

Isla de la Juventud (Special Municipality)



Siguanea, Juan El Evangelista, Parrot Island, Isla de Pinos – Isla de la Juventud has had more incarnations than Fidel Castro has had policy u-turns. A veritable no-man’s-land compared with the more popular tourist haunts on the Cuban ‘mainland’, La Isla – as locals affectionately call it – is an engaging blend of sleepy Cuban backwater and untamed ecological wilderness.

The island’s most celebrated attraction is its underwater coral formations and scuba divers flock here for what are considered to be the most impressive collections of drop-offs, wrecks, caves and marine life in the Caribbean. But, for those more at home on dry land, there’s plenty of quieter corners in which to slow down, put your feet up, and get to know the locals.

Nueva Gerona is the best place to start, the island’s cheerful capital, an architectural hotch-potch of old and new that feels as if it fell asleep in 1945 and woke up 60 years later. Other curiosities include the indigenous cave paintings in Cueva Punta del Este, a turtle breeding center on the isolated south coast and the botanical gardens of La Jungla de Jones.

The island has served as a prison, with such infamous dissidents as Fidel Castro and José Martí banished here. Cuba’s alternative Alcatraz can be viewed in a cluster of grotesque circular buildings known collectively as Presidio Modelo. Situated 114km to the east, brilliant Cayo Largo del Sur is Cuba’s most ‘exclusive’ all-inclusive resort. In dramatic contrast to the humdrum pace and underlying Cuban character of La Isla, the atmosphere here is plush, foreign and ruthlessly professional, though the beaches are pristine and the cluster of high-ranking hotels as good as you’ll find anywhere.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Getting There**
Cross the Golfo de Batabanó in a speedy hydrofoil or lumbering on the ferry (p186)
- **Jail Break**
Explore the eerily empty Presidio Modelo (p187), where Fidel Castro and other Moncada Barracks rebels were imprisoned
- **Indigenous Art**
Admire the ‘Sistine Chapel’ of primitive cave paintings in Cueva de Punta del Este (p189)
- **Going Deep**
Wrecks, walls, coral gardens and caves; Punta Francés (p188) is *the* best place to dive in Cuba
- **Beach Comb**
Relax on the white, soft sands of Playa Sirena (p189) on Cayo Largo del Sur



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 46

■ POPULATION: 80,625

■ AREA: 2398 SQ KM

NUEVA GERONA

☎ 46 / pop 37,300

Flanked by the Sierra de Las Casas to the west and the Sierra de Caballos to the east, Nueva Gerona is a small, unhurried town that hugs the left bank of the Río Las Casas, the island's only large river. Little-visited and devoid of any the major historical buildings that dot Cuba's Isla Grande, it's a small, cheap and incredibly friendly place and you could easily find that you're the only foreign face around.

Information

AIRLINE OFFICES

Cubana (☎ 2-253; Calle 39 No 1415 btwn Calles 16 & 18)

IMMIGRATION

Inmigración (cnr Calles 34 & 35; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon & Wed) Probably not the greatest place to seek an extension.

MEDIA

Radio Caribe Broadcasts varied musical programs on 1270AM.

Victoria Local paper published on Saturday.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Farmacia Nueva Gerona (☎ 32 60 84; cnr Calles 39 & 24; ☎ 8am-11pm Mon-Sat)

Hospital General Héroes de Baire (☎ 32 30 12; Calle 39A) There's a recompression chamber here.

Policlínico Provincial de Emergencia (Calle 41 btwn Calles 32 & 34)

MONEY

Banco de Crédito y Comercio (☎ 32 48 05; Calle 39 No 1802; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) On the corner of Calle 18.

Banco Popular de Ahorro (☎ 32 27 42; cnr Calles 39 & 26; ☎ 8am-noon & 1:30-5pm Mon-Fri)

Cadeca (☎ 32 34 62; Calle 39 No 2022; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-1pm Sun) On the corner of Calle 20.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Photo Service (☎ 32 47 66; Calle 39 No 2010 btwn Calles 20 & 22) Buy or develop film.

POST

Post office (☎ 32 26 00; Calle 39 No 1810 btwn Calles 18 & 20; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat)

TELEPHONE & INTERNET ACCESS

Etesca (Calle 41 No 2802 btwn Calles 28 & 30; ☎ 6am-10pm)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Ecotur (☎ 32 71 01; Calle 39 btwn Calles 24 & 26) Call here to arrange your permit to the militarized zone.

Oficina de Campismo (☎ 32 45 17; Calle 37 No 2208 btwn Calles 22 & 24; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

Sights

This is a good area to discover on bicycle, with beaches, Museo Finca El Abra and the Presidio Modelo all only a few kilometers from Nueva Gerona. Ask at your casa particular about bicycle rentals.

DOWNTOWN

The **Museo Municipal** (☎ 32 37 91; Calle 30 btwn Calles 37 & 39; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) is in the former Casa de Gobierno (1853). It houses a small historical collection with a few pirate tidbits mixed in with the usual bones and birds.

The art school on the west side of Parque Central is the former **Centro Escolar**, built in 1928. On the northwest side of Parque Central is the church of **Nuestra Señora de los Dolores** (☎ 32 18 35). This Mexican colonial-style church was built in 1926, after the original was destroyed by a hurricane. In 1957 the parish priest, Guillermo Sardiñas, left Nueva Gerona to join Fidel Castro in the Sierra Maestra, the only Cuban priest to do so. Sardiñas was eventually promoted to the rank of *comandante*.

On Calle 28, two blocks east of Parque Central, you'll see a huge ferry painted black and white and set up as a memorial next to the river. This is **El Pinero** (☎ 32 41 62), the original boat used to ferry passengers between La Isla and the main island from the 1920s until 1974. On May 15, 1955, Castro and the other prisoners released from Moncada returned to the main island on El Pinero.

In terms of the revolution, the most important museum here is the **Museo de la Lucha clandestina** (☎ 32 45 82; Calle 24 btwn Calles 43 & 45; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sat, 8am-noon Sun), which is crammed with both boring (reams of correspondence) and fascinating (cool photos of Fidel and the other rebels imprisoned in Presidio Modelo) information about the underground struggle against Batista.

More interesting for the average visitor is the **Planetario y Museo de Historia Natural** (☎ 32

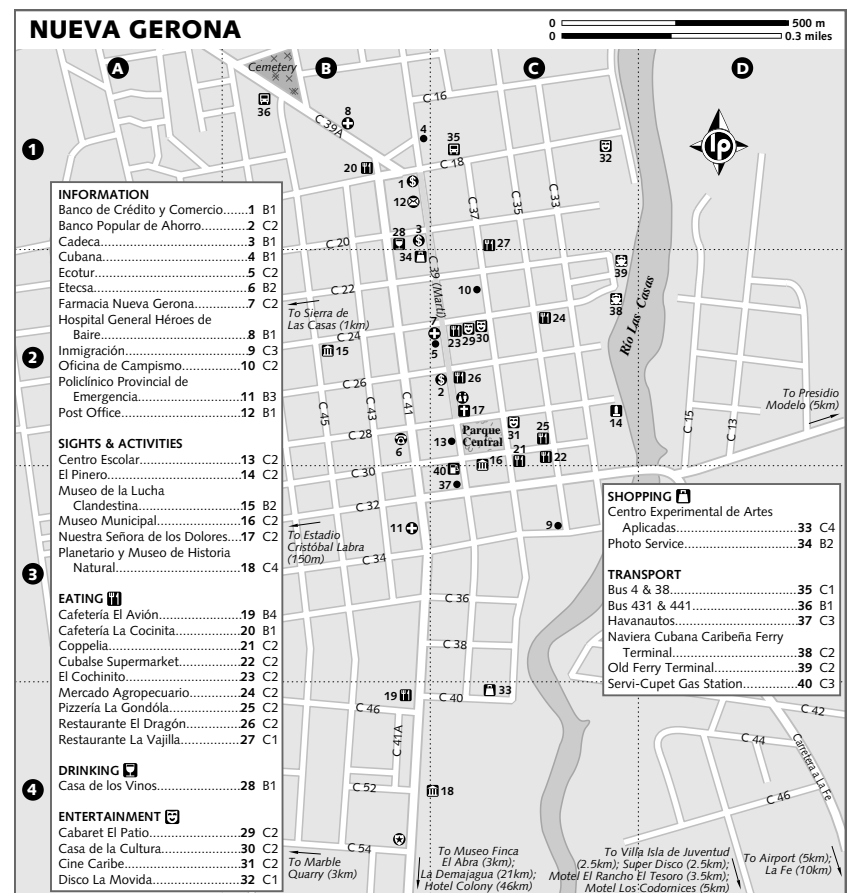
31 43; cnr Calles 41 & 52; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Sat, 9am-noon Sun), showcasing the natural history, geology and archaeology of the island. There's a replica of the Cueva Punta del Este cave paintings here if you can't make it out there (see p189). You might gain access to the planetarium (and use of the telescope therein) by talking to the guard.

MUSEO FINCA EL ABRA

This **museum** (Carretera Sigüanea Km 2; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is 3km southwest of Nueva Gerona, off the road to La Demajagua (the continuation of Calle 41). Coming from Motel El Rancho El Tesoro, go southwest a few hundred meters on a dirt road to another

highway. Turn right and cross a bridge over the Río Las Casas. At the next junction, turn right again, and you'll soon come to a sign indicating the access road to Finca El Abra.

The teenage José Martí arrived at Finca El Abra on October 17, 1870, to spend nine weeks of exile on this farm, prior to his deportation to Spain. Legend has it that the shackles he wore here were forged into a ring by his mother, which Martí wore to his death. The old hacienda is directly below the Sierra de Las Casas and it's worth coming as much for the surroundings as for the museum. Cuban oaks and eucalyptus trees line the access road, and a huge ceiba tree stands next to the museum. A



sundial (1868) is outside the museum. The adjacent house is still occupied by Omar Sarda, whose ancestor Giuseppe Girondella hosted Martí here.

To loop back to town, look for the dirt road just before the museum. This road leads north to the island's former **marble quarry**, which is clearly visible in the distance. The quarry is moderately interesting (if you dig big holes in the ground), but the real attraction is the climb up the hill, from where there are lovely views. After descending, continue north between a garbage dump and several rows of pig pens (not very attractive, but any loop has got to be better than backtracking, right?) to Calle 54 on the right. This street will bring you into town via the Planetario y Museo de Historia Natural, six blocks to the east.

Activities

HIKING

It's possible to climb the **Sierra de Las Casas** from the west end of Calle 22. A few hundred meters along a dirt track, you will see a trail on the left toward the hills. At the very foot of the hill is a deep cave with a concrete stairway leading down to the local swimming hole. The trail beyond this is fairly obvious, but mark your way mentally so you can return without a worry. A stone on the mountaintop is inscribed 'pilot's seat', and from here you can see most of the north of the island.

Festivals & Events

Fiesta de la Toronja (Grapefruit Festival) is held on Isla de la Juventud every March. Pucker up for this one.

Sleeping

Many people offering private rooms meet the arriving ferries. This is the best way to go, as you'll have a room right in town, and your hosts will feed you filling meals. See the boxed text (right) for suggestions. Otherwise, Nueva Gerona's state-run hotels are located south of town.

Motel Los Codornices (☎ 32 49 81; Antigua Carretera a La Fe Km 4.5; r CUC\$20; (P) (♿) (♿)) This far-flung motel, 2km north of the airport and 5km southeast of Nueva Gerona, is patronized mostly by Cubans. The cabanas are better than the rooms, but this place

is so far removed it's an 'only if desperate' option.

Villa Isla de Juventud (Islazul; ☎ 32 32 90; Autopista Nueva Gerona-La Fe Km 1; s/d incl breakfast CUC\$29/33; (P) (♿) (♿)) Situated about 5km from the airport and 2.5km from Nueva Gerona, this is the best accommodation option and has friendly staff to boot. There are 20 rooms with fridges in two-story, four-unit blocks. Framed by the island's twin marble mountains, Villa Isla de Juventud has a surprising amount of atmosphere. The Villa's reputation is enhanced by a suspension bridge behind the hotel that crosses the Río Las Casas. It's not a bad spot, especially around sunset, but make sure you're well lathered with insect repellent.

Motel El Rancho El Tesoro (Islazul; ☎ 32 30 35; s/d CUC\$31/36) This friendly motel lies in a wooded area near the Río Las Casas, 3km south of town, just off the Autopista Nueva Gerona La Fe. The 60 rooms are in five long blocks of 10 rooms each, with another 10 rooms upstairs in a two-story building near the entrance.

Eating

Casas particulares (most of which are licensed to serve food) serve better value meals than any of the state-run restaurants. You might try El Doblón, the restaurant in Villa Isla de Juventud.

CASAS PARTICULARES – ISLA DE LA JUVENTUD

Alicides Taureaux Nieves (☎ 32 43 10; Calle 35 No 1813 btwn 18 & 20; r CUC\$20) Near the ferry; meals served and friendly service.

Elda Cepero (☎ 32 27 74; Calle 43 No 2004 btwn Calles 20 & 22; r CUC\$20) Nice backyard and meals; ask about bikes.

Odalís Peña Fernández (☎ 32 23 45; Calle 10 No 3710; r CUC\$15-20; (♿)) Three blocks west of Cubana office, signposted 'Peña Village' it has two rooms for let.

'Villa Choli' – Ramberto Peña Silva (☎ 32 31 47; Calle C No 4001A btwn Calles 6 & 8; r CUC\$20) Reader recommended.

Villa Mas – Jorge Luis Mas Peña (☎ 32 35 44; Calle 41 No 4108 Apt 7 btwn Calles 8 & 10; r CUC\$15) Outside town center behind hospital; friendly hosts and rooftop terrace.

RESTAURANTS

El Cochinito (☎ 32 28 09; cnr Calles 39 & 24; ☎ noon-11pm, closed Wed) Get your pork steaks, yucca, rice and beans here and eat al fresco out the back.

Restaurante El Dragón (☎ 32 44 79; cnr Calles 39 & 26; meals CUC\$3; ☎ noon-10pm, closed Wed) Specializes in Chinese food, but there's little selection and it's not recommended for vegetarians. There's sometimes live music after 8pm and there's always a big gong to beat if the inspiration hits.

Pizzería La Góndola (cnr Calles 30 & 35; ☎ noon-10pm) Offering a break from the pork-chicken-*congrí* (rice flecked with beans) cycle, the pizza here is on par with other Cuban pizza places.

Restaurante La Vajilla (☎ 32 46 92; Calle 37 btwn Calles 20 & 22; mains CUC\$4; ☎ noon-9pm, closed Thu) For cheap *comida criolla* (Creole food) try this large hangarlike building that becomes a disco at night. Main plates cost around CUC\$4.

Cafetería La Cocinita (☎ 32 46 40; Calles 18 & 41; ☎ 24hr) This is a good place for peso sandwiches and juice or more substantial meals in the nicer sit-down section in the back.

Cafetería El Avión (☎ 32 29 70; cnr Calles 41 & 40; ☎ 10am-7pm) Another peso place. The adjacent snack counter is open 24 hours.

Coppelia (☎ 32 22 25; Calle 37 btwn Calles 30 & 32; ☎ noon-10pm Tue-Sun) You wouldn't be in Cuba if there wasn't a Coppelia. Head here to sate that ice-cream craving.

GROCERIES

Mercado agropecuario (cnr Calles 24 & 35) Try this large market for fresh vegetables and meat.

Cubalse Supermarket (Calle 35 btwn Calles 30 & 32; ☎ 9:30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Sells groceries and sundries.

Drinking

Casa de los Vinos (cnr Calles 20 & 41; ☎ 1-10pm Mon-Wed, 1pm-midnight Fri-Sun, closed Thu) A nice local drinking hole with 'ahoy matey!' nautical decor. Aside from ham sandwiches, you can get wine made from grapefruit, grapes and melon by the glass.

Entertainment

Evening events are often held at the **Casa de la Cultura** (☎ 32 35 91; cnr Calles 37 & 24). Also ask

about the famous local *sucu-sucu* (a variation of *son*, Cuba's popular music) group led by Mongo Rives, which sometimes plays at the Casa de la Cultura in **La Fe** (☎ 39 74 68; cnr Calles 7 & 8).

DANCE CLUBS

Disco La Movida (Calle 18; ☎ from 11pm) For a little atmospheric booty shaking, join the throngs of locals dancing in an open-air locale hidden among the trees near the river.

Cabaret El Patio (☎ 32 23 46; Calle 24 btwn Calles 37 & 39; per couple CUC\$3; ☎ 10pm-2am Thu-Sun) Next door to the Casa de la Cultura, this venue has an entertaining floorshow at 11pm. Show up early to get in; official policy is couples only.

Restaurante El Dragón (cnr Calles 39 & 26; ☎ from 10pm Tue & Wed, 8pm Thu-Sun) This restaurant has disco dancing in the rear courtyard.

Super Disco (admission CUC\$1; ☎ from 10pm Thu-Sun) You've got to love a place with a name like this. The locals do: this club next to Villa Isla de la Juventud is always packed.

Restaurante La Vajilla (☎ 32 46 92; Calle 37 btwn Calles 20 & 22; ☎ noon-9pm, closed Thu) Less popular but worth a mention in Nueva Gerona's small-town nightlife is this place which offers a disco in a hangarlike building at night.

CINEMAS

Cine Caribe (☎ 32 24 16; cnr Calles 37 & 28) For a film or video, check out this cinema on Parque Central.

SPORT

Estadio Cristóbal Labra (☎ 32 10 44; cnr Calles 32 & 53) Nueva Gerona's baseball stadium, Estadio Cristóbal Labra, is six blocks west of the Policlínico Provincial de Emergencia. From October to April, the local team usually plays here at 1:35pm daily except Monday and Friday, though not every week. Ask at your local casa particular for details of upcoming games.

Shopping

Calle 39, also known as Calle Martí, is a pleasant pedestrian mall interspersed with small parks.

Centro Experimental de Artes Aplicadas (Calle 40 btwn 39 & 37; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) This center, near the planetarium, makes and sells artistic ceramics.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The easiest way to get to the Isla is to fly and when you weigh up cost over hassle you might think it's worth the money. Rafael Cabrera Mustelier Airport (airport code GER) is 5km southeast of Nueva Gerona. Cubana flies here from Habana three times a day for CUC\$34.50 one-way. There are no international flights. Aerotaxi offers charter flights (you have to buy all the seats on the plane) and you could arrange passage in Habana if you have about CUC\$500 to blow. For contact details see p474.

There's no regular air or sea connection from Isla de la Juventud to Cayo Largo del Sur. It is, however possible to charter an 11-passenger Aerotaxi biplane for a day trip at CUC\$470, including waiting time. Otherwise, you must return to Habana to go to Cayo Largo del Sur.

BOAT

Getting to La Isla by boat isn't the piece of cake it ought to be. Tickets for the Soviet-made Kometa hydrofoils (known locally simply as the *kometa*) or the infinitely slower Mexican ferries that ply the route between Surgidero de Batabanó and Nueva Gerona are sold at the **NCC kiosk** (☎ 878-1841; ☎ 7am-noon) in the main bus station in Habana, where you can pay for both your bus transfer and ferry reservation in one shot (CUC\$13). Due to recent popularity it is wise to make a reservation in person one or two days in advance at the NCC kiosk though, oddly, return tickets off the island are not available here or anywhere else in Habana. In terms of getting back you'll have to chance your arm in Nueva Gerona where you can purchase a return ticket on arrival. If you're on a tight schedule save yourself the hassle and take a plane.

It's advisable not to show up independently in Batabanó with the intention of buying a ferry ticket direct from the dock. Although technically doable, a number of travelers have come unstuck here, being told, more often than not, that the tickets have been sold out days in advance through the NCC kiosk in Habana. Furthermore, bedding down for the night in Batabanó is not a particularly inspiring experience.

The return leg is equally problematic. Procure your ticket as early as possible in

Nueva Gerona's **Naviera Cubana Caribeña (NCC) ferry terminal** (☎ 32 49 77, 32 44 15; cnr Calles 31 & 24), beside the Río Las Casas. The *kometa* leaves for Surgidero de Batabanó daily at 9am (CUC\$11), but you'd be wise to get there at least two hours beforehand to tackle the infamous queues.

Before reserving tickets, ask if there's a bus connection from Surgidero de Batabanó to Habana, as a number of northbound catamaran departures have no connection at all. A connecting bus should cost CUC\$2 and you will need to make a reservation as you buy your boat ticket. If you find yourself stranded, large passenger trucks with rows of benches often meet the ferries at Surgidero de Batabanó, charging 10 pesos per person to go to the Habana bus station. It ain't comfy, but it'll get you there.

True to form, there are no printed schedules for the boat or ferry crossings to and from La Isla. Theoretically the *kometas* are supposed to leave Nueva Gerona at 9am and dock in Batabanó at noon, returning back to the island at 1pm. But don't take anything as a given until you have booked your ticket. Isla boat crossings, rather like Cuban trains, have an annoying tendency of being late, breaking down or getting cancelled altogether.

Traveling in either direction you'll need to show your passport. See Surgidero de Batabanó (p176) and Habana City (p141) for more.

Getting Around TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

From the airport, look for the bus marked 'Servicio Aereo', which will take you into town for one peso. To get to the airport, catch this bus in front of **Cine Caribe** (cnr Calles 28 & 37). A taxi to town will cost about CUC\$5, or CUC\$30 to the Hotel Colony.

BUS

Bus 431 to La Fe (35 centavos, 26km) and 441 to the Hotel Colony (two pesos; La Fe: 17km; Hotel Colony: 45km) leave from a stop opposite the cemetery on Calle 39A, just northwest of the hospital.

Bus 38 leaves from the corner of Calles 18 and 37 departing for Chacón (Presidio Modelo), Playa Paraiso and Playa Bibijagua at 7:30am Monday to Saturday. It makes four additional trips throughout the day.

Bus 4 also leaves from this stop, but it only goes as far as Chacón.

CAR

Havanaautos (☎ 32 44 32; cnr Calles 32 & 39; ☎ 7am-7pm) rents cars, and can arrange transport into the military zone.

The Servi-Cupet gasoline station is at the corner of Calles 30 and 39 in the center of town.

HORSE CARTS

Horse *coches* (carts) often park next to the Cubalse Supermarket on Calle 35. You can easily rent one at CUC\$10 per day for excursions to the Presidio Modelo, Museo Finca El Abra, Playa Bibijagua and other nearby destinations.

EAST OF NUEVA GERONA

The island's most impressive but depressing sight is the **Presidio Modelo** at Reparto Chacón, 5km east of Nueva Gerona. Built between 1926 and 1931, during the repressive regime of Gerardo Machado, the prison's four five-story, yellow circular blocks were modeled after those of a notorious penitentiary in Joliet, Illinois, and could hold 5000 prisoners at a time. During WWII, assorted enemy nationals who happened to find themselves in Cuba (including 350 Japanese, 50 Germans and 25 Italians) were interned in the two rectangular blocks at the north end of the complex.

The Presidio's most famous inmates, however, were Fidel Castro and the other Moncada rebels who were imprisoned here from October 1953 to May 1955. They were held separately from the other prisoners,

in the hospital building at the south end of the complex. After heckling Batista during a February 1954 prison visit, Castro was thrown into solitary confinement. In 1967, the prison was closed and the section where Castro stayed was converted into a **museum** (☎ 32 51 12; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 8am-4pm Tue-Sat, 8am-noon Sun). Admission includes a tour, but cameras/videos are CUC\$3/25 extra. Bring exact change. Admission to the circular blocks is free.

Cementerio Colombia, with the graves of Americans who lived and died on the island during the 1920s and 1930s, is about 7km east of Nueva Gerona and 2km east of Presidio Modelo. Bus 38 passes here.

Cabañas Playa Paraiso (☎ 32 52 46), on a beach 2km north of Chacón (about 6km northeast of Nueva Gerona), usually doesn't rent rooms to foreigners, but the **bar & restaurant** (☎ noon-8pm) are open to all. Playa Paraiso itself is no paradise, but more a dirty brown beach. Still, it's in a scenic spot, with a high hill behind and a small island offshore. The wharf here was originally used to unload prisoners for the Presidio Modelo. If you're driving around this way there's a better beach called Playa Bibijagua 4km to the east of Chacón. Here there are pine trees, a peso restaurant and plenty of low-key Cuban ambience. Nondrivers can catch bus 38 from Nueva Gerona.

SOUTH OF NUEVA GERONA Sights & Activities

The main reason to come here is for the diving at Punta Francés (see the boxed text, p188), but there are a couple of other interesting diversions for those who have time.

FIDEL IN PRISON

Beaten but not defeated after the abortive attack on Moncada Barracks, Fidel was banished to the Isla de Pinos in October 1953 to lick his wounds and plot afresh. Incarcerated in the barren Presidio Modelo along with 25 fellow conspirators prisoner number RN3859, as Castro was officially known, shared a cell with his brother Raúl who he kept awake day and night with hours of incessant ranting.

Not surprisingly there was plenty to talk about. Taking advantage of their privileged status as political prisoners, the Castro brothers lost no time in setting up an in-house revolutionary academy that schooled fellow inmates in the intricacies of economic theory and guerrilla warfare.

Meanwhile, back in his cell, Fidel passed the long daylight hours transforming his epic *History Will Absolve Me* speech into an authoritative political manifesto. Scribbling down the text from memory the document was smuggled out of his cell in matchboxes whereupon a few thousand copies were run off and circulated by supporters around the country.

INTO THE BLUE

Protected from sea currents off the Gulf of Mexico and blessed with a remarkable diversity of coral and marine life, Isla de la Juventud offers some of the best diving possibilities in the Caribbean. They're 56 buoyed dive sites here including everything from caves and passages, to vertical walls and coral hillocks. Wreck diving is also possible further east where the remains of 70 ships have been found in an area known as **Bajo de Zambo**.

Center of operations for the diving crowd is the **International Diving Center** (☎ 39 82 82/84) run from the Marina Siguanea a few kilometers south of Hotel Colony. The establishment has a modern on-site recompression chamber along with the services of a dive doctor, and it is from here that you can organize trips out to the National Maritime Park at **Punta Francés**.

Boat transfers to Punta Francés take about an hour and deliver you to gorgeous stretch of white-sand beach (complete with rustic restaurant) from which most of the main dive sites are easily accessible. The cream of the crop are **Cueva Azul** (advanced) and **Pared de Coral Negro** (intermediate) where you'll see abundant numbers of fish including tarpon, barracuda, groupers, snooks and angelfish – along with the odd sea turtle.

Diving costs start at CUC\$30. Nondivers can get to the beach for CUC\$8 where there's a lunch buffet at a rustic restaurant for CUC\$12.

Situated 6km west of Santa Fe in the direction of El Colony, **La Jungla de Jones** (☎ 39 62 46; admission CUC\$3; ☎ 24hr) is a rich and verdant botanical garden containing more than 80 varieties of tree. Bisected by a network of shaded trails and punctuated by a cornucopia of cacti, bamboo and mangoes, this expansive and recently restored garden once belonged to two American botanists, Helen and Harris Jones, who set up the establishment in 1902 with the intention of studying plants and trees from around the world. The highlight of La Jungla is the aptly named Bamboo Cathedral, an enclosed space surrounded by huge clumps of craning bamboo that only a few strands of sunlight manage to penetrate.

Criadero Cocodrilo (admission CUC\$3; ☎ 7am-5pm) has played an important part in crocodile conservation in Cuba over the last few years and the results are interesting to see. Harboring more than 500 crocodiles of all shapes and sizes, the *criadero* (hatchery) acts as a breeding center, similar to the one in Guamá in Matanzas (p250), although the setting here is infinitely wilder. Taken care of until they are seven years old, the center releases groups of crocs back into the wild when they reach a length of about 1m. To get to the criadero turn left 12km south of La Fe just past Julio Antonio Mella.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Colony (Gran Caribe; ☎ 39 81 81; fax 39 84 28; s/d incl breakfast, low season CUC\$38/64, high season

CUC\$56/84) This hotel on the Ensenada de la Siguanea, 46km southwest of Nueva Gerona, originated in 1958 as part of the Hilton chain but was confiscated by the revolutionary government before it got off the ground. Today the main building's a bit run down but the newer bungalows are in good shape; clean, bright and airy. You might save a few cents by taking a package which includes three meals and scuba diving. The water off the hotel's white-sand beach is shallow, with sea urchins littering the bottom. Take care if you decide to swim. A better (and safer?) bet is the Colony's pleasant pool. A long wharf (with a bar perfect for sunset mojitos) stretches out over the bay, but snorkeling in the immediate vicinity of the hotel is mediocre. The diving, however, is to die for. A Havanautos car-rental office is at the hotel.

Getting There & Away

Transport is tough on La Isla and bus schedules make even the rest of Cuba seem efficient. Try bus 441 from Nueva Gerona. Otherwise, your best bet to get to the hotel is by taxi (approximately CUC\$30 from the airport) or hire car (see p187).

THE SOUTHERN MILITARY ZONE

The entire area south of Cayo Piedra is a military zone and to enter you must first procure a one-day pass (CUC\$12) from the **Ecotur office** (☎ 32 71 01) in Nueva Gerona. The company will provide you with

a Spanish/English/German/French/Italian-speaking guide, but it is up to you to find your own 4WD transport for within the zone itself. This can be organized with Havanautos in Nueva Gerona (p187). Traveling in the military zone is not possible without a guide or an official pass so don't arrive at the Cayo Piedra checkpoint without either. As the whole excursion can wind up rather expensive it's an idea to split the transport costs with other travelers. Good places to fish around for other people are Hotel Colony and the Villa Isla de la Juventud. Both of these places also have tourist information offices that can give you more up-to-date advice on the region.

Cueva de Punta del Este

The Cueva de Punta del Este, a national monument 59km southeast of Nueva Gerona, has been called the 'Sistine Chapel' of Caribbean Indian art. Long before the Spanish conquest (experts estimate around AD 800), Indians painted some 235 pictographs on the walls and ceiling of the cave. The largest has 28 concentric circles of red and black, and the paintings have been interpreted as a solar calendar. Discovered in 1910, they're considered the most important of their kind in the Caribbean. Smaller, similar paintings can be seen in the Cueva de Ambrosio in Varadero (p234). The long, shadeless white beach nearby is another draw (for you and the mosquitoes – bring insect repellent).

Cocodrilo

Cocodrilo, 50km southwest of Cayo Piedra, is a friendly village of 750 residents, still untouched by tourism. Through the lush vegetation beside the potholed road one catches glimpses of cattle, birds, lizards and bee hives. The rocky coastline, with its natural inlets and small, white sandy beaches lapped by crystal-blue water, is magnificent. One kilometer west of this tiny settlement is the **Sea Turtle Breeding Center** (admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-6pm) where visitors can view rows of green-stained glass tanks that teem with turtles of all sizes. While not quite as captivating as watching the creatures nesting in the wild, the breeding center does an excellent job in conserving one of Cuba's rarest and most endangered species.

CAYO LARGO DEL SUR

☎ 45

Cayo Largo del Sur's 26km of glittering white sands, teeming coral reefs, and chain of fabulous all-inclusive resorts add up to a tropical paradise par excellence. What Cayo Largo del Sur is not, is Cuba. Here, women sunbathe topless, you can throw your toilet paper into the toilet rather than the bin, and an inordinate number of people speak a language (or several) other than Spanish. If you're looking for fun in the sun, spectacular scuba diving and all the creature comforts upmarket resorts are famous for, then you'll love this little tropical idyll. Packages from Habana are relatively affordable if you just want to jump over for a couple of days. In winter especially, the weather tends to be warmer and more stable than at resorts along Cuba's north coast.

Cayo Largo del Sur is the second largest (38 sq km) and easternmost island of the Archipiélago de los Canarreos. It lies between the Golfo de Batabanó and the Caribbean Sea, 177km southeast of Habana, 114km east of Isla de la Juventud, 80km south of the Península de Zapata and 300km due north of Grand Cayman Island. Though 26km long, this sandy coral key is never more than a couple of kilometers wide. Due to the island's isolation, there's a profusion of turtles, iguanas and bird life including cranes, *zunzuncitos* (bee hummingbirds) and flamingos.

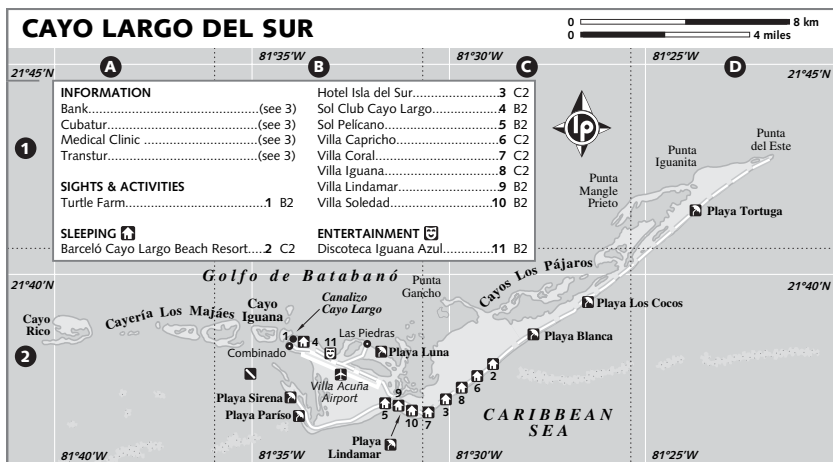
Information

The **Cubatur** (☎ 34 80 18) and Transtur offices, **bank** (☎ 34 82 25) and medical clinic are all at Hotel Isla del Sur (p191), and the telephone center is across the street. Euros are accepted at all the tourist installations here.

Due to dangerous currents, swimming is occasionally forbidden. This will be indicated by red flags on the beach, and care should be taken with waves, which can suddenly throw snorkelers into the reef. Mosquitoes can be a nuisance here, too, so bring repellent.

Sights & Activities

Cayo Largo del Sur's finest beach is the broad westward-facing **Playa Sirena**, where 2km of powdery white sand is well protected from the waves and wind. Tourists



on day trips from Habana and Varadero are often brought here. Various nautical activities are available, including scuba diving and certification courses with Puertosol. A dive shop and restaurant are at Playa Sirena. All of Cayo Largo del Sur's hotels offer day excursions to Playa Sirena for around CUC\$25, or you can walk there in less than two hours from Sol Pelicano via **Playa Paraíso**, a nudist beach (several stretches of sand on this island are clothing optional).

The island's other big day-trip destinations are **Cayo del Rosario** and **Cayo Rico** between Cayo Largo del Sur and Isla de la Juventud. Boat excursions to these beaches from the hotels cost around CUC\$35 per person. **Cayo Iguana**, off the northwest tip of Cayo Largo del Sur, is home to hundreds of friendly iguanas; unfortunately, many perished in Hurricane Michelle – the worst tropical storm to hit Cuba in 50 years – in 2001 though the population now seems to have recovered. Equally stoic is the tourist population that despite mass evacuations and extensive hotel damage after the hurricane remains similarly unfazed by the challenges of nature.

You can rent a bicycle and head east to **Playa Los Cocos**, where there's good snorkeling, or continue further northeast to **Playa Tortuga**, where sea turtles lay their eggs in the sand. A **turtle farm** (*granja de las tortugas*) is at Combinado, on the north-west end of the island beyond the airstrip.

Sporting activities available on the island include snorkeling, scuba diving, windsurfing, sailing, kayaking, tennis, horseback riding, cycling and volleyball. The best selections of these are at the Sol Pelicano and Isla del Sur hotels.

There's also deep-sea fishing from powerboats for marlin, dorado, snapper and bonito. Two international fishing tournaments are held here in September.

Sleeping & Eating

All of Cayo Largo del Sur's hotels face the 4km beach on the south side of the island. It's said that these white sands are unique in that they aren't heated up by the sun's rays. This permits barefoot (and bare-bottomed – Cayo Largo is known for its naturism) traffic along the shore and kind of compensates for the lack of shade.

This resort island is unique in Cuba in that you buy an all-inclusive package with Gran Caribe or Sol Meliá and your color-coded bracelet allows you to use whatever facilities belong to that chain. At the time of writing, Sol Meliá owned Sol Club Cayo Largo, and Sol Pelicano; while Gran Caribe Club had Villas Coral, Soledad, Lindamar, Hotel Isla del Sur, Iguana, Barceló and Capricho. Virtually everyone arrives on prepaid package tours, with transport, accommodation and meals included. Rack rates for the Gran Caribe properties are single/double CUC\$103/147 all-inclusive, or upwards of CUC\$160 per

person for the Sol Meliá properties. Check at Cubatur in Habana for better deals.

Barceló Cayo Largo Beach Resort (☎ 24 80 80; 📞 📺 📺 📺) The 306-room Barceló is Cayo Largo's newest resort and is set apart from the other hotels on an expansive stretch of Playa Blanca. Rather drab architecture is augmented by a smorgasbord of different dining options and an impressive array of energetic sporting activities. Good testimonies abound.

Sol Pelicano (☎ 34 82 60; www.solpelicano.solmeliacuba.com; 📞 📺 📺 📺) This Spanish-style resort on Playa Lindamar, 5km southeast of the airport, has 203 rooms in a series of three-story buildings and two-story duplex cabanas built in 1995. This is the island's largest resort and facilities include a nightclub. A small bridge links the complex to the beach.

Sol Club Cayo Largo (☎ 34 82 60; www.solmeliacuba.com; 📞 📺 📺 📺) Sol Meliá's other property is the five-star Sol Club Cayo Largo on the northwestern nub of the island. The beach out here is fantastic and every room comes with a terrace or balcony. To date, it's Cayo Largo's most exclusive resort (but watch for Meliá's Linda Arena, still under construction at the time of writing).

Villa Coral (El Pueblito; ☎ 34 81 11; fax 34 81 60; 📞 📺 📺) Also known as El Pueblito, this villa consists of 10 two-story buildings outfitted to look like colonial villas (eg faux terra-cotta roofs, wooden balconies) arranged around a swimming pool. There are 60 rooms here.

Villa Soledad (☎ 34 81 11; fax 34 81 60; 📞 📺) This adjacent cluster of single-story, plainer bungalows has another 43 rooms (but no restaurant – you have to go to one of the neighboring hotels held by Gran Caribe).

Villa Lindamar (☎ 34 81 11; fax 34 81 60; 📞 📺 📺) These 63 thatched bungalows are the only four-star rooms in this chain – love the hammocks. The Piazzoletta Italian Restaurant on the premises offers pizza and more.

Hotel Isla del Sur (☎ 34 81 11; fax 34 81 60; 📞 📺 📺) This hotel has 59 rooms with

minifridges in a long, two-story building. Built in 1981 on the point between Playa Lindamar and Playa Blanca, this was the first hotel on Cayo Largo del Sur. All meals here are served buffet style, and there's poolside entertainment nightly. A small shopping arcade is opposite the hotel, and guests at Villa Coral and Villa Iguana must come here for sporting activities such as horseback riding, tennis, deep-sea fishing and scuba diving. Bicycle rentals are available and there's a Transtur and Cubatur desk here.

Villa Iguana (☎ 34 81 11; 📞) This accommodation option has 114 rooms with fridges in 10 two-story blocks. The swimming pool (also used for scuba instruction) sits in the center of the resort and the beach is just 200m away down a flight of steps. Buffet-style meals are served in the Gavilán restaurant.

Villa Capricho (☎ 34 81 11; 📞 📺 📺) Just east of Villa Iguana, this place has 62 pleasant, individual wooden cabins, each with a porch and hammock. Windsurfing, kayaking and sailing are possible off its beach, and its Restaurante Blue Marlin specializes in paella and seafood.

Entertainment

After 11pm, there's a minibus service between the hotels and the Discoteca Iguana Azul, near the airport.

Getting There & Away

Several charter flights arrive directly from Canada weekly, and Cubana has weekly flights from Montreal and Milan.

For pop-by visitors, daily flights from Habana to Cayo Largo del Sur with Cubana cost CUC\$80 one way. But getting around once you arrive on the island can prove to be problematic. An easier option is to take an organized day trip from Habana or Varadero to Cayo Largo del Sur for in the vicinity of CUC\$137, including airport transfers, return flights and a sumptuous barbecue lunch. All the Habana agencies offer this (see p92).

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