

Villa Clara Province



Villa Clara is a geographically diverse province of placid lakes and misty oxen-furrowed fields that offers aspiring visitors everything from freshwater fishing to body revitalizing mineral springs. Situated in Cuba's historical center (Cubanaacán) and bordered to the south by the foliage-covered foothills of the Escambray Mountains, the area is sprinkled liberally with hill-side coffee plantations and is second only to Pinar del Río as a producer of fine tobacco.

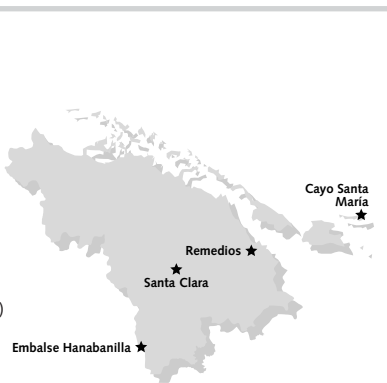
Long noted for the grandiosity of its Che Guevara monuments, travelers to Villa Clara will find reminders of the infamous *guerrillero* (guerrilla) almost everywhere. If you're here for the obligatory Che pilgrimage, Santa Clara is the place to be, an untouristy, down-to-earth city, where old men in Panama hats chew thoughtfully on cheap Cohibas while young innovators from the local arts scene busily set about igniting a small revolution of their own.

For solitude seekers, the quiet life can be found in colonial Remedios, one of Cuba's oldest towns and a pleasant alternative to the hustle and bustle of Santa Clara. Every December 24 Remedios' peace is shattered by a frenzy of exploding fireworks known locally as *Las Parrandas*. Bring your ear plugs or join in the festivities.

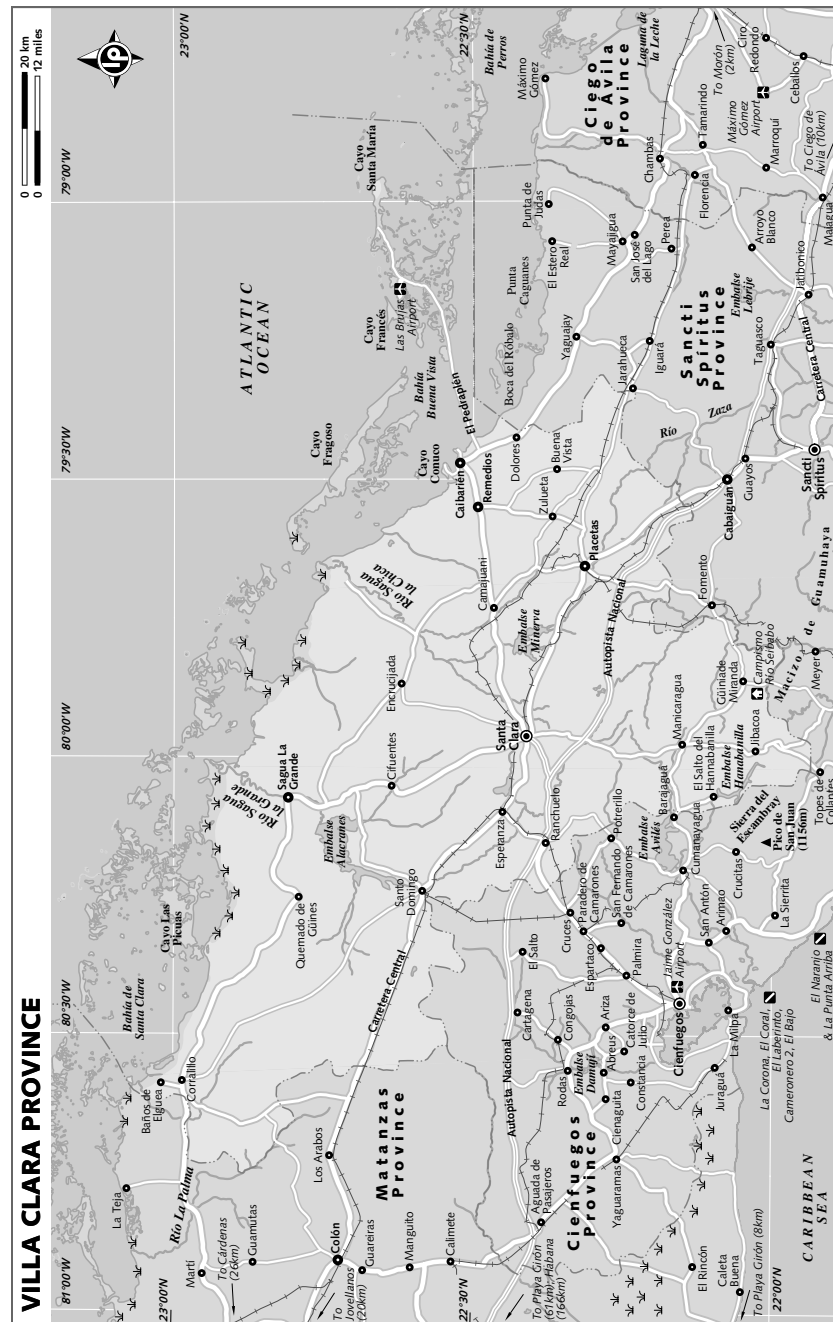
Scattered to the north the distant outlines of the Cayerías del Norte lie sprinkled like bright jewels across an ocean teeming with translucent coral. Currently boasting just four tourist-class hotels, these once lonesome island hideaways have been earmarked for future tourist development and armies of hard-hatted workmen are gearing up for business.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Che City**
Trace the legend of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara in Santa Clara's mausoleum (p274) and Tren Blindado (p274)
- **Quiet Corner**
Relax beneath the louvers in the unspoiled colonial pocket of Remedios (p280)
- **Unquiet Corner**
Take part in the flying sparks, shaking hips and flowing rum of the Remedios *Las Parrandas* (p280)
- **Paradise Found**
Feel the sand beneath your feet on the deserted beaches of Cayo Santa María (p283)
- **Mountain Retreat**
Hire a boat or fish for bass in scenic Embalse Hanabanilla (p279)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 42 ■ POPULATION: 836,350 ■ AREA: 8662 SQ KM



History

Located strategically in the island's geographical center, Villa Clara has long been a focal point for pirates, colonizers and revolutionaries intent on slicing the country divisively in two. Pirates were a perennial headache in the early years with the province's first town Remedios being moved twice and then abandoned altogether in the late 1600s by a group of families who escaped inland to what is now Santa Clara. Later the population was diluted further by emigrant Canary Islanders who brought their agricultural know-how and distinctive lilted Spanish accents to the tobacco fields of the picturesque Vuelta Arriba region. In December 1958 Ernesto 'Che' Guevara – aided by a motley crew of scruffy *barbudos* (bearded ones) – masterfully orchestrated the fall of the city of Santa Clara, by derauling an armored train carrying more than 350 government troops and weaponry to the east. The victory rang the death knell for Batista's grisly dictatorship and the triumph of Cuba's nationalistic revolution.

SANTA CLARA

☎ 422 / pop 210,680

Ringed by low hills and located within easy reach of Habana on the Autopista Nacional, Santa Clara is a young university city with a bustling central park. Most travelers come here to check out the Che sights but, for those who linger, a diverse and surprisingly colorful cultural scene awaits discovery.

History

Christopher Columbus believed that Cubanacán (or Cubana Khan; an Indian name that meant 'the middle of Cuba'), an Indian village once located near Santa Clara, was the seat of the khans of Mongolia; hence, his misguided notion that he was exploring the Asian coast. Santa Clara proper was founded in 1689 by 13 families from Remedios who were sick and tired of the unwanted attention of passing pirates. The town grew quickly after a fire emptied Remedios in 1692 and in 1867 it became the capital of Las Villas Province. A notable industrial center, Santa Clara was famous for its prerevolutionary Coca Cola factory and its pivotal role in Cuba's island-wide communications network. Today it continues to support a textile mill, a marble

SANTA CLARA STREET NAMES

Old name	New name
Caridad	General Roloff
Sindico	Morales
Nazareno	Serafin García
San Miguel	9 de Abril
Candelaria	Maestra Nicolasa

quarry and the Constantino Pérez Carrodegua tobacco factory. Santa Clara was the first major city to be liberated from Batista's army in December 1958.

Orientation

Monuments relating to the 1958 battle for Santa Clara are on the east and west sides of the city. The train station is seven blocks north of Parque Vidal; the two bus stations are less conveniently located on the Carretera Central west of town.

In common with many Cuban cities, Santa Clara has a dual street naming system: see above if you're confused.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Librería Viet Nam (Independencia Este btwn Plácido & Luis Estévez) Sells books in Convertibles and pesos.

Proyecto Ateneo Pepe Medina (Parque Vidal No 18) Small reading area with air-con.

INTERNET ACCESS

Etesca Telepunto (Marta Abreu No 55 btwn Máximo Gómez & Villuendas; per hr CUC\$6)

Palmares Café (Marta Abreu No 10 btwn Villuendas & Cuba; per hr CUC\$5) Two terminals.

LIBRARIES

Biblioteca José Martí (Calle Colón on Parque Vidal) Inside the Palacio Provincial.

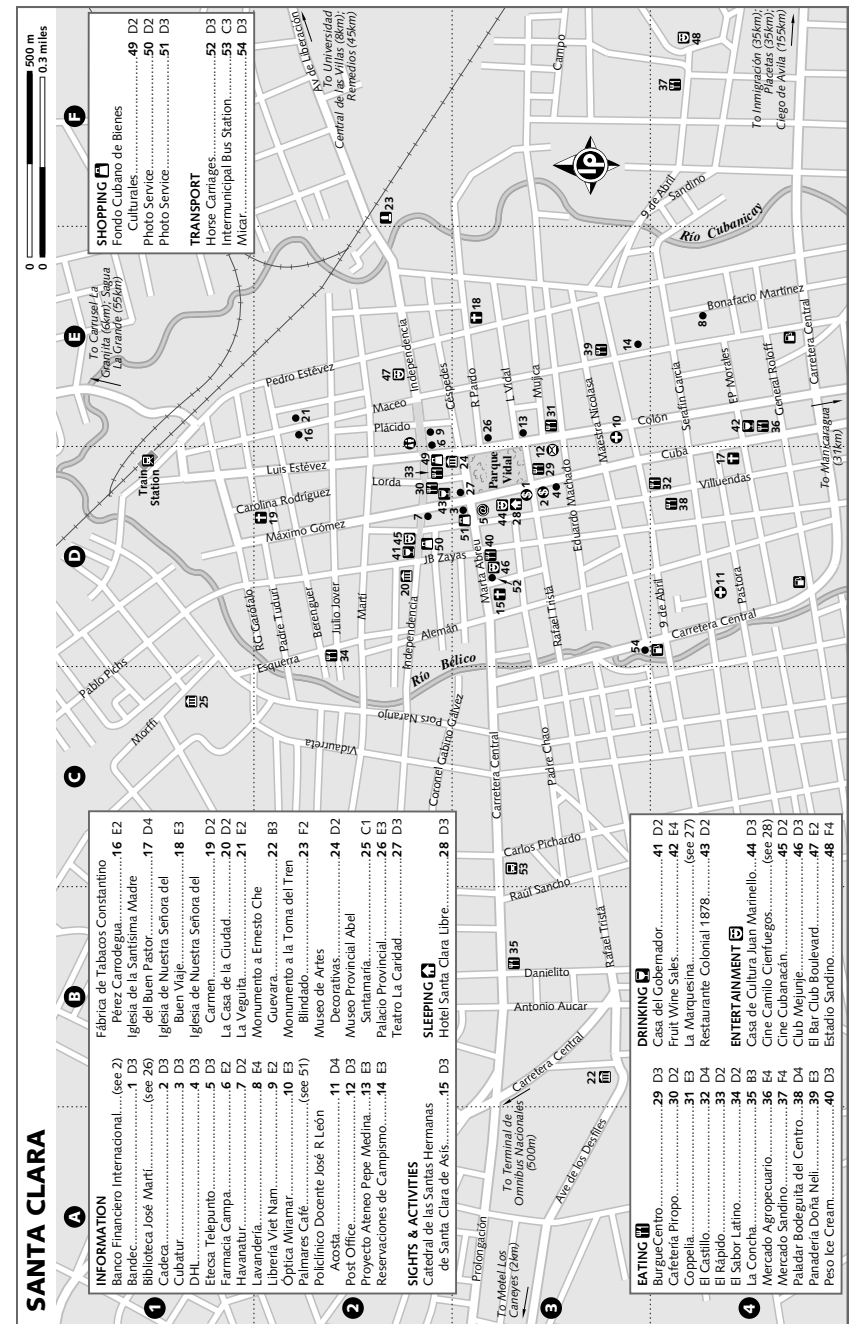
MEDIA

Radio CMHW broadcasts on 840AM and 93.5 FM. The *Vanguardia Santa Clara* newspaper is published Saturday.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Farmacia Campa (cnr Independencia Este & Luis Estévez; ☎ 8am-8:30pm)

Óptica Miramar (☎ 20 80 69; Colón No 106 btwn 9 de Abril & Maestra Nicolasa) Contact lenses and solution available.



SANTA CLARA

INFORMATION	Fábrica de Tabacos Constantino Pérez Carrodegua.....16 E2
Banco Financiero Internacional.....(see 2)	Pérez Carrodegua.....16 E2
Bancdel.....1 D3	Iglesia de la Santísima Madre del Buen Pastor.....17 D4
Biblioteca José Martí.....(see 26)	Buen Valle.....18 E3
Cadeca.....2 D3	Iglesia de Nuestra Señora del Carmen.....19 D2
Cubatur.....3 D3	La Casa de la Ciudad.....20 D2
DHL.....4 D3	La Vegetita.....21 E2
Etesca Telepunto.....5 D3	Monumento a Ernesto Che Guevara.....22 B3
Farmacia Campa.....6 E2	Monumento a la Toma del Tren Blindado.....23 F2
Havamar.....7 D2	Museo de Artes Escenicas.....24 D2
Lavandería.....8 E4	Museo Nacional Abel Santamaría.....25 C1
Librería Viet Nam.....9 E2	Palacio Provincial.....26 E3
Palmares Café.....10 E3	Teatro La Ciudad.....27 D3
Politécnico Docente José León.....(see 51)	
Post Office.....11 D4	
Proyecto Ateneo Pepe Medina.....13 E3	
Reservaciones de Campismo.....14 E3	
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Catedral de las Santas Hermanas de Santa Clara de Asís.....15 D3	
SLEEPING	
Hotel Santa Clara Libre.....28 D3	

EATING	Casa del Gobernador.....41 D2
Burguesito.....28 D3	Fruta Verde Sals.....42 E4
El Propio.....30 D2	Luque.....(see 27)
Colibris.....31 E3	Restaurante Colonial 1878.....43 D2
El Cofre.....32 D2	
El Rápido.....33 D2	ENTERTAINMENT
El Señor Latino.....34 D2	Casa de Cultura Juan Manuelillo.....44 D3
La Concha.....35 B3	Cine Camilo Cienfuegos.....(see 28)
Mercado Agropecuario.....36 F4	Cine Cubanacán.....45 D2
Mercado Sándino.....37 F4	Club Wejune.....46 D3
Paladar Rodegueta del Centro.....38 D4	El Bar Club Boulevard.....47 E2
Panadería Doña Nell.....39 B3	Estadio Sandino.....48 F4
Peso Ice Cream.....40 D3	

Policlinico Docente José R Leon Acosta (☎ 20 22 44; Serafin García Oeste No 167 btwn Alemán & Carretera Central)

MONEY

Banco Financiero Internacional (☎ 20 74 50; cnr Cuba No 6 & Rafael Tristán)

Bandec (☎ 21 81 15; cnr Rafael Tristán & Cuba; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Fri, 8am-11am Sat)

Cadeca (☎ 20 56 90; cnr Rafael Tristán & Cuba; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-12:30pm Sun) On Parque Vidal.

POST

DHL (☎ 20 89 76; Cuba btwn Rafael Tristán & Eduardo Machado; h8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun)

Post office (Colón No 10; h8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun)

TELEPHONE

Etesca (Marta Abreu No 55 btwn Máximo Gómez & Villuendas; ☎ 8am-10pm)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Cubatur (☎ 20 89 80; Marta Abreu No 10; h9am-6pm) Near Máximo Gómez.

Havanatur (☎ 20 40 01; Máximo Gómez No 9B; h8:30am-noon & 1-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-12:30pm Sat) Near Independencia.

Reservaciones de Campismo (☎ 20 49 05; Maceo Sur No 315 btwn Av 9 de Abril & Serafin García)

Dangers & Annoyances

While mainly safe, Santa Clara has earned an unsavory reputation for its bicycle-mounted *jineteros* (hustlers) in recent years, who dive-bomb rental cars at the entrance to the town. They're more aggressive than most. The same types hang around outside the front of the Hotel Santa Clara Libre offering various services and stories.

Sights

MONUMENTO ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA

This **monument, mausoleum & museum complex** (Av de los Desfiles; admission free; ☎ 8am-9pm Tue-Sat, 8am-6pm Sun), 2km west of Parque Vidal via Rafael Tristán, is in a vast square guarded by a bronze statue of 'El Che.' The statue was erected in 1987 to mark the 20th anniversary of Guevara's murder in Bolivia, and the sublime mausoleum below (entry from the rear) contains 38 stone-carved niches dedicated to the other guerillas killed in that failed revolutionary attempt. In 1997 the remains of 17 of them, including Guevara, were recovered from a secret mass grave in

Bolivia and reburied in this memorial. Fidel Castro lit the eternal flame on October 17, 1997. The adjacent museum collects the details and ephemera of Che's life and death.

To get here, hop on a 'Terminal' - or a 'Riviera' - bound horse carriage (one peso) on Marta Abreu or catch a *bici-taxi* (CUC\$1). The mausoleum and museum are shut on Mondays.

MONUMENTO A LA TOMA DEL TREN BLINDADO

This **boxcar museum** (admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-6pm Tue-Fri), east on Independencia just over the river, marks the spot where 18 men under the command of Che Guevara, equipped with rifles and grenades, captured a 22-car armored train containing 350 heavily armed Batista troops. Amazingly, this battle, which took place on December 29, 1958, only lasted 90 minutes. The bulldozer that the guerrillas used to cut the railway line is on a pedestal nearby.

MUSEO PROVINCIAL ABEL SANTAMARÍA

Strictly for enthusiasts or for walkers who like to get lost, this small **museum** (☎ 20 50 41; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) is a former military barracks where Batista's troops surrendered to Che Guevara on January 1, 1959. Not easy to find, it's on a hilltop north of the center at the north end of Esquerria, just across the Río Bético in Reparto Osvaldo Herrera.

FÁBRICA DE TABACOS CONSTANTINO PÉREZ CARRODEGUA

Santa Clara's **tobacco factory** (☎ 20 22 11; Calle Maceo No 181 btwn Julio Jover & Berenguer; admission CUC\$3; ☎ 7am-noon, 1-4pm) is one of the best in Cuba and makes a quality range of Montecristos, Partagás and Romeo y Julieta cigars. Tours here are lower key than in Habana and, as a result, the experience is a lot more interesting and less rushed. Across the street you'll find **La Veguita** (☎ 20 89 52; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm) the factory's diminutive sales outlet that is staffed by a friendly team of cigar experts. You can also buy cheap rum here and the bar out the back sells good coffee.

PARQUE VIDAL & AROUND

Named for Colonel Leoncio Vidal y Caro, who was killed here on March 23, 1896, **Parque Vidal** was encircled by twin sidewalks

CHE COMANDANTE, AMIGO

Few 20th-century figures have successfully divided public opinion as deeply as Ernesto Guevara de la Serna better known to his friends (and enemies) as 'Che.' From enduring symbol of third-world freedom, to the celebrated hero of the Sierra Maestra, to the most wanted man on the CIA hit-list; the image of this handsome and often misunderstood Argentine physician turned *guerrillero* can still be seen all over Cuba, on everything from key rings to blow-up posters to chart-topping album covers. But what would the man himself have made of such rampant commercialization?

Born in Rosario, Argentina in June 1928 to a bourgeois family of Irish-Spanish descent, Guevara was a delicate and sickly child who developed asthma at the age of two. It was an early desire to overcome this debilitating illness that instilled in the young Ernesto a willpower that would dramatically set him apart from other men.

A pugnacious competitor in his youth, Ernesto earned the name 'Fuser' at school for combative reputation on the rugby field. Graduating from the University of Buenos Aires in 1953 with a medical degree, he shunned a conventional medical career in favor of a cross-continental motor-cycling odyssey accompanied by his old friend and colleague Alberto Granada. Their nomadic wanderings - well-documented in a series of posthumously published diaries - would open up Ernesto's eyes to the grinding poverty and stark political injustices that were all too common in 1950s Latin America.

By the time Guevara arrived in Guatemala in 1954 on the eve of a US-backed coup against Jacobo Arbenz's leftist government, he was enthusiastically devouring the works of Marx and nurturing a deep-rooted hatred of the United States.

Deported to Mexico for his pro-Arbenz activities in 1955, Guevara fell in with a group of Cubans that included Moncada veteran Raúl Castro. Impressed by the Argentine's sharp intellect and never-failing political convictions, Raúl - a longstanding Communist party member himself - determined to introduce Che to his charismatic brother, Fidel.

The meeting between the two men at Maria Antonia's house in Mexico City in June 1955 lasted 10 hours and ultimately changed the course of history. Rarely had two characters needed each other as much as the hot-headed Castro and the calmer and more ideologically polished Che. Both were favored children from large families who shunned the quiet life to fight courageously for a revolutionary cause. Similarly, both men had little to gain and much to throw away by abandoning professional careers for what most would have regarded as narrow-minded folly. 'In a revolution one either wins or dies,' wrote Guevara prophetically years later, 'if it is a *real* one.'

In December 1956 Che left for Cuba on the *Granma* yacht, joining the rebels as the group medic. One of only 12 of the original 82 rebel soldiers to survive the catastrophic landing at Las Coloradas he proved himself to be a brave and intrepid fighter who led by example and quickly won the trust of his less reckless Cuban comrades. As a result Castro rewarded him with the rank of Comandante in July 1957 and in December 1958 Che repaid Fidel's faith when he masterminded the battle of Santa Clara, an action that effectively sealed an historic revolutionary victory.

Guevara was granted Cuban citizenship in February 1959, and soon assumed a leading role in Cuba's economic reforms as president of the National Bank and Minister of Industry. His insatiable work ethic and regular appearance at enthusiastically organized volunteer worker weekends quickly saw him cast heroically as the living embodiment of Cuba's 'new man.'

But the honeymoon wasn't to last. Disappearing from the Cuban political scene in 1965 Guevara eventually materialized again in Bolivia in late 1966 at the head of a small band of Cuban *guerrilleros*. After the successful ambush of a Bolivian detachment in March 1967, he issued a call for 'two, three, many Vietnams in the Americas.' Such bold proclamations could only prove to be his undoing. On October 8, 1967, Guevara was captured by the Bolivian army, and after consultation with military leaders in La Paz and Washington DC, he was shot the next day in front of US advisors. His remains were eventually returned to Cuba in 1997 and reburied in Santa Clara.

during the colonial era, with a fence separating Blacks and Whites. Today it is one of Cuba's busiest and most vibrant parks with old men gossiping on the shaded benches and young kids getting pulled around in carriages led by goats. Since 1902, the municipal orchestra has played in the park bandstand at 8pm every Thursday and Sunday.

The city's most impressive building is the 1885 **Teatro La Caridad** (Máximo Gómez), one of Cuba's three signature theaters, with an imposing front facade and frescoes inside by Camilo Zalaya. Opera singer Enrico Caruso has performed here. The **Museo de Artes Decorativas** (☎ 20 53 68; Parque Vidal No 27; admission CUC\$2; ☹ 9am-6pm Wed & Thu, 1-10pm Fri & Sat, 6-10pm Sun), just east of Teatro La Caridad, is an 18th-century building packed with period furniture and luxurious knickknacks donated by poet Dulce María Loynaz. The inner patio is a treat. On the eastern side of Parque Vidal is the neoclassical **Palacio Provincial** (1902-12), home today to the Martí library (with a rare book collection).

CHURCHES

Uncharacteristically, the churches are scattered around the city rather than on or near the main square. South of the center is the colonial-style **Iglesia de la Santísima Madre del Buen Pastor** (EP Morales No 4 btwn Cuba & Villuendas).

On the way to the train station north of the center, is the **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora del Carmen** (Carolina Rodríguez); it was built in 1748, with a tower added in 1846. A large monument facing the church commemorates the foundation of Santa Clara in 1689 by 13 families from Remedios. The **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora del Buen Viaje** (cnr Pedro Estévez & Pardo) is an eclectic mix of Gothic, Romanesque and neoclassical architecture.

Activities

The pulse beat of the city's progressive cultural life is at **La Casa de la Ciudad** (cnr Independencia & JB Zayas; admission CUC\$1; ☹ 8am-5pm) northwest of Parque Vidal. If you want to see another side to Santa Clara aside from the obligatory Che memorabilia, get chatting to the young artists here. The historic building hosts Art Expositions (including an original Wilfredo Lam sketch), Noches del Danzón and a film museum; but the real buzz of this place is hanging out with the local culture vultures and finding out

what makes this most unprepossessing of Cuban cities tick.

Courses

Santa Clara boasts Cuba's second most prestigious university, **Universidad Central Marta Abreu de las Villas** (☎ 28 14 10; Carretera de Camajuaní Km 5.5). Non-Cubans can participate in two-, four-, six- and eight-week Spanish-language courses here for CUC\$200/380/540/680 respectively. Courses include study materials and visits to local historical sites. To sign up visit the university's website (www.uclv.edu.cu) or inquire at the Foreign Language Department (caridada@sociales.uclvedu.cu).

La Casa de la Ciudad (cnr Independencia & JB Zayas) is another good learning center. You might be able to pick up dancing and percussion lessons here if you probe hard.

Sleeping IN TOWN

Hotel Santa Clara Libre (Islazul; ☎ 20 75 48; fax 68 63 67; Parque Vidal No 6; s/d low season CUC\$22/29, high CUC\$27/36; ☹) You can't miss the tall, minty-green facade of this 168-room hotel right on the park. Hosting Cuban honeymooners and economic package tours, this is a decent, central choice. Nonguests can check out the pleasant restaurant on the 10th floor and the rooftop bar (good views on the 11th). The front of this hotel is still pocked with bullet holes from one of the last battles of the revolution.

OUTSIDE TOWN

Carrusel la Granjita (Cubanacán; ☎ 21 81 90; www.cubanacan.cu; Carretera de Maleza Km 21.5; s/d low season CUC\$38/50, high CUC\$42/55; ☎ ☹ ☹ ☹) The 75 thatched units of this motel, 6km northeast of town, are sprinkled among a scenic orange grove. If you don't mind being outside town, it's quiet and a decent value. Try to get a room well away from the (noisy) swimming pool area. The moderately priced restaurants (à la carte, buffet or grill) are good deals, there's a nightly show around the pool, a late-night disco, massage therapist and horseback riding.

Motel Los Caneyes (Cubanacán; ☎ 20 45 12; cnr Av de los Eucaliptos & Circunvalación de Santa Clara; s/d low season CUC\$38/50, high CUC\$42/55; ☎ ☹ ☹ ☹) Recently added to the Cubanacán stable, this motel (the same price as La Granjita) has 91 thatched bungalows built in 'pre-Columbian'

CASAS PARTICULARES – SANTA CLARA

There's a cluster of casas on the short street of Bonifacio Martínez between Serafín García and the Carretera Central and also on nearby Maceo.

Elida Ramírez Herrera & Sergio Proenza González (☎ 21 59 14; Independencia No 266 btwn Pedro Estévez & M Gutiérrez; r CUC\$15-20) This friendly place has a room with three beds; there's a small patio.

Ernesto & Mireya (☎ 27 35 01; Cuba No 227 Altos btwn Pastora & EP Morales; r CUC\$15-20; ☹) Nice spacious room, common balcony overlooks church; neighbor rents in Apartment 3.

Héctor Martínez (☎ 21 74 63; R Pardo No 8 btwn Maceo & Parque Vidal; r CUC\$15-20; ☹) Terrific big room with dining area, kitchen and refrigerator; all new.

Hostal Ana (☎ 20 64 45; Serafín Garcías No 74 btwn Colón & Maceo; r CUC\$20; ☎ ☹) Two independent rooms with separate entry and communal terrace.

Hostal Florida Center (☎ 20 81 61; Maestra Nicolasa Este No 56 btwn Colón & Maceo; r CUC\$20; ☹) Beautiful colonial house with airy rooms with refrigerator and TV, generous meals served in lush patio.

Jorge García Rodríguez (☎ 20 23 23; Cuba No 209 Apt No 1 btwn Serafín García & EP Morales; r CUC\$15-20; ☹) Friendly place that rents two rooms; meals served.

Luisa Costa Pérez (☎ 29 41 67; Maceo Sur No 326 btwn Av 9 de Abril & Serafín García; r CUC\$15-20; ☹) Run by a sweet couple; big meals.

Martha Artiles Alemán (☎ 20 50 08; Marta Abreu No 56 btwn Villuendas & Zayas; r CUC\$15-20; ☹) Big, serviceable rooms.

Omelio Moreno Lorenzo (☎ 21 69 41; Eduardo Machado Este No 4 btwn Cuba & Colón; r CUC\$20; ☹) English and French spoken.

Orlando García Rodríguez (☎ 20 67 61; R Pardo No 7 btwn Maceo & Parque Vidal; r incl breakfast CUC\$15-20; ☹) Shared bathroom.

Rolando Sacercio Díaz (☎ 20 67 25; Maceo No 355A btwn Serafín García & EP Morales; r CUC\$15-20) Simple, spotless room with three beds; English spoken.

Vivian & José Rivero (☎ 20 37 81; Maceo No 64 btwn Martí & Independencia; r CUC\$20; ☹) Two rooms in lovely colonial house dating from 1908. Quiet terrace overlooks colorful inner garden.

Yadín & José (☎ 20 67 54; Bonifacio Martínez No 60 btwn EP Morales & General Roloff; r CUC\$20; ☹) Also at No 18.

style, and updated for the package tourists who frequent it. It's well located 2km due west of the Monumento Che Guevara and has nice grounds, but is pricey for what you get. Hunting and fishing tours are offered from here and there's a Havanautos desk.

Eating

La Concha (☎ 21 81 24; cnr Carretera Central & Dan-iellito) The town's most famous restaurant is within spitting distance of the Che memorial. It's an unfussy place rightly renowned for its tasty pizza (CUC\$4). Classy musicians often play here at lunchtimes.

Paladar Bodeguita del Centro (☎ 20 43 56; Villuendas Sur No 264 btwn 9 de Abril & Serafín García; dishes CUC\$10; ☹ 1-5pm & 7-11pm Mon-Sat, 7-11pm Sun) Voluminous dishes on offer include red snapper. The dimly lit atmosphere and graffiti-covered walls here mimic Habana's Bodeguita although once seated you'll feel more like you're in someone's front room (you are!).

El Castillo (9 de Abril No 9 btwn Cuba & Villuendas; ☹ noon-11pm). This peso find cooks up

quality meals of pork, chicken or liver with *congrí* (rice flecked with black beans), and salad for 35 pesos (CUC\$1.35). The twist is that you eat standing at a counter flanked by marble pillars, stained glass and mosaic tiles.

El Sabor Latino (☎ 20 65 39; Esquerra No 157 btwn Julio Jover & Berenguer; ☹ noon-midnight). Santa Clara's most inviting paladar is a little off the beaten track but lulls clients into its well-maintained midst with its Rolling Stone's 'Glimmer Twins' logo. The menu offers complete pork or chicken meals with rice, salad, *tostones* (fried plantain patties) and bread for CUC\$10 (or fish for CUC\$12); you can eat here late.

Palmares Café (Marta Abreu No 10 btwn Villuendas & Cuba; ☹ 9am-11pm; ☹) For the best burger in town head to this congenial city-center classic where excellent snack food and great coffee is served in a perfectly air-conditioned microclimate. It will make you feel as if you're back in Habana. This place also has two computer terminals (CUC\$5 per hour).

BurgueCentro (Parque Vidal No 31; ☎ 24hr) Cheap; the patio bar upstairs is a good drinking perch.

Stock up on peso ice cream at the architecturally hideous **Coppelia** (cnr Calle Colón & Mujica; ☎ 10:30am-midnight Tue-Sun) or head to **Cafetería Piropo** (cnr Lorda & Independencia; ☎ 10am-10pm). Across the street is – you guessed it – El Rápido.

Several peso bars and cafeterias are near the corner of Independencia Oeste and Zayas around Cine Cubanacán and your ever-faithful ice-cream man operates out of a window on Abreu.

GROCERIES

Mercado Sandino (9 de Abril) Santa Clara's largest agropecuario (vegetable market) is on the western side of the Estadio Sandino.

Mercado agropecuario (Cuba No 269 btwn EP Morales & General Roloff) This market is small, but well stocked with produce. It's in the center of the city.

Panadería Doña Neli (cnr Maceo Sur & 9 de Abril; ☎ 7am-6pm) Sells fruit cakes and bread; the bar adjacent (open 9am to 10pm) has a smoky, local atmosphere and sells sandwiches for a few Convertibles.

Drinking

La Marquesina (☎ 9am-1am) This lively bar in a corner of the Teatro La Caridad building is a winner. Bonus: chanteuse belting boleros to Casio keyboard accompaniment.

The brave can buy homemade fruit wine at the winemaker's door (at Morales No 10, between Cuba and Colón) for five (500mL) or eight (750mL) pesos; bring your own bottle.

Hard-drinking peso places:

Casa del Gobernador (cnr Independencia & JB Zayas; ☎ noon-11pm) Check out the live music on the colonial patio or duck into the dining room for a CUC\$5 pork filet.

Restaurante Colonial 1878 (Máximo Gómez btwn Marta Abreu & Independencia; ☎ noon-2pm & 7-10:30pm)

Entertainment

Club Mejunje (Marta Abreu No 107; ☎ 4pm-1am Tue-Sun) The heart of Santa Clara's hip cultural scene, this bar and performance space is set among the ruins of an old building and will open your eyes to the city's vibrant and happening nightlife. There are regularly scheduled *trova* (verse), bolero and *son* (Cuba's popular music) concerts, children's

theater and disco nights. You might even catch the occasional drag show.

El Bar Club Boulevard (☎ 21 62 36; Independencia No 2 btwn Maceo & Pedro Estévez; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 9:30pm-2am Tue-Sun) Humor shows and live bands get this fun cocktail lounge laughing, dancing and swinging from 11pm.

Casa de la Cultura Juan Marinello (☎ 20 71 81; Parque Vidal No 5) Concerts and art exhibits in a colonial casa.

Cine Camilo Cienfuegos (Parque Vidal), below the Santa Clara Libre and **Cine Cubanacán** (Independencia Oeste No 60), show large screen films in English.

SPORTS

The Estadio Sandino, east of the center via Av 9 de Abril, is the venue for baseball games from October to April. Villa Clara (La Villa) plays a central role in the history of Cuban baseball, but they're like the Boston Red Sox of Cuba: they have rabid fans and are super fun to watch, though victory has tended to elude them.

Shopping

Independencia, between Maceo and Zayas, is the pedestrian shopping mall called the Boulevard. It's littered with Convertible stores and has good second-hand clothes and consignment shops.

Fondo Cubano de Bienes Culturales (Luis Estévez Norte No 9 btwn Parque Vidal & Independencia) Sells Cuban handicrafts.

For all your photographic needs try **Photo Service** (Independencia Oeste No 55 btwn Villuendas & Zayas) and **Photo Service** (Marta Abreu No 10 btwn Villuendas & Cuba).

Getting There & Away

Santa Clara's Abel Santamaría Airport receives weekly flights from Montreal and Toronto. There is no connection to Habana.

BUS

The **Terminal de Ómnibus Nacionales** (☎ 20 34 70) is 2.5km out on the Carretera Central toward Matanzas, 500m north of the Che monument. There are **Astro** (☎ 29 21 14) buses to Cienfuegos, Habana and Trinidad two- to three-times daily, plus one to Santiago on alternate days.

Tickets for air-conditioned Viazul buses are sold at a special ticket window for foreigners next to the station entrance. If it's

closed, go to the 'Lista de Espera' window at the back of the station. Daily departures:

Destination	Cost (one way)	Time
Habana	CUC\$18	3:40am, 8:15am, 10:00pm
Trinidad	CUC\$8	10:50am
Varadero	CUC\$11	5:25pm
Santiago de Cuba	CUC\$33	1:45am, 1:10pm, 6:45pm

The Santiago de Cuba-bound bus also stops at Bayamo (CUC\$26, nine hours 10 minutes), Camagüey (CUC\$15, four hours 25 minutes), Ciego de Ávila (CUC\$9, two hours 35 minutes), Holguín (CUC\$26, seven hours 50 minutes), Las Tunas (CUC\$22, six hours 35 minutes) and Sancti Spiritus (CUC\$6, 1¼ hours).

The **intermunicipal bus station** (Carretera Central), west of the center via Marta Abreu, has daily buses to Remedios (CUC\$1.45, 45km).

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 20 28 95) is straight up Luis Estévez from Parque Vidal on the north side of town. The **ticket office** (Luis Estévez Norte No 323) is across the park from the train station. In theory, there are daily trains to Cienfuegos (CUC\$3, 2½ hours), Bayamo (CUC\$22, 9½ hours), Camagüey (CUC\$13, five hours 35 minutes) and Holguín (CUC\$8, 10 hours); twice daily trains to Santiago (CUC\$33, 12¼ hours); four nightly trains to Matanzas (CUC\$8, 3½ hours) and Habana (CUC\$14, five hours); and a train on alternate days to Sancti Spiritus (CUC\$4, three hours) and Morón (CUC\$5, three hours 40 minutes).

Getting Around

You'll note from the manure stench that local transport is mostly horse and carriage (one peso). Bici-taxis (from the northwest of the park) cost CUC\$1 a ride.

CAR & MOPED

Parque Vidal is closed to traffic (and cyclists must also dismount and walk their bikes).

Agencies renting wheels around the town:

Cubatur (☎ 20 89 80; Marta Abreu No 10; ☎ 9am-6pm) Rents mopeds.

Havanautos (☎ 20 58 95; Motel Los Caneyes)

Micar (☎ 20 45 70; cnr Carretera Central & Av 9 de Abril)
Transtur (☎ 20 81 77; Hotel Santa Clara Libre, Parque Vidal No 6)

The **Servi-Cupet gas station** (cnr Carretera Central & General Roloff) is south of the center. Just north is **Servicentro Oro Negro** (cnr Carretera Central & Av 9 de Abril).

TAXI

You can hire a car and driver from in front of the national bus station for trips to Remedios (CUC\$8 one way) or Caibarién (CUC\$10). A taxi to Habana will be about CUC\$50 (negotiate hard). Drivers also hang around Parque Vidal or you can call **Cubataxi** (☎ 20 68 56).

EMBALSE HANABANILLA

The Sierra del Escambray is the highest mountain range in central Cuba, with great hiking opportunities. Tucked into the foothills is the Embalse Hanabanilla, a 36-sq-km reservoir supplying Cuba's largest hydroelectric generating station. A tourist hotel stands on the northwestern shore and there's good fishing. Hanabanilla is a centrally located stopover between Cienfuegos, 58km to the west; Santa Clara, 80km to the north; or Trinidad, 58km to the south. Various hikes and boat trips can be organized here (see below).

SIERRA SOLITUDE

Access to the Escambray Mountains from Villa Clara Province is via the Embalse Hanabanilla, a huge manmade lake whose name in native language means 'cup of gold.' Among the walks and hikes that are available in this area are four little-known rustic gems. They're not often listed on any standard tourist itineraries; ask at the Hotel Hanabanilla for more information.

- **Un Reto de la Loma Atalaya** – a 17km hike with views of Santa Clara and Cienfuegos concluding at the 600m Cueva del Brollo
- **La Colicambiada** – a 6km hike with a visit to a *campesino's* house and swim in a nearby river; includes a boat transfer
- **Por La Ribera** – a 3km walk through forests and coffee plantations
- **La Monaña Por Dentro** – a trek to El Nicho in Cienfuegos Province

Sleeping & Eating

Campismo Río Seibabo (Cubamar; ☎ 24 98 32; per person CUC\$5) South of Güinia de Miranda near the border with Sancti Spiritus Province, Río Seibabo has 35 cabins. It welcomes non-Cubans. The lush rural grounds about the Río Seibabo.

Hotel Hanabanilla (Islazul; ☎ 49 11 25; s/d low season CUC\$18/24, high CUC\$23/30; 📞 📺 📺) This four-story hotel has 125 rooms with fridges, balconies and lake views. The Bar Mirador on the top floor also has good vistas. It's a peaceful spot except on the weekends when it's packed with Cubans making merry. You can rent speedboats, horses or choose from half-a-dozen hikes (see p279).

Getting There & Away

Theoretically there are buses from Manicaruaga, but the only practical access is by car, bike or moped.

REMEDIOS

☎ 42 / pop 48,908

Aaah, Remedios – where historic homes line cobblestone streets and you can lounge in the leafy central park with nary a hustler to hassle you. Certainly one of Cuba's prettiest towns, the laid-back, colonial air of Remedios shatters every December 24 when the citizens take sides and face off with floats, fireworks and dancing competitions in the legendary *Las Parrandas* (see below). Within easy reach of Santa Clara and Cayo Santa María, for many travelers

this is best all-round base for exploring the province.

The energetic Vasco Porcallo de Figueroa was famous for founding San Juan de los Remedios in 1524. He is also reputed to have fathered more than 200 children. Locals will readily tell you that this is Cuba's eighth historic settlement after Diego Velázquez' magnificent seven and few neutral observers would dare to disagree. The town served as a regional center until Santa Clara was founded in 1689, and after a fire in 1692 its importance declined.

Sights

The Parroquia de San Juan Bautista de Remedios (Camilo Cienfuegos No 20; ☎ 9am-11am Mon-Sat) on Parque Martí, is one of Cuba's finest churches. Though a church was founded here in 1545, this building dates from the late 18th century, the campanile was erected between 1848 and 1858 and its famous gilded high altar and mahogany ceiling are thanks to a restoration project (1944–46) financed by millionaire Eutimio Falla Bonet. The pregnant Inmaculada Concepción on the first side altar to the left of the entrance is said to be the only one of its kind in Cuba – the pearl teardrops are a nice touch. If the front doors are closed, go around to the rear or attend 7:30pm mass.

Also on Parque Martí, but lighter on the gold leaf, is the 18th-century **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora del Buen Viaje** (Alejandro del Río No 66). Between these churches is the **Museo de**

Música Alejandro García Caturla (Parque Martí No 5; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Thu, 7-11pm Fri, 2pm-midnight Sat), commemorating García Caturla, a Cuban composer who lived here from 1920 until his murder in 1940. Look for occasional concerts and plays here.

Visiting the **Museo de las Parrandas Remedias** (Máximo Gómez No 71; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-6pm), two blocks off Parque Martí, is the next best thing to partying here on December 24. The downstairs photo gallery recaps last year's fanfare, while the upstairs rooms show the intriguing history of this tradition, including scale models of floats and graphic depictions of how the fireworks are made. Another room is jammed with feathers, headdresses and tassels from the year previous.

The friendly staff and interesting exhibitions make the **Galería del Arte Carlos Enriquez** (Parque Martí No 2; admission free; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm) worth a peek. A gifted painter hailing from Zulueta, Enriquez called his studio 'Hurón Azul', a name adopted by Uneac's cultural space (p133) and a tasty paladar (p127), both in Habana.

Fourteen kilometers south of Remedios on the nice country road to Placetás is **Zulueta, 'la cuna del fútbol'** (the birthplace of soccer). In the sleepy square there, you'll find Cuba's only monument to the sport – a big, mounted football. You might catch an afternoon match at the town's showpiece stadium. This is a good alternate route for (motor)cyclists between Santa Clara and Cayo Santa María.

Sleeping

Hotel Mascotte (Cubanacán; ☎ 39 51 44; Parque Martí; r CUC\$46) This beautiful colonial building dates from 1869 and is the only hotel in town. Run by the Cubanacán chain, the service here is friendly and the accommodation spacious, clean and carefully restored. The nicest of the 10 rooms are numbers one to five (they have balconies overlooking the main square).

Eating

Las Arcadas (Parque Martí) The Mascotte's restaurant, serving standard meat and seafood fare, is the only game in town for a real meal outside of the casas particulares.

It's a case of 'nice location, shame about the food' as you check out the scant selection of eating places that ring Remedios' adorable Parque Martí.

CASAS PARTICULARES – REMEDIOS

Tranquil Remedios has close to 20 casas to supplement its solitary hotel.

Cecilio Acosta Herrera & Ania González Lozano (☎ 39 56 24; José A Peña No 75C btwn Maceo & La Pastora; r CUC\$20-25; 📞) Two attic rooms with negligible natural light share a bath.

La China & Richard (☎ 39 66 49; Maceo No 68 btwn Fe del Valle & Cupertino García; r CUC\$25; 📞) Friendly young couple. Room has terrace and meals are available. Richard can give you the low down on local history.

'Villa Colonial' – Frank & Arelys (☎ 39 62 74; cnr Maceo No 43 & Ave General Carrillo; r CUC\$20-25; 📞) Elegant house with high ceilings. Accommodation has separate entrance, lobby and sitting area. Nice young hosts, new on the scene.

La Fé (Máximo Gómez No 126) A peso place that serves the most meager of snacks opposite the Parroquia; don't miss the impressive stone counter snaking through the place.

Driver's Bar (Jose' A Peña No 61; ☎ 8am-10pm) Serves peso meals on one side and is a non-sense saloon on the other.

Entertainment

El Louvre (Máximo Gómez No 122) On the south side of the square, this is a café that accepts Convertibles and has a great parkside location. Locals will tell you it's the oldest bar in the country in continuous service – since 1866. If you're looking for a room/paladar/taxi, park yourself here, have a drink and wait for the offers.

Bar Juvenil (Adel Río No 47; ☎ 9pm-1am Sat & Sun) If you feel like dancing, head to this courtyard disco, near Máximo Gómez (enter via park), with palms, pillars and Moorish tiles. During the day there's table tennis and dominoes; despite the name, this peso place is alcohol-free, making it even more of a novelty than its colonial ambience.

Next door to El Louvre is **Las Leyendas**, an ARTex cultural center with music that opened in 2003. A block east of the park is the elegant old **Teatro Rubén M Villena** (Cienfuegos No 30) with dance performances, plays and Theater Guiñol for kids. The schedule is posted in the window and tickets are in pesos. Additional cultural activities can be found in the **Casa de Cultura Agustín J Crespo** (José A Peña No 67), opposite the Parroquia, **Uneac**

LAS PARRANDAS

Conceived in the early 1800s in the colonial town of Remedios, *Las Parrandas* is a cacophonous mix of carnival versus dancing competition versus explosive firework display gone haywire. There's even a bit of religious imagery thrown in for good measure.

Every year on December 24 the town divides into two teams based on various historical allegiances. Each team secretly builds an enormous float depicting anything from Simon Bolívar to a '60s pop culture icon. As the floats are hauled into the main square on Christmas Eve, the rum starts to flow and a huge singing and dancing extravaganza ensues with each team trying to outdo the other.

The festival climaxes around midnight with a deafening fireworks display, which quickly develops into a competition between rival neighborhoods – the prize going to the loudest, as opposed to the most spectacular, explosive devices. With the result duly announced, the victorious winners dance jubilantly through the streets with the not-so-disappointed losers coming in close behind. By morning – with hangovers setting in – the result is all but forgotten with frenzied firework fever giving way to seasonal goodwill.

Similar *Parrandas* displays can be seen in the towns of Caibarién and Placitas in Villa Clara Province, and Chambers and Punta Allegre in neighboring Ciego de Ávila.

(Maceo No 25), and – in a city that invented *Las Parrandas* – outside in the parks and squares.

Getting There & Away

The bus station is on the southern side of town at the beginning of the excellent 45km road to Santa Clara. Theoretically there is one daily bus to and from Santa Clara (one hour), twice daily service to Caibarién (20 minutes) and two departures Monday, Wednesday and Friday to Zulueta (30 minutes). Fares are CUC\$2 or less.

A taxi from the bus station to Caibarién will cost CUC\$3(ish) one way, and CUC\$5 to Santa Clara if you bargain hard. A bicitaxi from the bus station to Parque Martí is two pesos.

CAIBARIÉN

☎ 42 / pop 40,798

Caibarién, located on the coast 9km east of Remedios, is Villa Clara's main Atlantic port and has a large fishing fleet. It's a colorful little town, retaining a quaint, ramshackle feel despite the massive tourism development on nearby Cayo Santa María. Not worth a visit in its own right, Caibarién makes an alternative base for travelers who don't want to shell out the all-inclusive prices on the Cayos. Its December *Parrandas* are – allegedly – second only to Remedios in their explosiveness.

Havanatur (☎ 35 11 71; Ave 9 btwn Calle 8 & 10) can arrange accommodation on Cayo Santa

María. Cadeca and Banco Popular de Ahorro have outlets nearby.

Sleeping & Eating

You can find a private room if you hang around the main square looking foreign.

Virginia's Pension (☎ 36 33 03; www.virginiaspension.com; Ciudad Pesquera No 73; r CUC\$20-25; P ☎) Among the handful of legal places, this is the most popular; it's a reputable professional joint run by Virginia and Osmany Rodríguez.

There are a couple of passable places to eat including **Cafetería La Cubanita** (Calle 14 & Av 21) and the **Villa Blanca** (Av 9 cnr Calle 18), which serves up a local specialty known as Perro Soup. It's better than its name suggests. There's also an **agropecuario** (Calle 6) near the train station.

Entertainment

Piste de baile (Calle 4; admission 2 pesos) Surprisingly, Caibarién has a hot, happening disco near the train station. It's known by a generic name (*piste de baile* means dance floor) and it jumps with hundreds of young locals on weekends.

Getting There & Away

Four buses a day go to Remedios (CUC\$1, 20 minutes), the 4:30am and 2pm departures go all the way to Santa Clara (CUC\$2, 90 minutes) and three go to Yaguajay (CUC\$1.50, 45 minutes) from Caibarién's old blue-and-white **bus & train station** (Calle 6)

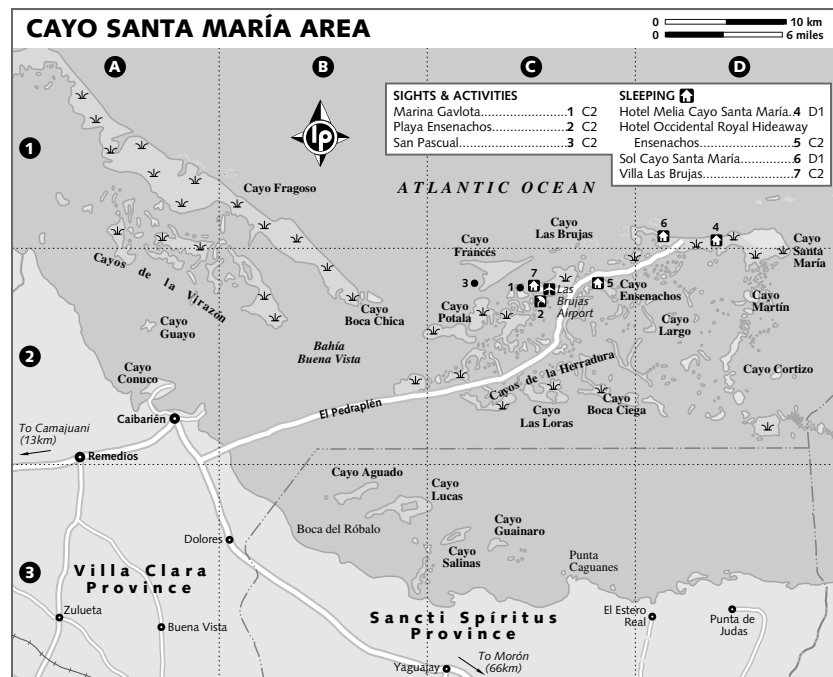
CUBAN COFFEE

With their abundant tree cover and balmy year-round humidity, the Escambray Mountains provide ideal conditions for growing coffee; and it is here that some of Cuba's finest varieties are produced. Contrary to popular belief the plant is not indigenous to the island, unlike tobacco. In fact, it was only after the arrival of the French Cuba, following a bloody slave uprising in Haiti in 1791, that *cafetales* (coffee farms) established themselves as a parallel economy to sugar.

Since the onset of the *período especial* (special period) in 1991, coffee production has been coordinated by Raúl Castro through the much-lauded Turquino Program. Grown on small worker-organized cooperatives and incorporating integrated organic cultivation methods, Cuban coffee is picked by hand (often by volunteer soldiers and students) before being transported by mule back from the fields where it is left out to dry in the sun on large cement patios.

These days approximately 2% of Cuba's arable land is given over to coffee production with the industry supporting a workforce of 265,000 during the harvesting season.

In contrast to the standard Starbucks tippie, the Cubans love their coffee strong and sweet. Served espresso style and laced with excessive amounts of caffeine and sugar *café cubana*, as the local brew is known, has become the national drink of choice and the first thing a hospitable *campesino* will offer tired and thirsty visitors.



on the western side of town. There's also a daily phantom train to Santa Clara via Remedios (CUC\$1.50, 90 minutes), leaving Caibarién in the morning and returning in the afternoon. The Servi-Cupet gas station is at the entrance to town from Remedios, behind the huge crab statue by Florencio Gelabert Pérez (1983).

CAYERÍAS DEL NORTE

Coined the white rose of the Jardines del Rey, Cayo Santa María lies at the western end of the Archipiélago de Sabana-Camagüey, 25km west of Cayo Guillermo. Nestled peacefully on its leeward side are Cayo Ensenachos, Cayo Las Brujas and a smattering of smaller coral keys known communally as the Cayerías del Norte. Between 1989 and 1996, a massive 48km causeway called **El Pedraplén** was constructed across the Bahía Buena Vista from the fishing port of Caibarién at a cost of 100 million pesos. Included in the design were 45 bridges to allow an exchange of tidal waters, an improvement over the earlier Cayo Coco causeway that caused serious environmental damage. This

is all part of a long-term plan to provide 10,000 hotel rooms in 28 resorts on these pristine keys. How this invasion will affect the region's 248 species of flora and thriving colonies of flamingos, seagulls and aningas is anyone's guess.

Sights & Activities

Most water-based activities can be arranged at **Marina Gaviota** (☎ 35 02 13), next to Villa Las Brujas. Highlights include a one-hour catamaran excursion with snorkeling (CUC\$15), a half-day catamaran cruise (CUC\$36), a sunset cruise (CUC\$49), deep sea fishing (CUC\$200, four people) and a two-hour Aqua bike excursion (CUC\$60). You can also enjoy the secluded confines of nearby Las Salinas beach for a small fee (see Eating, p284).

One of the area's oldest curiosities is the wreck of the **San Pascual**, a San Diego tanker built in 1920 that got wrecked in 1933 on the opposite side of nearby Cayo Francés. Later the ship was used to store molasses, and later still it was opened up as a rather surreal hotel/restaurant (until 2004). Journeys out

IF YOU HAVE A FEW MORE DAYS

Baños de Elguea, 136km northwest of Santa Clara nearly kissing the Matanzas provincial border, is a legendary health resort. According to local lore, a slave who had contracted a serious skin disease in 1860 was banished by his master, sugar mill owner Don Francisco Elguea, so that he wouldn't infect others. Sometime later the man returned completely cured. He explained that he had relieved his affliction merely by bathing in the region's natural mineral spring. A bathhouse was built and the first hotel opened in 1917. Today these sulfur springs and the mud are used by medical professionals to treat skin irritations, arthritis and rheumatism. The waters here reach a temperature of 50°C and are rich in bromide, chlorine, radon, sodium and sulfur.

Situated north of Coralillo, **Hotel & Spa Elguea** (☎ 68 62 90; s/d incl breakfast low season CUC\$30/40, high CUC\$36/48; P ♻️ 🚰) has 139 rooms with numerous spa treatments such as mud therapy, hydrotherapy and massages available at the nearby thermal pools. Regulars claim that its rejuvenating powers are among the best in Latin America.

to see the ship are included in some of the snorkeling excursions.

Sleeping

Villa Las Brujas (Gaviota; ☎ 20 41 99; s/d low season CUC\$56/70, high CUC\$61/80; P ♻️) Gaviota operates this place along a coral ridge overlooking the crystalline sea at Punta Periquillo on Cayo Las Brujas, 3km from the airport. These 24 *cabañas* make a great escape to one of Cuba's prettiest areas and the price is the most economical on the keys. Integrating pleasantly into the surrounding mangroves, the detached buildings overlook the pristine (and uncrowded) white sands of Playa Las Salinas just beyond the resort.

Sol Cayo Santa Maria (☎ 35 15 00; r from low season from CUC\$105, high CUC\$152; P ♻️ 🚰 🚰) The first of the fancy resorts to colonize the further-flung cayos, Sol Cayo Santa Maria is 8km on the main road beyond Las Brujas. It's a 300-room, four-star resort with all the amenities you would expect from a Sol Méliá enterprise. Scoop up a cheap online deal or book a room with Havanatur in Caibarién to avoid the exorbitant rack rates.

Melia Cayo Santa Maria (☎ 35 05 00; r low season from CUC\$127, high CUC\$161; P ♻️ 🚰 🚰) The Sol's bigger and newer sister hotel was opened for business in December 2003 with five glittering stars. It has all of Sol's luxury amenities and a little more besides,

including a spa, six restaurants, a health club and a white sandy beach that has to be seen to be believed. Fish around for a good deal.

Hotel Occidental Royal Hideaway Ensenachos (s/d from CUC\$255/300; P ♻️ 🚰 🚰) The Ensenacho area was once famous for its paradisiacal virgin white-sand beach. Virgin no more! The five-star Royal Hideaway opened in December 2005 to rave reviews and boasts everything from a Japanese restaurant to 506 luxury rooms. The beach is still here, of course, but now it's closed to all but the wristband-wearing guests.

Eating

For nonhotel guests the best bet for a decent meal is in the Farallón restaurant perched like a bird's nest overlooking blissful Las Salinas beach. Access is via the Gaviota Villa Las Brujas. A snack lunch with use of beach, bathrooms and parking costs CUC\$7. The coffee's good; the views even better.

Getting There & Away

Day-trippers can easily zoom in from Caibarién (56km), Remedios (65km) or Santa Clara (110km) to dip their toes in Cayo Santa Maria's warm turquoise waters. The causeway is accessed from Caibarién and there's a toll booth (CUC\$2 each way) 15km along. There is no public transport out here.

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