

CUBA

The Insiders' Guide



Discover the best of Cuba's landscapes, colonial architecture, and immutable revolutionary spirit with our local insiders.



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Welcome!

Put down the cigars and step out of the vintage cars! Join our local insiders and wander through historical sites of revolution, taste fresh peso food, shoot the breeze with the locals at a *casa particular*, or hike through limestone caves and emerald-green waterfalls – we’re going to show you the *real* Cuba.

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 There’s plenty to keep you entertained here. The best part? It’s not choc-a-bloc with tourists just yet.



Our Insiders’ Picks of Cuba’s Top 10 Experiences

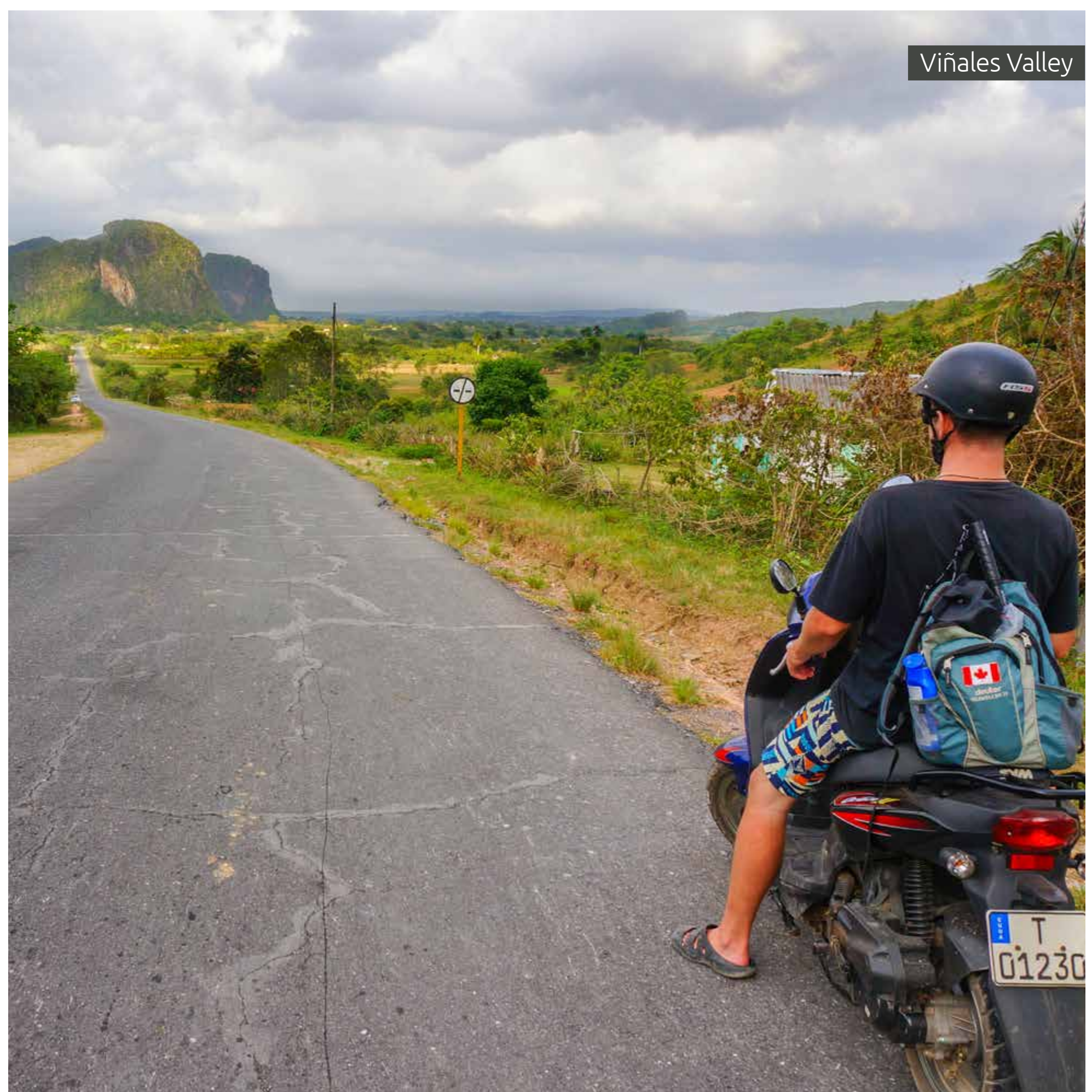
Explore the Viñales Valley

With red-earth lands, valleys of tobacco plantations, and limestone monoliths, it’s no surprise that Viñales Valley is Cuba’s most scenic natural attraction.

There’s plenty to keep outdoor-lovers entertained here: travelers can go trekking, climbing, zip-lining, caving, and horse-riding through this UNESCO World Heritage-listed gem. The best part? It’s not choc-a-bloc with tourists just yet.

Roam through Habana Vieja, Havana’s colonial enclave

Havana’s intensely cinematic, colonial



Goats on the Road

core fulfills every traveler's image of Cuba.

Stroll through the main drag of Calle Obispo with the sounds of salsa and rumba in the air; join the Hemmingway trail at Hotel Ambos Mundos and sip a mojito at La Bodiguita del Medio.

Don't miss the Museo de la Revolución for an immersive coverage of the Cuban Revolution, as well as the key battles and political aftermath. Just don't expect neutrality of coverage here.

Stay and dine with the locals at a *casa particular*

There are plenty of hotels in Cuba, but if you're looking to support a local family and have a richer travel experience, check out a *casa particular* – a local guesthouse – for a uniquely Cuban experience.

Casas are privately-run by locals, and the owners always make you feel like family.

For a glimpse into authentic, homemade Cuban dishes, be sure to have at least one dinner at the *casa*. This is where you'll see Cuba's flavors really shine!

Dance the night away in Trinidad

Cuba's best-preserved colonial town, Trinidad, is a charmer. Whichever night of the week you arrive, head to the wide stone staircase beside the Iglesia Parroquial and find Casa de la Música.

This open-air venue is Trinidad's most popular choice for a night out. Dance the night away under the stars,



Havana

Death to Stock

“There are plenty of hotels in Cuba, but if you're looking to support a local family and have a richer travel experience, check out a *casa particular*.”

or just sip a mojito and enjoy the entertainment. There are live salsa shows and music every night of the week.

It's popular with locals and travelers alike, so you're bound to make some new friends.

Experience Carnival in Santiago de Cuba

Birthplace of the conga and an exotic blend of African, Chinese, Indigenous, French Haitian, and Spanish cultures, it's only fitting that Cuba's biggest party – Carnival – is held in this exotic city.

Every year, towards the end of July, the former capital explodes in a joyous celebration of music, dance, and color. Costumed performers and dance troops fill the streets in impromptu parades, and contagious drum beats burst from every corner over the two-week celebration.



Havana

The Cuban national holiday is often in the middle of the celebration, so if you can, it's a good idea to plan your trip around July.

Spend a day on the bay of Cienfuegos

One of the most inviting city ports you could hope for, Cienfuegos – known as La Perla del Sur or the Southern Pearl – overlooks a picturesque bay.

At the 36-berth Marina Cienfuegos, you can charter a sailboat, arrange a sport-fishing excursion, book a cruise around the harbor, rent a Hobie Cat, or take a windsurfing class.

You can also rent snorkeling equipment and sign up for scuba diving trips here to a large coral reef, directly west of the beach. Either way, you're guaranteed an unforgettable day on the water.

Hike through Topes de Collantes National Park

Southwest of Trinidad, at the heart of Sierra del Escambray, is this beautiful national park. Here, you'll find ancient caves, rushing rivers, plunging

waterfalls, and crystalline pools.

There are lots of forest trails to choose from here, and if you're a nature-lover, Topes de Collantes is a must. It's home to tremendous biodiversity, including the eye-catching cartacuba, rare hummingbirds, and the tocororo – Cuba's national bird.

Independent travelers can hire a car, or for an easier option, sign up for an organized tour: not all trails are well-marked.

Scuba dive in Jardines de Rey

Some 30km from the mainland at Ciego de Ávila, Cuba's Gardens of the King remained unexplored till the late '80s.

These picture-perfect islands – woven with mangroves, lagoons, gleaming white sands, and crystal-clear waters – are ringed with a spectacular, 400km coral reef.



Topes de Collantes National Park

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At the 36-berth Marina Cienfuegos, you can charter a sailboat, arrange a sport-fishing excursion, book a cruise around the harbor, rent a Hobie Cat, or take a windsurfing class.

You can go snorkeling or diving here among the technicolor marine life, and with more than 30 dive sites dotting the dramatic coastline, it's perfect for divers of all abilities.

Surf the waves of La Setenta

Known to have waves up to eight feet high, this shallow rock reef is not far from the old center of Havana.

Like many places on the north shore, the best time to hit the waves here is when there's a massive storm in the Gulf of Mexico, which sends the surf crashing on the Caribbean islands.

Because of the underwater topography, access to the surf can be difficult from the coastline, but there's a random concrete slab sticking out into the ocean where many people find easier entry.

Soak up the sun on Baracoa's unspoiled beaches

If you're looking for a little sand and sun, Baracoa is a must on the itinerary.

The black-sand city beach, Playa Baracoa, is the most famous, but look beyond for a tiny slither of sparkling white sand – Playa Blanca – to get away from the crowds.

For custard-colored scoops of sand, head 21km northwest of the city, to the coves at Playa Maguana, or go southeast towards the Yumurí River for slithers of tiny, unspoiled beaches.

Get a taste of local peso food at Playa Mangilito, a beach shack restaurant. Tour, taxi, or bike along this remote coastal road for a relaxed day trip.

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General Cost Guide

CUP VS CUC

There are two different currencies in Cuba: the CUC (often pronounced kook by Cubans) and the CUP (The National Peso). CUC is pegged equally to the US dollar, while you'll get around 25 CUP for 1 CUC.



Many people believe this means there's a tourist currency and a local currency, but this isn't entirely true.

While almost everything tourists buy will be in CUC, if you get a chance to use CUP for things like produce, street food, and some local transport, do it! Using CUP can be a real money saver.

ESTIMATED TRAVEL BUDGET

Cuba on a shoestring: US \$35/day

Hardcore budget travelers could easily get by on US \$35 a day in Cuba if you're staying in the cheaper *casa particular* and eating mostly peso food.

It will afford you slow travel, with a cheap Astral bus ride every 3-4 days, and maybe even the odd tour.

Midrange: US \$50/day

This is a pretty comfortable travel budget for Cuba. You'll be able to stay in a nice *casa particular* and maybe the odd midrange hotel. You'll be able to eat a mix of peso food and nice sit down meals and can go on a few tours during your trip – maybe even a dive or two.

Top-End: US \$100+/day

The sky's the limit in the top-end category. Stay in swanky hotels, start every day off with a mimosa, and finish each evening with a delicious lobster meal, a fine bottle of wine, and a Cordoba cigar at sunset in your private Jacuzzi.

Cuba has enough luxury for even the swankiest traveler.

Climate & Weather

Cuba has a subtropical climate year-round, with a typically Caribbean temperature of 24°C (75°F) on average. With distinct wet, dry, and hurricane seasons, it can drop as low as 15°C (59°F) at night, so it does depend on the time of year you're visiting.

High travel season

The dry season of December through to mid-April, as well as all of July and August, is typically high season for tourists. Spring (around March and April) is the best weather-wise, since you'll miss the heat and humidity of summer. Prices are generally lower between Jan-Feb too, which is just before the Cuban holiday season.

If you're looking to surf (and you should while you're in Cuba), November to April is the best time visit. The Atlantic groundswell comes in from the north-east during this time, producing some decent barrels.

Wet season in Cuba

Summer – between May and October – is generally considered the wet season. With tops of 29°C-30°C (84°F-86°F), expect it to rain at least a couple of days every fortnight. Don't worry, though the rain comes down thick and heavy, it'll soon clear.

Hurricane season in Cuba

Cuba sits in the hurricane corridor in



Siboney Beach, Santiago de Cuba

the Gulf of Mexico, so the island can be hit by crazy storms. Though this could occur anytime during summer's wet season, September and October have the highest chance of serious storms.

If you're traveling during this time, it's important to be aware of all hurricane warnings. This is especially so in Eastern Cuba, which experiences the highest heat, humidity, and hurricane threat.

What to Pack

- Bring layers so you can adapt throughout the day. Your base layer should be anything that will help you beat the heat and humidity, but bring a light sweater for the cooler nights.
- If you're sensitive to the sun, bring plenty of sunscreen, a hat, and sunglasses to protect your skin.
- Cuba's a pretty relaxed place, but if you plan on going dancing or seeing a show, bring something a little smarter like a shirt or a sundress.
- Bring a good quality mosquito repellent (with DEET) and always remember to apply every morning, topping up every time you've gone for a swim, or if you're sweating heavily.
- Pro tip: keep a packet of tissues with you in your day bag; it's not always available in restrooms throughout the island.

Where to Stay

Hotels and resorts are aplenty in Cuba, and whatever your budget, you're spoiled for choice here. But if you're looking to support a local family and have a richer travel experience, check out a *casa particular* – a local homestay – for a uniquely Cuban experience.

Casas Particulares (private homes)

In 1997, the Government announced that Cubans could register their homes as privately-run businesses. Since then, locals have been renting out their rooms to foreigners.

Casas particulares are set up more like guesthouses than home stays, but the owners are there to make you feel like family. You can party with the owners, have dinner with them (or a cigar!), or just say hello and enjoy a quieter stay.

These homes are set up for travelers. Typically, the owner will live next door, upstairs, or down the road.

You'll find anywhere from one to five private rooms, many of which have an attached bathroom. Each room will usually have air-conditioning for those hot nights, and some basic furniture. Sometimes, there will be a kitchen in the home that you can use, plus a common area.

If you have any particular needs



Casa common area in Vinales

Goats on the Road

or requests for your casa (such as English-speaking hosts), be sure to check before reserving a room.

To book your stay, check out websites such as CasaHavanaParticular.com, HostelsClub.com, and HostelWorld.com. You can now also book through Airbnb, but you'll have to pay a service fee of between 6%-12% with this option.

Hostels

In Cuba, there aren't really any "hostels" in the traditional sense: A hostel typically has lots of dorm beds, a communal kitchen, a backpacker vibe, and activities available on the cheap.

In Cuba, expect to find more B&B's, homestays, and *casas* instead.

Recently, many of the *casas* have started listing their properties on websites like HostelWorld.com, but if

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***Casas particulares* are set up more like guesthouses than homestays, but the owners are there to make you feel like family.**

3 Tips for First-Timers

- Check the reviews from other travelers before you book your room. These are shown on the booking platforms directly, or search on [TripAdvisor.com](https://www.tripadvisor.com).
- The Wi-Fi situation in Cuba is a bit frustrating and time-consuming, so if you know which cities you want to visit during your trip, try to book all of your rooms ahead of time in your home country, rather than trying to find Wi-Fi in Cuba to book as you go.
- When you're in Cuba, you can also ask your *casa* to call or email the next one you're considering staying at. If it's low season, this option is OK, but leaving your accommodation until the day before isn't a great idea in the high/shoulder season.



Cayo Levisa cabanas, Western Cuba

Claire Boobbyer

you're looking for a true hostel stay, you may be disappointed.

If you'd prefer to stay in an actual hostel, there are a few available around Havana, but in reality, the only difference between them and a *casa* is that they have bunk beds.

Hotels

For a more luxurious stay, check in to one of the many hotels or resorts,



Havana

which are state-run rather than owned by individual Cubans.

There are a few iconic hotels in Cuba that you may want to stay at, or at least pop in to have a look.

The elegant National Hotel in Vedado, Havana has been welcoming guests since the 1930s. Some notable names who have stayed include Winston Churchill, Frank Sinatra, and Ava Gardner.

Also in Havana is Hotel Saratoga. With its neoclassical architecture and recent restoration, this gorgeous hotel has attracted the likes of Beyonce and Jay-Z.

To book a hotel in Cuba, search online or visit [Trivago.com](https://www.trivago.com), [Expedia.com](https://www.expedia.com), or [Booking.com](https://www.booking.com). Keep in mind that these historic hotels come with a hefty price tag, upwards of US \$300 a night, so it might not be for everyone.

Getting Around

Plane, train, coco-taxi, or classic cars... Cuba has some of the most interesting transportation options in the world. Just keep in mind that you're in the Caribbean – things may not run like they're supposed to, so keep a relaxed attitude and enjoy the ride.

Getting to Cuba

Americans, rejoice! You can now fly direct to Cuba from Atlanta, Charlotte, Houston, Los Angeles, Newark, New York, Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Orlando, and Tampa.

In order to travel legally to Cuba, US citizens must be traveling based on one of 12 official reasons. If you plan to travel to Cuba as a "tourist", technically this isn't allowed. Check out our [Visas and Vaccines section](#) for more details.

For all other nationalities, you can use "tourism" as your reason for traveling to Cuba, and you don't need to fill out



any visa forms – just a straightforward Tourist Card. These can usually be purchased at the airport before boarding your plane to Cuba. Note that if you're traveling via the US, the official reasons for travel still apply – even if you're not a US citizen.

You will also need to have travel insurance in order to be allowed to enter the country. If you arrive and you don't have proof of travel insurance, you'll be asked to purchase the Cuban Asistur policy – for \$5/day! The benefit limits might not be suitable, so it's a good idea to [get a quote](#) for travel insurance before you leave.

Renting cars in Cuba

Having your own wheels to explore a destination is something we always advocate. Unfortunately, in Cuba, it costs quite a bit to rent a car - around US \$80 per day. Because these are

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Viazul is the tourist bus on offer, and it's the inner-city transport of choice for travelers.



Coats on the Road

Viazul tour bus

government-run, it's the same price all around the country.

A cheaper option is to rent a motorbike for US \$25 a day, or US \$20 if you rent it for three or more days.

Viñales is a great spot to have a motorbike. You can head out to the San Tomas Cave, drive somewhere for sunset, or venture off on the two-hour trip to Cayo Jutias, a beautiful nearby beach!

You can also hire a driver for the day, or for an hour or so, to take you around in one of Cuba's famous classic cars.

Tourist buses

Viazul is the tourist bus on offer, and it's the inner-city transport of choice for travelers: it runs on time, is generally clean, and quite comfortable.

You can purchase your Viazul bus tickets at the bus station, or check with an Infotur office.

Shared cars

Another option for traveling between cities is a shared car. These can be arranged at Infotur offices, and at your accommodation. It's basically just a normal car or van that can fit about five

people. You'll be picked up at your *casa*, and dropped off at the next one. Door to door service!

The cost is the same as the bus. For example: from Trinidad to Havana, expect to pay around US \$35.

Local buses

Local buses are always very full, and very cheap (US \$0.04), paid for using CUP.

Coco-taxis

In Havana, there are round tricycles that resemble a yellow coconut. This is a very gimmicky way to get around, but fun nonetheless.

Collectivos

Collectivo cars run on set routes around the major cities. Tell your *casa* or hotel your destination, and they should be able to help you with what number of



Coco-taxi

Coats on the Road

collectivo to take, how much the price should be etc. The cost is very low at US \$0.50 / ride. Paid with CUP currency.

Bicycle taxis

This manpowered mode of transport is affordable and good for a quick ride.

Taxi

Old cars are used as taxis in Cuba, whether it's for an intercity trip, or a local journey, you'll find yourself in a car that's much older than you are!

Classic cars

The touristy way to get around. Tour rides in a shiny car are about an hour and cost US \$15 or so.

Trains

There are some old locomotive trains putting around Cuba, but for the most part, you have to be pretty patient to be a train traveler on this Caribbean-paced island. Even though there have been improvements to fuel supply and the rail fleet, the trains are still often unreliable and not the most comfortable.



Goats on the Road

Key Phrases for Travelers

What's up?: *¿Que bola, acere?*

What's your name?: *¿Como se llama?*

My name is _____: *Me llamo _____.*

Thank you: *Gracias*

Sorry: *Lo siento*

Let's go: *Dale*

More or less: *Más o menos*

The bus : *El guagua*

Where is _____?: *¿Dónde está _____ ?*

La Yuma: America - it can be pejorative or cheeky

La Revolución: The 1959 Revolution

Ropa vieja: Local shredded beef specialty. Literally "old clothes."

Arroz morro (sometimes just "morro"): Black beans and rice

Mani: Peanuts (street vendors sell them in small white paper cones)

Cajita: Literally a little box, usually contains a delicious cheap lunch of rice, beans and fried chicken.

_____ **Napolitano:** In red sauce, e.g. spaghetti



Daeth to Stock

Driving around Cuba

Cuban Cuisine

If someone tells you that the food in Cuba is bland and boring, they probably ate at an all-inclusive resort or a “luxury” restaurant. The best local food is found elsewhere in the country, so it’s time to debunk some common misconceptions surrounding Cuba’s food scene.

Local restaurants

These days, there are some excellent, locally-owned and operated restaurants serving Cuban and international fare. Cuban people have only been allowed to legally own and run their own restaurants since 2011, but they’re already popping up everywhere.

Eating at these *paladares* are a great way to help put your tourist dollars in the pockets of the locals, rather than state-run establishments.

Fresh fish and seafood are the stars of most menus in Cuba. A few stand-out dishes are the *ropa vieja* (stewed and shredded beef with tomato sauce and spices), *paella* (the Cuban version of the Spanish dish – usually found in a clay pot), *lechón asado* (spit-roasted pig) and *enchilado* (a fish dish cooked in wine and spicy tomato sauce).

Generally, if you’re in a busy plaza or square in Cuba, menu prices will be quite high, while the quality might be lacking.

Head away from the touristy spots



to see what local gems you can find. Also, make sure to chat with your *casa particular* about the best local restaurants in the city you’re visiting.

Eating at your *casa particular*

For a glimpse into authentic, homemade Cuban dishes, eat at a *casa particular* (a Cuban homestay). This is where you’ll see Cuba’s flavors really shine!

Many Cubans are excellent cooks, but haven’t had the chance to open up a restaurant due to past restrictions from the Government and/or money constraints.

For a mere US \$5-\$10, you can have an incredible spread of food. Typically, breakfast is included in the cost of a night’s stay at the *casa*. Expect fresh fruit juice (guava, mango, etc.), eggs of your choice, soft bread, homemade jam and slices of tropical fruit. Plus,

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Generally, if you’re in a busy plaza or square in Cuba, menu prices will be quite high, while the quality might be lacking.

strong Cuban coffee!

For dinner, you'll need to notify your *casa* in advance so they have time to purchase all of the fresh ingredients.

Each *casa* is different, but the portions are huge, the ingredients are fresh, and the food is made with love.

Peso food

Peso food are meals that are available from little shops, around the country, which accept CUP (the National currency).

These foods are unbelievably affordable, and if you're a traveler on a tight budget, you can easily get by on US \$3 a day while still treating yourself to three round meals a day.

That's right – peso food is often a buck a plate (sometimes less).

Some foods that you can buy with CUP include: fresh fruit juice (US \$0.04-\$0.08), egg & cheese sandwich (US \$0.36), sugarcane juice (US \$0.04), pork & rice meal (US \$1.50), pizzas (US\$0.24-\$1.20), ice cream cone (US \$0.04), coffee (US \$0.04), beer (US \$0.50) and fruit & vegetables from the market.



Lobster at casa in Havana

Goats on the Road

“**In Havana, you can dine on a lobster meal at the *casa* for just US \$10!**”

Cost of Food in Cuba

Food is one of those things in Cuba that varies greatly in price.

Typically, you can get “peso pizzas” for around US \$0.25-\$1, or some rice and meat meals for US \$1.50. There are also some stands selling delicious fresh juice for just US \$0.04 and egg and cheese sandwiches for just US \$0.35!

On the other hand, if you eat at a nicer sit-down restaurant that serves food with more frills – such as pasta, seafood, or steak – you will be charged in CUC. These types of meals, while still good value, will usually cost around US\$8-\$15.

If you choose to stay in a *casa particular*, you can ask the hosts to cook up a meal for you (highly recommended).

These dinners are often tastier and cheaper than you'll find in nicer restaurants, and you get to enjoy the experience of eating in a local's home.

In Havana, you can dine on a lobster meal at the *casa* for just US \$10!



Peso pizza

Goats on the Road

Cultural Highlights

Music, dance, rum, and cigars – so many aspects of Cuban culture have become famous throughout the world. But, there’s nothing like actually experiencing them in Cuba. Here are several iconic and lesser-known cultural highlights to add to your itinerary.

Traditional music

Perhaps the most famous spot in the entire country for traditional music is Santiago de Cuba’s Casa de la Trova – literally, the House of Troubadour Music. This multi-storied, 50-year-old institution has hosted some of the country’s brightest talents.

Stop by in the afternoon to catch intimate acoustic performances, or come in the evening for bigger shows with dancing.

Cuba’s evolving dining scene

In recent years, Cuba’s loosening



Havana



Havana

restrictions have led to an explosion of privately-run restaurants known as *paladares*.

These establishments now offer some of the finest, most creative cuisine in the country.

The *paladar* scene is ever-changing, so be sure to ask around locally for up-to-date recommendations.

Cuban rum

No drink is as much a part of Cuban culture as rum, and you’ll find plenty of opportunities to down a Cuba libre (rum and Coke), mojito, or daiquiri during your stay.

To explore Cuba’s rum heritage, head to the Museum of Rum in Old Havana, operated by the country’s most famous producer, Havana Club.

You’ll learn about the history of rum, see how it’s made, and finish off the tour with a small sample.

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No drink is as much a part of Cuban culture as rum.”



Fusterlandia

Part Gaudí, part pure Cuba, the quiet neighbourhood of Jaimanitas on the western edge of Havana has been converted into a whimsical public art gallery, brimming with colorful mosaics, surrealistic figures, and funky sculpted shapes.

It owes its unique character to the creative genius and community spirit of ceramicist and painter José Fuster, whose studio-workshop forms the project's centrepiece.

Cuban cigars

To learn about the process of making Cuba's world-famous cigars, pay a visit to one of Havana's cigar factories. The Partagás, Corona, and H. Upmann factories all offer tours, but you should check when you arrive to see what else is around.

In Pinar del Río province, the heart of Cuba's tobacco industry, various farms also welcome visitors, particularly in and around Viñales.

Depending on timing, you may be able to see various stages of production: from planting to

harvesting, drying, and finally, cigar-rolling.

Carnaval

Cuba's biggest Carnival celebration takes place annually in Santiago during the last week of July. It's a vibrant, colorful party bursting with conga parades and street performances. Be prepared for very hot weather and crowds.

If you're in town outside of the Carnival period, you can always visit the Museo del Carnaval, which has displays of carnival masks, instruments, costumes, historical photographs, and folkloric performances.

Jazz in Havana

Usually (but not always) held in December, the annual Havana International Jazz Festival attracts top musicians from around the world.

It can be difficult to obtain in-depth festival information far in advance, but no matter what time of year you're in Havana, you can always catch some world-class jazz at La Zorra y El Cuervo in the Vedado neighborhood.



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To learn about the process of making Cuba's world-famous cigars, pay a visit to one of Havana's cigar factories.

Santería, the Afro-Cuban Religion

Widely practiced in Cuba, Santería is a religion of Yoruban origin. This syncretic belief system is based on the worship of saints, known as orishas, many of whom are associated with the Roman Catholic saints.

A good place to learn more is at the Guanabacoa Museum, 5km east of Old Havana, or in Regla's church by the port, a short ferry ride across the harbor from Old Havana.

Travel Safety

Cuba is a safe country, with virtually no violent crime, although pick-pocketing and petty theft do happen. If you stay aware of your surroundings, you should be able to have a safe, enjoyable time.

Safety at night

Nightlife doesn't get started until about 10pm or later in Cuba, but it's generally safe. The biggest hazards are intoxicated people walking in the street, so be aware of your surroundings.

Sidewalks are poorly lit, and many have large holes, especially in Havana.

On average, Cubans make US \$18-\$20 a month. This means that if you want new friends to accompany you to a tourist restaurant or nightclub, you'll likely have to pay.

It's also not uncommon for *jineteros* or *jineteras* (a term that ranges from "hustler" to "sex worker", but tends



Santiago de Cuba



Old Havana

almost exclusively toward the latter when it refers to women) to befriend tourists.

There is no physical danger here, just be cognizant of the nature of your relationships and, as always, practice safe sex.

What to watch out for

Law enforcement is ubiquitous in Cuba, and protecting tourists is one of their main goals.

However, as part of that goal, many question Cubans who spend unsanctioned time with tourists, especially if the Cubans are local men and the tourists are women.

If you end up talking to the police because of this, remain calm and follow the lead of your Cuban friends, since there will be no negative ramifications for you, but there may be some for the Cubans.

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The biggest hazards are intoxicated people walking in the street, so be aware of your surroundings.



LGBT Pride Parade

Tips for solo female travelers

Like many parts of the world, street harassment is prevalent in Cuba. It's wrong, and you have every right to be upset by it.

Some people are able to tune it out, but others are not, and that is not your fault. Sadly, there really isn't anything you can do to prevent it, and you will see women harassed regardless of their clothing or behavior.

The most effective way to keep street harassment from ruining your trip is to connect with others about it, whether in person or online. If it becomes physical, please seek help immediately.

Piropos

Additionally, Cuba is known for *piropos*. This complimentary wordplay is expected to be clever, and is therefore seen as a cut above the all too common whistling and taunts. Feel free to throw back barbs, but know that playing along is often taken as flirting.

LGBT travelers in Cuba

For decades, LGBT Cubans were the black sheep of Cuba – outcasts trapped

on a Caribbean island that was at once conservative, Catholic, and communist.

While local LGBT people may experience legal or societal difficulties, LGBT visitors are highly unlikely to experience any challenges due to their sexuality.

While Cuba remains socially conservative, especially outside of big cities, times have changed dramatically.

Homosexuality was decriminalized in Cuba in 1979. Mariela Castro Espín – director of the Cuban National Center for Sex Education in Havana, LGBT activist, and daughter of President Raúl Castro – has helped improve Cuba's reputation around the world as a safer, more gay-friendly destination.

You'll find a visible gay scene in Havana: in the Vedado neighborhood, along the Malecón at the gay-popular Mi Cayito beach, and in bars and clubs that reflect a more innocent, pre-Grindr time.

Holding hands and basic affection isn't a big deal in Havana, especially in gay-friendly areas like the Vedado neighborhood in Havana. A little more caution is advised outside the city.

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The most effective way to keep street harassment from ruining your trip is to connect with others about it.

Top 3 Safety Tips

- Good shoes are hard to find in Cuba, so don't tie yours to your backpack or luggage. When at the beach, ask someone to watch over your things, as someone may steal your shoes while you're swimming.
- Tourists aren't allowed to swim off the Malecón in Havana, even though locals do. This is one of the few times law enforcement will interfere with tourists.
- There are only a few specific spots along the Malecón where you can climb back out of the ocean, so swim at your own risk.

Visas and Vaccinations

All travelers on vacation to Cuba require a Tourist Card to enter the country, and must take out health insurance for their trip. But what about vaccinations, and how should you go about acquiring a visa?

Visa requirements for travelers to Cuba (Non- US Residents)

Travelers flying to Cuba (not via the US) can purchase a green Cuba Tourist Card from their Cuban consulate, or a travel agent authorized to sell Cards.

Shop around as prices vary, and some airlines include the Tourist Card in the price of the flight.

If you're flying direct to Cuba from the USA, you must buy a US-issued, pink Tourist Card – whatever your nationality: A Tourist Card bought elsewhere is not valid for this journey.

Visa requirements for travel to Cuba (US Residents Only)

All travelers to Cuba must have a Tourist Card (aka a Tourist Visa) to enter Cuba. US citizens are only allowed to visit Cuba if their trip fits into one of the [12 categories of the General License for Travel](#) issued by the US Department of Treasury. Most travelers tick the People-to-People category, which requires a full-time schedule of educational activities, and US law requires travelers keep records of their trip.

Travel for pure tourism is still prohibited under the 1960s US Trade Embargo against Cuba. US Travelers, having ticked the appropriate category on an airline's booking engine, can purchase a direct flight to the island and buy their pink Cuba Tourist Card through the Cuban Consulate, an airline, or at the airport.

US airlines charge different prices for the Tourist Cards; all offer complete instructions on their websites.

Foreigners on a direct flight from the US to Cuba must also abide by US law, and follow the same procedures.

Other types of visas for travelers to Cuba

Other types of travel to Cuba – which requires the purchase of a visa – include Journalism, Business, Event, Diplomatic, or Family. Be sure to check your country's requirements before you leave.

Tourist Cards are generally issued for 30 days, and can be extended in-country for another 30 days.

Different rules and different extension prices apply for different nationalities. The extension requires the purchase of a bank stamp before attending an immigration office.

Health insurance documents for travel to Cuba

All travelers who enter Cuba must have insurance documentation. Health insurance has been mandatory since May 2010.

Random checks may be made on entry; a definite check is made when you request to extend your stay (*prorrogar*) at an immigration office in Cuba.

Travelers' Vaccinations for Cuba

- Standard vaccinations are required and protection from some mosquito-transmitted infections is essential.
- Make sure you're vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus, and polio.
- Take advice on rabies, and Hepatitis A protection.
- Carry a Yellow Fever vaccination certificate if you have recently been to a country affected by Yellow Fever.
- Malaria has not been reported in Cuba, but it has had outbreaks of mosquito-borne Dengue, and a few confirmed cases of mosquito-transmitted Zika (187 cases were reported in 2016).
- Cuba has also had outbreaks of Cholera; a vaccine is available.



WESTERN CUBA

A journey into the Western provinces of Cuba offers a taste of both rural and urban life, with some spectacular landscapes and adventures along the way. Whether you're drawn to the breathtaking scenery of the Viñales Valley or the salsa-filled air of Havana, western Cuba has it all.

Havana

With stunning architecture and gritty revolutionary landmarks galore, a visit to the country's political, cultural, and economic capital is the best way to kick off your Cuba adventure.

Habana Vieja

First-time visitors tend to dedicate the lion's share of their time to Old Havana. And rightly so: the city's intensely cinematic, colonial core fulfills every traveler's image of Cuba.

Day and night, the sound of salsa and rumba fills the air along Calle Obispo. Watch some of Cuba's artists at work in their studios, or join the Hemingway Trail at Hotel Ambos Mundos, where Big Ern lived from 1932-39 and penned chapters of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

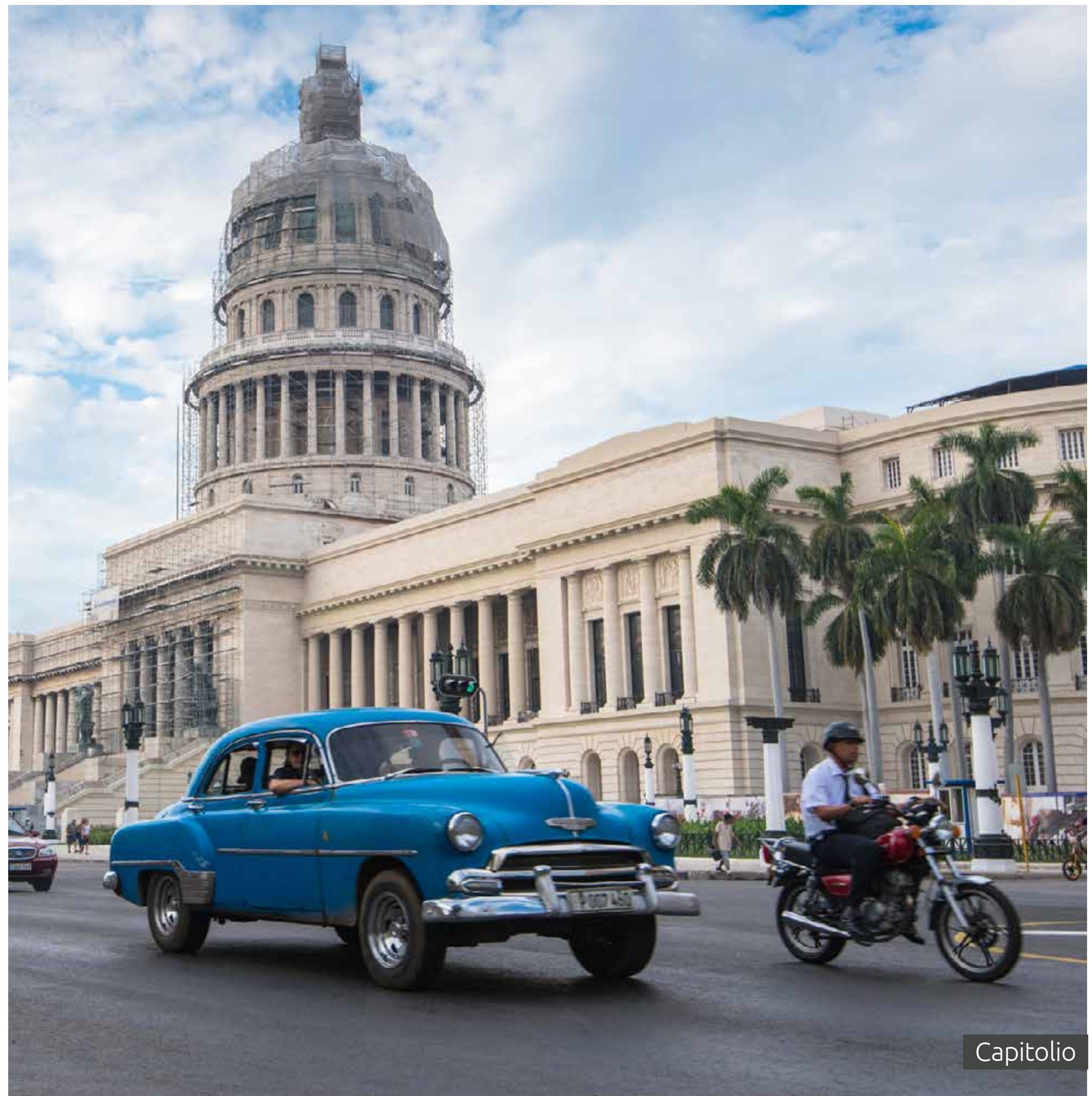
Follow in his footsteps with a customary mojito at La Bodigueta del Medio and a daiquiri at La Floridita – it's every traveler's rite of passage.

Centro

While it may resemble a war zone in parts, Centro still clings to its *Belle Époque*.

Parque Central, the city's transport and entertainment hub, is the neighborhood's bustling epicenter. It's surrounded by majestic architecture, including the iconic Hotel Inglaterra and the stunning Baroque Gran Teatro de Habana, home to the Cuban National Ballet.

Running west, along the leafy boulevard of El Prado, the lavish Capitolio is built in the style of Washington's capital



Capitolio

building by dictator Machado in 1926.

Just west of the Capitolio, the Partágas Cigar Factory destroys the myth that cigars are rolled on the thighs of dusky virgins. Don't miss the 30min tour, where you'll see the entire production process and watch skilled torcedores roll cigars as they listen to daily news readings – a tradition since 1895.

El Prado funnels south to Havana's front yard, the Malecón, a wild and invigorating seafront promenade where lovers swoon, fishermen cast their lines, and teens dive from the rocks.

Museo de la Revolución

One of Havana's must-see attractions, Havana's Revolutionary Museum is housed in the former Presidential Palace.

Completed in 1920, no expense was spared on the lavish structure: The building is topped with a monumental dome, and the interiors features dazzling

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Just west of the Capitolio, the Partágas Cigar Factory destroys the myth that cigars are rolled on the thighs of dusky virgins.



designs by Tiffany & Co.

With lashings of revolutionary iconography – and no attempt to even feign objectivity – the museum spotlights the seminal events preceding the Cuban Revolution, as well as the key battles and political aftermath. The staircase is riddled with holes from an unsuccessful attempt by a radical student group to take out President Fulgencio Batista in 1957.

Museo de Bellas Artes

Havana's Fine Art Museum is the city's cultural highlight. It's home to an exquisite collection of fine art, ancient Egyptian sarcophagi, colonial masterworks, and contemporary Cuban paintings and sculpture.

Housed in the original 1954 Trocadero Museum, the colonial Cuban wing displays works by Cuba's most famous painters, and an impressive international collection.

Many of the works belonged to some of Cuba's richest families, including the Bacardí family and members of Batista's government, that were left behind after the revolution.

Castillo de la Real Fuerza and Castillo del Moro

Havana's colossal forts not only shows off Spain's engineering prowess, but speaks to the city's strategic importance as a lucrative colonial port.

The second-oldest fort, the Castillo de la Real Fuerza, was built in 1558 to defend against pirates. Despite its formidable walls, the fort fell to frequent attacks by English buccaneers and pirates during the early 17th century.

Located on a headland, the Castillo del Moro (also known as El Castillo de los Tres Reyes) was built between 1589 and 1630, and provides the most memorable sunset views of Havana. It's now a museum, displaying a series of exhibits on Cuban history since the arrival of Columbus.

Getting Around Havana

The easiest option are the modern tourist taxis, managed by Cuba's Ministry of Transport, under the umbrella of Cubataxi. All tourist taxis have meters, but always be prepared for the 'my meter is broken' trick.

Expect to pay around CUC \$1 for the first km, and then between CUC \$0.60-0.80 for each additional km.

Get a better rate from local taxis, or yellow, Soviet-era Lada taxis (CUC \$0.40 per km).

For the romantically-inclined, negotiate a horse-drawn carriage ride (from CUC \$5-\$10 per hour), which can be picked up on Parque Central, by the Hotel Inglaterra.

The quirky option is to zip around town in an open air, bright yellow *cocomóvil*, which resembles a large eggshell on wheels.

For a local experience, you can take a shared colectivo taxi (classic Oldsmobiles, Buicks, and Chevys) which operate on fixed routes and will only pick you up at unmarked 'stops;' the most central pick up is by *Prado Y Neptuno* restaurant on Parque Central. Pay your 10 pesos (*moneda nacional*) as you exit the vehicle.

Another cheap option, bicitaxis (bicycle taxis) are technically illegal for tourists, so stay clear – you will have no comeback should any mishaps occur. Always agree your price beforehand.

Classic-car lovers can rent antique-cars like the Chevy '55 or a Mercury '54, with a driver, for around CUC \$25 per hour or CUC \$125 per day.

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The second-oldest fort, the Castillo de la Real Fuerza, was built in 1558 to defend against pirates.

Matanzas & Varadero

Just over two hours east of Havana is the undeservedly-overlooked Matanzas province. With plenty of sun, sand, and sea, it's time to add "the birthplace of rumba" back on the itinerary.

Music & dance in Matanzas

Matanzas, founded in 1693, was christened "the Athens of Cuba" for its rich artistic life.

Neglected for years by visitors and authorities, it's the birthplace of rumba. The dynamic, sexually-charged courtship dance of *guaguancó* is said to have begun in the warehouses of Matanzas port. Look out for local performances.

The central Sala de Conciertos José White has been beautifully restored, and hosts classical music and native *danzón* dance events.

The sumptuous 19th-century marble interiors of the Sauto Theater will soon be open to the public again following restoration.

Soak up the culture in Matanzas

The outstanding Pharmacy Museum preserves the antique ambience and vessels of an 1882 French-founded pharmacy.

Workshop Ediciones Vigía publishes exquisite, hand-crafted books of stories and poems. Next door, on Plaza



de la Vigía, an art gallery showcases contemporary artists' work.

Northwest of town, perched on the hilltop plateau, is the restored Ermita de Monserrate church with its panoramic views of the lush Yumurí Valley.

Head northeast to see the 18th-century San Severino Castle, which houses a small Slavery Museum.

Things to do around Matanzas

Southeast of Matanzas are the Cuevas de Bellamar, where visitors can explore 1km of underground tunnels.

Just east of the city is the Canímar River, where boat trips take visitors to explore upriver and see a slice of Cuban countryside.

Havana's sister cabaret, Tropicana Matanzas, is also close by.

North of Matanzas is the Yumurí

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On Plaza de la Vigía, an art gallery showcases contemporary artists' work.

WESTERN CUBA

Valley. Most visitors glimpse it from the lookout point where you can also see a 110m-high bridge – Puente Bacunayagua – spanning the valley.

Another way to experience the green valley is to take the Hershey train from Matanzas back to Havana – Cuba’s only electric train was established by the US chocolate mogul Milton S. Hershey.

Varadero beach

Stretching 21km along the Hicacos Peninsula into the Atlantic Ocean, Varadero beach has been the vacation spot for the rich and famous since the 1920s.

Today, there are more than 60 hotels and dozens of private B&Bs, plus a flashy new marina. The smartest hotels are closer to the tip, while the B&Bs and smaller hotels are clustered together in the small town at the western end of the peninsula.

Most visitors to Varadero come to sunbathe and swim, but there are plenty of water sports and land-based activities.



What to see & do in Varadero

For a touch of history, head to the Cueva de Ambrosio to see indigenous rock art, or get in quick to see the pretty Varadero Museum – it’s slated for demolition – to see antique wooden architecture.

If you’re looking for something a little more adventurous, go skydiving to get an aerial view of the sea below.

In the water, take a catamaran seafari out to Cayo Blanco and snorkel the reefs, or learn how to kite surf in the shallows. If you’re a keen diver though, it’s better elsewhere on the island.

Banana boats, pedalos, and sail boats are also available at many hotels.

On land, golfers can try their swing at the only 18-hole golf course on the island.

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Most visitors to Varadero come to sunbathe and swim, but there are plenty of water sports and land-based activities.



Claire Boobyer

Trinket seller, Varadero Beach

Viñales Valley

This UNESCO World Heritage-listed valley is an adventure-lovers' playground. Go trekking, climbing, zip-lining, and horse-riding through this hidden gem, and spend some time shootin' the breeze with the locals while exploring the charming town.

Exploring the valley

The Viñales Valley is made up of limestone mounds – known as mogotes – that are covered with shaggy vegetation, rising from the flat floor of the valley.

This photogenic landscape is surrounded by royal palms, oxen tilling fields, tobacco fields, and tobacco leaf drying huts. The views here are simply sublime – especially on blue-sky days.

At the heart of the valley is the small town of Viñales, now the tourist capital of western Cuba.

From here – and its vast number of



Viñales Valley

Horse-riding in the Viñales Valley



excellent B&Bs – travelers can explore the caves, the mogotes, tobacco, and fantastic food options.

Adventure activities in the Viñales

The National Park is crisscrossed with trekking routes. The Visitors' Center, close to the Los Jazmines Hotel, has tons of information and a booking service. If you're planning a trek here, make sure you bring an official guide.

Riders can hire horses and book guides through many B&Bs in town; this also gets you into the neighboring valleys. The horse ride to the Palmarito Valley will lead you past tobacco leaf-drying huts to the Palmarito Cave, where you can swim.

On the edge of the Palmarito Valley, at Loma del Fortín, there's a new zipline canopy tour. With four lines and eight platforms, it's a great way to get a bird's

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This photogenic landscape is surrounded by royal palms, oxen tilling fields, tobacco fields, and tobacco leaf drying huts.

WESTERN CUBA

eye view of the valley as you fly through the air.

For climbers, there are more than 250 routes offered here, and spelunking or caving fans should head to the Santo Tomás Caves to explore the 45kms of subterranean stalagmites and stalactites. Guides and headlights are provided for your safety.

Top landmarks close to Viñales Town

To the north of town, inside a mogote, is the Cueva de San Miguel cave. The main drawcard here is a reconstruction of a runaway slave settlement, but don't miss a meal at El Palenque de los Cimarrones restaurant for some delicious local fare.

North of the cave is the popular Cueva del Indio, where a boat ride powers visitors through the cave.

West of town, the Mural of Prehistory, on the mogote wall, was designed in 1961 by a Cuban muralist. It's not everyone's cup of tea, but check it out and head into the valley's new mirador for some drinks and fantastic views.

South of town, up the valley side, is the small La Casa del Veguero. In this small tobacco farm, you can witness cigar-rolling, but you're better off with the real deal in Vuelta Abajo.

At the top of the hill, the viewing terrace of the Hotel Los Jazmines offers outstanding valley views.

Close by, sip a mojito at the cute Balcón del Valle restaurant in the trees with its winning mogote views.

If you're staying in town, these spots are all accessible either by a bit of



walking, a taxi, or by the hop-on hop-off Viñales Bus Tour, which takes an hour to circuit the sites and departs eight times a day.

Thing to do in Viñales Town

After shooting the breeze with the owners of your *casa particular* while sitting on the terrace rocking chairs, mojito in hand, explore some of the activities in the town center.

The Jardín Botánico (Botanical Garden) was set up by two sisters, Carmen and Caridad. Today, the tangle of plants and flowers are still flourishing, and visitors are welcome to wander the grounds and dine in the small restaurant.

Those with bigger appetites should head up the hill for the farm-to-table feast at outstanding Finca Wilfredo's, with its pretty wooden house and awesome panoramic views.

Feasting should be followed by dancing – so look out for the band Sol del Valle at the Patio del Decimista, salsa bands at Patio de Polo Montañez, as well as disco and live band nights at Cueva San Miguel.

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Those with bigger appetites should head up the hill for the farm-to-table feast at outstanding Finca Wilfredo's, with its pretty wooden house and awesome panoramic views.



CENTRAL CUBA

Whether it's the cobblestone streets of Trinidad, the revolutionary spirit of Santa Clara, or the unforgettable city port of Cienfuegos, no trip to Cuba would be complete without a visit to Cuba's historic center.

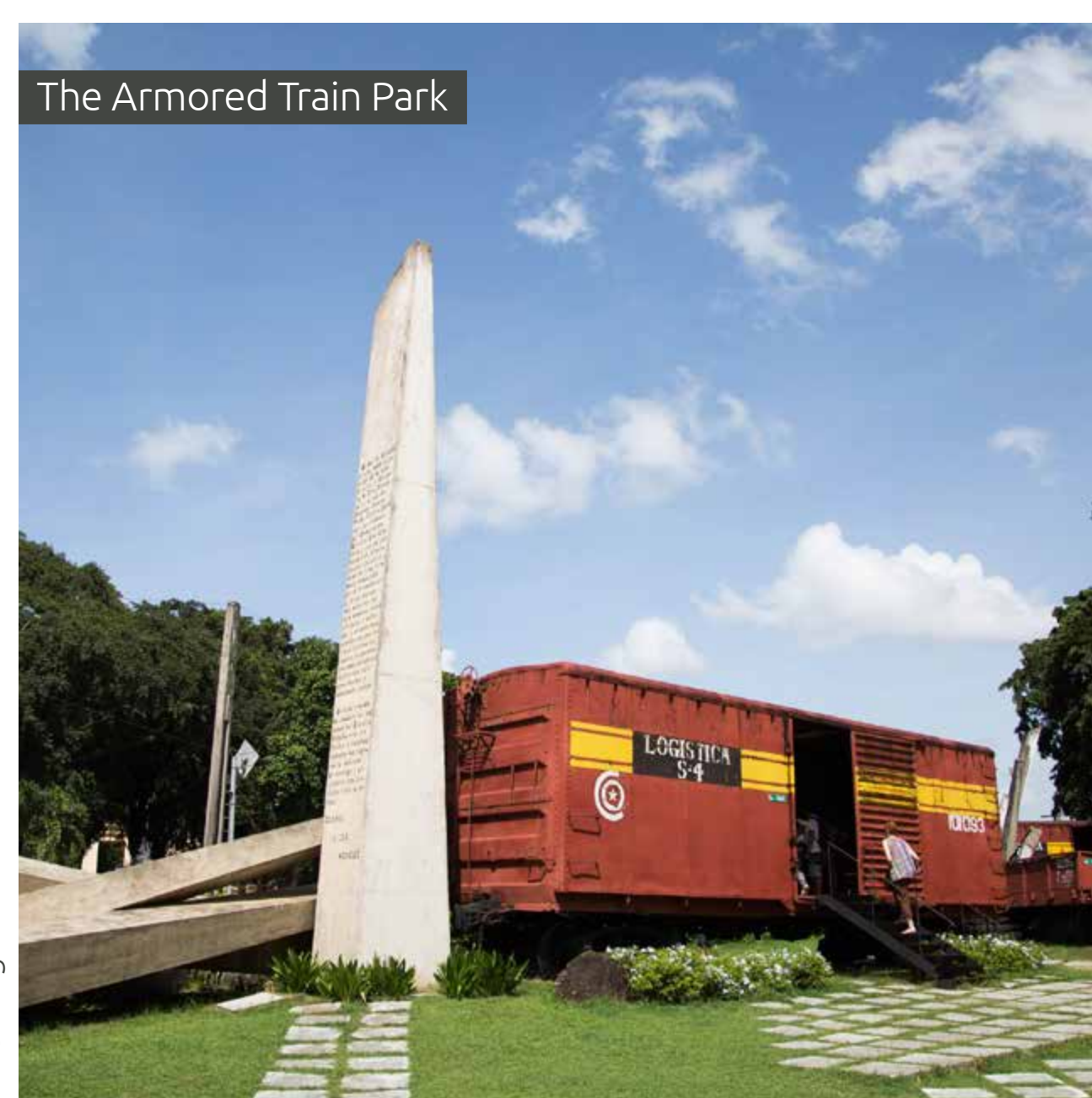
Santa Clara

Seemingly located in middle-of-nowhere Cuba, Santa Clara is the liberal capital of the country. It's known for its revolutionary spirit, a famous university, and many historical monuments, including Che Guevara's final resting place.

Che Guevara Mausoleum

If you talk to Santa Clara locals, they'll be proud that their national hero, the lauded Ernesto "Che" Guevara, is buried here. Though originally from Argentina, Che was one of the leaders of the Revolution, having spearheaded the movement alongside Fidel Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos.

On this monument, you'll see the words "*Hasta la victoria siempre,*" which translates as "To victory, always", a famous phrase that branded the Revolution.



Evie Cheung



Che Guevara Mausoleum

Evie Cheung

The Armored Train Park (El Tren Blindado)

As a monumental piece of Cuban Revolution history, The Armored Train Park is one of the most visited attractions in Santa Clara. This event ended the Battle of Santa Clara and was a turning point in the revolution.

In an attempt to thwart the rebels, Fulgencio Batista sent a train from Havana to Santa Clara, loaded with hundreds of soldiers and supplies. 18 guerrilla rebels attacked the train, and Che himself is credited with derailing it entirely by bulldozing 30m of train tracks.

Today, you can visit the original site and see historical black and white photos from that day.

Leoncio Vidal Park (Parque Vidal)

Located in the middle of the city,

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On this monument, you'll see the words "*Hasta la victoria siempre,*" which translates as "To victory, always", a famous phrase that branded the Revolution.



Evie Cheung

Leoncio Vidal Park

Leoncio Vidal Park is a favorite spot for locals to gather and pass the time.

Here, you'll find a relaxing atmosphere, well-manicured foliage, and the famous statue El Niño de La Bota (The Boy with the Leaking Boot), one of the symbols of the city.

The park is dedicated to Colonel Leoncio Vidal y Caro, who is remembered as a hero of the Cuban War of Independence against Spain.

It's easy walking distance to here from the majority of hotels and *casa particulares* that you'd stay in. Take note that the streets around the park are closed to cars to preserve the environment.

Catedral de Las Hermanas Santa Clara Asis

This beautiful cathedral was the center of controversy in 1923, as it was built to replace the original church in the center of Parque Vidal.

Now located three blocks west of the park, it's home to beautiful stained-glass windows and a white statue of the Virgin Mary – who used to be on the road to Havana to bless travelers.

Teatro La Caridad

As one of the few remaining colonial theatres in the country, Teatro La Caridad is now preserved as a national monument. It's one of the eight grand theatres of the Cuban Colonial era. Unfortunately, it's closed to the public, but we've seen travelers slip a few CUCs to whoever is working the entrance, and discover a world of interior architecture from a different time.

El Mejunje

Looking for an authentic, off the beaten path experience? While it may not be in all the tourist books, El Mejunje is definitely worth a visit during your time in Santa Clara. This icon of the city houses various art pieces from political Cuban artists and hosts many local events. As an important LGBT center, it hosts the annual Cuban Pride Parade.



Cuban Pride Parade

Evie Cheung

Getting Around Santa Clara

Because Santa Clara is a small city, you can get to most places just by walking. If you're not feeling the Cuban heat, you can also hire a horse-drawn carriage from town square.

Be aware though – in an effort to preserve the historic streets and architecture, cars are not allowed in the town square.

Cienfuegos

With a scenic bay for watersports and a unique blend of colonial French élan and exotic Caribbean vibes, there's lots to see and do here in Cuba's most inviting city port.

Parque José Martí

Centered around a marble statue commemorating the city's namesake revolutionary, the lush and elegant Parque José Martí is the city's heart and soul.

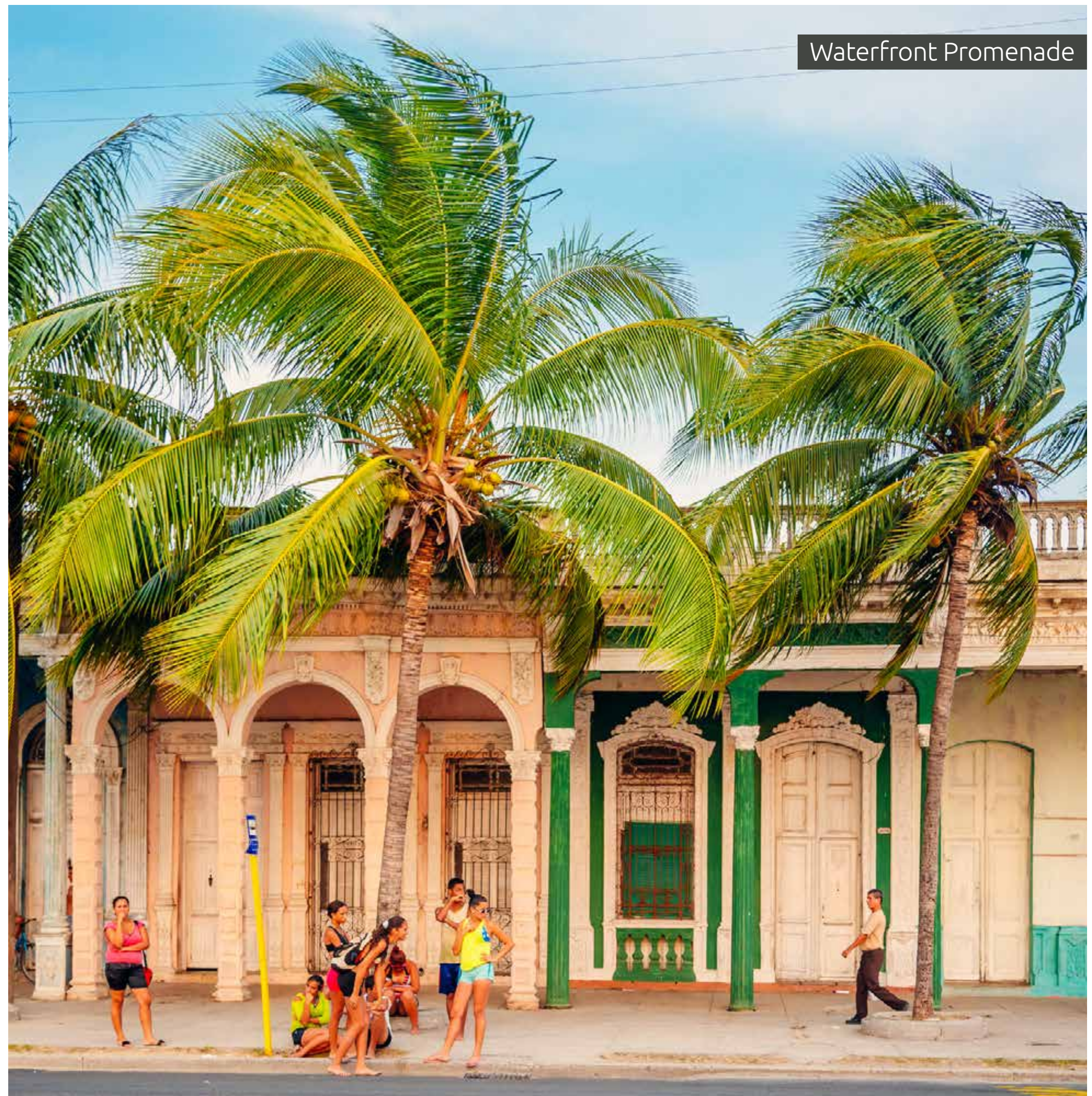
Surrounding the park, Cienfuegos's impressive late 19th-century buildings speaks to the city's glorious heyday.

On the park's north side, the theatre Teatro Tomás Terry is a national monument, playing host to diverse acts from Diana Fuentes (Cuba's answer to Taylor Swift) to actress Sarah Bernhardt.

Directly opposite, the grandiose Museo Provincial distills Cienfuegos's epic history into a small collection of exhibits, primarily focused on 19th-century French-Cuban decorative arts and furniture.

On the southwestern side, the Palacio Ferrer (built in 1918) is home to the Casa de la Cultura, where quality art exhibits, concerts, and dance performances are worth a quick peek.

On the eastern side, the striking yellow Catedral de la Purísima Concepción features dazzling stained-glass windows depicting the 12 apostles, and a statue of the city's



“Cienfuegos's palm-lined waterfront promenade unfurls south to Punta Gorda.”

patron saint – the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception.

Palacio del Valle

Cienfuegos's palm-lined waterfront promenade unfurls south to Punta Gorda, where glorious palaces and mansions reveal the wealth and pomp of Cuba's 19th-century sugar barons.

The city's architectural magnum opus is the Palacio del Valle, a riot of Moorish stucco, tile, and turrets built in 1917 by Spaniard Acisclo del Valle Blanco.

The maze of rooms spans Baroque, Neoclassical, and Gothic styles, and culminates in the arresting Salón Comedor (dining room), an ode to the intricacy and mathematical precision of Spain's Alhambra Palace.

During the 1950s, Batista planned to convert the palace into a casino, but now it's a restaurant (the food's hit-



Cienfuegos Bay

“One look at the picturesque bay and you’ll want to get involved in the city’s myriad of watersports on offer.”

and-miss), with a rooftop bar worth a visit for its Instagram-winning sunset views and live music performances.

Museo Nacional Naval

Five blocks northwest of Parque José Martí, it’s hard to miss the elaborate pearl-pink National Naval Museum. Built in 1933, it’s housed in the showy former headquarters of the southern naval command center.

It was here in September 1957 that a disgruntled band of sailors and civilians revolted unsuccessfully against the Batista government.

The story of the rebellion forms most of the museum’s exhibits, along with a forensic insight into Cuban Naval history. It also shed light (don’t expect a balanced commentary) on Cuba’s declaration of war on Germany, Tokyo, Rome, as well as the Bay of Pigs Invasion.

There’s a collection of military and maritime artifacts, including Spanish coins, and terrific views of Cienfuegos’s bay.

Watersports on the bay

One look at the picturesque bay and you’ll want to get involved in the city’s myriad of watersports on offer. Each year, several international regattas, fishing tournaments, and speedboat races are held in the bay.

Head southeast of town for a cluster of pleasant Caribbean beaches, including Playa Rancho Luna (the most accessible) – an ivory sand, half-moon beach with rocky headlands, around 18km from town.

At the Faro Luna Diving Center, you can rent snorkeling equipment and sign up for scuba diving trips to a large coral reef directly west of the beach.

At the 36-berth Marina Cienfuegos, you can charter a sailboat, arrange a sport-fishing excursion, book a cruise around the harbor, rent a Hobie Cat, or take a windsurfing class.



Horse taxi

Camagüey

This isn't a city you've likely heard of unless you've already started planning your trip to Cuba, but it's likely the first you'll remember when you arrive home. An artistic and sophisticated colonial gem, Camagüey is a place that will woo visitors at every turn.

Parque Ignacio Agramonte

This square is in the heart of the city, and with plenty of trees and comfortable seating, it's a popular place to spend the afternoon or early evening. If you're lucky, you'll be able to see a musical performance here in the evening.

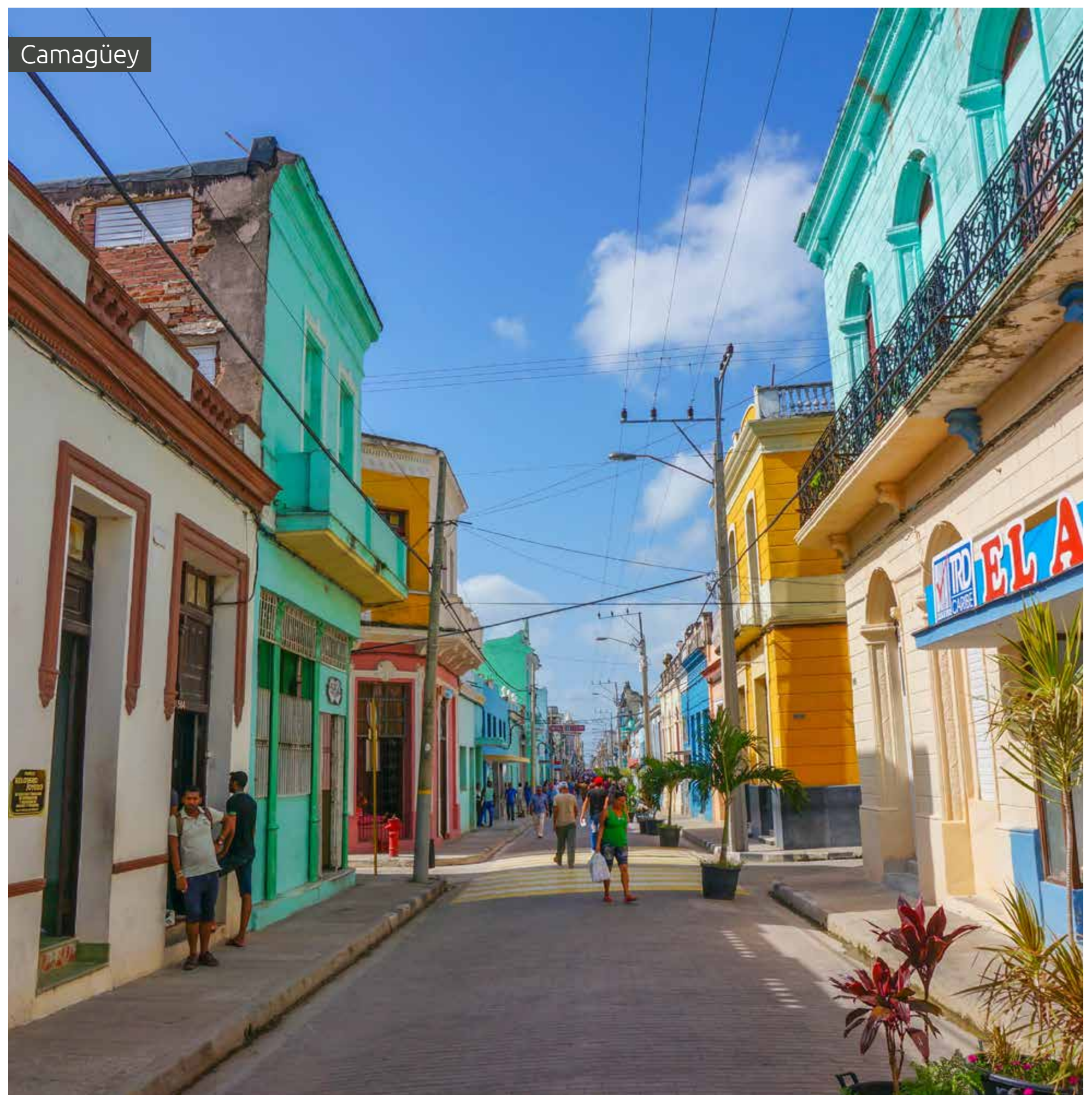
Inglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad

This church is hard to avoid. Located at the intersection of Republica and Agramonte, two popular walking streets, its tall, beige, and orange tower is probably one of the most photographed sights in Camagüey.



Inglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad

Goats on the Road



Camagüey

Goats on the Road

Casino Campestre

This massive green space stretches over Río Hatibonico and is Cuba's largest urban park. It's the perfect place to relax and enjoy the afternoon sun.

Families, couples, joggers, and strollers all head to this park to sit on the shaded benches or on picnic blankets in the grass.

Originally plotted in 1860, today there's a monument dedicated to Mariano Barberán and Joaquín Collar – as well as a baseball stadium – and you can sometimes catch live concerts in the park as well.

Inglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Merced

Don't miss this one! The church was constructed in 1748, and has an active convent attached to it. The two-level arched interior is beautiful. Plus, there

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Camagüey is a place that will woo visitors at every turn.

CENTRAL CUBA


Coats on the Road

are creepy catacombs and the Santo Sepulcro – a solid silver coffin.

Museo Provincial Ignacio Agramonte

This museum is home to Cuba’s second largest collection of modern and contemporary art. It’s a must-see for any visitor to Camagüey.

The cavernous interior of this local war museum is full of 19th and 20th century art. It includes the chilling works of Fidelio Ponce, and iconic paintings by the renowned Cuban artist Tati – the most famous of which is The Benefactors of Our Lady of Charity of Cobre, painted in 1803.

Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral

This gothic-style cathedral is topped by three eerie-looking spires that clearly appears to have adopted different motifs to most other cathedrals in Cuba.

Plaza San Juan de Dios

There are many lovely plazas in Camagüey that offer a nice change

from the narrow cobbled streets.

San Juan de Dios is known as the city’s most picturesque and beautiful plaza.

There are lots of restaurants surrounding the square, but they tend to be overpriced and not very good.

La Cava Restaurant & Wine Cellar

You probably never thought you’d find a wine cellar in Cuba!

La Cava offers a unique experience, with a variety of wines from Cuba and around the world starting at just US \$10 a bottle.

The tapas are tasty and very affordable, and the cool, oak scented ambiance reminds you that you’re in a beautiful old cellar.

If you’re looking for a nice setting with a non-pretentious menu, this is the place for you.

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There are many lovely plazas in Camagüey that offer a nice change from the narrow cobbled streets.



Trinidad

Cuba's best-preserved colonial town, Trinidad, is a charmer. Head down cobblestone streets to see pastel-colored houses, and visit the car-free historic core that'll take you back to the 19th century.

Iglesia Parroquial de la Santísima Trinidad

The streets surrounding Trinidad's main square, Plaza Mayor, are lined with beautiful mansions from the heyday of the local sugar industry.

Facing the square, Trinidad's main church was built over a 75-year period in the 19th century, and is known for its impressive neoclassical altar and fine acoustics.

Its greatest treasure is an 18th century wooden statue of Christ, known as El Señor de la Vera Cruz.

Convento de San Francisco

A block off the Plaza Mayor, the Convent of Saint Francis, with its distinctive yellow bell tower from 1813, is Trinidad's



Street musicians in Trinidad



Plaza Mayor, Trinidad

“A block off the Plaza Mayor, the Convent of Saint Francis, with its distinctive yellow bell tower from 1813, is Trinidad's most recognizable landmark.”

most recognizable landmark.

It's now home to the Museo Nacional de la Lucha Contra Bandidos, with exhibits about the Castro regime's struggle against counterrevolutionaries during the 1960s.

There are also spectacular views from the bell tower.

Museo de Historia Municipal

Inside a magnificent 19th century mansion, the Palacio Cantero, this museum contains an eclectic assortment of antique furniture, artwork, and decorative items, as well as exhibits on the sugar industry and other aspects of local history.

Climb the tower for great views of Trinidad and the Sierra del Escambray mountains.

Museo Romántico

Dating from 1740, with an upper floor



Flavio Vallanari

added in 1808, the Palacio Brunet houses the Museo Romántico, which focuses on the period from the 1830s through the 1860s.

Objects on display include porcelain, glass, furniture, artwork, and other items owned by the wealthy Brunet family and other local elites.

Museo de Arquitectura Colonial

Flanking the Plaza Mayor, the Museum of Colonial Architecture occupies two connected blue buildings from the 18th century.

It highlights outstanding examples of domestic architecture from the colonial period, including walls, ceilings, carved doors, ironwork, and other elements.

Valle de los Ingenios

Most of Trinidad's wealthiest colonial-era families made their fortunes in the sugar industry, centered in the nearby Valle de los Ingenios.

Stop at the Mirador de la Loma del Puerto for a panoramic view of the entire valley, dotted with the ruins of former sugar plantations.

One of the most interesting is the Manaca Iznaga estate, where you can visit the restored manor house, sample hand-pressed sugar cane juice, and climb a 45m bell tower, built in 1816, for more stunning views.

Casa de la Música

Atop the wide stone staircase beside the Iglesia Parroquial is Trinidad's most popular choice for a night out: an open-air venue where you can dance the night away under the stars, or just sip a mojito and enjoy the entertainment.

There are live salsa shows and music every night, so don't worry if you're arriving here on a weekday.

Playa Ancón

This lovely, 4km stretch of white-sand beach located on the Peninsula Ancón, is just 12km south of Trinidad.

Cuba's largest black coral reef is located just offshore at Cayo Blanco; day trips for snorkeling and diving are available.

Topes de Collantes National Park

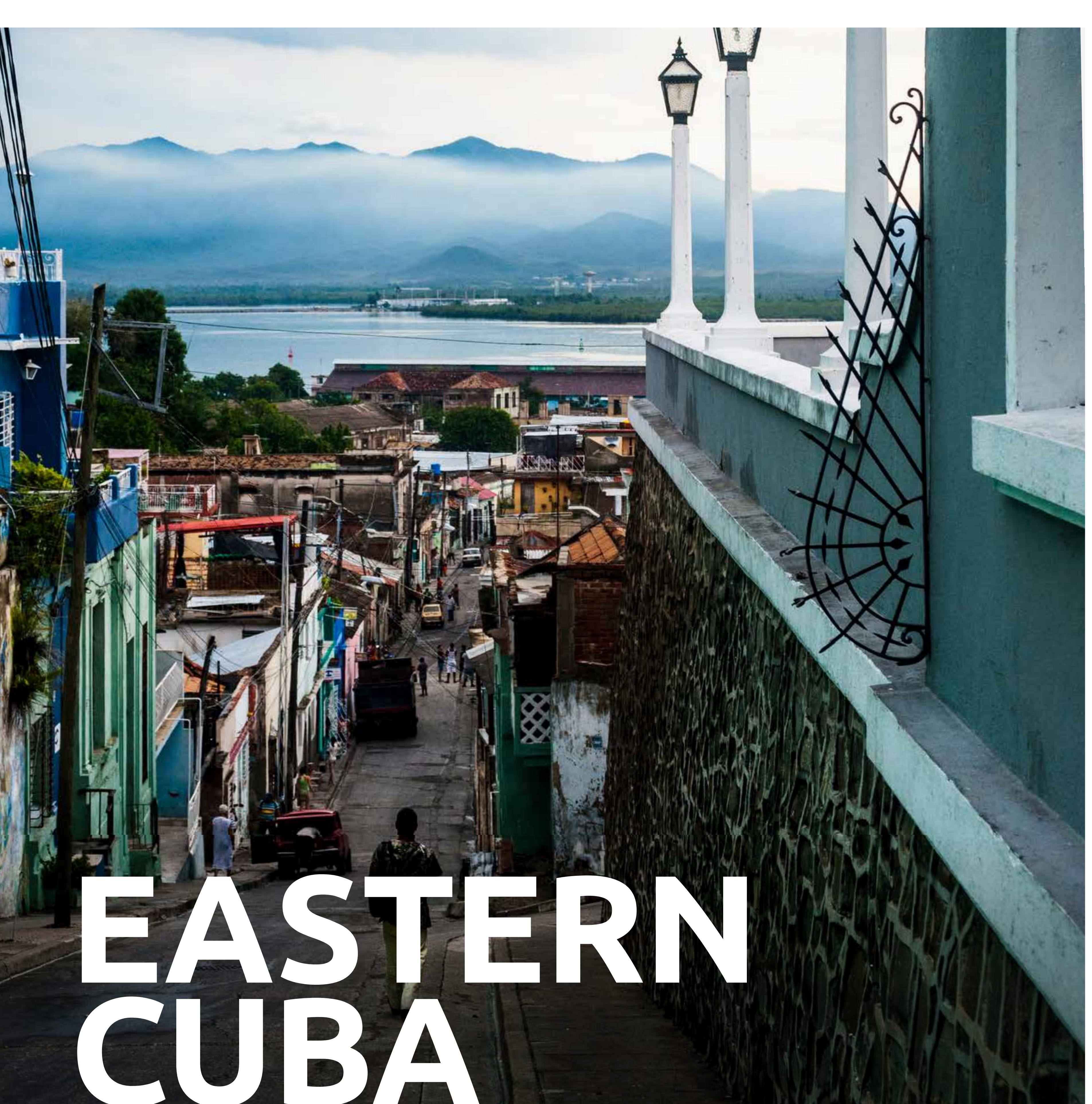
The Sierra del Escambray mountain range forms a verdant backdrop for Trinidad.

The best place to explore it is at Topes de Collantes, a natural reserve full of beautiful forest trails, some of which lead to natural swimming holes and waterfalls.

Organized day trips are available from Trinidad, but you can also arrange your own transportation and pay a usage fee for trail access.

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Stop at the Mirador de la Loma del Puerto for a panoramic view of the entire valley, dotted with the ruins of former sugar plantations.



EASTERN CUBA

Many travelers have heard of wild eastern Cuba. But don't repeat the mistake of many and skip this enchanting part of the country. From Baracoa's pristine beaches to Holguin's burgeoning dining scene, it's worth spending a week exploring this untapped destination.

Santiago de Cuba

The hot and exciting Caribbean city of Santiago de Cuba is an essential stop on any trip to Cuba. As the former capital and key player in the Cuban Revolution, there's plenty to explore in this city known for its history, rum, and music.

Casa de Diego Velázquez

Casa de Diego Velázquez, home of Santiago's first governor, is a must-see. With its Moorish decoration and fine furniture, it's said to be the oldest house in Cuba.

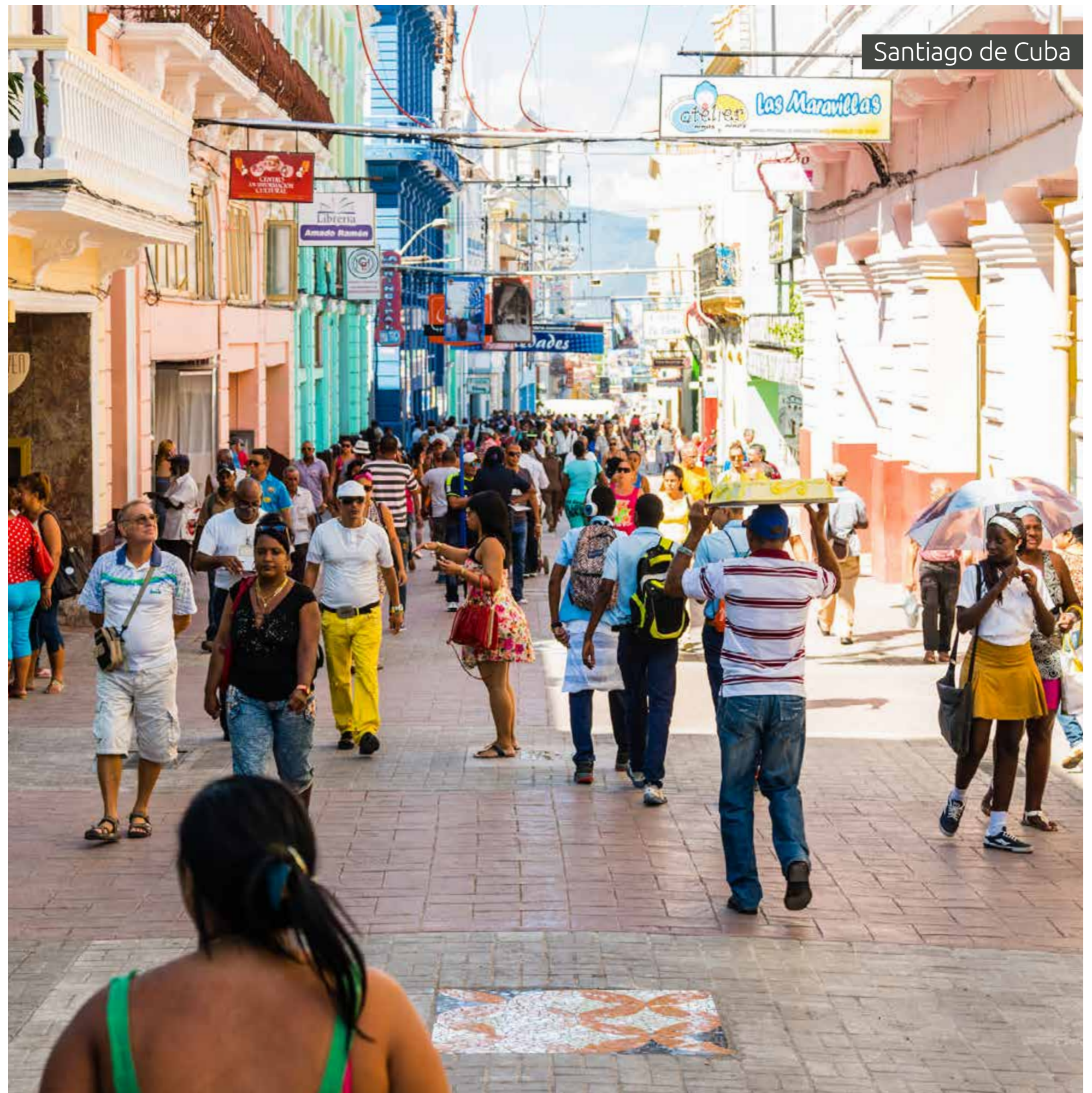
Located on the main Céspedes Park, it's overlooked by the towering, 19th-century cathedral and the attractively renovated colonial town hall.

San Pedro de La Roca Castle

The Spaniards defended the enormous bay of Santiago with the monumental, 17th-century San Pedro de La Roca Castle, known as El Morro.



El Morro



Santiago de Cuba

It now features a piracy museum and a cannon-firing ceremony at sunset.

Complejo Monumental Antonio Maceo

One of Cuba's independence leaders, Antonio Maceo, is commemorated in a statue surrounded by 23 enormous, upright iron machetes in the striking Complejo Monumental Antonio Maceo, which dominates the city's Revolution Plaza.

San Juan Hill

When the Americans stepped in to the Spanish-Cuban-American war in 1898 — fought over Cuba's independence from the Spanish realm — the last battle was fought at the San Juan Hill on the outskirts of the city. It was here that Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders defeated Spanish troops. Today, the park features monuments and plaques.

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The Spaniards defended the enormous bay of Santiago with the monumental, 17th-century San Pedro de La Roca Castle.



Cathedral of Nuestra Señora de la Asuncion

Moncada Museum

Fast forward to the 1950s, and the young rebel Fidel Castro, in an attempt to overthrow President Fulgencio Batista, attacked the city's military barracks. The assault failed, but Castro eventually fought his way to victory in 1959. The Moncada Barracks is now a detailed museum of the attack and the Castro-led guerrilla struggle from 1956-59.

Fidel Castro's tomb in Santa Ifigenia

The most famous resident of the ornate Santa Ifigenia Cemetery on the city's outskirts is Fidel Castro, who died in 2016. His simple stone tomb is next to that of José Martí, Cuba's national hero, and mastermind of Cuba's 1895-98 independence war; a changing of the guard ceremony is enacted at his mausoleum every 30 minutes.

Bacardi Museum

Santiago de Cuba is also renowned for its rum and music. The Bacardí family founded their rum factory here in the city in 1862.

The founder's son, Emilio Bacardí, also became the mayor of the city, and he established the Bacardi museum in the city center in 1899.

This museum, with its exhibits of items belonging to Cuba's independence leaders, as well as Peruvian mummies, is among the top things to see in the city.

Close by is the Museum of Rum, located in a beautifully restored, 19th-century villa detailing the history of the liquor. Go grab a shot of Bacardi – it's free to visitors.

Music venues

Combine rum with music by visiting some of the city's top music venues. Check out the Casa de La Trova and the more intimate Casa de las Tradiciones in the French-influenced Tivolí district.

Reach this barrio via the city's well-known, long flight of steps: Padre Pico.

Carnaval Museum

If you're not in town for Carnaval, typically held at the end of July, visit the Carnaval Museum and catch one of its daily music and dance events.



Cayo Granma, Santiago de Cuba

Claire Boobbyer

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The most famous resident of the ornate Santa Ifigenia Cemetery on the city's outskirts is Fidel Castro, who died in 2016.

Holguin

Cuba's third largest city mostly registers on the radar of travelers who are visiting the beautiful beaches of Guardalavaca, just 50km north of the city. But a swing through Holguin's pretty and clean historical center is definitely worth your time.

Loma de la Cruz (Hill of the Cross)

Holguin's hillside overlook and shrine is the crown jewel of the city.

You can grab a taxi or climb the 458 steps from town where a bar – perched some 260m above sea level – overlooks the verdant hills surrounding the city.

The hill gets its name from the wooden cross placed here in 1790 by a Franciscan friar, and Cubans still leave offerings and light candles at the shrine.

Parque Galixto Garcia

Back down the hill, enjoy the well-preserved art deco buildings around



Terry Ward



Terry Ward

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The hill gets its name from the wooden cross placed here in 1790 by a Franciscan friar.

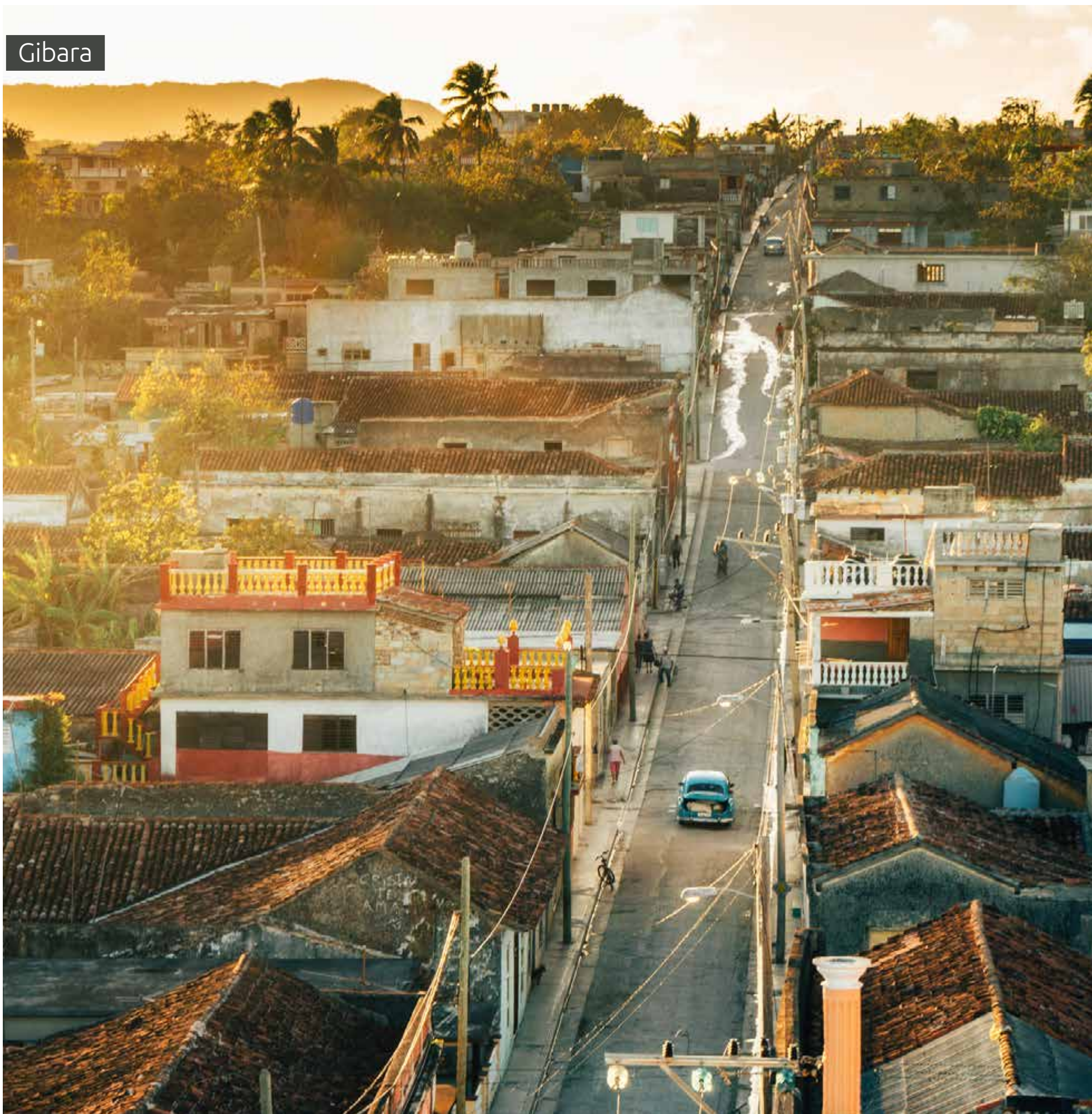
the Parque Galixto Garcia in town, one of Holguin's many parks, and pose for a photo in front of the pre-Revolution Eddy Suñol Theater.

Grab a bite

For an excellent meal at a *paladar* (a family-run restaurant) in the historic city center, take a short walk from Parque Galixto Garcia to 1920 Restaurante & Bar. Tasty dishes such as grilled octopus, Serrano ham, and the classic Cuban rice dish *congrís* are on the inexpensive menu.

Guardalavaca

Just under an hour's drive from Holguin, you'll reach the spectacular beaches of Guardalavaca. Rent a Hobie Cat or pedal boat to explore the turquoise seas, or join the locals picnicking on the sand with bottles of Havana Club rum and Reggaeton music at the ready.



Gibara

Day-trip to Gibara

Another worthy day trip takes you about an hour northeast of the city, along rutted roads, to the colonial town of Gibara.

Christopher Columbus made landfall here in 1492 and loved the town so much he stayed for 12 days.

The 19th century was Gibara's golden age, and you can still see some of the original homes from that era around town.

Take a walk through the small parks and historic center, or join a local guide to explore the area's famous caves.

Then, head to the outskirts of town to La Cueva Taina, a fabulous, family-run seafood restaurant in a farm-like setting, where the mojitos are strong and the Mesa Gibareña (set menu) includes a spread of stuffed land crabs, whole snapper, grilled shrimp, tostones, and more.

“**Christopher Columbus made landfall here in 1492 and loved the town so much he stayed for 12 days.**”

A Day in the Life of a Cuban Coffee Farmer

In the small town of Palenque, outside the city of Guantanamo, I opened the window to my farmhouse room and saw the fog creeping up the mountain-side.



Small coffee trees dot the landscape for acres up and over the hills, bordering a cluster of wooden homes belonging to the extended family of Ana Martinez Almaquer and Senen Dies Moreno.

The family has owned the land for more than two generations, and among the coffee trees, they also have citrus and banana trees, a large personal garden, three pigs, and two cows – which, according to Cuban law, they are allowed to milk but not eat.

To harvest and process the coffee, the family hires a few locals to help pick the beans, which must be done by hand. One woman, who had been working with them for years, had built herself a small sled. She drags that behind her across uneven ground, between coffee trees interspersed with palms and banana trees, all providing shade and keeping the soil nurtured.

The hard, berry-like seeds turn red when they are ripe, and she collects them in burlap bags to be weighed when she returns to the main house.

Once dried, they can sell them. They have a contract with the government to harvest and process a certain amount of coffee per year, and only after that amount is reached may they consume what is left.

While Cuban coffee is traditionally a strong, espresso-like coffee sweetened with sugar and lightened with milk, in modern Cuba, milk is often scarce or expensive.

Here, a pan with fresh milk from the cow that morning was slowly heating to pasteurize, and for the first time on this trip to Cuba, I would be able to have *café con leche*.

Baracoa

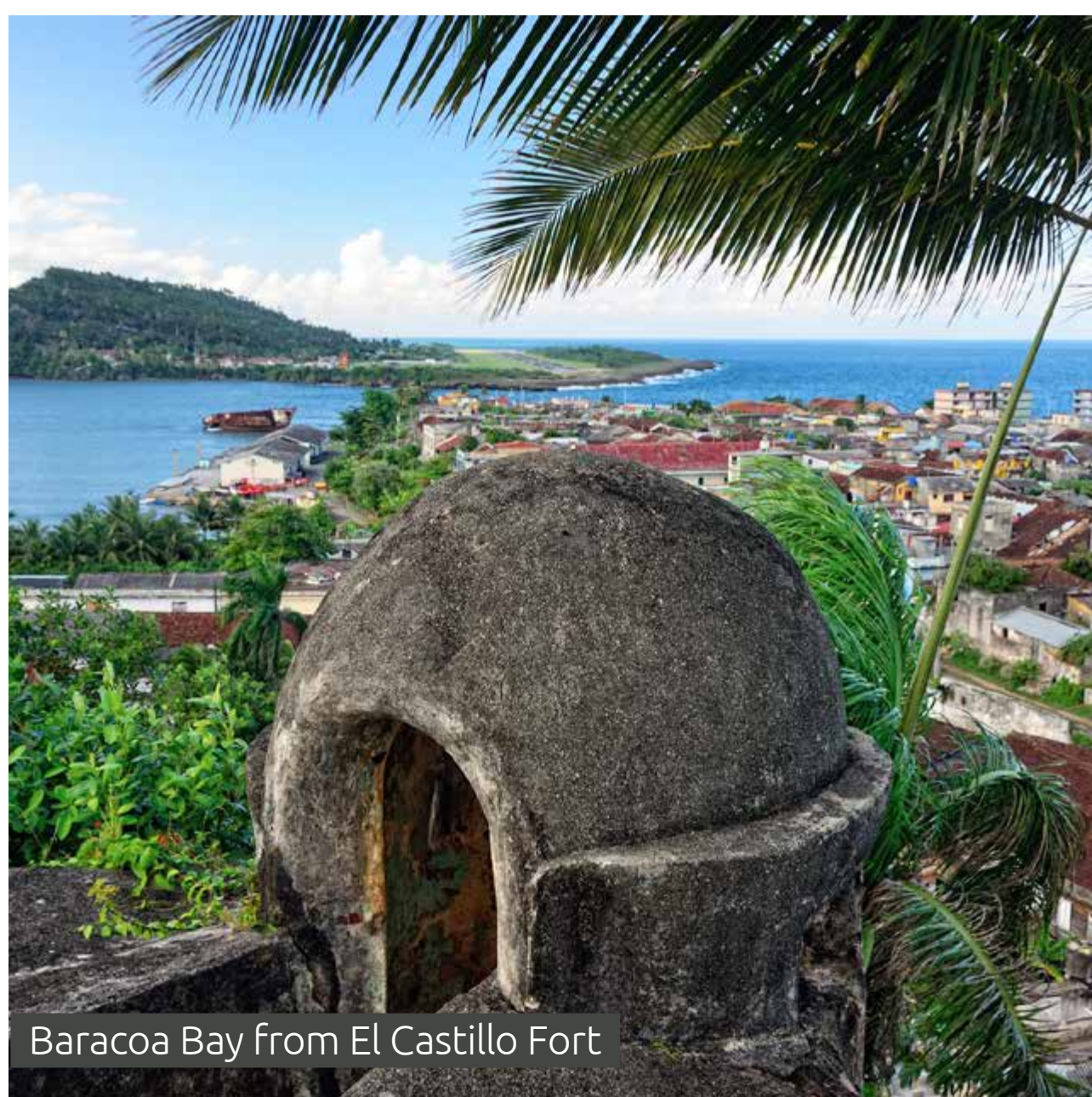
Far-flung Baracoa might be difficult to get to, but with beautiful rivers, waterfalls, beaches, and wild exploration at its doorstep, it's no wonder most travelers who plan to come for a day or two, end up staying a week.

Our Lady of the Ascension Cathedral

Founded in 1511 as the first city of Cuba, this tiny city facing the Atlantic Ocean is packed with history, legend, and wild nature. One of its most famous landmarks is Our Lady of the Ascension Cathedral, which houses the Cruz de La Parra. It's said to be a cross that Christopher Columbus planted on these shores in 1492.

Fuerte Matachín & El Castillo

The city was defended by a series of small forts built to deter multiple pirate attacks. Inside one of them – Fuerte Matachín – you can read about the city's history and admire



Baracoa Bay from El Castillo Fort



Plaza Marti, Baracoa

Claire Boobbyer

“The city was defended by a series of small forts built to deter multiple pirate attacks.”

a collection of endangered multi-colored local shells (Polymitas).

Another fort, the hilltop Santa Bárbara Castle, is now the city's most attractive hotel: El Castillo.

Archaeological remains & Taíno Aboriginal legacy

Earlier history is captured at the archaeological museum, Cueva Paraíso, in a cave above the city. Here you'll have panoramic views over Baracoa below. The aboriginal Taínos were a strong presence here, and their legacy is still apparent today, especially in the cuisine.

Serving up traditional dishes are *paladares* (private restaurants) such as El Buen Sabor and El Poeta.

Baracoa's nightlife is legendary, with salsa and live music nights at the venues in town – all scattered around the tiny central park.

EASTERN CUBA

Baracoa's mountains & rivers

Baracoa's real drawcard is its wilderness. The flat-topped Yunque Mountain, which dominates the city skyline, is a full day hike up through the forest, passing endemic species. Once you reach the top, the astonishing views of the coast will no doubt blow you away.

Explore the river canyon of the Yumurí River, kayak the Duaba River, bathe in the Duaba's waterfall, and visit Finca Duaba's cocoa plantation trail.

Not too far from town is the tiny, pretty village of Boca de Miel (Mouth of the River of Honey) reached by walking along the town's beach.

Further upstream, bathe with the locals in the refreshing Honey River to fulfill the legend that all those who bathe here will return to Baracoa.

For the more adventurous, head out

“**Further upstream, bathe with the locals in the refreshing Honey River to fulfill the legend that all those who bathe here will return to Baracoa.**”

to Alexander de Humboldt Park, 56km northwest of Baracoa. It's home to the world's smallest bird, bat, and frog. Trek through this UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, and take a boat trip out to spot manatee in Taco Bay at the end of your trek.

Baracoa's beaches

If you're looking for a little sand and sun, you're spoilt for choice here.

Beyond the black-sand city beach, Playa Baracoa, there's a tiny slither of sparkling white sand, Playa Blanca.

Find custard-colored scoops of sand, 21km northwest of the city, in coves at Playa Maguana.

Southeast towards the River Yumurí are slithers of tiny, unspoiled beaches.

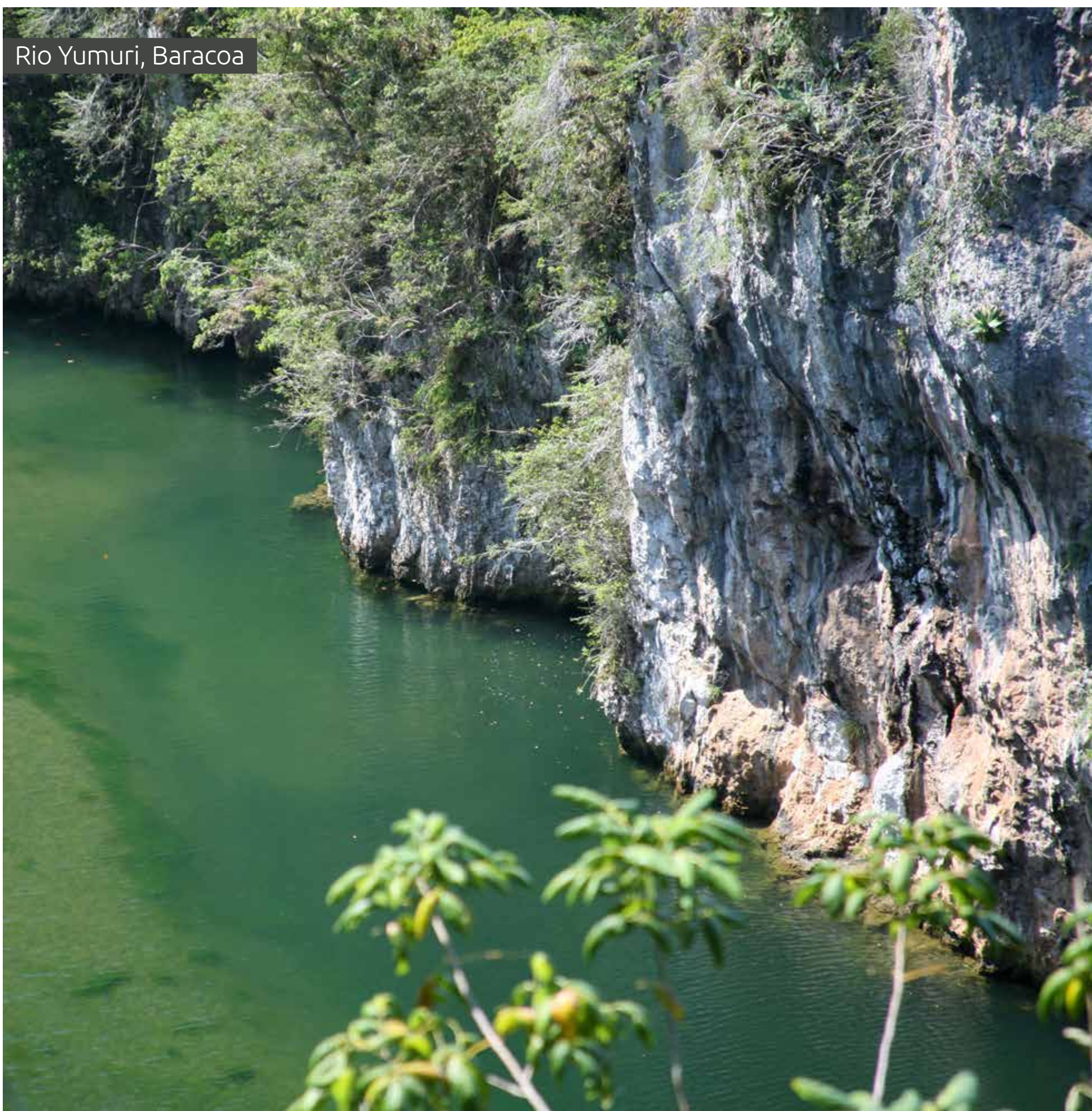
Get a taste of local peso food at Playa Mangilito, a beach shack restaurant. Tour, taxi, or bike along this remote coastal road for a relaxed day trip.

Food in Baracoa

Unlike other areas of Cuba, Baracoa's regional cuisine is famous throughout the island. Many dishes here are cooked in coconut milk. Ask at your casa for the best *paladores* to sample the local fare.

Baracoa's chocolate can be drunk at the Casa del Chocolate on the main street, or found as chocolate bars from sellers on the side of the road.

Don't miss Baracoa's best delicacy: the *cucurucho* – a palm-leaf cone stuffed with mashed coconut, honey, and almonds, sold on the side of the road.



Rio Yumuri, Baracoa

Claire Boobyer



ADVENTURE CUBA

Whether you're looking to cycle through valleys dotted with ancient farmhouses, find waterfalls on horseback, or float above coral reefs teeming with marine life, Cuba has an outdoor experience to thrill every kind of adventure-seeker.

Western Cuba

Packed between the capital and Cuba's westernmost tip is the stunning scenery of the Cordillera de Guaniguanico, the world's best tobacco soil, palm-fringed beaches, caves, and a bounty of natural wonders... all within easy reach from Havana.

Las Terrazas

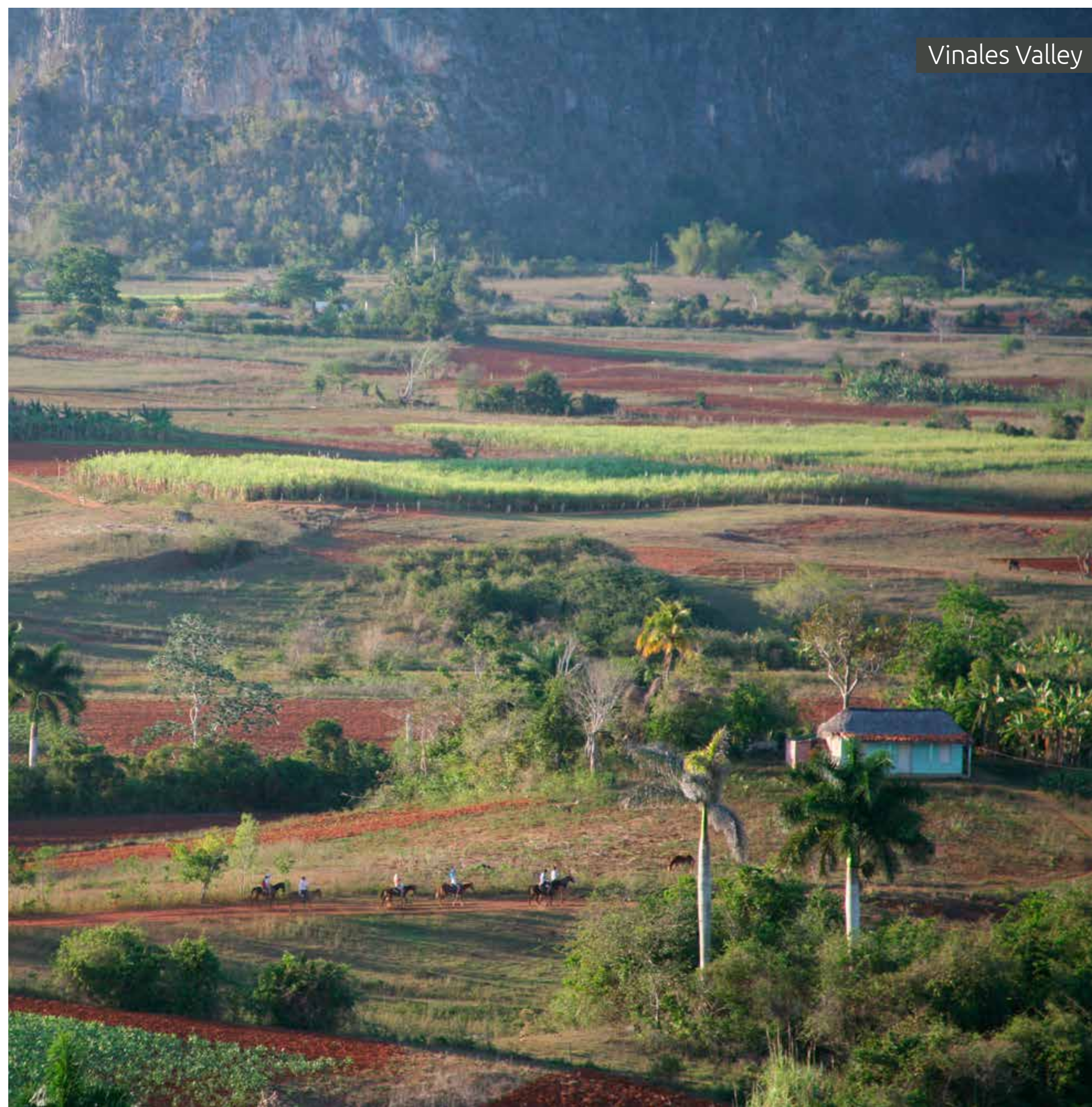
Just an hour outside Havana is the eco-community of Las Terrazas. Here, you can hike forests, pass old coffee plantations, bird watch, take a canopy tour, lunch on organic vegetarian food, and cool off in the pools of the San Juan River. While you're here, don't miss the nearby Soroa, Cuba's largest orchid garden.

La Güira Park

This former hacienda, surrounded by the forests of Parque La Güira, has recently been restored. Explore the area and hike to Che Guevara's 1962 Cuba missile base, Cueva de los Portales.



Claire Boobyer



Claire Boobyer

Viñales Valley

Western Cuba's poster attraction is the UNESCO World Heritage Site: Viñales Valley. Round-topped mountain stumps (known as mogotes), surrounded by ruddy red soil, royal palms, farms, working oxen, and walking trails, create a lush backdrop to rural Cuba.

The valley town, Viñales, is the center for accommodation, trekking, horse riding, cave visits, and more.

Visit the tobacco fields

South of the Viñales Valley is the area known as Vuelta Abajo, the best tobacco-growing region in Cuba.

Take a tour of one of the working tobacco plantations, and learn about the crop from seed to harvest, through to the artisanal creation of the cigar. The most famous is the Alejandro Robaina Plantation. An outstanding tour is offered at the Finca Hector Luis Prieto

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Round-topped mountain stumps, surrounded by ruddy red soil, royal palms, farms, working oxen, and walking trails, create a lush backdrop to rural Cuba.

Cigar rolling, Vuelta Abajo



Claire Boobyer

(Finca Quemado de Rubi). Grab lunch, or stay the night in attractive riverside cabañas with crop views.

In Pinar del Río city, stop by at the Francisco Donatien Tobacco Factory to watch workers craft the cigars.

Cayo Levisa

Western Cuba is fringed by beautiful, palm-tree studded beaches. Closest to Havana is the north coast of Cayo Levisa, a sublime lick of white sand facing shallow turquoise sea. The food is a let-down, and the dive shop is not always working, but if you can, snag a spacious beachfront bungalow – it's a real treat.

Off-the-beaten track beaches

Between Cayo Levisa and Cayo Jutías, there are wild beaches, such as Playa La Mulata and Playa La Altura, plus a handful of B&Bs and *casas particulares* to stay in.

Cayo Jutías

This is the closest beach to Viñales, and a popular day trip, where there's a restaurant/bar and water sports center.

Walk to the eastern tip for driftwood sculptures, and see bright orange

starfish in the crystal-clear shallows.

María La Gorda

María La Gorda is a popular dive center at the western tip of the island. There's a range of accommodation on the beach, but limited food options.

Diving here gets mixed reviews, but it's not Cuba's top diving spot.

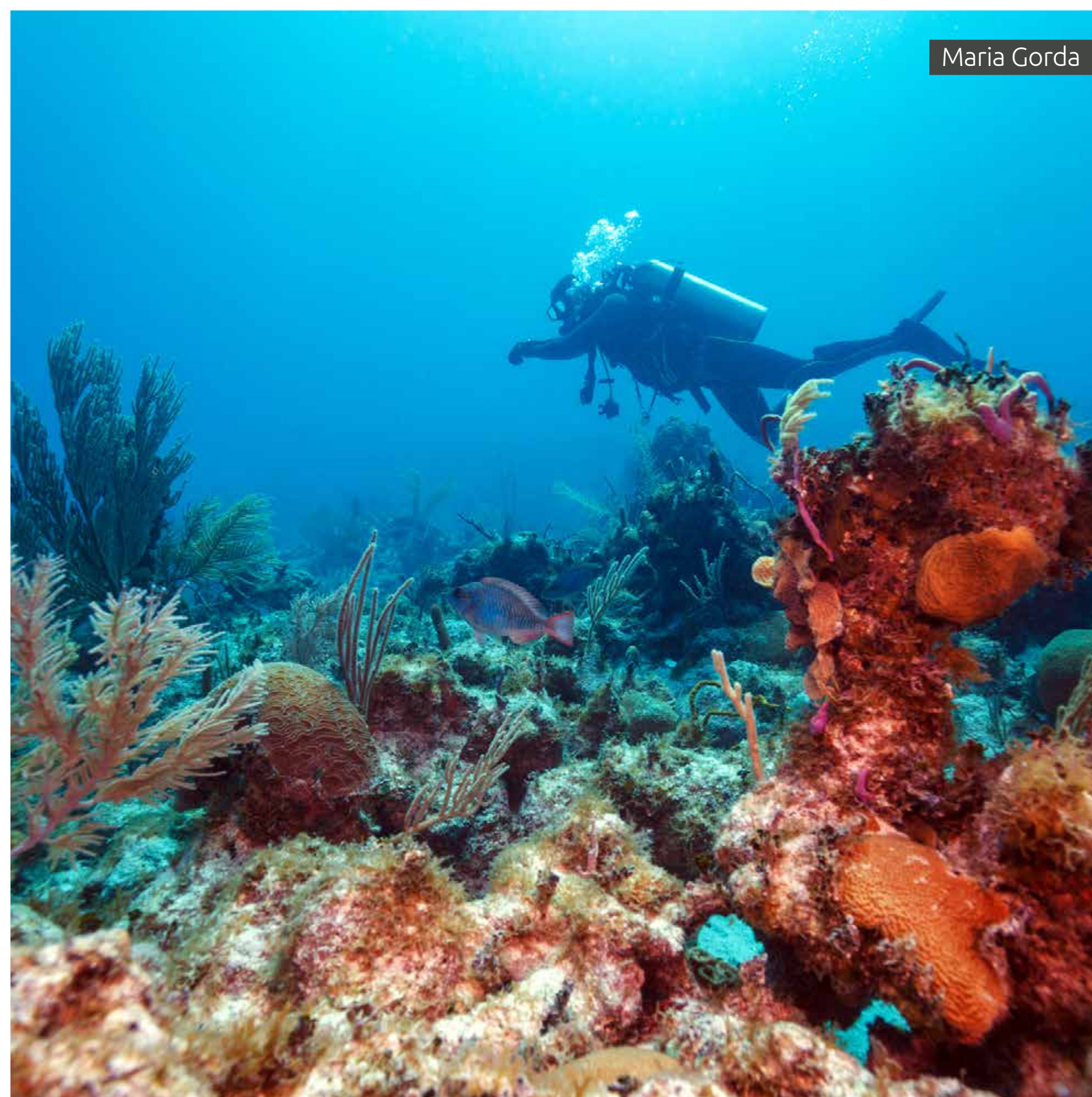
Guanhacabibes Peninsula & Cabo de San Antonio

At the extreme western tip of Cuba is the Guanhacabibes Peninsula, home to sharp limestone terraces, bird life, nesting turtles, and deer.

The Playa Las Tumbas beach at Cabo de San Antonio is mostly a hardcore trip for birders, divers, fishermen, and naturalists. There are state-run cabanas, and a small restaurant if you do wind up here.

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María La Gorda is a popular dive center at the western tip of the island.



Central Cuba

Between the montage of palm-fringed coastline, sandy beaches, and densely forested mountains of central Cuba, an incredible inventory of outdoor recreation awaits those who are wild at heart.

Ciénaga de Zapata

With incredible biodiversity and landscapes that border on the surreal, the Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata (Zapata Swamp National Park) packs a punch.

Just off the southern coast of the Matanzas province, within striking distance of Cienfuegos or the sugar mill town of Australia (yup), this untamed peninsula is home to Cuba's most varied ecosystems.

The Bay of Pigs, synonymous with the failed 1961, US-backed invasion of Cuba, runs along the peninsula's eastern edge.

Just off the shores of the paradisiacal Playa Girón, warm waters studded with coral set the stage for prime scuba diving and snorkeling.

The park's seething swampland draws seasoned ornithologists and budding naturalists to its rich flora and fauna, with more than 900 plant species, 175 species of birds, 31 species of reptiles (including the endemic Cuban crocodile), and over 1,000 species of invertebrates.

Around Trinidad: Playa Ancón, La Boca & Cayo Blanco

Cuba's colonial jewel, Trinidad, is the gateway to some of Cuba's most



exhilarating landscapes.

Cyclists can ride from Trinidad, through valleys dotted with farmhouses, to Playa Ancón (12km) on the south coast.

Playa Ancón is one of Cuba's most beautiful stretches of sugary white sand, and is lined with flashy, all-inclusive hotels and water sports facilities.

For more local color, you can detour to La Boca (18km), an earthy fishing village on the Guaurabo River, with a shingle beach shaded by acacia trees.

Dive trips can be arranged to Cayo Blanco, 25km south-east of the Playa Ancón. The warm waters and coral keys, rich in marine life, is perfect for divers and snorkelers of all abilities.

The marina also offers catamaran strips and deep sea fishing charters in calm waters, populated with wahoo, swordfish, marlin, tarpon, and barracuda.

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Every Wednesday night as the sun dips behind the city's surrounding mountain peaks, the SiCLas comes alive.

Escambray Mountains

These mystical and foreboding mountains form the backdrop for the Parque Nacional Topes de Collantes. It also makes for a rewarding day or overnight trip from Trinidad.

The network of hiking trails here take you through lush woodlands, natural swimming pools, coffee plantations, and waterfalls surrounded by native flora and fauna.

For independent travelers, guided hikes and horseback adventures can be organized by tour companies and private guides in Trinidad.

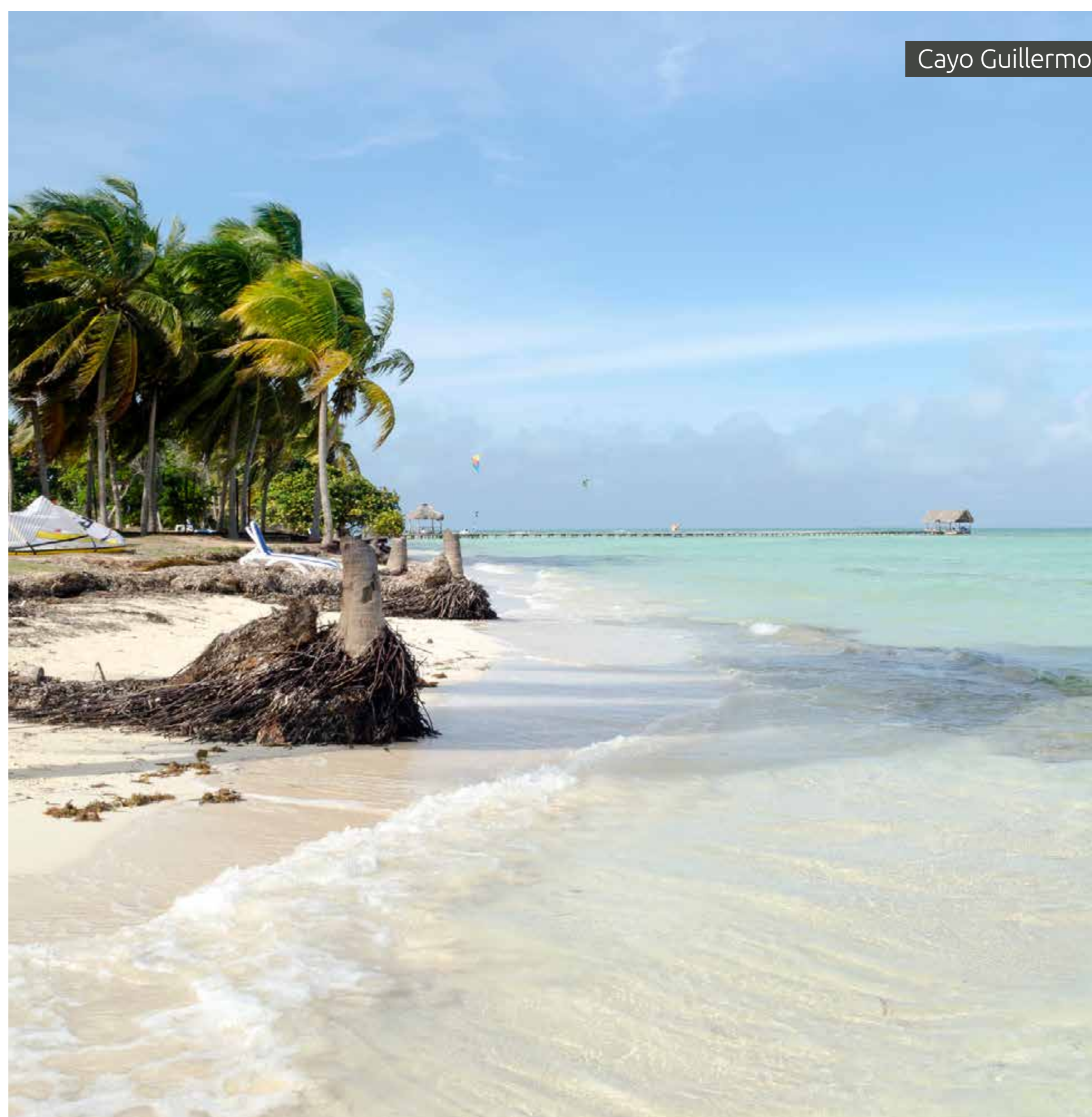
Nearby is Valle de los Ingenios. This area is traditionally known as a place of healing, where locals have gone to bathe in the natural springs. A popular day trip is one to Hacienda Codina, which features medicinal mud baths and lush, verdant gardens.

Parque Nacional Topes de Collantes

Within Topes de Collantes, the Javira reserve is best explored on horseback. The incredible network of trails takes you through streams, canyons, ancient caves, and scenic waterfalls.

Just 6km from Trinidad, the UNESCO-protected Valle de los Ingenios (Valley of the Mills) was the beating heart of Cuba's sugar production from the late 18th to late 19th century.

Amidst fields of soaring palms, the ruins of more than seventy 19th-century sugar mills, including warehouses, slave quarters, and an operational steam train, can be explored on foot, by bike, or on horseback.



Jardines del Rey

Some 30km from the mainland at Ciego de Ávila, Cuba's fabled Jardines del Rey (Gardens of the King) remained unexplored until the late 1980s.

This collection of picture-perfect islands, woven with mangroves, lagoons, gleaming white sands, and clear waters, are ringed with a spectacular, 400km coral reef.

Go snorkeling or diving here, and you'll find technicolor marine life including, parrotfish, grunts, yellowtail snappers, angelfish, tarpon, jacks, spadefish, groupers, sharks, and barracudas. With more than 30 dive sites dotting the dramatic coastline, there's no wonder this is a popular dive site.

For something a little more low-key, find yourself a spot on the most coveted ribbon of sand in Playa Pilar, located at the western fringes of Guillermo.

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The Javira reserve is best explored on horseback. The incredible network of trails takes you through streams, canyons, and scenic waterfalls.

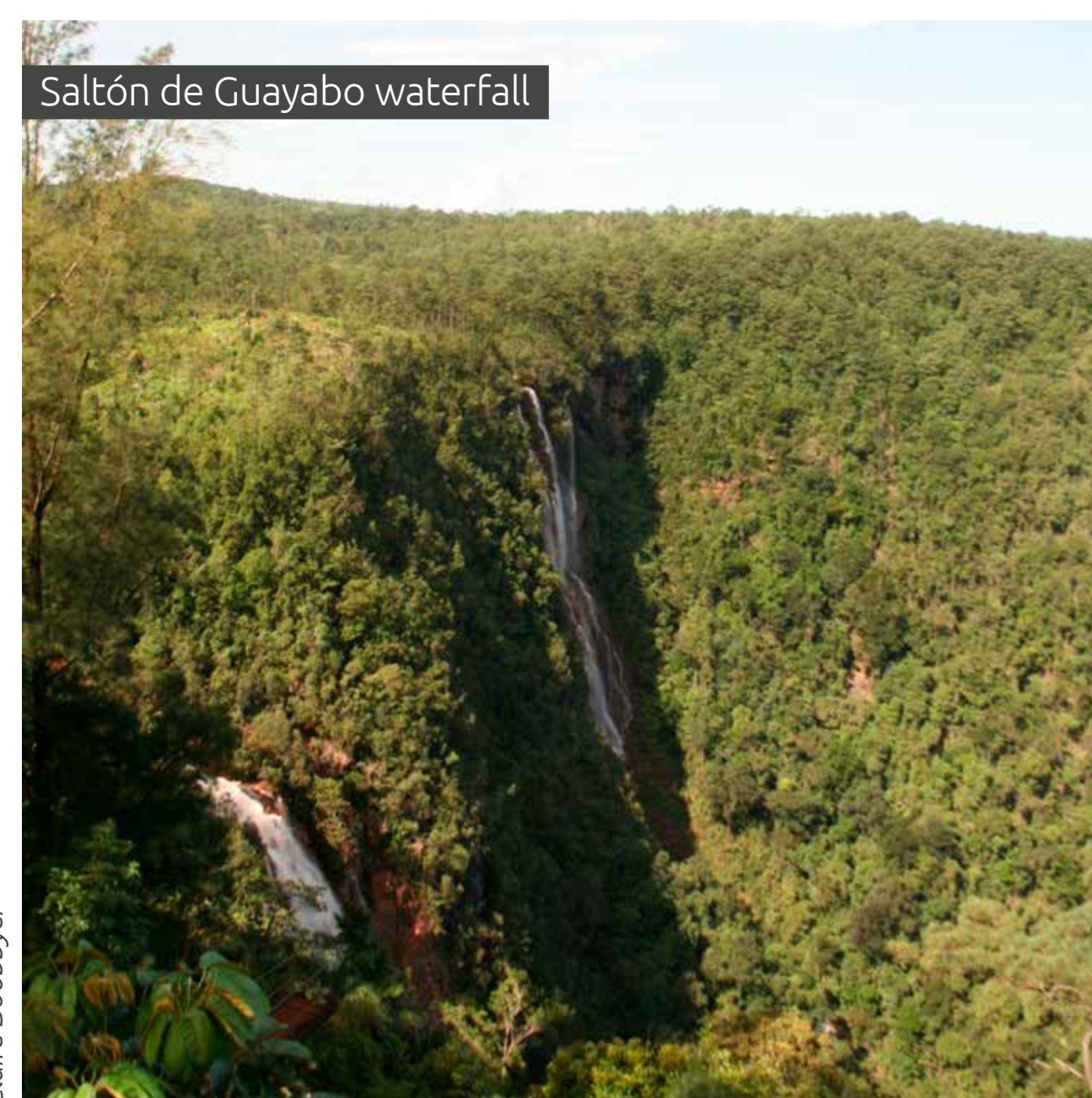
Eastern Cuba

Eastern Cuba is less traveled-to than other parts of the island, but for true challenge-seekers, it's where some of the best adventures are found. With a bit of planning, most of these adrenaline-highs can even be organized on the ground.

Pico Turquino: Cuba's highest peak

If you're a keen hiker, don't miss the chance to summit Pico Turquino in the Sierra Maestra Mountains. At 1,974m, it's the highest mountain in Cuba.

Though it can be climbed in one day for the very fit, most hikers spend at least one or two nights camping before descending to Las Cuevas on the Caribbean coast, west of Santiago de Cuba. Equally, you can begin the trail at Las Cuevas.



Saltón de Guayabo waterfall

Claire Boobbyer

Sierra Maestra



Claire Boobbyer

“If you're a keen hiker, don't miss the chance to summit Pico Turquino in the Sierra Maestra Mountains. At 1,974m, it's the highest mountain in Cuba.”

Fidel Castro's rebel mountain camp

The Pico Turquino hike can also be combined with a visit to Fidel Castro's mountain rebel camp, La Comandancia de La Plata.

Castro and his guerrilla army holed up here in 1958 and built a camp, hospital, and rebel radio station. It's now a well-preserved museum, and can be reached on a day hike from Santo Domingo.

Santo Domingo is the HQ for trekking services. Note, travelers must be accompanied by a local guide at all times here.

Pine Forest Mountain & waterfalls

Striking northeast, the cool mountain air of the Sierra de Cristal houses the Pinares de Mayarí pine forest. There's a chalet hotel up there with walks into the

ADVENTURE CUBA

surrounding forest. Take a plunge into the foot of the cascading Saltón de Guayabo waterfall near the hotel.

Cayo Saetia

This is one of Cuba's most bizarre destinations. Cayo Saetía is an offshore island populated by ostrich, zebra, and buffalo. It's a former hunting ground turned tourist attraction.

Stay in the hotel bungalows and drive to the gorgeous, butter-soft sand beach buttressed by granite boulders in the morning, and take a jeep photo safari through the long grass in the afternoon.

Caverns, shipwrecks & snorkeling

Most of the reef diving and snorkeling takes place off the beaches of the Guardalavaca area on the northeast coast.

Just west, in the Gibara area, are caverns suitable for diving and snorkeling, depending on your experience. Behind Gibara town are a series of caves that can be explored on foot.

Off the southern coast, west of Santiago de Cuba, are the wrecked remains of vessels sunk during the Cuban-



Guardalavaca

Claire Boobbyer

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Behind Gibara town are a series of caves that can be explored on foot.

Spanish-American War in 1898. The most famous of these is the Cristóbal Colón.

Guardalavaca

Heading north from Cayo Saetía, you'll reach the beaches of Guardalavaca – a series of beaches backed by hills peppered with royal palms. Sail, swim, dive, and cruise on the catamaran down to Cayo Saetía for the day.

Baracoa beaches & surfing

Heading south along the pot-holed, coastal road from Saetía to Baracoa, adventurers will revel in the city's nearby beaches, the trails of Alexander de Humboldt National Park, and climbing its famous flat-topped mountain, El Yunque.

Further south, surfers are talking up the surfing at the mouth of the Yumurí River. If you're keen to catch a wave, make sure you take your own board with you.



Caverna de Panaderos, Gibara

Claire Boobbyer

Hiking and Trekking

It's an exciting time for outdoor adventurers in Cuba, as nature reserves and national parks that have been restricted to travelers for decades are now opening up to provide outdoor recreation, history, and wildlife-watching for all.

Sierra del Escambray

Southwest of Trinidad, at the heart of Sierra del Escambray and encircled by lofty mountains, Topes de Collantes National Park is where you can hike to ancient caves, passing rivers, waterfalls, and find natural pools to cool off.

One of the park's well-trodden trails (8km round trip) leads to the Salto del Caburní, a 65m waterfall where you can bathe in emerald green waters.

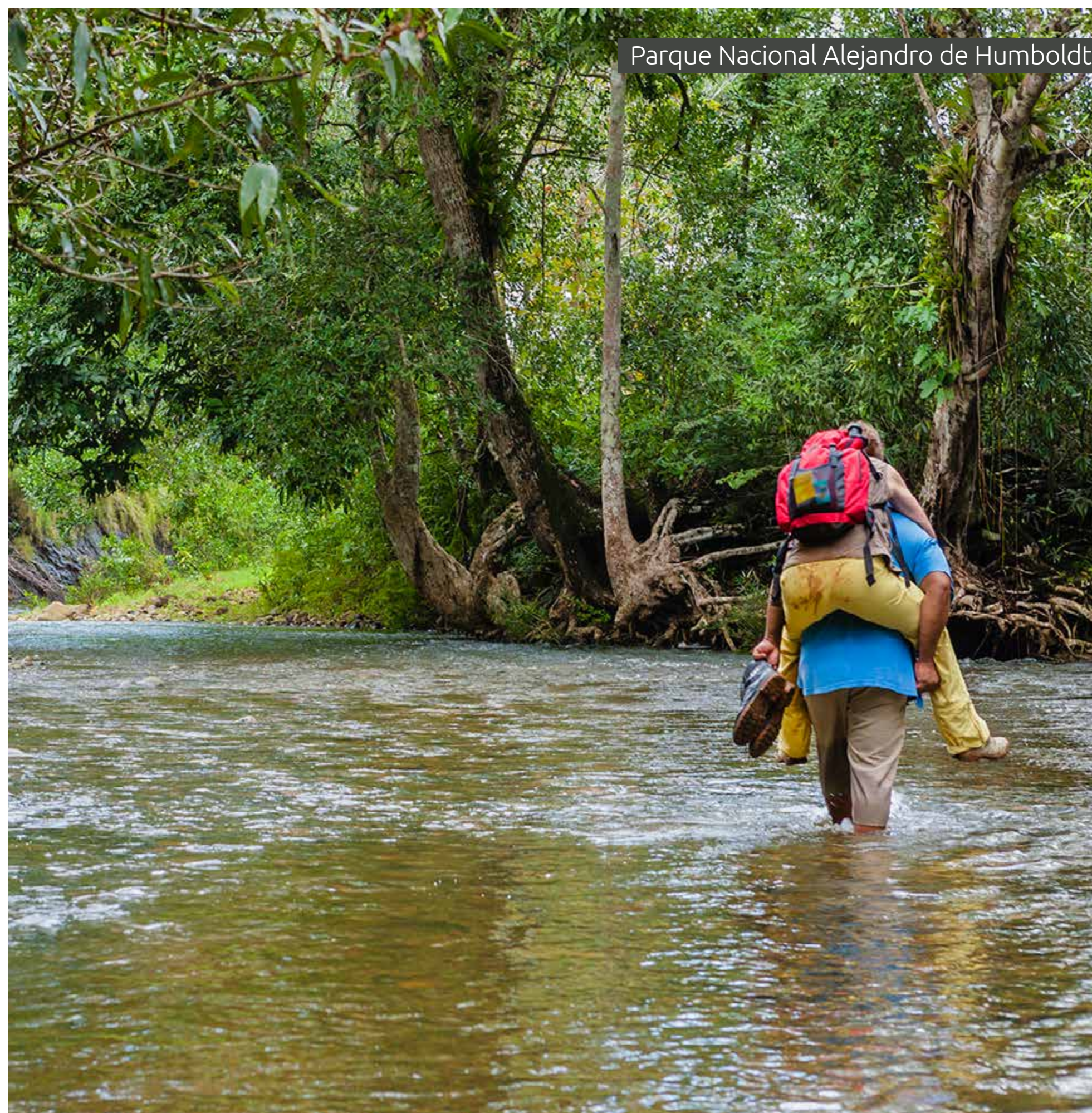
The taxing trail (it's steep and muddy) traverses palm, pine, and eucalyptus forests, which provide shade for more than 40 varieties of coffee.

Novice hikers should be mindful of steep descents along muddy trails.

Other popular hikes include an 8km round trip to Salto Vega Grande waterfall, and a 3km hike to La Batata, which rewards with a river-cave system flush with natural ponds.

When it comes to logistics, skip the depressing, Soviet-style hotels in the 'resort village' and hole up in nearby Trinidad.

Independent travelers can hire a car,



or for an easier, hassle-free option, sign up for an organized tour: not all trails are well-marked.

Sierra Maestra

Back in 1958, when Fidel Castro and his guerillas set up their camp here and plotted the Revolution against Batista, the Sierra Maestra was an utterly wild, impenetrable jungle.

Today, the Gran Parque Nacional Sierra Maestra is a Mecca for hard-core hikers and wildlife enthusiasts.

Within the park, Cuba's highest summit Pico Turquino (1,971m or 6,469ft), is certainly no cakewalk. It features steep ascents, humid conditions, and some scrambling is required. Don't attempt this unless you have a pretty high baseline of fitness, or have done some training for your trip.

Most hikers tackle the peak over two days from Alto del Naranjo, a 13km

Important tip

When hiking and biking in Cuba, it's key to remember that guides are still obligatory in most areas (Viñales is an exception), and you should be prepared for poor infrastructure in most national parks.

ADVENTURE CUBA

round trip.

Thrill-seekers can opt for the 22km route, which involves climbing up and over the mountain to the Caribbean coast at Las Cuevas. This hike must be undertaken with a guide, which costs around CUC \$68 per person and includes an overnight mountain refuge en route.

For more revolutionary history and a (slightly) less challenging trail, an alternative, but equally breathtaking hike, leads to Comandancia de la Plata, the headquarters of the revolutionary army for nearly two years.

Along with the medical hut where Che Guevara treated injured fighters, you can check out Fidel's private digs.

Viñales Valley

With its red-earth lands, valleys of tobacco plantations, and limestone monoliths (mogotes), it's no surprise that Viñales is Cuba's most alluring natural attraction. The farming town of Viñales nearby also provides an excellent base and a soulful immersion into traditional Cuban farming life.

Unlike most of Cuba's national parks, hikers here have the freedom to explore the region's trails, farmlands, caves, waterfalls, and swimming holes without being accompanied by a local guide.

A tame introduction is the 2km hike from Viñales town to a working tobacco plantation, Finca Raúl Reyes and on to the Cueva de la Vaca, a cave which delivers tourist-brochure worthy panoramas of the valley's signature mogotes.

The 3km ascent to the eco village of Los Aquáticos is memorable for its soul-stirring sunrises; a guide will cost around CUC \$5 and organized tours often throw in a horse and cart for a leg of the journey, if you want to take it easy.

Reserva Ecológica Alturas de Banao

If you want to get off-the-beaten-track, this is the place. Nestled within the Guamuhaya mountain range, this small but magical ecological reserve spans four distinct ecosystems.

The serrated mountains and foothills, dotted with the ruins of century-old farmhouses and laced with hiking trails, allows for close encounters with plant and animal species.

Accessed from the village of Banao, 20km west of Sancti Spíritus, the park headquarters (with a restaurant and visitor center) are located at Jarico, 3.5km from the Sancti Spíritus–Trinidad road.

A prime hiking base is the clean, no-frills Campismo Planta Cantú, located 4km off Route 12 between Banao and Sancti Spíritus.

Right on your doorstep, you gain access to several hiking trails and waterfalls, including Cascada la Bella, and a scenic, 6km trail to La Sabina bio-station.

Seasoned mountain men and women take on the 10km hike to the Comandancia del Guerrillero Heroico, Che Guevara's former guerrilla headquarters, deep in the mountains near the hamlet of Gavilanes.

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With its red-earth lands, valleys of tobacco plantations, and limestone monoliths (mogotes), it's no surprise that Viñales is Cuba's most alluring natural attraction.

Scuba Diving

Cuba's vast reef system is among the most spectacular and best-protected in all of the Caribbean. Here's our pick of the best diving spots and a few tips to help you take the plunge.

Tours, gear, and qualifications

The busiest and most-experienced scuba diving tour operators are found in beach resort areas – such as Cayo Coco, Varadero, and Guardalavaca – as well as popular dive destinations of Maria la Gorda, Isla de la Juventud, and Punta Frances.

Hotel chains like Melia, Iberostar, Brisas, and Royalton all have reliable dive shops in-house.

Rental gear can be of varying quality. As always, if you have your own, you're best off bringing it with you. Just make sure hoses and attachments have all been recently serviced at home before you arrive, as replacement parts can be hard to come by in Cuba.

Even if you plan to rent everything on the island, it's best to at least bring your own mask, since fit is so personal.

Basic open water diver certification is all you need for much of the diving in Cuba. If you're a beginner, it's best to stick with shallow reef dives until you feel more comfortable.

For divers with advanced certifications, there's much to explore here, too, in the way of caves, caverns, drift dives, and tunnels.



Safety in the water

One of the best safety measures you can have is to ensure you've got the right insurance cover, so you're taken care of in case of an emergency. You may need to select scuba diving as an activity you're doing at the time of purchase, so you can be covered for the type of diving you're doing.

As with diving anywhere in the world, it's important to respect the limits instilled by your instructors, as well as the limits dictated by your dive computer.

Never dive beyond your limits: dive with a buddy at all times, and be sure to observe the 24-hour no-fly rule after your last dive.

Diving in Maria la Gorda

Start your dive explorations on the peninsula furthest west in Cuba: Maria la Gorda. Here, international dive centers

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Trek into Tayrona National Park to enjoy sandy beaches surrounded by tropical forests.

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front the sheltered Bahia de Corrientes, and is considered one of the island's best-protected zones for diving. The area falls within the Guanahacabibes National Park and is home to around 50 excellent dive sites that include plunging walls, swim-throughs, and caves.

Some standouts include the Gorgonian Garden, home to hulking Nassau groupers, and Lost Paradise, where you can fin amongst shoals of jacks and barracuda. Keep an eye out for patrolling stingrays, though.

Cayo Largo

Cayo Largo, east of Isla de la Juventud off Cuba's southern coast, is yet another prime place to submerge, with shallow waters that host a wide range of marine life. Tunnels, steep walls, and vibrant coral heads are among the over 30 dive sites here, with eels, barracuda, sharks, lobster, grouper and all manner of snapper among the inhabitants.

Jardines del Rey and Cayo Coco

Off the northern coast of Cuba, make a beeline for the Jardines del Rey (Gardens of the King) and Cayo Coco, home to beaches with sugar-white sand and a rainbow of reef life.

The water is warm and crystal clear – all the more enticing for spotting angelfish, parrotfish and large schools of tarpon and spadefish as you fin along the pristine reefs.

Punta Frances: Cuba's fabled Pirate Coast

Punta Frances, located along the Isla

de la Juventud, is another must-do for divers. Advanced divers can submerge into a tunnel at the site, called Cueva Azul, to spot huge tarpon.

Even snorkelers along Punta Frances' shores may spot hawksbill sea turtles and maybe even manatees, too.

Jardines de la Reina Marine Park

The Gardens of the Queen Marine Park, off the island's southern coast, is perhaps Cuba's greatest underwater treasure. A government-protected area, it's considered among the most beautiful dive destinations in all of the Caribbean.

Since commercial fishing is not allowed within the park, the marine life here is prolific, with all manner of sea turtles and sharks (including reefs, hammerheads, black tips, leopards, and silkies).

The best way to visit the area is on multi-day trips via liveaboard dive boats.

Bay of Pigs

About two hours southeast of Havana, the Bay of Pigs may be in history books for the failed US military invasion, but scuba divers know it for something else. You can gear up right on the beach and dive straight from the shore to access a spectacular wall that vibrates with all manner of tropical fish, and over 17 species of coral plants.

The Jaruca is a purpose-sunk wreck that's fun to explore in this area. Advanced divers will love the site called Punta Perdiz for its deep wall dazzling with fish life.

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Even snorkelers along Punta Frances' shores may spot hawksbill sea turtles.

Best Season for Diving

You can dive year-round in Cuba, but the best conditions are during the dry season, between December and April.

The water is cooler at this time (around 22°C), and you'll probably want a 5mm wetsuit if you're doing multiple dives, but the seas are also calmest and the water at its most clear, with up to 40m of visibility.

During the rainy season, between June and October, increased wind creates choppy surface conditions and there's also a risk of hurricanes, so avoid diving during this time.

Surfing

Let's be clear, Cuba's no Indonesia or Hawaii when it comes to surfing, but with over 5,500 km of undeveloped coastline and a burgeoning surf culture, it's bursting onto the scene as an exciting new wave-riding destination.

Etiquette & safety tips

Cuba's surfing scene is finally starting to catch on. Not long ago, police were arresting Cuban surfers because they were convinced that they were trying to escape from the island.

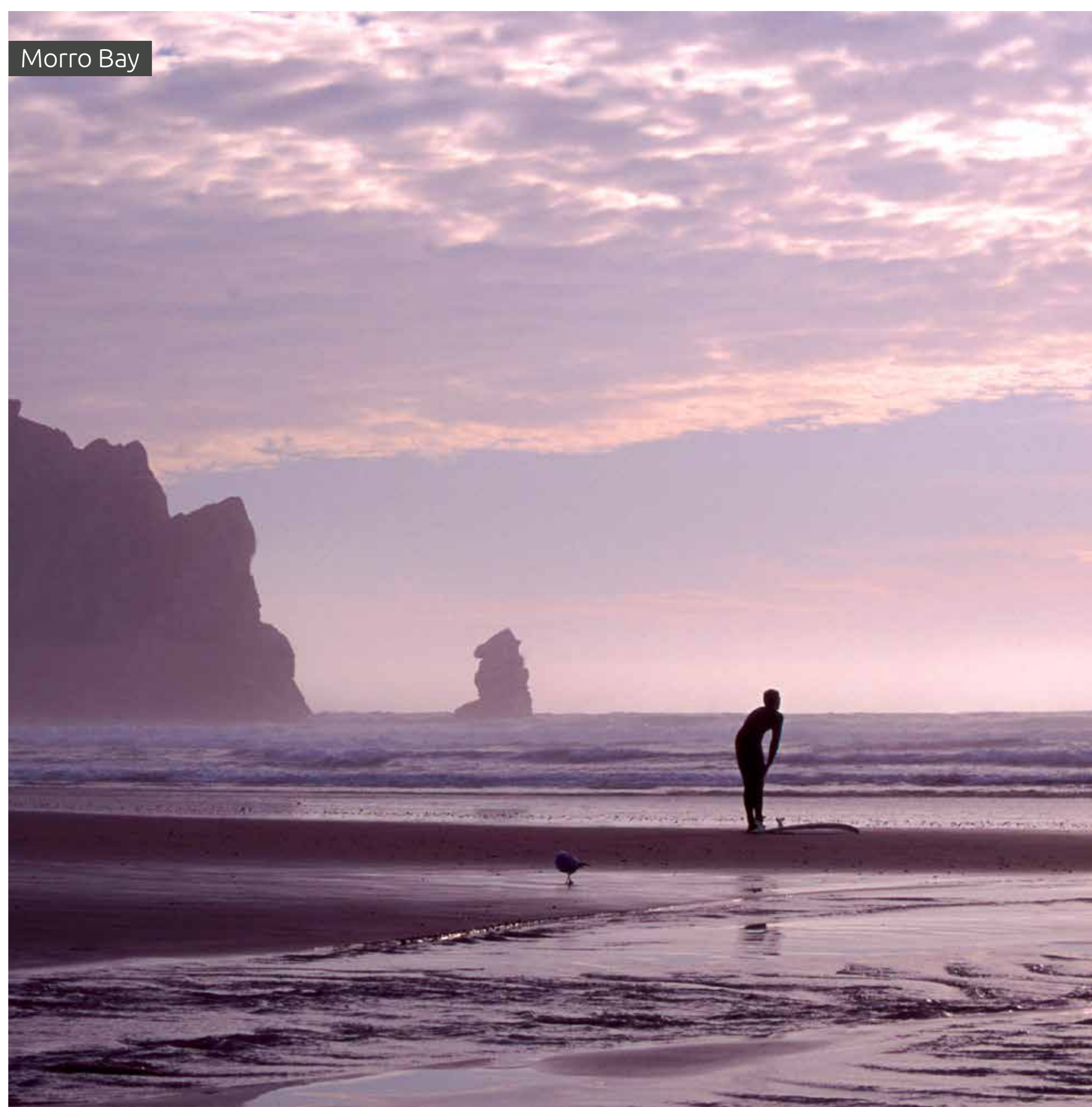
Today, there is a significant amount of kitesurfing and a growing surf culture, but you may find that etiquette on the waves hasn't quite evolved. Be on the defensive side and be vocal.

There are no lifeguards on many of the local beaches, so try to be extra careful and be aware of sharp corals, jagged rocks, and some hard tabletop formations in places like La Setenta and Calle 70.

Cuban policies, combined with the American blockade, have made surfing in Cuba a pretty complicated endeavor, especially for locals who have a hard time getting their hands on boards, wax, and other essentials for the sport.

While there are some places to rent gear, it's best to bring your own from home if you can.

Sometimes if you stay in *casas*



particulares near popular surf towns, you can find wax that other surf travelers have left behind. The owners can sometimes help you with surf tips and locations too.

Yumuri

Known as one of the best surfing spots in Cuba, this river mouth surf bay is located just 30km east of Baracoa.

A mostly pebble stone beach, Yumuri has pretty decent waves breaking both left and right, depending on the current swell.

La Setenta

Known to have waves up to eight feet high during strong northeast Atlantic groundswells, this shallow rock reef is not far from the old center of Havana.

Like many places on the north shore, the best time to hit the waves here is when there's a massive storm in

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Cuba's surfing scene is finally starting to catch on. Not long ago, police were arresting surfers because they were convinced they were trying to escape.

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the Gulf of Mexico, sending the surf crashing on the Caribbean islands.

There's a shallow table reef here with some pretty jagged rocks, so it's important not to head out at low tide.

Because of the underwater topography, access to the surf can be difficult from the coastline, but there's a random concrete slab sticking out into the ocean where many people find easier entry.

Playas del Este

Mostly known for great kitesurfing, there's the odd body surfer and surfers on Playas del Este near Havana.

This beach runs for 25km along the northern coast. There are few facilities here and you really have to wait for a groundswell or a storm further north to enjoy proper waves.

But, if you're into strapping on a kite, Havana Kiteboarding have a surf shop in Playas del Este where you can rent gear and organize lessons.

Calle 70

This is Havana's main break, but it's not a safe one, so be careful.



Cabo de San Antonio beach

The waves are okay here, but they crash over a razor-sharp reef dotted with sea urchins and stone fish, so most serious falls here are known to leave the surfer cut and bloody.

You can do lessons on this break, but there are better places in the country for beginners.

Baconao

Along the south coast of the national park there are some good surfing opportunities.

Sun Beach

There's an average beach break here with decent and easy waves good for all surfers. There are some lifeguards here, who tend to shut the beach down if the waves get too big.

Cabo de San Antonio

This beach is known to have adequate surfing during storms in the Gulf. If the waves are too tame, head to the Parque Nacional Península de Guanahacabibes, at the tip of the peninsula, for some crocodile spotting and cenote swimming.

Best Season for Diving

Cuba enjoys a tropical climate year-round, with north-easterly trade winds constantly blasting the shoreline and a balmy average temperature of 21°C (69.8°F).

The only real time to surf in Cuba is in winter – from November to April – when the Atlantic groundswell comes in from the north-east, producing some decent barrels.

Cuba sits in the hurricane corridor in the Gulf of Mexico, so the island can be hit by crazy storms. It's not recommended to be on the water during strong weather from June to November, and it's important to be aware of all hurricane warnings.

Essential Insurance Tips

Since the restoration of Cuba-US diplomatic ties under former US President Obama, Cuba has opened up as a tourist destination. With direct flights from the US to Havana, more Nomads than ever are heading to the Caribbean state to immerse themselves in the local culture.

Cuban Insurance Requirements

US Travelers: There are a few procedures when entering Cuba that are important to be aware of. Reports have surfaced stating that the Cuban government requires American travelers to have a valid Cuban ‘Asistur’ travel insurance policy.

The Asistur insurance policy is a Cuban-based insurance company which offers premiums for a few dollars per day.

The requirement to have this Asistur policy remains – regardless of whether or not travelers have valid insurance from a non-Cuban provider like World Nomads. In some instances, airlines are automatically adding the Asistur insurance directly onto customer’s airline ticket cost when they purchase a ticket to Cuba.

Does this mean you only need the Asistur policy? It’s very important that you look further into what the Asistur policy covers before traveling to Cuba, so you

can decide if the cover provided suits your needs.

Many travelers have stated the Cuban policy is less than sufficient for their purposes, with limited cover for evacuation. You can also refer to the [US Department of State](#) for further advice on travel insurance for Cuba.

The World Nomads policies for US residents can cover you up to US \$100,000 for emergency medical and sickness expenses, as well as up to US \$500,000 for evacuation on the Explorer plan.

Non-US travelers: For non-US travelers, you’re required to have medical and air evacuation cover, which the Cuban authorities will ask to see at the border.

For all countries except Canada, World Nomads insurance policies can cover both overseas emergency medical expenses, as well as air evacuation. The UK foreign travel advice says that ‘medical facilities in Havana are better than elsewhere in Cuba, but you may need to be medically evacuated if you need specialist care. This can be very expensive’. And they’re not wrong. We’ve seen medical evacuations which cost over US \$50,000!

If you’re planning on doing high-risk sports, it’s a requirement by the Cuban government that you also take out an Asistur policy. So, it’s a good idea to plan ahead and check what the government considers to be high-risk, but it includes sports such as motor sports, scuba diving, caving, mountain

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Many travelers have stated the Cuban policy is less than sufficient for their purposes, with limited cover for evacuation.

climbing (using ropes or guides), rock climbing, hang-gliding, skydiving, contact sports, and hunting.

Medical Insurance

The infrastructure in Cuba is still limited, and basic things that you may take for granted such as ATM's and Wi-Fi are not easy to find.

The economy is still a cash economy, and very few facilities accept credit cards. While paying for small doctor's consultations are easy enough, this lack of infrastructure can be particularly tricky when it comes to needing hospitalization or evacuation.

If you're in need of a doctor in Cuba, a quick cash transaction can see you through the thick of it. Where the policy covers you, you can then submit an online claim to World Nomads.

However, if you need a hospital or evacuation and present a foreign insurance they do not know, they may demand cash. This is because many of the facilities are familiar with the Asistur policy on face value and how it works. If you find yourself in this position, our assistance teams are on standby and have experience dealing with hospitals and evacuation teams in Cuba. It's important that you contact your assistance team as soon as you need help, so they can work with the medical facility on your behalf.

Impact of Government Sanctions

Cuba is a sanctioned country. Unfortunately, if you live in Canada, World Nomads travel insurance cannot

cover your trip, as our insurer is unable to pay local providers due to the sanctions.

For other countries, sanction restrictions may change at any time in the future, so do check your policy carefully before you buy to make sure you can travel to Cuba on your travel insurance.

Got questions?

We're here to help navigate how travel insurance works, so if you have questions about what's covered, what's not covered, and how to get help, our [helpdesk](#) has answers to most insurance questions. Or, simply [ask us](#).

All of the information we provide about travel insurance is a brief summary only. It does not include all terms, conditions, limitations, exclusions, and termination provisions of the travel insurance plans described. Coverage may not be available for residents of all countries, states or provinces. Please carefully read your policy wording for a full description of coverage.



Main square in Trinidad

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If you're in need of a doctor in Cuba, a quick cash transaction can see you through the thick of it.



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