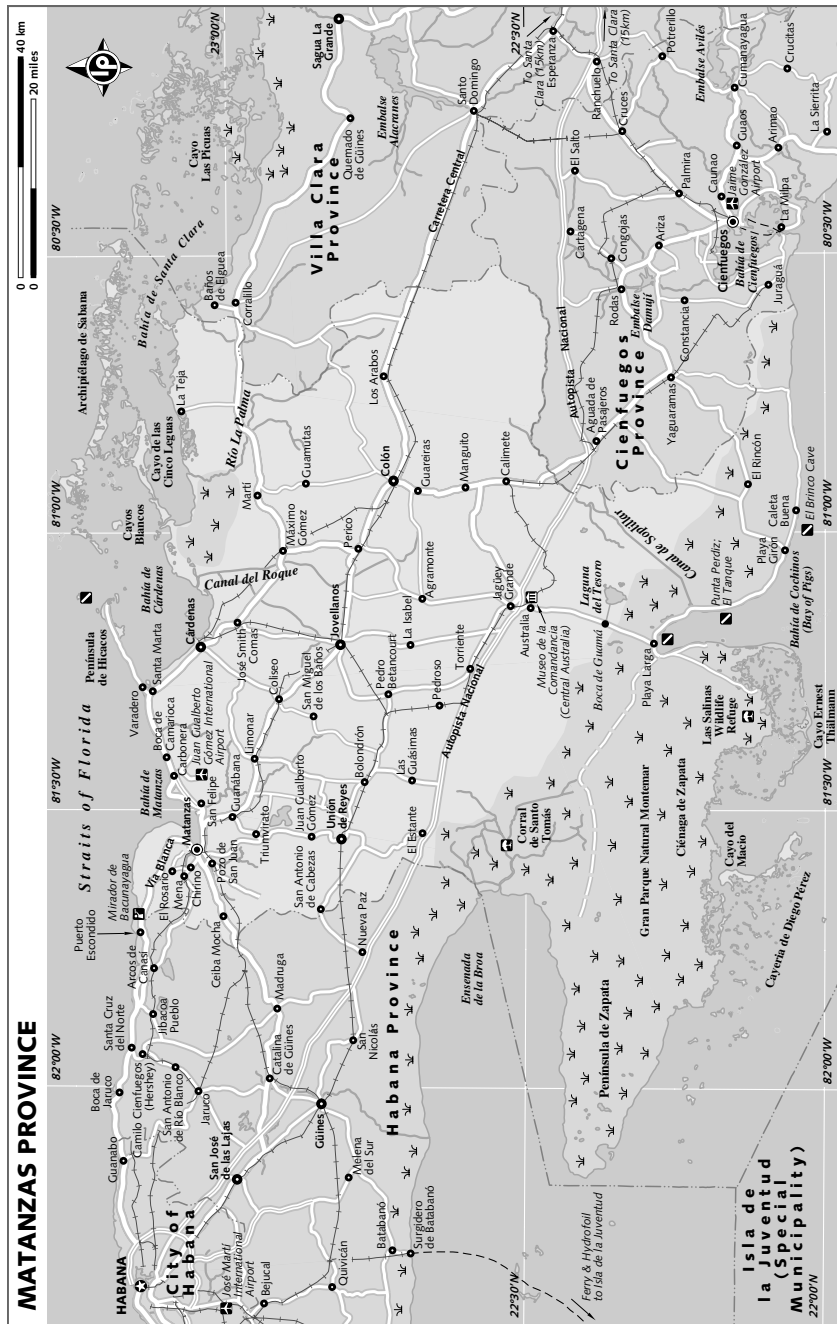
- **Gritty City**  
Unlock the buried secrets of dusty Matanzas, (p221), the 'Athens of Cuba'
- **Romantic Sunsets**  
Sip cocktails at dusk at Varadero's intriguing Mansión Xanadu (p234)
- **Ecosystems**  
Discover the amazingly varied vegetation zones in the Ciénega de Zapata (p252)
- **War Folly**  
Relive the Bay of Pigs fiasco at the evocative museum at Playa Girón (p254)
- **Ghost Town**  
Kick through the ruins of San Miguel de los Baños (p249)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 45

■ POPULATION: 665,419

■ AREA: 11,978 SQ KM



# NORTHERN MATANZAS

Northern Matanzas boasts an attractive rural landscape punctuated by low mountains and lush valleys – most notably the Valle del Yumurí. Home to Cuba’s largest resort area (Varadero) and one of its biggest ports (Matanzas), the northern coastline is also the province’s main population center and is national center for industry and commerce.

## MATANZAS

📍 45 / pop 126,220

Sadly neglected by the powers that be and languishing *Titanic*-like beneath a thick layer of postrevolutionary dust, Matanzas is Cuba’s sleeping giant; a city of striking bridges and withered colonial churches that hide just a few coats of paint away from their 19th-century neoclassical splendor.

Known formerly as the ‘Athens of Cuba’ for its pivotal role in the development of poetry, theater and music on the island, Matanzas’ position as a one-time rival to Habana in all things cultural doesn’t carry much weight with contemporary visitors, who are conspicuous by their absence. Straddled with humdrum ration shops, a painfully dismal restaurant scene, and a decrepit and scruffy central park that is crying out for an architectural version of the ‘extreme makeover’, the local buzz in Matanzas’ dilapidated streets is as downbeat as it is elusive. If it’s five-star comforts you’re after hop on a Viazul bus straight back to Planet Varadero. But if the thought of authentic rumba drumming, beer over dominos or the chance to meet some genuinely hospitable locals makes you fidget on your beachside sun-lounger, gritty, in-your-face Matanzas could be the place for you. Welcome to the *real* Cuba amigos!

## History

In 1508 Sebastián de Ocampo sighted a bay that the Indians called Guanima. Now known as the Bahía de Matanzas, it’s said the name recalls the *matanza* (massacre) of a group of Spaniards during an early indigenous uprising. In 1628 the Dutch pirate Piet Heyn captured a Spanish treasure fleet carrying 12 million gold florins ushering in a lengthy era of smuggling and piracy. Undeterred by the pirate threat, 30 families from the Canary Islands arrived in 1693, on the orders of King

Carlos III of Spain, to found the town of San Carlos y Severino de Matanzas. The first fort went up in 1734 and the original Plaza de Armas still remains as Plaza de la Vigía.

For a decade starting in 1817 Matanzas flourished economically with the building of numerous sugar mills. The export of coffee added further equity to the city’s bank balance and in 1843 with the laying of the first railway to Habana, the floodgates were opened. The second half of the 19th century was a golden age in Matanzas’ history when the city set new standards in the cultural sphere with the development of a newspaper, a public library, a high school, a theater and a philharmonic society. Due to the large number of artists, writers and intellectuals living in the area, Matanzas became known as the ‘Athens of Cuba’ with a cultural scene that dwarfed even Habana.

Home to several modern poets including Cintio Vitier and Carilda Oliver Labra, Matanzas is where Cuba’s first *danzón* (traditional Cuban ballroom dance) was performed in 1879 and is also the spiritual home of the rumba. With a long history of slave occupation there are a number of Santería *cabildos* (associations) here, the oldest of which dates back to 1808.

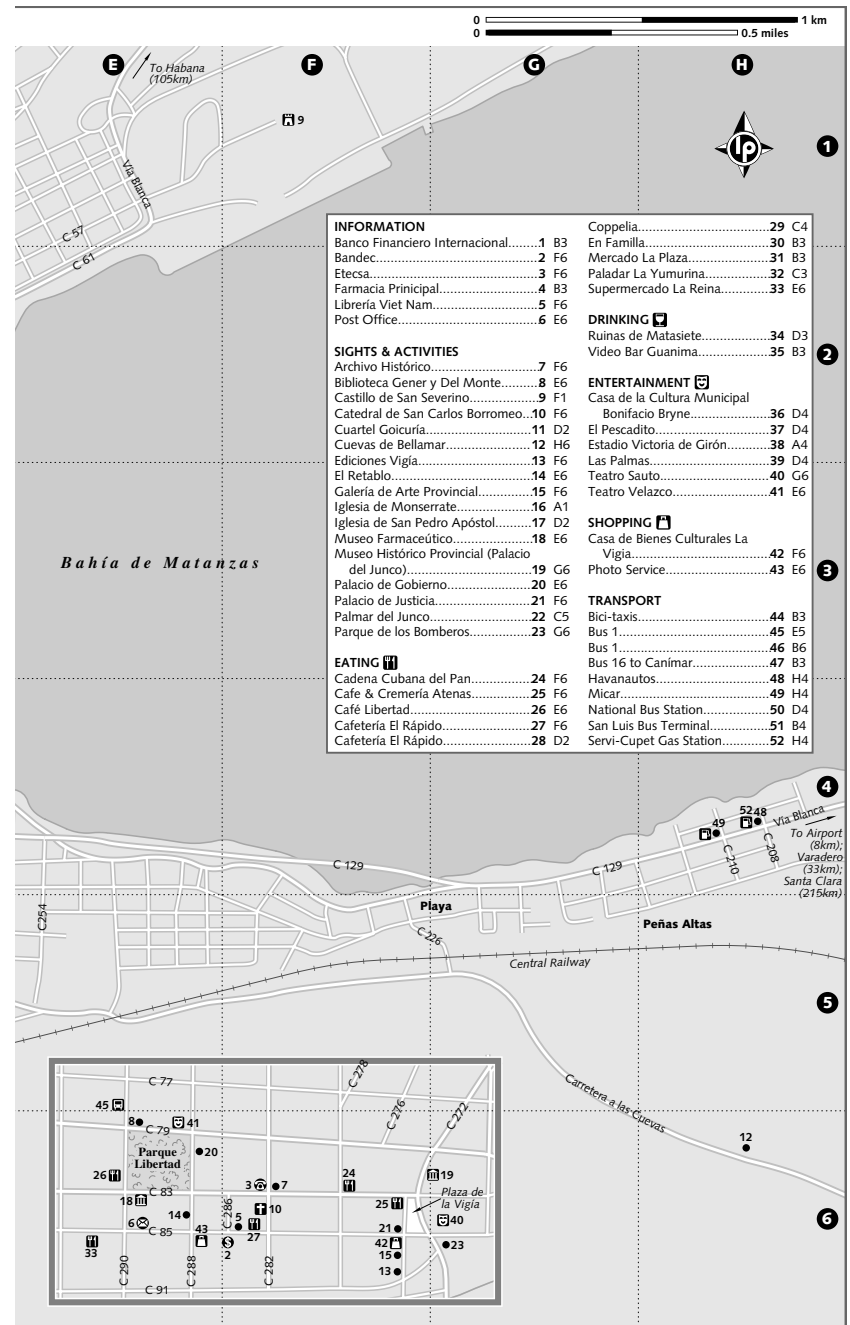
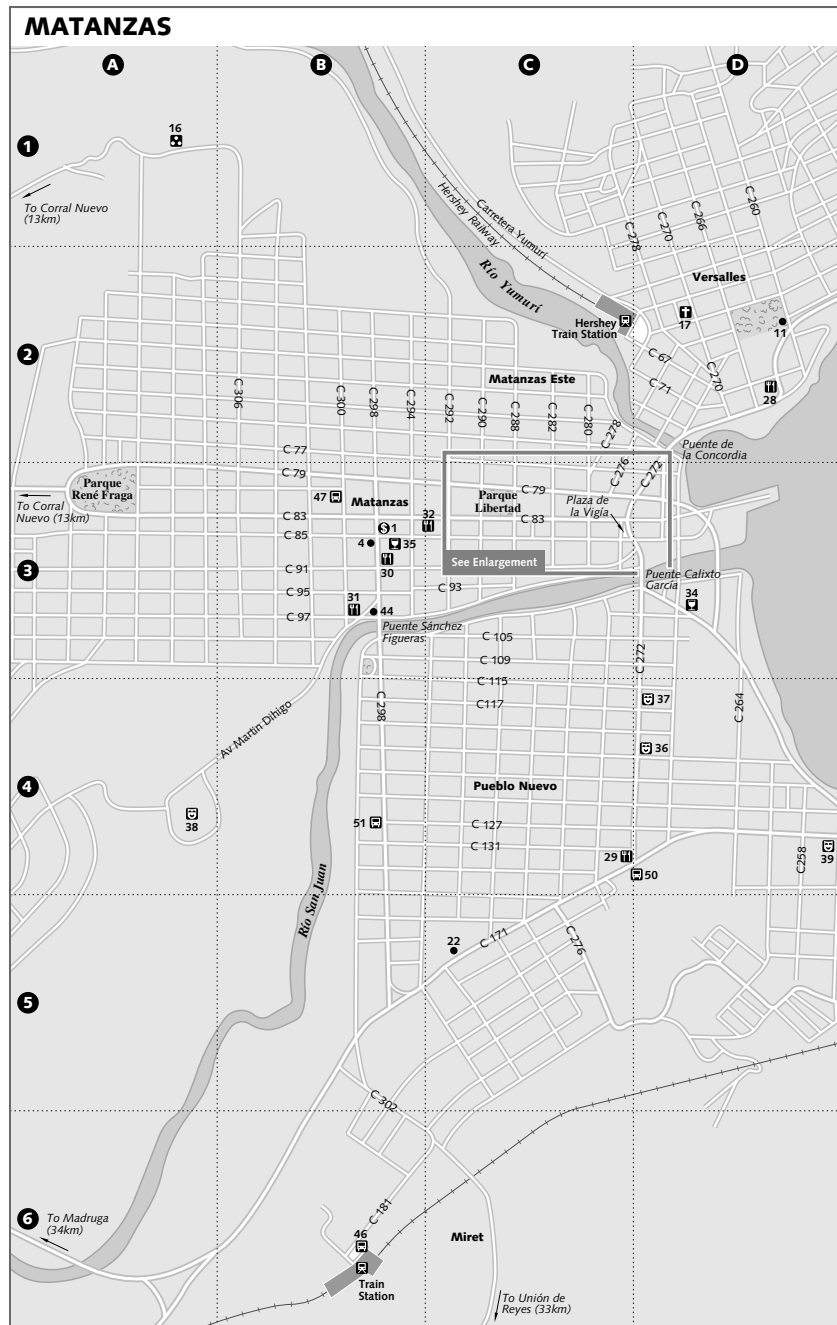
## Orientation

Matanzas is on the Vía Blanca between Varadero and Habana, 42km west of Varadero and 98km east of central Habana. The Carretera Central from Pinar del Río to Santiago de Cuba also passes through the city.

The compact old town lies between the Río Yumurí and the Río San Juan with the historic Versalles quarter situated to the north. Most of the industry is east of Versalles. The Hershey Railway terminates in

### MATANZAS STREET NAMES

Old name	New name
Contreras	Calle 79
Daouz	Calle 75
Maceo	Calle 77
Medio/Independencia	Calle 85
Milanés	Calle 83
San Luis	Calle 298
Santa Teresa	Calle 290
Zaragoza	Calle 292



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Cuartel Cojuria.....	11 D2
Cuevas de Bellamar.....	12 H6
Ediciones Vigía.....	13 F6
El Retablo.....	14 E6
Galería de Arte Provincial.....	15 F6
Iglesia de Monserrate.....	16 A1
Iglesia de San Pedro Apóstol.....	17 D2
Museo Farmacéutico.....	18 E6
Museo Histórico Provincial (Palacio del Junco).....	19 G6
Palacio de Gobierno.....	20 E6
Palacio de Justicia.....	21 F6
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Versalles, but all other transport facilities are south of the Río San Juan.

The streets of Matanzas suffer from a capricious numbering system. In the old town the north-south streets bear even numbers, beginning at Calle 268 near the bay. The east-west streets increase from Calle 75 at the Yumuri bridge (Puente de la Concordia) to Calle 97 along the banks of the San Juan.

Matanzas residents just ignore these arbitrary numbers and continue using the old colonial street names. However, we use the numbers because that's what you'll see on street corners (see p221).

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**Librería Viet Nam** (Map pp222-3; Calle 85 No 28612; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Near Calle 288.

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Etesca** (Map pp222-3; cnr Calle 83 & Calle 282; per hr CUC\$6; ☎ 9am-9pm)

### LIBRARIES

**Biblioteca Gener y Del Monte** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 24 41 34; Calles 79 & 290; ☎ 8:30am-10pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-3:30pm Sat, 8:30am-12:30pm Sun) On Parque Libertad, this is one of the oldest libraries in Cuba (1835). Housed in the former Casino Español, it's a beautiful place and a must for bibliophiles.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Farmacia Principal** (Map pp222-3; cnr Calles 298 & 85; ☎ 8am-10pm)

**Servimed** (☎ 25 31 70; Hospital Faustino Pérez, Carretera Central Km 101) Clinic just southwest of town.

### MONEY

**Banco Financiero Internacional** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 25 34 00; cnr Calles 85 & 298)

**Bandec** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 24 27 81; Calle 85 No 28604 btwn 286 & 288)

**Cadeca** (Map pp222-3; Calle 286; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun) Two portable kiosks here behind the cathedral.

### POST

**Post office** (Map pp222-3; Calle 85 No 28813; ☎ 24hr) On the corner of Calle 290.

### TELEPHONE

**Etesca** (Map pp222-3; cnr Calle 83 & Calle 282; per hr CUC\$6; ☎ 9am-9pm)

## Sights & Activities

### IN TOWN

The steel **Puente Calixto García** (1899) – number one bridge in a city that boasts 21 of them – spans the Río San Juan and leads directly into **Plaza de la Vigía** (Map pp222-3) from the south. Three centuries ago the original settlement of Matanzas was established on this site. The Matanzas fire brigade still has its headquarters in the 1897 neoclassical **Parque de los Bomberos** (Map pp222-3) just opposite.

Across the plaza is **Ediciones Vigía** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 24 48 45; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri), one of Matanzas' most intriguing attractions. Founded in 1985, this unique institution produces handmade paper and first-edition books on a range of topics. The books are typed, stenciled and pasted in editions of 200 copies. Visitors are welcome in the workshop and you can purchase numbered and signed copies for CUC\$5 to CUC\$15 each. They're genuine collector's items. Next door is the fine **Galería de Arte Provincial** (Map pp222-3; Calle 272 btwn Calles 85 & 91; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 10am-2pm Mon, 10am-6pm Tue-Sat).

The **Teatro Sauto** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 24 27 21), diagonally across Plaza de la Vigía from the art gallery, is one of Cuba's finest neoclassical buildings (1863) and famous for its superb acoustics. The lobby is graced by marble Greek goddesses and the main hall ceiling bears paintings of the muses. Three balconies enclose this 775-seat theater, which features a floor that can be raised to convert the auditorium into a ballroom. A work of art, the original theater curtain is a painting of the Puente de la Concordia over the Río Yumuri. Enrico Caruso performed here, as did the Soviet dancer Anna Pavlova in 1945. Your best chance of catching a performance is on Friday, Saturday or Sunday at 8:30pm.

A few blocks directly west is **Parque Libertad** (Map pp222-3) with several more of Matanzas' most stimulating sights, including a bronze statue (1909) of José Martí in the center. Head to the south side to grab a beer in the Café Libertad opposite the once grand Hotel Louvre (1894) before visiting the **Museo Farmacéutico** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 25 31 79; Calle 83 No 4951; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sun). Formerly Botica La Francesa, founded in 1882 by the Triolett family, this antique pharmacy has been a museum since 1964 and is crowded with all the odd bottles

and instruments, porcelain jars and medical recipes used in the trade. The eastern side of the park is dominated by the orderly **Palacio de Gobierno** (Map pp222-3) dating from 1853, now the seat of the **Poder Popular** (Popular Power). On the northern side are the defunct Hotel Velazco and the former **Casino Español** (nr Calles 79 & 290), where the first performance of the *danzonete* (Cuban ballroom dance) *Rompiendo La Rutina* by Ancteo Díaz took place. It's now the **Biblioteca Gener y Del Monte** (Map pp222-3).

Kids and theater lovers shouldn't miss **El Retablo** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 61 70 38; Calle 288 No 8313; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat), a gallery filled with all the fantastic costumes, marionettes and creations made by Cuba's masterful puppet makers. Performances are held here every second Saturday of the month. Nearby is the city's **Archivo Histórico** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 24 42 12; Calle 83 No 28013 btwn Calles 280 & 282), in the former residence of local poet José Jacinto Milanés (1814-63). A bronze statue of Milanés stands on the Plaza de la Iglesia in front of the nearby **Catedral de San Carlos Borromeo** (Map pp222-3; Calle 282 btwn Calles 83 & 85; donation welcome; ☎ 8am-noon, 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sun). This neoclassical cathedral was constructed in 1693 and rebuilt in 1878.

Other impressive buildings include the imposing **Palacio de Justicia** (Map pp222-3) opposite the Teatro Sauto, first erected in 1826 and rebuilt between 1908 and 1911. Also on Plaza de la Vigía is the **Museo Histórico Provincial** (Map pp222-3; cnr Calles 83 & 272; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 10am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Sun). This large museum housed in the Palacio del Junco (1840) contains exhibits relating to Matanzas history. Free concerts are held here at 4pm on Saturday.

The **Versalles quarter** (Map pp222-3), north of the Río Yumuri, was colonized by French refugees from Haiti in the 19th century and by the 1890s this area was the font of an exciting new musical genre called rumba. From the Plaza de la Vigía head north on Calle 272 across the graceful **Puente de la Concordia** (Map pp222-3). The neoclassical **Iglesia de San Pedro Apóstol** (Map pp222-3; cnr Calles 57 & 270) is worth seeking out. Four blocks east on the corner of Calles 63 and 260 stands the sinister-looking **Cuartel Goicuría** (Map pp222-3), a former barracks of Batista's army that was assaulted on April

29, 1956, by a group of rebels led by Reinold T García. Today it's a school.

In an industrial area above the port, a little over 1km northeast of Cuartel Goicuría, is the 18th-century **Castillo de San Severino** (Map pp222-3; Av del Muelle; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 9am-5pm) erected by the Spanish. To get there from Versalles, walk northeast to the end of Calle 57 and cross the highway. Entry is via the Centro Politécnico Ernest Thälmann on Calle 230. Continue straight, past the school, on a pot-holed dirt track and around the corner is the castle on the right. Slaves were brought directly into the castle from nearby boats and held in sinister dungeons below. Later, Cuban patriots were imprisoned within these walls. A plaque recalls 61 persons executed here between 1895 and 1897. San Severino remained a prison until the 1970s. Three cannons, one dated 1775, and the central square are well preserved, and plans exist to turn the castle into a tourist center. There are great views of Matanzas Bay.

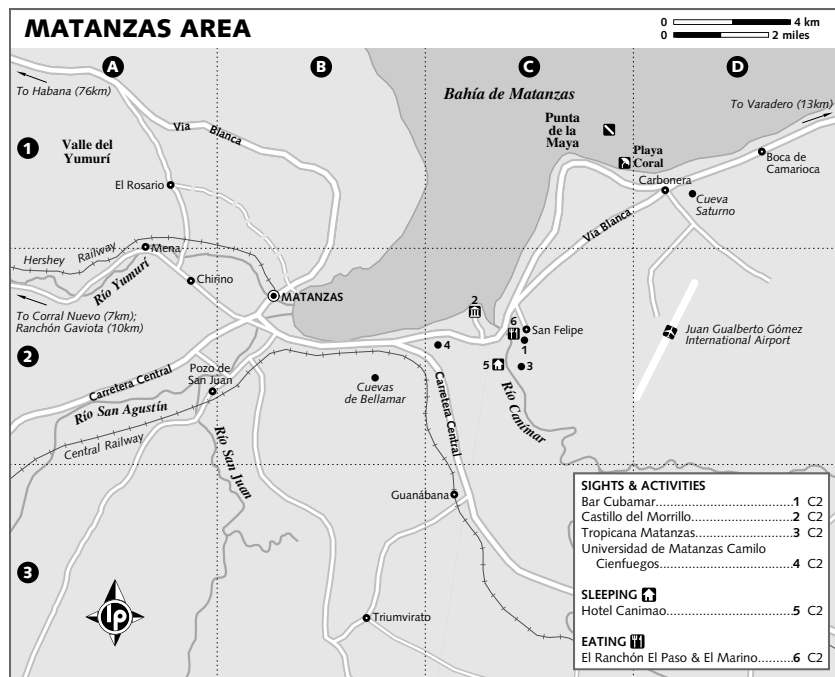
For an excellent view of Matanzas and the picturesque Valle del Yumuri, march north up Calle 306 to the ruined **Iglesia de Monserate** (Map pp222-3), dating from 1875 and perched loftily above the town.

Baseball fans might want to make the pilgrimage to **Palmar del Junco** (Map pp222-3) in the southern part of the city, site of Cuba's first baseball field (1904) and a source of much civic pride.

### OUTSIDE TOWN

The **Cuevas de Bellamar** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 25 35 38; admission CUC\$5, camera CUC\$5; ☎ 9am-6pm), 5km southeast of Matanzas, are 300,000 years old and are promoted locally as the oldest tourist attractions in Cuba. The 2500m-long caves were discovered in 1861 by a Chinese workman in the employ of Don Manuel Santos Parga. There's an underground stream inside; two restaurants, a pool and playground outside. One-hour visits into the cave leave every hour seven times a day starting at 9:30am. To get there, take bus 16, 17 or 20 east toward Canimar and ask the driver to let you out near Calle 226. From there it's a 30-minute walk uphill to the caves; a tiny railroad tunnel makes this road impassable for anything larger than a jeep or compact car. Other vehicles must follow a confusing, roundabout route via Calle 276, south from Calle 171, near the old train station.





The Río Canimar, 8km east of Matanzas, feeds into the bay. It's one of the deepest rivers in Cuba. Just before the highway bridge a road runs 1km down the western (ocean) side of the river to a cove where the four guns of the **Castillo del Morrillo** (1720) overlook a small beach. This castle is now a **museum**

#### THE ORIGIN OF THE VALLE DEL YUMURÍ

An old Indian legend tells of a maiden named Coalina who was hidden away by her father after it was prophesized that a terrible disaster would befall the community if she ever fell in love. In due course a young chief of Camagüey named Nerey heard of Coalina's beauty and resolved to find her. Of course, they fell in love at first sight, whereupon an earthquake split apart the mountains of Matanzas and the waters of the Río Yumurí rushed toward the sea, destroying the village and carrying off the lovers. Coalina's last words were 'Yu muri', archaic Spanish for 'I die.'

(Map p226; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun) dedicated to the student leader Antonio Guiteras Holmes (1906-35), who founded the revolutionary group Joven Cuba (Young Cuba) in 1934. After serving briefly in the post-Machado government, Guiteras was forced out by army chief Fulgencio Batista. On May 8, 1935, he and 18 others came to Matanzas to find a yacht that would take them into exile in Mexico. Before they could board, Guiteras and Venezuelan revolutionary Carlos Aponte Hernández (1901-35), who had served with Sandino in Nicaragua, were discovered by Batista's troops and shot. Bronze busts of the pair now mark the spot where they were executed, under a *caoba* (mahogany) tree down some steps from a cement gate back near the bridge. The shore behind the castle isn't a bad place for a swim.

Boat trips 12km up the jungle-clad **Río Canimar** depart from **Bar Cubamar** (Map p226; ☎ 26 15 16), below the bridge on the inland side. Varadero tour companies offer this excursion with lunch, horseback riding, fishing and snorkeling, but you can work out a similar deal for approximately CUC\$25

by showing up at the landing before noon. Rowboats are for rent (CUC\$2 per hour) at the bar any time.

The old coastal road to Varadero is great on a moped, providing better scenery and a mellow pace than the Autopista. There are some OK swimming spots en route and **Playa Coral** (Map p226) has 2km of offshore reef with the best snorkeling in the area. The airport access road is just beyond Playa Coral at the small crossroads town of Carbonera (a fresh fish lunch can be arranged here; ask around). One kilometer south of the *Vía Blanca* on this road is the **Cueva Saturno** (Map p226; ☎ 25 32 72; admission incl snorkel gear CUC\$5; ☎ 8am-6pm). It's promoted as a snorkeling spot and Varadero companies include it on many tours, but don't believe the hype: it's really just a ho-hum cave with limited access unless you're an experienced cave diver with all the relevant equipment. Beware the odd hustler or three and the screaming crowds clamoring to get into the water. There's a snack bar here that sells good coffee.

#### Festivals & Events

Matanzas is famous for its rumbas and the spicy Marina neighborhood across the Puente de la Concordia is home to some of the most renowned rumberos, including Los Muñequitos de Matanzas. During the 10 days following October 10, you can shake your bones with these and other talented musicians at the **Festival del Bailador Rumbero** in the Teatro Sauto.

#### Sleeping IN TOWN

None of the three once resplendent hotels in the center of Matanzas are currently open. World-weary Hotel El Louvre on the south side of Parque Libertad (no sign), is the most likely candidate for a renovation although there weren't any hands-in-the-pockets, hard-hat-wearing builders around to verify.

Rather fortuitously the Matanzas casa particular scene is better-than-average.

#### OUTSIDE TOWN

**Hotel Canimao** (Islazul; Map p226; ☎ 26 10 14; s/d low season CUC\$23/34, high season CUC\$28/38; P ☎ ☎ ☎) High above the Río Canimar 8km east of Matanzas on the way to Varadero, Hotel

#### CASAS PARTICULARES – MATANZAS

With no city-center hotels Matanzas relies on a small clutch of super-friendly casas.

**Anita & Luis Alberto Valdés** (☎ 24 22 97; Calle 79 No 28205 2nd fl btwn Calles 282 & 288; r CUC\$25; ☎) Two bedrooms with separate baths. Top hosts and huge delicious meals.

**'Hostal Alma' – Alberto Hernández** (☎ 24 78 10; Calle 83 No 29008 btwn Calles 290 & 292; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) Two rooms in colonial house both with private baths, roof terrace, sun loungers and pleasant central courtyard. Meals available. Alberto is an excellent host and an expert on Matanzas' history.

**'Hostal Azul' Yoel Báez & Aylín Hernández** (☎ 24 78 10; Calle 83 No 29012 btwn Calles 290 & 292; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) Huge colonial room in quiet house. Very attentive hosts. Shares phone with Hostal Alma.

**Roberto Chaves Llerena & Margarita Romero** (☎ 24 25 77; Calle 79 No 27608 btwn Calles 276 & 278; r CUC\$20) Big colonial house, meals, bike storage.

Canimao has 120 comfortable rooms with little balconies catering to Cubans. It does excursions on the Río Canimar (CUC\$15, including lunch) and the Cuevas de Bellamar (CUC\$8). Bus 16 from the corner of Calle 300 and Calle 83, in Matanzas, will drop you at the bridge downhill from the hotel. Nonguests can use the pool and the Tropicana nightclub (p228) is next door.

#### Eating IN TOWN

While Matanzas has no real paladares, the casas particulares can usually rustle up something suitably delicious.

**Café Atenas** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 25 34 93; Calles 83 No 8301; ☎ 10am-11pm) If you're stuck for ideas for lunch try the clean and cozy Café Atenas opposite the Teatro Sauto on Plaza de la Vigía. It offers pizza, spaghetti, sandwiches, beer, coffee and a stupendous chicken and shrimp bruschetta with friendly service.

**Café Libertad** (Map pp222-3; cnr Calles 290 & 83) This café is your best bet – make that your only bet! – on Parque Libertad; great location, though the peso *hamburguesas* (hamburgers) could do with a little bit of extra garnish.

**Cafetería El Rápido** (Map pp222-3; cnr Calles 85 & 282), next to the cathedral, is big, but bogus. Better is the **branch** (Map pp222-3; cnr Calles 262 & 75; ☎ 24hr), just down from the Cuartel Goicuría in Versalles, with a nice terrace. Lots of cheap peso take-out windows exist on Calle 272 in Versalles, just across the bridge from Matanzas.

Other options:

**Cremería Atenas** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 9am-9pm) Next door to Café Atenas, ice-cream junkies will find their fix at this place.

**Paladar La Yumurina** (Map pp222-3; Calle 83 No 29202; ☎ 8am-9pm) Serves the house-specialty egg sandwich in a bright dining room. It's on the corner of Calle 292.

**En Familia** (Map pp222-3; cnr Calles 298 & 91;

☎ 10am-11:30pm) This new place serves chicken, drinks and sandwiches.

**Coppelia** (Map pp222-3; cnr Calles 272 & 127; ☎ 10am-10pm) Cuba's favorite ice cream can be found near the bus station.

**Cadena Cubana del Pan** (Map pp222-3; Calle 83 btwn Calles 278 & 280; ☎ 24hr) Has loaves of 10-peso bread you can watch being kneaded and baked; they sometimes have the yummy round rolls too.

**Supermercado La Reina** (Map pp222-3; Calle 85 No 29006 btwn Calles 290 & 292; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-12:30pm Sun) Groceries.

**Mercado La Plaza** (Map pp222-3; cnr Calles 97 & 298) Matanzas' colorful vegetable market, is near the Puente Sánchez Figueras (1916). Many peso stalls selling fried things are here.

## OUTSIDE TOWN

There are two quite nice options outside of town en route to Varadero.

**El Ranchón El Paso** (Map p226; ☎ 10am-11pm) A simple, breezy place high above the Río Canimar, 8km east of Matanzas. Good pork or chicken meals cost under CUC\$4. There's a full bar.

**El Marino** (Map p226; ☎ 26 14 83; ☎ noon-9pm) Next door to El Ranchón El Paso, the fancier, reader-recommended El Marino specializes in reasonably priced seafood, including lobster and shrimp. There are egg dishes and soups for vegetarians.

Cuevas de Bellmar is also a decent place to catch a meal.

## Drinking

**Ruinas de Matasiete** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 25 33 87; cnr Vía Blanca & Calle 101; ☎ 24hr) Matanzas' best boozier is a Convertible bar housed in the ruins of a 19th-century warehouse, next to the bay. It's

near the entrance to town if you're coming from Varadero. Drinks and grilled meats are served on an open-air terrace, but a better reason to come is to hear live music (from 9pm Friday, Saturday and Sunday). There's a minimum cover charge of CUC\$3.

**Video Bar Guanima** (Map pp222-3; Calle 85 No 29404 btwn Calles 294 & 298; ☎ 10am-6pm & 8pm-2am). Only couples are allowed entry here, but singles will find willing partners at the door.

## Entertainment

**Teatro Sauto** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 24 27 21) Across Plaza de la Vigía Teatro Sauto is a national landmark and one of Cuba's premier theaters. Performances have been held here since 1863 and you might catch the Ballet Nacional de Cuba or the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba. Performances are at 8:30pm with Sunday matinees at 3pm (see p224).

**Teatro Velazco** (Map pp222-3; cnr Calles 79 & 288) Situated on Parque Libertad, it shows films.

Plaza de la Vigía is a great place to catch live rumba on the weekend; there are also live performances in Matanzas Este on Sunday afternoon (2pm) – ask a local.

**Casa de la Cultura Municipal Bonifacio Bryne** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 29 27 09; Calle 272 No 11916 btwn Calles 119 & 121) This place in Pueblo Nuevo has cultural programs most evenings at 9pm.

**Las Palmas** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 25 32 52; cnr Calle 254 & Calle 127; admission CUC\$1; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Wed, noon-2am Fri-Sun) A good starlit night out for a fraction of the price of the Tropicana shindig can be had at this ARTex place.

**El Pescadito** (Map pp222-3; Calle 272 btwn Calles 115 & 117) Similar to Las Palmas but more central and local.

**Tropicana Matanzas** (Map p226; ☎ 26 53 80; admission CUC\$35; ☎ 10pm-2am Tue-Sat) Capitalizing on its success in Habana and Santiago de Cuba, the Tropicana has a branch 8km east of Matanzas, next to the Hotel Canimao. You can mingle with the Varadero bus crowds and enjoy the same entertaining formula of lights, feathers, flesh and frivolity in the open air. Rather like a cricket match, rain stops play here if the weather cracks.

**Estadio Victoria de Girón** (Map pp222-3) From October to April, baseball games take place at this stadium, 1km southwest of the market. The schedule varies, so ask when the local team, Citricultores, will be playing. Don't expect Cuba's best ball here: this is equivalent to a farm team.

## Shopping

Shopping in Matanzas is akin to looking for a waterfall in the Sahara.

**Casa de Bienes Culturales La Vigía** (Map pp222-3; Calle 272 No 8501) Incurable shopping addicts can mosey on down to this place on Plaza de la Vigía or browse for original handmade books at Ediciones Vigía, which can be found at the other end of the same block (see p224).

**Photo Service** (Map pp222-3; Calle 288 No 8311 btwn Calles 83 & 85) This is the place for all your photo-related needs.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Matanzas is connected to the outside world through Juan Gualberto Gómez International Airport, 20km east of town. See p243 for details.

### BUS

Long-distance buses use the **National Bus Station** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 9-2923) in the old train station on the corner of Calles 131 and 272 in Pueblo Nuevo south of the Río San Juan. Matanzas has good connections to the rest of the country. **Viazul** (www.viazul.com) has departures to Habana (CUC\$7, 8:55am, 12:35pm and 6:55pm) and Varadero (CUC\$6, 10:15am, 2:10pm and 8:15pm). Astro buses leave this station for Santiago de Cuba (CUC\$31, alternate days), Cienfuegos (CUC\$7, daily), Santa Clara (CUC\$8, daily), Cárdenas (CUC\$2, daily) and Habana (CUC\$5, twice daily).

Two seats on each bus are reserved for Convertible-paying tourists, and these tickets are sold the same day one hour prior to departure.

Buses within Matanzas Province use the **San Luis Bus Terminal** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 29 27 01; cnr Calles 298 & 127) for the following services:

Destination	Cost	Departure time
Canasí	CUC\$1	5am, 5pm
Cárdenas	CUC\$2	1:40pm Mon, Wed & Fri
Colón	CUC\$3	7:30am, 3:10pm, 3:55pm
Jagüey Grande	CUC\$3	1:30pm Tue & Thu
Jovellanos	CUC\$2	1:45pm
Varadero	CUC\$2	9am, 10am, noon, 2pm

Prices are approximations and you may be able to pay in pesos.

## HITCHHIKING

Catch rides to Habana from opposite the Cuartel Goicuría, Calles 63 and 260, in Versalles. For Varadero, take bus 16 or 17 from Calle 300, between Calles 81 and 83, to Canimar and hitch from there (for the risks associated with hitching see p477).

## TRAIN

The **train station** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 29 16 45; Calle 181) is in Miret, at the southern edge of the city. Foreigners must pay the peso price in Convertibles to the *jefe de turno* (shift manager). All trains between Habana and Santiago de Cuba stop here. In theory, there are eight daily trains to Habana beginning at 3:25am (CUC\$3, 1½ hours) and a Cienfuegos departure at 8:05pm, alternate days (CUC\$6, three hours). Eastbound, there's a 10:10pm train to Bayamo (CUC\$23, 24 hours) and an 8:45pm train to Holguín (CUC\$26, 13 hours, 683km). The Santiago de Cuba train (CUC\$27, 13 hours) leaves daily at 7:58am and 4:46pm, stopping at the following towns:

Destination	Cost	Duration (hrs)
Camagüey	CUC\$19	7
Ciego de Ávila	CUC\$15	5
Las Tunas	CUC\$24	9
Santa Clara	CUC\$8	3½

In practice, these services are usually delayed or cancelled.

The **Hershey Train Station** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 24 48 05; cnr Calles 55 & 67) is in Versalles, an easy 10-minute walk from Parque Libertad. There are five trains a day to Casablanca Station in Habana (CUC\$2.80, four hours) via San Antonio (CUC\$0.40), Canasí (CUC\$0.85), Jibacoa (CUC\$1.10), Hershey (CUC\$1.40) and Guanabo (CUC\$2). Departure times from Matanzas are 4:34am, 8:26am, 12:30pm, 5:12pm and 9:08pm (the 12:30pm train is an express and takes three hours instead of four). Ticket sales begin an hour before the scheduled departure time and, except on weekends and holidays, there's no problem getting aboard. Bicycles may not be allowed (ask). The train usually leaves on time, but it often arrives in Habana one hour late. There was a time when this train went right to the La Coubre train station, which is way more convenient than Casablanca; check if this is a possibility. This is the only

electric railway in Cuba, and during thunderstorms the train doesn't run. It's a scenic trip if you're not in a hurry.

## Getting Around

Buses within Matanzas are scarce. To get to the train station from the center, Bus 1 leaves from Calle 79 between Calles 290 and 292. If all else fails, hail a bici-taxi just before the Puente Sánchez Figueras. The Oro Negro gas station is on the corner of Calles 129 and 210, 4km outside the city of Matanzas on the road to Varadero. There's also a Micar rental office here. Servi-Cupet and **Havanautos** (Map pp222-3; ☎ 25 32 94; cnr Calles 129 & 208) are a block further on. A soda bar with snacks is attached. If you're driving to Varadero, you will pay a CUC\$2 highway toll between Boca de Camarioca and Santa Marta (no toll between Matanzas and the airport).

## VARADERO

☎ 45 / pop 18,000

Varadero is Cuba on growth hormones, a sprawling resort complex that bears little or no relation to the country as a whole.

The setting itself is paradisiacal enough, a 20km swathe of unbroken white sand perched on the wafer-thin Hicacos Peninsula that could rival anything else in the Caribbean. United States chemical millionaire Iréné Dupont must have thought as much when he built his dream home here in 1930, a lavish art-deco mansion he duly christened Xanadu for its tempestuous ocean views and golden carpet of adjacent beach. He was promptly joined by Al Capone, President Batista and anyone else in Cuba who owned money.

Counting more than 50 hotels, 16,000 rooms and with 50 flights a week coming in from Canada alone, the resort has grown bigger by the year and, to some extent, is a victim of its own success. But tourists mean money and unsurprisingly, neither the all-out building spree nor the flocking vacation crowds who revel in the resort's exotic mix of sun, sand, sea, and – ah – socialism, are showing any signs of abating.

These days Varadero is an unkempt mix of the sublime and the ridiculous. There's plenty to do here, but the spread out fa-

cities, uninspiring architecture and rather lackluster bar scene place the resort some way behind Florida and Cancún in terms of overall luxury.

Contrary to popular belief, Cubans are not banned from Varadero. In fact, in contrast to other more cut-off resorts such as Cayo Coco, integration is higher than you might first expect. At least one third of the peninsula is given over to a Cuban town of the same name which, while lacking the atmosphere of a Habana or a Santiago, still retains a rough semblance of everyday Cuban life.

## Orientation

Varadero begins at the western end of the Península de Hicacos, where a channel called the Laguna de Paso Malo links the Bahía de Cárdenas to the Atlantic Ocean. After crossing the Puente Bascular (Lift Bridge) over this waterway, the Vía Blanca becomes the Autopista Sur and runs up the peninsula's spine 20km to Marina Gaviota at Varadero's easternmost point. From the same bridge Av Kawama heads west along the channel toward several big resorts. In

general the Atlantic side of the peninsula (with the 20km of bright white sands for which Varadero is famous) is devoted to tourism, while the Bahía de Cárdenas side is where locals live (another Cuban community is in Santa Marta at the western end of the peninsula). The largest and most expensive resorts are to the east on Punta Hicacos. The quietest section of beach in the center of Varadero is between Calles 46 and 65.

Beginning around Calle 13, everything from hotels to groceries, becomes progressively more expensive the further east you travel.

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**Librería Hanoi** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 26 94; cnr Av 1 & Calle 44; ☎ 9am-9pm) A good selection of books in English, from poetry and politics.

### CONSULATES

**Canadian consulate** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 20 78; Calle 13 No 422 btwn Av 1 & Camino del Mar) Also represents Australia.

### EMERGENCY

**Asistur** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 72 77; cnr Av 1 & Calle 42; ☎ 9am-4:30pm Mon-Fri)

### INTERNET ACCESS

Most hotels have Internet access at CUC\$5 to CUC\$7 per hour.

**DHL Cibercafé** (Map pp232-3; Av 1 btwn Calles 39 & 40)

### LIBRARIES

**Biblioteca José Smith Comas** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 23 58; Calle 33 No 104 btwn Avs 1 & 3; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat) Present your hotel guest card to withdraw books (free); book donations happily accepted.

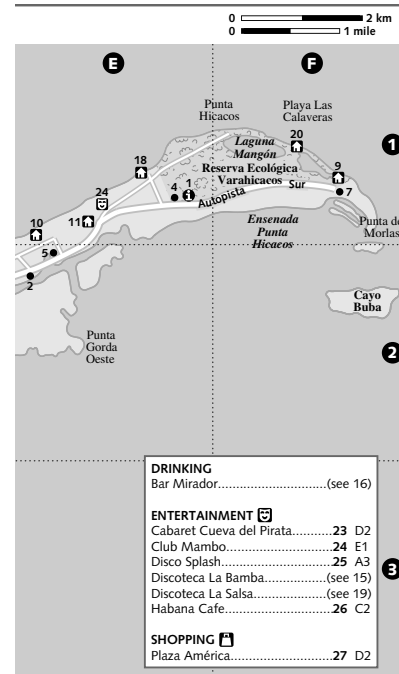
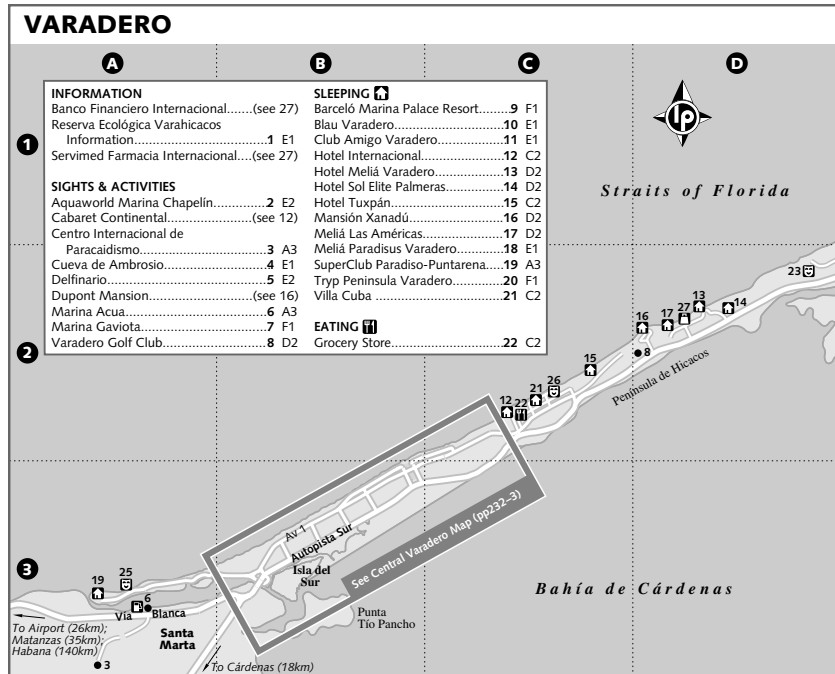
### MEDICAL SERVICES

Many large hotels have infirmaries that provide free basic first aid.

**Clínica Internacional Servimed** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 77 10; cnr Av 1 & Calle 60; ☎ 24hr). Medical or dental consultations (CUC\$25 to CUC\$5) and hotel calls (CUC\$50 to CUC\$60). There's a good pharmacy (open 24-hours) here with items in Convertibles.

**Policlínico Dr Mario Muñoz Monroy** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 34 64; Calle 27; ☎ 24hr) Near Av 1. Intended for Cubans, but they don't generally turn sick people away.

**Servimed Farmacia Internacional** (Map pp230-1; Plaza América, cnr Av Las Américas & Calle 61; ☎ 9am-7pm) Well-stocked pharmacy with items in Convertibles.





**MONEY**

In Varadero, European visitors can pay for hotels and meals in euros. If you change money at your hotel front desk, you'll sacrifice 1% more than at a bank.

**Banco de Ahorro Popular** (Map pp232-3; Calle 36 btwn Av 1 & Autopista Sur; ☎ 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri) Probably the slowest option.

**Banco de Crédito y Comercio** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 36; ☎ 9am-1:30pm & 3-5pm Mon-Fri) Changes traveler's checks; expect queues.

**Banco Financiero Internacional** Av 1 (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 70 02; cnr Av 1 & Calle 32; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun); Plaza América (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 82 72; Plaza América, cnr Av Las Américas & Calle 61; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) Traveler's checks and cash advances on Visa and MasterCard.  
**Cadeca** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av de la Playa & Calle 41; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-noon Sun)

**POST**

Many of the larger hotels have branch post offices in the reception area.

**DHL** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 44 52; cnr Av 1 & Calle 42; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Upstairs, enter from rear.

**Post office** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 36; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat)

**TELEPHONE**

**Cubacel** Av 1 (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 72 22; cnr Av 1 & Calle 42; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Aeropuerto Juan Gualberto Gómez (☎ 880-9280; Aeropuerto Juan Gualberto Gómez; ☎ 8am-7pm) For the Av 1 branch, enter from rear.

**Etcasa** Av 1 (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 30); Plaza América (Plaza América, cnr Av Las Américas & Calle 61; 24hr) Sells telephone cards, international calls.

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**

Almost every hotel has a tourism desk where staff will book adventure tours, sky-diving, scuba diving, whatever. It's almost always cheaper, however, to go directly to the tour agency or outfit.

**Cubatur** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 44 05; fax 66 70 48; cnr Av 1 & Calle 33; ☎ 8:30am-6pm) Reserves hotel rooms nationally; organizes Varadero excursions and bus transfers to Habana hotels.

**EcoTur** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 86 12; Av 3ra btwn Calles 33 & 34, hab 114 & 116)

**Gaviota** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 18 44; fax 66 73 25; cnr Calle 56 & Playa)

**Havanatur Tour & Travel** Av de la Playa (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 70 26; Av de la Playa btwn Calles 36 & 37; ☎ 8am-6pm); Av Las Américas (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 77 08; Av Las Américas; ☎ 8am-8pm) Near Hotel Tuxpán, Av Las Américas (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 72 03; Av Las Américas; ☎ 8am-8pm) Hotel rooms booked and bus transfers arranged to Habana or the Habana airport, plus sightseeing excursions.

**Dangers & Annoyances**

Crime-wise Varadero's dangers are minimal. Aside from getting drunk on free mojitos and tripping over your bath rug on the way to the toilet, you haven't got too much to worry about. Watch out for mismatched electrical outlets in hotels. In some rooms, a 110V socket might sit right next to a 220V one. They should be labeled, but aren't always.

Out on the beach, a red flag means no swimming allowed due to the undertow or some other danger. A blue jellyfish known as the Portuguese man-of-war can produce a bad reaction if you come in contact with its long tentacles. Wash the stung area with sea water and seek medical help if the pain becomes intense or you have difficulty in breathing. They're most common in sum-

mer when you'll see them washed up on the beach; tread carefully. Theft of unguarded shoes, sunglasses and towels is routine along this beach.

Twenty-four hours a day, long tongues of flame shoot up from two tall chimneys just southwest of Varadero, as excess natural gas from oil wells in the vicinity is burned off. Coming into town from Cárdenas and points west, you'll notice a nauseating smell as sulfurous gas is released from the wells. The offending odor sometimes drifts over to hotels on Varadero's western side. Persons with asthma especially should avoid staying anywhere west of Hotel Bellamar. We've received reports that Sherritt International was engaged in a project to clean the gas and convert it into electricity, but the stench lingers. Varadero itself may be sitting on top of the richest oilfield of all, and wells may one day sprout from the hotel gardens.

**Sights**

If art and history are your thing you've come to the wrong place. Varadero's reputation as a font of cultural interaction is not

**CENTRAL VARADERO**

**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

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- Artisan Market.....21 F1
- Barracuda Diving Center.....(see 42)
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- El Gofrito.....22 E1
- Iglesia de Santa Elvira.....23 F1
- Judo Club.....24 F1
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- Museo Municipal de Varadero.....26 G1

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- Banco de Ahorro Popular.....1 E1
- Banco de Crédito y Comercio.....2 E1
- Banco Financiero Internacional.....3 D1
- Biblioteca José Smith Comas.....4 D1
- Cadeca.....5 E1
- Canadian Consulate.....6 B1
- Clinica Internacional Servimed.....7 H1
- Cubacel.....(see 9)
- Cubatur.....8 D1
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- Ecotur.....11 D1
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- Gaviota.....13 G1
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- Grocery Store.....47 B1
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- Discoteca Havana Club.....65 H2
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- Micar.....85 C1
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- Transtur.....91 C1
- Vía Car Rental.....92 D1



exactly legendary. Nevertheless there are a few sights worth pondering over if the beach banality starts to wear a bit thin.

The Parque Central and adjacent Parque de las 8000 Taquillas host the biggest **artisan market** (Map pp232-3; btwn Calles 44 & 46) in town and nestled among the *uva caleta* (sea grape) trees it's a pretty part of the public beach. Just east is the colonial-style **Iglesia de Santa Elvira** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 47) and there's a monument to fallen revolutionary heroes across the street.

Around 1km east, the friendly **Museo Municipal de Varadero** (Map pp232-3; Calle 57; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 10am-7pm) displays period furniture and Varadero history in a large, two-story mansion erected in 1921. Don't miss the two-headed baby shark and the fine beach view from the upstairs balcony.

**Parque Josone** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 58; admission free; ☎ 9am-midnight) is Varadero's Central Park. The expansive, shady grounds feature an attractive lake with quaint bridges and geese flitting about, lots of lovely trees and a tranquil vibe. Girls celebrating their *quinceñeras* (15th birthdays) often hold their photo shoots here. The park dates back to 1940, when the owner of the Arrechabala rum distillery in nearby Cárdenas built a romantic mansion here, the Retiro Josone. It's now a restaurant, and the family's guesthouse is Restaurante La Campana. For CUC\$2 an hour you can float about in a rowboat. For a further CUC\$5 you can enjoy the dubious pleasure of riding on the park's resident camel. There's a public **swimming pool** (admission CUC\$2) in the southern part of the park and the odd ostrich lurking somewhere nearby. Good music can be heard here nightly.

Everything east of the stone gate on Av Las Américas, near Hotel Las Morlas, once belonged to the Dupont family. Here they built a three-story mansion called Xanadu overlooking the coast and laid out a nine-hole golf course. Today the **Mansión Xanadu** (Map pp230-1) is a B&B abreast Varadero's 18-hole golf course, with a restaurant downstairs and a bar on the top floor; a choice spot for sunset cocktails. Nearby, **Plaza América** (Map pp230-1; btwn Meliás Las Américas & Varadero) is Varadero's (and Cuba's) top shopping mall.

Beyond Marina Chapelin, 5km northeast of the Dupont Mansion along Autopista Sur, is Varadero's **Delfinario** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 80 31; admission CUC\$10, camera/video camera CUC\$5/10;

☎ 9am-5pm). Dolphin shows happen here daily at 11am, 2:30pm and 4:30pm. Swimming with the dolphins costs CUC\$65. You're allowed to grab the dolphin's fin and let it drag you around. Ride of a lifetime or cruel aqua-zoo? You decide.

East on Autopista Sur and 500m beyond the Club Amigo Varadero is the **Cueva de Ambrosio** (Map pp230-1; admission CUC\$3; ☎ 9am-4:30pm). Some 47 pre-Columbian drawings were discovered in this 300m cave in 1961. The black and red drawings feature the same concentric circles seen in similar paintings on the Isla de la Juventud, perhaps a form of solar calendar. The cave was also used as a refuge by escaped slaves.

A few hundred meters beyond the cave is the entrance to the **Reserva Ecológica Varahicacos** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 9am-4:30pm) Varadero's nominal green space and a wildlife reserve that's about as 'wild' as New York's Central Park. Bulldozers have been chomping away at its edges for years. There are three short trails (CUC\$3, 45 minutes each), the highlight of which are a couple of caves and a giant cactus tree nicknamed 'El Patriarca' (patriarch). **Playa Las Calaveras** (Map pp230-1), 800m of beach promoted as 'virgin' by tourist brochures is dotted with massage shacks and drink stands.

**Cayo Piedras del Norte**, 5km north of Playa Las Calaveras (one hour by boat), has been made into a 'marine park' by the deliberate sinking of an assortment of military equipment in 15m to 30m of water. The yacht *Coral Negro* was sunk here in 1997, followed by frigate 383 in 1998. Also scuttled for the benefit of divers and glass-bottom boat passengers are a towboat, a missile launching gunboat (with missiles intact) and an AN-24 aircraft.

At least half-a-dozen Varadero hotels are worthy of a visit in their own right – if you can get past the omnipresent security guards. Top favorites includes '50s retro Hotel Internacional, the art deco Mansión Xanadu and the spectacularly modernist Méliá duo.

## Activities

### SCUBA DIVING & SNORKELING

There are more than 30 dive sites around Varadero, many of them shallow dives appropriate for snorkelers or beginners, but also with some sunken ships and cave dives to challenge more advanced divers. One

drawback with diving in Varadero is that there is only one shore dive (20km away at Playa Coral) and the rest of the boat dives require an hour in transit (one way).

Varadero's top scuba facility is the mega-friendly, multilingual **Barracuda Diving Center** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 34 81; www.aquaworldvaradero.com; cnr Av 1 & Calle 58; ☎ 8am-6pm). Diving is CUC\$40 per dive (CUC\$35 if you bring your own equipment). Cave diving or night diving costs CUC\$50, and packages of four/five/six dives are CUC\$105/130/150. Snorkelers can join the divers for CUC\$25. A scuba excursion to the Bahía de Cochinos is CUC\$50/70 with one/two tanks, equipment included. Barracuda conducts introductory resort courses for CUC\$70 and ACUC (American Canadian Underwater Certifications) courses for CUC\$365, plus many advanced courses. A brand new recompression facility is installed on-site and there's also a resident doctor. A popular seafood restaurant is on the center's premises.

As a secondary option you have the **Acua Diving Center** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 80 64; Av Kawama btwn Calles 2 & 3) in western Varadero. It charges much the same prices as Barracuda, but doesn't have quite the facilities, nor volume. When a north wind is blowing and diving isn't possible in the Atlantic, you can be transferred to the Caribbean coast in a minibus (90-minute drive); this costs a total of CUC\$45/65 for one/two dives. Certification courses are possible.

**Marina Gaviota** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 77 55), at the eastern end of Autopista Sur, also offers scuba diving at similar prices and has snorkeling excursions. A three-hour

snorkeling trip is CUC\$35 per person (six-person minimum). **Scuba Cuba** at **Aquaworld Marina Chapelin** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 75 50; www.aquaworldvaradero.com; Autopista Sur Km 12) also has snorkeling and diving trips.

### DEEP-SEA FISHING

Varadero's three marinas offer a variety of nautical activities and facilities. Many outfits are at **Aquaworld Marina Chapelin** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 75 50; www.aquaworldvaradero.com), where five hours of deep-sea fishing costs CUC\$290 for four people (price includes hotel transfers and open bar; nonfishing companions pay CUC\$30). **Marina Gaviota** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 77 55), at the eastern end of Autopista Sur, and **Marina Acua** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 80 62), just west of Varadero, have similar packages. Book the latter through the **Acua Diving Center** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 80 64; Av Kawama btwn Calles 2 & 3).

### GOLF

While it's no Pebble Beach, golfers will certainly have a swinging session at the uncrowded and nicely laid out **Varadero Golf Club** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 77 88; www.varaderogolfclub.com; Mansión Xanadu Dupont de Nemours; green fees 9/18 holes CUC\$48/70; ☎ 7am-7pm). The original nine holes created by the Duponts are between Hotel Bella Costa and the Dupont Mansion, and in 1998 the course was extended to 18 holes (par 72) by adding another nine holes along the southern side of the three Meliá resorts. Bookings are made through the Pro shop next to the Dupont Mansion (now a cozy B&B with free, unlimited tee time). A twilight nine holes after 4:30pm costs CUC\$25 and you can also rent clubs and a caddie.

### TAKING THE PLUNGE

For those with a head for heights, Varadero's greatest thrill has to be skydiving with the **Centro Internacional de Paracaidismo** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 72 56, 66 72 60; skygators@cubairsports.itgo.com), based at the old airport just west of Varadero. The terminal is 1km up a dirt road, opposite Marina Acua. Skydivers take off in an Antonov AN-2 biplane of WWII design (don't worry, it's a replica) and jump from 3000m using a two-harness parachute with an instructor strapped in tandem on your back. After 35 seconds of free fall the parachute opens and you float tranquilly for 10 minutes down onto Varadero's white sandy beach. The center also offers less spectacular (but equally thrilling) ultralight flights at various points on the beach. Prices for skydiving are CUC\$150 per person with an extra CUC\$45 for photos and CUC\$50 for video. Ultralight flights start at CUC\$30 and go up to CUC\$300 depending on the length of time. If you are already a qualified skydiver solo jumps are also available on production of the relevant certification.

A day's notice is usually required for skydiving and jumps are (obviously) weather dependent. Since opening in 1993 the center has reported no fatalities.

Nine and 18 hole lessons are CUC\$100 and CUC\$200 respectively.

It's also fun to play miniature golf at **El Golfito** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 42; per person CUC\$3; ☎ 24hr).

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

Kids love the *bolera* (bowling alley) inside the **Centro Todo En Uno** (Map pp232-3; cnr Calle 54 & Autopista Sur; per game CUC\$2.50; ☎ 24hr), a complex with a giant, modern playground adjacent and lots of junk food, making this a good family destination away from the resorts.

**Sailboards** are for rent all over the beach (CUC\$10 per hour) as are small catamarans, parasails, banana boats, sea kayaks etc. The upmarket resorts usually include these water toys in the all-inclusive price.

For a workout to write home about, pay a visit to the tiny sports club inauspiciously named **Judo** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 46; ☎ 9am-noon, 2-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 9-11am Sat) on the east side of Parque Central. Despite the rough facilities and decidedly pokey interior, the staff here are real pros and will give you the best boxing/judo/karate/jujitsu session you've ever had. Invigorating or what!

### Courses

Varadero is not the best place in Cuba to learn Spanish. That said, many of the all-inclusive hotels lay on free Spanish lessons for guests. If you're staying in cheaper digs, ask at the reception of one of these larger hotels and see if you can worm your way onto an in-house language course by offering to pay a small fee.

### Tours

Tour desks at the main hotels book most of the nautical or sporting activities mentioned earlier and arrange organized sightseeing excursions from Varadero. You'll pay a surcharge (usually CUC\$5 per person) if you book at these desks instead of going directly to the tour operator.

Among the many off-peninsula tours offered are a half-day trip to the Cuevas de Bellamar (see p225) near Matanzas, a bus tour to the Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs) and a whole range of other bus tours to places as far away as Santa Clara, Trinidad, Viñales and, of course, Habana.

**Gaviota** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 18 44; cnr Calles 56 & Playa) has a variety of helicopter tours in Rus-

sian M1-8 choppers to places as far apart as Trinidad (CUC\$149) and Pinar del Río (CUC\$139). It also organizes jeep safaris to the wonderfully scenic Valle del Yumuri. The excursion (adult/child CUC\$68/51) includes a visit with a *campesino* family and a huge, delicious meal at Ranchón Gaviota on the shores of a reservoir, where horseback riding and paddle boats are available.

### BOAT TOURS

The 48-passenger *Varasub* offers 90-minute underwater viewing possibilities six times a day (adult/child CUC\$35/20), including unlimited soda or rum drinks and transfers. You sit on benches at the bottom of the air-con vessel and peer out through glass windows, though the boat itself doesn't actually submerge. Trips on *Varasub* can be arranged at any Havanatur office (p232). The boat leaves from the Super Clubs Puntarenas in west Varadero.

One of Varadero's most popular cruises is the **'Seafari Cayo Blanco'** (CUC\$75) to – you've guessed it – Cayo Blanco. This trip includes the dolphin show at the Delfinario, open bar, lunch on Cayo Blanco, two snorkeling stops, live music and hotel transfers. This trip comes with a free sunset cruise that can be carried over to the following day if desired. Several readers have reported that these trips were the highlight of their stay. There are cheaper catamaran tours that are less heavily promoted, but still great fun, with the same excellent snorkeling. Try the stripped-down tour (CUC\$40) that has no music and dancing, and a chicken, rather than seafood lunch. There's also a two-hour guided **'Boat Adventure'** (☎ 66 84 40; per person CUC\$39; ☎ 9am-4pm) by two-penion jet ski from here (bear-hugging crocodiles optional). Bookings for any of these can be made directly at **Aquaworld Marina Chapelin** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 75 50; www.aquaworldvaradero.com; Autopista Sur Km 12) or at hotel tour desks (for a surcharge).

Marina Gaviota has a seven-hour catamaran tour (CUC\$85), which includes a chance to swim with dolphins held in an enclosure on a coral key called Rancho Cangrejo, followed by a lobster lunch on Cayo Blanco.

Other boat trips come and go – as is the way in a busy and rapidly expanding resort. You can check current information in almost any hotel or go direct to the horse's

mouth at Marina Gaviota or Aquaworld Marina Chaplin.

### Festivals & Events

The Carnival formerly held at Varadero in late January and early February is now irregular. Golf tournaments are held at the Varadero Golf Club in June and October and the annual regatta is in May. Varadero also hosts the annual tourism convention the first week in May when accommodation is tight and some places are reserved solely for conference participants.

### Sleeping

Varadero is huge. For budget travelers traipsing around on foot looking for available rooms is a sport akin to marathon running. Book ahead or concentrate your efforts on the southwest end of the peninsula where hotels are cheaper and there is a semblance of Cuban life in the town itself. There are plenty of restaurants to choose from in this neck of the woods and the municipal beach is never more than two blocks away.

As with all other resort areas in Cuba, it is illegal to rent private rooms in Varadero and the law is strictly enforced. Don't believe any tout who tries to tell you otherwise.

### BUDGET

**Villa La Mar** (Islazul; Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 39 10; cnr Av 3 & Calle 29; s/d low season CUC\$29/40, high season CUC\$36/48; ☎) Varadero's best budget deal is the no-frills, no-pretensions Villa la Mar where you'll dine on fried chicken, meet real-life Cuban tourists and fall asleep to the not-so-romantic sound of the in-house disco belting out the Cuban version of Britney Spears. Located a few blocks from the Viázul bus station and without a swimming pool, this is Varadero on the ultimate shoe-string – barring a night out on the beach.

### MIDRANGE

**Aparthotel Varazul** (Islazul; Map pp232-3; Av 1 btwn Calles 14 & 15; s/d low season CUC\$33/45, high season CUC\$40/55) Another decent choice for independent-minded travelers is one of these one-bedroom apartments with kitchenette and small balcony. Cooking your own food is possible (check that the kitchen has proper cooking gear). You can use the pool at the adjacent Hotel Acuazul, and the beach is just

a block or two away. The Varazul is popular for long stays.

**Hotel Acuazul** (Islazul; Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 71 32; Av 1 btwn Calles 13 & 14; s/d incl breakfast low season CUC\$35/48, high season CUC\$45/60; ☎ ☎) If the sickly pink and blue facade doesn't send you running for a new pair of sunglasses, this downtown 78-room stalwart on Primera Avenida could be a reasonable option. Rooms are basic and the breakfast buffet a proverbial famine compared the culinary delights further north, but the service is friendly enough and there's also a swimming pool in a courtyard out back.

**Hotel Pullman** (Islazul; Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 71 61; Av 1 btwn Calles 49 & 50; s/d low season CUC\$37/47, high season CUC\$50/60) This intimate Spanish castle-style pensione is one of Varadero's nicest budget-type hotels and has long been a backpacker favorite for its fair value and good location. Newly renovated with heavy wooden furniture, quirky decorations and rocking chairs on the front porch, the atmosphere is laid-back and untouristy with a choice section of municipal beach situated just 150m away.

**Hotel Dos Mares** (Islazul; Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 27 02; cnr Av 1 & Calle 53; s/d incl breakfast low season CUC\$37/47, high season CUC\$50/60) A good option if you can't get into the Pullman, this attractive old three-story building is about 70m from a cracking niche of beach. Rooms are a little on the dark side.

**Apartamentos Mar del Sur** (Islazul; Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 74 81; cnr Av 3 & Calle 30; 1-2-bedroom d incl breakfast low season CUC\$48/76, high season CUC\$60/86, hotel s/d low season CUC\$38/50, high season CUC\$42/62; ☎ ☎) Affording some semblance of independence, the one- and two-bedroom apartments in this scattered complex have cooking facilities and living rooms. It's all several hundred meters away from the beach, but is decent value.

**Villas Sotavento** (Islazul; Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 71 32; Calle 13 btwn Av 1 & Camino del Mar; s/d low season CUC\$39/58, high season CUC\$47/67) If you prefer a little house to a hotel set-up, try one of these 25 older two-story villas, each with three or four double units. The 108 simple rooms vary considerably as these were once privately owned holiday homes, and the front door, living room, fridge and patio will be shared with other guests.

**Club Herradura** (Islazul; Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 37 03; Av de la Playa btwn Calles 35 & 36; s/d incl breakfast low season CUC\$42/58, high season CUC\$50/67; ☎) This

four-story, crescent-shaped hotel is right on the beach, which gets swallowed up at high tide. Accommodation is spacious, nicely outfitted with wicker furniture and those facing the beach have great balcony views. There are all-inclusive rates available too; ask.

**Villa Los Delfines** (Islazul; Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 77 20; cnr Av de la Playa & Calle 38; s/d incl breakfast & dinner low season CUC\$65/100, high season CUC\$80/120; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Islazul goes (almost) all-inclusive in this friendlier, cozier copy of the big resorts further northeast. The 100 rooms here come packed with additional extras such as satellite TV, minibar and safe deposit box. The resort even has its own protected beach.

#### TOP END

Rates in these resorts are all-inclusive, and discounted if you take a package.

**Club Tropical** (Cubanacán; Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 39 15; Av 1 btwn Calles 22 & 23; s/d CUC\$69/112; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Right on a nice piece of beach, this activities-oriented hotel attracts youthful package tourists and a few married Cubans. It's well located right in the center but, at 40 years of age, the slightly tatty rooms don't merit the asking price.

**Hotel Sunbeach** (Hotetur; Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 74 90; Calle 17 btwn Ays 1 & 2; s/d low season CUC\$560/96, high season CUC\$573/116; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Formerly known as Hotel Bellamar (locals still call it that), this place is one block from the beach. The 282 recently renovated rooms are serviceable, but with its worn aquamarine sofas and ugly '60s-style architecture this hotel has delusions of grandeur. Overpriced, unless you can secure a (very) sweet package deal.

**Villa Tortuga** (Gran Caribe; Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 47 47; Calle 7 btwn Camino del Mar & Av Kawama; s/d low season CUC\$74/108, high season CUC\$84/128; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This very good value resort in western Varadero is squeezed between the beach and the canal, meaning even the cheap rooms have a view. The pool is big, there are tons of activities and all the rooms have balconies and satellite TV. The food is not bad.

**Hotel Cuatro Palmas** (Gran Caribe; Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 70 40; www.accorhotels.com; Av 1 btwn Calles 60 & 62; r CUC\$100/130; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This friendly resort right on the beach is run by the French Accor chain. Rooms are in a huge Spanish-style complex enclosing a swimming pool. Rooms No 1241 to 1246 were once part of dictator Fulgencio Batista's personal residence. Jammed together across the street are

a series of shared two-story villas with another 122 rooms with fridges and toilet only (shower is shared). This is the first of the real 'posh' all-inclusives as you head east, though it's still close enough to town for getting around on foot.

**Hotel Tuxpán** (Cubanacán; Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 75 60; Av Las Américas; s/d low season CUC\$80/130, high season CUC\$102/150; 🍷 🍷 🍷) There are often phenomenal packaged deals (including from Habana) to this 233-room resort right on the beach. Don't be fooled by the blah building and lobby; all rooms have a terrace or balcony, the food is reportedly good and there's a welcoming pool and hot tub.

**Blau Varadero** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 75 45; s/d low season CUC\$75/105, high season CUC\$125/155; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This is the peninsula's newest and tallest hotel though the design – in contrast to the spectacular Meliá's – ain't particularly pretty. Minimalist furnishings and surgical cleanliness give the place an airport feel though the businesslike staff are keen to please.

**Hotel Internacional** (Gran Caribe; Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 70 38; Av Las Américas; s/d low season CUC\$86/123, high season CUC\$110/157; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Opened in December 1950 as a sister hotel to Miami's Fontainebleau, the four-story Internacional is Varadero's most famous and fabulously retro resort. While it retains its '50s charm, the rooms are modern-ish and the facilities extensive, including a cabaret, tennis courts and massages. Unlike some of Varadero's sprawlers it's also right on the beach. Bonuses at the Internacional include cool art (there's a large René Portocarrero mural in the lobby) and super-friendly staff. If you're rolling a dice on the Varadero all-inclusive options, weight your chances toward here.

**Club Amigo Varadero** (Cubanacán; Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 82 43; fax 66 82 02; s/d low season CUC\$65/110, high season CUC\$100/160; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Formerly the Gran Hotel, Club Amigo's lurid pinks, yellows and greens suggest Disneyland, Las Vegas or something worse.

**Hotel Meliá Varadero** (Cubanacán; Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 70 13; www.solmeliacuba.com; Autopista del Sur Km 7; r from CUC\$165) This stunning resort wins the prize for most impressive lobby (and there's some pretty ostentatious lobbies in Varadero) with a seven-story, vine-dripping atrium creating a natural curtain from the open dome down to the reception area. Rooms overlook the golf course or the beach and it's a popular honeymoon spot. The Meliá Varadero sits on

a rocky headland, so you have to walk a bit to reach the beach, but what the hell! Kids aged 12 and under stay here for 50%.

**SuperClub Paradiso-Puntarena** (Cubanacán; Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 71 20/21/22/23/24; Av Kawama Final; s/d low season CUC\$94/135, high season CUC\$112/172; 🍷 🍷 🍷) A mammoth place with 532 rooms in two eight-story towers. Inside the impressive two-level atrium looks more like a train station than a hotel while the freshwater swimming pool (one of the biggest free form pools in Cuba) is equally huge. Other than that this place ain't particularly pretty and the security guards can be a tad on the surly side, if you're not wearing the obligatory plastic wristband. Watch out for the drunken Canadians!

**Villa Cuba** (Gran Caribe; Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 82 80; cnr Av 1 & Calle C; s/d low season CUC\$97/139, high season CUC\$132/189; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Interesting architecture, a variety of accommodation options and loads of activities make this a good choice. Families and groups of friends should investigate the one- to two-bedroom villas (singles/doubles low season CUC\$199/249) which all feature communal living areas, fridge, TV and a patio. There are four rooms designed for disabled guests.

**Hotel Kawama** (Gran Caribe; Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 44 16/17/18/19; Calle 0; s/d low season CUC\$104/149, high season CUC\$132/189; 🍷 🍷 🍷) A venerable old hacienda-style building from the 1930s the Kawama is, by definition, a piece of Varadero history. It was the first of the 50-plus hotels to inhabit this once-deserted peninsula more than 70 years ago and, as far as character and architectural ingenuity go, it's still one of the best. Even by today's standards the property is huge, with some 235 colorful rooms blended artfully into the thin sliver of beach that makes up Varadero's western extremity. All inclusive prices include everything from tennis to aqua-bike usage.

**Mansión Xanadu** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 84 82; fax 66 84 81; Av Las Américas; s/d low season CUC\$120/150, high season CUC\$160/210; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Rated by many as Varadero's most intriguing and intimate lodging are the six deluxe rooms in the Dupont Mansion. This was a museum until recently and the five-star rooms retain the 1930s furniture and decor from Dupont's days. Rates here include unlimited tee time. Built on a small bluff, beach access is just alongside.

**Hotel Sol Elite Palmeras** (Cubanacán; Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 70 09; Autopista del Sur Km 8; standard s/d from CUC\$180/240; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Opened in 1990, this was the first joint venture between a foreign company and the Cuban government. The main horseshoe-shaped building fronts the best section of beach or there's the one-/two-room bungalows (from CUC\$200/270) set in luxuriant, heavily wooded grounds. The hotel's huge lobby, with its bars, restaurants, caged birds, vegetation and many places to sit down, is well worth a walk around. There's a 24-hour pharmacy here (unit No 314).

**Meliá Las Américas** (Cubanacán; Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 76 00; www.solmeliacuba.com; Autopista del Sur Km 7; s/d from CUC\$200/295; 🍷 🍷 🍷) You've arrived at the luxury end of the peninsula. Everything that went before was small-fry compared to these proverbial giants. Parked on the eastern side of the golf course, this upscale resort is on a choice stretch of beach with plush decor and swanky fittings. The rooms are big, the pool overlooks the beach and the meals are lavish. Golfers, especially, will have fun here.

**Meliá Paradisus Varadero** (Gaviota; Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 87 00; Punta Rincón Francés; s/d low season CUC\$265/395, high season CUC\$295/450; 🍷 🍷 🍷) The eastern tip of the peninsula at Punta Hicacos is five-star territory and this Meliá wins the Oscar for Varadero's most expensive hotel (no mean feat). It has shapely pillars and shaded courtyards blending subtly into a choice stretch of paradisiacal beach. Hey – it's almost worth it!

The last two resorts on the peninsula sprawl out like suburbs from a large town and are mostly the preserve of Gaviota: the **Tryp Peninsula Varadero** (Gaviota; Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 88 00; Varahicacos Ecological Reserve; r from CUC\$120; 🍷 🍷 🍷) and the **Barceló Marina Palace Resort** (Gaviota; Map pp230-1; ☎ 61 44 99; r from CUC\$100; 🍷 🍷 🍷). There are others too, but they're all of the same genre.

#### Eating

Since private restaurants are banned at Varadero, your options are limited to the adequate though sometimes uninspiring government-owned restaurants. You can eat well for under CUC\$10 and the variety (Chinese food one night, fondue the next) is unlike any you'll find anywhere else in Cuba (excluding Habana). As 90% of the hotels on



### ESCAPE FROM THE ALL-INCLUSIVES

OK, so the food buffet might be mouth-watering and the in-house diving instruction oh-so-convenient but, when it comes to meeting the Cubans in their natural environment, Varadero is not exactly overloaded with options. For a slightly more up-front and personal look at the Cuba of communist myth, load up your day bag, rip off that culture-constricting plastic wristband, and sally forth in search of some of the following treats:

- Hire a bike to **Playa Coral**, Varadero's best snorkeling beach situated 20km to the west of the resort along the pancake flat Vía Blanca (masks, snorkels and fins can be hired at the beach itself).
- Hire a moped to **Cárdenas** for a captivating look at Cuban life without the tourist brochure wrapping.
- Hire a jeep to **Ranchón Gaviota** in the **Valle de Yumurí** and witness bucolic Cuban *campesino* culture a mere stone's throw from the looming hotel complexes of Varadero.

the eastern end of the peninsula are all-inclusive, you'll find the bulk of the independent eating joints situated west of Calle 64.

Touts along Av 1 may offer you a lobster meal in a private home for about CUC\$10 a plate. It's illegal and best avoided. They're the ones who'll end up in trouble, not you.

Many of central Varadero's unpretentious places offer light meals, cold beers and live music. Most places post their menu (with prices) outside. The prices are fairly generic so the following list reads roughly west to east.

### RESTAURANTS

**Castel Nuovo** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 78 45; cnr Av 1 & Calle 11; ☎ noon-11pm) One of the town's best pizza and pasta places, it also has chicken, beef and fish dishes, plus enough choice to satisfy vegetarians.

The atmospheric stretch of Camino del Mar between Calles 9 and 14 has a number of places to eat.

**Mi Casita** (Map pp232-3; Camino del Mar btwn Calles 11 & 12) Overlooking the beach is this beautiful glass-fronted restaurant that serves lobster

and garlic butter or fillet mignon (CUC\$13) in a magnificent setting.

**Restaurante El Ranchón** (Map pp232-3; Av 1 btwn Calles 16 & 17; meals under CUC\$5; ☎ 10am-10pm) A pleasant thatched dining hall overlooking the beach opposite Hotel Sunbeach. It's a simple, reasonable menu done well: shrimp with garlic, pork chops and fish fillets.

**FM-17** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 48 31; cnr Av 1 & Calle 17; ☎ 8am-2am) With more local vibe than most Varadero visitors ever see, this simple place has sandwiches and burgers for CUC\$1 to CUC\$2, plus a free cabaret show nightly at 9pm.

**Restaurante El Criollo** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 47 94; cnr Av 1 & Calle 18; ☎ noon-midnight) This is one of the more enjoyable state-run places, and has typical Cuban dishes.

**Lai-Lai** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 77 93; cnr Av 1 & Calle 18; meals CUC\$6-8; ☎ noon-11pm) Set in a two-story mansion on the beach, this place has set menus with several courses (wontons, soup, shrimp, rice and dessert).

**Casa de la Miel La Colmena** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 26) With a dozen different ice-cream dishes, plus fish fillets (CUC\$6) and greasy, garlicky shrimp, this place is sure to please.

**La Góndola Pizzería** (Map pp232-3; meals CUC\$2-4) Close to Casa de la Miel La Colmena, this restaurant has delicious pizzas, lasagna and tortellini with Bolognese sauce. Head to the romantic dining room in the back.

**Restaurante Guamairé** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 18 93; Av 1 btwn Calles 26 & 27; ☎ noon-11:45pm) For something different, this restaurant dishes up pineapple and crocodile kebabs (CUC\$14) reared at the Boca de Guamá crocodile farm. Perfectly legal in case you were wondering.

**Restaurante La Vega** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 47 19; Av de la Playa btwn Calles 31 & 32; ☎ noon-11pm) Finally! A Cuban restaurant with ambience. Dark wood, leather chairs, a wraparound porch and interesting art and architecture make this place the best dining option in Varadero. Stick to the delicious vegetable or seafood (CUC\$7) paella and save room for *flan al ron* (cream caramel with rum; CUC\$3). You'll still remember the coffee here after two months reviewing half the restaurants in Cuba – it's that good! Connected to the Casa del Habano, there's an upstairs cigar lounge for after dinner smokes (replete with beach views).

**Restaurante Esquina Cuba** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 40 19; cnr Av 1 & Calle 36; ☎ noon-11:45pm) Made fa-

mous by its most illustrious diner Compay Segundo, this place has since been winning fans with its pork/chicken/*ropa vieja* (shredded beef with tomatoes and onions) special. Great Cuban ephemera lines the walls, including B&W photos of Varadero in its Mafia hang-out heyday. You'll eat well here.

**Restaurante La Vicaría** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 47 21; cnr Av 1 & Calle 38; ☎ 10:30am-10pm) Set meals of fish, pork or chicken include a beer – like all La Vicarias, the price and service make this one of the most popular places in town. There's also a nice garden.

There are several upscale restaurants in **Parque Josone** (Map pp232-3; Av 1 btwn Calles 56 & 59). These include **El Retiro** (☎ 66 73 16; ☎ noon-10pm), with international cuisine and good lobster; **Dante** (☎ 66 77 38), with Italian food; and **Restaurante La Campana** (☎ 66 72 24) with Cuban dishes. On the edge of the park is **La Casa de Antigüedades** (cnr Av 1 & Calle 59), an old mansion crammed with antiques where beef, fish, and shellfish dishes are served beneath chandeliers.

**Barracuda Grill** (Map pp232-3; Calle 58; complete meals CUC\$7; ☎ 11am-7pm) Set in a thatched pavilion overlooking the beach on the grounds of the Barracuda Diving Center, this popular place has terrific fish and shellfish.

**Albacora** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 36 50; cnr Av 1 & Calle 59; ☎ 10am-11pm) Fish, squid, shrimp and lobster are available at beachside Albacora. Check out the open bar offer (noon to 4pm).

A few more upscale restaurants are opposite the Hotel Cuatro Palmas, Av 1 and Calle 62, including **Restaurante La Fondue** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 77 47; ☎ noon-11pm) with surprisingly good Swiss French cuisine for CUC\$10 to CUC\$20.

**Calle 62** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 62) Set next door to Restaurante La Fondue, this is a fun, open-air bar with tasty light meals such as omelettes, hot dogs and hamburgers. Live music happens here nightly from 9pm to midnight.

### ICE-CREAM PARLORS

**Heladería Coppelia** (Map pp232-3; Av 1 btwn Calles 44 & 46; ☎ 3pm-11pm) Tucked back in Parque de las 8000 Taquillas, this place serves ice-cream sundaes for CUC\$1.

### GROCERIES

There are **grocery stores** (Map pp232-3; Calle 13 No 9 btwn Av 1 & Camino del Mar; ☎ 9am-6:45pm); beside

**Aparthotel Varazul** (Map pp232-3; Calle 15; ☎ 9am-7pm); at **Caracol Pelicano** (Map pp232-3; cnr Calle 27 & Av 3; ☎ 9am-7:45pm); at **Club Herradura** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av de la Playa & Calle 36; ☎ 9am-7pm) and at **Cabañas del Sol** (Map pp230-1; Av Las Américas; ☎ 9am-7:45pm). Always check prices at these places, so the cashier doesn't overcharge you. Shops in the large resorts gouge their guests for mineral water etc.

The only place where you can always find bread and pastries is **Panadería Doña Neli** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 43; ☎ 24hr).

### Drinking

**Bar Benny** (Map pp232-3; Camino del Mar btwn Calles 12 & 13; ☎ noon-midnight) A tribute to the 'Barbarian of Rhythm' Benny Moré, this place has a kicking, jazz-den energy, with B&W photos of the legendary musician lining the walls and his velvety voice oozing from the sound system. Post-beach cocktails and olives recommended here.

**Bar Dragón** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 18; ☎ 6pm-2am) Connected to the Lai-Lai mansion-restaurant, this is good for a drink or three.

**Bar Mirador** (Map pp230-1; Av Las Américas; admission CUC\$2) On the top floor of the Dupont Mansion, Bar Mirador has a happy hour from 5pm to 7pm daily and is Varadero's ultimate romantic hang-out. Head up to enjoy the sunset and a poke around this historic house. It's well-worth the taxi fare.

### Entertainment

While Varadero's bar and club scene might look enticing on paper, there's no real entertainment 'scene' as such, and the concept of bar-hopping à la Cancún or Miami Beach is almost nonexistent, unless you're prepared to incorporate some long-distance hiking into your drinking schedule. Here's a rough rundown of what's on offer.

### TROVA & TRADITIONAL MUSIC

**Casa de la Cultura Los Corales** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 25 62; cnr Av 1 & Calle 34) Local folk singers perform at the Café Cantante here every Thursday at 10pm (CUC\$5 admission). You can also catch 'filin' (feeling) matinees, where singers pour their heart into Neil Sedaka-style crooning. You can hire an instructor here for Cuban music or take dance lessons for around CUC\$2 an hour.

## DANCE CLUBS

**El Kastillito** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 38 88; cnr Av de la Playa & Calle 49; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8pm-3am, matinee 2pm Sun) This club on the beach is unrivaled for sexy, heated dancing. Barefoot, synchronized couples scuffling sand beneath their feet add to the five-star local energy here. The beach bar serves drinks and meals throughout the day.

**Discoteca Havana Club** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 18 07; cnr Av 3 & Calle 62; admission CUC\$5) At the Centro Comercial Copey, this is another tourist disco that welcomes Cubans. Expect big, boisterous crowds, including possessive, aggressive men in that stereotypical style.

**Discoteca La Salsa** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 11pm-3am) Above the reception desk at SuperClub Paradiso-Puntarena, at the western end of Varadero, this club attracts a foreign crowd.

**Discoteca La Bamba** (Map pp230-1; guests/non-guests free/CUC\$10; ☎ 10pm-4am) Varadero's most modern video disco is at Hotel Tuxpán, in eastern Varadero. It plays mostly Latin music (and we've heard that for security reasons the fire escapes may be locked).

**Club Mambo** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 86 65; Av Las Américas; open bar, admission CUC\$10; ☎ 10am-2am Mon-Fri, 10am-3am Sat & Sun) Since the Palacio de la Rumba was shut down, Club Mambo next to Club Amigo Varadero in the eastern part of town, has been Varadero's hippest nightclub. The quality live music attracts all types, but at this price to get in, don't expect many Cubans. There's a pool table if you don't feel like dancing.

Other options:

**Disco La Red** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 31 30; Av 3 btwn Calles 29 & 30; admission CUC\$1; ☎ from 11pm) When people actually turn out, good local atmosphere is to be had at this place.

**Discoteca La Pachanga** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 45 71; cnr Av 1 & Calle 13; ☎ 11pm-3am) This disco at Hotel Acuazul is one of Varadero's hottest clubs.

**Karaoke 440 Disco Bar** (Map pp232-3; Camino del Mar btwn Calles 14 & 15; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 10:30pm-3am) This place mixes up drunk, warbling wannabes with disco dancing.

**Discoteca El Eclipse** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 17) On the 14th floor at Hotel Sunbeach.

**La Descarga Karaoke Bar** (Map pp232-3; admission CUC\$3; ☎ 10pm-5am) You can check the mic, one, two at this karaoke place in the strip mall next to the Hotel Kawama.

**Disco Splash** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 70 90) In Superclub Puntarena.

## CABARETS

**Cabaret Anfiteatro Varadero** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 99 38; cnr Vía Blanca & Carretera Sur) Just west of the bridge into Varadero, this cabaret has a gala open-air floor show similar to that of the Tropicana. It's used mostly for special occasions and doesn't open every week.

**Hotel Kawama** (Map pp232-3; Calle 0; admission incl 2 drinks CUC\$5; ☎ 11pm nightly except Sun) A cabaret show is presented on a stage below the restaurant at Hotel Kawama.

**Cabaret Mediterráneo** (Islazul; Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 24 60; cnr Av 1 & Calle 54; admission CUC\$10; ☎ doors 8:30pm, show 10pm) A professional two-hour show in an open-air location beneath thatched roofs nightly at 10pm. On a good night, it's worth the money.

**Cabaret Continental** (Map pp230-1; Av Las Américas; admission incl drink CUC\$35; ☎ show 10pm) Hotel Internacional stages a 2½ hour floor show Tuesday to Sunday involving 40 singers and dancers. It's nationally renowned and considered by many to be second only to the Tropicana in its kitschy appeal. You can book dinner (8pm) before the show and after midnight the cabaret becomes a disco. Inquire at your hotel tour desk first as it's sometimes a bit fussy about who they let in.

**Habana Café** (Map pp230-1; Av Las Américas; admission CUC\$10; ☎ 9pm-2am) Has a talented floor show followed by disco dancing. It's an older crowd than the Cueva del Pirata set.

**Cabaret Cueva del Pirata** (Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 77 51; Autopista Sur; open bar CUC\$10; ☎ 10pm-3am except Sun) A kilometer east of the Hotel Sol Elite Palmeras, Cabaret Cueva del Pirata presents scantily clad dancers in a Cuban-style floor show with a buccaneer twist (eye patches, swashbuckling moves etc). This cabaret is inside a natural cave and once the show is over, the disco begins. Most hotel tour desks can arrange return hotel transfers. It's a popular place, attracting a young crowd.

## Shopping

Avenida 1, from the Laguna to Parque Josone, is strung with artisan markets, all selling the same wide selection of souvenirs and handicrafts, including items (particularly leather work) you won't find in the Habana markets. For one-stop shopping, the big market at Parque Central is good, while the smaller, friendly market at Av 1 between Calles 51 and 52 is recommended for browsing.

**Arte-Música** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 59) A good place for CDs, books and art, as well as some (very) old copies of Lonely Planet guides.

**Casa del Habano** (Av de la Playa btwn Calles 31 & 32 Map pp232-3; ☎ 9am-6pm; cnr Av 1 & Calle 63 Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 78 43; ☎ 9am-7pm) The place for cigars: it has top-quality merchandise and helpful service.

**Galería de Arte Varadero** (Map pp232-3; Av 1 btwn Calles 59 & 60; ☎ 9am-7pm) Antique jewelry, museum-quality silver and glass, paintings and other heirlooms from Varadero's by-gone bourgeois days are sold here. As most items are of patrimonial importance, everything is already conveniently tagged with export permission.

**Taller de Cerámica Artística** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 9am-7pm) Next door to Galería de Arte Varadero, you can buy fine artistic pottery (they're made on the premises). Most items are in the CUC\$200 to CUC\$250 range.

Caracol shops in the main hotels sell souvenirs, postcards, T-shirts, clothes, alcohol and some snack foods. The prices are usually as good as those elsewhere.

**Bazar Varadero Publicigraf** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 44; ☎ 9am-7pm) In Parque Central. It's a good place for ceramics, reproductions of famous paintings, artistic postcards, dolls, wall hangings, T-shirts and books. A clothing boutique is adjacent.

**Kawama Sport** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 60; ☎ 9am-8pm) Sells beach clothing, snorkeling gear and occasionally bicycles.

**Bazar Cuba** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av Las Américas & Calle 64) Has the greatest selection of souvenirs and crafts in Varadero. It also sells beach clothing, jewelry and books.

**Centro Comercial Caimán** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 62; ☎ 9am-8pm) One of Varadero's main shopping malls is opposite Hotel Cuatro Palmas.

**Centro Todo en Uno** (Map pp232-3; cnr Autopista Sur & Calle 54) A medium-sized mall with plenty of amusements.

Film is cheaper in one of these outlets than in hotel shops.

**Photo Club** (Map pp232-3; Av 1 btwn Calles 42 & 43)

**Photo Service** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 72 91; Calle 63 btwn Avs 2 & 3; ☎ 9am-10pm)

**ARTex Handicraft Market** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 12; ☎ 9am-9pm) Conveniently located next to a proper **ARTex store** (Map pp232-3; Av 1 btwn Calles

46 & 47), with an excellent selection of CDs, cassettes, T-shirts and even a few musical instruments.

For American-style consumerism and useful services, head to **Plaza América** (Map pp230-1), Varadero's and Cuba's largest shopping complex. Here you'll find fancy boutiques, music shops, cigar store, bars, restaurants, bank, post office, a **minimarket** (☎ 10am-8:30pm), car rental desks, absolutely everything and the Varadero Convention Center.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Juan Gualberto Gómez (airport code VRA) International Airport is 20km from Varadero toward Matanzas and another 6km off the main highway. Airlines here include Cubana from Buenos Aires and Toronto; LTU International Airways from Düsseldorf and four other German cities; Martinair from Amsterdam; and Air Transat and Skyservice from various Canadian cities. The check-in time at Varadero is 90 minutes before flight time.

There are no domestic flights into Varadero.

### BUS

**Terminal de Ómnibus** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 26 26; cnr Calle 36 & Autopista Sur) has daily long-distance Astro bus services to Habana (CUC\$8, three hours), Santa Clara (CUC\$12, 3½ hours) and Cienfuegos (CUC\$14, four hours). Air-con **Viazul** (☎ 61 48 86; ☎ 7am-noon & 1-7pm) buses leave for Habana at 8am, 11:40am and 6pm daily (CUC\$10). On either bus, ask to be let out at the first stop after the tunnel in Habana; from there Astro goes to the Terminal de Ómnibus near the Plaza de la Revolución (convenient if you're staying in Vedado), while the Viazul bus goes to the boondocks on Av 26 in Nuevo Vedado. Viazul also has a daily bus to Trinidad at 7:30am (CUC\$20, six hours), stopping at Entronque de Jagüey (CUC\$6, 1½ hours), Santa Clara (CUC\$11, 3½ hours) and Cienfuegos (CUC\$16, 4½ hours).

There are 10 daily bus departures to Matanzas (CUC\$2, 35km) from here. If you have the time, you can get to Habana by taking this bus to Matanzas and continuing on the Hershey Railway from there.

Getting to Cárdenas by local bus is fairly straightforward if you're prepared to wait.

Bus 236 departs every hour or so from next to a small tunnel marked 'Ómnibus de Cárdenas' outside the main bus station. You can also catch this bus at the corner of Av 1 and Calle 13 (CUC\$1). This bus runs the length of the peninsula.

The easiest way to get to Habana is on one of the regular tour buses booked through the tour desk at your hotel or at any Havanatur office. It's possible to buy just transport between Varadero and Habana for CUC\$25/30 one way/round-trip. These buses collect passengers right at the hotel doors.

#### CAR

Cars are available from **Havanautos** (Calle 55 Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 44 65; cnr Av 1 & Calle 31 Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 44 09). Other offices are at **Hotel Cuatro Palmas** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 70 40, ext 51) and **Villa Tortuga** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 39 99).

**Transtur** (Calle 10 No 703 Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 31 49; cnr Av 1 & Calle 21 Map pp232-3; ☎ 66 73 32) also has rental desks at or near the following hotels: SuperClub Paradiso-Puntarena, Club Tropical, Internacional and Cuatro Palmas.

**Cubacar** (Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 18 19; cnr Av 1ra & 54) also has desks at the Tuxpán and Hotel Sol Elite Palmerasa. **Via Car Rental** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 3 & Calle 30) is opposite Apartamentos Mar del Sur.

Many of these companies also have desks at Plaza América, although we've received complaints about agents there who demanded kickbacks.

**Havanautos** (☎ 25 36 30), **Transtur** (☎ 25 36 21), **Vía** (☎ 61 47 83) and **Cubacar** (☎ 61 44 10) all have car-rental offices in the airport parking lot. Expect to pay at least CUC\$65 a day for the smallest car (or CUC\$50 daily on a two-week basis).

The cheapest cars are available from **Micar** (Villa Cuba Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 85 52; cnr Av 1 & Calle C; cnr Av 1 & Calle 20 Map pp232-3; ☎ 61 18 08), which has tiny Fiats starting at CUC\$35 a day, including 100km, add on the insurance. Call ahead as the affordable cars go fast. Luxury cars are available at **ReX** (Meliá Las Américas Map pp230-1; ☎ 66 77 39; Autopista del Sur Km 7; Aeropuerto Juan Gualberto Gómez ☎ 66 75 39). It rents Audi and automatic-transmission (rare in Cuba) cars starting at CUC\$100 plus per day.

There's a **Servi-Cupet gas station** (Map pp232-3; cnr Autopista Sur & Calle 17; ⏰ 24hr) on the Vía Blanca at the entrance to Marina Acua near

Hotel Sunbeach; and one at **Centro Todo En Uno** (Map pp232-3; cnr Calle 54 & Autopista Sur).

If heading to Habana, you'll have to pay the CUC\$2 toll upon leaving.

#### TRAIN

The nearest train stations are 18km south-east in Cárdenas and 42km west in Matanzas. See those sections for details.

### Getting Around TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Varadero and Matanzas are each about 20km from the spur road to Juan Gualberto Gómez International Airport; it's another 6km from the highway to the airport terminal. A tourist taxi costs CUC\$20 to Matanzas and around CUC\$25 from the airport to Varadero. Convince the driver to use the meter and it should work out cheaper. The closest point to the airport served by regular public transport to the city of Matanzas is near the Río Canimar bridge, 13km away. Otherwise, the drivers of the Varadero tour buses will probably be happy to take you for around CUC\$10 per person. Unlicensed private taxis are prohibited from picking up or delivering passengers to the airport. All Viazul buses bound for Habana call at the airport, so you might try catching a ride with them.

#### BUS

**Varadero Beach Tour** (all-day ticket CUC\$5; ⏰ 9:30am-9pm) is a handy open-top double-decker tourist bus with 45 'hop-on, hop-off' stops linking all the resorts and shopping centers along the length of the peninsula. It passes every half-hour at well-marked stops with route and distance information. You can buy tickets on the bus itself. There's also a free shuttle connecting the three large Meliá resorts.

There are two local bus routes costing 20 centavos a ride: No 47 and 48 from Calle 64 to Santa Marta, south of Varadero on the Autopista Sur; and No 220 from Santa Marta to the east end of the peninsula. You'll spend a lot of time waiting for these to show up. Bus 236 to and from Cárdenas (CUC\$1) runs the length of the peninsula and is useful. Most municipal buses around Varadero don't bear a number, and many are special services for hotel employees only. If you're able to converse in Spanish, get information from the Cubans waiting at the bus stops.

#### HORSE & CART

A state-owned horse and cart around Varadero costs CUC\$5 per person for a 45-minute tour or CUC\$10 for a full two-hour tour – plenty of time to see the sights.

#### MOPED & BICYCLE

Mopeds and bikes are an excellent way of getting off the peninsula and discovering a little of the Cuba outside. Rentals are available everywhere (per hour/day costs CUC\$9/24) with gas included in hourly rates (though a levy of CUC\$6 may be charged on a 24-hour basis; ask). The **Palmares rental posts** (Map pp232-3; cnr Av 1 & Calle 13 or cnr Av 1 & Calle 38) are in the center of town with hire bikes and mopeds for those not staying at an all-inclusives. Don't expect a 21-speed Trek. If fact if you get any gears at all, count yourself lucky. Bikes generally go for CUC\$2/15 per hour/day.

Mopeds hired at the resorts are sometimes more expensive. Unlimited bike use, however, is usually included in the package. Ask about helmets, though they are not mandatory and often not available. You may also want to ask about bike locks.

#### TAXI

Metered tourist taxis charge a CUC\$1 starting fee plus CUC\$1 per kilometer (same tariff day and night). Coco-taxis (*coquitos* or *huevitos* in Cuban) charge less with no starting fee. A taxi to Cárdenas/Habana will be about CUC\$20/85 one way. You can phone order taxis by calling **Transtur** (☎ 61 34 15), **OK Taxi** (☎ 66 73 41), **Cuba Taxi** (☎ 61 05 55) or **Transgaviota** (☎ 61 97 62). The last uses large cars if you're traveling with a bike or big luggage. Tourists are not supposed to use the older Lada taxis.

Unofficial taxis with yellow 'particular' license plates face a 1500-peso fine if caught carrying foreigners. Thus you'll seldom be propositioned by private taxi drivers in Varadero itself.

### CÁRDENAS

☎ 45 / pop 98, 644

Cárdenas, straddled on the coast 20km east of Varadero, is called Flag City or the 'city of bicycles' – in marked contrast to the tour-bus traffic that plies the streets of Cuba's tourist mecca nearby. It was here in 1850 that Venezuelan adventurer Narciso López

and a ragtag army of American mercenaries raised the Cuban flag for the first time in a vain attempt to free the colony from its complacent Spanish colonizers. Other notable inhabitants have included revolutionary hero Antonio Echeverría, shot during a raid to assassinate President Batista in 1957, and schoolboy 'celebrity' Elián González, the unfortunate five-year-old whose rescue from the turbulent sea off Florida in November 1999 sparked an international tug-of-war.

Founded in 1828 on former swampland, Cárdenas grew up as a port town in the heart of Cuba's richest sugar-growing area. Graced with streets of illustrious buildings decked out in period furnishings and stained-glass windows, the city suffered irrevocably after the revolution and today's drab and tatty facades infested with the all-pervading smell of horse manure can be something of a shock to stray travelers on a brief sojourn from Varadero. If you want to see a picture of real Cuban life, it doesn't get more eye-opening than this. If it's minty mojitos and all-day volleyball you're after, stick to the tourist beaches.

#### Orientation

The northeast-southwest streets are called Avenidas and streets running northwest-southeast are called Calles. Av Céspedes (Av Real) is Cárdenas' main drag; the avenues to the northwest are labeled '*oeste*' (west), and those to the southeast are labeled '*este*' (east). The city's main northwest-southeast street is Calle 13 (Calzada); *calles* are numbered consecutively beginning at the bay.

Cárdenas residents (confusingly) use the old street names.

#### Information BOOKSHOPS

**Librería La Concha de Venus** (cnr Av Céspedes & Calle 12; ⏰ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Has a decent selection of books in Spanish.

#### INTERNET ACCESS

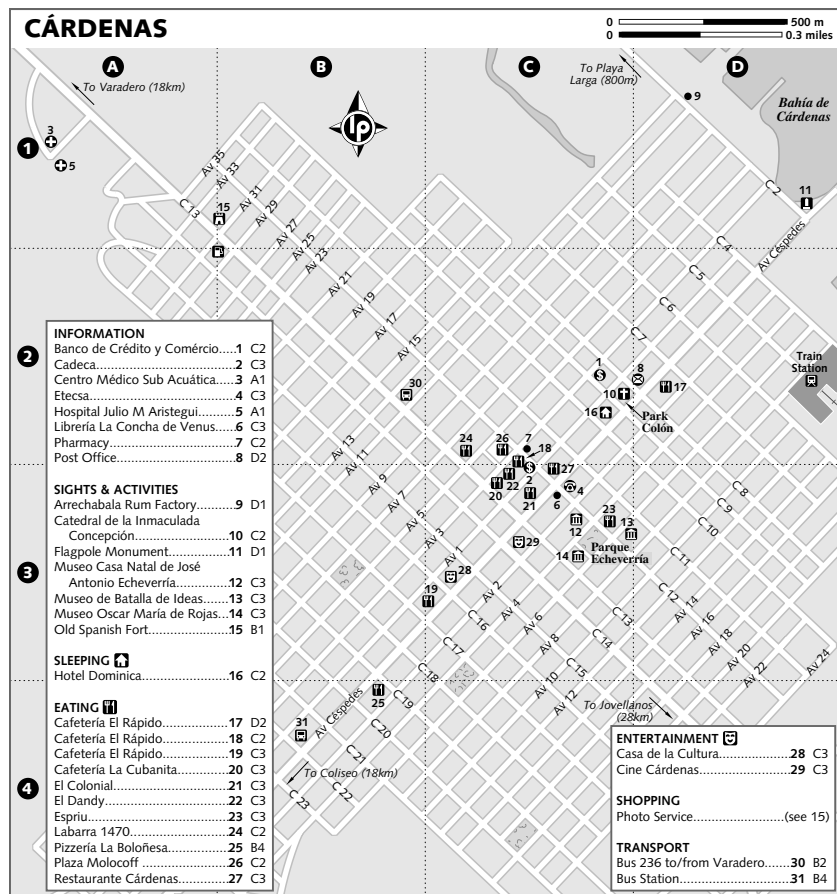
**Eteca** (cnr Av Céspedes & Calle 12; ⏰ 7am-11pm)

#### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Centro Médico Sub Acuática** (☎ 52 21 14; channel 16 VHF; Calle 13; per hr CUC\$80; ⏰ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat, doctors on-call 24hr) It's 2km northwest on the road to Varadero at Hospital Julio M Aristegui. Has a Soviet recompression chamber dating from 1981.

**Pharmacy** (☎ 52 15 67; Calle 12 No 60; ⏰ 24hr)



**MONEY****Banco Crédito y Comercio** (cnr Calle 9 & Av 3)**Cadeca** (☎ 52 41 02; cnr Av 1 Oeste & Calle 12)**POST****Post office** (cnr Av Céspedes & Calle 8; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat)**TELEPHONE****Etesca** (cnr Av Céspedes & Calle 12; ☎ 7am-11pm)**Sights**

Cárdenas has several major sights related to its famous history and hometown heroes. At the northeast end of Av Céspedes is the monument with a huge **flagpole** commemorating the first raising of the Cuban flag on

May 19, 1850. It's a simple, but moving memorial with good views of the bay and Varadero. To the northwest near the port is the **Arrechabala Rum Factory** where Varadero rum is distilled. The Havana Club rum company was founded here in 1878; tours are sporadic but have been known to take place daily 9am to 4pm for a cost of CUC\$3; ask in town.

From here, make your way southwest to pretty Parque Echeverría where you'll find a trio of fascinating museums that would do any city proud. The **Museo Casa Natal de José Antonio Echeverría** (Av 4 Este No 560; admission free, but tip the guide; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) has a rich historical collection including the original garrote used to execute Narciso

López by strangulation in 1851. Objects relating to the 19th-century independence wars are downstairs, while the 20th-century revolution is covered upstairs. A spiral staircase with 36 steps links the two levels of this house dating from 1703. In 1932 Echeverría was born here and a monument to this student leader slain by Batista's police in 1957 is outside on Parque Echeverría. The nearby **Museo Oscar María de Rojas** (cnr Av 4 Este & Calle 12; admission CUC\$5; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) is Cuba's second oldest museum after the Museo Barcardi in Santiago.

Its extensive, if rather incongruous, collection of artifacts include a fossilized tree, a strangulation chair from 1830, a face mask of Napoleon, the tail of Antonio Maceo's horse, Cuba's largest collection of snails and last but by no means least some preserved fleas – yes fleas – from 1912. Newly renovated in a lovely colonial building and staffed with knowledgeable official guides, the museum makes a good side trip.

Around the corner is the new **Museo de Batalla de Ideas** (Av 6 btwn Calles 11 & 12; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), with a well designed

**LOS BALSEROS**

The plight of the *balseros* – or 'rafters', as they are sometimes known – is one of the most shocking and oft-repeated episodes in the tit-for-tat war that has been raging between the US and Cuba for nearly five decades.

There have been various exoduses of Cubans to the US since 1959. The first wave consisted of political exiles, the upwardly-mobile bourgeoisie who had grown rich on the pickings of Mafia-run Habana, and had little to gain and a lot to lose from a ragtag army of bearded communists sequestering their Vedado villas. Most of these characters ended up in Miami where they formed a powerful political lobby (the Cuban American National Foundation) and dreamed wistfully about returning to their homeland.

The second wave departed in 1980 during the Mariel boatlift, after asylum seekers who had entered the Peruvian embassy in Habana set off a chain reaction that forced Castro – in a rare fit of frustration – to allow permission for 120,000 Cubans to enter the US. Never one to miss an opportunity, the Cuban leader also seized the chance to empty Cuban jails of the mad, the bad and the disaffected.

The third wave was made up almost entirely of dispossessed migrants who fled to the US in the wake of the economic meltdown that accompanied the *período especial* (special period). Times got tougher during 1991–94 and discontent came to a head after a small riot in Habana in August 1994; Castro decided to diffuse the situation by opening the doors to another mass exodus.

Throughout the late summer of 1994 thousands of Cubans left for Florida on homemade boats. By early September more than 30,000 had been picked up by the US Coast Guard on barely-seaworthy rafts. Unable to cope with the influx and anxious to avoid another Mariel boatlift, the Clinton administration elected to house these people temporarily in Guantánamo naval base pending a Cuban-American immigration agreement.

The revision of the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act signed in 1995 – better known as the 'wet foot/dry foot' policy – allowed only Cubans who made it to dry land to apply for US citizenship. Escapees picked up at sea would summarily be sent home – a fact that makes the Elián González saga (five-year-old Elián was picked up floating on a tire off Fort Lauderdale) all the more confusing.

The real tragedy of the *balseros* is the sense of desperation and heavy human cost that has so often characterized their plight. In one horrific episode in 1994 the Cuban coast guard rammed an escaping tugboat in the open sea causing the death of 38 Cubans on board. In another incident in 1999, the US Coast Guard reportedly used pepper spray and a water canon to stop six Cubans reaching Surfside Beach in Florida.

In April 2003 violence flared up once more when three men hijacked a ferry at gunpoint in Habana in an attempt to reach the United States. After lightening fast, behind-closed-door trials the men were executed nine days later. It was yet another horrific chapter in a tragic story that shows little sign of abating.

and organized overview of the history of US-Cuban relations, replete with sophisticated graphics. The entire Elián González incident is covered in detail and there are good city views from the mirador on the 3rd floor. *Jineteros* (touts) will offer to show you Elián's house for a small tip, though you might like to give the poor boy some much-needed privacy.

Parque Colón is a small square containing the **Catedral de la Inmaculada Concepción** (1846; Av Céspedes btwn Calles 8 & 9), built in 1846, noted for its stained glass and purportedly the oldest statue of Christopher Columbus in the western hemisphere. Dating from 1862, Colón, as he's known in Cuba, stands rather authoritatively with his face fixed in a thoughtful frown and a globe resting at his feet. It's the closest Cárdenas gets to a decent photo opportunity; it's ironic and poignant that the world should be dropped so casually at his feet.

Like something from the zany brain of PT Barnum, **Plaza Molocoff** (cnr Av 3 Oeste & Calle 12) is a whimsical two-story cast-iron market hall with a glittery 16m-high silver dome built in 1859. Now it's the city **vegetable market** (☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun).

## Sleeping

Down the road Varadero flaunts more than 50 hotels. Here in humble Cárdenas the only functioning cheapie was the classically un-classic **Hotel Dominica** (☎ 52 15 51; cnr Av Céspedes & Calle 9) on Parque Colón. This faded old starlet once had 25 rooms with bath, but is closed for what looks like lengthy renovations – judging by the absence of any hammering noises. Fortunately Cárdenas has a handful of decent casas particulares and they'll be very keen for your business.

### CASAS PARTICULARES – CÁRDENAS

**Lázara Galindo Gómez** (Av 6 btwn Calles 9 & 10; r CUC\$25) Clean place with all mod cons close to the center.

**Ricardo Dominguez** (☎ 528 944 31; cnr Avs 31 & 12; r CUC\$35; 📍) Large luxurious place with big yard, parking and TV.

**Rolando Valdés Lara** (☎ 072 703 155; cnr Av 30 & Calle 12; r CUC\$30; 📍) Breakfast CUC\$3 extra.

## Eating

Half the chefs in Varadero probably come from Cárdenas, but that doesn't make the restaurants in their home town anything to write home about. Grim, scant and hard to find are the three phrases that spring to mind when discussing the eating houses of this city. There are three El Rápidos if that's any measuring stick. Anyone allergic to soggy microwaved cheese and ham sandwiches is quite likely to starve.

**Espriu** (Calle 12 btwn Avs 4 & 6; dishes CUC\$1-3; ☎ 24hr) An exceptional restaurant among uninspired choices, Espriu is on Parque Echeverría. It has espresso, shrimp cocktails, fish fillets, burgers and sandwiches. It's probably the best game in town.

**Cafetería El Rápido** (☎ 24hr) This is where most stray tourists end up. Has three branches: one is on the corner of Calle 12 and Av 3 Oeste; another is on the corner of Calle 8 and Av Céspedes; the third is on Céspedes between Calles 16 and 17.

**Cafetería La Cubanita** (cnr Av 3 Oeste & Calle 13; ☎ 24hr) Located near Plaza Molocoff, Cafetería La Cubanita has a pleasant outdoor setting where you can consume drinks for Convertibles.

Other options:

**El Colonial** (cnr Av Céspedes & Calle 12; ☎ 8am-3pm) A simple cafeteria that serves burgers, beer and pork dishes on a cute patio.

**Labarra 1470** (Calle 13 btwn Avs 6 & 7) A newer place with tablecloths and a nicer decor that specializes in Cuban fare.

Cheap peso eateries include **Restaurante Cárdenas** (cnr Av Céspedes & Calle 12; ☎ 11am-midnight), a recommended choice for breaded pork, *congrí* (rice and beans) and tomato salad, and **Pizzería La Boloñesa** (Av Céspedes No 901; ☎ 10am-10pm) for peso pizza.

There are many Convertible supermarkets and stores are along Av 3 Oeste near Plaza Molocoff including **El Dandy** (Av 3 on Plaza Molocoff; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) selling drinks and groceries. You can get cheap peso snacks in the market itself and the area surrounding, where merchants peddle every thing from fake hair to plastic Buddhas.

## Entertainment

**Casa de la Cultura** (☎ 52 12 92; Av Céspedes No 706 btwn Calles 15 & 16) Housed in a beautiful but faded colonial building with stained glass, iron awnings and an interior patio with

### IN THE MIDDLE OF IT ALL

Tucked away in central Matanzas, among rolling hills and vivid splashes of bougainvillea, is the once grand resort town of **San Miguel de los Baños**. Popular at the beginning of the 20th century for its soothing medicinal waters and well-equipped bathhouses, spa seekers used to flock here in their thousands to visit the ornate **Gran Hotel**, a building so ostentatious it was considered by specialists to be a replica of the Great Casino at Monte Carlo.

A brief building flurry ensued, the legacy of which can still be seen in the smattering of lavish neoclassical villas that line the town's arterial Av de Abril. But the tranquility wasn't to last. A few years before the revolution the bathhouses fell into disuse after the local water supply was polluted by waste from a nearby sugar mill, and town faded from prominence.

Today San Miguel de los Baños is a curious cross between abandoned ghost town and life-sized architectural museum. Passing visitors can still poke around the surreal Gran Hotel (plans to reopen it have yet to materialize) or alternatively you can negotiate a steep hike up the nearby **Loma de Jacán**, a glowering hill with 448 steps broken only by faded murals of the Stations of the Cross.

You can reach San Miguel de los Baños by turning off the Carretera Central at Coliseo, 25km southwest of Cárdenas.

rockers. Search the hand-written advertising posters for rap *peñas* (performances), theater and literature events.

**Cine Cárdenas** (cnr Av Céspedes & Calle 14) Has daily movie screenings.

## Shopping

**Photo service** (cnr Calle 13 & Av 31) This is housed inside an old Spanish fort. All your standard camera needs can be met here.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

Transport services are thin out of Cárdenas and you're much better off making your way to Varadero and then hooking up with something there. Astro buses depart the **bus station** (cnr Av Céspedes & Calle 22) to Habana and Santa Clara daily, but they're often full upon reaching Cárdenas. Trucks to Jovellanos/Perico leave at 10:30am and 3pm (three pesos, 52km), which puts you 12km from Colón and possible onward transport to the east. The ticket office is at the rear of the station.

Reliable Bus 236 to/from Varadero leaves hourly from the corner of Av 13 Oeste and Calle 13 (50 centavos, but they like to charge tourists CUC\$1).

## HITCHHIKING

To hitch to Varadero from Cárdenas, take a horse cart to the hospital, where almost any passing bus will stop to pick you up for CUC\$1 as far as Santa Marta. Alternatively, you can park yourself a way up Calle 13 and

wait; other tourists are usually willing to help out their compadres for this short ride (for information on the risks associated with hitching see p477).

## TRAIN

You could be very lucky and catch one of the frequently cancelled rail cars from **San Martín Train Station** (Av 8 Este) near the bay, to Unión de Reyes via Jovellanos (daily), Guareiras via Colón (daily) and Los Arabos (twice daily).

## Getting Around

The main horse-cart (one peso) route through Cárdenas is northeast on Av Céspedes from the bus station and then northwest on Calle 13 to the hospital, passing the stop of bus 236 (to Varadero) on the way.

The gas station **Servi-Cupet** (cnr Calle 13 & Av 31 Oeste) is opposite an old Spanish fort on the northwest side of town, on the road to Varadero.

## PENÍNSULA DE ZAPATA

☎ 459 / pop 8267

Most of the 4520-sq-km Península de Zapata in southern Matanzas is included in Gran Parque Natural Montemar, formerly known as Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata. In 2001, it was declared a Unesco Biosphere Reserve and, despite being one of Cuba's largest municipalities, it's also one of its most uninhabited.

To the east of this swampy wilderness lies the elongated Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs) where propaganda billboards proclaim Cuba's erstwhile victory over the 'Yanqui' imperialists in 1961. There are two worthwhile beaches here, Playa Larga at the bay's curvaceous head and the more southerly Playa Girón. Both beaches are fronted by slightly moth-eaten resort hotels that are popular with divers. Aside from its reputation as a proverbial banana-skin for US imperialism the Bay of Pigs also boasts some of the best cave diving in the Caribbean.

Situated to the northeast of the peninsula lies the sugar-mill town of Australia, along with the cheesy tourist circus of Boca de Guamá, a reconstructed Taíno village.

Transport in the area is erratic and difficult to pin down. Accommodation outside of the resorts, on the other hand, is surprisingly abundant. You can check out excellent casa options in Jagüey Grande, Central Australia, Playa Larga and Playa Girón.

## Information

**La Finquita** (☎ 2277; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat), a snack bar and information center run by Cubanacán just before the turn-off toward Playa Larga from the Autopista, arranges trips into the Zapata Peninsula (see p252) and books rooms at the Villa Guamá.

Etcasa, the post office and Convertible stores are across the Autopista in bustling Jagüey Grande. Insect repellent is absolutely essential on the peninsula and while Cuban repellent is available locally, it's like wasabi on sushi for the ravenous buggers here.

## CENTRAL AUSTRALIA & AROUND

About 1.5km south of the Autopista Nacional on the way to Boca de Guamá, is the large Central Australia sugar mill, built in 1904. During the 1961 Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs) invasion, Fidel Castro had his headquarters in the former office of the sugar mill. Today it's the **Museo de la Comandancia** (☎ 2504; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Sun). This municipal museum contains a few stuffed birds and animals, and a good historical collection ranging from prehistory, but surprising little about the Bay of Pigs episode itself. Outside is the wreck of an invading aircraft shot down by Fidel's troops. The concrete memorials lining the

road to the Bahía de Cochinos mark the spots where defenders were killed in 1961.

Approximately 400m on your right after the Central Australia exit is the **Finca Fiesta Campesina** (admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-6pm), a kind of wildlife park-meets-country fair with labeled examples of Cuba's typical flora and fauna. The highlights of this strangely engaging place are the coffee (some of the best in Cuba and served with a sweet wedge of sugarcane) and the hilarious if slightly infantile games of guinea pig roulette overseen with much pizzazz by the gentleman at the gate. It's the only place in Cuba – outside of cockfighting – where you encounter any form of open gambling.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Motel Batey Don Pedro** (☎ 2825; r CUC\$25) This motel is located just south of the turn-off to the Peninsula de Zapata from Km 142 on the Autopista Nacional at Jagüey Grande. The eight thatched double units are comfortable and cheap and come with ceiling fans and crackling TVs. Beware the frogs in the bathroom. The motel is designed to resemble a peasant settlement, and the on-site restaurant, though friendly and intimate, serves pretty rosey food. A better bet is the adjacent Fiesta Campesino, which sells energy-boosting *guarapo* (sugarcane juice) and coffee that's positively divine.

**Pío Cuá** (☎ 3343; Carretera de Playa Larga Km 8; meals CUC\$6-20; ☎ 9am-9pm), The fanciest restaurant around here, where bus tour groups are treated to shrimp, lobster or chicken meals in a big structure that somehow manages to combine thatch and stained glass successfully.

If you just can't drive any further, there are a number of legal *casas particulares* in the area including **Orlando Caballero Hernández** (☎ 91 32 75; Calle 20 No 5; r CUC\$20; ☎ ☎), at the Central Australia sugar mill, with small, clean rooms and some great testimonies and the more convenient **Casa de Zuleida** (☎ 91 36 74; Calle 15A No 7211 btwn 72 & 74; r CUC\$15-20; ☎ ☎) in Jagüey Grande behind the hospital. There are more *casas* in Playa Larga (32km) and Playa Girón (48km).

## BOCA DE GUAMÁ

The main center for visitors to this area is Boca de Guamá, about halfway between the Autopista Nacional at Jagüey Grande

and the famous Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs). It's a whole lot of tourist claptrap, with a restaurant, expensive snack bar, knickknack shop, ceramics workshop, crocodile 'farm' and boats waiting to take you across the Laguna del Tesoro to a resort built to resemble an Indian village. Tour buses crowd the parking lot and loud rap music welcomes your passage back in time to the hidden mysteries of pre-Columbian Cuba. You'll need an extremely hyperactive imagination to make anything out of this.

## Sights

Don't confuse the real **Criadero de Cocodrilos** (guided visit CUC\$5; ☎ 8am-5pm) with the faux farm inside Boca de Guamá's tourist complex. On your right as you come from the Autopista, the Criadero de Cocodrilos is an actual breeding facility run by the Ministerio de Industrias Pesqueras where two species of crocodiles are raised: the native *Rhombifer (cocodrilo)* and the *Acutus (caimán)*, which is found throughout the tropical Americas. Sometimes security guards will try to point you across the road to the Guamá zoo, but if you're persistent you can get a guided tour here (in Spanish), taking you through every stage of the breeding program, from eggs and hatchlings to big, bad crocs. Prior to the establishment of this program in 1962 (considered the first environmental protection act undertaken by the revolutionary government), these two species of marsh-dwelling crocodiles were almost extinct.

The breeding has been so successful that across the road in the Boca de Guamá complex you can buy stuffed baby crocodiles or dine, perfectly legally, on crocodile steak.

The **park/zoo** (adult/child CUC\$5/3; ☎ 9am-6pm) has two crocodiles that are often under water trying to beat the stifling 85% humidity. There are other caged animals here.

If you buy anything made from crocodile leather at Boca de Guamá, be sure to ask for an invoice (for the customs authorities) proving that the material came from a crocodile farm and not wild crocodiles. A less controversial purchase would be one of the attractive ceramic bracelets sold at the nearby **Taller de Cerámica** (☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) where you can see five kilns in operation.

Aside from the crocodile farm, the main attraction is the **Laguna del Tesoro**, 8km east of Boca de Guamá via the Canal de la Laguna

and accessible only by boat (see Getting Around, p252). On the east side of this 92-sq-km lake is a tourist resort named Villa Guamá, built to resemble a Taíno village, on a dozen small islands. A sculpture park next to the mock village has 32 life-size figures of Taíno villagers in a variety of idealized poses. The lake is called 'Treasure Lake' due to a legend about a treasure the Taíno are said to have thrown into the water just prior to the Spanish conquest (not dissimilar to South American El Dorado legends). The most important part of the whole scenario is Guamá himself – a rebel chief who fought bravely against the Spanish. All of this has a strong appeal to Cuban honeymooners who flock to Villa Guamá, and if you're into kitsch, you're all over it. There's freshwater fishing for largemouth bass here.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Villa Guamá** (Cubanacán; ☎ 5515; s/d low season CUC\$34/42, high season CUC\$38/47) This place was built in 1963 on the east side of the Laguna del Tesoro, about 5km from Boca de Guamá by boat (cars can be left at the crocodile farm; CUC\$1). The 50 thatched *cabañas* with bath and TV are on piles over the shallow waters. The six small islands bearing the units are connected by wooden footbridges to other islands with a bar, cafeteria, overpriced restaurant and a swimming pool containing chlorinated lake water. Rowboats are for rent. Noise from the on-site disco will leave you questioning this place's authenticity (there are no known records of discos in Taíno Indian villages), and the tranquility is further broken by the ubiquitous day-trippers who come and go by speedboat from dawn till dusk. Birding at sunrise however, is reputedly fantastic. You'll need insect repellent if you decide to stay. The ferry transfer is not included in the room price (see Getting Around, p252).

At the boat dock you'll find **Bar La Rionda** (☎ 9:30am-5pm), Restaurant Colibrí and Restaurant La Boca (set meals CUC\$12).

## Getting There & Away

In theory the public bus between Jagüey Grande and Playa Girón passes once in the morning and there's service to/from Habana (178km) on Friday, Saturday and Sunday afternoon. If you're without your own



transport, you can hitch into Playa Girón or out to the Autopista and jump on a Viazul, Astro or tour bus at the restaurant near the Finca Campesino (most buses going in either direction pit stop here). Tours from Varadero to Boca de Guamá occur daily, and if you're traveling independently, you can probably negotiate a ride back there by speaking to the driver (CUC\$10 per person should be plenty).

### Getting Around

A passenger ferry (adult/child CUC\$10/5, 20 minutes) departs Boca de Guamá for Villa Guamá across Laguna del Tesoro four times a day. Speedboats depart more frequently and whisk you across to the pseudo-Indian village in just 10 minutes any time during the day for CUC\$10 per person round-trip (with 40 minutes waiting time at Villa Guamá), two-person minimum. In the morning you can allow yourself more time on the island by going one way by launch and returning by ferry.

### GRAND PARQUE NATURAL MONTEMAR

Ciénaga de Zapata is the largest *ciénaga* (swamp) in Cuba, and one of the country's most diverse ecosystems. Crowded into this vast wetland (which is essentially two swamps divided by a rocky central tract) are 14 different vegetation formations including mangroves, wood, dry wood, cactus, savannah, selva and semideciduous. There are also extensive salt pans. The marshes support more than 190 bird species, 31 types of reptiles, 12 species of mammals, plus countless amphibians, fish and insects (including the insatiable mosquito). There are more than 900 plant species here, some 115 of them endemic. It is also an important habitat for the endangered *manatí* (manatee) the Cuban *cocodrilo* (crocodile; *Crocodylus rhombifer*) and the *manjuarí* (alligator gar; *Atractosteus tristoechus*), Cuba's most primitive fish.

The Zapata is the place to come to see bee hummingbirds (the world's smallest bird), cormorants, cranes, ducks, flamingos, hawks, herons, ibis, owls, parrots, partridges, sparrows, tocororos (Cuba's national bird) and wrens. Numerous migratory birds from North America winter here, making November to April the best birding season. It's also the number-one spot in Cuba for catch-and-release sport fishing and fly-

fishing, where the palometa, sábalo and robalo are jumping (bonefish too!).

Unsuitable for agriculture, communications in Zapata were almost nonexistent before the revolution when poverty was the rule. Charcoal makers burn wood from the region's semideciduous forests, and *turba* (peat) dug from the swamps is an important source of fuel. The main industry today is tourism and ecotourists are arriving in increasing numbers.

### Information

The **National Park Office** (☎ 7249; ☒ 8am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) is at the north entrance to Playa Larga on the road from Boca de Guamá. Staff here are knowledgeable and helpful. Alternatively you can try the Cubanacán office on the Autopista near Central Australia.

### Sights & Activities

There are four main excursions into the park, although the itineraries – particularly with regard to bird-watching – are flexible. Transport is not always laid on, so it is best to check beforehand. Cars (including chauffeur-driven jeeps) can be rented from **Transtur** (☎ 4114) or **Havanautos** (☎ 98 41 23) in Playa Girón. One of the most popular excursions is to **Laguna de las Salinas** where

### CROCODILES

The Cuban crocodile or *Crocodylus rhombifer* has the smallest range of any crocodile, existing only on the Zapata Peninsular and in the Lanier swamps of the Isla de la Juventud (where it has been introduced). Hunted extensively by humans for centuries the species is now endangered with an estimated 6000 reptiles still active in the wild (inside a total area of 300 sq km).

Cuban crocs are strong swimmers and relatively agile on land. Their diet consists mainly of fish, but they will also tackle small mammals. Identifiable by their black and yellow speckles, the animals grow to average size of 3.2m and can live for up to 80 years.

The best place to view crocodiles in captivity is at the Criadero de Cocodrilos in Matanzas Province (p251) or on the Isla de la Juventud (p188).

large numbers of migratory waterfowl can be seen from November to April: we're talking 10,000 pink flamingos at a time, plus 190 other feathered species. The first half of the road to Las Salinas is through the forest, while the second half passes swamps and lagoons. Here, aquatic birds can be observed. Guides are mandatory to explore the refuge. The 22km visit lasts over four hours though you may be able to negotiate for longer; costs start at CUC\$10 per person.

For avid bird-watchers **Observación de Aves** (per person CUC\$19) offers an extremely flexible itinerary and the right to roam (with a qualified park ornithologist) around a number of different sites, including the Reserva de Bermejas. Among 18 species of endemic bird found here you can see prized Ferminins, Cabreritos and Gallinuelas de Santo Tomás – both found only on the Zapata Peninsula.

Switching from land to boat the **Río Hatiguánico** (per person CUC\$19) takes you on a three-hour 12km river trip through the densely forested northwestern part of the peninsula. You'll have to duck to avoid the branches at some points while at others the river opens out into a wide deltalike estuary. Birdlife is abundant in this part of the peninsula and if you're lucky you may also see turtles and crocodiles.

It's also worth asking about the **Santo Tomás** (CUC\$10) trip; an excursion that begins 30km west of Playa Larga in the park's only real settlement (Santo Tomás) and proceeds along a tributary of the Hatiguánico – walking or boating, depending on the season. It's another good option for birders.

Aspiring fishermen can arrange excellent fly-fishing at either Las Salinas or Hatiguánico. Ask at the National Park office.

### PLAYA LARGA

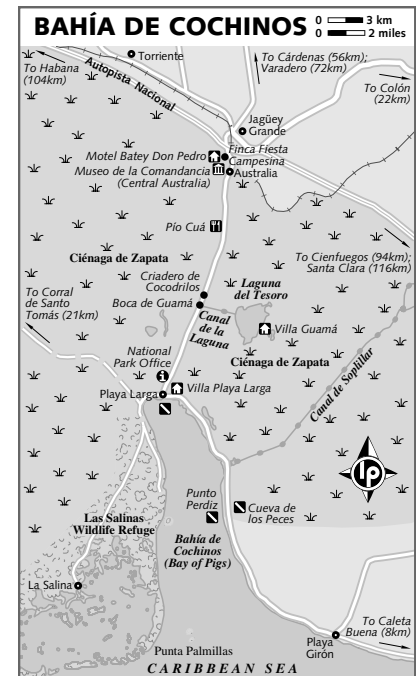
Continuing south from Boca de Guamá you reach Playa Larga, on the Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs), after 13km (or 32km from where you left the Autopista Nacional). United States-backed exiles took a beating trying to invade Cuba through this bay on April 17, 1961 and the museum dedicated to these events at Playa Girón, 35km further south, captures the drama pretty well. While the best accommodation is in Playa Girón, the national park office is here in Playa Larga and there is a good scuba-diving outfit too.

### Activities

#### SCUBA DIVING & SNORKELING

If you prefer fish to birds **Club Octopus International Diving Center** (☎ 7225), 200m west of Villa Playa Larga, offers full scuba facilities at CUC\$25 per dive or CUC\$35 for an orientation session and introductory dive (to 8m). There are 12 rich dive sites just offshore between Playa Larga and Playa Girón (you'll know them by the international scuba symbol painted on the asphalt) and both this outfit and the one in Punta Perdiz visit them. Other water activities here include snorkeling (with/without instructor CUC\$5/10), Wetbike (CUC\$1 per minute), aqua-bike (CUC\$3 per hour), kayak (CUC\$3 per hour) and catamaran (three people CUC\$15 per hour). There's a bar and restaurant overlooking the beach.

More underwater treasures can be seen at the **Cueva de los Peces** (admission CUC\$1; ☒ 9am-6pm) a flooded tectonic fault, or cenote, about 70m deep on the inland side of the road, almost exactly midway between Playa Larga and Playa Girón. There are lots of bright, tropical fish, plus you can explore back into



the darker, spookier parts of the cenote with snorkel gear (CUC\$3). Local dive shops bring scuba divers here. Hammocks swing languidly around the cenote and the beach facing has good snorkeling too, making it a nice afternoon jaunt. There's a handy restaurant, with premium prices.

Just beyond the Cueva is **Punto Perdiz**, another phenomenal snorkeling (CUC\$3 per hour) and scuba-diving (CUC\$25 per dive) spot with an on-site diving outfit. The shallow water is gemstone blue here and there's good snorkeling right from the shore. It costs CUC\$1 to use the thatched umbrellas, beach chairs and showers and there's a decent restaurant.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Villa Playa Larga** (Cubacán; ☎ 7225, 7294; s/d low season incl breakfast CUC\$27/40, high season CUC\$35/44; 📍 🚶 🚿) On a small scimitar of white sand beach by the road, just east of the village, this hotel has huge rooms with bath, sitting room, fridge and TV. There are also eight two-bedroom family bungalows, though the restaurant is legendary in its bleakness (and in total contrast to the setting). Transtur has a car rental desk here. If you must choose, Villa Playa Girón is in a much nicer location (see p256).

There's some affable *casas particulares* in Playa Larga. Start your search at **Casa Fefa** (☎ 98 71 33) run by Josefa Pita Cobas and Osney González Pita, a one-minute walk from Caleton beach. Osney can put you in touch with hiking and bird-watching guides.

**Palmares restaurant** (meals CUC\$2-7) Across the road from Villa Playa Larga, Palmares has hearty ham-and-cheese sandwiches, fish meals and can cook up a respectable vegetarian plate.

### Getting There & Away

The hypothetical bus between Playa Girón and Jagüey Grande is supposed to pass here in the morning, but don't be surprised if it doesn't. Another bus should run to and from Habana (191km) on Friday, Saturday and Sunday afternoon.

### PLAYA GIRÓN

Playa Girón, on the eastern side of the Bahía de Cochinos, 48km south of Boca de Guamá, is named for a French pirate,

the rather unfortunate Gilbert Girón, who met his nemesis here (by decapitation) in the early 1600s after one raid too many. In Cuba it is equally infamous for another botched raid, the ill-fated, CIA-sponsored invasion that tried to land on these remote sandy beaches in April 1961 in one of the 20th century's classic David and Goliath struggles. History, with its poignant monuments and propaganda-spouting political billboards, has an extra degree of resonance here though. These days Playa Girón with its clear Caribbean waters and precipitous off-shore drop-off is a favorite destination for scuba divers and snorkelers.

In addition to some nice private houses, Playa Girón's one and only resort is a pleasant and low-key place, despite the huge ugly seawall built to provide a protected swimming area. Long, shady Playa Los Cocos, where the snorkeling is good, is just a five-minute walk south along the shore. Beach lovers beware. Varadero this is not. In common with many of Cuba's southern coastal areas there's often more *diente de perro* (dog's tooth) than soft white sand here. Added to this, distances are long and public transport poor, so unless you have rented a car, you'd better be prepared to rough it.

### Information

On the main entry road to the hotel there's a pharmacy, post office, international post office and a Caracol shop selling some groceries. The settlement of Playa Girón is a tiny one-horse town, so if you need any goods or services, the hotel is the most likely place to look.

### Sights

The **Museo de Playa Girón** (admission CUC\$2, cameras CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm) has gleaming glass display cases and a tangible sense of history. Housed across the street from Villa Playa Girón, it offers two rooms of artifacts from Bahía de Cochinos plus numerous photos with (some) bilingual captions. The mural of victims and their personal items is eye-catching and the tactical genius of the Cuban forces comes through in the graphic depictions of how the battle unfolded. The 15-minute film about the 'first defeat of US imperialism in the Americas' is CUC\$1 extra. A British Hawker Sea Fury

### THE BAY OF PIGS

What the Cubans call Playa Girón, the rest of the world has come to know as the Bay of Pigs 'fiasco', a shoddily planned comedy of errors that made a laughing stock out of the Kennedy administration and elevated Fidel Castro into the role of unassailable national hero.

Conceived in 1959 by the Eisenhower administration and headed up by deputy director of the CIA Richard Bissell, the plan to initiate a program of covert action against the Castro regime was given official sanction on March 17, 1960. There was but one proviso: no US troops were to be used in combat.

Setting about their task with characteristic zeal, the CIA modeled their operation on the 1954 overthrow of the left-leaning government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala. But ambition soon got the better of ardor.

By the time President Kennedy was briefed on the proceedings in November 1960 the project had mushroomed into a full-scale invasion backed by a 1400-strong force of CIA-trained Cuban exiles and financed with a military budget of US\$13 million.

Activated on April 15, 1961 the invasion was an unmitigated disaster from start to finish. Intending to wipe out the Cuban Air Force on the ground, US planes painted in Cuban Air Force colors (and flown by Cuban exile pilots) comically missed most of their intended targets. Castro, who had been forewarned of the plans, had scrambled his air force the previous week. Hence when the invaders landed at Playa Girón two days later, Cuban sea furies were able to promptly sink two of their supply ships and leave a force of 1400 men stranded on the beach.

To add insult to injury, a countrywide Cuban rebellion that had been much touted by the CIA never materialized. Meanwhile a vacillating Kennedy told a furious Bissell that he would not provide the marooned exile soldiers with US air cover.

Abandoned on the beaches, without supplies or military back up, the disconsolate invaders were doomed; 114 were killed in skirmishes and a further 1189 were captured. The prisoners were returned to the US a year later in return for US\$53 million worth of food and medicines. For the Americans, the humiliation was palpable.

The Bay of Pigs failed due to a multitude of factors. Firstly the CIA had overestimated the depth of Kennedy's personal commitment and had made similarly inaccurate assumptions about the strength of the fragmented anti-Castro movement inside Cuba. Secondly Kennedy himself, adamant all along to make a low-key landing, had chosen a site on an exposed strip of beach close to the Zapata swamps. Thirdly, no one had given enough credit to the political and military know-how of Fidel Castro or the extent to which the Cuban Intelligence Service had infiltrated the CIA's supposedly covert operation.

The consequences for the Americans were far-reaching. 'Socialism or death!' a defiant Castro proclaimed at a funeral service for seven Cuban 'martyrs' on April 16, 1961. The revolution had swung irrevocably toward the Soviet Union.

aircraft used by the Cuban Air Force is parked outside the museum and round the back are other various vessels used in the battle that you can look at.

### Activities

The **International Scuba Center** (☎ 4118), at Villa Playa Girón, had been temporarily (though use that word with caution in Cuba) relocated up the road to Punta Perdiz (or better still try Playa Larga). Snorkeling happens further down the beach.

Eight kilometers southeast of Playa Girón is **Caleta Buena** (☎ 10am-6pm), a lovely protected cove perfect for snorkeling with

abundant coral and small fish. Admission is CUC\$12 and includes an all-you-can-eat lunch buffet and open bar. There are beach chairs and thatched umbrellas dotting the rocky shoreline and enough space in this remote place to have a little privacy. The scuba-diving company at Villa Playa Girón has a kiosk here, charging the same rates; snorkel gear is CUC\$3.

### Sleeping & Eating

Budget travelers will like the selection of private rooms available here. Most places serve meals, but double check because the government choices in Girón are dire.

**Villa Playa Girón** (Cubanacán; ☎ 4110; s/d all-inclusive low season CUC\$45/60, high season CUC\$55/70; 📍 🚗 🚶) This unpretentious resort is a good option if you want the services of a decent hotel, though with its '70s architecture and slightly kitschy holiday-camp feel, you won't be enjoying the all-inclusive luxury of Varadero. Skip the rooms in long blocks near the pool and go for one of the concrete bungalows (some are huge, two-bedroom spreads with a kitchen – good for groups). The expansive grounds face the beach.

There were rumors that this hotel might be hosting Misión Milagros (p449) sometime in 2006. Phone ahead to check that the hotel is open.

### Getting There & Away

The bus to/from Matanzas via Jagüey Grande supposedly leaves Playa Girón at 5am two to three times a week. A bus to Cienfuegos leaves Monday to Friday at 5am. If any tour buses are at the hotel, find the driver and try to arrange a ride for a negotiable fee.

A single-passenger truck operates daily between Playa Girón and Cienfuegos (CUC\$4, 1½ hours, 94km), leaving Playa Girón at 5am and departing Cienfuegos bus station at 12:30pm for the return. A taxi should cost approximately CUC\$40 for this trip. From Playa Girón to Playa Larga, the fare will be closer to CUC\$20.

### CASAS PARTICULARES – PLAYA GIRÓN

**Hostal Luis** (☎ 4121; r incl breakfast CUC\$25; 📍 🚗 🚶) First house on road to Cienfuegos. Two spotless rooms in warm family atmosphere; look for the lions on the fence.

**Jorge Luis Osorio** (☎ 98 43 74; r CUC\$20-30; 📍 🚗 🚶) On the main road outside hotel. Two modern rooms with patio out back. Neighbor also rents.

**KS Abella** (☎ 4260; r CUC\$20; 📍 🚗 🚶) On the road to Cienfuegos; in front of apartments. Friendly, delicious meals.

**Silvia Acosta** (☎ 4237; r CUC\$20; 📍 🚗 🚶) On the road to Cienfuegos. Tremendous shell entryway, nice rooms with private entrance.

**Villa Merci – Mercedes Blanco Pérez** (☎ 4304; r CUC\$20; 📍 🚗 🚶) On road to Caleta Buena. Clean rooms, friendly couple.

### Getting Around

Transtur, Cubacar and **Havanaautos** (☎ 98 41 23) all have car-rental offices at Villa Playa Girón.

Servi-Cupet gas stations are on the Carretera Central at Jovellanos and Colón at Jagüey Grande, and on the Autopista Nacional at Aguada de Pasajeros in Cienfuegos Province.

East of Caleta Buena (southeast of Playa Girón), the coastal road toward Cienfuegos becomes very bad and is only passable by a tractor, so you must backtrack and take the inland road via Rodas.