

Cuba

Dogs sleep on the motorway as a Russian Lada roars past, brightly painted in the incongruous colors of the tropics. Behind it a 1954 Cadillac belches black from its impossibly large and beautifully contoured frame. The two Cold War classics coexist here so naturally that it's curious to imagine that this is the motoring equivalent of seeing a penguin and a polar bear on the same ice floe. After a century split evenly between US and Russian influence, Cuba is slowly rousing itself as the Cuban Revolution moves on to its next stage.

With Fidel having shuffled off stage left, Cuba's boundless energy threatens to burst at any moment. Yet, until it does, 1950s Americana overlaid with a generous layer of 1970s Sovietica lives on in a glorious and unique time warp. Whatever your opinion of this most divisive of nations, there's never been a better time to visit.

As well as having the usual Caribbean attractions in abundance – from white sand and palm-fringed beaches to dramatic mountain scenery, Cuba has one of the world's most exciting (and bloody) histories, extraordinary musical and dance traditions all of its own and a rich national architecture that never ceases to astound.

Yes, it's harder work than most of its neighbors, and yes, the government is cashing in on every penny you spend, but the reason people come to Cuba again and again, rife as it is with contradictions and intrigue, is that there's simply nowhere else like it on earth.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 110,860 sq km
- **Capital** Havana
- **Country code** ☎ 53
- **Departure tax** CUC\$25 (cash only)
- **Famous for** Cigars, rum, Fidel Castro, salsa, classic cars
- **Language** Spanish
- **Money** Cuban convertible peso (CUC) and Cuban peso (CUP; also known as *moneda nacional*, MN); CUC\$1 = US\$1.04 = €0.67 = UK £0.53
- **Official name** Republic of Cuba
- **People** Cubans
- **Phrase** *Queué bolá assure?* (What's up, brother?); *ciao/ciaocito* (goodbye/bye)
- **Population** 11.2 million
- **Visa** All visitors require a tourist card (CUC\$15), which is usually issued with your plane ticket or can be bought at airports; see p187



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Havana** (p141) Revel in the gorgeous colonial architecture, the dramatic sea-whipped Malecón and the steamy nightlife of Cuba's thrilling capital, which brings new meaning to the words 'faded grandeur'
- **Santiago de Cuba** (p173) Discover Cuba's beguiling second city, a place shot through with revolutionary history, great music and much charm
- **Viñales** (p160) Drink in some of the Caribbean's most extraordinary landscapes and join the ranks of climbers, hikers and nature lovers discovering this unique Unesco World Heritage site
- **Península de Guanahacabibes** (p163) Explore this fantastic iguana-heavy national park, which has two good resorts on superb beaches; you'll find the mainland's best diving here
- **Las Parrandas, Remedios** (p168) Head to tiny colonial backwater Remedios on Dec 24 for Cuba's most exciting street party, before spending Christmas on the beach

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** While seven days can easily be spent soaking up Havana's rich brew of culture, history and nightlife, an overnight trip to Viñales, Santa Clara or Trinidad is a great way to see a little more of the country.
- **Two Weeks** After several days in Havana, either head west to the Península de Guanahacabibes via Viñales or east to Trinidad, Santa Clara and the beaches at Playa Ancón or Cayo Santa María.
- **Three Weeks** Follow the two-week itinerary on the eastern route and then head east to Santiago de Cuba and Baracoa on the very eastern tip of the island.
- **One Month** Follow the three-week itinerary, but take the time at explorer pace, with hiking thrown in: Topes de Colantes or Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt. Keen divers might want to consider a side trip to Isla de la Juventud.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Peak times for travelers are Christmas, Easter, July and August. Overbooking and price hikes are the disadvantages at these times, especially during July and August, when it's also un-

pleasantly hot throughout much of the country. The ideal time to visit is January to May, when it's warm but uncrowded and there's no threat of hurricanes (which can be a problem on the coasts from June to November). Festivals happen all year round (see p185).

HISTORY

European Arrivals

When Christopher Columbus neared Cuba on October 27, 1492, he described it as 'the most beautiful land human eyes have ever seen.' Spanish conquistadors, led by Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar, agreed: they came, they saw, they conquered and enslaved – despite resistance by indigenous chiefs Hatuey and Guamá. The native population was decimated, and by 1550 only about 5000 survivors remained from a population of around 120,000. The Spanish then began using Africans as slaves.

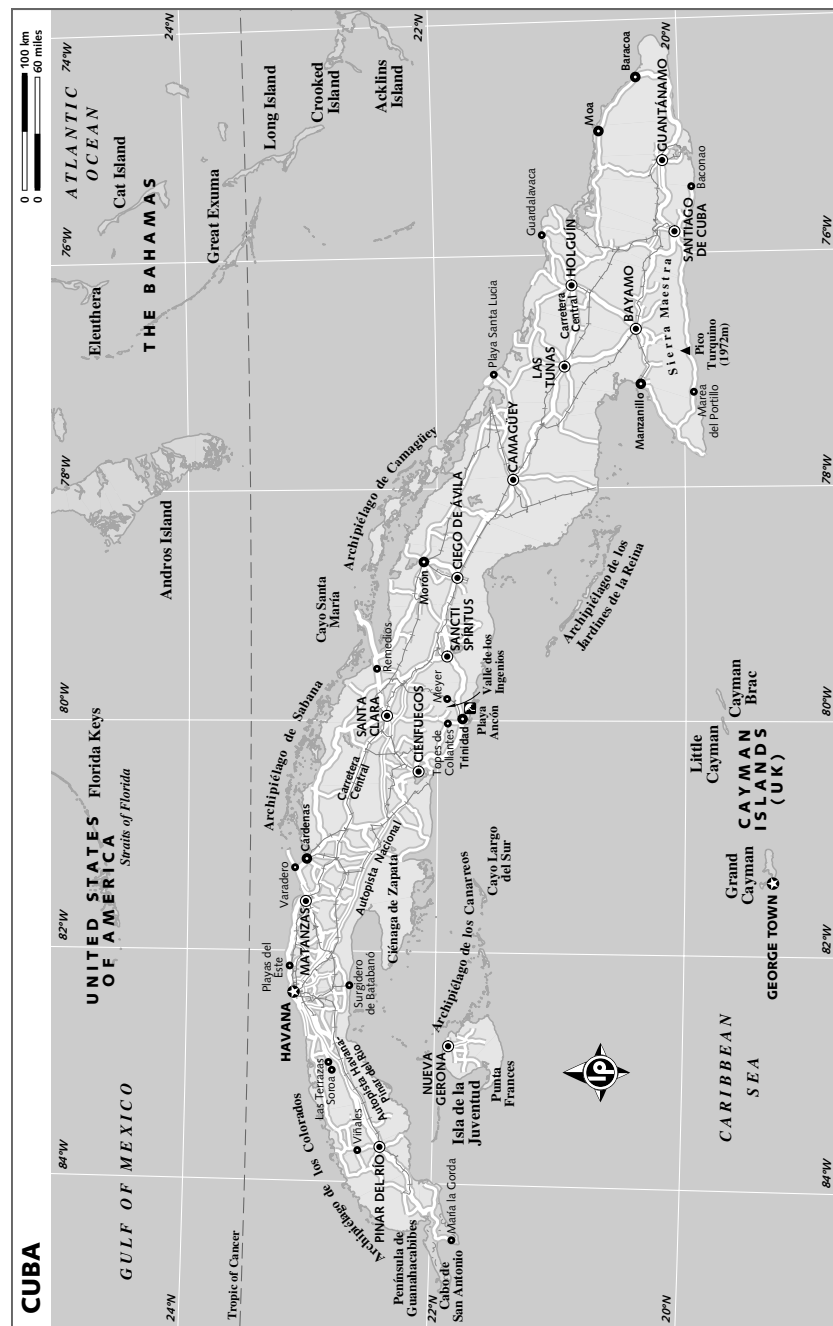
By the 1820s Cuba was the world's largest sugar producer and the US was sweet on it. So important was Cuban sugar that the US offered – twice – to buy Cuba from Spain. The slave trade continued furiously and by the 1840s there were some 400,000 Africans in Cuba, forever altering the country's makeup.

The Road to Independence

Fed up with the Spanish power structure, landowners plotted rebellion. On October 10, 1868, sugar baron Carlos Manuel de Céspedes launched the uprising by releasing his slaves and asking them to join his independence struggle. This began the First War of Independence, which extended into a Ten Years' War, costing some 200,000 lives before a pact improving conditions in Cuba – but not granting independence – was signed with the Spanish in February 1878. Around this time, some Cuban landowners began advocating annexation by the US.

HOW MUCH?

- **Room in casa particular** CUC\$20 to CUC\$30
- **Dinner in casa particular** CUC\$7
- **Bus ticket Havana–Santiago** CUC\$51
- **Concert ticket** CUC\$10
- **Internet per hour** CUC\$6



Enter José Martí. Poet, patriot and independence leader, Martí organized feverishly for independence and, having convinced Antonio Maceo and Máximo Gómez to lead the revolution, landed in eastern Cuba in April 1895 from the United States: on May 19 Martí was shot and killed.

Gómez and Maceo stormed west in a scorched-earth policy that left the country in flames. Cuba was a mess: thousands were dead, including Antonio Maceo, killed south of Havana in December 1896. On February 15, 1898, the US battleship *Maine*, sent to Havana to 'protect US citizens,' exploded unexpectedly in Havana Harbor, killing 266 US sailors.

After the *Maine* debacle, the US scrambled for control, even trying to buy Cuba again (for US\$300 million). The only important land battle of the war was on July 1, when the US Army, led by future US president Theodore Roosevelt, attacked Spanish positions on San Juan Hill in Santiago de Cuba. The Spaniards surrendered on July 17, 1898.

The US, Dictators & Revolutionaries

In November 1900, a Cuban constitution was drafted. Connecticut senator Orville Platt attached a rider giving the US the right to intervene militarily in Cuba whenever it saw fit. Given the choice of accepting this Platt Amendment or remaining under US military occupation indefinitely, the Cubans begrudgingly accepted the amendment; in 1903, the US used the amendment to grab the naval base at Guantánamo.

On May 20, 1902, Cuba became an independent republic, led by a series of corrupt governments, starting with the first president, Tomás Estrada Palma, right up to dictator Fulgencio Batista, who first took power in a 1933 coup.

Batista was duly elected president in 1940, when he drafted a democratic constitution guaranteeing many rights. He was succeeded by two corrupt and inefficient governments, and on March 10, 1952, he staged another coup.

A revolutionary circle formed in Havana, with Fidel Castro and many others at its core. On July 26, 1953, Castro led 119 rebels in an attack on the Moncada army barracks in Santiago de Cuba (see p174). The assault failed when a patrol 4WD encountered Castro's motorcade, costing the attackers the element of surprise.

Castro and a few others escaped into the nearby mountains, where they planned their guerrilla campaign. Soon after, Castro was captured and stood trial; he received a 15-year sentence on Isla de Pinos (now Isla de la Juventud).

In February 1955 Batista won the presidency and freed all political prisoners, including Castro, who went to Mexico and trained a revolutionary force called the 26th of July Movement ('M-26-7'). On December 2, 1956, Castro and 81 companions alighted from the *Granma* at Playa Las Coloradas in the Oriente. The group was quickly routed by Batista's army, but Castro and 11 others (including Argentine doctor Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, Fidel's brother Raúl, and Camilo Cienfuegos) escaped into the Sierra Maestra.

In May of the next year, Batista sent 10,000 troops into the mountains to liquidate Castro's 300 guerrillas. By August, the rebels had defeated this advance and captured a great quantity of arms. Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos opened additional fronts in Las Villas Province, with Che capturing Santa Clara. Batista's troops finally surrendered on December 31, 1958.

The Revolution Triumphs

On January 1, 1959, Batista fled, taking with him US\$40 million in government funds. Castro's column entered Santiago de Cuba that night and Guevara and Cienfuegos arrived in Havana on January 2.

The revolutionary government immediately enacted rent and electricity reductions, abolished racial discrimination and nationalized all holdings over 400 hectares, infuriating Cuba's largest landholders (mostly US companies). Many Cubans also protested at the new policies: between 1959 and 1970, 500,000 Cubans said *adios*. While clearly left-wing, Castro was no communist when he came to power. However, with US political and business will against him, he found himself driven into the arms of Nikita Khrushchev. The Soviet Union massively invested in Cuba and helped the regime through its early years with both military and technical know-how.

In January 1961 the US broke off diplomatic relations and banned US citizens from traveling to Cuba. On April 17, 1961, some 1400 CIA-trained émigrés attacked Cuba, landing in the Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs). The US took a drubbing.

After this defeat the US declared a full trade embargo (known as the *bloqueo*). In April 1962, amid rising Cold War tensions, Khrushchev secretly installed missiles in Cuba, sparking the Cuban Missile Crisis and bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war. Six days later, after receiving a secret assurance from Kennedy that Cuba would not be invaded, Khrushchev ordered that the missiles be dismantled. Castro was excluded from the deal-making.

Marked by inconsistency and bureaucracy, the Cuban economy languished despite massive injections of Soviet aid. Conversely, educational advances were rapid, particularly the 1961 literacy campaign that taught every Cuban to read and write. Meanwhile, Cuba started supporting revolutionary efforts in Latin America and Africa.

The Wall Falls & the Special Period

When the Eastern bloc collapsed in 1989, US\$5 billion in annual trade and credits to Cuba vanished, forcing Castro to declare a five-year *periodo especial* (special period) austerity program, technically ongoing. Rationing and rolling blackouts were instituted and food was scarce. Cubans share their survivor stories of this time willingly.

In August 1993 the US dollar was legalized to provide much-needed liquidity. Class differences re-emerged as people with dollars gained access to goods and services not available in CUP (Cuban pesos); touts (known as *jinteros*, or jockeys) and prostitutes (*jineteras*) reappeared.

When it comes to sore subjects, US immigration policy runs a close second to the embargo. The Cuban Adjustment Act (1966) grants residency to any Cuban arriving on US shores. This has sparked immigration crises, including the *Mariel* boatlift in 1980 when 125,000 people left and the 1994 *balsero* crisis when some 35,000 people on makeshift rafts struggled across the Florida Straits; many died.

In recent years under George W Bush the US policy, which had softened somewhat under Bill Clinton, became far stricter and travel for Americans to Cuba became far more zealously prosecuted.

Life After Fidel

On February 18, 2008, in a letter to daily Communist newspaper *Granma*, Fidel Castro announced to the world that he would not

'aspire or accept' a further term as president and commander in chief. The announcement may have been a surprise (most observers were expecting Fidel to die in office) but there was no revelation about Castro's fitness; his brother and closest ally Raúl Castro had been running the country since Fidel was struck down by serious illness in 2006.

Raúl Castro was duly elected President on February 24, 2008, and is expected to run Cuba for the next few years before passing power onto a younger generation of politicians groomed by Fidel to carry on his legacy.

All bets are currently off about what will happen here in the near future. Many believe that, once Fidel dies, cautious reform will be instituted by Raúl, who is believed to be far less of a dogmatist than Fidel, as well as less anti-American. Indeed, in his first months as president, Raúl Castro has repealed some of Cuba's most backward laws, including bans on cell phones and computers for individual citizens. He has also signaled a further shift from state-run to private agriculture, abandoning the disastrously inefficient state farms that dominate the sector at present. Perhaps even more significantly, he has announced the first Communist Party congress since 1997. It will convene in 2009, and will likely plot the future of Cuba for the next decade and beyond. Once Raúl – who is only seven years younger than Fidel – relinquishes power, the scramble for control of the Caribbean's largest island and one of the last communist states on earth will begin. Whatever the outcome, these will be interesting times for Cuba.

THE CULTURE

In Cuba, money is a consuming topic because hard currency rules: there are places you can go and things you can buy with CUCs (Cuban convertible pesos) but not with CUP. This double economy has reinvigorated the class system that the revolution has worked to neutralize, and the re-emergence of haves and have-nots is among the most ticklish issues confronting Cuba today.

Though housing is free, acute shortages mean even four generations may live under one roof. This cramps love-lives and Cubans will tell you it's why the country has one of the world's highest divorce rates.

Most homes don't have a phone or computer, infinitesimally few have internet access, and disposable income – disposable anything –

is an oxymoron. These factors combine to make recycling and repurposing a national pastime – one foreigners seem to think is much more charming than locals do.

ARTS

The Buena Vista Social Club with their take on *son* may have put Cuban music on the map, but today you'll only hear these now rather tired-sounding songs played in joyless tourist bars. The rest of the country is busy listening to thumping, angry reggaeton – the Panamanian combination of hip-hop, dancehall and reggae – the perfect soundtrack to a frustrated country yearning for change.

If you have the chance, check out some live reggaeton performances, as they are likely to be memorable (the sheer energy and enthusiasm is impressive), although you'll need to go looking for them – a reggaeton group won't pitch up at your hotel during cocktail hour.

Of course if *son*, salsa, jazz or hip-hop are more your thing, you'll have plenty of chance to see them too. Respected founders of *son* include Níco Saquito, Trio Matamoros and Arsenio Rodríguez. In the 1940s and '50s, *son* bands grew, playing rumba, *chachachá* (cha-cha) and mambo. The reigning mambo king was Benny Moré (1919–63), known as 'El Bárbaro del Ritmo' (Barbarian of Rhythm). You will still hear his voice floating out from bars.

Jazz, considered music of the enemy in the revolution's most dogmatic days, has always seeped into Cuban sounds. Jesus 'Chucho' Valdés' band Irakere, formed in 1973, broke the Cuban music scene wide open with its heavy Afro-Cuban drumming laced with jazz and *son*. Havana remains the best place for seeing jazz live (p156).

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean, a long, thin country with 5746km of coastline. Though more prone to winter cold fronts, the north shore has the Caribbean standard powdery sands and turquoise sea. The southern coast is more rocky, bedeviled by *diente de perro* (jagged rocks that line the shore), but has good fishing and unexplored pockets with some lovely beaches too.

Over millions of years, Cuba's limestone bedrock has been eroded by underground rivers, creating interesting geological features

like the 'haystack' hills of Viñales. Cuba has several important mountain ranges providing good hiking opportunities, including the Sierra del Escambray in the center of the country (see p170) and the Sierra Maestra in the Oriente, featuring Pico Turquino (1972m), Cuba's highest peak.

At present, more than 14% of the country is protected in some way. There are six national parks: Parque Nacional Península de Guanahacabibes and Parque Nacional Viñales, in Pinar del Río; the Gran Parque Natural Montemar (aka Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata) in Matanzas; Parque Nacional Desembarco del Granma in Granma and Gran Parque Nacional Sierra Maestra (straddling Granma and Santiago de Cuba Provinces); and Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt in Guantánamo.

Wildlife

Cuba hosts 350 varieties of birds, including the toothpick-sized *zunzuncito* (bee hummingbird), the world's smallest bird. Cuba also boasts the world's smallest toad, the *ranita de Cuba* (Cuban tree toad, 1cm).

Land mammals have been hunted almost to extinction, except for the indigenous *jutía* (tree rat), a 4kg edible rodent. Marine fauna is more inspiring: manatees frequent Punta Frances on the Isla de la Juventud and the coastline around the Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt in Guantánamo, and whale sharks swim around María la Gorda (August to November). Leatherback, loggerhead, green and hawksbill turtles also frequent Cuban seas. Iguanas are a common sight in the Parque Nacional Península de Guanahacabibes in Pinar del Río Province.

There are 90 types of palm, including the *palma real* (royal palm); the national tree, it figures prominently in Cuba's coat of arms and the Cristal beer logo (you'll see plenty of those!). Reforestation programs have been a priority for the Cuban government, which has planted over three million trees since 1959.

FOOD & DRINK

With easily the worst food in the Caribbean, Cuban cuisine is likely to be the bugbear of your trip. If you have high cholesterol or are a non-fish-eating vegetarian or, heaven help you, a vegan, you may want to consider your need to travel to Cuba carefully.

Standard meals are fried pork or chicken with *congrí* (rice flecked with red or black beans), fried plantains and a 'salad' meaning whatever raw vegetables are available. Standards soar when you eat in casas particulares (private homes renting out up to two rooms) and paladares (private restaurants), but inconsistently so. Some towns inexplicably have dreadful restaurants and poor paladares (Santiago de Cuba is one), while in other towns it's easy to eat well (Baracoa, for example).

Drinking in Cuba is a much better experience than eating. The two main beers, Cristal (light) and Bucanero (heavier and with more of a kick) are both good for cooling down, but Cuban cocktails are where things become truly sublime. Excellent mojitos, daiquiris and Ron Collins are easy to find almost anywhere. To be safe, drink bottled water (*agua natural*) or boil it (the local method).

HAVANA

pop 2.2 million / ☎ 7

Perhaps the Caribbean's most beguiling city, Havana (La Habana) gets under your skin quickly and stays with you for years – its filthy but vibrant streets, crumbling but breathtaking buildings and the good-humored *habaneros* all combine to form an unforgettable Hispanic-Afro-Caribbean vibe you'll be sad to leave.

Unlike many other Caribbean capitals, Havana remains remarkably true to its colonial design and has suffered surprisingly little damage in two centuries of turbulent history. The original heart of the city, Habana Vieja, a Unesco World Heritage site and the finest colonial complex in the Americas, has been reinventing itself during the past decade with painstaking restoration work. Now many of its abandoned churches and fine mansions have been restored to their former glory after a century of neglect – all you have to do is take a look at some of the buildings not yet tackled to see the scale of the ruination.

Recently the focus of restoration efforts has moved from Habana Vieja to the Malecón, the beautiful but desperately crumbling city seafront. Now blighted by scaffolding, in a few years the Malecón will hopefully be the jewel in the crown of Havana once again.

INFORMATION

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 106, 55-11-85, 55-21-85)

Internet Access

Havana is the most internet-friendly place in the country, but access is still not cheap anywhere and computers can be slow. Those with their laptops can head to the NH Parque Central and use the wi-fi there (CUC\$8 per hour).

Cibercafé Capitolio (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-0485; Prado & Teniente Rey; per 30min/hr CUC\$3/5; ☎ 8am-8pm)

Inside the main entrance of Capitolio Nacional, this is the cheapest access in town.

Etecsa Habana Vieja (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-4477; Habana 406 cnr Obispo; ☎ 9am-6pm); Vedado (Map pp146-7; cnr Calles 23 & O, Centro de Prensa Internacional; ☎ 8am-7pm) Access is CUC\$6 per hour at all branches.

Servicio de Internet (Map pp146-7; ☎ 831-1321; Calle 15 No 551 btwn Calles C & D; per 1/2/5 hr CUC\$6/10/20; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Havana's most unusually located cybercafé is inside a mathematical institute.

Medical Services

Clinica Central Cira García (Map pp146-7; ☎ 204-2811; www.cirag.cu; Calle 20 No 4101, Playa)

Hospital Nacional Hermanos Ameijeiras (Map pp146-7; ☎ 877-6053; www.hha.sld.cu; San Lázaro No 701) Enter below the parking lot off Padre Varela (ask for 'CEDA' in Section N).

Tryp Habana Libre Pharmacy (Map pp146-7; ☎ 834-6100; Calle L btwn Calles 23 & 25, Vedado) A well-stocked pharmacy in Havana's largest hotel.

Money

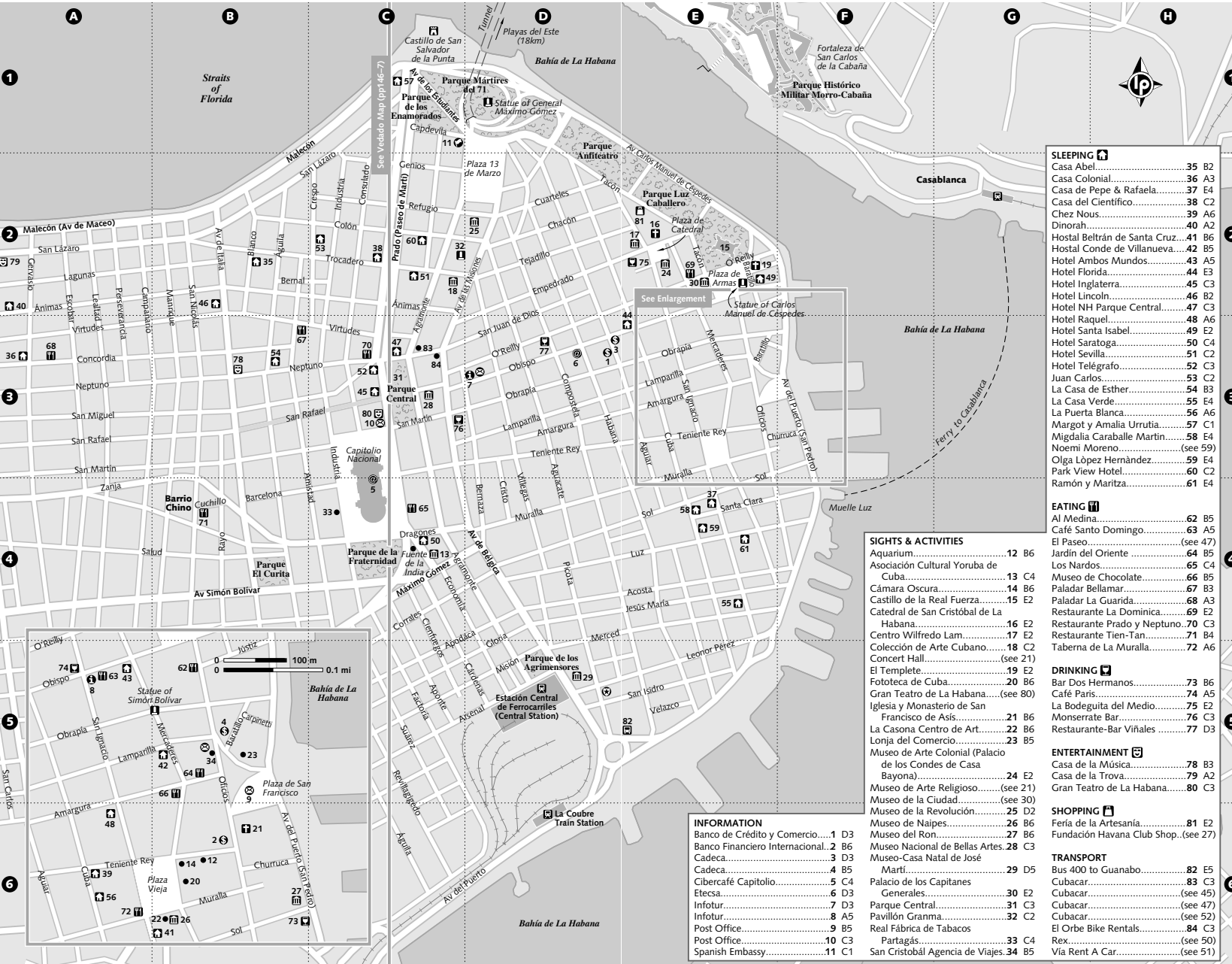
The following are the main banks and currency exchange places in Havana. Banks can be crowded and have long queues, so those in a hurry should head to a Cadeca, where exchange rates are a little worse and traveler's checks and cash advances are a little more expensive, but where you're usually dealt with quickly.

Banco de Crédito y Comercio Habana Vieja (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-5006; Aguiar No 310; ☎ 8:30am-1:30pm Mon-Fri) Near Obispo; Vedado (Map pp146-7; ☎ 870-2684; Calle 23) In the Airline Building.

Banco Financiero Internacional Centro Habana (Map pp146-7; ☎ 873-6496; Av Salvador Allende); Habana Vieja (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-9369; cnr Oficinas & Teniente Rey); Vedado (Map pp146-7; ☎ 55-44-29; Calle L btwn Calles 23 & 25) In Tryp Habana Libre.

Banco Metropolitano Calle M (Map pp146-7; ☎ 55-33-16/17/18; Línea & Calle M); Paseo (Map pp146-7; ☎ 830-1962; Línea off Paseo); Vedado (Map pp146-7; ☎ 879-2074; Av de la Independencia) In the post office.

HABANA VIEJA & CENTRO HABANA



SLEEPING

Casa Abel	35 B2
Casa Colonial	36 A3
Casa de Pepe & Rafaela	37 E4
Casa del Científico	38 C2
Chez Nous	39 A6
Dinorah	40 A2
Hostal Beltrán de Santa Cruz	41 B6
Hostal Conde de Villanueva	42 B5
Hotel Ambos Mundos	43 A5
Hotel Florida	44 E3
Hotel Inglaterra	45 C3
Hotel Lincoln	46 B2
Hotel NH Parque Central	47 C3
Hotel Raquel	48 A6
Hotel Santa Isabel	49 E2
Hotel Saratoga	50 C4
Hotel Sevilla	51 C2
Hotel Telegrafo	52 C3
Juan Carlos	53 C2
La Casa de Esther	54 B3
La Casa Verde	55 E4
La Puerta Blanca	56 A6
Margot & Amalia Urrutia	57 C1
Migdalia Caraballe Martín	58 E4
Noemi Moreno	(see 59)
Olga López Hernández	59 E4
Park View Hotel	60 C2
Ramón & Maritza	61 E4

EATING

Al Medina	62 B5
Café Santo Domingo	63 A5
El Paseo	(see 47)
Jardín del Oriente	64 B5
Los Nardos	65 C4
Museo de Chocolate	66 B5
Paladar Bellamar	67 B3
Paladar La Guarida	68 A3
Restaurante La Dominicana	69 E2
Restaurante Prado y Neptuno	70 C3
Restaurante Tien-Tan	71 B4
Taberna de La Muralla	72 A6

DRINKING

Bar Dos Hermanos	73 B6
Café Paris	74 A5
La Bodeguita del Medio	75 E2
Montserrat Bar	76 C3
Restaurante-Bar Viñales	77 D3

ENTERTAINMENT

Casa de la Música	78 B3
Casa de la Trova	79 A2
Gran Teatro de La Habana	80 C3

SHOPPING

Feria de la Artesanía	81 E2
Fundación Havana Club Shop	(see 27)

TRANSPORT

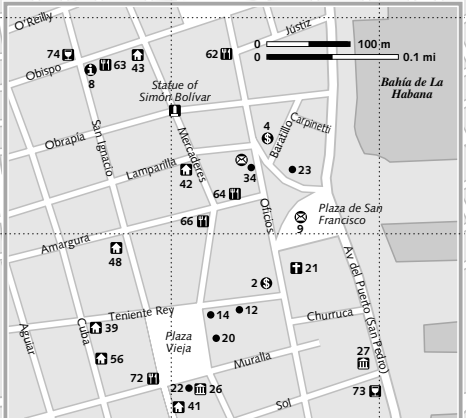
Bus 400 to Guanabo	82 E5
Cubacar	83 C3
Cubacar	(see 45)
Cubacar	(see 47)
Cubacar	(see 52)
El Orbe Bike Rentals	84 C3
Rex	(see 50)
Via Rent A Car	(see 51)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Aquarium	12 B6
Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba	13 C4
Cámara Oscura	14 B6
Castillo de la Real Fuerza	15 E2
Catedral de San Cristóbal de La Habana	16 E2
Centro Wilfredo Lam	17 E2
Colección de Arte Cubano	18 C2
Concert Hall	(see 21)
El Temple	19 E2
Fototeca de Cuba	20 B6
Gran Teatro de La Habana	(see 80)
Iglesia y Monasterio de San Francisco de Asís	21 B6
La Casona Centro de Art.	22 B6
Lonja del Comercio	23 B5
Museo de Arte Colonial (Palacio de los Condes de Casa Bayona)	24 E2
Museo de Arte Religioso	(see 21)
Museo de la Ciudad	(see 30)
Museo de la Revolución	25 D2
Museo de Naipes	26 B6
Museo del Ron	27 B6
Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes	28 C3
Museo-Casa Natal de José Martí	29 D5
Palacio de los Capitanes Generales	30 E2
Parque Central	31 C3
Pavillón Granma	32 C2
Real Fábrica de Tabacos Partagás	33 C4
San Cristóbal Agencia de Viajes	34 B5

INFORMATION

Banco de Crédito y Comercio	1 D3
Banco Financiero Internacional	2 B6
Cadeca	3 D3
Cadeca	4 B5
Cibercafé Capitolio	5 C4
Eteca	6 D3
Infotur	7 D3
Infotur	8 A5
Post Office	9 B5
Post Office	10 C3
Spanish Embassy	11 C1



CUBA

CUBA

Cadeca Habana Vieja (Map pp142-3; cnr Oficios & Lamparilla; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) Facing Plaza de San Francisco; Habana Vieja (Map pp142-3; Obispo No 257 btwn Aguiar & Cuba; ☎ 8:30am-10pm) ATMs here; Vedado (Map pp146-7; Calle 23 btwn K & L; ☎ 7am-2:30pm, 3:30-10pm); Vedado (Map pp146-7; Línea btwn Paseo & Calle A) Cadeca gives cash advances and changes traveler's checks at higher commissions than banks.

Post

DHL (Map pp146-7; ☎ 832-2112; Calzada No 818 btwn Calles 2 & 4; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri)

Post office Centro Habana (Map pp142-3; Prado); Habana Vieja (Map pp142-3; Oficios No 102, Plaza de San Francisco); Vedado (Map pp146-7; Línea & Paseo; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat); Vedado (Map pp146-7; Av de la Independencia; ☎ 24hr)

Tourist Information

Infotur Airport (☎ 266-4094; Terminal 3 Aeropuerto Internacional José Martí; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm); Habana Vieja (Map pp142-3; ☎ 863-6884; www.infotur.cu; cnr Obispo & San Ignacio; ☎ 10am-1pm, 2-7pm); Habana Vieja (Map pp142-3; ☎ /fax 866-3333; cnr Obispo & Bernaza) Arranges tours, sells maps and phone cards, has transportation schedules.

SIGHTS

Habana Vieja

The core of the Cuban capital is the Unesco World Heritage site of Habana Vieja (Old Havana), a fantastic cluster of stunning buildings and churches, many of which have been beautifully restored from near ruins to their former glory over the past decade.

PLAZA DE CATEDRAL

'Music set in stone' was how novelist Alejo Carpentier eulogized the **Catedral de San Cristóbal de la Habana** (Map pp142-3; cnr San Ignacio & Empedrado; ☎ 10:30am-3pm; admission free, to climb tower CUC\$1), and its baroque double towers do exude lyrical ambience, especially at night. Elevated to a cathedral in 1788, it's one of the oldest in the Americas, even though its interior is rather ho-hum. There are great views from the tower.

The excellent **Centro Wilfredo Lam** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-2096; San Ignacio No 22 cnr Empedrado), which displays work by one of Cuba's leading modern painters, was closed for refurbishment at the time of research, but should be opening again in 2009. As well as its permanent collection, it hosts some good international temporary exhibits.

The **Museo de Arte Colonial** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-6440; San Ignacio No 61; admission CUC\$2, guided tour extra CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-6:30pm), housed in the **Palacio de los Condes de Casa Bayona**, the oldest house on the square (1720), is a quirky place where you're watched like a hawk by the room attendants (most of whom will try to sell you Che Guevara coins). The collection is divided up by medium – sculpture, metal work and stained glass all have their own rooms, while the upper floor is given over largely to reconstructed rooms full of colonial furniture. Some rooms are borderline surreal – check out the one given over exclusively to chairs and another to cupboards.

PLAZA DE ARMAS

The **Palacio de los Capitanes Generales** (Map pp142-3) is one of Cuba's most majestic buildings. Construction began in 1776, and from 1791 to 1902 it was home to Spanish and US power players, after which it became the presidential palace. Since 1968 it has housed the **Museo de la Ciudad** (☎ 861-6130; admission unguided/guided CUC\$3/4; ☎ 8:30am-5:45pm). Highlights include peacocks strutting about the courtyard, a large collection of carriages and a stellar display of weaponry. A guided tour allows you to visit areas off-limits to other visitors.

On the northeast side of the Plaza de Armas is the Americas' oldest colonial fortress, the **Castillo de la Real Fuerza** (Map pp142-3), built between 1558 and 1577. The west tower is crowned by the famous bronze weather vane **La Giraldilla**. The saucy dame probably looks familiar – she's the Havana Club logo. At the time of research the fortress was closed to visitors but was likely to reopen soon.

In 1519 the Villa de San Cristóbal de la Habana was founded on the spot marked by the 1828 **El Templete** (Map pp142-3; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8:30am-6pm), a neoclassical Doric chapel. The first Mass was held below a ceiba tree similar to the one at the entrance (touch it for good luck).

PLAZA DE SAN FRANCISCO

Another of Havana's picturesque plazas, Plaza de San Francisco (Map pp142-3) is a real beauty distinguished by the domed **Lonja del Comercio** (1909), now Havana's most prestigious office space. The south side of the square is dominated by the **Iglesia y Monasterio de San Francisco de Asís**. Originally constructed in 1608

and rebuilt between 1719 and 1738, today it's a **concert hall** (concerts CUC\$10; ☎ performances 8pm) hosting classical recitals and the **Museo de Arte Religioso** (☎ 862-3467; admission CUC\$2, guided tour extra CUC\$1; ☎ 8:30am-6pm), with access to Havana's tallest church tower (closed for restoration during our last visit) and a surprisingly large religious art collection housed in two adjacent colonial mansions. There are often excellent temporary photographic exhibits in the 3rd-floor gallery.

On the water, two blocks south of here, is the **Museo del Ron** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-3832; Av del Puerto No 262; admission CUC\$7; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri & Sat, 10am-4pm Sun). This is a great place to learn about the brewing process if you're unable to visit a *ron* (rum) factory while you're in Cuba. The tour takes you through the process from cane cutting to finished product (you'll get to quaff amber Añejo Reserva in the tasting room). The scale model of the Central La Esperanza distillery (complete with functioning train) is especially cool.

PLAZA VIEJA

The Plaza Vieja (Map pp142-3), dating from the 16th century, is the much-loved heart of Habana Vieja and is now almost complete after the restoration of nearly all its buildings. There's a slight feel that many of the 'sights' here have been purpose-built to keep the tourist groups occupied. A case in point is the **Cámara Oscura** (☎ 866-4461; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 9am-5:20pm), providing live, 360-degree city views from atop a 35m-tall tower. Frankly you'd be better off having a cocktail on a Parque Central hotel roof. Next door is **Fototeca de Cuba** (☎ 862-2530; Mercaderes No 307; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat), a photo gallery where contemporary photography is showcased. At the time of research a planetarium was being built next door as well.

A much more genuine sight is the eccentric **Museo de Naipes** (Map pp142-3; Muralla No 101; admission by donation; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Tue-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun), a museum of playing cards. The surprisingly good display of over 2000 different decks includes ones portraying Mussolini, Scooby Doo and U Thant. Next door is **La Casona Centro de Arte** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-8544; Muralla No 107; admission free; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Sat), with quality art exhibits in a fantastic colonial palace.

MUSEO-CASA NATAL DE JOSÉ MARTÍ

Located in front of Havana's wonderful main train station, the **Museo-Casa Natal de José Martí** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-3778; Leonor Pérez No 314; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8:30am-6:30pm) is the birthplace of Cuba's national hero and an important sight for Cubans. Martí was born in this humble dwelling on January 28, 1853, and while there are a few mildly interesting documents, photos and trinkets on display, the Spanish-only exhibit may leave some people rather cold.

Centro Habana

CAPITOLIO NACIONAL & AROUND

Havana's signature architectural sight is the very impressive **Capitolio Nacional** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 863-7861; admission unguided/guided CUC\$3/4; ☎ 9am-6:30pm), which is similar to the US Capitol Building, but richer in detail.

Initiated in 1929, the Capitolio took 5000 workers three years, two months and 20 days to build at a cost of US\$17 million. Everything is monumental here, from the huge bronze doors to the 49-tonne, 17m statue of the republic, the third-largest indoor bronze statue in the world (only the Buddha in Nava, Japan, and the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, are bigger). Below the Capitolio's 62m-high dome, a 24-carat diamond replica is set in the floor. Inside there is an internet club, a café and a selection of arts and crafts stalls.

Behind the Capitolio is the **Real Fábrica de Tabacos Partagás** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 867-6657; Industria No 520 btwn Barcelona & Dragones; admission CUC\$10; ☎ tours every 15min 9:30-11am & noon-3pm), a cigar factory built in 1845 and, at the time of writing, the only Havana cigar factory it's possible to visit with any ease. A tour here is a fascinating insight into both Cuba's most famous export and, perhaps even more so, into the lives of ordinary Cubans working in a factory. Few people leave unimpressed by the level of quality control that goes on here. Starting on the ground floor where the leaves are unbundled and sorted, the tour moves to the upper floors to watch the tobacco being rolled, pressed, banded and boxed. The tours (in English, French or Spanish) culminate in a visit to the well-stocked cigar shop.

Across the Prado the **Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 863-5953; www.nnl-cuba.org/obinibatá; Prado No 615; admission CUC\$10; ☎ 9am-5pm) would be an interesting introduction to the Afro-Caribbean religious tradition of Santería were it not so overpriced.

VEDADO



A	B	C	D
INFORMATION	SLEEPING	EATING	
Banco de Crédito Comercio.....(see 62)	Ana Livia Grimany Rojo.....24 D4	Coppelia.....35 F2	
Banco Financiero Internacional.....1 G4	Casa Silvia.....25 D4	Decameron.....36 C3	
Banco Financiero Internacinal.....(see 34)	Hotel Méliá Cohiba.....26 C2	El Conejito.....37 E2	
Banco Metropolitano.....2 C3	Hotel Nacional.....27 F2	La Roca.....38 F2	
Banco Metropolitano.....3 E2	Hotel St Johns.....28 F2	Paladar Los Amigos.....39 F2	
Banco Metropolitano.....4 E5	Hotel Vedado.....29 F2	Pan.com.....40 C4	
Cadeca.....5 E3	Hotel Victoria.....31 F3	Trattoria Maraka's.....41 F2	
(see 2)	Iris y Felipe.....32 D4		
Clinica Central Cira Garcia.....6 A5	José A García.....32 D4		
DHL.....7 C3	Melba Piñeda Bermúdez.....33 C3		
Etesca.....(see 43)	Tryp Habana Libre.....34 F3		
French Embassy.....8 A5			
German Embassy.....9 D3			
Hospital Nacional Hermanos Ameijeiras.....10 G2			
Immigration Office.....11 D6			
Netherlands Embassy.....12 A4			
Post Office.....13 C3			
Post Office.....(see 4)			
Servicio de Internet.....14 D3			
Tryp Habana Libre Pharmacy.....(see 34)			
US Interests Section.....15 E2			
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES			
Anfiteatro Parque Almendares.....(see 45)			
Bosque de la Habana.....16 B6			
Cubanacan.....17 F2			
Cubatur.....18 D2			
El Focsa.....19 E2			
Memorial José Martí.....20 E5			
Ministry of the Interior.....21 E5			
Parque Almendares.....22 B6			
Parque Lennon.....23 C4			
US Interests Section.....(see 15)			

E	F	G	H
DRINKING	ENTERTAINMENT	SHOPPING	TRANSPORT
Café Fresa y Chocolate.....42 C4	Casa de Cultura Roberto Blany.....47 E5	Aerocaribbean.....(see 62)	Airline Building.....62 F2
Centro de Prensa Internacional.....43 F2	Casa de la Amistad.....48 D3	Cubana de Aviación.....(see 62)	Cubatur.....63 F3
Opus Bar.....44 D2	Casa de la Cultura Centro Habana.....49 C4	Promociones de ICAIC.....(see 52)	Rex.....64 F2
	Cine Charles Chaplin.....50 C4		Vía Rent a Car.....(see 34)
	Cine Riviera.....51 E3		
	Cine Yara.....52 F2		
	Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba.....53 C3		
Anfiteatro Parque Almendares.....45 B6	El Chevere.....54 B6		
Callejón de Hamel.....46 G3	El Hurón Azul (Uneac).....55 E3		
	Estado Latinoamericano.....56 G6		
	Jazz Café.....57 C2		



CUBA

CUBA

Like the practice of the religion during colonial times, the museum is today something of a Trojan Horse; when African slaves were forcibly converted to Christianity, they secretly worshipped their own gods (orishas) by disguising them as Christian saints. In this 'museum' the artifacts are actually shrines and any attempt to educate visitors is perfunctory. Despite that, it's an enlightening look into a very different world. There are free *tambores* (drum jams/ceremonies) here on alternate Fridays at 4:30pm (when museum entry is free).

Just north of the Capitolio is the **Gran Teatro de La Habana** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-3077; Prado No 458; guided tours CUC\$2; ☎ 9am-5pm). Built between 1907 and 1914, this is an outrageously beautiful building inside and out. As well as visiting for a guided tour during the daytime, you can catch some of Havana's best performances here (CUC\$20; see p156), most notably the National Ballet of Cuba.

Across from the Gran Teatro is **Parque Central** (Map pp142-3) and the very first Martí statue erected in Cuba (1905). You'll see men laughing and arguing near the statue; this is the famous *esquina caliente*, where baseball fanatics debate their favorite teams.

MUSEO NACIONAL DE BELLAS ARTES

Cuba's largest and most impressive art collection is housed in two striking buildings, collectively called the **Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 863-9484; www.museonacional.cult.cu; admission one/both buildings CUC\$5/8; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun). The main building, housed in the wonderful Centro Asturianas (a former Spanish social club), looks every bit the part of a national art collection and it doesn't disappoint, displaying a huge collection taking in world art from Greek sculpture and Roman mosaics to canvases by El Greco and Gainsborough.

The **Colección de Arte Cubano** (Map pp142-3; Trocadero btwn Agramonte & Av de las Misiones; guided tours in Spanish/English CUC\$2/7) up the road is a showcase of purely Cuban art in a new, fully wheelchair-accessible and architecturally distinguished building. If you only visit one art gallery in Cuba, make sure that this is it. Look especially for works by Collazo, Blanco and Wilfredo Lam. Book in advance for the guided tours.

MUSEO DE LA REVOLUCIÓN

The **Museo de la Revolución** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-4092; Refugio No 1; admission CUC\$5, guided tour in Spanish per person CUC\$2; ☎ 10am-5pm) is one of Havana's most important sights and is well worth a few hours. Housed in the former Palacio Presidencial, site of the 1957 Batista assassination attempt and where Castro's cabinet convened until the '60s, the building alone is fascinating, with several offices preserved and the interiors decorated by Tiffany's. Everything you wanted to know about the Cuban Revolution is here, and a lot more. The exhibition boasts rare photographs, original documents and revolutionary ephemera. However, while individual events are documented in huge detail, there's no overall narrative linking them together, making it less than brilliant for newcomers to Cuban history. There are often good temporary exhibits in the downstairs Hall of Mirrors. You'll be charged extra to bring in your camera.

From the museum it's possible to walk out into the backyard and visit the glass-encased **Pavillón Granma** (Map pp142-3), which since 1976 has been home to the 18m 'yacht' *Granma* that ushered Fidel Castro and 81 others into world history in 1956. Today this is one of the revolution's holiest shrines and has the eternal flame to prove it.

Vedado

Vedado ('forest reserve') is a world away from Centro Habana and Habana Vieja, being developed only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a residential suburb for the wealthy. Despite that, it's in many senses the center of the city, with its most vibrant arts and cultural scenes, and the favored playground of both the business and political elite. The main streets of Vedado are Calle 23 and Línea – both full of shops, restaurants, bars, cinemas and theaters.

Vedado's most obvious attraction to travelers is the huge **Necrópolis Cristóbal Colón** (Map pp146-7; ☎ 830-4517; entrance crn Calzada de Zapata & Calle 12; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm). Cuba's largest cemetery, famous for its elaborate mausoleums. It's very pleasant to stroll through, or you can take a free guided tour (tip expected) or just buy the map (CUC\$1) at the ticket office and find your own way.

To be taken to the heart of the stand-off between Washington and Havana don't miss the **US Interests Section** (Map pp146-7; ☎ 833-3551;

Calzada btwn Calles L & M, Vedado), which has been at the center of Cold War-style wrangling ever since it first opened in 1977. In recent years lots of drama has surrounded this building, especially since the US decision in 2006 to broadcast messages and news through an electronic billboard. In retaliation the Cuban government has built an 'anti-imperialism park' outside with hundreds of flagpoles to obscure the billboard. Unsurprisingly the area is thick with propaganda and police.

Beatles fans should visit **Parque Lennon** (Map pp146-7; Calles 15 & 17 btwn Calles 6 & 8) with its rather unusual (and none too flattering) bronze statue of John lounging on a bench. Every December 8 there are musical vigils here commemorating his life.

Running along the Río Almendares below the bridge on Calle 23, **Parque Almendares** (Map pp146-7) is a wonderful oasis in the heart of chaotic Havana. Benches line the river promenade, plants grow profusely and there are many facilities here, including an antiquated **miniature golf course**, the Anfiteatro Parque Almendares (p156) and a **playground**.

Most people are surprised to learn that the vast **Plaza de la Revolución** (Map pp146-7), ultimate symbol of Castro's revolution, was actually built under Batista to commemorate national hero José Martí. On important occasions, Fidel Castro addressed up to 1.2 million supporters from in front of the star-shaped, 142m-high **Memorial José Martí** (☎ 859-2347; admission museum & tower adult/student CUC\$5/3.50; ☎ 9:30am-5pm Mon-Sat) and 17m Martí statue. Join the crowd on May 1 if you want to experience it yourself. There's a thoughtful museum dedicated to José Martí inside the memorial; ride the elevator to the enclosed 129m-high viewpoint. If you go late in the afternoon you'll get some fantastic close-up views of circling vultures enjoying the updrafts.

The **Ministry of the Interior** (Map pp146-7) on the plaza's north side is easily identifiable by its huge 'Che' mural. Be careful walking around here, it's a very sensitive center of government and lots of officious guards are intent on blowing whistles if you stop in the wrong place.

Havana has become synonymous with the **Malecón** (Map pp146-7), its 8km seawall that was constructed in 1901. Though you've probably seen many photos of this seaside scene, the pastiche of architectural gems in Havana's unrivaled afternoon light is enchanting.

Two blocks off the Malecón at Calle M is **El Focsa** (Map pp146-7), the monstrous green-and-yellow architectural wonder (or blunder, depending on your viewpoint) that is Cuba's tallest building.

HAVANA FOR CHILDREN

Havana is not an obvious place to bring children and the combination of the heat and the lack of things to do may dismay some younger travelers. Kids will enjoy a trip to the **Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña** (Map pp142-3; admission CUC\$5; ☎ 9am-6pm) for the chance to clamber around an old fortress and get a taste of the city's rich history. There's also the freshwater **Aquarium** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 863-9493; Calle Teniente Rey No 9 btwn Mercaderes & Oficios; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) and the beach at Playas del Este (p159).

TOURS

Havana tours can be convenient if you've got little time or inclination to see the city alone, but they're definitely not necessary. While tours of Habana Vieja (CUC\$18, half a day) can be very enlightening and a great introduction to the city, it's probably the more further flung attractions that tours are useful for, such as day trips to megaresort Varadero (from CUC\$40, including lunch and open bar) and the out-of-town Tropicana Nightclub (starting at CUC\$80). Other options include tours to Viñales (CUC\$50) and a Trinidad-Cienfuegos overnight (CUC\$140). The following arrange similar tours:

Cubanacán (Map pp146-7; ☎ 833-4090; www.cubanacan.cu; Calle 23 No 156 btwn Calles O & P, Vedado)
Cubatur (Map pp146-7; ☎ 835-4155; www.cubatur.cu; Calle F No 157, Vedado)

San Cristóbal Agencia de Viajes (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-9171/2; www.viajessancristobal.cu; Calle de los Oficios No 110 bajos btwn Lamparilla & Amargura)

SLEEPING

You are much, much better off staying in a casa particular than a hotel anywhere in Havana, unless you're planning to splash out on a five-star experience. There are a few hotel exceptions where service is good, but on the whole you'll be paying far more for far less.

Habana Vieja

CASAS PARTICULARES

Ramón y Maritza (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-3303; maritza.mirabal@yahoo.es; Calle Luz No 115 btwn San Ignacio &

Inquisidor; r CUC\$25; 🏠) Two rooms in a gorgeous colonial house, highly recommended for atmosphere.

Olga López Hernández (Map pp142-3; ☎ 867-4561; olgarene@hotmail.com; Cuba No 611, Apt 1 btwn Luz & Santa Clara; s/d incl breakfast CUC\$25/30; 🏠) A very pleasant, well furnished and quiet colonial apartment. Both rooms share a bathroom, living room and balcony.

La Puerta Blanca (Map pp142-3; ☎ 867-2736; mer cyvlady@yahoo.es; Cuba No 505 btwn Teniente Rey & Muralla; r CUC\$30; 🏠) A charming colonial house with two rooms opening onto an interior patio, one with private balcony, the other with air-con. The rooms share a bathroom, but each has a refrigerator. There's a great roof terrace and the house is safe and friendly.

Chez Nous (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-6287; cheznous@cenia.inf.cu; Teniente Rey No 115 btwn Cuba & San Ignacio; r CUC\$30; 🏠) Huge rooms with tiled floors, fridge, TV, en suite bathroom and high ceilings are supplemented by a vast roof terrace (if you're brave enough to climb up the rickety stairs). There's one room on the terrace, which is our favorite. Meals available. French spoken.

Noemi Moreno (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-3809; Cuba No 611, Apt 2 btwn Luz & Santa Clara; r CUC\$30; 🏠) Noemi's tasteful apartment is a mirror image of Olga López Hernández's casa next door. There are two rooms available, each with fantastic bathroom and pleasant furnishings, and it has a sitting room and an open-air patio to boot.

Migdalia Caraballe Martin (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-7352; www.casamigdalia@yahoo.es; Santa Clara No 164, Apt F btwn Cuba & San Ignacio; r CUC\$30; 🏠) Migdalia's house is large and attractive and its three rooms all have high ceilings. One has its own bathroom and the other two share one. It's excellently located and faces the Santa Clara convent.

La Casa Verde (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-9877; fabio.quintana@infomed.sld.cu; San Ignacio No 656 btwn Jesús María & Merced; r CUC\$30; 🏠) The most over-the-top colonial house in Havana, this place should be avoided by minimalists. It is, however, a great option, friendly and full of atmosphere. The two rooms have private bathrooms and fridges and share access to a superb roof terrace. English spoken.

Casa de Pepe & Rafaela (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-9877; San Ignacio 454 btwn Sol & Santa Clara; r CUC\$30; 🏠) The parents of Fabio, the owner of La Casa Verde, rent three good rooms with smart private bathrooms in a similarly styled

colonial mansion stuffed with antiques and decorated with Moorish tiles.

HOTELS

Hostal Beltrán de Santa Cruz (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-8330; www.habaguanex.com; San Ignacio No 411 btwn Sol & Muralla; s/d/ste incl breakfast CUC\$80/130/150; 🏠) This atmospheric colonial courtyard hotel has just 11 beautifully appointed rooms decked out with antiques. It's extremely popular, so book well ahead and request one of the bigger rooms overlooking the courtyard. There's a fantastic bar-restaurant in the courtyard and staff are charming.

Hotel Florida (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-4127; www.habaguanex.com; Obispo No 252; s/d/ste incl breakfast CUC\$95/160/200; 🏠) A real Havana classic, the Florida has it all – a fantastic location, beautiful façade, attractive rooms and a classy atmosphere. The two-tier arched and colonnaded courtyard will impress anyone – book ahead.

Hotel Ambos Mundos (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-9530; www.habaguanex.com; Obispo No 15; s/d/ste CUC\$95/160/200; 🏠) Not nearly the museum piece you might expect it to be (Hemingway partially wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in room 511, which is still accepting visitors at CUC\$2 a pop), the Ambos Mundos feels like the throbbing heart of Old Havana. The rooms are decent – generally large and airy, if unremarkable – and there's a good rooftop bar and restaurant with superb views.

Hotel Conde de Villanueva (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-9293; www.habaguanex.com; Mercaderes No 202; s/d/ste incl breakfast CUC\$95/160/200; 🏠) This tiny hide-away is fantastically atmospheric, with only nine rooms surrounding a verdant colonial courtyard in the heart of the old town. Six of the rooms have balconies, and all have good facilities and are attractively furnished although, in the spirit of most Cuban hotels, the cheap bathroom fixtures are already in need of a refit.

Hotel Raquel (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-8280; www.habaguanex.com; cnr Amargura & San Ignacio; s/d/ste incl breakfast CUC\$115/200/240; 🏠) The glorious marble-pillared lobby and wonderful stained-glass atrium on the upper floor are reasons enough to stay here, one of Havana's most beautifully restored hotels. Rooms are well appointed, many with balconies, mosaic floors and high ceilings. However, reports on the staff vary enormously, so don't count on the best standards of service.

Hotel Santa Isabel (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-8201; www.habaguanex.com; Baratillo No 9 btw Obispo & Narciso López; s/d/ste incl breakfast CUC\$190/240/340; 🏠) Despite its enviable location on the quiet side of the Plaza de Armas, the Santa Isabel feels somehow out of the melee of Habana Vieja, a cool, calm oasis of luxury. Its 27 rooms, 20 of which overlook the plaza, all have balconies and feature iron-framed beds, large bathtubs, TV, phone and minibar.

Centro Habana

CASAS PARTICULARES

Gurpick Casa Abel (Map pp142-3; ☎ 863-4033; www.havana-house.webcindario.com; Blanco No 111 btwn Ánimas & Trocadero; r CUC\$20; 🏠) A superb deal here at Abel's colonial house above a lively *agropecuario* (free-enterprise vegetable market) in Centro Habana. Two good rooms with private bathrooms are supplemented by motherly love from Abel's wife and excellent meals. One of the best places in town.

Dinorah (Map pp142-3; ☎ 864-5683; Animas No 766 btwn Gervasio & Beloscaín; r CUC\$20-25; 🏠) With four rooms in a beautiful colonial house stuffed with antiques and what we'll charitably call knick-knacks, the Museo Dinorah (as her husband calls it) is a fantastic, eccentric place – look out for the car parked in the living room. The rooms are spacious and very well appointed with antique furniture and private bathrooms.

Juan Carlos (Map pp142-3; ☎ 863-6301; Crespo No 107 btwn Colón & Trocadero; r CUC\$20-25; 🏠) A traditional Havana colonial home, Juan Carlos' bright, super-clean house is a great deal with an excellent location just moments from the Prado and the Malecón. The cheapest room shares a bathroom, the other has its own private facilities.

Casa Colonial (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-7109; orixl@yahoo.com; Gervasio No 216 btwn Concordia & Virtudes; r CUC\$25; 🏠) This repeatedly reader recommended charmer is in the heart of Centro and is well removed from the tourist crowds. The two comfortable rooms are both quiet, with new fittings such as fridge and air-con. Each has its own private en suite bathroom and Cary and Nilo, the hosts, are warm and welcoming. Meals available.

La Casa de Esther (Map pp142-3; ☎ 863-0401; es thercv2551@clubarte.cult.cu; Aguila No 367 btwn Neptuno & San Miguel; r CUC\$25-30, tr CUC\$45) This excellent artistic hangout enjoys a prime position, great rooms, stylish décor and a superb roof terrace.

Superclean bathrooms are shared and breakfast is excellent.

Margot y Amalia Urrutia (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-7824; Apt A, 7th fl, Prado No 20; r CUC\$25-35; 🏠) The only thing Centro Habana about this superb option is the address, situated as it is in an elite high-rise apartment block moments from the Malecón. With stunning views from the large terrace, this makes for a memorable introduction to the city. Of the two rooms, the larger has an en suite bathroom and goes for CUC\$35, while the smaller (CUC\$25) is cheaper, but lacks the views.

HOTELS

Hotel Lincoln (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-8061; Av de Italia; s/d incl breakfast CUC\$39/46; 🏠) Despite its fantastic exterior, the Lincoln is a mediocre place, although staff try their best to be helpful. Rooms are basic, but fine, with cable TV, telephone and bathroom. Use the safe and leave your high expectations at the door.

Casa del Científico (Map pp142-3; ☎ 862-1607, 862-1608; Prado No 212; s/d with shared bathroom CUC\$45/55; 🏠) Housed in a gorgeous colonial building complete with marble columns, sweeping stairways and a roof terrace overlooking the Prado, the once forlorn Casa del Científico is in the process of refurbishing its 11 rooms (four were complete at the time of research), making this an excellent option. All rooms have private facilities. Staff members, while not speaking English, are helpful and friendly.

Park View Hotel (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-3293; www.hotelparkview.cu; cnr Calle Colón & Morro; s/d CUC\$52/86; 🏠) Unexpected good value here – the Park View has none of the history or grand style of other nearby hotels, but its clean, comfortable rooms, many with good views and balconies, are excellent value.

Hotel Inglaterra (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-8595; www.grancaribe.cu; Prado No 416; s/d/tr CUC\$84/120/168; 🏠) This historic hotel, built in 1875, is not the prime place to stay that it once was (noisy rooms, swarming hustlers etc). The rooftop La Terraza bar has excellent views.

Hotel Telégrafo (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-1010, 861-4741; Prado No 408; s/d CUC\$90/150; 🏠) With a stylish lobby, enviable location and modern rooms, the Hotel Telégrafo, a recent refit of a classic late-19th-century hotel, is a winner and gets strong recommendations from those who've stayed here. Enjoy a cocktail

on the terrace and watch the crowds go by. Has wi-fi.

Hotel Sevilla (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-8560; fax 860-8582; Trocadero No 55 btwn Prado & Agramonte; s/d incl breakfast CUC\$102/142; 📶 📺 📺) Fantastically atmospheric and immortalized as the site of a key scene in Greene's *Our Man in Havana*, the elegant Moorish Sevilla has played host to everyone from Fidel Castro to Al Capone. With pleasant, airy rooms and a large outdoor swimming pool overlooking the Prado, this is a fantastic way to get to know Havana.

Hotel Saratoga (Map pp142-3; ☎ 868-1000; www.hotel-saratoga.com; Prado No 603; s/d from CUC\$200/275, ste CUC\$330-670; 📶 📺 📺) Havana's finest hotel opened in 2005. It is slap bang in the center of the city and boasts every possible convenience, from free wi-fi internet access in each room to a stunning rooftop pool, bar, gym and restaurant with incredible city views. The rooms are spacious, stylish and comfortable, and include huge bathrooms, DVD players and gorgeous views of the Capitolio.

Hotel NH Parque Central (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-6627; www.hotelnhparquecentral.com; Neptuno btwn Agramonte & Prado; s/d CUC\$205/270, ste CUC\$330-550, all incl breakfast; 📶 📺 📺) The Saratoga may have the edge over the NH nowadays, but this pioneering five-star place remains hugely popular for its high standards of service and supreme location, even if it's almost a pastiche of the sterile five-star international hotel with its large but bland rooms. Views from the 9th-floor bar are spectacular, however, and you could do far, far worse. Offers wi-fi access.

Vedado

CASAS PARTICULARES

Iris y Felipe (Map pp146-7; ☎ 873-5286; www.irisweb.freesevers.com; Calle Mazón No 4 btwn Neptuno & San Miguel; r CUC\$25; 📶) This excellent, easy-going and friendly house just by Havana's university is a safe and reliable option. Iris offers two rooms, both with private bathrooms, a great breakfast (CUC\$5 extra) and a huge roof terrace. Both rooms have an independent entrance.

Ana Livia Grimany Rojo (Map pp146-7; ☎ 830-4311; anagrimany@yahoo.es; Calle 23 No 1103 btwn Calles 8 & 10; r CUC\$25-30; 📶) This large, beautifully understated but interesting apartment hosted by two young architects is a great place to kick back in the heart of arty Vedado. The two rooms both have private bathrooms, and while one is bigger, the other has a private terrace.

José A García (Map pp146-7; ☎ 830-9367; josevado1003@yahoo.es; Calle 23 No 1003 btwn Calles 4 & 6; r incl breakfast CUC\$25-30) This thoroughly extraordinary place is one of the biggest and most beautiful casas in town. The house has two large rooms with private bathrooms, and while there's no air-con, it's naturally cool with its vast corridors and high ceilings. A fantastic, atmospheric option.

Melba Piñeda Bermúdez (Map pp146-7; ☎ 832-5929; lienafp@yahoo.com; Calle 11 No 802 btwn Calles 2 & 4; r CUC\$30; 📶) A very friendly house on a quiet and leafy Vedado backstreet with two rooms available. One has a private terrace, both have private bathrooms and access to a large communal balcony.

Casa Silvia (Map pp146-7; ☎ 833-4165; silviavidal602@yahoo.es; Paseo No 602 btwn Calles 25 & 27; r CUC\$30-35; 📶) This unbelievably palatial home has two rooms with fridges and private bathrooms. There's also an independent cabaña next door complete with kitchen for long-term rentals. All rooms have refrigerators and discounts for singles are available. Look no further for style and atmosphere.

HOTELS

Hotel Vedado (Map pp146-7; ☎ 836-4072; www.gran-caribe.com; Calle 0 No 244 btwn Calles 23 & 25; s/d incl breakfast CUC\$67/80; 📶 📺 📺) This large Vedado block houses 203 average rooms. There are some good views to be had, and TV and phone in each room, but overall it's a bit of a damp squib, although a decent pool and a good location for central Vedado compensate somewhat.

Hotel Victoria (Map pp146-7; ☎ 833-3510; www.hotelvictoriacuba.com; Calle 19 No 101 & Calle M; s/d/tr incl breakfast CUC\$80/100/138; 📶 📺 📺) Much preferable to its bigger neighbors, the intimate 1920s-built Victoria has rooms that, while not luxurious or large, have plenty of character and some excellent views. It's quiet too, but within easy walking distance of downtown Vedado.

Hotel Nacional (Map pp146-7; ☎ 836-3564; www.hotelnacionaldecuba.com; Calles 0 & 21; s/d/tr CUC\$120/170/238; 📶 📺 📺) Cuba's most famous hotel, this stunner soars above the Malecón on its own hillside, boasting superb views and unbeatable gardens. Indeed, the entire place is more of a museum than a hotel, with its old-world elevators and general air of splendor and privilege, to the point that the dull and rather worn rooms

seem an afterthought. The 6th (executive) floor has its own reception, fax, meeting rooms, secretarial staff and higher room rates (single/double/triple CUC\$150/210/278).

Hotel Melía Cohiba (Map pp146-7; ☎ 833-3636; www.solmelia.com; Paseo btwn Calles 1 & 3; r from CUC\$170; 📶 📺 📺) This is a good choice for business or just comfort if you've hit your tolerance threshold for 'five star' Cuban hotels elsewhere in the country – this is the real thing. While it won't win any beauty contests, Havana's business hotel of choice boasts very comfortable rooms, excellent service, good restaurants and friendly staff.

Tryp Habana Libre (Map pp146-7; ☎ 834-6100; www.solmelia.com; Calle L btwn Calles 23 & 25; r/ste CUC\$200/300; 📶 📺 📺) This vast white elephant is Havana's biggest hotel, and even though it's far nicer inside than its exterior would suggest, you still wonder who comes to Cuba and stays somewhere so sterile. The rooms are large (and many have extraordinary views) but the furnishings are dated and some just plain old. This is where many package groups end up – you've been warned.

EATING

Havana's eating scene, while it has its moments, is on the whole a microcosm of that throughout the country – gems are out there, but they're extremely few and far between.

Habana Vieja

Museo de Chocolate (Map pp142-3; ☎ 866-4431; cnr Mercaderes & Amargura; ☎ 10am-5:45pm Tue-Sun) This 'museum' is really just a café, but it serves up an incredibly tempting range of chocolate-based goodies, from steaming cups of hot chocolate to delicious on-site made chocolates. It's popular with tourist crowds and can be busy, but it's worth braving.

Jardín del Oriente (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-6686; Amargura btwn San Ignacio & Mercaderes; mains CUC\$1-3; ☎ 10am-11pm) This rightly popular place is in the heart of Habana Vieja, but avoids much of the tourist crowd by being hidden away in a charming garden. With food at rock-bottom prices, it's worth the wait when it's busy for a choice of Cuban and international staples.

Café Santo Domingo (Map pp142-3; Obispo No 159 btwn San Ignacio & Mercaderes; snacks CUC\$2.50-3.50; ☎ 24hr) Tucked away upstairs beyond a good bakery is this café hideaway. The sandwiches and pizzas are big and tasty, plus there are eggs and bacon for breakfast.

Restaurante La Dominica (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-2918; O'Reilly No 108; pizzas CUC\$4.50-9.50, mains CUC\$5-15; ☎ noon-midnight) There's no disguising that it's almost exclusively tourists who come to La Dominica, either to sit inside the plush, fiercely acclimatized main dining room, or to be strummed at by Buena Vistas outside. Despite that, the food's pretty good, with a full Italian menu that includes several vegetarian options, tasty pizza, lobster and seafood pasta.

Taberna de la Muralla (Map pp142-3; ☎ 866-4453; cnr San Ignacio & Muralla; mains CUC\$4.50-12.50; ☎ 11am-midnight) Havana's first (and as yet, only) microbrewery is a magnet for both tourists and locals on one side of the Plaza Vieja, drawn by the great-smelling barbecue, endless glasses of cold beer, and live music that goes on all day. Go inside for peace and quiet in the high-ceilinged main room, or join the crowds on the square for beers and kebabs.

Al Medina (Map pp142-3; ☎ 867-1041; Oficinas 12 btwn Obrapia & Obispo; mains CUC\$5-10; ☎ noon-11pm) Middle Eastern food in Havana? Surprisingly so. Al Medina has a large selection of dishes, from delicious tagines to mezze platters serving up specialties such as hummus and dolmades. Of course these are all very Cuban versions of familiar dishes, but it's still a pleasant space set in a charming courtyard in the middle of the old town.

Centro Habana

Restaurante Prado y Neptuno (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-9636; cnr Prado & Neptuno; appetizers CUC\$4-7, mains CUC\$4-9; ☎ noon-midnight) Dubbing itself rather fancifully as 'the best Italian restaurant in the Caribbean' (ha!), Prado y Neptuno nevertheless does pretty decent Italian food and has a warm and friendly atmosphere untypical of most state-run restaurants. Try the good pizza or the house lasagna.

Restaurante Tien-Tan (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-5478; Cuchillo No 17 btwn Zanja & San Nicolás; mains CUC\$4-15; ☎ 11am-11pm) The touts working at other restaurants on this strip will try to waylay you, but keep walking until you get here, by far the best of the Chinese restaurants on Cuchillo. The sizzling beef platter (CUC\$10) and sweet-and-sour pork (CUC\$6.50) are highly recommended, as is the wonton soup. The upstairs dining room is better.

Los Nardos (Map pp142-3; ☎ 863-2985; Prado No 563 btwn Teniente Rey & Dragones; mains CUC\$4.50-10; ☎ noon-midnight) Chef Ángel Ochoa works away in a

bright kitchen with glass walls in sharp contrast to the dark, wood-heavy dining area at Los Nardos, one of Havana's most innovative restaurants. The menu is strong on fish and seafood and has enough veggie choice in the starters at least to make it one of Centro's few good choices for non-carnivores.

Paladar Bellamar (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-0023; Virtudes No 169 near Amistad; dishes CUC\$6-8; ☎ noon-10pm) This family-run place never seems to change – its cooking can hardly be called exciting, but it's perfectly tasty and there's usually a variety of home-cooked Cuban standards, from pork and *congrí* to freshly caught fish. The family sits around watching soap operas while you enjoy the food in their front room.

our pick **Paladar La Guarida** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 866-9047; www.laguarida.com; Concordia No 418 btwn Gervasio & Escobar; mains CUC\$10-16; ☎ noon-4pm, 7pm-midnight) Gorgeously decorated and bedecked in stills from '90s cult movie *Fresa y Chocolate* (filmed in the building), Paladar La Guarida is Centro Habana's – and some would say the whole city's – best paladar. Inventive starters (rabbit lasagna with black-olive tapenade, egg-plant stacks with quail) are followed by more traditional main courses served with a twist. Dessert is sublime, English is spoken and service is remarkably friendly. While you'll always need to reserve ahead for the evenings, you can usually pop in unannounced for lunch.

El Paseo (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-6627; Neptuno btwn Prado & Agramonte, NH Parque Central; mains CUC\$16-33; ☎ dinner) This smart restaurant, the smartest on offer from the NH Parque Central, is a rare place to enjoy a sophisticated atmosphere on the tourist-choked Parque. With its silver service and quiet atmosphere, the place maintains the highest international standards to match the gourmet menu.

Vedado

Coppelia (Map pp146-7; ☎ 832-6184; Calles 23 & L; ☎ 11am-10:30pm Tue-Sun) This classic Havana ice-cream mecca draws crowds from morning until closing time – look no further for your authentic experience of the capital than here, across the street from student favorite Cine Yara. Enter the *divisa* (CUC) part on Calle 23 or wait in line for the real deal and pay peanuts in pesos.

Pan.com (Map pp146-7; cnr Calle 17 & 10; sandwiches CUC\$2-4; ☎ 11am-11pm Mon-Fri, noon-midnight Sat & Sun) The TV may have inane slapstick comedy blaring out all day and service might border

on the rude, but pan.com is one of Havana's best places for sandwiches and burgers. The fries are good too, and the place attracts a relaxed student crowd just around the corner from Parque Lennon.

La Roca (Map pp146-7; ☎ 834-4501; Calle 21 No 102; specials CUC\$3-8; ☎ midday-12:30am) This fiercely air-conditioned space is an old Havana classic although, like most things classic in the city, it's a rather faded version of its former self. Still, you can enjoy a cocktail in the small bar, or dine on *langosta mariposa* (butterfly lobster; CUC\$18) in the main stained-glass salon, attended by liveried staff.

El Conejito (Map pp146-7; ☎ 832-4671; Calle M No 253; rabbits CUC\$4-7; ☎ noon-11pm) El Conejito is a very smart 'English-style tavern,' moodily lit and decked out in dark wood fittings and red tablecloths. Oh yes, and it's all about rabbit, as its Spanish name might suggest. Delicious specialties include Creole rabbit, rabbit in Burgundy sauce, rabbit in aioli sauce... you name it, they've got a rabbit dish for it. There's also a good selection of seafood and fish dishes for those uncomfortable eating little Thumper.

Paladar Los Amigos (Map pp146-7; ☎ 830-0880; Calle M No 253; mains CUC\$5-6; ☎ noon-midnight) This pleasant little place is tucked away at the back of a colonial house in one of the smarter parts of Vedado. It won't win any awards, but the Cuban cuisine the kitchen cooks up is remarkably popular, so you should book ahead.

Trattoria Maraka's (Map pp146-7; ☎ 833-3740; Calle O No 260 btwn Calles 23 & 25; pizzas CUC\$6-7, mains CUC\$8-12; ☎ noon-11:45pm) This handy place looks like it would be deeply average, but it actually serves up very good pizza in a useful location just off Vedado's main strip. You'll have to work hard to get the staff's attention, but if you do, try the Greek salad, gooey lasagna or spinach cannelloni.

Decameron (Map pp146-7; ☎ 832-2444; Línea No 753 btwn Paseo & Calle 2; appetizers CUC\$3.50-5.50, mains CUC\$9-16; ☎ noon-11pm) It's easy to miss on the outside, but you'll be glad you made the effort to come here once inside. The quirkily decorated dining rooms are bedecked with everything from musical instruments to antique clocks and are often full of diners. The real high point is the food – it's all delicious, from the large selection of imaginative starters to grills, pizzas, fresh fish and a good wine list.

DRINKING

Habana Vieja & Centro Habana

Bar Dos Hermanos (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-3436; San Pedro No 304; ☎ 24hr) Once Lorca propped the bar up here (in a spot with a good view of the sailors across the road) and it's still a brilliant place, with good cocktails and a friendly crowd, even if the majority of people here are on the tourist trail.

La Bodeguita del Medio (Map pp142-3; ☎ 867-1374; Empedrado No 207; ☎ 11am-midnight) Havana's most famous bar, La Bodeguita may have been a Hemingway favorite but today feels rather like a tourist trap. Despite that, it's still a fun and atmospheric place for a tippie.

Monserrate Bar (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-9751; Obrapia No 410; ☎ 10am-midnight) On Havana's most popular bar strip, next door to the horrendously over-priced and charmless La Floridita, here drinks are half the price in a far more enjoyable atmosphere. This is our favored place for a daiquiri, even if there are no Hemingway connections.

Restaurante-Bar Viñales (Map pp142-3; cnr O'Reilly & Compostela; ☎ 10am-midnight) For local atmosphere, you can't beat this big, open place featuring strong cocktails and colorful characters.

Café Paris (Map pp142-3; Obispo No 202; ☎ 10am-midnight) This unexpectedly excellent hot spot right in the heart of Habana Vieja is a gem – every night things get busy here with impromptu concerts, a packed bar and lots of regular characters keeping things lively.

Vedado

Opus Bar (Map pp146-7; ☎ 836-5429; Calzada & Calle D; ☎ 3pm-2am) This Havana time warp, on the top floor above the prestigious Teatro Amadeo Roldán, is quirky and you certainly don't need to worry about it being overrun by tourists. With great views, good cocktails and comfy cream leather-effect chairs, this is a great out-of-the-way spot. Unusually for Havana, the entire place is nonsmoking.

Centro de Prensa Internacional (Map pp146-7; Calles 23 & O; ☎ 9am-7pm) The basement bar here is favored by journalists and is a good place generally to pick up the buzz, and make contacts and expat friends.

Café Fresa y Chocolate (Map pp146-7; ☎ 826-3629; cnr Calles 23 & 12; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Wed, noon-midnight Thu-Sun) An arty crowd patronizes this place, named after the cult '90s Cuban movie nominated for an Oscar. It adjoins the ICAIC

film institute and attracts a solid crowd of actors, directors and theater folk.

ENTERTAINMENT

Live Music

TRADITIONAL & SALSA MUSIC

Casa de la Amistad (Map pp146-7; ☎ 830-3114; Paseo No 406; admission Mon, Wed & Fri/Tue, Thu & Sat free/CUC\$5; ☎ noon-11pm Mon, Wed & Fri, noon-1am Tue & Thu, noon-2am Sat) This superb venue, housed in a stunning colonial mansion in the heart of Vedado, is the place to come in Havana for quality salsa, Cuban jazz and other live music. While on Monday, Wednesday and Friday it's just a great place for a drink or dinner in a refined atmosphere, on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday the place comes alive with music performed outside. Performances start at 9pm and dancing continues until the early hours.

Casa de la Música (Centro Habana (Map pp142-3; ☎ 878-4727; Av de Italia; 4pm matinee CUC\$5, night CUC\$15-25); Miramar (☎ 202-6147; Calle 20 No 3308; admission CUC\$15-20; ☎ 8pm-2am Tue-Sat, shows 10pm) Of the two Casas de la Música in Havana, the outpost in distant Miramar is reckoned by locals to be the superior by far. It's probably worth swallowing the cab fare to get out here and enjoy a much more authentic program of music in a less touristy atmosphere, although the slightly divey Centro Habana club of the same name can be a lot of fun too.

Casa de la Trova (Map pp142-3; ☎ 879-3373; San Lázaro No 661; admission free; ☎ 6pm-midnight Tue-Sun) Headquarters of Havana's *son* sound it may be, but the Casa de la Trova has been looking like one of the city's less essential music joints of late. While some excellent Cuban bands play here on a regular basis, it's always best to call ahead and see what's on.

El Hurón Azul (Map pp146-7; ☎ 832-4551; Calles 17 & H; admission CUC\$1-5) This excellent place is the social club of the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (Uneac; National Union of Cuban Writers & Artists), the once much reviled state-run center of artistic and intellectual life in Cuba. Head here for an Afro-Cuban *peña* (musical performance or get-together) on Wednesday, boleros from 10pm to 2am Saturday, or jazz and *trova* (traditional poetic singing) from 5pm Thursday.

Casa de Cultura Roberto Blantly (Map pp146-7; ☎ 881-0722; Calles 37 No 262; admission CUP20-50) Formerly counter-cultural Mecca Patio de María, this peso-charging house of culture hosts excellent salsa concerts with lots of

dancing every Saturday from 8pm. A great place to meet locals.

Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (Map pp146-7; ☎ 830-3060; Calle 4 No 103 btwn Calzada & Calle 5; admission CUC\$5; ☎ from 3pm Sat) This place has a steamy Sábado de Rumba – audience participation is encouraged.

Callejón de Hamel (Map pp146-7; Callejón de Hamel btwn Aramburu & Hospital; admission by donation; ☎ from 11am) Another recommended rumba happens at this wild place.

JAZZ

Jazz Club La Zorra y El Cuervo (Map pp146-7; ☎ 66-24-02; Calles 23 & O, Vedado; admission CUC\$10; ☎ 9pm-2am) Havana's most famous jazz club is in a funky underground cavern on Vedado's main drag. As with most jazz clubs around the world, the kind of night you'll have here depends entirely on who's playing. Get a timetable from the entrance and ask around for who's hot. It's a dark, smoky space shared between local jazz aficionados and curious tourists. Make a beeline here for jams held during the International Jazz Fest, where you may find some true jazz greats on the stage.

Jazz Café (Map pp146-7; ☎ 55-33-02; Calle 1 & Paseo, Galerías de Paseo; drink minimum CUC\$10; ☎ noon-late) This upscale supper club overlooking the Malecón is perfect for sunset cocktails. At night, the club swings into action with jazz, *timba* (contemporary salsa) and salsa, although the dance floor is tiny. You'll get some of Havana's best jazz combos on stage here.

ROCK, REGGAE & RAP

La Madriguera (Map pp146-7; ☎ 879-8175; Quinta de los Molinos, cnr Calzada de Infanta & Salvador Allende; admission CUP40; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Wed, 9am-midnight Thu-Sat) Home of the young wing of Uneac, the Asociación Hermanos Saíz, this is the place to come to experience Cuba's best reggaeton. There are also good rap and rumba groups performing here.

Anfiteatro Parque Almendares (Map pp146-7; Calle 23 & Río Almendares; admission CUP2-5) This riverside amphitheater hosts terrific concerts by the likes of Frank Delgado and Interactivo. Regular *peñas* (musical performances or get-togethers) include reggae at 8pm on Friday and rap at 8pm on Saturday.

Nightclubs

Mi Habana Cafe Cantante (Map pp146-7; ☎ 879-0710; Paseo & Calle 39; admission CUC\$5-10; ☎ 10pm-2am Tue-

Sat) This subterranean club next door to the Teatro Nacional de Cuba in Vedado's hauntingly empty Plaza de la Revolución is incongruously lively, with nightly salsa and *son* acts and good DJs. Locally famous band Síntesis performs here regularly. There's a 'no shorts and T-shirts' dress code.

El Chevere (Map pp146-7; ☎ 204-5162; Calles 49-A & 28-A in Parque Almendares; admission CUC\$10-15; ☎ midnight-4am) One of Havana's hottest discos, this place hosts a good mix of locals and tourists in a large complex by the beautiful Parque Almendares at Vedado's furthest end.

Cabarets

Tropicana Nightclub (☎ 267-0110; Calle 72 No 4504, Marianao; admission from CUC\$70-90; ☎ box office 10am-4pm, show 10pm) This Havana institution is the place to head for high-kicking scantily clad dancers who have been doing their rather dated thing since the '30s. It's horrendously overpriced (and you'll be charged extra to bring a camera), but Greene fans (yes another key scene in *Our Man in Havana* happens here) and those wanting some old-style Cuban glitz will not leave disappointed.

Theater

Gran Teatro de La Habana (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-3077; Prado & San Rafael; admission CUC\$10; ☎ box office 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) This magnificent theater is closely associated with its most famous resident: the acclaimed Ballet Nacional de Cuba and its founder Alicia Alonso.

Teatro Nacional de Cuba (Map pp146-7; ☎ 879-6011; Paseo & Calle 39; per person CUC\$10; ☎ box office 9am-5pm & before performances) This modern theater on the Plaza de la Revolución hosts landmark concerts, foreign theater troupes, La Colmenita children's company and the Ballet Nacional de Cuba. It was being refurbished at the time of research, but should be open again during the lifetime of this book.

Teatro Amadeo Roldán (Map pp146-7; ☎ 832-4522; Calzada & Calle D; admission CUC\$10) This modern, 886-seat theater is the best place for classical music in Havana and is the seat of the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional (performing at 11am on Sunday, in season). Try to catch master Leo Brouwer conducting.

Cinemas

Havana has a vibrant cinema scene, with some 200 theaters citywide. Movie tickets cost CUC\$2; most theaters show Cuban movies

IN THE BLOOD *As related to Brendan Sainsbury*

Regla Yurísán Pentón Hernández is a pianist who lives in Habana Vieja.

Could you sum up Havana in one sentence?

It is a place where everyone in the world wants to be.

How has Havana changed in the last 10 years?

Thanks to the restoration work of city historian Eusebio Leal, *habaneros* [inhabitants of Havana] have been able to rediscover their culture.

What, in your opinion, is the finest Cuban cigar and why?

Populares, for their aroma and taste.

What is your favorite Havana night out?

The Casa de la Música in Galiano [Av de Italia], Bar Monserrate, and Café Paris in Calle Obispo.

Why are Cubans such skillful dancers?

It's a tradition born out of the union between Indians, Spanish and Africans. It's in our blood. If a Cuban can't sing, they dance; if they can't dance, they sing.

How can the inquisitive traveler find the 'real' Cuba?

Get on a *camello* [metro bus]; go to an *agropecuario* [free-enterprise vegetable market]; visit a school, hospital, theater or cinema; experience a festival; see an exposition of art; or come to Habana on May 1 and witness a parade.

What do people talk about on the Malecón?

They discuss work or school; they talk about their dreams; they drink rum; and they talk about love.

and a surprising amount of mainstream fare flowing from Hollywood.

Cine Yara (Map pp146-7; ☎ 832-9430; Calles 23 & L) Havana's most famous cinema also has the best popcorn. Admission to its varied program of movies costs CUC\$2.

Cine Riviera (Map pp146-7; ☎ 830-9564; Calle 23 No 507 near Calle G) Also hosts quality rock and pop concerts on occasion (admission CUC\$10).

Cine Charles Chaplin (Map pp146-7; ☎ 831-1101; Calle 23 No 1157 btwn Calles 10 & 12) The theater of the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográfica (ICAIC) has special screenings (premieres, foreign films, festivals etc) and Dolby surround sound.

Sports

Estadio Latinoamericano (Map pp146-7; ☎ 870-6526; Zequierra No 312; admission CUP3) Baseball games happen at 8:30pm Monday to Saturday and 1:30pm on Sunday at this 58,000-seat stadium in Cerro, just south of Centro Habana, from October to April (and beyond if Havana's Industriales make the play-offs).

SHOPPING

Fería de la Artesanía (Map pp142-3; Tacón btwn Tejadillo & Chacón; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Sat) While this won't be the cheapest crafts market you'll find in Cuba, and it can be over-run with tour groups, there's still a good selection of paintings,

guayaberas (pleated, buttoned men's shirts), woodwork, Che everything, jewelry and more. Haggling is both expected and essential.

Fundación Havana Club Shop (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-1900; Av del Puerto; ☎ 9am-9pm) Come to the Fundación Havana Club for cool Havana Club gear, such as martini glasses (CUC\$6) or mojito glasses (CUC\$2).

Promociones de ICAIC (Map pp146-7; ☎ 832-9430; Calles 23 & L) A fabulous selection of original Cuban movie posters (CUC\$10) are on offer here, in Cine Yara, making fantastic souvenirs. There are also film-themed T-shirts (CUC\$7) and classic Cuban films on video and DVD. Another outlet is inside Café Fresa y Chocolate (corner Calles 23 and 12).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

José Martí International Airport (☎ 649-5666, 649-0410) is at Av de la Independencia, 25km southwest of Havana. For information on flights to Havana, see p188 and p188.

To book a flight, take a number at **Cubana de Aviación** (Map pp146-7; ☎ 834-4446; www.cubana.cu; Airline Bldg, Calle 23 No 64; ☎ 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat). **Aerocaribbean** (Map pp146-7; ☎ 879-7524/25; www.aero-caribbean.com; Airline Bldg, Calle 23 No 64) is located a couple of doors down. Most other airlines that have offices in Havana are located on this strip.

Bus

The **Viazul** (☎ 881-1413; www.viazul.com; Calle 26 & Zoológico, Nuevo Vedado) terminal is located 3km southwest of Plaza de la Revolución. Infotur (p144) and **Cubatur** (Map pp146-7; cr Calles 23 & L) sell tickets. There's also a Viazul ticket office in the arrivals area of Terminal 3 at José Martí Airport, and several others scattered around town. See below for bus services. Those bound for Santa Clara should buy a ticket on any Santiago de Cuba service, or the 8:40am service to Holguín (CUC\$18).

Car

The following offices deal with car hire. You're often better off going directly to hotel representatives than calling the operators.

Cubacar Hotel Inglaterra (Map pp142-3; ☎ 866-6218); Hotel NH Parque Central (Map pp142-3; ☎ 866-6507); Hotel Telégrafo (Map pp142-3; ☎ 863-8990); Plaza Hotel (Map pp142-3; ☎ 866-8915)

Rex Airport (☎ 642-60-74); Hotel Saratoga (Map pp142-3; ☎ 868-1000 ext 1302); Vedado (Map pp146-7; ☎ 835-6830; Línea & Malecón)

Vía Rent a Car Hotel Sevilla (Map pp142-3; ☎ 206-9791); Tryp Habana Libre (Map pp146-7; ☎ 838-4954)

Taxi

Taxis at the **Viazul** (Calle 26 & Zoológico, Nuevo Vedado) bus terminal offer fares for up to four people to Varadero (CUC\$50), Santa Clara (CUC\$75) Cienfuegos (CUC\$94) and Trinidad (CUC\$100).

Train

Most trains depart from Havana's **Estación Central de Ferrocarriles** (Map pp142-3; ☎ 861-7651, 862-1920; Av de Bélgica & Arsenal). The smaller, more modern La Coubre terminal, used by certain arrivals and departures, is a short walk down the road. See opposite for train services.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

For all practical purposes, there is no public transportation from the airport to the city

center, and taxi drivers work this to their full advantage. A taxi should cost CUC\$20 (or CUC\$15 from the city to the airport), but you'll be told CUC\$25; bargain hard. You may also find yourself sharing a taxi with another traveler or two – this is perfectly normal, although make sure you're definitely not paying over CUC\$20 in this case. A taxi between any of the terminals costs CUC\$5 per person – bargaining doesn't seem to be an option on this one.

Bicycle

El Orbe (Map pp142-3; ☎ 860-2617; Av de las Misiones; ☎ 9am-4:30pm Mon-Sat) rents out beat-up cruisers for CUC\$2 per hour or CUC\$12 for 24 hours. You have to leave identification as deposit; there's a parts and service store on site. It's always best to reserve ahead, as there's a limited number of bikes available. The locks provided are risible so, if you want to be able to leave the bike somewhere, bring your own lock.

Buses

Havana's public transportation system is a misery that locals have to deal with every day. Long waits for horribly overcrowded buses make for excessively long journey times and we don't recommend taking the plunge. Cheap taxis, bici-taxis (see below) and walking are the best way to get around town.

Taxis

Bici-taxi (two-seater taxis powered by a bicyclist) are available throughout Habana Vieja and Centro Habana and are great for short hops (CUC\$1 to CUC\$2). Agree on the price first. Coco-taxis are the yellow eggs-on-wheels you will see zipping all over town; they carry three people and cost CUC\$0.50 per kilometer.

Panataxi (☎ 55-55-55) has the cheapest official taxis. Fancier taxis can be ordered from **TaxiOK** (☎ 204-0000) and **Transgaviota** (☎ 267-1626).

SERVICES FROM HAVANA'S VÍAZUL BUS TERMINAL

Destination	One-way fare (CUC\$)	Distance (km)	Duration (hr)	Schedule
Santiago de Cuba	51	861	15	3pm, 6:15pm, 10pm
Trinidad	25	335	5¾	8:15am, 1pm
Varadero	10	140	3	8am, noon, 6pm
Viñales	12	189	3½	9am, 2pm

SERVICES FROM HAVANA'S ESTACIÓN CENTRAL & LA COUBRE

Destination	One-way fare (CUC\$)	Distance (km)	Duration (hr)	Schedule
Santa Clara	10	276	4	6:20am*, 2pm, 3:15pm, 4:45pm, 7pm, 8:25pm*, 9:45pm*
Santiago de Cuba	32 (regular) 70 (especial)	861	13-16	3:15pm (regular) alternate days & 7pm (especial) alternate days

* from La Coubre.

AROUND HAVANA

There's plenty to explore in the vicinity of the Cuban capital, although most travelers head straight for Trinidad or Santiago. The wonderful Parque Histórico Militar Morro-Cabaña, which includes the protective fortress that has guarded the Bahía de la Habana for centuries, is a must-see day trip, while the Playas del Este are the most obvious place to make an easy escape to beautiful beaches for the day.

PARQUE HISTÓRICO MILITAR MORRO-CABAÑA

One of Havana's must-see sights is the impressive Parque Histórico Militar Morro-Cabaña (Map pp142-3), across the Bahía de la Habana from the city's port. The complex makes for a great half-day trip, and the views of Havana to be had from here are outstanding.

The **Castillo de los Tres Santos Reyes Magno del Morro** (☎ 863-7941; admission incl museum CUC\$4; ☎ 8am-8pm) was erected between 1589 and 1630 on an abrupt limestone headland to protect the entrance to the harbor. In 1762 the British captured El Morro by attacking from the landward side and digging a tunnel under the walls. In 1845 the first lighthouse in Cuba was added to the castle (admission CUC\$2). There is also a **maritime museum**.

The **Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña** (☎ 862-0617; admission CUC\$4; ☎ 8am-11pm) was built between 1763 and 1774 to deny attackers the long ridge overlooking Havana. It's one of the largest colonial fortresses in the Americas, replete with grassy moats, ancient chapel and cobblestone streets. Dictators Gerardo Machado y Morales and Batista

used the fortress as a military prison, and Che Guevara established his revolutionary headquarters here. Be sure to visit the creative Havana skyline **mirador** (viewpoint) on the other side of the **Museo de Comandancia del Che** here.

Nightly at 9pm a cannon is fired on the harbor side of La Cabaña by a squad attired in 19th-century uniforms, a hold-over from Spanish times when these shots signaled that the city gates were closing. The **cañonazo** (admission CUC\$6) begins at 8:30pm, followed by a concert by Moncada, a geriatric rock band.

To get here, take the ferry from Muelle Luz (Map pp142-3) to Casablanca (CUC\$1, every 15 to 30 minutes dawn to dusk), from where it's an easy walk to the Parque Histórico Militar Morro-Cabaña.

PLAYAS DEL ESTE

Havana's pine-fringed Riviera, Playas del Este (off Map pp142-3), begins at Bacuranao, 18km east of Havana, and continues east through **Santa María del Mar** (the nicest of the beaches here) to Guanabo, 27km from the capital. These beaches provide an effortless escape from Havana should you need it, and there are many casas particulares in Guanabo (look for the green triangle).

The beach is lined with **rentals** including windsurfers (per hour CUC\$6), catamarans (per hour CUC\$12) and beach chairs (per three hours CUC\$2). Several simple fish restaurants line the beach.

Bus 400 to Guanabo leaves hourly from the rotunda at Desamparados near the train station in Habana Vieja. Bus 405 runs between Guanabacoa and Guanabo.

A taxi from Playas del Este to Havana will cost around CUC\$20.

ISLA DE LA JUVENTUD – THE CARIBBEAN’S BEST DIVING?

True diving fanatics should look no further than the incredible Punta Frances on the Isla de la Juventud, a short internal flight south of the Cuban mainland. Most famous for being where Fidel Castro spent several years imprisoned in the 1950s, the island is generally considered to have the best diving in the Caribbean.

The **Hotel Colony** (☎ 46-398-181; fax 46-398-428; r half board CUC\$108; 📺 📺 📺) is the place to stay for divers. It’s a remote place with excellent rooms and very bad food, which you have to grin and bear, as staying here gives you relatively easy access to the fantastic diving. The hotel is a 30 minute, CUC\$20 taxi ride from Nueva Gerona Airport. There is absolutely nothing out here, so there’s no alternative to eating in the hotel unless you’re lucky enough to hire one of the island’s very scarce rental cars and want to drive to Nueva Gerona each evening. From the hotel you’re just a short bus ride from the **International Diving Center** (☎ 46-398-282) where every day a boat makes the trip to the Punta Frances diving site for a two-tank dive, with plenty of beach time between on a gorgeous, pristine strip of white sand. Manatees, sharks, lots of fish and rays, huge lobsters and crabs, plenty of wrecks, dramatic cliffs and bright coral combine to make this Cuba’s most exciting diving.

Flights to the island’s administrative center, Nueva Gerona, are operated several times daily by **Cubana de Aviación** (Map pp146-7; ☎ 834-4446; www.cubana.cu; Airline Bldg, Calle 23 No 64, Havana; 🕒 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) and cost CUC\$86 return.

For more information, see Lonely Planet’s Cuba guide.

PINAR DEL RÍO PROVINCE

The Western flank of Cuba extends from Havana Province to the narrow Yucatán Channel separating Cuba from Mexico. This lush part of the island is home to endless tobacco plantations, pine trees, sugarcane and rice fields and is one of Cuba’s most scenic. With rock climbing, caving, diving and birding sprinkled throughout two Unesco Biosphere Reserves and one World Heritage site, this is Cuba’s outdoor adventure hub. Beyond the uninteresting city of Pinar del Río, the countryside becomes breathtaking, as well as extremely rural.

Whether you go north to stunning Viñales, famous for its vast limestone hills, or continue heading west to the Península de Guanahacabibes, where superb diving, pristine beaches, and exciting hikes await you, you’ll be guaranteed a rewarding trip.

Pinar del Río Province is also home to San Juan y Martínez and the Vuelta Abajo plantations, where the world’s finest tobacco thrives in the sandy soil. The majority of export-quality tobacco comes from here. The best time to visit is at harvest time, from January to March.

If you’re driving from Havana, the roads are generally good all the way to Viñales (via Pinar, the northern coastal route is far worse

and the main challenge will be finding your way onto the Autopista Habana-Pinar del Río from the capital.

VIÑALES

pop 27,000 / ☎ 048

Quite unlike anywhere else in Cuba, Viñales is a nature-lover’s paradise and well deserving of its Unesco World Heritage site status. Tucked within the Sierra de los Órganos is Parque Nacional Viñales, at the end of a stunning and often white-knuckle road from the south. The name Viñales refers to both this area of extraordinary limestone cliffs as well as the quiet and generally unremarkable town at its center, which nevertheless enjoys one of the most dramatic settings in the Caribbean. With its famous *mogotes*, bizarrely mammoth limestone extrusions that pepper the otherwise flat but lush landscape, Viñales has become a center for climbers, walkers and anyone who enjoys a good sunset. Indeed, the government has now set up an official climbing center here; until recently all climbers were effectively breaking the law. Viñales itself is a sleepy place but one well-adapted for travelers, with plenty of activities on offer.

Information

Banco de Crédito y Comercio (☎ 79-31-30; Salvador Cisneros No 58; 🕒 8am-3pm Mon-Fri)

Cadeca (☎ 79-63-34; Salvador Cisneros & Adela Azcuy; 🕒 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Gives cash advances and changes traveler’s checks at higher commissions than banks.

Cubanacán (☎ 79-63-93; Salvador Cisneros No 63C; internet per hr CUC\$6; 🕒 8:30am-12:30pm & 1:30-9pm)

Etesca (Ceferino Fernández No 3) Internet access and international calls.

Post office (☎ 79-32-12; Ceferino Fernández No 14; 9am-6pm Mon-Sat)

Viñales Visitor Center (🕒 8am-6pm) On the main road into town from Pinar del Río before Hotel Los Jazmines. Guided tours can be booked (CUC\$8, 2½ hours).

Sights

The stand-out attractions of Viñales are its *mogotes* and the fascinating cave complex of Santo Tomás, a 20km drive from town. The town itself has a few mildly diverting sights, but it’s really about kicking back and drinking in the scenery here. Across from the Cupet gas station in the town center, look for a funky gate hung with fresh fruit. This is the **Jardín de las Hermanas Caridad** (Salvador Cisneros No 5; admission by donation; 🕒 8am-5pm), a sprawling, nearly 100-year-old garden. Cascades of orchids bloom beside plastic doll heads, lilies grow in soft groves and turkeys run amok.

Just past the baseball stadium – look for the giant T-Rex and teeny Martí – is the **Mundo Prehistórico Museo Parque** (Adela Azcuy Norte No 6; admission by donation; 🕒 9am-6pm), an outdoor labyrinth of local natural history created by Jesús Arencibia. His explanations of the fossils and endemic plants are peppered with humor, poetry and lore.

The **Museo Municipal Adela Azcuy Labrador** (☎ 79-33-95; Salvador Cisneros No 115; admission CUC\$1; 🕒 9am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun) occupies the former home of independence heroine Adela Azcuy (1861–1914). The small, but earnest, collection focuses on the history of Viñales, replete with reconstructed cave. Hikes set out from here (see right).

About 4km west of Viñales is the **Mural de la Prehistoria** (admission CUC\$1; 🕒 8am-7pm), a 120m-long painting on the side of Mogote Dos Hermanas. Designed in 1961, it took 15 people five years to complete. Ponder the psychedelic/horrific spectacle with a drink at the bar. **Horseback riding** (per 15min/1hr CUC\$1/5) is available. For phenomenal valley views, hike the **Sendero Al Mural** at the base of the cliff to the top of the *mogote*; allow an hour, round-trip.

The stand-out sight of the area is **Gran Caverna de Santo Tomás** (admission CUC\$10; 🕒 8:30am-

4pm) is not to be missed. Tours leave at half past the hour from 8:30am. With over 46km of galleries on eight levels, it’s Cuba’s largest cave system. Tours are given by friendly, if eccentric guides in both Spanish and English. Wear sturdy shoes, not sandals, as there’s a fair bit of clambering to be done, over often slippery surfaces. Headlamps are provided for the 1km, 90-minute tour that takes in surreal formations including giant stalagmites and stone percussive pipes that the guide will ‘play’. The cavern is at El Moncada, off the road to Minas de Matahambre, 15km from Viñales. A cab there and back including waiting time will cost CUC\$15.

For an idyllic beach, head north to **Cayo Jutías** (admission incl 1 drink CUC\$5). The *pedreplén* (causeway) begins 4km west of Santa Lucía. **Restaurante Cayo Jutías** (🕒 9am-5pm) is here. The fastest, prettiest route is via El Moncada and Minas de Matahambre. Two private rooms are available for rent in Santa Lucía or you can camp.

Activities

HIKING

The Museo Municipal (left) offers five excellent **walking tours** (tours CUC\$5; 🕒 9am & 3pm) that make a great introduction to the area, taking in everything from tobacco farming to local traditions, coffee plantations and visits to the more accessible *mogotes*. Tours last from one to four hours and are expertly led in Spanish, English or French. Longer hikes can be arranged.

The **Maravillas de Viñales trail** (admission CUC\$1) is a 5km signposted hike beginning 2km before El Moncada, 13km from the Dos Hermanas turn-off (admission fee payable at the trailhead). This makes a good three-hour hike with endemic plants and orchids lining the trail; it’s not quite a loop and leaves you about 500m downhill from the trailhead.

ROCK CLIMBING

Viñales has finally arrived as one of the Caribbean’s top climbing draws. After years of being tolerated by default, it was finally made fully legal with a permit system as of early 2008. Amateur local climbers and a smattering of professionals from around the world have collectively mapped over 300 routes. Climbers should check www.cubaclimbing.com for exhaustive information and background essential for planning.

As the government was just getting the permit process ready at the time of research, those heading to climb in Viñales should contact either Oscar Jaime Rodriguez who runs Casa Oscar (below), a casa favored by climbers, or Edgar Rivery Ricardo at Casa El Cafetal (below) for information and help with obtaining permits. In general, climbing is still in its infancy here, so it's a good idea to bring your own gear and to be generous about leaving as much of it as you can here with locals keen to help the industry grow. October to April is the preferred climbing season.

Sleeping

CASAS PARTICULARES

Villa Nelson (☎ 01-52-23-90-68; Cienfuegos No 4; r CUC\$15-20; 🚽) Look out for the unnervingly well reproduced Lonely Planet sign at this good casa run by a friendly young couple, a block from the main road. It offers two basic rooms; one has air-con, the other a fan and a small private kitchen. Excellent meals can be organized for nonguests as well as guests.

Villa El Mojito (☎ 01-52-23-90-24; Adela Azcuy Norte No 43; r CUC\$15-20; 🚽) The owner of this friendly casa, a short walk from the main road, is a former barman and a daily mojito is included in the price. There are two decent rooms in the back yard, and the daughter speaks English.

Casa El Cafetal – Martha Martínez (☎ 01-52-23-89-13; villaelcafetal@correodecuba.cu; Adela Azcuy Norte Final; r CUC\$20) Set in a charming garden at the end of a road off the main street, you're almost in the countryside here, beneath a looming *mogote*. Martha rents out one super-clean room with a private bathroom. Meals available. Her son, Edgar, is a leading local climber who speaks good English and can provide a wealth of information.

Casa Campo (☎ 01-52-23-89-13; Adela Azcuy Norte Final; r CUC\$20) Beyond Martha's (and sharing the same telephone) is another charmer in the same rural style. There's one bedroom here with a private bathroom and access to a gorgeous garden.

Casa Oscar (☎ 79-33-81, 69-55-16; leydisbel040610@yahoo.es; Adela Azcuy Sur No 43; r CUC\$20; 🚽) This buzzing two-room casa is the favorite place for visiting climbers to stay. Host Jaime (Oscar Jaime Rodriguez) is a mine of information and this is a good first port of call for those interested in climbing. There are two rooms here, both with private bathroom. The upstairs room has a private roof terrace, while the one downstairs has a small patio and is larger.

Villa Yudy y Emilio (☎ 69-51-68; Sergio Dopico 32; r CUC\$20; 🚽) Another delightfully bucolic-feeling house. The two large bedrooms here both have private bathrooms. There are great views towards a nearby *mogote*, at the end of the village. From the center of town, pass Restaurant Don Tomás and take the first right. When the road splits follow the left fork and it's the last house.

Villa Tinquillo (☎ 69-51-58; Sergio Dopico 30; r CUC\$20; 🚽) Two houses before Yudy y Emilio, this small place is very cozy, offering one room with a private bathroom. It's a breezy and calm place, run by an old lady.

HOTELS

Hotel Rancho San Vicente (☎ 79-62-01; s/d incl breakfast CUC\$44/61; 🚽 🍷) With its lovely setting beneath the hillside, Rancho San Vicente is less about the views and more about being surrounded by nature. Make sure you get one of the excellent newer rooms (6 to 43) as the older ones aren't great. The breakfast is dreadful – give it a miss. Instead enjoy the onsite sulfur baths and massages.

Los Jazmines (☎ 79-62-05; s/d incl breakfast CUC\$48/71; 🚽 🍷) Forget the fact that this state-run place is a little rough around the edges and that the paint is peeling; come here for one of the most extraordinary views in the country, available from nearly every room. The pink Jazmines, in its coveted hilltop position, is visible for miles around, and while its rooms are smallish, there's nothing better than sitting back on the patio and watching the sun go down with a cocktail.

La Ermita (☎ 79-60-71; s/d incl breakfast CUC\$58/74; 🚽 🍷) The best option to be had in Viñales is La Ermita, with its stunning views, sweet cabin-style rooms and friendly staff. Poolside mojitos are highly recommended. Horseback riding (CUC\$5 per hour) is available. This is the only hotel within easy walking distance of town.

Eating & Drinking

Viñales, second only to Santiago de Cuba, has some of the poorest food on offer in the country. There simply aren't any decent paladares in town, so your best bet is to eat in a casa (nearly all will do an evening meal even if you aren't a guest; just call ahead).

El Estanco II (Carretera de Puerto Esperanza; mains CUC\$2-4; 🍷 11am-10pm) This pleasant open-air pizza and pasta place serves up basic meals

at a slow pace. Don't come wanting to eat in a hurry, but otherwise it's fine, with agreeably low prices, a local vibe and a cigar shop as well. It's 1km north of town on the road to Cueva del Indio, a nearby cave.

Restaurante Las Magnolias (☎ 79-60-62; mains CUC\$3-8; 🍷 8am-4pm) With what is probably the best food to be had in town, Las Magnolias is a cozy and friendly spot outside the town center across from Cueva del Indio. Sink into the complete lunch (CUC\$8) in the attractive patio here and enjoy the views of the surrounding countryside.

Restaurante San Tomás (☎ 79-63-00; mains CUC\$6-10; 🍷 10am-9:30pm) This wonderful colonial house in the center of town could be superb, but sadly it's afflicted with ever worsening food and rude service. Any night of the week it's busy with tourists eating and drinking in the picturesque garden, but standards have been dropping for a decade and it's currently hard to recommend.

Ranchón y Finca San Vicente (☎ 79-61-10; mains CUC\$8; 🍷 noon-5pm) This beautifully located restaurant is unquestionably touristy, but still serves up decent food in its huge al fresco dining room. Still, unless a tour group comes in, the place can feel eerily empty.

Entertainment

The Casa de la Cultura, situated on the main square, has a full program of cultural activities. Don't miss the annual Viñales festival in mid-December; it's a fun weekend of music and drinking attended by thousands. For the rest of the year there are two decent bars, although there's often some sort of nightlife at the three big hotels.

Patio del Decimista (☎ 79-60-14; Salvador Cisneros No 102; admission free; 🍷 7pm-midnight) Serves live music nightly from 9pm and cold beers on its patio.

El Viñalero (Salvador Cisneros No 105; 🍷 7:30am-midnight) Across the street from Patio del Decimista, this place also has live music and sidewalk tables.

Getting There & Around

There are two routes to Viñales from Havana – the slightly quicker one on the highway via Pinar del Río and the more adventurous back route via Bahía Honda. Both roads as they approach Viñales are dramatic and somewhat vertiginous.

BUS

Viazul (Salvador Cisneros No 63A; 🍷 8am-noon & 1-3pm) is opposite Viñales' main square. The two daily Havana departures are at 8am (CUC\$12, 3¼ hours via Pinar del Río) and 2pm (CUC\$12, 3½ hours via Las Terrazas).

CAR

The following agencies rent out wheels: **Cubanacán** (Salvador Cisneros No 63C; 🍷 9am-7pm) Has scooters (per day CUC\$25) and bicycles (per day/week CUC\$6/20).

Havanautos (☎ 79-63-90) At the Cupet; rents out scooters.

TAXI

Taxis parked alongside the square will take you to Pinar del Río (CUC\$10) or Gran Caverna de Santo Tomás (CUC\$15, round-trip).

PENÍNSULA DE GUANAHACABIBES

☎ 048

The far western tip of Cuba is made up of the large Península de Guanahacabibes, a national park and Unesco Biosphere Reserve. It's a long, attractive drive around 150km southwest of Pinar del Río through the lush tobacco plantations and pretty villages for which Pinar del Río Province is famed.

However, the peninsula itself is very different – a semiwilderness made up of huge forests, mangrove swamps and more than its fair share of stunning white beaches – this is a nature-watcher's and diver's paradise, with two decent hotels to choose between. Anyone with a car should take the road towards Cabo de San Antonio, where the local population of iguanas can be seen basking on the rocks throughout the day. Edible tree rats (*jutías*), white-tail deer and a huge population of varied birds are other attractions that can be seen on this road.

Sights & Activities

Well within the entrance to the park is the **Estación Ecológica Guanahacabibes** (☎ 75-03-66; 🍷 9am-2pm) where a multilingual group of guides offer tours in Spanish, English and Italian to Cabo de San Antonio. They also run guided hikes along two **hiking trails**, Cuevas las Perlas (CUC\$8, three hours, 3km) is superior, highlighted by dense forest and **Pearl Cave**, a multigallery cave system of which 300m is accessible. Much of the Del Bosque al Mar 'hike' (CUC\$6, 1½ hours, 1.4km) is on hot tarmac.

Its saving grace is the terrific shoreline cenote filled with tropical fish.

The peninsula has two large areas full of **dive sites** with incredible concentrations of fish. The long-established sites are around María la Gorda and number over 30, including El Valle de Coral Negro, a 100m-long black-coral wall, and El Salón de María, a 20m-deep cave with feather stars and Technicolor corals. The second concentration, around Punta El Cajón beyond Cabo de San Antonio, remains almost totally unknown to divers, as the diving center only opened here in 2008.

The **Puertosal International Dive Center** (☎ 77-81-31; per dive CUC\$35, equipment CUC\$7.50; 📞 courses 9am & 3pm) at Hotel María la Gorda offers certification and introductory courses and night dives. Snorkelers can ride along for CUC\$12.

The **Cabo de San Antonio Dive Center** (☎ 75-01-18) opened in 2008 and had not published price information at the time of research. It's located by the Cabo de San Antonio Marina, 3km beyond the hotel Villa Cabo de San Antonio.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation on the peninsula is limited to one of two state-run beach resorts on the far side of the national park. Both are above average and are a world away from the package-tourist scene.

Hotel María la Gorda (☎ 77-81-31, 77-30-72; commercial@mlagorda.co.cu; s/d/tr incl breakfast CUC\$44/68/98, full board extra per person CUC\$26; 🍷) This long-established resort enjoys idyllic isolation on its own gorgeous palm-fringed bay. The accommodations are divided up into uninspiring two-story blocks on the beach, or far better wooden cabins scattered among the woods behind the main hotel. Go for these, as they're newer, less crowded together and full of charm, even if they aren't right on the beach. Most people come here for the excellent diving, although it's a great place for nondivers too with a water-sports center and an excellent beach. Isolated as you are out here, you're better off not taking the full-board option as the buffet is pretty mediocre, and there's a better *à la carte* restaurant next to reception with tasty pizzas and other meals. Credit cards are accepted here and the diving is of fantastic quality.

Villa Cabo de San Antonio (☎ 75-76-55, 75-76-54; www.gaviota-grupo.com; s/d incl breakfast CUC\$56/76, s/d half board CUC\$64/92; 🍷) This relatively new property is the best option on the peninsula. With

just 14 spacious, beautifully designed, dark-wood rooms moments from a stunning white beach, this really is about as isolated as it's possible to get on mainland Cuba, a good 1½ hours' drive beyond María La Gorda. There's a decent restaurant (where absurdly formal waiting prevails – check out the tongs used to serve packets of butter!) and a couple of kilometers up the road there is a new marina, a dive center and a second restaurant. Watch the mosquitoes.

Getting There & Around

There is a daily bus service in both directions connecting Havana with María La Gorda. The Transgaviota bus (CUC\$60/100 one way/return, five hours) collects travelers from hotels in Havana according to demand (call the main hotel number to book a seat), leaving at 8am. The bus then returns to Havana at 2pm from the resort. There is at present no public transport to Cabo de San Antonio. Any car can make the journey easily, although drivers should be aware that the road deteriorates to a dirt track halfway between the Estación Ecológica and the hotel. There is a gas station at the Marina Cabo de San Antonio.

CENTRAL CUBA

What central Cuba lacks in dramatic scenery it makes up for with a host of gorgeous colonial towns, including the single most-visited place on the island, the utterly lovely Trinidad. While the beauty of Trinidad remains incontestable, there's also a good choice of far less visited gems in central Cuba such as cultural Santa Clara and gorgeous backwater Remedios.

Of course central Cuba is also home to the mother lode of Cuba's tourist industry, the megaresort town of Varadero, which, while not covered in this book, is still where approximately half the tourists arriving in Cuba are heading. There are excellent stretches of beaches across the north coast, as well as some good pockets in the south. You'll also find good hiking in Topes de Collantes and important historic monuments including Che Guevara's solemn last resting place in Santa Clara. So central Cuba shouldn't just be seen as a region to get through on the way to Oriente –

stop off as much as you can and you'll be amply rewarded.

By car or bicycle, you have the choice of the Autopista, a multilane highway that makes for fast driving, or the Carretera Central. While the latter is certainly more scenic, the driving can be laborious as you dodge horse carts, goats and tractors. From Havana there are daily **Viazul** (www.viazul.cu) buses to Trinidad, Santiago de Cuba (stopping in Santa Clara) and Remedios. There's also a service between Trinidad and Santiago de Cuba.

SANTA CLARA

pop 210,700 / ☎ 42

Wonderful Santa Clara is synonymous with an Argentinean doctor-turned-revolutionary who never spent much time here. 'El Che' made this his adopted home due to the town being the site of his most famous military victory. While he died in Bolivia at the hands of the CIA in 1967 and was cremated, his remains were returned to Cuba and buried here in 1997. As a result Santa Clara is official home to the extraordinary Che cult, although those coming here for the city's revolutionary history alone might leave disappointed. Santa Clara is instead much better enjoyed as a progressive, friendly city with a large student population and a lively cultural scene.

Information

Banco Financiero Internacional (☎ 20-74-50; Cuba No 6 & Rafael Trista)

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

Cadeca (☎ 20-56-90; Rafael Tristán & Cuba on Parque Vidal; 📞 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-12:30pm Sun) For cash advances and cashing traveler's checks.

DHL (☎ 21-49-69; Cuba No 7 btwn Rafael Tristán & Eduardo Machado; 📞 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat, 8am-noon Sun)

Dino's Pizza (Marta Abreu No 10; per hr CUC\$5; 📞 9am-10:30pm Mon-Fri, 9:30am-10:30pm Sat & Sun)

This place has a couple of terminals with sketchy internet access.

Eteca Telepunto (Marta Abreu No 55 btwn Máximo Gómez & Villuendas; per hr CUC\$6; 📞 8:30am-7:30pm) The most reliable internet access in town.

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

Sights

The **Monumentos a Ernesto Che Guevara** and **Tren Blindado** are within walking distance of the

Parque Vidal if you have good legs; otherwise catch a taxi or horse carriage.

MONUMENTO ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA

Santa Clara's premier site is a semireligious monument, mausoleum and museum in honor of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. The **complex** (Av de los Desfiles; admission free; 📞 9am-5:30pm Tue-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun) is just outside the town center and can be seen for miles around with its tall Che statue. The statue was erected in 1987 to mark the 20th anniversary of Guevara's murder in Bolivia, and the mausoleum below contains 38 stone-carved niches dedicated to the guerillas killed in that failed revolutionary attempt. In 1997 the remains of 17 of them, including Guevara, were recovered from a secret mass grave in Bolivia and reburied here. Fidel Castro lit the eternal flame on October 17, 1997. The adjacent museum contains a large number of Che photographs – the great poser playing golf and eating what appears to be a hamburger are two of the less expected shots. Other ephemera include guns, letters, medical equipment and a rare late picture of Che shorn and looking uncannily like Brando in *The Godfather*.

MONUMENTO A LA TOMA DEL TREN BLINDADO

This rather eccentric train wreck (literally) is a reconstruction of Che's greatest military victory, when he led 18 men into a ridiculously brave ambush of a 22-car armored train containing 408 heavily armed Batista troops. Amazingly, this battle on December 29, 1958, only lasted 90 minutes. The **museum** (admission CUC\$1; 📞 9am-5:30pm Mon-Sat), east on Independencia just over the Río Cubanacán, is contained within the very boxcars Che ambushed. Events are painstakingly documented, and it's a great spot simply to see how well everything has been reconstructed.

PARQUE VIDAL & AROUND

Parque Vidal is the charming central Plaza of Santa Clara, around which the city is clustered. Any weekend evening you'll find live music here, whether impromptu or planned, small scale or large.

Buildings of note include the 1885 **Teatro La Caridad** (Máximo Gómez; performances CUC\$2), in the northwest corner of Parque Vidal, with frescoes by Camilo Zalaya. The **Museo de Artes Decorativas** (☎ 20-53-68; Parque Vidal No 27; admission

CUC\$2; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon, Wed & Thu, 1-10pm Fri & Sat, 6-10pm Sun), just east of Teatro La Caridad, is an 18th-century building packed with period furniture and treasures. The inner patio is a treat.

West of the park is the **Casa de la Ciudad** (☎ 20-55-93; Independencia & JB Zayas; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-noon Mon, 8am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Sun), showing the history of Santa Clara, hosting contemporary art exhibitions and functioning as a general meeting place for the city's intellectuals. Check here for nighttime cultural activities.

A glimpse inside the town's **Cigar Factory** (☎ 20-22-11; Calle Maceo 181 btwn Julio Jover & Berenguer; admission CUC\$3; ☎ 9-11am & 1-5pm Mon-Sat) is a fascinating experience, not least because it's relatively unvisited by tourists and as authentic a Cuban experience as can be had. Annoyingly you can't buy tickets there, but have to buy them from the **Havanatur office** (☎ 20-40-01; Maximo Gomez 9B) near Independencia.

Sleeping

CASAS PARTICULARES

Vivian y José Rivero (☎ 20-37-81; Maceo No 64 btwn Martí & Independencia; r CUC\$20; ☎) Two spacious, well-appointed rooms both with private bathroom in a pleasant colonial house with a large terrace and courtyard. Granny's love of loud TV somewhat detracts from the colonial vibe, but otherwise this is a great place.

El Castillito (☎ 29-26-71; Céspedes No 65A btwn Maceo & Pedro Estévez; r CUC\$20; ☎) Run by an extremely friendly couple, El Castillito has just one very comfortable room with a double bed, safe, well-stocked fridge, TV and a private roof terrace moments from Parque Vidal. Some English is spoken and meals are offered.

our pick **Hostal Florida Center** (☎ 20-81-61; Maestra Nicolasa Este No 56 btwn Colón & Maceo; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) One of the most lovely places to stay in Cuba, this casa-cum-paladar has two beautiful guest rooms stuffed full of Art Deco furnishings. Each enjoys a private bathroom, fridge, TV and access to the gorgeous verdant courtyard, also home to an aviary, a speedy tortoise and the world's cutest chow-chow. Superb meals are on offer as well, and the knowledgeable, warm-hearted, English- and French-speaking owner, Ángel, is keen to help.

Héctor Martínez (☎ 21-74-63; Rolando Pardo No 8 btwn Maceo & Parque Vidal; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) Charming Héctor offers two lovely rooms in his large colonial house just off the main square. Both

have private facilities and share access to an attractive courtyard.

Hostal Casa Mercy (☎ 21-69-41; Eduardo Machado No 4 btwn Cuba & Colón; r CUC\$20-25) Two super-clean rooms with private bathrooms, fridges and shared access to a large airy terrace are available at this central location. A washing service and guarded parking are also offered by the kindly, multilingual hosts.

Olga Rivera Gómez (☎ 21-17-11; zaidabarreto2006@yahoo.es; Evangelista Yanes No 20 btwn Máximo Gómez & Carolina Rodríguez; r CUC\$25; ☎) Friendly Olga has two lovely rooms in a big colonial house on a quiet square a five-minute walk from the center. Ask for the bright room overlooking the church, which enjoys both views and light. Each room has private bathroom, fridge and access to a huge roof terrace.

Zaida Barreto García (☎ 29-48-44; zaidabarreto2006@yahoo.es; Berenguer No 11 btwn Máximo Gómez & Carolina Rodríguez; r CUC\$25; ☎) Olga's sister has two similar rooms in a connecting house backing onto Olga's, making it possible for groups of eight or so to share the two houses.

HOTELS

Hotel Santa Clara Libre (☎ 20-75-48; fax 68-63-67; Parque Vidal No 6; s/d incl breakfast CUC\$22/29; ☎) There's no real reason to stay in this deeply mediocre hotel when Santa Clara has some of the friendliest and most charming casas in the country on offer, but at least it's a cheap option and the staff are friendly. The rooms are small and many suffer from damp, but there are good views from the 11th-floor bar. The hotel facade is bullet-pocked from one of the revolution's final battles.

Eating & Drinking

There's a busy stretch of bars and cafés on the pedestrian strip of Independencia, just north of Parque Vidal. While they're all pretty similar, the most popular, with al fresco tables and a good atmosphere, are La Cubana and Europa.

El Castillo (9 de Abril No 9 btwn Cuba & Villuendas; ☎ noon-11pm) Unlike almost every state-run peso canteen in Cuba, this is a little gem. Friendly staff serve up large, good quality portions of pork, chicken, *congrí* and salad for peanuts at an impressive marble bar. Look no further to make local friends and hear people discuss the news and sports.

Dino's Pizza (Marta Abreu No 10; pizzas CUC\$3-7; ☎ 9am-10:30pm Mon-Fri, 9:30am-10:30pm Sat & Sun) A

carbon copy of the many Dino's around Cuba, this version remains a decent place for pizza, and there's internet access to boot (CUC\$5 per hour).

La Concha (☎ 21-81-24; cnr Carretera Central & Danilito; mains CUC\$4-10; ☎ 11am-11pm) While La Concha's premises are a rather sterile arrangement of tables in a glass-fronted unit (on the main road out of the center towards the Che Memorial), it's often hard to get a table simply because the pizza here is so prized by locals. Seafood specialties and meaty mains are also on offer.

El Sabor Latino (☎ 40-65-39; Esquerra No 157 btwn Julio Jover & Berenguer; set meal CUC\$12-15; ☎ noon-midnight) This relaxed paladar offers a huge range of Creole cooking. It's not cheap, although it can be if you go for the soups or salads rather than the voluminous all-inclusive meal deals, which, while slightly overpriced, are delicious.

Entertainment

Club Mejunje (Marta Abreu No 107; ☎ 4pm-1am Tue-Sun) If you're here on Saturday night, come along to Cuba's only openly gay club, which is remarkably straight-friendly and attracts everyone from local stars of drag to young gangs of toughs. Set in the ruins of an old building, this is the heart of the city's alternative culture. There's usually dancing or theater every other night of the week, and there's nowhere else in Cuba quite like it.

El Bar Club Boulevard (☎ 21-62-36; Independencia No 2 btwn Maceo & Pedro Estévez; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 10pm-2am Tue-Sun) A fun cocktail lounge with comedy acts and live music.

Villa Clara ('La Villa,' aka Las Naranjas) are the arch rivals of Havana's Industriales; catch a baseball game at Estadio Sandino, east of the center via Av 9 de Abril.

Shopping

Stroll 'El Bulevar,' Independencia, between Maceo and Zayas for good secondhand clothes and consignment shops.

La Veguita (☎ 20-89-52; Calle Maceo No 176A btwn Julio Jover & Berenguer; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) This excellent specialist shop opposite the cigar factory unsurprisingly sells cigars, and boasts an excellent humididor and smoking room, as well as offering coffee and a range of rums to take home. There's a friendly bar-café at the back where you'll get the best coffee in town.

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

ARTex (☎ 21-43-97; Colón No 16 btwn Machado & Rafael Tristán; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) Cuba's reliable musical and clothing outlet has CDs, souvenirs and a range of T-shirts and other gifts. There's a second, smaller outlet on the south side of Parque Vidal.

Getting There & Away

The **Nacionales Bus Station** (☎ 22-25-23) is 2.5km out on the Carretera Central toward Matanzas, 500m north of the Che monument. Tickets for Viazul are sold in the Viazul office on your right in the main hall. For daily departures see below.

The **intermunicipal bus station** (Carretera Central), just west of the center via Marta Abreu, has three daily buses to Remedios (CUC\$1.45, approximately one hour, 6:40am, 9:05am and 2:35pm.).

The **train station** (☎ 20-28-95) is straight up Luis Estévez from Parque Vidal on the north side of town. The **ticket office** (Luis Estévez Norte No 323) is across the park from the station. In theory, trains serve the destinations shown in the boxed text, p168.

Getting Around

Local transportation is mostly by *coche* (horse cart), with an important route along Marta Abreu toward the bus stations and Che monument (CUP1). From the train station to the center, catch the 'Materno' (CUP2).

SERVICES FROM SANTA CLARA NACIONALES BUS STATION

Destination	One-way fare (CUC\$)	Distance (km)	Duration (hr)	Schedule
Havana	18	276	4	8am, 5:30pm, 3:10am
Santiago de Cuba	33	590	12	7:30pm, 7:25am, 1:15pm, 6:45pm, 12:55am, 1:45am
Trinidad	8	88	3½	11:30am

SERVICES FROM SANTA CLARA TRAIN STATION

Destination	One-way fare (CUC\$)	Distance (km)	Duration (hr)	Schedule
Havana	10	276	6	9:30am daily
Santiago de Cuba	20 (slow train) 41 (fast train)	590	8-10	8:24am (slow train) alternate days, midnight (fast train), alternate days

Scooters are rented from **Cubatur** (☎ 422-20-85-34; Marta Abreu No 10; ☎ 9am-8pm) for CUC\$18 per day.

Taxis in front of the national bus station and around Parque Vidal charge CUC\$8 to Remedios, CUC\$50/80 one way/round trip to Cayo Santa María and CUC\$45 to Havana, or call **Cubataxi** (☎ 20-25-80).

REMEDIOS

pop 46,500 / ☎ 42

Dreamy Remedios, less than an hour east of Santa Clara, is a wonderful place to escape the tourists and relax into everyday Cuban life in a *jintero* (tout)-free, tranquil town set around a brightly painted square full of traditional colonial houses. Come here to escape the megaresorts of the coast and the busy towns more emblazoned on the bus tour trail – you'll find some of the island's most beautiful and welcoming casas and will still enjoy easy access to the beaches at Cayo Santa María if you have your own car. For many, the real reason to come here is to see the tranquility shattered every December 24 for **Las Parrandas**, a night of mind-blowing fireworks, street dancing and general chaos as the tiny town descends into one of Cuba's most raucous street parties.

Sights & Activities

The town is built around the 18th-century **Parroquia de San Juan Bautista de Remedios** (Camilo Cienfuegos No 20 on Parque Martí; ☎ 9-11am Mon-Sat), a rather faded beauty famous for its gilded altar. The pregnant Inmaculada Concepción (with charming pearl teardrops) is said to be unique in Cuba. It's not always possible to visit, but ask around and someone will usually be able to let you in. Which of the church's two chapels you live nearest to determines your affiliation as the town splits into two groups for its ultimate spectacle, the **Las Parrandas** fireworks and street party.

Visiting the **Museo de las Parrandas Remedianas** (Máximo Gómez No 71; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-

Sat, 9am-noon Sun), two blocks off Parque Martí, is the next best thing to partying here on December 24. It has a photo gallery, scale models of floats and graphic depictions of how the fireworks are made. Another room is jammed with the feathers, headdresses and tassels from the previous year.

You can escape to **Cayo Santa María**, 65km from Remedios, for a day on central Cuba's most brilliant beach. You'll have to pay for a day pass to one of the very smart resorts (CUC\$25 to CUC\$50 per person including unlimited food and drink). The prettiest stretches are alongside Villa las Brujas and at the end of the Meliá resorts' access road. The cay is accessed via the *pedreplén* (CUC\$2 toll; sadly no Cubans allowed).

Sleeping

CASAS PARTICULARES

Hostal El Patio (☎ 39-52-20; aile@ucv.edu.cu; José A Peña No 72 btwn Hermanos García & A Romero; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) One very pleasant room is on offer at the back of this centrally located colonial house. Private bathroom and fridge are included and meals are available.

our pick **La Paloma** (☎ 39-54-90; Balmaseda No 4 btwn Máximo Gómez & Capablanca; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) Right on the main square, this excellent casa oozes charm with two large rooms, both with big marble bathrooms, and two attentive and friendly young hosts. It offers a shared communal terrace and antiques aplenty – a great choice for atmosphere and location.

La Casona Cueto (☎ 39-53-50; amarelys@capiro.vcl.sld.cu; Alejandro del Río No 72; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) Few places feel as properly colonial as this large family home just off the main square. It offers three rooms, all with good private bathrooms, although the upstairs room has no air-con. It has a fantastic courtyard and a gorgeous roof terrace, and the house is full of pets.

Villa Colonial (☎ 39-62-74; www.villacolonial.de.ki; Maceo No 43 btwn General Carrillo & Fe del Valle; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) Staying here effectively means

you have your own four-room house, complete with antiques, huge high ceiling and a friendly family next door on hand to help. English is spoken, and dinners are available. Stay here for privacy, atmosphere and style.

Hostal La Estancia (☎ 39-55-82; amarelys@capiro.vcl.sld.cu; Cienfuegos No 34 btwn Brigadier González & Maceo; r CUC\$25-30; ☎) This is one of Cuba's finest casas, a gorgeous rambling house stuffed full of antiques, built around a large shady courtyard containing a pool. The two rooms both have large private bathrooms and pretty tiled floors. Meals available.

HOTELS

Hotel Mascotte (☎ 39-51-45; Parque Martí; r incl breakfast CUC\$49; ☎) Remedios only has one hotel, but it's a charmer and not a bad alternative to a casa. All 10 rooms have TV, phone and rather shabby bathrooms, but it's a fantastic *grande dame* of a building, dating from 1869 and overlooking the main square. If you have the choice rooms 1 to 5 all have balconies overlooking the square, of which 1 and 5 are the most spacious. Room prices go up to CUC\$80 for Las Parrandas.

Eating & Drinking

As usual the best food is available in casas particulares, although there are a couple of other options.

Driver's Bar (José Peña No 65; mains CUP10-15; ☎ noon-2:45pm & 6-9:45pm) An atmospheric peso option, this is a local favorite comprising a busy bar and a popular restaurant where steaks, fried chicken and pork are served up for next to nothing.

Las Arcadas (☎ 39-51-45; Parque Martí; mains CUC\$5-10) The Hotel Mascotte restaurant serves up very standard Cuban dishes and enjoys the smartest setting in town.

El Louvre (Máximo Gómez No 122; ☎ 8am-10pm) For morning coffee and evening drinks head here. This place has been serving refreshments since 1866 from a long stone bar, opposite the church.

Getting There & Away

The bus station marks the beginning of the old town, a short distance after the entrance to town on the first major road left. There are three daily services to Santa Clara (CUC\$1.45, one hour) at 5am, 7:10am and 4:30pm and Havana (CUC\$8, 6½ hours,

7:15pm daily and an extra service at 7pm on alternate days). For services to the rest of the country, change in Santa Clara.

TRINIDAD

pop 65,000 / ☎ 41

Cuba's worst kept secret, Trinidad is almost unbearably gorgeous with its large pastel-painted colonial mansions, horse-drawn carriages rattling down cobbled streets and the distant mountains providing a suitably dramatic setting. Sadly the gem that originally attracted backpackers in the mid-'90s has been overwhelmed by bus tours, day-trippers and the inevitable *jinteros* (touts) who now dominate the town, to the point that you should look elsewhere for your authentic small-town Cuban experience. (For more on *jinteros*, see p184)

However, to miss out would be a shame – there's a bevy of superb, atmospheric casas here, plus a great beach at nearby Playa Ancón and the lush hills of the Topes de Collantes and Valle de los Ingenios (the latter is a Unesco World Heritage site, along with Trinidad's old town). So disregard the touts and the fact that most of the year there are just as many foreigners as locals here, and prepare to love Trinidad in spite of it all.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Cafe Internet Las Begonias (Antonio Maceo No 473; per hr CUC\$6; ☎ 7:30am-1am) Good place to meet other travelers.

Eteca (☎ 99-41-29; General Lino Pérez No 274; per hr CUC\$6; ☎ 8:30am-7:30pm) On Parque Céspedes.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Servimed Clínica Internacional Cubanacán

(☎ 99-62-40; General Lino Pérez No 103; ☎ 24hr) Consultations before/after 4pm CUC\$25/30. Has an on-site pharmacy.

MONEY

Banco de Crédito y Comercio (☎ 99-24-05; José Martí No 264)

Banco Financiero Internacional (☎ 99-61-07; cnr Camilo Cienfuegos & José Martí; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) Cash advances; ridiculously long lines.

Cadeca (☎ 99-62-63; Martí No 164 btwn Lino Pérez & Camilo Cienfuegos)

POST

Post office (Antonio Maceo No 420 btwn Colón & Zerquera)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Cubanacán (☎ 99-61-42; www.cubanacan.cu; cnr José Martí & Zerquera)

Cubatur (☎ 99-63-14; www.cubatur.cu; cnr Calle Maceo & Bolívar)

Havanatur (☎ 99-61-83; www.havanatur.com; Lino Pérez No 336, btwn Maceo & Codania)

Sights & Activities

Trinidad has two main centers – the Plaza Mayor, home to many of the bigger tourist sites, and the far more ‘real’ Parque Céspedes, a short walk away down José Martí. Head to the latter and beyond if you want to get a feeling for the ‘real’ Trinidad. In general the town has no unmissable sites – coming here is really about drinking the whole place in – but there are plenty of moderately interesting things to do for those so inclined. Most of the more substantial things to see and do are outside the town.

Near Plaza Mayor is the impressive **Museo Histórico Municipal** (Casa Cantero; ☎ 99-44-60; Simón Bolívar No 423; admission CUC\$2; 🕒 9am-5pm Sat-Thu), the town’s single most impressive museum, where the ill-gotten wealth of slave trader Justo Cantero is displayed in the stylish, neoclassical rooms. The view from the top of the tower alone is worth the admission price.

Near to the church is the **Museo Romántico** (☎ 99-43-63; Echerri No 52; admission CUC\$2; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) in the Palacio Brunet, built between 1740 and 1808. The mansion-turned-museum collects 19th-century furnishings, china and such. As with most old houses, the kitchen and bathroom are the most interesting rooms.

Housed in the former San Francisco de Asís convent, the photogenic **Museo Nacional de la Lucha Contra Bandidos** (☎ 99-41-21; Echerri No 59; admission CUC\$1; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) is distinguished by its yellow campanile, the only part of the original building remaining. The collection relates to the struggle against counter-revolutionary bands in the Sierra del Escambray (1906-65). Climb the tower for good views.

For a bird’s-eye view of Trinidad, walk up Simón Bolívar, between the Iglesia Parroquial and the Museo Romántico, to the ruined 18th-century **Ermida de Nuestra**

Señora de la Candelaria de la Popa. From here, it’s a 30-minute uphill hike to 180m-high **Cerro de la Vigía**, which delivers broad vistas of Trinidad, Playa Ancón and beyond.

Playa Ancón, 12km south of Trinidad, is an inviting ribbon of white beach lapped by tranquil blue waters – perfect for a day cycling trip. There’s an excellent reef for snorkeling and scuba diving offshore. The seven-hour **snorkeling tour** (per adult/child incl lunch & open bar CUC\$40/30) to Cayo Blanco, departing at 9am, gets rave reviews; black coral and bountiful marine life are highlights. All the Trinidad agencies arrange these trips, or you can go to **Cubanacán Náutica Trinidad** (☎ 99-47-54), a few hundred meters north of Hotel Ancón, which also offers sailboat charters.

Dozens of crumbling 19th-century *ingenios* (sugar mills) dot **Valle de los Ingenios**. The royal palms, waving cane and rolling hills are timelessly beautiful, especially seen from the saddle (see below). The valley’s main sight is the 1750 **Manaca Iznaga** (admission CUC\$1), 16km east of Trinidad, a 44m-high tower with exquisite 360-degree views. The tourist train stops here; it’s an hour’s walk from the local train station at Meyer (see p172).

Topes de Collantes, the rugged 90km-long Sierra del Escambray mountain range some 20km northwest of Trinidad, has some of Cuba’s best unguided hiking. The **Carpeta Central information office** (☎ 99-02-31; 🕒 8am-5pm) sells a topographical map of the area (CUC\$2.50), and offers camp sites (CUC\$10) and guides. The most popular hike is the 2.5km, 2½-hour round-trip trek to the **Salto del Caburní** (per person CUC\$6.50), a 62m waterfall cascading into cool swimming holes. It’s difficult to get here without a car.

Tours

Cubatur and Cubanacán (left) sell the same excursions, including the popular Valle de los Ingenios **sugar train tour** (adult/child CUC\$10/5), which starts at 9:30am), **horseback riding** tours to the Cascada El Cubano (CUC\$18 including transportation, park entrance fee, lunch and guide) and **day hikes** (adult/child CUC\$29/20) to Topes de Collantes.

Freelance guides lead **horseback riding** (per person 3/6hr CUC\$7/15) trips to the Valle de los Ingenios or Cascada El Cubano (add a CUC\$6.50 park entry fee for the latter). A tour to the Guanajara National Park and its waterfall is also on offer (CUC\$55 per person).

Sleeping**CASAS PARTICULARES**

Carmelina de la Paz (☎ 99-32-94; Piro Guinart No 239 btwn Suyama & Independencia; r CUC\$15-20) Wow! This huge old house really is something – look no further for somewhere memorable to stay. Two vast bedrooms both have private bathrooms, and the one at the front of the house has sole access to an equally large terrace. High ceilings, good food and a warm welcome make this a great place to bed down.

Yolanda (☎ 99-63-81; yolimar56@yahoo.com; Piro Guinart No 227 btwn Suyama & Independencia; r CUC\$15-20; 🕒) Yolanda has four excellent rooms on offer, each with private facilities and a fridge. Go for the upstairs room, which has both air-con and a terrace with wonderful views. The other rooms surround a leafy colonial courtyard and Baby Jesus sleeps on the sitting room sofa.

Orlando Rodríguez Ramon (☎ 99-21-10; Antonio Guiteras No 229 btwn Calzada & País; s CUC\$15-20, d CUC\$20-25; 🕒) Offers a private upstairs apartment with a double and single bed, large terrace and living room with fridge. Excellent for privacy although the bathroom is a bit makeshift. Some English is spoken.

Familia Gil Lemes (☎ 99-31-42; carlosj3142@yahoo.es; José Martí No 263 btwn Rosario & Colón; s CUC\$15-20, d CUC\$20-25; 🕒) Another fantastic colonial place. The Gil Lemes family rents one room with its own bathroom down the corridor. There’s also a garage where cars can be parked safely.

Aracelys Reboso (☎ 99-35-97; bernaatdad@yahoo.com; Lino Perez No 207 btwn Frank País & Calzada; r CUC\$20-25; 🕒) Aracelys, a retired English teacher, speaks very good English and her two excellent rooms, both with private bathroom, share a sitting room and two gorgeous terraces. Meals are available, and her son Francisco Petersen also rents No 179 (CUC\$15 to CUC\$20), a comfortable, quiet room with large bathroom leading to a sunny patio.

Gustavo Cañedo (☎ 99-66-16; gustavocanedo13@yahoo.es; Piro Guinart No 216 btwn Maceo & Izquierdo; r CUC\$20-30) Another huge house with high ceilings and tiled floors. Two communicating rooms share a bathroom.

Casa Muñoz (☎ 99-36-73; http://casa.trinidadphoto.com; José Martí No 401 btwn Olvido & Claro; r CUC\$25-30; 🕒) Being refurbished at the time of research, this charming house will soon be even better. There are two rooms both with private bathrooms. The house is a colonial stunner run by a photographer and his wife.

Casa Arandía (☎ 99-66-13; eloely2006@htdtd.ssp.sld.cu; Maceo No 438 btwn Colón & Zerquera; r CUC\$25-30; 🕒) Another great place to stay is this friendly casa, which offers two rooms (one of which was about to be redone at last pass) with private bathrooms and fridges. Go for the upstairs room, though, which is self-contained and has access to a private roof terrace. Meals available.

HOTELS

Casa de la Amistad (☎ 99-38-24; Zerquera btwn Martí & País; r CUC\$25; 🕒) This tiny hotel has just six humble but comfortable rooms, all with private bathroom. Favored by fellow travelers of the Cuban government, the place is nonetheless open to all, although it’s best to call ahead.

Iberostar Grand Hotel Trinidad (☎ 99-60-70; www.iberostar.com; Martí No 262; s/d CUC\$125/150; 🕒) Trinidad’s star hotel does not disappoint and is well worth the splurge if you fancy some pampering. The beautiful and unobtrusively designed five-star property is in the heart of town and manages to pull off both a traditional design and thoroughly modern touches, from a gorgeous lobby centered on a fountain to free internet access and a fantastic restaurant and cocktail bar. The 40 rooms are very smart and spacious, with large bathrooms and comfortable fittings.

Eating

The stretch of Martí around Lino Pérez and Camilo Cienfuegos is crowded with peso stalls, selling *pizza*, *cajitas* (takeout meals that come in small boxes) and snacks.

Cremería Las Begonias (☎ 99-64-04; Antonio Maceo No 473; burgers CUC\$3-4; 🕒 7:30am-1am) Hide out in the back patio with a milkshake, ice cream or coffee. Across the street there’s Cafetería Las Begonias, another branch of this popular café, which has a Cubatur office and internet access, as well as snack food.

Trinidad Colonial (☎ 99-64-73; Antonio Maceo No 402; mains CUC\$4-20; 🕒 11:30am-10pm) The Trinidad Colonial is inside a suitably grand historic villa with tables outside as well as in. Avoid it at lunch times when it’s the preferred realm of the tour-bus crowd, but come in the evening when the fish and seafood menu is best enjoyed. Try the shrimp in chili sauce.

Mesón del Regidor (☎ 99-64-56; Simón Bolívar No 424; mains CUC\$5-12; 🕒 10am-10pm) Just down from the Plaza Mayor, this popular but firmly tourist-

oriented eatery does a mean line in grilled meats, but gets crowded at lunch with tour groups. There's live music here as well, which can sometimes be excellent.

Paladar Sol y Son (Simón Bolívar No 283 btwn Frank País & José Martí; mains CUC\$6-10; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-10pm) This atmospheric 1830s mansion with tables sprinkled throughout the back garden is definitely the place to head for romance. There's friendly service and the food is largely excellent – try the superb side of pork and clean your palate with a killer daiquiri.

Paladar Estela (☎ 99-43-29; Simón Bolívar No 557; meals CUC\$8-10; ☎ 7-10pm Mon-Fri) Trinidad's second-choice paladar (after Paladar Sol y Son) is also good, serving up a straightforward menu of Cuban dishes based around chicken, pork and *congrí* in a pleasant back garden a short distance from the Plaza Mayor. Set meals include side dishes and dessert.

Entertainment

Casa de la Música (☎ 99-34-14; admission free; ☎ 4pm-midnight) This enormous place is spread over a steep set of outdoor steps and is the busiest place in town, with a packed after-dinner crowd for the main show at 10pm nightly. As well as the main performance and the several bars, there are sometimes salsa concerts in the rear courtyard (admission CUC\$2).

Casa de la Trova (☎ 99-64-45; Echerrí No 29; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 10pm-1am) Housed in a pretty old mansion with a smart colonial vibe, this place has a changing schedule of local live music – it can be pot luck, but is sometimes surprisingly good.

Palenque de los Congos Reales (cnr Echerrí & J Menéndez; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 1:30pm-midnight Sun-Fri, 1:30pm-1am Sat) Offers energetic salsa and *son*, heavy on the Afro-Cuban beat with live shows nightly at 10pm.

Las Ruinas del Teatro Brunet (Antonio Maceo No 461 btwn Simón Bolívar & Zerquera; cover CUC\$1) Hosts an athletic Afro-Cuban show at 10pm from Tuesday to Friday, and a Cuban folklore show from 10pm Saturday, in a crumbling colonial patio. The cover charge is added to the cost

of your drink. Check here for drumming and dance classes.

Shopping

There's a decent **arts and crafts market** (Jesús Menéndez) in front of the Casa de la Trova. This is a good place for (pricey) shopping, especially for its elaborate lace designs, though do avoid the black coral and turtle-shell items.

You can buy locally produced artwork at the **Casa de la Cultura Julio Cueva Díaz** (Zerquera No 406). **Yami Martínez** (☎ 99-30-17; Maceo No 413 btwn Zerquera & Colón) creates funky sculptures that you can buy directly from her home studio.

Head to **Casa del Habano** (cnr Zerquera & Maceo) for all your rum and cigar needs. If it's CDs and musical instruments you're after, it's the **Casa de la Música**, up the stairway beside the Iglesia Parroquial.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The **bus station** (Piro Guinart No 224), accessed via Gustavo Izquierdo, has a left-luggage room. See below for services.

CAR

The quickest route to Trinidad from Havana is via Santa Clara and Manicaragua, offering beautiful mountain scenery. The coastal route from Cienfuegos, though slower, is lined with little beaches and fishing villages. Both roads are decent. You can organize car hire at **Cubatur** (☎ 99-63-14; www.cubatur.cu; cnr Calle Maceo & Bolívar).

TAXI

For trips to Havana (CUC\$60) or Cienfuegos (CUC\$40), **Cubataxi** (☎ 419-2214) can be contracted at the bus station.

TRAIN

While there is a risibly small, pink **terminal** (☎ 99-42-23, 99-33-48) here, Trinidad's trains are strictly local and do not connect with the rest of the country's stellar network.

There's one train a day in each direction along a pretty branch line through the Valle de los Ingenios, departing Trinidad at 9:30am and stopping at Iznaga and Condado before terminating in Meyer, 19km north of Trinidad (CUC\$10, 80 minutes). It returns to Trinidad from Meyer at 1:30pm, giving you a few hours to explore the valley. You can also hop on the return train at Condado or Iznaga. It arrives back in Trinidad at 2:50pm.

Getting Around

You can rent bicycles (per day CUC\$3) beside **Cubataxi** (☎ 99-22-14) at the bus station. There's also a regular bus between Trinidad and Playa Ancón that leaves from outside the Havantur office. A coco-taxi costs around CUC\$4 to Playa Ancón.

Transtur (☎ 99-61-10; cnr Maceo & Zerquera) at Cubatur rents out scooters (per day/week CUC\$20/126).

EASTERN CUBA

You can't claim to have really seen Cuba without a visit to 'El Oriente', as the eastern half of the island is known. Here, things move more slowly (the motorway peters out somewhere around Ciego de Ávila, as if to make a point) and a more simple yet exotic way of life prevails. This is Cuba's Caribbean heart – dramatic, steamy and moving to its very own unpredictable rhythm.

At the end of the island, of course, cultural heavyweight and second city Santiago de Cuba is the center of its own world, providing relief from Havana's domination of everything else in the country. The region also includes the infamous Guantánamo Bay US Naval Base, as well as one of the country's most stunning drives – between Guantánamo and Baracoa, the charming town right on the eastern tip of the island, which is a great place to chill out off the beaten track.

Getting There & Away

Santiago de Cuba's Aeropuerto Antonio Maceo receives a smattering of international flights, mainly from elsewhere in the Caribbean. Domestic flights connect Santiago to Havana. Baracoa also has an airport that connects it to Havana.

Train travel, though slow, is a possibility between Havana and Santiago de Cuba. However, most people either take the bus (12 hours) or drive the distance themselves, often stopping over in friendly Camagüey to break up the journey.

Getting Around

Bus connections center on Santiago, and are limited, especially from Baracoa. The road network is fine, and it is possible to drive a loop from Santiago to Holguín via Baracoa, although the road is in bad repair for much of the journey beyond Baracoa. Despite that, it's easily doable in a normal car. The only local transportation up this way is by truck.

SANTIAGO DE CUBA

pop 495,000 / ☎ 22

There's magic in the air of Santiago, Cuba's second city and the much needed counterweight to Havana in music, politics and culture. With its beguiling setting on the mouth of a large bay surrounded by mountains, its plethora of beautiful buildings and a brightly painted old town located on a precipitous hillside, it's unlike almost anywhere else in the country. The city looks firmly to its Caribbean neighbors in a way Havana never has done, and as a result there are far more pronounced Haitian, African and Hispanic influences to be felt here. Take your time to enjoy Santiago and you'll find it soon enchants you.

History

Founded in 1514, Santiago de Cuba was the first Cuban capital (1515–1607). After the capital shifted to Havana and Santiago's gold reserves and indigenous labor started giving out, the city lost prominence; despite being the 'cradle of the revolution,' it still nurses an inferiority complex.

On July 26, 1953, Fidel Castro and his companions stole away from the Granjita Siboney farm 20km southeast of Santiago and unsuccessfully attacked the Moncada Barracks, an embarrassingly badly planned attack now talked up as a key part of Castro's revolutionary myth. At his trial here Castro made his famous 'History Will Absolve Me' speech, which became the basic platform of the Cuban Revolution.

Information

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 106; cnr Mariano Corona & Sánchez Hechevarría)

SERVICES FROM TRINIDAD'S BUS STATION

Destination	One-way fare (CUC\$)	Distance (km)	Duration (hr)	Schedule
Havana	25	335	6	7:30am & 5pm
Santa Clara	8	88	3	9am & 3:30pm
Santiago de Cuba	33	581	11½	8am

INTERNET ACCESS

Etcsa (per hr CUC\$6; ☎ 8:30am-7:30pm) Heredia (cnr Heredia & Félix Peña); Tamayo Fleites (cnr Tamayo Fleites & Hartmann)

MEDICAL SERVICES**Clínica Internacional Cubanacán Servimed**

(☎ 64-25-89; cnr Av Raúl Pujol & Calle 8, Vista Alegre; consultations CUC\$30; ☎ 24hr) Some English-speaking staff, plus a dentist.

Farmacia Cubanacán (☎ 64-25-89; cnr Av Raúl Pujol & Calle 8; ☎ 24hr) Best pharmacy. Another is in the Meliá Santiago de Cuba, open from 8am to 6pm.

Farmacia Las Américas (Av Victoriano Garzón No 422; ☎ 24hr)

Hospital Provincial Saturnino Lora (☎ 64-56-51; Av de los Libertadores; ☎ 24hr)

MONEY

Banco de Crédito y Comercio (☎ 62-80-06; Felix Peña No 614) ATM on Heredia.

Banco Financiero Internacional (☎ 62-20-73; Felix Peña No 565; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Cadeca (☎ 68-61-76; Aguilera No 508; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-noon Sun) Others are in the Meliá Santiago de Cuba and Hotel Las Américas.

POST

Post office (Aguilera No 519)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Cubatur (☎ 62-31-24, 62-87-37; Av Garzón No 364 btwn Calle 3 & 4; ☎ 8am-8pm)

Havanatur (☎ 68-72-80; Calle 8 No 54 btwn Calle 1 & 3, Vista Alegre; ☎ 8am-5pm)

Sights**PARQUE CÉSPEDES & AROUND**

The heart of Santiago is **Parque Céspedes**, a large square dominated by the five-nave **Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción**, situated on the south side of the park. Cuba's first cathedral was built here in the 1520s; the present cathedral with its coffered ceiling, dome and graceful archangel was completed in 1922.

The square is named for Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, the man who freed his slaves and declared Cuban independence in 1868; a bronze bust stands here in his honor. Some of Santiago's most impressive buildings ring this park, including the 1522 **Casa de Diego Velázquez** (Felix Peña No 602), the oldest house still standing in Cuba. This Andalusian-style showpiece now houses the **Museo de Ambiente Histórico Cubano** (☎ 65-26-52; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 9am-1pm,

2-5pm Mon-Thu & Sat, 2-5pm Fri, 9am-9pm Sun), with its collection of period furnishings.

Two blocks downhill from the park is the **Balcón de Velázquez** (Bartolomé Masó & Mariano Corona; admission with/without camera CUC\$1/free; ☎ 9am-7pm Tue-Sun), the site of an old Spanish fort with lovely harbor views. Three long blocks downhill on Bartolomé Masó is the **Fábrica de Tabacos César Escalante** (☎ 62-23-66; Av Jesús Menéndez No 703; admission CUC\$5; ☎ 9-11am & 1-3pm), a working cigar factory open for visits.

Pío Rosado, the alley running alongside the Museo del Carnaval, leads up to the quite fabulous neoclassical building housing the **Museo Municipal Emilio Bacardí Moreau** (☎ 62-84-02; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 9am-4:15pm). Founded in 1899 by famous rum distiller and first mayor of Santiago de Cuba, Emilio Bacardí y Moreau (1844-1922), this is one of Cuba's oldest functioning museums and features exhibits relating to the 19th-century independence struggles, as well as European and Cuban paintings.

Eight blocks northwest of Parque Céspedes is the important **Museo-Casa Natal de Antonio Maceo** (☎ 62-37-50; Los Maceos No 207; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-4:30pm Mon-Sat), where the independence war general was born on June 14, 1845. During the 1895 war he was second in command, after Máximo Gómez, and died fighting in western Cuba in 1896. This museum exhibits highlights of Maceo's life, including the tattered flag flown in battle.

CUARTEL MONCADA (MONCADA BARRACKS)

The **Parque Histórico Abel Santamaría** (General Portuondo & Av de los Libertadores) is the home to the hospital that was occupied by revolutionary forces on July 26, 1953, during the attack on the adjacent Moncada Barracks.

The **Cuartel Moncada** (Moncada Barracks) is where more than 100 revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro attacked Batista's troops on July 26, 1953. At the time, this was Cuba's second-most-important military garrison. The revolutionaries had hoped the assault would spark a general uprising throughout Cuba, but things went awry and the armed struggle was put on hold for another 3½ years.

A major **museum** (☎ 62-01-57; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 9:30am-5:30pm Mon-Sat, 9:30am-12:30pm Sun) can be visited through gate No 3 (on General Portuondo near Moncada), where the main attack took place. The outer walls here are still

bullet-pocked. The museum outlines the history of Cuba, with heavy emphasis on the revolution. A scale model of Moncada illustrates the 1953 assault.

CEMENTERIO SANTA IFIGENIA

A visit to the 1868 **Cementerio Santa Ifigenia** (☎ 63-27-23; Av Crombet; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 7am-5pm), 2km north of the city center, is a stroll through history. Many of the giants of Cuban history are found among the 8000 tombs here, including Cuba's national hero, José Martí (1853-95). The Martí Mausoleum (1951) is flanked by the muses and there's a dramatic changing of the guard every half-hour. Buried here are those who died during the 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks, and Carlos Manuel de Céspedes (1819-74), the father of Cuban independence.

CASTILLO DE SAN PEDRO DEL MORRO

This dazzling excursion is a must on any trip to Santiago. A Unesco World Heritage site and the best preserved 17th-century Spanish military complex in the Caribbean, the **Castillo de San Pedro del Morro** (☎ 69-15-69; admission CUC\$4, photos CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-8pm) perches dramatically on a 60m-high promontory, 10km southwest of town via Carretera del Morro. Built between 1633 and 1693, El Morro guards the entrance to the Bay of Santiago and the views are extraordinary.

A taxi here from Parque Céspedes with a 30-minute wait costs between CUC\$10 and CUC\$15, depending on your negotiating skills.

Sleeping**CASAS PARTICULARES Casco Histórico**

Andres y Ramona Gamez (☎ 65-43-49; Corona No 371 Altos btwn General Portuondo & Máximo Gómez; r CUC\$15-20; ☎) This friendly couple offer one very independent room with a double and single bed, complete with kitchen, dining area, bathroom and patio. There's an extra room in the host's sister's house downstairs.

La Terraza Azul (☎ 65-29-88; Aguilera No 615 btwn Barnada & General Serafin Sánchez; r CUC\$20; ☎) There are three different rooms on offer at this sprawling colonial pile just off the Plaza de Marte. The best of the lot are upstairs on the blue terrace for which the casa's named – both have basic kitchens and private bathrooms.

Ana Delia Villalón Pérez (☎ 65-11-91; Bartolomé Masó No 172 btwn Corona & Padre Pico; r CUC\$20, apt CUC\$25; ☎) There are sublime views from this old blue-painted house that faces the Balcon Velazquez. Both rooms have private facilities but the apartment has its own kitchen so is more expensive. The roof terrace is superb.

our pick El Mirador (☎ 65-21-95; mariangelcuba@hotmail.com; Pío Rosado No 412 btwn Sagarra & Hechavarría; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) This excellent casa has two rooms available, both with private bathrooms and a fully stocked fridge. If you can, book the upstairs room on the roof terrace in advance, as it's by far the best. The food here is excellent too, and the young host family is charming.

Casa Mundo (☎ 62-40-97; Heredia No 308 btwn Pío Rosado & Porfirio Vallente; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) An excellent location in an antique-stuffed colonial home with two fairly basic but spotless rooms, both with private facilities.

Casa Colonial (☎ 62-27-47; ali@ucilora.scu.sld.cu; José A Saco No 516 btwn Mayía Rodríguez & San Agustín; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) This busy family home offers two attractive rooms, both with fridge and private bathroom. The upstairs room comes complete with roof terrace and is the best.

Ylia Deas Díaz (☎ 65-41-38; Hartmann No 362 btwn General Portuondo & Máximo Gómez; r CUC\$20-30; ☎) This pretty casa has one room with a double and single in it as well as a fridge and a private bathroom. It's in a charming neighborhood a short walk from Parque Céspedes.

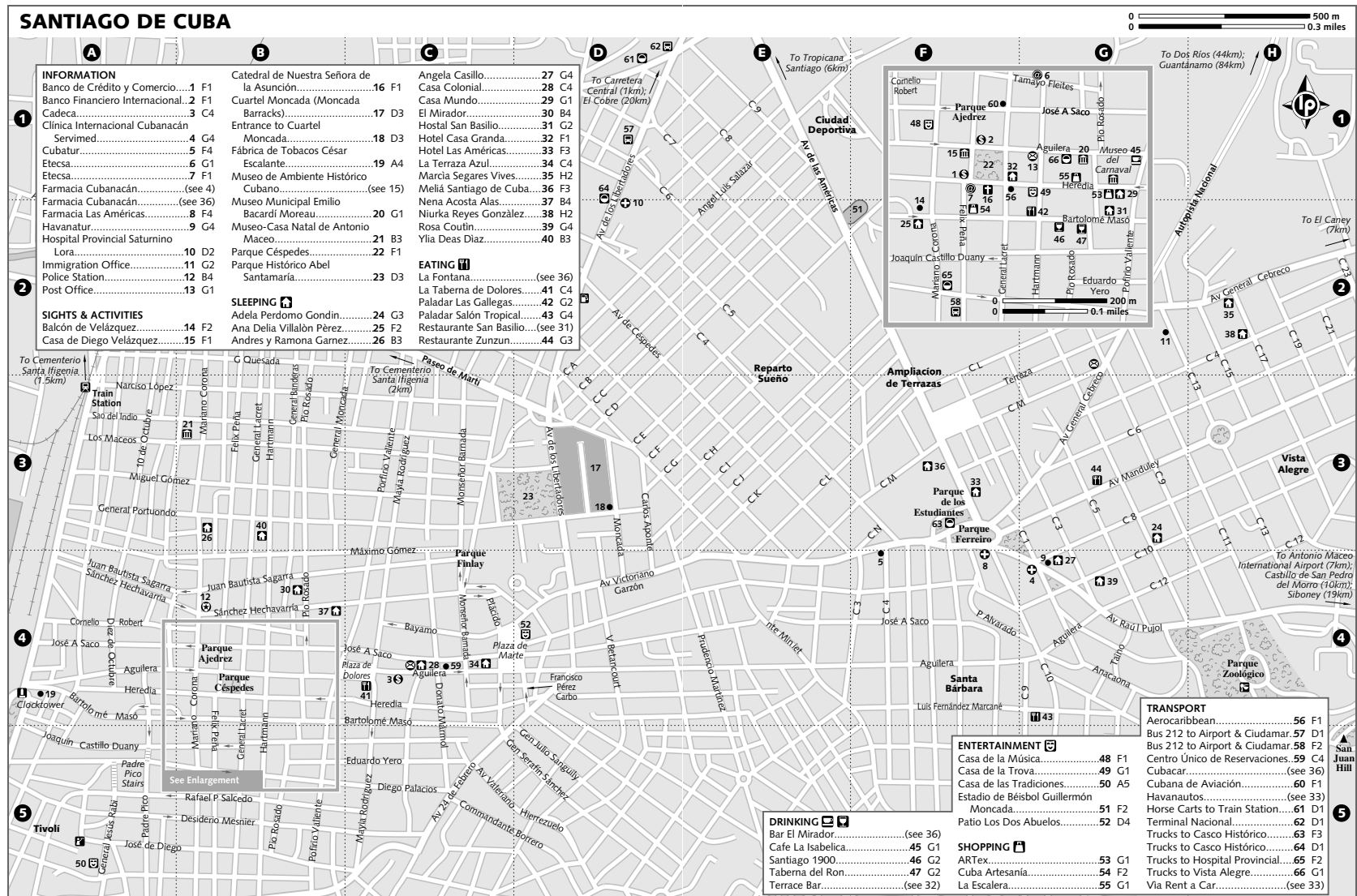
Nena Acosta Alas (☎ 65-41-10; botin@medired.scu.sld.cu; Hechavarría No 472 btwn Pío Rosado & Porfirio Vallente; r CUC\$25; ☎) This highly recommended atmospheric colonial home is decked out in antiques and boasts a lovely dog. There's currently only one room available, but another is planned. It has a private bathroom, a fridge and access to a beautiful garden.

Vista Alegre

Marcía Segares Vives (☎ 64-42-32; Calle 17 No 2; r CUC\$20; ☎) Two rooms, both with large private bathrooms, one of which has a tub and access to a small patio. Both have fridges. The house is old and atmospheric.

Angela Casillo (☎ 64-15-51; Calle 8 No 60 Altos btwn Calle 1 & 3; r CUC\$20; ☎) Two big rooms off a giant terrace in a modern house; there are also rooms available with the neighbor downstairs.

Rosa Coutín (☎ 64-12-42; Calle 10 No 54 btwn Calles 3 & 5; r/apt CUC\$20/25; ☎) Two rooms in a small modern house on a quiet side street. Both rooms have independent



entrances and are simple and airy; they also include a fridge and private bathroom.

Adela Perdomo Gondin (☎ 64-16-21; Calle 10 No 201; r CUC\$20-25; 🚽) This modern and breezy house has one large room on offer with a decent-sized private bathroom.

Niurka Reyes González (☎ 64-42-42; Calle 4 No 407 bajos; r CUC\$20-25; 🚽) This stunner of a 1940s

mansion has to be seen to be believed. With two gorgeous rooms with excellent private bathrooms, a shared back terrace and tons of style, this is a great suburban retreat.

HOTELS

Hostal San Basilio (☎ 65-17-02; Bartolomé Masó No 403; r CUC\$49; 🚽) This is the best all-round deal in

town – book ahead and stay in one of the eight comfortable rooms in this boutique-ish old mansion. Excellent location, a good restaurant and immunity from tour groups are other advantages.

Hotel Las Américas (☎ 64-20-11, 68-72-25; comerc@hamera.hor.tur.cu; Av de las Américas & Av General Cebreco; s/d incl breakfast CUC\$53/69; 🚽 📺 📶) This multi-style

place is a decent option between the city center and Vista Alegre. There are 70 decent rooms, a good pool and various eating and drinking options.

Hotel Casa Grande (☎ 65-30-21/22/23/24; www.grancaribe.cu; Heredia No 201; s/d incl breakfast CUC\$98/152; 🚽) This grand place on Parque Céspedes may have made it into Graham Greene’s *Our*

Man in Havana, but today it's a disappointing place to bed down. With dark and often dirty rooms, it's a deeply mediocre place trading on its past.

Meliá Santiago de Cuba (☎ 68-70-70; www.solmeliacuba.com; Av de las Américas & Calle M; r CUC\$115, ste CUC\$145-165; 🏠 📺 📺) Santiago's best hotel will never win any awards for unobtrusive architectural blending, but despite its unattractive exterior the rooms are of international business standard, and it has a good pool, restaurant and bar.

Eating

Santiago's main drawback is its food, which is probably the worst in Cuba – no meager achievement. Ask around for any new paladares, but in general eating in a casa particular is your best bet.

Paladar Salón Tropical (☎ 64-11-61; Fernández Marcané No 310, Reparto Santa Barbara; mains CUC\$3-8; 🍷 noon-midnight) This well-established paladar feels far more like a private venture than the other paladar in town, as it's located on the roof of a far-flung family home with great views across the city. Try the large selection of *brochetas extravagantes* (literally 'extravagant kebabs'; various meats on a skewer) or the many different types of fresh fish.

La Fontana (☎ 68-70-70; Méliá Santiago de Cuba, Calle M; mains CUC\$6-12; 🍷 noon-11pm) This breezy and surprisingly decent Italian restaurant is located within the unbecoming carapace of Santiago's poshest hotel, but its quality pizza, antipasti, pasta and fresh fish dishes don't disappoint.

Restaurante Zunzun (☎ 64-15-28; Av Manduley No 159; mains CUC\$6-21; 🍷 noon-10pm) This Vista Alegre mansion is about the most glamorous setting in town. The food is decent too – try the seafood enchilada or the crustacean medallion, and enjoy the translation of *ropa vieja* as 'old rope' (it's actually shredded beef). Ask for a table on the terrace or book a private room to escape the bus parties. Staff are friendly and there's a passable selection of wines available.

Restaurante San Basilio (☎ 65-17-02; Bartolomé Masó No 403; mains CUC\$7-9; 🍷 midday-2:30pm & 7-10:30pm) This charming Italian place oozes informal style, tucked away in one room of Santiago's most boutique hotel. The menu is a lot more inventive and interesting than most 'Italian' places in Cuba, and the fresh seafood is especially good.

La Taberna de Dolores (☎ 62-39-13; Plaza Dolores; mains CUC\$7-10; 🍷 noon-11:45pm) The best of a bad bunch on Plaza de Dolores, a square given over almost entirely to tourists, La Taberna is housed in a fantastic colonial house over two floors and has very friendly service. The menu will hold no surprises, but there are sometimes barbecues here too in addition to the standard Cuban mains on the menu.

Paladar Las Gallegas (Bartolomé Masó No 305; mains CUC\$8-10; 🍷 1-10:45pm) This is Santiago's best-established private restaurant, occupying a potentially attractive space upstairs in a colonial building in the Casco Histórico. The food is fine, but unexciting, while service can be sloppy and rude. Try to get a table on the balcony.

Drinking

Cafe La Isabelica (Aguilera & Porfirio Valiente; 🍷 7am-11pm) This little charmer is a great place to meet locals and share strong peso coffee in a smoky atmosphere.

Taberna del Ron (Pío Rosado btwn Bartolomé Masó & Duany; 🍷 10am-10pm) This small hideaway in one side of the Museo del Ron is a great place to sample numerous different styles and types of rum.

Terrace Bar (Heredia No 201; admission nonguests CUC\$2; 🍷 10am-1am) The rooftop of the Hotel Casa Granda has great views but a compulsory entry fee now means that the only Cubans here will be serving your drinks. Entry includes a mojito or soft drink.

Santiago 1900 (☎ 62-35-07; Bartolomé Masó No 354; 🍷 noon-midnight) We're only including this as it's so bad you should be warned. Potentially fabulous, this gorgeous old Bacardí palace sums up everything wrong with Cuban tourist venues: rude service, strip lighting, loud music and bad cocktails.

Bar El Mirador (Av de las Américas & Calle M; 🍷 9pm-2am) You get top-notch cocktails served up here in a refined and businesslike atmosphere. There are great views from up here – it's on the 15th floor of the Meliá Santiago de Cuba.

Entertainment

Casa de la Trova (☎ 65-26-89; Heredia No 208; admission CUC\$2; 🍷 11am-3pm & 8:30-11pm Tue-Sun) Santiago's hottest spot, the large Casa de la Trova is home to *nueva trova* and is still a big center of innovation. Sadly though, it's an unpredictable place – some nights it's excellent, while others you can be overwhelmed by tour groups.

Patio Los Dos Abuelos (☎ 62-33-02; Francisco Pérez Carbo No 5; admission CUC\$2; 🍷 10am-2am) You have to search this place out, but if you do so you won't be disappointed. Friendly staff serve drinks in the main bar, while there are live performances of everything from *son* to reggaeton in the breezy back garden. Tuesday is *trova* night, while Sunday is *oriental típico* (music typical of the Oriente region of Cuba).

Casa de las Tradiciones (Rabí No 154; admission CUC\$1; 🍷 from 8:30pm) This place is a good opportunity to escape the tourist crowds. Located in the edgy (and hilly!) Tivoli district, this intimate but great fun venue attracts some fantastic caliber musicians. Friday is traditional *trova* night.

Casa de la Música (☎ 65-22-27; Corona btwn José A Saco & Aguilera; admission CUC\$5; 🍷 10pm-2:30am) This semi-swanky place features live salsa, followed by taped disco. It gets rowdy after midnight.

Estadio de Béisbol Guillermeón Moncada (☎ 64-26-40; Av de las Américas; admission CUP1) The stadium's on the northeastern side of town about 1km north of Hotel Las Américas; catch a game with some of the country's most rambunctious baseball fans – they're even more so since Santiago won the national championship in 2007. Games start at 7:30pm Tuesday, Wednesday Thursday and Saturday, and at 1:30pm on Sunday.

Shopping

La Escalera (Heredia No 265 btwn Pío Rosado & Hartmann; 🍷 9am-9pm) Eddy Tamayo's wonderful antique bookshop shouldn't be missed. The fascinating collection includes some very rare gems and Eddy is a mine of information on what he sells.

ARTex (Heredia No 304 btwn Pío Rosado & Porfirio Valiente) The standard range of handicrafts, music, books, novelty gifts and a superior selection of postcards are available here. There's a small café out the back as well.

Cuba Artesanía (Felix Peña No 673; 🍷 9am-9pm) Souvenir hunter heaven: a huge range of

quality handicrafts and other knick-knacks are on offer here.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Antonio Maceo International Airport (SCU; ☎ 69-86-14) is 7km south of Santiago de Cuba, off the Carretera del Morro.

For flight information, see p188.

Some airline offices:

Aerocaribbean Airport (☎ 69-40-00); Town Center (☎ 68-72-55; www.aero-caribbean.com; General Lacret No 701; 🍷 9am-noon & 1-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat)
Cubana de Aviación Airport (☎ 69-12-14); Town Center (☎ 65-15-77/78/79; Saco & General Lacret; 🍷 8:15am-4pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 8:15am-6:30pm Tue & Thu, 8:15am-11pm Sat)

BUS

Terminal Nacional (National Bus Station; cnr Av de los Libertadores & Calle 9) is 3km northeast of Parque Céspedes. For **Viazul** (☎ 62-84-84) services see below.

TRAIN

Santiago's deeply ugly but relatively efficient new **train station** (☎ 62-28-36; Av Jesús Menéndez), northwest of the center, has daily trains to Havana. The '*regular*' service (CUC\$30, 17 hours, 861km, 9:50pm alternate days) is even longer than the still slow '*especial*' service (CUC\$72, 16 hours, 861km, 5:35pm alternate days). Both trains also stop in Santa Clara (regular/especial CUC\$20/42, 10 hours, 590km).

You can buy tickets more centrally at **Centro Único de Reservasiones** (☎ 65-21-43; Aguilera No 565 bajos; 🍷 7am-7pm Mon-Fri, 7-11am Sat & Sun). For day-of-departure tickets, you have to go to the '*última hora*' window outside the train station; arrive by 8am.

Getting Around TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

A taxi to the airport costs CUC\$5. Taxis congregate in front of the Meliá Santiago de Cuba

SERVICES FROM SANTIAGO DE CUBA'S NATIONAL BUS STATION

Destination	One-way fare (CUC\$)	Distance (km)	Duration (hr)	Schedule
Baracoa	15	234	5	7:45am
Havana	51	861	16	9am, 3:15pm, 6pm & 10pm
Santa Clara	33	590	11½	9am, 3:15pm, 6pm & 10pm
Trinidad	33	581	11½	7:30pm

and around Parque Céspedes. Elsewhere call **Cubataxi** (☎ 65-10-38/39).

Buses 212 and 213 (40 centavos) travel to the airport; 212 is faster for going to the airport, while 213 is faster coming from the airport.

CAR & SCOOTER

There are dire shortages of hire cars in Santiago – even worse than in the rest of the country. Even if you have a reservation it may just be down to luck if there's something available.

Cubacar Airport (☎ 69-41-95); Meliá Santiago de Cuba (☎ 68-71-77)

Havanaautos Airport (☎ 68-61-61); Hotel Las Américas (☎ 68-71-60; ☎ 8am-10pm) Hotel Las Américas has scooters (rent for CUC\$27 per day).

Rex Airport (☎ 68-64-44)

Via Rent a Car Airport (☎ 68-70-18); Hotel Las Américas (☎ 22-68-72-90)

HORSE CART

To get into town from the train station, catch a southbound horse cart (CUP1) to the clock tower at the north end of Alameda Park, from which Aguilera (to the left) climbs steeply up to Parque Céspedes. Horse carts between the Terminal Nacional bus station (they'll shout *'Alameda'*) and the train station (CUP1) run along Av Juan Gualberto Gómez and Av Jesús Menéndez, respectively.

TRUCK

Camiones (trucks) run from the city center to the Moncada Barracks and the Hospital Provincial (near the Terminal Nacional); hop on along Corona one block west of Parque Céspedes or on Aguilera. Trucks for Vista Alegre also travel along Aguilera; there's a stop facing the Etecsa building. From the Hotel Las Américas to the Casco Histórico (the city's historic center), trucks stop at the Parque de los Estudiantes rotary.

BARACOA

pop 82,000 / ☎ 121

Baracoa is a delightful backwater fast attracting the attention of travelers who, hearing rumors of a new Trinidad as yet untouched and unspoiled, are heading out this way. Sadly the rumors aren't strictly true – and while there's lots to recommend Baracoa, including plenty of pretty colonial buildings, Trinidad this isn't. Yet the traveler presence is minimal

compared to Cuba's other big draws, and with a charming setting, a laid-back vibe and some fantastic beaches and hiking in the vicinity, Baracoa is definitely somewhere to head for if you'd like to spend some time buried deep in El Oriente.

Information

Banco de Crédito y Comercio (☎ 64-27-71; Antonio Maceo No 99; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat)

Cadeca (☎ 64-53-46; José Martí No 241) Gives cash advances and changes traveler's checks.

Clínica Internacional Baracoa (☎ 64-10-38; Calle Martí 237 btwn Reyes & Sánchez; ☎ 24hr) This excellent new clinic has English-speaking doctors on call and the best pharmacy in town.

Cubatur (☎ 64-53-06; cubaturbaracoa@enet.cu; Calle Martí No 181) Tours in English, Italian and German.

Etecsa (cnr Antonio Maceo & Rafael Trejo, Parque Central; Internet access per hr CUC\$6; ☎ 8:30am-7:30pm)

Farmacia Principal Municipal (Antonio Maceo No 132; ☎ 24hr)

Sights & Activities

Founded in December 1511 by Diego Velázquez, Baracoa was the first Spanish settlement in Cuba. It served as the capital until 1515, when Velázquez moved the seat of government to Santiago de Cuba.

Two fortresses, one at either end of town, are reminders of Baracoa's strategic significance – Fuerte de la Punta is at the end of the peninsula and now houses a decent restaurant, while the Fuerte Matachín at the far end of José Martí houses a mildly diverting **Museo Municipal** (☎ 64-21-22; cnr Martí & Malecón; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-6pm) containing pre-Hispanic pottery, copies of Columbus' diary and some impressive colonial weapons. Check out the huge cannons out back.

A more engaging museum is the **Museo Arqueológico Cueva del Paraíso** (admission CUC\$2; ☎ 8am-5pm). It's a steep walk from town; head up the steps from Coroneles Galano and turn left on the dirt track at the top. Among the stalactites are spatulas for vomiting, pipes for smoking hallucinogens, and the remains of what may prove to be indigenous rebel Guamá. The expert docents here also lead **cave tours**.

The charming triangular town square, Parque Central, is dominated by the collapsing squat pile of the restoration-due **Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción** (Antonio Maceo No 152; admission by donation; ☎ Mass 6pm daily plus 9am Sun),

which dates from 1883 and houses the Cruz de La Parra; experts agree that this is the last remaining cross out of some two dozen that the original Spaniards settlers erected throughout Latin America (the one in Santo Domingo is a copy). If the church is closed, knock on the last door on Calle Maceo to gain access.

Facing the cathedral is a bust of Taíno chief **Hatuey**, who was burned at the stake by the Spanish in 1512 for leading anti-Spanish guerillas. Famously, before his death at the stake, a priest asked him if he'd like to go to heaven. 'Are there people like you there?' he asked. 'Yes' came the reply, to which Hatuey answered that he wanted nothing to do with a god that allowed such evil deeds to be carried out in his name.

For a pleasing day trip, hike southeast of town, past the stadium and along the beach for about 20 minutes to a bridge crossing the Río Miel. After the bridge, turn left at the fork; after 15 minutes you reach **Playa Blanca** (admission CUC\$2), an idyllic picnic spot. Head right at the fork and after about 45 minutes you will come to the blue and yellow **homestead of Raudeli Delgado**. For a donation (per person CUC\$3 to CUC\$5), Raudeli will lead you on a 30-minute hike into a lush canyon and to the **Cueva del Aguas**, a cave with a freshwater swimming hole.

Stunning 569m **El Yunque** dominates the landscape around town and can be climbed on an enjoyable and exciting half-day hike with a guide. To climb the mountain take the road towards Moa for 6km and then turn left at the signposted spur. The trailhead is 4km further on. The 10km, four- to five-hour **hike** (☎ 64-27-18; per person CUC\$13) is hot; bring plenty of water and good shoes, but the crystal currents of the Río Duaba and a 7m waterfall provide relief. It costs CUC\$8 per person for the 2.5km, one-hour walk just to the waterfall. On the way you should see rare frogs, butterflies, endangered giant snails and tree lizards.

For a taste of hidden Cuba, where early morning rainbows arch over the sea and women carry burdens on their heads, take a road trip through the palm-studded valley to **Playa Bariguá**, 17km from Baracoa. A further 4km along, you come to Boca de Yumurí, where there's a **black sand beach** and **boat trips** (CUC\$2) up the jungle-fringed river.

You won't find a prettier beach up here than **Playa Maguana**, an idyllic, white-sand beauty 22km northwest of Baracoa. Grab

yourself some shade under a palm and a cold beer from the snack bar and try to figure out how to tweak your itinerary to stay here for a while. Check if one of the four rooms at Villa Maguana is available.

Sleeping

CASAS PARTICULARES

Ourpick El Mirador (☎ 64-36-71; Maceo No 86 btwn 24 de Febrero & 10 de Octubre; r CUC\$15-20; ☎) This excellent casa, housed in a wonderful colonial house, offers two good rooms for rent, with access to a fantastic balcony over one of Baracoa's main streets. Both rooms have private bathrooms and share access to a kitchen.

Casa de Huesped Colonial (☎ 64-25-94; Maceo No 80 btwn 24 de Febrero & Coliseo; r CUC\$15-20; ☎) Two rooms in an atmospheric and welcoming colonial home, with one further room in the flat above, looked after by the hostess' daughter. All rooms have private facilities and share a roof terrace with fantastic bay views.

Casa Tropical (☎ 64-34-37, 64-37-30; Martí No 175 btwn Giro Frias & Céspedes; r CUC\$15-20; ☎) This charming paladar also has two good rooms with private bathrooms out the back overlooking the small garden courtyard. Rooms are simple but cool and airy.

Casa Bella Vista (☎ 64-38-83; c.bellavista@yahoo.com; Calixto García No 55; r CUC\$15-20; ☎) A two-room house with good views over the bay from the front balcony. Both rooms have bathrooms and fridges and are presided over by friendly hosts.

Casa Sofi (☎ 64-21-84; sofi@toa.gtm.sld.cu; Maceo No 27 btwn Castillo Duany & Peraljo; r CUC\$15-20; ☎) Pretty blue and white wooden house with a grand front porch for people-watching. One comfortable room with private bathroom. Excellent food served. The owners' son also rents at Casa La Marina on Calixto García.

La Terraza (☎ 64-25-29; Giro Frias No 40 btwn Calixto García & Rubert López; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) A friendly and well-run place, La Terraza affords some privacy and is ideal for a group of friends. The two rooms both have private bathrooms and share access to a kitchen, dining room and the eponymous terrace.

HOTELS

Hotel El Castillo (☎ 64-51-06; www.hotelescastillocuba.com; Loma del Paraíso; s/d CUC\$42/58; ☎) The view alone from this former Spanish fort is worth the trip up the steep hillside. The best of the three properties around Baracoa owned

by state-run tourism company Gaviota, El Castillo has 34 rooms full of character and complete with fridge, TV, phone, safe and bathroom. Sadly not much is made of the views from the rooms themselves, but these are best enjoyed from the large pool area anyway. It's a 10-minute walk from town up the steps on Frank País or Calixto García.

Hostal La Habanera (☎ 64-52-73/4; www.hostalla.habanera.com; Maceo No 68; r incl breakfast CUC\$49; ♿ ♻️) There's lots to recommend Baracoa's surprisingly good main hotel, housed in a wonderful colonial building that was refitted in 2003. The combination of old and modern works here and you can't beat rooms 1, 8, 9 and 10 for their direct access to a huge, shared walk-out balcony overlooking the town's main square.

Eating & Drinking

Baracoa has two local specialties worth a try – the street snack *cucurucho* (grated coconut mixed with sugar served in cones) and hot chocolate, made with chocolate from Baracoa's famous factory.

Casa del Chocolate (Antonio Maceo No 123; snacks CUC\$1; ☎ 7am-11pm) An astonishing number of flies and grumpy service don't seem to deter locals from this place, where hot chocolate and chocolate ice cream (from the local chocolate factory) are the seriously delicious treats of choice. Don't miss it.

1511 (☎ 64-15-11; Martí No 167; mains CUC\$1-3; ☎ 7:30-9:30am, noon-2pm & 6-9:40pm) Look no further for the local scene. You may feel conspicuous as a tourist coming in here but, if you have a smattering of Spanish, you may well make friends quickly with gregarious locals who use this place as a canteen. Food is not Michelin-starred, but it's fine.

Cafetería Piropo (Antonio Maceo No 142; light meals CUC\$1-3; ☎ 24hr) This Palmares venture on Parque Central is unmissable (in fact you can hear it from several blocks away most of the time). Come here to catch up with the local teen and 20s crowd who pack it out for live music, flowing drinks and fast food. The poorer kids hang out on the square in front.

Casa Tropical (☎ 64-34-37; Martí No 175; mains CUC\$5-7; ☎ 11am-11pm) This friendly paladar and casa particular is a great place for a meal, with seating inside and out. The menu is heavy in grilled fish and shrimp, but also does a mean line in soups and chicken dishes.

Restaurante La Punta (☎ 64-14-80; Fuerte de la Punta; mains CUC\$6-9; ☎ 9am-11pm) Atmospherically set within the walls of one of the town fortresses (what a pity the outside tables are cheap and plastic! – the setting could so easily be stunning), this is a formal state-run concern with fancy tablecloths and a menu of unexciting but decent Cuban cooking. Book a table on the outside terrace.

Bar Restaurante La Colonial (☎ 64-53-91; Martí No 123; mains CUC\$9-12; ☎ 10am-11pm) With its charming colonial setting and good food, this paladar is a winner, even if it did rather seem to be resting on its laurels on our last visit. The English-speaking staff are friendly and the food is generally very good for rural Cuba. Try the fresh coconut shrimp.

Entertainment

Casa de la Trova Victorino Rodríguez (Antonio Maceo No 149A; admission in evenings CUC\$1; ☎ 7am-midnight, shows 9pm-midnight) Lively live *trova* and *son* are played every night at this old favorite on Parque Central. It's also open for coffee and drinks all day and is a popular meeting place.

El Ranchón (admission CUC\$1; ☎ 10pm) Up 146 steep stairs at the western end of Coroneles Galano, El Ranchón has a great hilltop setting with superb views over the town and sea. However, this is a pretty rough bar favored by locals. It's rowdy and can be fun, but proceed with caution.

Baseball games are held at Estadio Manuel Fuentes Borges from October to April. It's southeast from Fuerte Matachín.

Getting There & Away

Planes and buses out of Baracoa are sometimes fully booked, so avoid coming here on a tight schedule without an outbound reservation.

Cubana de Aviación Airport (☎ 64-25-80; Calle Martí No 181 ☎ 64-21-71; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-3pm Mon-Sat) flies in both directions between Havana and Baracoa (CUC\$130, 2½ hours one way) every Thursday and Sunday.

The **National Bus Station** (☎ 64-38-80; Av Los Mártires & José Martí) has daily Viázul departures to Santiago de Cuba (CUC\$15, five hours, 234km), leaving at 2:15pm. This is the only bus in and out available to foreigners at the time of writing – so reserve your return ticket ahead of time.

The **Intermunicipal Bus Station** (Galano & Calixto García) has daily trucks to Moa, passing Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt

(CUP5, 1½ hours, 78km), with departures from 5am, and Yumurí (CUP1, one hour, 28km), with departures at 8am and 3pm.

Getting Around

There is a **Cubacar** (☎ 64-53-43/4) office at the airport and a **Vía Rent a Car** (☎ 64-51-55) inside the adjacent Hotel Porto Santo. Scooters can be rented from Vía Rent a Car for CUC\$14/18/24 per four/eight/24 hours, though they must be picked up from the Hotel El Castillo where they are stored. A taxi to Boca de Yumurí is CUC\$5.

PARQUE NACIONAL ALEJANDRO DE HUMBOLDT

A Unesco World Heritage site 40km northwest of Baracoa, this beautiful **national park** perched above the Bahía de Taco should serve as a paradigm for Cuba's protection efforts. The 60,000 hectares of preserved land includes pristine forest, 1000 flowering plant species and 145 ferns, making it the Caribbean's most diverse plant habitat. As for fauna, it's the home to the world's smallest frog and the endangered manatee, both of which you can see while hiking here.

Hikes are arranged at the **visitors center** (hikes per person CUC\$5-10; ☎ 9am-6pm). The three hikes currently offered are the challenging 7km Balcón de Iberia loop, with a 7m waterfall, El Recrea, a 3km bayside stroll and the Bahía de Taco boat tour (with a manatee-friendly motor developed here); December to February is the best time to see these elusive beasts.

You can arrange a tour through Cubatur in Baracoa or get here independently on the Moa-bound truck.

DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

Cuba has a huge range of accommodations, mostly substandard due to being state-run. By far the best accommodations in the country are in casas particulares, or private homes, a '90s innovation that allowed Cubans to rent out one or two rooms in their house to independent travelers. Casas particulares are cheaper, cleaner and friendlier than hotels, and in general they offer a better standard of accommodations, although this of course varies tremendously.

All those listed in this guide are recommended. Accommodations are rented by the room (CUC\$15 to CUC\$30; bargaining possible); by law, casas can only rent out two rooms, with a maximum of two people per room (parents with children excepted). Some casas break this rule, but it's rare.

Hotels, with the exception of some four- and five-star foreign-managed joint ventures, are generally disappointing by comparison. In Havana and big beach resorts there are some excellent options, though. Prices quoted here are for the high season; low-season prices are 10% to 25% cheaper. Prearranging accommodations here is difficult; never pay for anything up front. Cubans are not allowed in hotel rooms.

ACTIVITIES

Diving & Snorkeling

With its huge coastline Cuba is known for all things aquatic, including diving and snorkeling. There are over 30 dive centers throughout Cuba. Most equipment is older than that you'll be used to diving with and safety standards (Briefing? What briefing?) are much lower than elsewhere in the Caribbean. Dives cost around CUC\$35, while certification courses are CUC\$300 to CUC\$350, and introductory courses cost CUC\$35 to CUC\$50.

The most popular diving area covered in this book is María la Gorda (p164). The best diving in the country is at Punta Frances on the Isla de la Juventud (see p160), while a brand new area has recently been opened up with some 30 pristine sites off the Península de Guanahacabibes at Cabo de San Antonio.

Hiking

Top hikes include the Cuevas las Perlas stroll (p163) on the Península de Guanahacabibes, summiting flat-topped El Yunque (p181) and exploring Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt (left), the latter two both a short distance from Baracoa.

There are lamentably few independent hikes. Try the Salto del Caburní trail (Topes de Collantes, p170), or the various hikes around Viñales (p161).

Rock Climbing

The Viñales valley (p161) has over 300 routes (at all levels of difficulty, with several 5.14s) in one of Cuba's prettiest settings. Word is well and truly out among the international

climbing crowd, so much so that it's now recognized as a sport and regulated by the government who started issuing climbing permits in 2008.

Due to the heat, the climbing season is from October to April. For more information, visit the website of **Cuba Climbing** (www.cubaclimbing.com).

BOOKS

Required reading for any trip are Graham Greene's silly classic thriller *Our Man in Havana*, an amusing story of a vacuum salesman falling into spying circles during the last days of the Batista regime; Reinaldo Arenas' *Before Night Falls*, a heartbreaking tale of a gay writer's struggle to fit into Castro's brave new world in 1960s and '70s Cuba; and *The Dirty Havana Trilogy* by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, a more contemporary account of life in the troubled Cuban capital.

Covering the First War of Independence to the present, *Cuba: A New History*, by Richard Gott, is the latest, broadest history of the island. A slew of Castro biographies has graced the shelves in recent years, although arguably the true story will only be told some time from now.

Taking a frank but reverent look at the revolution is *Cuba: Neither Heaven Nor Hell*, by María López Vigil. For a traveler's point of view on this confounding island, *Enduring Cuba*, by Zoë Bran is highly recommended.

BUSINESS HOURS

The following are the standard business hours used in this chapter; exceptions are noted in individual reviews. All businesses shut at noon on the last working day of each month.

Banks ☎ 9am to 3pm Monday to Friday

Restaurants ☎ 10:30am to 11pm Monday to Sunday

Shops ☎ 9am to 5pm Monday to Saturday, 9am to noon Sunday

CHILDREN

Children are integrated into all parts of Cuban society: at concerts, restaurants, church, political rallies and parties. Travelers with children will find this embracing attitude heaped upon them, too.

One aspect of local culture parents (and children) may find unusual is the physical contact that is so typically Cuban: strangers ruffle kids' hair, give them kisses or take their hands with regularity.

PRACTICALITIES

- **Newspapers** *Granma*, *Juventud Rebelde* and *Trabajadores* are the three national papers.
- **Radio & TV** There are over 60 local radio stations and five TV channels; most midrange and top-end hotels have some cable.
- **Electricity** The most common voltage is 110 volts, 60 cycles, but you'll also find 220 volts; sockets are suited to North American-style plugs with two flat prongs.
- **Weights & Measures** The metric system is used, except in some fruit and vegetable markets.

Shortages of diaper wipes, children's medicine, formula etc, can be a challenge, but Cubans are very resourceful: ask for what you need and someone will help you out.

Children travel for half price on trains, buses and flights. Most hotels offer room discounts. For ideas on fun kids' stuff in Havana, see p149.

CUSTOMS

Travelers can bring in personal belongings (including cell phones, cameras, binoculars, recording devices, radios, computers, tents and bicycles), but no GPS equipment or satellite phones. Canned, processed and dried foods are no problem. You can export 50 cigars without a receipt. Cash up to US\$5000 or its equivalent need not be declared. A helpful leaflet in English is available on arrival at José Martí International Airport documenting all the dos and don'ts.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

'You wanna buy cigar, my fren?' – this refrain will follow you throughout the country. Welcome to the land of the *jintero* or tout, a profession raised to an art form by the Cubans, who, in their defense, have very few other ways to make money. Learn quickly to ignore them, don't make eye-contact, say 'no thank you' clearly but firmly, never stop walking, and when you're asked where you're from, choose somewhere obscure (this avoids a rehearsed and interminably cutesy patter about your *jintero*'s sister working as a nurse

in Liverpool or studying in Toronto). Harsh? Yes, but *jinteroism* is any traveler in Cuba's single biggest annoyance so getting to grips with it will improve your holiday vastly.

Cigar selling is not the only racket the *jinteros* work. They will also offer to take you to a casa or paladar (they'll get CUC\$5 from the owners usually – which comes from hiked prices for your accommodation or meal), find you a 'beautiful woman,' get you a taxi or take you out dancing. Unless you're at your wits' end, never go with them.

Cuba is not a dangerous destination, although Centro Habana is the most likely spot in the country that you'll get mugged (a rarity, but just be aware at night). Apart from this and other small opportunistic crimes such as pickpocketing, you have almost nothing to be afraid of. Never leave valuables in any room, and use the safe if there's one provided.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Canada Embassy (☎ 204-2516; www.havana.gc.ca; Calle 30 No 518, Miramar); Consulate (☎ 45-61-20-78; fax 45-66-73-95; Calle 13 No 422, Varadero) Also represents Austria.

France Embassy (Map pp146-7; ☎ 201-3131; www.amba-france-cu.com; Calle 14 No 312 btwn Avs 3 & 5, Miramar)

Germany Embassy (Map pp146-7; ☎ 833-2460; alemania@enet.cu; Calle 13 No 652, Vedado)

Italy Embassy (☎ 204-5615; ambitcub@cubacel.net; Av 5 No 402, Miramar)

Netherlands Embassy (Map pp146-7; ☎ 204-2511; <http://cuba.nlambassade.org>; Calle 8 No 307 btwn Avs 3 & 5, Miramar)

Spain Embassy (Map pp142-3; ☎ 866-8025; emb.lahabana@mae.es; Cárcel No 51, Centro Habana)

UK Embassy (☎ 204-1771; www.britishebassy.gov.uk/cuba; Calle 34 No 702, Miramar) Also represents New Zealand.

US Interests Section (Map pp146-7; ☎ 833-3551/52/53, out of hr 834-4400; <http://havana.usinterestsection.gov>; Calzada btwn Calles L & M, Vedado)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Liberation & New Year's Day Big street parties countrywide on January 1; outdoor concerts in Havana.

Baseball playoffs Two weeks of top ball in late April; location varies.

Día de los Trabajadores Massive rallies on May day, May 1, in Plazas de la Revolución countrywide.

Festival del Caribe, Fiesta del Fuego In the first week of July, Santiago de Cuba holds a raucous week-long festival celebrating Caribbean dance, music and religion.

Day of the National Rebellion In a different province each year, July 26 is the celebration of the 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks.

Carnaval, Santiago de Cuba Held in the last week of July, this is the country's oldest and biggest.

Festival de Rap Cubano Habana Hip Hop Everyone's bustin' rhymes in this wildly successful international event in mid-August.

Festival Internacional de Ballet Tremendous biennial event packed with performances; held in mid-October in even-numbered years.

Festival Internacional de Jazz Straight ahead, be-bop, Latin, far out or funkified jazz happens in the first week of December.

Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latino-Americano This prestigious film festival features hundreds of screenings in the first week of December.

Las Parrandas Extravagant fireworks and floats in one of Cuba's most outrageous festivals, on December 24 (Remedios).

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Despite the bad old days of communist persecution, things have changed massively in the past two decades and Cuba is now a surprisingly gay-friendly place (by pitiful Caribbean standards at least). The two main factors for this are the hit 1994 movie *Fresa y Chocolate*, which sparked a national dialogue about homosexuality, something that had previously been taboo, and, in more recent times, the campaigning efforts of Mariela Castro, daughter of President Raúl Castro and director of the National Center for Sex Education. Castro has campaigned for tolerance towards all sexualities, she has advocated AIDS education and even speaks out for gender reassignment rights – something utterly unheard of in the Caribbean before.

Despite this, gay life remains hidden from public view. With the exception of one progressive club in Santa Clara (Club Mejunje, p167) there are no openly gay clubs and gay life revolves heavily around internet contacts, cruising and private *fiestas de diez pesos* (private parties charging CUC\$2 cover). These mostly gay parties are moving shindigs held on Friday and Saturday nights in Havana from around midnight; head to gay meeting spot Cine Yara (p157) and chat up the crowds of partygoers to find out where that night's party is happening.

In general, foreigners are treated as a breed apart by Cubans, so gay travelers requesting a double bed won't shock most people. Still,

for your own safety it's good to remain discreet at street level by avoiding public displays of affection.

HOLIDAYS

There are only a few holidays that might affect your travel plans, when shops close and local transportation is erratic.

January 1 Triumph of the Revolution; New Year's Day.

May 1 International Worker's Day; no inner-city transportation.

July 26 Celebrates start of the revolution on July 26, 1953.

October 10 Start of the First War of Independence.

December 25 Declared an official holiday after the Pope's 1998 visit.

INTERNET ACCESS

Access to the internet is provided in all sizeable towns by Etecsa (per hour CUC\$6) from small and often slow internet cafés. You may be asked to show your passport or give your passport number when purchasing access cards. Laptop connections in hotels are getting better – there's a smattering of wi-fi places in Havana, although none are free even for guests, with the exception of the Saratoga (p152), which has free connections in each room. Despite not officially being allowed, some *casas particulares* have internet access, which you will usually be charged to use by your host family.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Cubans famously enjoy far better free health care than their far-wealthier US neighbors, and continue to set high standards for developing nations with excellent hospitals and doctors throughout the country. Most medication is available in Cuba, although you should bring anything you know you'll need. You should also have insurance covering you during your stay. In large cities and places where many tourists visit there are usually clinics designed for foreigners, with English-speaking doctors and better supplies than elsewhere. Charges are made for treatment, but are tiny compared to treatment in Western private hospitals. The free health care in normal Cuban hospitals should only be used when there are no private clinics available.

MONEY

Two currencies circulate throughout Cuba – Cuban convertible pesos (CUC) and Cuban pesos (CUP), also called *moneda nacional*

(MN). Most prices in this chapter are quoted in convertible pesos (CUC\$) and nearly everything tourists buy is in this currency, although you can often buy street food and drinks in CUP, making it a good idea to change CUC\$10 to CUC\$20 for such sundries at a *Cadeca*.

Convertible pesos can only be bought and sold in Cuba with euros, British pounds, Canadian dollars and Swiss francs; these currencies are exchanged at the global exchange rate for the dollar, plus an 8% tax tacked on by the Cuban government. US dollars are also convertible, but with a huge 18% tax. Therefore bring one of the four accepted currencies to avoid giving more than is inevitable of your holiday funds to the Cuban government.

Convertible pesos are useless outside Cuba; you can reverse-exchange currency at the airport before you pass through immigration. Do not change money on the street as scams are rampant and there's no benefit to you.

ATMs have become much more reliable in recent years, but should only ever be taken for granted in Havana and Santiago. Elsewhere imagine their working as a useful bonus, but never count on it. Credit cards are also charged at an 8% commission, so their use will not save you any money, sadly. Generally, using them in better hotels and resorts is trouble-free, but again, never rely on them. Visa is the most widely accepted credit card. Due to embargo laws, no credit card issued by a US bank or subsidiary is accepted in Cuba.

While they add security, traveler's checks are a hassle in Cuba. In addition to commissions, cashing them takes time, and smaller hotels don't accept them. They're virtually useless in the provinces. If you insist on carrying them, get Thomas Cook checks.

TELEPHONE

Cuba's country code is ☎ 53. To call Cuba from North America, dial ☎ 1-53 + the local number. From elsewhere, dial your country's international access code, then Cuba's country code ☎ 53 + city or area code + local number. In this chapter, the city or area code is given in the statistics at the start of each section and only the local number is given in the listings.

To call internationally from a Cuban payphone, dial ☎ 119 + country code + area code and the number. To the US, just dial ☎ 119-1 + area code and the number.

To place a collect call (reverse charges, *cobro revertido*) through an international op-

erator, dial ☎ 012. This service is not available to all countries. You cannot call collect from public phones.

To call between provinces, dial ☎ 0 + area code + number. To call Havana from any other province, you just dial ☎ 7 + number.

Cell Phones

Cuba's cell phone monopoly is **Cubacel** (www.cubacel.com), which has good coverage throughout the country. Most cell phones (with the obvious exception of US ones!) will roam quite happily onto the local Cubacel network, although this is an expensive way to communicate.

Anyone using their phone regularly can buy a SIM card from any Etecsa office and put it in their cell phone providing it has been unlocked. You have to buy prepaid cards, plus pay CUC\$3 line rental per day. You are charged for both incoming *and* outgoing local calls (from CUC\$0.52 to CUC\$0.70 per minute). International rates are CUC\$2.70 per minute to the US and CUC\$5.85 per minute to Europe. Only 900 MHz, unlocked phones work here; you can rent one for CUC\$7 per day.

Phone Cards

Etecsa is where you buy phone cards, use the internet and make international calls. Blue public Etecsa phones (most broken) are everywhere. Phone cards (magnetic or chip) are sold in convertible-peso denominations of CUC\$5, CUC\$10 and CUC\$20, and *moneda nacional* denominations of CUP3, CUP5 and CUP7. You can call nationally with either, but you can only call internationally with convertible-peso cards.

Phone Rates

Local calls are CUP0.05 per minute, while interprovincial calls cost from 35 centavos to CUP1 per minute.

International calls made with a card cost CUC\$2.45 per minute to North America and CUC\$5.85 to Europe/Oceania. Operator-assisted calls cost CUC\$3.71 and CUC\$8.78, respectively.

TOILETS

Toilets are plentiful – if rather smelly – throughout the country. It's customary to tip 5 to 10 centavos per visit to the bathroom

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- Fire ☎ 105
- Police ☎ 106

when there's an attendant. Cuban sewer systems are not designed to take toilet paper and every bathroom has a small wastebasket beside the toilet for this purpose. Except in top-end hotels and resorts, you should discard your paper in this basket or risk an embarrassing backup.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Despite tourism being all-pervasive, the tourist infrastructure in Cuba is nowhere near as good as in neighboring Caribbean nations. The national tourism portal is www.cuba.travel.cu, although it carries little information you can't find in a guidebook or elsewhere online. Tourist offices in Cuban towns usually serve the dual functions of providing promotional materials for local restaurants and hotels, and selling tours and excursions. While English is usually spoken, the practical use of tourist information offices is extremely limited.

VISAS

Visitors initially get four weeks in Cuba with a *tarjeta de turista* (tourist card) issued by their airline or travel agency. Unlicensed US visitors buy their tourist card at the airline desk in the country through which they're traveling to Cuba (US\$25); they are welcomed in the country like any other tourist. You cannot leave Cuba without presenting your tourist card (replacements cost CUC\$25).

The 'address in Cuba' line should be filled in with a hotel or legal *casa particular*, if only to avoid unnecessary questioning.

Business travelers and journalists need visas. Applications should be made through a consulate at least three weeks in advance, preferably longer.

Obtaining an extension is easy: go to an immigration office and present your documents and CUC\$25 in stamps (obtainable at local banks). You'll receive an additional four weeks, after which you'll need to leave Cuba and re-enter anew if you need to stay longer. Attend to extensions at least a few business days before your visa is due to

expire. The following cities covered in this book all have immigration offices:

Baracoa (Antonio Maceo No 48; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri)

Havana (Map pp 146-7; ☎ 206-0307; cnr Calle Factor al final & Santa Ana, Nuevo Vedado)

Santa Clara (cnr Av Sandino & Sexta; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-3pm Mon-Thu)

Santiago de Cuba (Map pp 176-7; Calle 13 near Av General Cebreco, Vista Alegre; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri)

Trinidad (Julio Cueva Díaz off Paseo Agramonte; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Thu)

Viñales (cnr Salvador Cisneros & Ceferino Fernández; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri)

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Entering Cuba

For a country with such a fearsome reputation as a communist prison, Cuba's a very straightforward place to enter. The key thing is to have your passport, onward ticket and tourist card (see p187), and know where you're staying (at least for your first night). Ensure you've filled out your tourist card before you arrive at the immigration counter, and if you don't know where you'll be staying make something up.

Air

Despite the best efforts of the US to isolate Cuba, the island remains well connected throughout the Caribbean and beyond.

Cuba's national airline is **Cubana de Aviación** (www.cubana.cu). Its modern fleet flies major routes and its fares are usually the cheapest. Still, overbooking and delays are nagging problems and it charges stiffly for every kilo above the 20kg luggage allowance.

José Martí International Airport (☎ 649-5666, 649-0410; Av de la Independencia) is 25km southwest of Havana. Terminal 1, southeast of the runway, handles domestic Cubana flights. A few kilometers away on Av de la Independencia is Terminal 2, which receives direct charter flights from the US. Most international flights use the excellent Terminal 3, a modern facility 2.5km west of Terminal 2. Aerocaribbean and Aerogaviota use Terminal 5 (aka the Caribbean Terminal).

Jamaica is a major transportation hub to Cuba. Cubana flies from Kingston and

Montego Bay to Havana daily, as does Air Jamaica.

Cubana also flies twice a week to Havana from Guadeloupe, Martinique, Santo Domingo and Puerto Príncipe. The latter two flights stop in Santiago de Cuba first. From the Bahamas, Cubana flies daily between Nassau and Havana; Bahamasair flies three times a week. US citizens cannot purchase Nassau-Havana tickets online or anywhere in the US.

The following airlines fly to/from Cuba:

Aerocaribbean (☎ 833-3621; www.aero-caribbean.com)

Aeroflot (☎ 204-3200; www.aeroflot.com) Moscow

Air Canada (☎ 836-3226/27; www.aircanada.com) Toronto

Air France (☎ 833-2642; www.airfrance.com) Paris

Air Jamaica (☎ 833-3636; www.airjamaica.com) Montego Bay

Air Transat (☎ 204-3802/04; www.airtransat.com) Toronto

Bahamasair (☎ 833-3114; www.bahamasair.com) Nassau

Cayman Airways (www.caymanairways.com) Grand Cayman

Copa Airlines (☎ 204-1111; www.copa.air.com) Panama City

Cubana de Aviación (☎ 834-4949; www.cubana.cu) London, Mexico City, Montego Bay, Montreal, Paris, Santo Domingo, Toronto, plus other destinations

Iberia Mexicana de Aviación (☎ 204-3454; www.iberia.com) Cancún, Mexico City

TACA (☎ 833-3114; www.taca.com) San Salvador

Virgin Atlantic (☎ 7-207-0747; www.virginatlantic.com) London

Sea

Marinas around Cuba accepting foreign vessels include María la Gorda, Cabo de San Antonio, Marina Hemingway (Havana), Cienfuegos, Varadero, Trinidad and Santiago de Cuba. Harbor anchorage fees are CUC\$10 per day or 45 centavos per foot for a pier slip with water and electric hookups. There are no scheduled ferry services to Cuba.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Internal flights are well provided for by national carrier **Cubana de Aviación** (☎ 834-4949; www.cubana.cu) and **Aerocaribbean** (☎ 833-3621; www.aero-caribbean.com). Both connect Havana to Santiago de Cuba (CUC\$219 return),

TRAVEL BAN PENALTIES

Together with the embargo against Cuba, the US government enforces what is known as a 'travel ban,' preventing its citizens from visiting Cuba. Technically a treasury law prohibiting US citizens from spending money in Cuba, it has largely squelched leisure travel for over 40 years.

The 1996 Helms-Burton Bill imposes fines of up to US\$50,000 on US citizens who visit Cuba without government permission. It also allows for confiscation of their property. In addition, under the Trading with the Enemy Act, violators may also face up to US\$250,000 in fines and up to 10 years in prison. The authors and publisher of this guide accept no responsibility for repercussions suffered by US citizens who decide to circumvent these restrictions. You are strongly encouraged to visit www.democracynamericas.org to inform yourself of the latest legislation on Capitol Hill, and to review the Office of Foreign Assets Control regulations limiting travel (www.treas.gov/ofac).

Baracoa (CUC\$259 return) and Nueva Gerona (CUC\$86 return) on the Isla de la Juventud. One-way tickets are half the price of round-trip.

Bicycle

Cuba is legendary among cyclists and you'll see more bicycle enthusiasts here than divers, climbers and hikers put together. Cuba's status with cyclists dates from the mid-'90s when it first opened up to tourism, when cars were still few and far between. Sadly, conditions aren't quite as good as they once were: as driving becomes more affordable for many Cubans, the roads are getting busier with ancient Soviet lorries and 1950s American cars belching out plumes of pollution wherever they go. However, Cuba is a largely flat country, with a driving population used to sharing the road.

Spare parts are difficult to find; *poncheras* fix flat tires and provide air. Bring your own strong locks as bicycle theft is rampant. Try to leave your bike at a *parqueo* – bicycle parking lots costing CUP1, located wherever crowds congregate (markets, bus terminals etc). Riding after dark is not recommended. Trains with baggage carriages (*coches de equipaje* or *bagones*) take bikes for CUC\$20. These compartments are guarded, but take your panniers with you and check over the bike when you arrive. Viazul buses also take bikes.

Bus

Bus travel is a dependable option with **Viazul** (☎ 881-1413, 881-5652, 881-1108; www.viazul.cu; Calle 26 & Zoológico, Nuevo Vedado), which has punctual, air-con coaches to destinations of interest to travelers. Sadly it's not possible for foreigners to travel on Astro buses, which cover the

country far more comprehensively, meaning that if you want to get off the beaten path you're pretty much forced to hire a car or ride a bike. Bus reservations are advisable during peak travel periods (June to August, Christmas and Easter) and on popular routes (Havana-Trinidad, Trinidad-Santa Clara and Santiago de Cuba-Baracoa). See individual Getting There & Away sections for information about bus connections to and from other towns in Cuba.

Very crowded, very steamy, very Cuban *guaguas* (local buses) can be useful in bigger cities. There is always a line at *paradas* (bus stops). Shout '*el último?*' ('the last?') to determine who is last in line. You 'give' *el último* when the next person arrives, thereby knowing exactly where you fall in line. Buses cost from 40 centavos to CUP1. You must always walk as far back in the bus as possible and exit through the rear. Make room to pass by saying '*permiso*,' and watch your bag.

Car

Renting a car in Cuba follows the predictable pattern of so much of Cuban life. It's pretty straightforward, but resign yourself to paying over the odds for a badly maintained and usually pretty crappy machine.

To rent a car, you'll need your passport, your home driver's license and a refundable CUC\$200 deposit (in cash or with non-US credit card). You can rent a car in one city and drop it off in another for a reasonable fee. The cheapest cars start at CUC\$50 per day for a Hyundai Atos and climb steeply to around CUC\$70 per day minimum during the high season.

Another bugbear is that (especially in Havana and Santiago) cars are in such short

supply that reservations are pretty much meaningless. Usually the best thing to do is call around the car-hire places the day you want a car, then go straight there if they have something available. The hotel outlets are often better bets than the main offices. In Havana, those around Parque Central are often the best places to ask; try the Plaza, NH Parque Central, Sevilla, Telégrafo and the Inglaterra, all within easy walking distance of each other.

Contracts for three days or more come with unlimited kilometers. As if things weren't idiotic enough, your car comes with only a tiny bit of gas in it to allow you to drive to the gas station to fill up. You're expected to return it empty, but don't risk running out just to save a few CUCs. Drivers under 25 pay a CUC\$5 fee; additional drivers on the same contract pay a CUC\$15 surcharge.

Check over the car carefully before driving off as you'll be responsible for any damage or missing parts. Make sure there is a spare tire of the correct size, a jack and lug wrench. Check that there are seatbelts, all the lights work, and all the doors lock properly. Some cars are in a shocking state. It's worth complaining and trying to swap if the engine sounds strange. Take the optional CUC\$10 per day insurance.

We have received many letters about poor or nonexistent customer service, bogus spare tires, forgotten reservations and other car-rental problems. The more Spanish you speak and the friendlier you are, the more likely problems will be resolved to everyone's satisfaction (tips to the agent may help).

FUEL & SPARE PARTS

Cupet and Oro Negro *servicentros* (gas stations) selling hard-currency gas are nearly everywhere. Gas is sold by the liter and is either regular (per liter CUC\$0.80) or *especial* (per liter CUC\$0.95). Either works equally well, although car hire companies ask you to put *especial* in your car.

ROAD CONDITIONS

The Autopista and Carretera Central are generally in good repair. While motorized traffic is refreshingly light, bicycles, pedestrians, tractors and livestock can test your driving skills. Driving at night is not recommended due to variable roads, crossing cows, poor lighting and drunk drivers (an ongoing

problem despite a government educational campaign). Signage, though improving, is still sadly appalling. Particularly bad is the signage around Havana – getting out of the city and finding *any* roads from the ring road is a complete nightmare. Allow plenty of extra time and ask repeatedly to check you're going the right way.

ROAD RULES

Seatbelts are required and speed limits are technically 50km/h in the city, 90km/h on highways and 100km/h on the Autopista.

There are some clever speed traps along the Autopista. Speeding tickets start at CUC\$30 and are noted on your car contract (deducted from your deposit when you return the car). However, in practice most police will ignore hire cars going too fast, but do slow down to the speed instructed for the ubiquitous 'control zones'.

Horse Cart

Many provincial cities have *coches* (horse carts) that trot on fixed routes.

Taxi, Bici-taxi & Coco-taxi

Car taxis are metered and cost CUC\$1 to start, CUC\$0.75 per kilometer thereafter. Cabbies usually offer foreigners a flat, off-meter rate that works out close to what you'll pay with the meter.

Bici-taxis are big tricycles with two seats behind the driver. Tourists pay CUC\$1 to CUC\$2 for a short hop; agree on the price beforehand. You'll be mobbed all over the country in tourist spots by the ubiquitous cry of 'taxi' from these guys.

So-called coco-taxis are egg-shaped motorbike taxis that hold two to three people and are mainly seen in Havana. Locals often refer to them as *huevitos* (literally 'little eggs'). Agree on a price before getting in.

Train

Public railways operated by Ferrocarriles de Cuba serve all the provincial capitals and are a great way to experience Cuba if you have time and patience, but a nightmare if you're keen to make progress and move about efficiently! Departure information provided in this chapter is purely theoretical. Getting a ticket is usually no problem – tourists will be charged in CUC\$, though Spanish-speaking travelers frequently travel on trains for the

local peso price. The most useful routes for travelers are Havana–Santiago de Cuba and Havana–Santa Clara. The bathrooms are foul. Watch your luggage and bring food.

Truck

Camiones (trucks) are a cheap, fast way to travel within or between provinces. Every city

has a provincial and municipal bus stop with *camion* departures.

This is the most basic and least comfortable way to travel. In most cases there's standing room only, and there are no toilet facilities. Departures are scheduled, though, and prices are ridiculously cheap. This is definitely a great way to experience local life.