

Holguín Province



Sleepy Holguín is a province of contrasts and paradoxes. Glimmering in the south, the pine-clad Sierra Cristal Mountains boast some of Cuba's most serene and attractive landscapes, while further east in polluted Moa the Che Guevara nickel mine coats the countryside in a thick layer of red dust.

The contradictions don't end there. Long renowned for the ferocity of its *mambí* (resistance fighters) in the independence wars of the 19th century, Holguín has spawned its fair share of heroes and villains in the years since. In 1926 *el líder máximo* (highest leader), Fidel Castro, was born in Finca Manacas near the one-horse town of Birán (his home is now a fascinating museum) while his infinitely less accomplished predecessor, Fulgencio Batista, hailed from the pretty provincial town of Banes to the northeast.

Hugging the coast, the big resort complexes of Guardalavaca and Playa Pesquero play host to some of Cuba's largest and most expensive five-star playgrounds where package tourists can sip on mint-laced mojitos (rum cocktails) while scantily-clad Cuban dancers offer up a program of sensuous nighttime entertainment with all the trimmings.

If you get bored of the beach volleyball check out Holguín, the province's unsung capital and a great place to sample all of those uniquely Cuban treats that the organized tours never see fit to mention. Check out a baseball game, tuck into peso pizza in Parque Calixto García or relax in the low-key music houses of Calle Maceo as the aroma of cheap cheroots drifts through the winking louvers and dissolves imperceptibly above the *dominó* tables.

HIGHLIGHTS

■ City of Parks

Get to know the local culture in down-to-earth Holguín (p348)

■ Eastern Beaches

Sample laid-back beach life in low-key Guardalavaca (p360)

■ Alpine Air

Hike around the pine forests and waterfalls of Villa Pinares del Mayarí (p368)

■ Casa del Comandante

Take a peep behind the mask at Fidel's childhood home, the Finca Las Manacas (p368)

■ Remote Digs

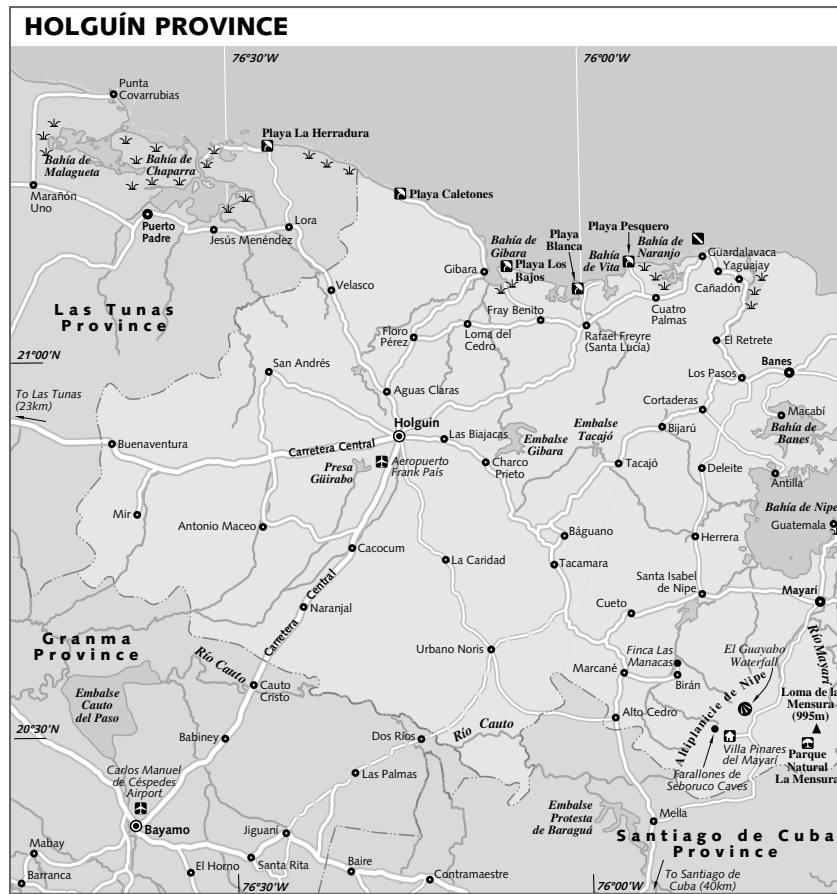
Make a side trip to paradisiacal Cayo Saetía (p369)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 24

■ POPULATION: 1.04 MILLION

■ AREA: 9300 SQ KM



History

Most historians and experts agree that Columbus first made landfall on October 28, 1492 at Cayo Bariay near Playa Blanca, just west of Playa Don Lino. The Spaniards were welcomed ashore by Seboruco Indians – the remains of whose erstwhile ancestors can still be found at numerous archaeological sites around Banes – and they captured 13 of them to take back to Europe as ‘specimens.’ Choosing Baracoa rather than Gibara as the new colonial capital 20 years later, Spanish explorer Diego Velázquez de Cuellar gifted the land north of Bayamo to Captain García Holguín, a Mexican conquistador. The province became an important sugar-growing area and, at the end

of the 19th century, much of the land was bought up by the US-owned United Fruit Company. Formerly part of the Oriente territory, Holguín became a province in its own right in 1975.

HOLGUÍN

☎ 24 / pop 264,927

Known euphemistically as ‘the city of parks’, (they’re more squares than parks), Holguín is Cuba’s fourth largest city and retains a laid-back and friendly atmosphere that puts visitors instantly at ease. Safe, charming and relatively easy to navigate, the gridlike central core is a great place to dip into everyday Cuban life without the infractions of *jinetero* (tout) hassle. Indeed,



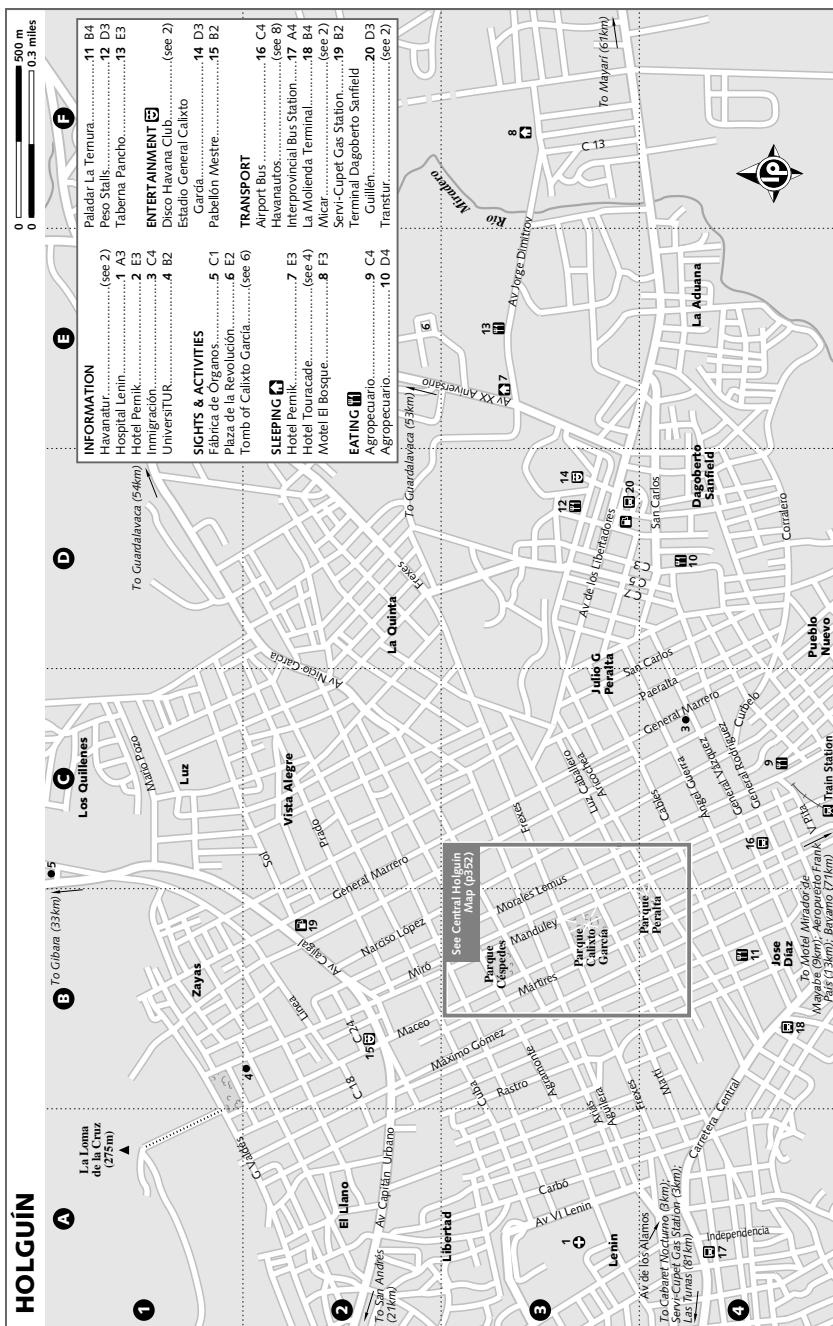
local life ticks along sensuously here to a gentle rhythm all of its own. Check out the local sports program, drop by the dynamic Uneac (Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba; National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists) cultural center or just sit out on colorful Parque Céspedes drinking in the sights and sounds of a city of stalwart survivors going industriously about its daily business.

History

In 1515 Diego Velázquez, Cuba’s first governor, conferred the lands north of Bayamo to Captain García Holguín, an officer in the Spanish army and one of island’s original pioneering colonizers. Setting up a cattle

ranch in the province’s verdant and fertile hinterland, Holguín and his descendants presided over a burgeoning agricultural settlement that by 1720 had sprouted a small wooden church and more than 450 inhabitants. In 1752 ‘San Isidoro de Holguín’ (the settlement was renamed after the church) was granted the title of city and by 1790 the population had expanded tenfold to 12,000.

Holguín was the setting of much fighting during the two wars of independence when ferocious *mambí* warriors laid siege to the heavily fortified Spanish barracks at La Periquera (now the Museo de Historia Provincial, p353). Captured and lost by Julio Grave de Peralta (after whom one of



the squares is named), the city was taken for a second time on December 19, 1872 by Cuban general and native son Calixto García, Holguín's posthumous local hero.

With the division of Oriente into five separate provinces in 1975, the city of Holguín became a provincial capital.

Orientation

Parque Calixto García is Holguín's most important central square; to the north is Parque Céspedes and to the south is Parque Peralta. Manduley (aka Libertad) and Maceo are the main north-south thoroughfares, running between the train station and the hills that border the city's northern limits. The main bus station is to the west of town, the main tourist hotels to the east.

Information

BOOKSTORES

ARTex (Map p352; Manduley No 193A) Sells books, CDs, posters and Che T-shirts on Parque Calixto García.
Librería Villena Botev (Map p352; ☎ 42 76 81; Frexes No 151) On the corner of Máximo Gómez. Books in Spanish only.

INTERNET ACCESS

Etecta Telepunto (Map p352; cnr Martí & Maceo; per hr CUC\$6; ☎ 9am-7pm) Three computer terminals in Parque Calixto García.
Hotel Pernik (Map p350; cnr Avs Jorge Dimitrov & XX Aniversario; per hr CUC\$6) Two terminals.

LIBRARIES

Biblioteca Alex Urquiola (Map p352; ☎ 42 13 66; Maceo No 178; ☎ 8:30am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-4:30pm Sat) On Parque Calixto García.

MEDIA

The local newspaper *Ahora* is published on Saturday. Radio Ángulo CMKO can be heard on 1110AM and 97.9FM.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Both Hotel Pernik (p354) and Motel El Bosque (p354) have infirmaries.
Farmacia Turno Especial (Map p352; Maceo No 170; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat) On Parque Calixto García.
Hospital Lenin (Map p350; ☎ 42 53 02; Av VI Lenin) Will treat foreigners in an emergency.

MONEY

Banco de Crédito y Comercio (Map p352; ☎ 42 25 12; Arias) On Parque Céspedes.

Banco Financiero Internacional (Map p352; ☎ 46 85 02; Manduley No 167 btwn Frexes & Aguilera)
Cadeca (Map p352; ☎ 46 81 09; Manduley No 205 btwn Martí & Luz Caballero; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun)

POST

Post office Manduley No 183 (Map p352; ☎ 46 82 54; ☎ 10am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Fri); Parque Céspedes (Map p352; Maceo No 114; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) There's also a DHL office at the post office on Parque Calixto García.

TELEPHONE

Etecta Telepunto (Map p352; cnr Martí & Maceo; ☎ 9am-7pm) On Parque Calixto García.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Havanatur Frexes (Map p352; ☎ 46 80 91; Frexes No 172 btwn Morales Lemus & Narciso López) Hotel Pernik (Map p350; cnr Avs Jorge Dimitrov & XX Aniversario)
Reservaciones de Campismo (Map p352; ☎ 42 28 81; Mártires No 87; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)
UniversiTUR (Map p350; ☎ 46 28 23; universiturhlg@esihl.colombus.cu; Manduley btwn Calles 10 & 12)

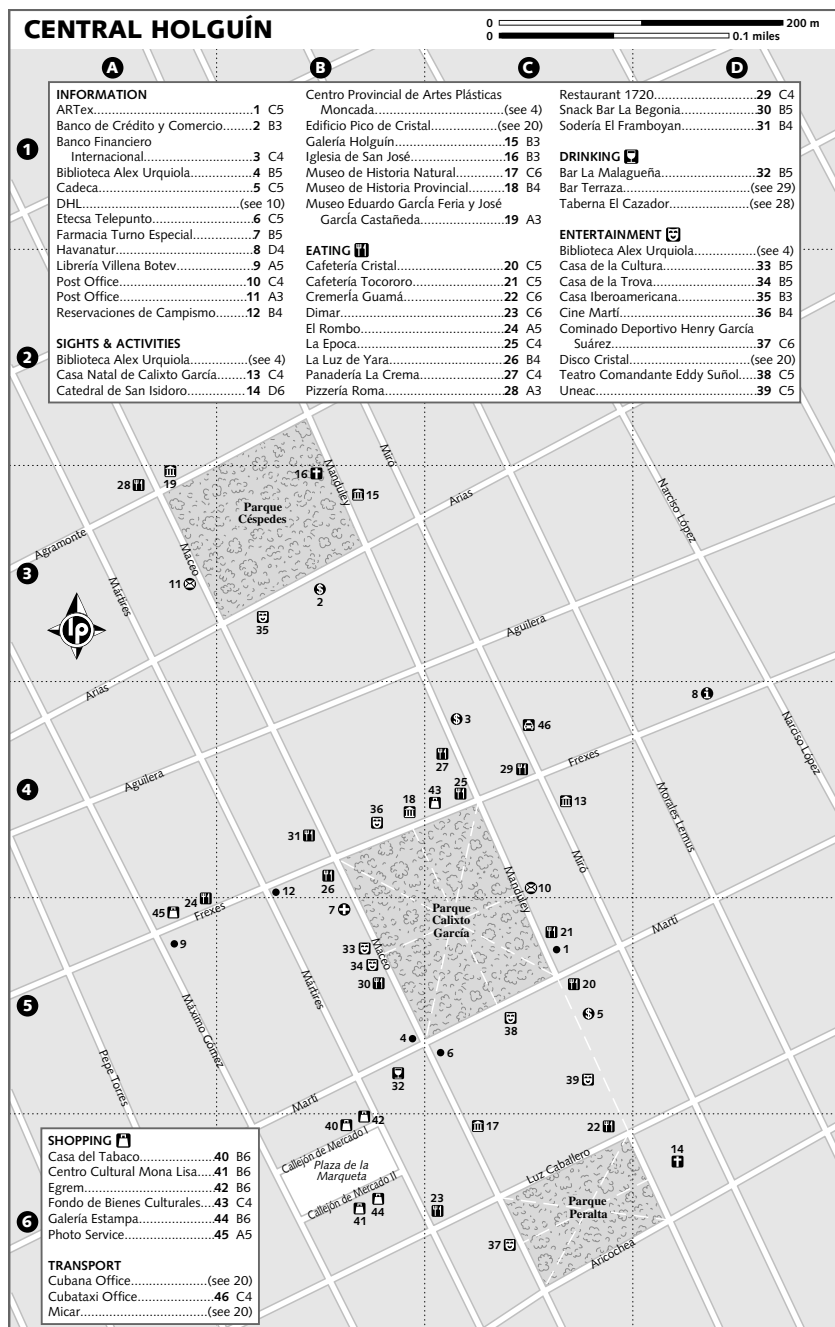
Sights

An afternoon exploring the city's parks, plazas and surrounding sights is a great way to discover Holguín. No walk is complete without a climb up to La Loma de la Cruz (p353).

PARQUE CÉSPEDES

Founded in the late 18th century, this shady square hosting hot stick-ball action during the day is the youngest of Holguín's parks. On its eastern edge is the **Iglesia de San José**, (Map p352; Manduley No 116) with its distinctive bell tower (1842) and dome (visible from La Loma de la Cruz). Locals calls this Parque San José.

In a colonial building facing the church is the **Galería Holguín** (Map p352; ☎ 42 23 92; Manduley No 137; admission free; ☎ 8am-6pm Tue-Wed, 8am-10pm Thu-Sun). Duck into the high-ceilinged rooms to check out some (good) local art. The small **Museo Eduardo García Ferial y José García Castañeda** (Map p352; cnr Agramonte & Maceo; admission free) on the square's northwestern corner documents the life and work of two local archaeologists and naturalists. Eduardo was responsible for creating Holguín's first museum and once boasted the largest snail collection in Cuba.

**PARQUE CALIXTO GARCÍA**

The former Plaza de Armas was created in 1719 and served originally as the town's meeting point and marketplace. The centerpiece today is a 1912 statue of General Calixto García, who captured Holguín from the Spaniards in December 1872.

To learn more about this dynamic hero, head to **Casa Natal de Calixto García** (Map p352; ☎ 42 56 10; Miró No 147; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-9pm Tue-Sat) two blocks east of the park. García was born here in 1839.

On the park's northern side is the **Museo de Historia Provincial** (Map p352; ☎ 46 33 95; Frexes No 198; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-5pm). Now a national monument, the building was constructed between 1860 and 1868 and used as a Spanish army barracks during the independence wars. It was nicknamed La Periquera (parrot cage) for the red, yellow and green uniforms of the Spanish soldiers who stood guard outside. The prize exhibit is an old axe-head carved in the likeness of a man, known as the Hacha de Holguín (Holguín Axe), thought to have been made by aborigines in the early 1400s and discovered in 1860. There's a pretty patio inside.

In the southwestern corner of Parque Calixto García is the **Centro Provincial de Artes Plásticas Moncada** (Map p352; ☎ 42 20 84; Maceo No 180; admission free; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Sat). This bright gallery is Holguín's best and shares space with the **Biblioteca Alex Urquiola** (Map p352; ☎ 46 25 62; Maceo No 180), housing Holguín's biggest book collection.

The **Museo de Historia Natural** (Map p352; ☎ 42 39 35; Maceo No 129 btwn Parques Calixto García & Peralta; admission/camera CUC\$1/1; ☎ 9am-10pm Tue-Sat, 9am-9pm Sun) has Cuba's biggest collection of stuffed animals behind glass, including the world's smallest frog and world's smallest hummingbird.

PARQUE PERALTA

This square (called Parque de las Flores locally) is named for General Julio Grave de Peralta (1834-72), who led the uprising against Spain in Holguín in October 1868. His marble statue (1916) faces the cathedral. Big and beige, the **Catedral de San Isidoro** (Map p352; Manduley) dates from 1720 but is heavily restored. Be sure not to miss the life-size statue of Pope Jean Paul II outside.

PLAZA DE LA MARQUETA

This partly-restored plaza and work-in-progress west of Parque Peralta was laid out in 1848 and formerly served as Holguín's marketplace. Today the aim is to transform the plaza into the city's cultural hub, and bookstores and art exhibits have already set this process in motion. Check out the telephone poles turned into totems that anchor the plaza's corners and the numerous bronze statues of well-known Holguineros that decorate the sidewalks.

The ruins in the plaza's center are undergoing massive and lengthy restoration as they are transformed into one of Cuba's most atmospheric concert halls. The shopping in this plaza, including the arty Galería Estampa and Centro Cultural Mona Lisa, is quality.

BEYOND THE CENTER

At the northern end of Maceo is a stairway built in 1950, with 460 steps ascending **La Loma de la Cruz** (Map p350), a 275m-high hill with panoramic views. A cross was raised here in 1790 in hope of relieving a drought, and every May 3 the Romerías de Mayo (p354) brings hundreds of pilgrims. It's a 20-minute walk from town or you can drive up the western side (accessible via G Valdés); a bici-taxi to the foot of the hill should cost 10 pesos. This walk is best tackled early in the morning when the light is pristine and the heat not too debilitating.

Holguín is a city most *fiel* (faithful) and the **Plaza de la Revolución** (Map p350) east of the center is a huge monument to the heroes of Cuban independence, bearing quotations from José Martí and Fidel Castro. Massive rallies are held here every May 1. The **tomb of Calixto García** (Map p350) is also here, as is a smaller monument to García's mother.

Fábrica de Órganos (Map p350; Carretera de Gibara No 301; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) is the only mechanical music-organ factory in Cuba. This small factory produces about six organs a year, as well as guitars and other instruments. A good organ costs between the equivalent of US\$10,000 and US\$25,000. Eight professional organ groups exist in Holguín (including the Familia Cuayo, based at the factory), and you may be able to hear one playing on Parque Céspedes at 4pm on Thursday and 10am on Sunday.

Festivals & Events

The **Romerías de Mayo**, in the first week of May, is a week-long art party with exhibitions, music, poetry and festivities, with the national rap competition and the La Loma de la Cruz pilgrimage among the highlights. Holguín's **Carnaval** happens in the third week of August and it's a blowout, with outdoor concerts, and copious amounts of dancing, roast pork and potent potables.

Sleeping

Holguín has several Cuban-only hotels, limiting tourist options to two or three places.

Hotel Touracade (UniversiTUR; Map p350; ☎ 46 28 23; fax 48 18 43; Manduley No 26 btwn Calles 10 & 12; r CUC\$10-15; 🏠) This small UniversiTUR hotel near La Loma de la Cruz is designed for foreigners studying Spanish. It might let you a room if you're desperate.

Hotel Pernik (Islazul; Map p350; ☎ 48 10 11; fax 48 16 67; cnr Avs Jorge Dimitrov & XX Aniversario; s/d with breakfast low season CUC\$35/48, high season CUC\$45/60; 🏠 🚿 🚿 🚿) Holguín's most comfortable and popular tourist hotel, this incongruously designed place, 3km east of town, sometimes gets overwhelmed by its own popularity. The big rooms have balconies and the pool is a sprawler. Nevertheless, coming from Islazul's unreliable stock of Soviet-inspired architectural creations, the hotel suffers from the usual foibles of dull

food and blaring late-night music. Overpriced at CUC\$60 for a double. There's public Internet access here (CUC\$6 per hour; noon to midnight) and a disco (admission CUC\$2 to CUC\$4, depending on season).

OUTSIDE TOWN

Motel Mirador de Mayabe (Islazul; Map p350; ☎ 42 34 85; Alturas de Mayabe; s/d low season CUC\$35/48, high season CUC\$45/60; 🏠 🚿 🚿) This motel, high up on the Loma de Mayabe 10km south-east of Holguín, has 24 rooms tucked into lush grounds. The views, taking in vast mango plantations, are especially good from the pool. The Mirador de Mayabe's claim to fame is a beer-drinking donkey named Pancho, who hangs out near the bar. Typical Cuban lunches are served at the Finca Mayabe, just above the motel, where there's also a cockfighting ring. The Casa Campesina nearby is a replica of a traditional farmer's dwelling, and a host of domestic plants and animals are on hand; kids love it. A bus runs to Holguín from the bottom of the hill, 1.5km from the motel, three times a day.

Motel El Bosque (Islazul; Map p350; ☎ /fax 48 11 40; Av Jorge Dimitrov; s/d with breakfast low season CUC\$35/48 high season CUC\$45/60; 🏠 🚿 🚿) One kilometer beyond Hotel Pernik, the 69 duplex bungalows here are set among extensive green grounds, making it feel more removed than it is. There's a nice bar beside the swim-

ming pool (nonguests can use it for CUC\$5, which includes CUC\$3 in drinks).

Eating

RESTAURANTS

Taberna Pancho (Map p350; ☎ 48 18 68; Av Jorge Dimitrov; 🕒 noon-10pm) This is a lively Cuban place between Hotel Pernik and Motel El Bosque with some original menu choices. Nothing on the list, including hamburgers and draft Mayabe beer, costs more than CUC\$3. Try the sausage special.

Dimar (Map p352; cnr Mártires & Luz Caballero; dishes CUC\$2-5; 🕒 11am-10pm) A new seafood chain restaurant specializing in cheap shrimp cocktail and grilled fish has opened for business between Peralta and Marqueta squares.

Restaurant 1720 (Map p352; ☎ 46 81 50; Calle Frexes btwn Manduley & Miró; 🕒 12:30-10:30pm) Holguín's finest dining is in this painstakingly restored cake-icing colonial mansion where you can dine on paella (CUC\$6) or shrimp flambé (CUC\$13); an excellent way to spend an afternoon if the rain is pouring down outside. There's an expensive perfume shop here, a lush lobby, and a salubrious inner courtyard that sometimes hosts music. Check out the wall plaques that give interesting insights into Holguín's history.

Paladar La Ternura (Map p350; Jose A Cardet No 293) Many of Holguín's paladares (private restaurants) have gone under or been closed down. One notable survivor is this upstairs place, which serves large portions of chicken, pork and beef dishes in an elegant dining room.

CAFETERIAS

Peso stalls are crowded near the Interprovincial Bus Station on the Carretera Central.

Cremería Guamá (Map p352; cnr Luz Caballero & Manduley; 🕒 10am-10:45pm) This place is Holguín's alternative Coppelia where you can enjoy peso ice cream al fresco overlooking pedestrianized Calle Manduley, the city's most happening thoroughfare.

Cafetería Cristal (Map p352; ☎ 42 58 55; ground fl, Edificio Pico de Cristal, cnr Manduley & Martí; 🕒 24hr) Reliable, affordable chicken meals are served at this popular place with cranking air-con. A more upscale restaurant is upstairs (open noon to 10pm).

Cafetería Tocaroro (Map p352; Manduley No 189; 🕒 24hr) Centrally located on Parque Calixto

García and serving reasonable spaghetti, pizza, chicken and sandwiches, this place is often packed with locals and the odd stray Guardalavaca tourist.

El Rombo (Map p352; Frexes btwn Mártires & Máximo Gómez; 🕒 9am-11pm) Don't be put off by the odd smell: this friendly branch of Cafeterías Cubanitas does a big, tasty ham-and-cheese sandwich and other items similar to Cafetería Tocaroro, but without the wait.

Snack Bar La Begonia (Map p352; ☎ 46 85 86; Maceo No 176; 🕒 9am-10pm) With ice cream (CUC\$1), sandwiches (CUC\$2 to CUC\$3) and drinks served beneath flowering trellises on Parque Calixto García, this is a relaxed place to meet other travelers. It's also popular with wedding parties and *quincinera* (15th birthday celebrations for Cuban girls) photo shoots.

Also recommended:
Sodería El Framboyan (Map p352; Maceo; 🕒 10am-11pm) Ice cream galore (cones CUC\$1, sundaes up to CUC\$2.50) Near Frexes.
Pizzería Roma (Map p352; cnr Maceo & Agramonte) Get your street pizza here (six pesos).

GROCERIES

La Luz de Yara (Map p352; cnr Frexes & Maceo; 🕒 8:30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-noon Sun) Bustling department store/supermarket with a bakery section on Parque Calixto García.

La Epoca (Map p352; Frexes No 194) Another make-your-own-picnic option on Parque Calixto García.

Panadería La Crema (Map p352; Manduley No 140; 🕒 7am-10pm) A good selection of breads and cakes here means long lines.

There are two **agropecuarios** (vegetable markets; Map p350): one is off Calle 19, the continuation of Morales Lemus near the train station; the other is on Calle 3 in Dagoberto Sanfield. There are plenty of peso stalls beside the baseball stadium.

Drinking

Taberna El Cazador (Map p352; cnr Maceo & Agramonte) Terrace peso bar with park views.

Bar La Malagueña (Map p352; Martí No 129) This popular spot near Parque Calixto García attracts a mixed local/traveler crowd.

Bar Terraza (Map p352; ☎ 46 81 50; Calle Frexes btwn Manduley & Miró; 🕒 9pm-2am) A spiffy place above Restaurant 1720 to sip a mojito. Has views over Parque Calixto García.

CASAS PARTICULARES – HOLGUÍN

Augusto Gutiérrez Rodríguez (☎ 42 72 75; 3rd fl, Morales Lemus No 148 btwn Luz Caballero & Martí; r CUC\$20-25; 🏠) Separate entry via a narrow spiral staircase.

Germán González Rojas (☎ 42 40 75; Ángel Guerra No 178 btwn Camilo Cienfuegos & Carretera Central; r CUC\$20) Festive place with several rooms; including an independent apartment with two rooms, bath and patio.

Haydée Torres Marrero (☎ 42 47 21; Narciso López No 151 btwn Frexes & Martí; r CUC\$15; 🏠 🚿) Spacious upstairs with fridge, terrace and living room.

Isabel Sera Galves (☎ 42 25 29; Narciso López No 142 btwn Aguilera & Frexes; r CUC\$20; 🏠) Friendly home with great back patio; prices drop by CUC\$5 in slow season.

'La Palma' – Enrique R Interián Salerno (☎ 42 46 83; Calle Maceo No 52A btwn 16 & 18, El Llano; r CUC\$25; 🏠) Neocolonial house from 1945 near the Loma de la Cruz. Son of owner is a painter and sculptor.

Check out the terra-cotta bust of Che and the 3m-long canvas of the last supper (with St John as a woman). Fantastic hosts.

Marieta González (Calle Mendieta No 37 btwn Agramonte & Garayalde; r CUC\$25) Same family as 'La Palma.'

Roberto Polanco Vega (☎ 46 13 77; apt 4, Calle 7 No 29; r CUC\$20) Reparto Julio G Peralta near Terminal Dagoberto Sanfield Guillén, self-catering, good meals served.

'Villa Liba Hostal' – Jorge A Mezerene (☎ 42 38 23; villaliba@yahoo.es; Maceo No 46; r CUC\$25; 🏠 🚿) Near the Loma de la Cruz stairway. Nicely furnished rooms sleep three to four. Patio; professional.

Entertainment

Teatro Comandante Eddy Suñol (Map p352; ☎ 46 31 61; Martí No 111) Holguín's premier theater is an architectural treat from 1939 on Parque Calixto García. It hosts both the Rodrigo Prats Theater Company and the Ballet Nacional de Cuba and is renowned both nationally and internationally for its operettas, dance performances and Spanish musicals. Check here for details of performances by the famous children's theater Alas Buenas.

Uneac (Map p352; Calle Manduley btwn Luz Cabalero & Martí) This is Holguín's cultural hot-house. If you only visit one Uneac center in Cuba – and there are 14 of them in all (one in each province) – make sure it's here. Situated in a lovingly restored house in pedestrian Calle Manduley, this friendly establishment offers everything from literary evenings (with a famous author) and music nights, to patio theatre (including Lorca), and cultural reviews. Everyone is welcome.

Also recommended:

Biblioteca Alex Urquiola (Map p352; ☎ 46 25 62; Maceo No 180) On the corner of Martí. Music and theater events are often hosted here including performances by the Holguín Symphony Orchestra.

Casa de la Trova (Map p352; Maceo No 174; ☎ Tue-Sun) Traditional folk singing and music on Parque Calixto García.

Casa de la Cultura (Map p352; Maceo No 172; ☎ Tue-Sun) Exhibitions and classical music.

Casa Iberoamericana (Map p352; ☎ 42 25 33; Arias No 161) On Parque Céspedes; frequently hosts *peñas* (musical performances).

Pabellón Mestre (Map p350; cnr Maceo & Capitán Urbano; ☎ 9pm-late) Open-air dancing and cultural activities.

DANCE CLUBS

Disco Cristal (Map p352; ☎ 42 58 55; 3rd fl, Edificio Pico de Cristal, Manduley No 199; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 9pm-2am Tue-Thu) On the corner of Martí. Holguín's preferred city-center club, locals with Convertibles get down here; and there are good views from the dance floor. You must spend CUC\$3 on food or drink in addition to paying the cost of admission.

Disco Havana Club (Map p350; ☎ 48 10 11; Hotel Pernik, cnr Avs Jorge Dimitrov & XX Aniversario; guests/nonguests CUC\$2/4; ☎ 10pm-2am Tue-Sun) Holguín's premier disco. If you're staying at Hotel Pernik the music will visit you – in your room! – until 1am.

Cabaret Nocturno (☎ 42 51 85; admission CUC\$10; ☎ 10pm-2am) Tropicana-style club beyond Servi-Cupet 3km out on the road to Las Tunas. No show when it's raining.

CINEMAS

Gine Martí (Map p352; Frexes No 204; 1-2 pesos) For big-screen movies, head to this cinema on Parque Calixto García.

SPORTS

Holguín is one of the best places on the island to view Cuba's two national sports: baseball and boxing.

Estadio General Calixto García (Map p350; admission 1 peso) Baseball games are held from October to April at this stadium, just off Av de los Libertadores, not far from Hotel Pernik. Holguín's Perros won the national championship in 2002 for the first time in history, so Holguíños are pretty excited about their ball these days. The stadium also houses a sports museum.

Cominado Deportivo Henry García Suárez (Map p352; Maceo; admission 1 peso; ☎ 8pm Wed, 2pm Sat) You can catch boxing matches at this intimate gym on the western side of Parque Peralta, where three Olympic medalists have trained, including the female judo medalist. Ask here about organizing a training session.

Shopping

Holguín has some decent shopping. If you're in a rush, head directly to the Plaza de la Marqueta (Map p352) where there is a smattering of different shops including Egreem for music, Casa del Tabaco for cigars and Galería Estampa for fine arts.

Fondo de Bienes Culturales (Map p352; ☎ 42 37 82; Frexes No 196) This shop on Parque Calixto García has one of the best selections of Cuban handicrafts.

Photo Service (Map p352; Frexes btwn Máximo Gomez & Mártires) Can cater for all your camera needs.

Getting There & Away

AIR

There are 16 international flights a week into Holguín's well-organized **Aeropuerto Frank País** (☎ 46 25 12; airport code HOG), 13km south of the city, including from Amsterdam, Düsseldorf, London, Montreal, and Toronto. Almost all arrivals get bussed di-

rectly off to Guardalavaca and see little of Holguín city.

Domestic destinations are served by **Cubana** (☎ 46 25 12, 46 25 34; cnr Manduley & Martí), which flies daily to Habana (CUC\$103 one way, two hours), and Aerocaribbean (tickets are also available from Cubana office).

BUS

The **Interprovincial Bus Station** (Map p350; ☎ 46 10 36; cnr Carretera Central & Independencia), west of the center near Hospital Lenin, has Astro buses going to Habana (CUC\$28, daily), Guantánamo (CUC\$11, alternate days) and Santiago (CUC\$7.50, alternate days).

Air-conditioned **Viazul** (www.viazul.com) buses leave daily; see the table following.

| Destination | Cost (one way) | Departure time |
|------------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| Habana | CUC\$44 | 1:25pm, 6:45pm |
| Santiago de Cuba | CUC\$11 | 3:25am, 4:50pm, 10:15pm |
| Trinidad | CUC\$26 | 11pm |

You can take the Habana bus as far as Las Tunas (CUC\$6), Camagüey (CUC\$11), Ciego de Ávila (CUC\$17), Sancti Spiritus (CUC\$21) or Santa Clara (CUC\$26). The Santiago departure also stops in Bayamo (CUC\$6), but to reach Guantánamo or Baracoa, you have to change in Santiago de Cuba.

TRAIN

The **train station** (Map p350; ☎ 42 23 11, Calle V Pita) is on the southern side of town. Foreigners must purchase tickets in Convertibles at the special **Ladis ticket office** (☎ 7:30am-3pm). The ticket office is marked 'U/B Ferrocuba Provincial Holguín' on the corner of Manduley opposite the train station.

Theoretically, there's one daily morning train to Las Tunas (CUC\$4, two hours), a daily afternoon train to Santiago de Cuba (CUC\$5, 3½ hours), and a daily 6:15pm train to Habana (CUC\$31, 15 hours). This train stops in Camagüey (CUC\$9), Ciego de Ávila (CUC\$13), Guayos (CUC\$17), Santa Clara (CUC\$20) and Matanzas (CUC\$20). You may have to change trains at the Santiago-Habana mainline junction in Cacocum, 17km south of Holguín.

The only service that operates with any regularity is the train to Habana. The San-

tiago de Cuba service is rather irregular; ask before planning your trip around it.

TRUCK

Trucks to points south and west operate from **La Molienda Terminal** (Map p350; ☎ 46 20 11; Carretera Central No 46), between the bus and train stations. Trucks leave when full for Las Tunas and Bayamo (four pesos each), with the last departure around 2pm. You can also get colectivos from here to either destination for 20 pesos. No trucks go directly to Santiago de Cuba or Camagüey, so you must make the journey in stages.

The **Terminal Dagoberto Sanfield Guillén** (Map p350; Av de los Libertadores), opposite Estadio General Calixto García, has at least two daily trucks to Gibara (two pesos; window six), Banes (four pesos; window five) and Moa (nine pesos; window five). To reach Guardalavaca, take a truck to Rafael Freyre (aka Santa Lucía, two pesos, window three) and look for something else there.

If you have never traveled in a truck before, Holguín is a good place from which to try it.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The public bus to the airport leaves daily around 2pm from **airport bus stop** (Map p350; General Rodríguez No 84) on Parque Martí near the train station. A tourist taxi to the airport costs CUC\$8 to CUC\$10. It's also possible to spend your last night in Bayamo, then catch a taxi (CUC\$18 to CUC\$20) or a truck (three pesos) to Holguín Airport.

BICI-TAXI

Holguín's bici-taxis are ubiquitous. They charge five pesos for a short trip, 10 pesos for a long one.

CAR

You can rent or return a car at the following places:

Havanaautos Motel El Bosque (Map p350; ☎ 48 81 57; Av Jorge Dimitrov); Aeropuerto Frank País (☎ 46 84 12)

Micar Cafetería Cristal (Map p352; ☎ 46 85 59; cnr Manduley & Martí); Hotel Pernik (Map p350; ☎ 48 16 52; cnr Avs Jorge Dimitrov & XX Aniversario)

Transtur Hotel Pernik (Map p350; ☎ 48 10 11; cnr Avs Jorge Dimitrov & XX Aniversario); Aeropuerto Frank País (☎ 46 84 14) Also rents mopeds.

A **Servi-Cupet station** (Carretera Central; ☎ 24hr) is 3km out toward Las Tunas; another is just outside town on the road to Gibara. An **Oro Negro service station** (Carretera Central) is on the southern edge of town. The road to Gibara is north on Av Cajigal; also take this road and fork left after 5km to reach Playa Herradura.

TAXI

A **Cubataxi** (Map p352; ☎ 42 32 90; Miró No 133) to Guardalavaca costs CUC\$20. To Gibara, negotiate a CUC\$25 to CUC\$30 round-trip deal.

GIBARA

☎ 24 / pop 28,826

Gibara is Holguín's outlet to the sea, a once important sugar-export town that was linked to the provincial capital via a railway. With the construction of the Carretera Central in the 1920s Gibara lost its mercantile importance and after the last train service was axed in 1958, the town fell into a sleepy slumber from which it has yet to awaken.

Christopher Columbus first arrived in the area in 1492 and called it Río de Mares (River of Oceans) for the Rios Cacoyugüin and Yabazón that drain into the Bahía de Gibara. The current name comes from *jiba*, the indigenous word for a bush that still grows along the shore.

Refounded in 1817, Gibara prospered in the 19th century as the sugar industry expanded and the trade rolled in. To protect the settlement from pirates, barracks were built and a 2km wall was constructed around the town in the early 1800s, making Gibara Cuba's second walled city after Habana. The once sparkling-white facades earned Gibara its nickname: *la villa blanca*.

Situated 33km from Holguín via a scenic road that undulates through friendly, eye-catching villages, Gibara is a small, intimate place whose unique ocean-side atmosphere gives it a distinct almost un-Cuban flavor. Redolent of a small Baracoa, the town's beautiful bayside setting is characterized by pretty plazas, crumbling Spanish ruins and a postcard view of the saddle-shaped Silla de Gibara that so captivated Columbus.

Each year in April, Gibara hosts the **Festival de Internacional de Cine Pobre** (International Low Budget Film Festival), which

draws films and filmmakers from all over the world.

Information

Most services line Calle Independencia.

Banco Popular de Ahorro (cnr Calles Independencia & Cuba) Changes traveler's checks.

Bandec (cnr Calles Independencia & J Peralta) Also changes traveler's checks.

Post office (Independencia No 15) There are few public phones here.

Sights

At the top of Calle Cabada is **El Cuartelón**, a crumbling-brick Spanish fort with graceful arches, that provides stunning town and bay views. Continue on this street for 200m to Restaurant El Mirador for an even better vantage point. You'll see remnants of the old fortresses here and at the **Fuerte Fernando VII**, on the point beyond Parque de las Madres, a block over from Parque Calixto García.

The centerpiece of **Parque Calixto García** (lined with weird *robles africanos* – African oaks with large penis-shaped pods) is **Iglesia de San Fulgencio** (1850). The Statue of Liberty in front commemorates the Second War of Independence. On the western side of the square, in a beautiful colonial palace (more interesting than the stuffed stuff it collects) is the **Museo de Historia Natural** (Luz Caballero No 23; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Wed, 8am-noon, 1-5pm & 8-10pm Thu-Sun). Through barred windows you can watch women rolling cheroots in the cigar factory across the square.

Two museums share the colonial mansion (1872) at Independencia No 19: the **Museo de Historia Municipal** (admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Wed, 8am-noon, 1-5pm & 8-10pm Thu-Sun) downstairs and the **Museo de Artes Decorativas** (☎ 3-4407; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Wed, 8am-noon, 1-5pm & 8-10pm Thu-Sun) upstairs. The latter is more interesting, with nearly 800 pieces collected from Gibara's colonial heyday. Across the street is the **Galería Cosme Proenza** (Calle Independencia No 32), with wall-to-wall works by one of Cuba's foremost painters (think Hieronymus Bosch).

Activities

There are two decent beaches within striking distance of Gibara. **Playa Los Bajos** is

CASAS PARTICULARES – GIBARA

Gibara's 23 casas include some real gems.

'Hostal La Bombilla' – Enrique Reyes Sánchez (☎ 3-4535; Céspedes No 7 btwn J Peralta & Luz Caballero; r CUC\$20-25; ☎ ☎) Newly refurbished rooms in a friendly family home. One block from the ocean.

'Hostal Vitral' – Nancy Pérez (☎ 3-4469; Independencia No 36 btwn J Peralta & Calixto García; r CUC\$20; ☎ ☎) Gorgeous restored colonial with roof terrace and hammocks; meals provided. Pick from four lovely rooms.

La Casa de los Amigos (☎ 3-4115; lacasadelosamigos@yahoo.fr; Céspedes No 15 btwn J Peralta & Luz Caballero; r CUC\$20-25; ☎ ☎) One of the most amazing casas you'll find in Cuba with frescos, wood carvings, gazebo and a huge, colorful open courtyard/patio. The rooms are boutique-hotel standard with antique sinks and the food a French-Cuban fusion.

Leoncia Milagros (☎ 3-4493; J Agüero; r CUC\$20) Behind the bus terminal, with a helpful family, nice rooms and big meals served on the terrace.

Odalys & Luis (☎ 3-4542; Céspedes No 13 btwn Luz Caballero & J Peralta; r with fan/air-con CUC\$20) Big rooms in a colonial house with patio; a block and a half from Parque Calixto García; good meals.

'Villa Boqueron' – Isidro Rodríguez López (☎ 3-4559; Ave Rabi No 53 btwn J Peralta & Luz Caballero; r CUC\$20-25; ☎ ☎) Friendly family with good food, this house is 5m from the ocean.

usually accessible by local ferry (two pesos) or skiff (round-trip CUC\$3) from the fishing pier on La Enramada, the waterfront road leading out of town. These boats cross the Bahía de Gibara to Playa Blanca, from where it's 3km east to Playa Los Bajos.

You'll need some sort of transport to get to lovely, little **Playa Caletones**, 17km to the west of Gibara. The apostrophe of white sand and azure sea here is a favorite of vacationers from Holguín. The town is ramshackle, with no services except the thatched place guarded by a palm tree that serves as a bar in summer; locals will offer to cook you lunch.

Sleeping

No hotels at present, but there are a handful of magnificent casas particulares (see above).

Eating

Gibara's painfully inadequate restaurant scene won't have you searching far beyond your trusty casa particular. Here are some suggestions if you're excruciatingly hungry.

Restaurante El Faro (La Concha) This place, on Parque de las Madres, serves chicken and fish meals overlooking the bay. It's a simple, potentially romantic spot.

Bar El Coral (La Concha; ☎ 24hr) This place has the same seaside atmosphere as El Faro.

Patio Colonial, wedged between the Museo de Historia Natural and Casino Español, is an atmospheric outdoor cafeteria that hosts musical performances. Nearby, **El**

Caribe (Parque Calixto García) is a pizza place that takes Convertibles.

Restaurant El Mirador, high above town near El Cuartelón, has a view to die for and is a good place to quench your thirst after a romp up the hill.

Drinking & Entertainment

Cine Jiba (Parque Calixto García) In Cuba's self-proclaimed film capital you can check out big-screen movies in this recently refurbished cinema.

Casa de Cultura (Parque Colón) You might catch a salsa night here or an appreciation of Nicolás Guillén's poetry on the pleasant inner courtyard.

For theater and dance, it's the historic Casino Español (1889).

Getting There & Away

Competition for public transport out of Gibara is fierce, so be early for the one scheduled truck at 5:10am (one peso). The bus station is a kilometer out on the road to Holguín. There are two daily buses in each direction and a taxi (to Holguín) should cost you about CUC\$20.

For drivers heading toward Guardalavaca the link road from the junction at Floro Pérez is hell at first, but improves just outside Rafael Freyre. There's an Oro Negro gas station at the entrance to town.

RAFAEL FREYRE & AROUND

The stretch between Rafael Freyre (Santa Lucía on some maps) and Guardalavaca

is developing fast. High-end resorts have already started colonizing **Playa Pesquero**, a small but sweet 1km beach accessible via a spur road just before the Cuatro Palmas junction. The sand is golden, the water shallow and the Cuban government happy to keep counting the profits. Travel and hotel brochures call this beach Costa Verde and along with Playa Esmeralda it is usually lumped alongside Guardalavaca (its infinitely poorer cousin).

Three kilometers west of Don Lino is **Playa Blanca**; Columbus landed somewhere near here in 1492, and this great meeting of two cultures is commemorated in **Parque Nacional Monumento Bariay** (Parque Natural Cristóbal Colón; admission CUC\$8) a varied mix of sights and memorabilia, the centerpiece of which is an impressive Hellenic-style monument designed by Holguín artist Caridad Ramos for the 500th anniversary of the landing in 1992. Other points of interest here include an information center, the remains of a 19th-century **Spanish fort**, three reconstructed **Taino huts**, an **archaeological museum** and the reasonable **Restaurante 'Columbo'**. It makes a nice afternoon out.

A promising new place just off the link road to the Playa Pesquero resorts is **Parque Rocazul** (☎ 3-0833; day trip with lunch CUC\$30), an eco-tourism venture that offers guided trekking, horseback-riding, mountain-biking and rowing/fishing excursions. The park is extensive with hills, trails, ocean access and an ostrich farm, though – thanks to its location next to Holguín's top-end resorts – it's not cheap.

Sleeping & Eating

PLAYA PESQUERO

Playa Costa Verde (Gaviota; Map p361; ☎ 3-0520; s/d low season CUC\$119/190, high season CUC\$169/270; 📞 📺 📺 📺) Eighty-five percent Canadian and popular with divers, the Costa Verde has recently undergone a change in management from Super Clubs to Gaviota which is probably a change for the better. Good snorkeling and diving trips are on offer.

Hotel Playa Pesquero (Gaviota; Map p361; ☎ 3-0530; s/d from CUC\$129/224; 📞 📺 📺 📺) Welcome to Cuba's biggest hotel. With 933 rooms the Pesquero, which opened in 2004 to rave reviews, is the size of a small village, with an infrastructure to match.

People use golf carts to get around here although the design is fairly clever and the beach – as one might expect – is picture perfect. There are something like 10 restaurants on site (one vegetarian), a massive swimming pool, a small shopping mall and activities for everyone from babies to senior citizens.

The other two resorts on this strip are Grand Playa Turquesa and Blau Costa Verde, both all-inclusive four-star establishments in a similar price range.

AROUND RAFAEL FREYRE

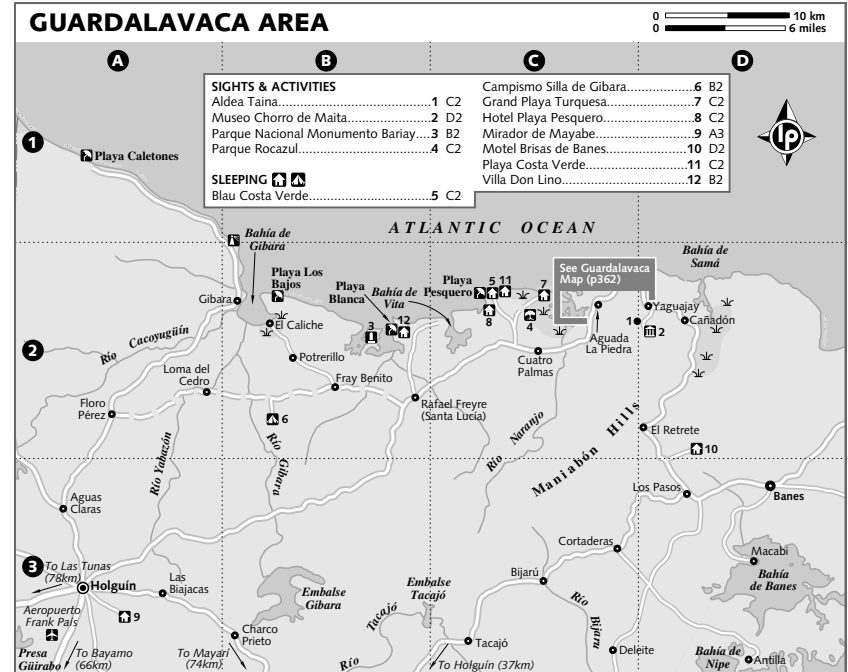
Campismo Silla de Gibara (Cubamar; Map p361; ☎ 42 15 86; per person CUC\$7.50; 📞) This camping ground sits on the hillside between Floro Pérez and Rafael Freyre, 35km southeast of Gibara via a rough road. It's 1.5km off the main road. There are 42 rooms sleeping two, four or six people, but come for the views, not the comfort. There's a cave to hike to, 1.5km hike up the hill, and horses for rent. Make a reservation with **Cubamar** (☎ 7-831-3151; www.cubamarviajes.cu; crn Calle 3 & Malecón, Vedado) in Habana, or at the **Reservaciones de Campismo** (Map p352; ☎ 42 28 81; Mártires No 87; 📞 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) in Holguín.

Villa Don Lino (Islazul; Map p361; ☎ 2-0443; s/d low season CUC\$37/47, high season CUC\$50/60; 📞) This place is situated 8.5km north of Rafael Freyre off a spur road. Mostly couples stay in the 36 single-story *cabañas* – with the small white beach, it makes a romantic retreat. This is a good option for people who want to play, but not stay, at Guardalavaca. It has been enthusiastically recommended by readers.

GUARDALAVACA

Guardalavaca is a string of mega-resorts draped along a succession of idyllic beaches 54km northeast of Holguín. Glimmering in the background, a landscape of rough green fields and haystack-shaped hills winks invitingly at bevies of sun-lounging tourists.

In the days before the all-inclusives, Columbus described this stretch of coast as the most beautiful place he had ever laid eyes on. Few modern-day visitors would disagree. Love it or hate it, Guardalavaca's enduring popularity is based on a devastating mix of enviable tropical beaches, ver-



dant green hills, and sheltered turquoise coral reefs. For many discerning travelers it leaves the more commercialized tourist resorts further west flailing hopelessly in the shade.

In the early 20th century this region was an important cattle-rearing area and the site of a small rural village (Guardalavaca means, quite literally, 'guard the cow'). The tourism boom didn't begin until the late 1970s when local Holguínero Fidel Castro inaugurated Guardalavaca's first resort – the sprawling Atlántico – by going for a quick dip in the hotel pool. The local economy hasn't looked back since.

The resort area is split into three separate enclaves: Playa Pesquero (see opposite), Playa Esmeralda and – 7km to the east – Guardalavaca proper; the original hotel strip which is already starting to peel a little around the edges. Unlike Varadero and Cayo Coco, Guardalavaca is less snooty and lower key. Fortuitously, it also allows beach access to Cubans, a factor that gives the place an added dash of local color.

Information

EMERGENCY

Asistur (Map p362; ☎ 3-0148; Centro Comercial Guardalavaca; 📞 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat)

Consulate of Canada (☎ 3-0320; Club Amigo Atlántico – Guardalavaca, Ste 1)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Clínica Internacional (Map p362; ☎ 3-0291) A 24-hour pharmacy on the same site as Villa Cabañas.

MONEY

Euros are accepted in all the Guardalavaca, Playa Esmeralda and Pesquero resorts.

Banco de Crédito y Comercio (Map p362; ☎ 3-0223; 📞 8am-noon & 1:30-3pm Mon-Fri) Behind Hotel Guardalavaca near the beach.

Banco Financiero Internacional (Map p362; ☎ 3-0272; Centro Comercial Guardalavaca) Just west of Club Amigo Atlántico – Guardalavaca.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Cubatur (Map p362; ☎ 3-0171; fax 3-0170; 📞 8am-4pm) Just behind the Centro Comercial Los Flamboyanes.

Ecotur (Map p362; ☎ 3-0155; Villa Cabañas No 8) Land/sea adventure tours.

six passengers) and a 'challenge tour' jeep-zodiac combo including lunch and horseback riding.

Delphis Diving Center (Map p362; Sol Río Luna Mares) Offers scuba diving and certification courses for guests of the two Grupo Sol Meliá resorts at Playa Esmeralda.

Eagle Ray Marlin Dive Center (Cubanacán Náutica; Map p362; Cubanacán Náutica; ☎ 3-0316) On the beach behind Disco Club La Roca. Identical program and prices to Center Coral Reef.

Sleeping

There are no casas particulares here, as renting rooms is banned. Banes, 33km to the southeast, is the closest town with private rooms.

GUARDALAVACA

Villa Cabañas (Map p362; ☎ 3-0144; r CUC\$57; 🏠) As the least-expensive place in Guardalavaca, the 20 cabins here are sometimes booked solid – phone ahead. They're good value, sleeping three comfortably and with a kitchen to boot. Rooms have TVs and a few resident frogs, and the water is hot-ish. It's located behind the Clínica Internacional – the beach and the rest of Guardalavaca's facilities are a hop, skip and a jump down the road. Ecotur also an office here and it's a cheap place to do laundry.

Club Amigo Atlántico – Guardalavaca (Cubanacán; Map p362; ☎ 3-0121, s/d from CUC\$79/128; 🏠 🏠 🏠 🏠) This sprawler of a resort is a fusion of the former Guardalavaca and Atlántico hotels, the latter of which is the resort's oldest, completed in 1976. In places, the age is starting to show. The architecture in this small 'village' (there are an astounding 600 rooms here in total) has an uninspiring blocklike layout and the paint is looking faded in places. Nevertheless, the Club Amigo has a wide range of accommodation options, including villas, bungalows and standard rooms, and is ever popular with families for its extensive kids' activities program. Most guests are Canadian and English, judging by the accents.

Brisas Guardalavaca Hotel (Cubanacán; Map p362; ☎ 3-0218; fax 3-0162; s/d all-inclusive low season from CUC\$95/140, high season CUC\$115/180; 🏠 🏠 🏠 🏠) This über-resort comprised of the Villa las Brisas and Hotel las Brisas at the eastern end of the beach is package-tour paradise. Though the beach is smallish, this is undoubtedly the more up-market of Guardalavaca's hotels, with big, clean rooms, good

service and a quiet location. Facilities include Disco La Dolce Vita, floodlit tennis courts, and water sports, including scuba diving.

PLAYA ESMERALDA

Moving 6km to the west, the resorts become more expensive and secluded. With its iridescent jade waters, craggy coves and sheltered setting, Playa Esmeralda has a private paradise feel missing at Guardalavaca. Reservations are available through **Havanatur** (Map p362; ☎ 3-0260; Centro Comercial Los Flamboyanes, Guardalavaca) or **San Cristóbal Agencia de Viajes** (☎ 7-861-9171/2; www.sancristobaltravel.com; Oficinas No 110 btwn Lamparilla & Amargura, Habana Vieja) in Habana.

Sol Río Luna Mares Resort (Gaviota; Map p362; ☎ 3-0030; s/d CUC\$210/300; 🏠 🏠 🏠 🏠) This two-in-one hotel is an amalgamation (all the rage in Cuba) made up of the former Sol Club Río de Luna and the Meliá Río de Mares. The latter part is closer to the beach and has a better overall layout. Nonguests are allowed into the restaurants, bars, shops and activity centers here. Yippee!

Paradise Río de Oro (Gaviota; Map p362; ☎ 3-0090; fax 3-0095; s/d CUC\$335/520; 🏠 🏠 🏠 🏠) The five stars are glowing at this 292-room resort that seems much smaller thanks to a clever layout, sterling service and landscape screening. Swing in a hammock overlooking the beach or get a massage in a cliffside hut. There's even a Japanese restaurant floating on a koi pond. Garden villas with private pools cost CUC\$900.

Eating

Restaurante Italiano (Map p362; 🕒 10am-11pm) You'll feel like an outcast eating at this place, beside Centro Comercial Guardalavaca, while everyone else tucks into the all-you-can-eat buffets a couple of hundred yards away. Nevertheless pizzas are big and service is quick and amiable. A good meal for two won't break CUC\$10.

Restaurante El Cayuelo (Map p362; ☎ 3-0736; 🕒 10am-11pm) Seafood is the house specialty here and a full lobster meal is less than CUC\$20. A nice break from the resorts. It's on the beach 800m east of Brisas Guardalavaca Hotel.

Other recommendations:

El Ancla (Map p362; ☎ 3-0381; 🕒 11am-11pm) Seafood and beautiful coastal setting, just west of Disco Club La Roca.

El Conuco de Mongo Viña (Map p362; 3-course meals CUC\$8; 🕒 9am-4am) On the Bahía de Naranjo, a 2km walk from the Sol Meliá duo.

El Rápido (Map p362; Centro Comercial Los Flamboyanes; 🕒 24hr) If you can't beat 'em, join 'em! There's also a pool table and video games here.

Drinking & Entertainment

Disco Club La Roca (Map p362; ☎ 3-0167; admission CUC\$1; 🕒 1-5pm & 9:30pm-3am) This disco just west of the Centro Comercial Guardalavaca has a nice open-air locale overlooking the beach. It opens during the day with video games, karaoke and other free entertainment.

Bar Oasis (Map p362; 🕒 7am-11pm) This small thatched bar near the golf driving range is where moped-riding swarms descend for icy Cristales.

Shopping

There's a small handicraft market next to Club Amigo Atlántico – Guardalavaca. ARTex, behind Hotel Guardalavaca, has a good selection of CDs.

Other options:

Casa del Habanos (Centro Comercial Los Flamboyanes) All the smoke you could want.

Photo service (Map p362; Centro Comercial Los Flamboyanes) In the main shopping center; does everything from film processing to passport shots.

Getting There & Away

Club Amigo Atlántico – Guardalavaca can sometimes arrange transfers to Holguín for CUC\$10; ask around. A taxi from Guardalavaca to Holguín will cost a heftier CUC\$40 one way for the car. For radio taxis, call **TaxiOK** (☎ 3-0243) or **Transgaviota** (☎ 3-0966).

Getting Around

Drivers of the various hotel employee buses have strict orders not to carry tourists, and trying to use public transportation is hopeless here in Guardalavaca. Private taxis are banned, but you might hitch a ride with other tourists (for information on the risks associated with hitching see p477). *Coches de caballo* (horse carriages) run between Playas Esmeralda and Guardalavaca or you can rent a moped or bike at all of the resort hotels.

A **Servi-Cupet station** (🕒 24hr) is between Guardalavaca and Playa Esmeralda.

All the rental agencies have offices in Guardalavaca and rent mopeds for CUC\$30 per day:

Cubacar Centro Flamboyanes (Map p362; ☎ 3-0243); Club Amigo Atlántico – Guardalavaca (Map p362; ☎ 3-0180)

Havanaautos (Map p362; ☎ 3-0223; Cupet Cimex Garage)

Transtur (Map p362; ☎ 3-0134; Villas Cabañas No 6)

BANES

🕒 24 / pop 44,983

The sugar town of Banes, just north of the Bahía de Banes, is a place of contradictions and paradoxes. Cuban president Fulgencio Batista was born here in 1901. Forty-seven years later, in the local clapboard church of Nuestra Señora de la Caridad, another fiery leader-in-waiting, Fidel Castro, tied the knot with the blushing Birta Díaz Balart. A generous Batista gave them a US\$500 gift for their honeymoon.

Founded in 1887, this effervescent company town was owned and operated by the US-run United Fruit Company until the 1950s and many of the old American company houses still remain. These days in the sun-streaked streets and squares you're more likely to encounter cigar-smoking cronies slamming dominoes and moms carrying meter-long loaves of bread; in short, everything Cuban missing from the all-inclusive resorts. The 33km road south-east from Guardalavaca to Banes winds between *bohíos* (thatched huts) and royal palms through the Maniabón Hills; it's a really beautiful trip.

Information

There's an **immigration office** (Av de Cárdenas No 314A) here if you need a visa extension. Banes is one of those towns with no street signs and locals who don't know street names, so prepare to lose yourself.

Sights & Activities

If you're coming from the resorts, Banes' biggest attraction may be the street-life a stroll through town provides.

On October 12, 1948, Fidel Castro Ruz and Birta Díaz Balart were married in the **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Caridad** on Parque Martí in the center of Banes. (After their divorce in 1954, Birta remarried and moved to Spain, but through their only child, Fidelito, Fidel has several grandchildren.)

FIDEL: BEHIND THE MASK

Fiery, explosive and egotistical; the indomitable figure of Fidel Castro has stamped his mark on the 20th century like few figures, Cuban or otherwise. But what of the real personality that lies behind the public mask?

Born near the village of Birán in Holguín Province on August 13, 1926, the illegitimate product of a relationship between Spanish-born landowner Ángel Castro and his cook and housemaid Lina Ruz (they later married), Fidel grew up as a favored child in a large and relatively wealthy family of sugar farmers. Educated at a Jesuit school and sent away to study in the city of Santiago at the age of seven, the young Castro was an exceptional student whose prodigious talents included a photographic memory and an extraordinary aptitude for sport. Indeed, legend has it that at the age of 21, Fidel – by then a skilled left-arm pitcher – was offered a professional baseball contract with the Washington Senators.

At the age of 13 Fidel staged his first insurrection, a strike organized among his father's sugarcane workers against their unforgiving and exploitative boss, a gesture that did little to endear him into the fraternal fold.

One year later the still-teenage Castro penned a letter to US president FD Roosevelt congratulating him on his re-election and asking the American leader for a US\$10 bill 'because I have not seen a ten dollars bill American and I would like to have one of them.' Rather ominously for future US-Cuban relations, the request was politely turned down.

Undeterred Fidel marched on regardless, bulldozing everything that fell in his path. On the completion of his high-school certificate in 1945, his teacher and mentor Father Francisco Barbeito predicted sagely that his bullish star pupil would 'fill with brilliant pages the book of his life.' He wasn't far wrong.

Armed with tremendous personal charisma, a wrought-iron will, and an inbred ability to pontificate interminably for hours on end, Fidel made tracks for Habana University where his forthright and unyielding personality quickly ensured that he excelled at everything he did.

Banes is better known for the **Museo Indocubano Bani** (☎ 8-2487; General Marrero No 305; admission without/with guide CUC\$1/2; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sat, 8am-noon & 7-9pm Sun). The museum's small but rich collection of Indian artifacts is one of the best on the island. Don't miss the tiny

CASAS PARTICULARES – BANES

There are no hotels in the town proper, but Banes has some good private rooms.

Casa Evelin Feria (☎ 8-3150; Bruno Meriño No 3401A btwn Delfin Pupo & JMH, Reparto Cárdenas; r CUC\$20-25; 🍷) Pleasant upstairs room. Breakfast provided for CUC\$3.

Julio Dante (☎ 8-3243/8-3643; Robles No 85A btwn Calles 7 & 8; r CUC\$20; 🍷) Spotless rooms and linen; good meals.

Sergio Aguilera (☎ 8-2412; Calle Iglesias No 4089, Reparto Nicaragua; r CUC\$20; 🍷) Family atmosphere; meals.

Alfredo Serrano Proenza (☎ 8-2464; pastjoelmorales@yahoo.com; Delfin Pupo No 1105 btwn Bruno Meriño & JM Gomez, Reparto Cárdenas; r CUC\$20-25; 🍷)

golden fertility idol unearthed near Banes (one of only 20 gold artifacts ever found in Cuba).

Railway junkies shouldn't miss **steam locomotive No 964** (El Panchito; Calle Tráfico), built at the HK Porter Locomotive Works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1888, now on display 400m east of the bus station. **Playa de Morales**, 13km east of Banes along the paved continuation of Tráfico, is a fishing village where you can while away an afternoon dining with locals and watching the men mend their nets. A few kilometers to the north is the even quieter **Playa Puerto Rico**.

Sleeping OUTSIDE TOWN

Campismo Puerto Rico Libre (Cubamar; ☎ 9-6918; per person CUC\$5) This place is north of Playa de Morales, 13km from Banes. The basic cabins line the rocky shore, there's a restaurant, and people in the nearby fishing villages will happily cook seafood meals for you. Ask about the caves (about 1km from the campismo), and bring insect repellent.

Training ostensibly as a lawyer, Castro spent the next three years embroiled in political activity amid an academic forum that was riddled with gang violence and petty corruption. 'My impetuosity, my desire to excel, fed and inspired the character of my struggle', he recalled candidly years later.

Blessed with more lives than a cat, Castro has survived a failed putsch, 15 months in prison, exile, a two-year guerrilla war in the mountains, and a reported 617 attempts on his life. His sense of optimism in the face of defeat is nothing short of astounding. With his rebel army reduced to a ragged band of 12 men after the Granma landing, he astonished his beleaguered colleagues with a fiery victory speech. 'We will win this war', he trumpeted confidently, 'We are just beginning the fight!'

As an international personality who has outlasted 10 American presidents, the 21st-century incarnation of Fidel Castro – world statesman – is no less enigmatic than the revolutionary leader of yore. Fostering his own brand of Caribbean socialism with an unflinching desire to 'defend the revolution at all costs' the ever-changing ideology that Castro so famously preaches is perhaps best summarized by biographer Volker Skierka as 'a pragmatic mixture of a little Marx, Engels and Lenin, slightly more of Che Guevara, a lot of José Martí, and a great deal indeed of Fidel Castro.'

Castro the private individual is equally difficult to pin down. Among associates it is well known that his hobbies include scuba-diving and baseball; others claim that an off-duty Fidel enjoys consuming ice cream and chocolate milkshakes. He never dances but is, by all accounts, a formidable cook (his signature dish is spaghetti Bolognese).

Estranged from many of his closest family, including his embittered Miami-based daughter Alina, Castro's friends have a propensity to be as evasive and as tight-lipped as the great man himself. 'One thing is certain', wrote longtime friend and associate, Colombian novelist, Gabriel García Márquez, 'Wherever he may be, however and with whomever, Fidel Castro is there to win. I do not think anyone in this world could be a worse loser.'

Motel Brisas de Banes (Map p361; cabin CUC\$30)

This place, on a hill overlooking a reservoir 10km northwest of Banes off the road to Guardalavaca, has eight cabins, each sleeping two people. There are nice views – a pleasant out-of-the-way place for a beer.

Eating & Drinking

Restaurant El Latino (General Marrero No 710; 🕒 11am-11pm) A top Banes choice is this Palmareas place with all the usual Creole dishes delivered with a little extra flair and charm. Service is good and the accompanying musicians unusually talented and discreet.

La Vicaria (🕒 24hr) Across the street from El Latino is yet another reliable La Vicaria, with pasta, burgers and Gordon Bleu (chicken stuffed with ham and cheese), plus eggs and coffee for breakfast (everything is less than CUC\$4).

Coctelera (General Marrero No 327A) Several peso bars around town are jumping with atmosphere and cheap hooch, including this one, and the super popular Doña Yulla next door.

Alternatively, head down the street to Las 400 Rosas, an outdoor Convertible place selling sodas, beer and snacks next to the Museo Indocubano Bani.

Entertainment

Cafe Cantante (General Marrero No 320) This gregarious, music-filled patio is the top spot in Banes. During the day, you'll hear the municipal band honking its way through rehearsal while the night brings disco or *son* (Cuba's basic form of popular music) septets for your listening pleasure. Sundays afternoons feature traditional *trova* (poetic singing/songwriting) from 2pm to 7pm, while Sunday nights are when the really special stuff happens. Visiting jazz musicians (who often play gigs at Guardalavaca) play concerts here, and indulge in jam sessions.

Casa de Cultura (☎ 8-2111; General Marrero No 320) Next door to Cafe Cantante this venue, housed in the former Casino Español (1926), has a regular Sunday *trova* matinee at 3pm and Saturday *peña del Rap* (rap music session) at 9pm.

Getting There & Away

From the bus station at the corner of Tráfico and Los Ángeles, one morning bus goes to Holguín (72km) daily (supposedly). An afternoon bus connects with the train to Habana. Trucks leave Banes for Holguín more frequently.

BIRÁN

Fidel Castro Ruz was born on August 13, 1926, at the **Finca Las Manacas** (aka 'Casa de Fidel') near the village of Birán, south of Cueto. The farm – which was bought by Fidel's father Ángel in 1915 – is huge, and includes its own workers' village (a cluster of small thatched huts for the mainly Haitian laborers), cockfighting ring, post office, store and telegraph. The several large yellow wooden houses that can be glimpsed through the cedar trees are where the Castro family lived.

The Finca opened as a museum in 2002 under the unassuming name of **Sitio Histórico de Birán** (admission/camera/video CUC\$10/20/40; ☎ 9am-noon & 1:30-4pm Tue-Sat, 9am-noon Sun), so as not to draw attention to Castro's so-called 'personality cult.' The modesty extends to the signage which is nonexistent. To get here, take the southern turn-off 7km west of Cueto, and drive 7km south to the Central Loynaz Hechevarría sugar mill at Marcané. From there a road runs 8km east to Birán, from which it's another 3km northeast to Finca Las Manacas.

The museum itself is an interesting excursion containing more than 100 photos, assorted clothes, Fidel's childhood bed, and his father's 1918 Ford motorcar. With 27 installations the place constitutes a *pueblito* (small town) and, if nothing else, it shows the extent of the inheritance that this hot-headed ex-lawyer gave up to go and live in the Sierra Maestra for two years surviving on a diet of crushed crabs and raw horse meat.

The graves of Fidel's parents, Ángel Castro and Lina Ruz, are to the right of the entrance gate.

MAYARÍ

☎ 24 / pop 80,200

'De Alto Cedro, voy para Marcané, llevo a Cueto, voy para Mayarí.' The famous opening stanza from the classic Cuban song, *Chan Chan* is more than a tad mislead-

ing. Mayarí is not a place people go to so much as end up. The 51st state of America before 1959, thanks to the all-embracing presence of the United Fruit Company, Mayarí today has little to offer the average tourist. Travelers use it more as a base to visit the nearby Finca Manacas, Cayo Saetia or the waterfalls and forests of the coffee-growing **Parque Natural La Mensura**, 30km south. There's a Servi-Cupet gas station in town. This area is notable for its dense pine forests and impressive waterfalls. Hikes and attractions include La Presa Lake, La Planca flower garden, horseback-riding, eco-hikes and a chance to glimpse some of the 100 or more endemic plants found only in this area. For further details inquire at the Villa Pinares del Mayarí (see below).

Sleeping & Eating

Villa Pinares del Mayarí (Gaviota; ☎ 5-3308; fax 3-0926; s/d CUC\$30/35, cabins CUC\$35/40; 🚽) One in a duo of classic Gaviota Holguín hideaways, Pinares del Mayarí stands at 600m elevation between the Altiplanicie de Nipe and Sierra del Cristal, 30km south of Mayarí on a rough dirt road. Part Swiss-chalet resort, part mountain hideaway, this isolated rural gem is situated in one of Cuba's largest pine forests and the two- and three-bedroom cabins, with hot showers and comfortable beds, make a nice retreat. There's also a large restaurant, bar, tennis court and horses for hire.

The villa is within the Parque Natural La Mensura and offers hikes to El Guayabo waterfall (Cuba's highest), the Loma de la Mensura (995m) and the ghostly Farallones de Seboruco caves. You can arrange tours to Cayo Saetia (see below) from here.

Getting There & Away

The only way to get Villa Pinares del Mayarí outside of an organized tour is via car or taxi. The access road is rough and in a poor state of repair though passable in a hire car if driven with care. If arriving from Santiago the best route is via the small settlement of Mella.

EAST OF MAYARÍ

East of Mayarí the road gets increasingly potholed and the surroundings, while never losing their dusty rural charm, progressively more remote. The culmination

of this rustic drive is lovely Cayo Saetia, a small, flat wooded island in the Bay of Nipe that is connected to the mainland by a small bridge. During the '70s and '80s this was a favored hunting ground for communist apparatchiks who enjoyed splaying lead into the local wildlife. Fortunately those days are now gone. Indeed, ironic as it may sound, Cayo Saetia is now a protected wildlife park with 19 species of exotic animal including camels, zebras, antelopes, ostriches and deer. Bisected by grassy meadows and adorned by hidden coves and beaches, it's the closet Cuba gets to an African wildlife reserve. Well worth a visit.

Sleeping & Eating

Campismo Río Cabonico (☎ 59 41 18; r per person from CUC\$5) This place is at Pueblo Nuevo, 9km east of Levisa and 73km west of Moa, about 900m south of the main road. The 23 cabins with baths and fans on a low terrace beside the Río Cabonico (decent swimming) have four or six beds. Reservations can be made through the Reservasiones de Campismo in Holguín (p351).

Villa Cayo Saetia (Gaviota; ☎ 9-6900; vsaetia@ip.etecsa.cu; s/d low season CUC\$30/35, high season CUC\$35/40; 🚽) This wonderfully rustic but comfortable resort on a 42-sq-km island at the entrance to the Bahía de Nipe is small, remote and more up-market than the price suggests. The 12 rooms are split into rustic and standard *cabañas* with a slight price differential, while the in-house restaurant La Güira – decked out Hemingway-style with unsavory reminders of hunters past – serves exotic meats such as antelope. You'll

feel as if you're a thousand miles from anywhere here.

Getting There & Around

There are three ways to explore Cayo Saetia aside from the obvious two-legged sorties from the villa itself. A one-hour jeep safari costs CUC\$9, while excursions by horse and boat are CUC\$6 and CUC\$5 respectively. Though isolated you can secure passage on a twice weekly Gaviota helicopter from Guardalavaca (CUC\$124, Saturday and Monday) or a bus/boat combo from the town of Antillas. If arriving by car, the control post is 15km off the main road. Then it's another 8km along a rough, unpaved road to the resort. A hire car will make it – with care.

MOA

☎ 24 / pop 57,484

Important economically and horrendous ecologically, Moa is a big, ugly mine at the foot of the verdant scarps of the Cuchillas de Moa. Unless you're a Canadian mining technician, or an environmentalist investigating impending ecological disasters, there's absolutely no reason to come here. 'A better world is possible' proclaims one of the billboards as you leave the town behind. Absolutely!

Sleeping

Hotel Miraflores (Islazul; ☎ 6-6125; Av. Amistad, Rpto. Miraflores; s/d low season CUC\$29/40, high season CUC\$36/48; 🚽) If you must stay, this is a modern four-story hotel on a hillside on the western side of Moa, 5km west of

MINING NEAR MOA

A pillar of the country's export economy for decades, the mining of nickel and cobalt in Cuba has a long and checkered history. In the early 1950s the US-owned Moa mines provided the majority of nickel needed to fight the Korean War and during the '70s and '80s Soviet technical help aided Cuba to achieve its position as the world's third largest supplier of nickel. Since the economic crises of the early 1990s the Cuban government has been forced to establish joint ventures to keep Moa afloat with the majority of investment coming from Toronto-based Sheritt International.

Unfortunately the changes have led to a lowering of environmental standards in the industry with old, leaky equipment causing the air and water to fill up with sulfur and precipitate (some Moa residents claim) an unpleasant form of acid rain. Critics complain that the Canadian-financed Pedro Soto Alba nickel mine reportedly throws out 12,000 cubic meters of liquid waste per day. Tons of this toxic compound – which contains dangerously high levels of chrome, magnesium and sulfuric acid – is being dumped into the sea causing irrevocable damage to marine life.

the airport. The local Havanautos office is at this hotel, and there's a tourist taxi stand.

Getting There & Around

Moa's Orestes Acosta Airport is conveniently located beside the highway to Baracoa, just 3km east of downtown Moa. **Cubana** (☎ 6-7916) has flights to/from Habana on Monday (CUC\$124 one way, three hours).

The bus station is near the center of town, 3km east of the Hotel Miraflores. A daily bus leaves for Holguín and another goes

to Santiago de Cuba, but there's no bus to Baracoa. You may be prevented from using the regular passenger trucks that leave the bus station for Holguín and Baracoa, as foreigners are officially prohibited. This means that there's no legal public transport except for hitching and tourist taxis between Moa and Baracoa. Taxi drivers will ask CUC\$25 to Baracoa.

Havanautos (☎ 6-6683) has an office at the Hotel Miraflores. The Servi-Cupet gas station is at the entrance to Moa from Mayarí, not far from the Hotel Miraflores.