

Pinar del Río Province



Rust-red soil, well-tended fields of tobacco, Chevrolets and Buicks rattling along rutted roads: the images of bucolic Pinar del Río Province are Cuban to the core. Situated on the island's western extremity and within easy reach of the capital Habana, the 'Garden of Cuba', as picturesque Pinar is often called, has been attracting visitors for decades. Most come to sample the plethora of astounding natural attractions that have made the region internationally famous. Others prefer to linger, rum glass in hand, on the sun-dappled beaches of Cayo Jutías and Cayo Levisa.

Transcended by the hilly Sierra del Rosario reserve in the east and the more isolated Peninsula de Guanahacabibes in the west, Pinar del Río is the only province in Cuba to boast two Unesco biospheres. Nestled somewhere in between lies the majestic Valle de Viñales, a geological anomaly with its complicated cave systems and craggy limestone mogotes that lures everyone from birders to rock climbers.

Southwest of the provincial capital, the Autopista gives way to the misty fields of the San Luis region; the world's finest tobacco-growing area, and a landscape punctuated by lone straw-hatted *guajiros* (farmers) laboring industriously under the hot, tropical sun. Continue driving for a few hours more and the road finally runs out in María la Gorda, one of Pinar's best beaches and the 'operations center' for an enthusiastic fraternity of international scuba divers who revel in its sheltered waters and dazzling underwater coral formations.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Sunrise over Tobacco Country**
Hike up to Hotel Los Jazmines and watch the early morning mist lift off the Valle de Viñales (p207)
- **Underwater Odyssey**
Experience scuba diving at translucent Playa María la Gorda (p203)
- **Splendid Isolation**
Stop and smell the roses on idyllic Cayo Levisa (p213)
- **Hot Water Hedonism**
Soak up medicinal mineral waters in San Diego de los Baños (p214)
- **Eco-village**
Enjoy the artistic ambience of model village, Las Terrazas (p217)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: VARIES ■ POPULATION: 739,473 ■ AREA: 10,924 SQ KM

HISTORY

Western Cuba's pre-Columbian history is synonymous with the Guanahatabeys, a group of nomadic Indians who lived in caves and procured most of their livelihood from the sea. Less advanced than the other indigenous natives who lived on the island, the Guanahatabeys were a peaceful and passive race whose culture had developed, more or less independently of the Taíno and Siboney cultures further east. Extinct by the time the Spanish arrived in 1492, little firsthand documentation remains on how the archaic Guanahatabey society was structured and organized although some archaeological sites have been found on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula.

Post-Columbus the conquistadors left rugged Pinar del Río largely to its own devices, and the area developed lackadaisically only after Canary Islanders started arriving in the late 1500s. It was originally called Nueva Filipina (New Philippines), but the region was renamed Pinar del Río in 1778, supposedly for the pine forests crowded along the Río Guamá. Tobacco plantations and cattle ranches quickly sprang up in the rich soil and open grazing land that typifies Pinar and the fastidious farmers who made a living from the delicate and well-tended crops were colloquially christened *guajiros*, a native word that means – literally – 'one of us.' By the mid-1800s, Europeans were hooked on the fragrant weed and the region flourished. Sea routes opened up and the railway was extended to facilitate the shipping of the perishable product.

GUAJIRO NATURAL

In a country where disparaging nicknames are part of the national culture, the label *guajiro* has a peculiarly rural connotation. Used interchangeably to mean farmer, hillbilly, simpleton or bumpkin, this much maligned regional stereotype has its spiritual home in Pinar del Río Province where cigar-chewing tobacco farmers are characterized by a level of generosity that verges on the gullible.

Polo Montañez, a humble and much-loved musician who rose to national and international fame as a singer in the early 2000s, did much to de-stigmatize the traditional *guajiro* stereotype. Resident of a small agrarian community in Pinar del Río Province, he worked by day as a lumberjack and by night as a self-taught guitarist and singer in a luxury tourist hotel in the model settlement of Las Terrazas. Fame came late. In fact, Polo's first commercial success, the aptly named *Guajiro Natural*, didn't hit the big-time until 2001 by which time the singer had attained the ripe old age of 46. Tragically the honeymoon wasn't to last. In November 2002, while returning by car from Habana to his home in Pinar, Polo was involved in a fatal collision with a truck trailer. He died a week later of severe head injuries. A new *guajiro* legend had been created.

These days, tobacco, along with tourism, keep Pinar del Río both profitable and popular. Quiet and laid-back compared with the car-crazy capital 160km or so to the east, the relaxed Pinareños – despite the countless *guajiro* jokes – are some of the friendliest, most ingratiating people you'll meet on the island.

PINAR DEL RÍO AREA

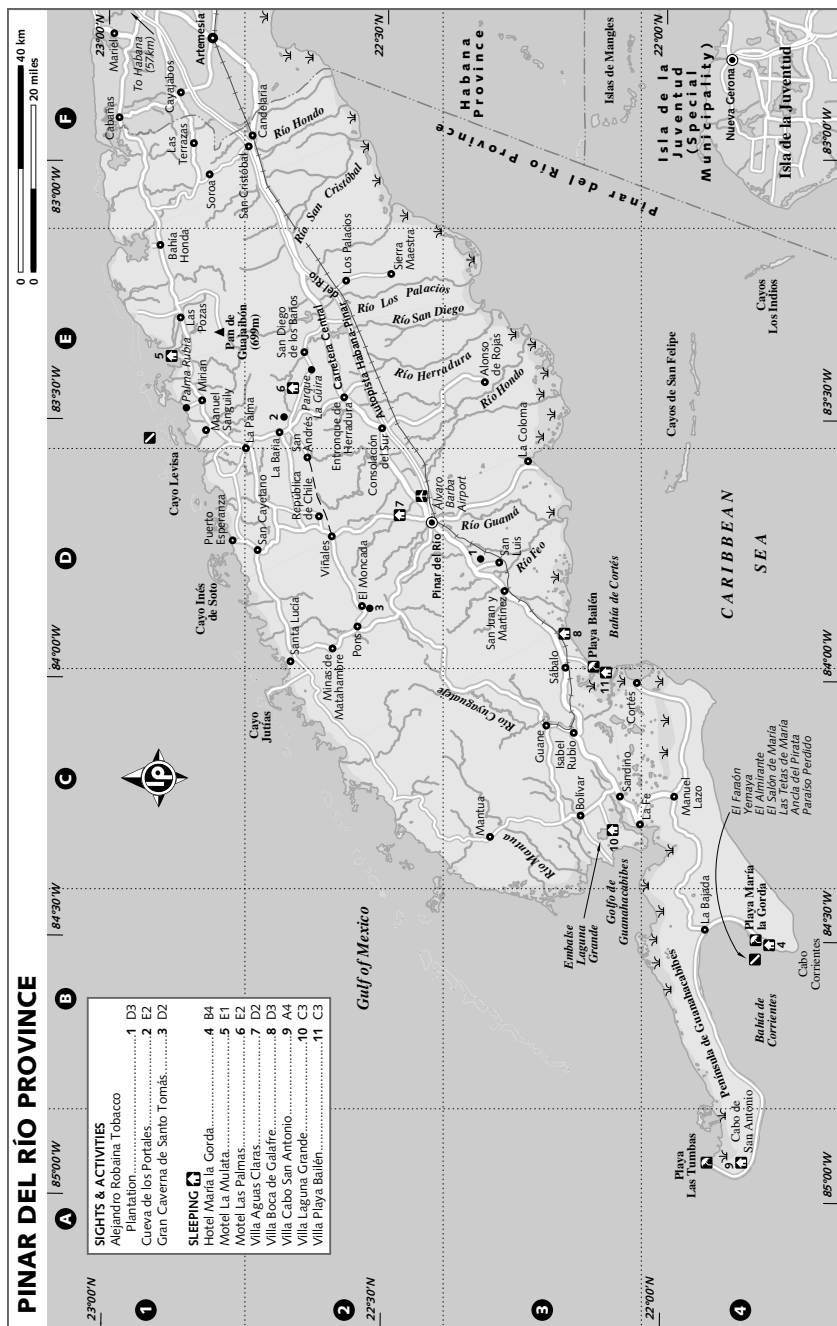
PINAR DEL RÍO

☎ 82 / pop 148,295

Pinar del Río, 162km southwest of Habana via the Autopista, is a bustling Cuban town of rusty bicycles and beaten up old American cars that has developed a rather unsavory reputation for its aggressive *jineteros* (touts). You'll get used to saying 'no me moleste, por favor' (don't bother me please) quite a lot here.

Situated right in the center of Cuba's prime tobacco-growing area and characterized by a surprisingly well-maintained collection of pastel-colored, neoclassical buildings, the town lacks the tourist facilities of nearby Viñales and is often overlooked by independent travelers, who use it as a springboard for the more accessible natural attractions of the villages further north.

Founded in 1774 by a Spanish army captain, Pinar del Río was one of the last provincial capitals on the island to take root. Neglected by successive central governments who preferred sugarcane to tobacco,



the city developed into an urban backwater and became the butt of countless jokes about easily-to-fool *guajiros* who were popularly portrayed as simple-minded rural hicks. In 1896 General Antonio Maceo brought the Second War of Independence to Pinar del Río in an ambitious attempt to split the island in two and the town finally got its wake-up call.

Following the 1959 revolution Pinar del Río's economic fortunes improved exponentially; this was facilitated further by the building of the Autopista Nacional from Habana and the development of tourism in the 1980s.

Orientation

The main street in Pinar del Río is called Martí and there are also many facilities on Máximo Gómez and Antonio Maceo, which run parallel to Martí just to the south. An important cross street is Isabel Rubio, which becomes the Carretera Central north of the city toward Habana and on the road to San Juan y Martínez to the southwest.

To avoid going the wrong way when you're looking for addresses, it's important to know that the street numbering begins at two base streets: Gerardo Medina divides the numbering of east-west streets while Martí marks the division between the north-south streets.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Havanatur (☎ 77 84 94; cnr Martí & Colón; ☏ 8am-noon & 1:30-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon & 1-4pm Sat) Best selection of maps, books in English and office supplies.

PINAR DEL RÍO STREET NAMES

Locals stick to the old street names; this chart should help:

Old name	New name
Recreo	Isabel Rubio
Caubada	Commandante Pinareo
Calzada de la Coloma	Rafael Ferro
Vélez Caviedes	Gerardo Medina
Rosario	Ormani Arenado
San Juan	Rafael Morales
Virtudes	Ceferino Fernández

INTERNET ACCESS

Eteca Telepunto (cnr Gerardo Medina & Juan Gómez; per hr CUC\$6; ☏ 24hr)

LEFT LUGGAGE

Downstairs at the bus station you can talk your way into leaving your bag(s) at the luggage storage window for CUC\$1.

MEDIA

Guerrillero is published on Friday. Radio Guamá airs on 1080AM or 90.2FM.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Farmacia Martí (Martí Este No 50; ☏ 8am-11pm)

Hospital Provincial León Cuervo Rubio (☎ 75 44 43; Carretera Central) Two kilometers north of town.

MONEY

Banco Financiero Internacional (☎ 77 81 53; Gerardo Medina Norte No 46) Opposite Casa de la Música.

Bandec (☎ 75 26 07; Martí Este No 32; ☏ 8:30am-noon & 1:30-3:30pm Mon-Fri) There's another branch on Martí No 53.

Cadeca (☎ 77 83 57; Martí No 46; ☏ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Sat)

POST

Post office (Martí Este No 49; ☏ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat)

TELEPHONE

Eteca (cnr Gerardo Medina & Juan Gómez; ☏ 24hr)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Campismo Popular (☎ 75 26 77; Isabel Rubio Norte No 20A; ☏ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Near Adela Azcuy.

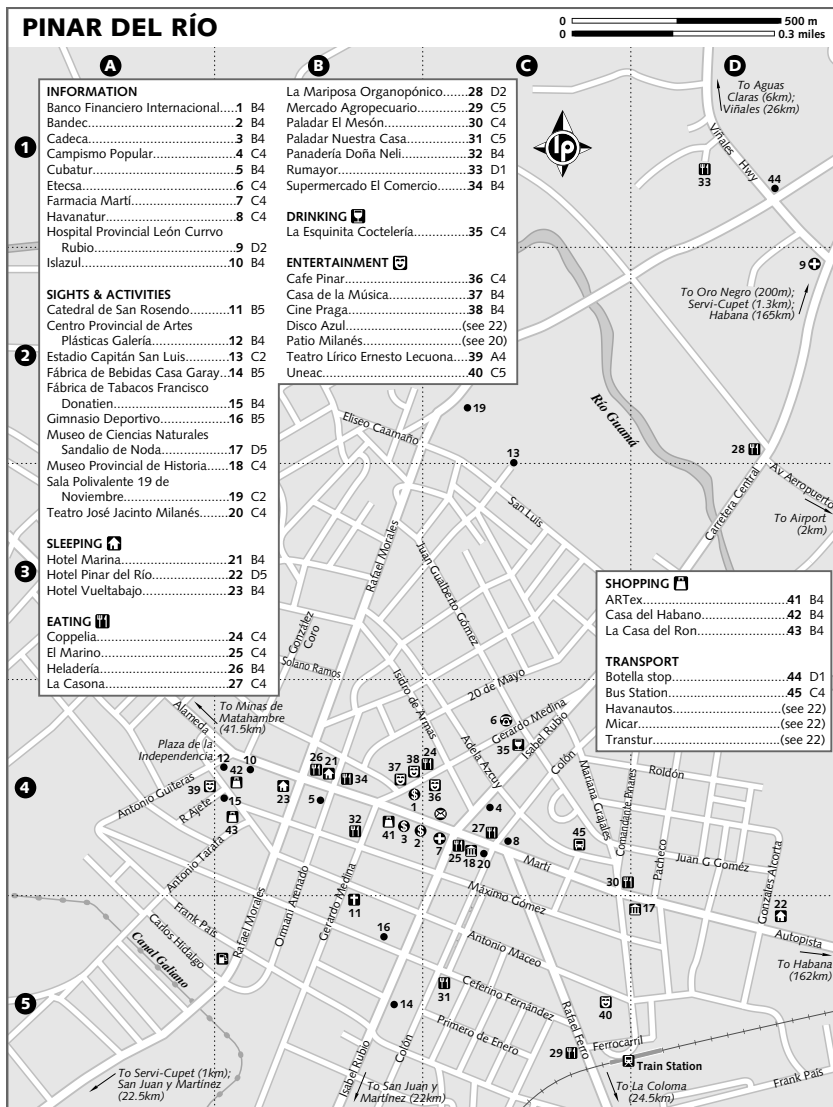
Cubatur (☎ 77 84 05; Ormani Arenado btwn Martí & Máximo Gómez; ☏ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

Havanatur (☎ 77 84 94; cnr Martí & Colón; ☏ 8am-noon & 1:30-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon & 1-4pm Sat)

Islazul (☎ 75 56 62; Martí Oeste No 127A)

Dangers & Annoyances

For a relatively untouristed city Pinar del Río has its fair share of unsolicited touts or *jineteros* (p397). When you're strolling along Martí young men will try their hardest to attach themselves to you as a paid guide or to lead you to a private room or paladar. You may also be pursued by youths on bicycles as you arrive in town by car, or accosted when you stop at the first traffic light after the Autopista. If the light is



green, they'll swerve dangerously in front of you to try to get you to stop. Keep your windows closed and ignore them if they point to one of your tires, pretending it's flat.

Sights

The most interesting sight is the **Museo de Ciencias Naturales Sandalio de Noda** (☎ 77 94 83; Martí Este No 202; admission CUC\$1, plus camera

CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun). In a wild, neo-Gothic-meets-Moorish mansion built by local doctor and world traveler Francisco Guasch, this museum (called Palacio de Guasch by locals) has everything from a concrete T-Rex to a stuffed baby giraffe. Come for the flowering garden, architectural details and friendly specialist staff.

Nearby is the **Museo Provincial de Historia** (☎ 75 43 00; Martí Este No 58 btwn Colón & Isabel Rubio; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8:30am-6:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat), collecting the history of the province from pre-Columbian times to the present. Look for the Enrique Jorrín ephemera – Jorrín was the creator of the *chachachá* (cha-cha).

Four blocks south is the **Fábrica de Bebidas Casa Garay** (Isabel Rubio Sur No 189 btwn Ceferino Fernández & Frank País; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-3:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12:30pm Sat). Erected in 1892, this factory uses a secret recipe to distill sweet and dry versions of the famous Guayabita del Pinar guava brandy. Factory tours are offered in Spanish, English and French, topped off by a taste of the brew in the sampling room. There's a shop adjacent.

You can observe people busily rolling cigars at the **Fábrica de Tabacos Francisco Donatien** (Maceo Oeste No 157; admission CUC\$5; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri). Until 1961 this building was a jail, but now it's tobacco central on the tourist circuit. Unless you're really interested, it's not worth the admission price, as the guides are untrained and the workers want extra money for photos. The factory in Santa Clara's a better bet. Check out its cigar store, however. The top brand produced here is called Vegueros.

On Plaza de la Independencia near Alameda and around the corner from the cigar factory is the **Centro Provincial de Artes Plásticas Galería** (Antonio Guiteras; admission free; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat), which presents good local art. The **Taller Provincial del Grabado**, a large engraving workshop welcoming visitors, is adjacent.

The wooden, 500-seat **Teatro José Jacinto Milanés** (cnr Martí & Colón) is a gorgeous venue from 1845; too bad it has been undergoing restoration since 1991.

Pinar del Río's understated **Catedral de San Rosendo** (Maceo Este No 3) dates from 1883 and its pastel yellow exterior gleams with a recent coat of paint. As with most Cuban churches the building is often closed. Slip inside for a peek during the Sunday morning service.

Activities

Gym freaks might want to check out the **Gimnasio Deportivo** (Ceferino Fernández No 43 btwn Isabel Rubio & Gerardo Medina) where, with some fumbling Spanish and a bit of deft sign

language, you can talk your way into tai chi, weightlifting or somersaulting over a horsebox. Alternatively there's the **Sala Polivalente 19 de Noviembre** (Rafael Morales) for boxing, volleyball and basketball.

From October to April, exciting baseball games happen at the **Estadio Capitán San Luis** (☎ 75 38 95; 1 peso), on the north side of town. Pinar del Río is one of the country's best teams. Pop by in the evening to see the players going through a training session.

Festivals & Events

Carnaval in early July features a procession of *carrozas* (carriages) through the streets with couples dancing between the floats. It's a big drunken, dance party.

Sleeping

IN TOWN

Hotel Marina (☎ 75 25 58; Martí Oeste No 56 btwn Rafael Morales & Ormani Arenado; r CUC\$16) A rock bottom peso place that will probably take you if you pay in Convertibles. Facilities are basic and the reception more than a tad fly-blown.

Hotel Pinar del Río (Islazul; ☎ 50 70 74; cnr Gonzales Alcorta & Autopista; s/d low season CUC\$24/34, high CUC\$29/38; ☎ ☎ ☎) Situated at the eastern end of town, where tourists are supposed to stay (and many do), the 136 rooms have bright spots such as refrigerators and radios, but the bad lighting and dizzying

LOS AMARILLOS

Motor tentatively out of any Cuban town and, more often than not, you'll pass a large group of patient hitchhikers standing clustered around an authoritative-looking figure dressed in yellow. These are the ubiquitous *amarillos* or traffic organizers whose job it is to stand at preorganized pick-up points and place ride-seekers into queues via an old-fashioned numbering system.

In Cuba hitchhiking – or *hacer botella* as it is known locally – is an essential part of the countrywide transport network and the practice of catching a lift via the *amarillos* is legally enforced (for information on the risks associated with hitching see p477). All cars with blue (government-owned) license plates are obliged to stop and take on passengers if they have room.

decor cast a shadow. The disco is popular with the locals who can afford it.

Hotel Vueltabajo (Islazul; ☎ 75 53 63; cnr Martí & Rafael Morales; s/d low season CUC\$42/55, high CUC\$48/65; 🍴) A rare newcomer in Cuba's stable of midrange hotels is this fabulous hotel, a lovingly restored colonial building with high ceilings, striped window awnings and various other decorative flourishes. The large rooms are a little under-furnished, but they're clean and spacious, and old-fashioned shutters give out onto the street. Downstairs there's a bar/restaurant; a reasonable breakfast is included in the price.

For a capital city, Pinar del Río has few private rooms. See the boxed text, below for recommendations.

OUTSIDE TOWN

Villa Aguas Claras (Cubamar; ☎ 77 84 27; s/d low season incl breakfast CUC\$19/30, high CUC\$21/34; 🍴 🚿) The plushest of all Cuba's 85-plus campismos, Villa Aguas Claras is 8km north of town on the Viñales Hwy and has facilities more akin to a midrange hotel. The 50 bungalows with hot showers sleep two (10 have air-con). The rooms are adequate, the landscaping lush and the staff congenial, making this a better overall choice than Hotel Pinar del Río. The Villa Aguas Claras also offers horseback riding and day trips. Insect repellent is essential here. Aguas Claras is accessible from Pinar del Río by bus 7 six times a day.

Eating

PALADARES

Paladar El Mesón (Martí Este No 205; ☎ noon-10pm Mon-Sat) This long-standing paladar opposite the Museo de Ciencias Naturales serves chicken, pork and fish in a pleasant colonial atmosphere. Main plates start at CUC\$4.50 with side dishes extra; the service is efficient and friendly.

Paladar Nuestra Casa (☎ 77 51 43; Colón Sur No 161 btwn Ceferino Fernández & Primero de Enero) Another good, private eatery a bit out of the center, this serves fish all ways including *filete Canciller* (fish stuffed with ham and cheese).

RESTAURANTS

Coppelia (Gerardo Medina Norte No 33; ☎ noon-midnight Tue-Sun) You'll require line-waiting skills, but the two peso a scoop ice cream (when there is ice cream) is dreamy.

Heladería (Martí cnr Rafael Morales; ☎ 9am-9pm) Even dreamier is this clean and friendly place where you can get a substantial *tres gracias* (three scoops) for the price of a teaspoon's worth of Haagen Daas.

El Marino (Martí Este No 52; ☎ 6:30-9pm Mon-Tue & Thu-Fri, 8pm-midnight Sat) On the corner of Isabel Rubio, El Marino specializes in seafood and does a decent fish filet for CUC\$4.50.

La Casona (☎ 77 82 63; cnr Martí & Colón; ☎ 11am-11pm) Further down the street, this colonial-style restaurant has steak, chicken and pasta. Atmosphere hovers around zero at

both these state-run places, but the food isn't bad.

Rumayor (☎ 76 30 51; ☎ noon-midnight) The best government-operated restaurant in Pinar del Río is Islazul's Rumayor, located 1km north of the town center, off the Viñales Hwy. Justly famous for its succulent *pollo ahumado* (smoked chicken), you'll pay a little extra here (CUC\$10 to CUC\$15), but it is definitely worth it. There is a cabaret here as well (see right).

GROCERIES

Mercado agropecuario (Rafael Ferro; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) Pinar del Río's colorful open-air market is almost on top of the tracks near the train station.

La Mariposa Organopónico (cnr Carretera Central & Av Aeropuerto) A conveniently located organic fruit and vegetable market; and a good place to get a close-up look at Cuban's urban agriculture program.

Other self-catering options:

Panadería Doña Neli (cnr Gerardo Medina Sur & Máximo Gómez; ☎ 7am-7pm) Sells bread.

Supermercado El Comercio (cnr Martí Oeste & Arenado; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) One the best supermarkets in town.

Drinking

La Esquinita Coctelería (cnr Isabel Rubio Norte & Juan Gómez; ☎ noon-midnight) A darling cocktail place where tropical foliage gone haywire creates semiprivate nooks in the back patio. Pesos only, *por favor*.

Entertainment

Casa de la Música (Gerardo Medina Norte No 21; admission CUC\$1; ☎ concerts start at 9pm nightly) Has live concerts in a cozy patio.

Cafe Pinar (☎ 77 81 99; Gerardo Medina Norte No 34; admission CUC\$1-4; ☎ 10-2am) Across from Casa de la Música, this is an enduringly popular spot. Live bands play nightly in the intimate patio space and there's a light menu with pasta, chicken and sandwiches. Come here if you want to meet some other travelers.

Disco Azul (cnr Gonzales Alcorta & Autopista; admission CUC\$2; ☎ from 10pm Tue-Sun) In Hotel Pinar del Río, this is Pinar del Río's most popular dance spot. Entry for nonguests is from outside the hotel.

Teatro Lírico Ernesto Lecuona (Antonio Maceo Oeste No 163) Near the cigar factory, this theater presents plays in Spanish.

Patio Milanés (cnr Martí & Colón), Alongside the Teatro José Jacinto Milanés, Milanés has nightly cultural activities; check the schedule that's posted outside.

Cine Praga (☎ 75 32 71; Gerardo Medina Norte No 31) Next to Coppelia restaurant, Cine Praga shows mostly subtitled films; also look here for the video schedule at **Uneac** (Antonio Maceo No 178 btwn Rafael Ferro & Comandante Pinares; ☎ movies at 8:30pm & 10:15pm).

From Tuesday through Sunday nights, Rumayor (left) functions as a kitschy cabaret, with a floor show that starts at 11pm (CUC\$5 cover). It's not the Tropicana, but it ain't half bad.

CASAS PARTICULARES – PINAR DEL RÍO

Anna María García & Salvador Reyes (☎ 77 31 46; Alameda No 24 Bajos btwn Volcán & Avellaneda; r CUC\$20; 🍴) Clean, German spoken, good house for cyclists, helpful.

Colonial House – José Antonio Mesa (☎ 3173; Gerardo Medina Norte No 67 btwn Adela Azcuy & Isidro de Armas; r CUC\$15) Good for groups; courtyard.

Fernández Rent Room (☎ 3158; Colón Norte No 73 btwn Juan Gualberto Gómez & Adela Azcuy; r CUC\$15) Shared bath, meals served, signposted.

Gladys Cruz Hernández (☎ 77 96 98; Av Comandante Pinares Sur No 15 btwn Martí & Máximo Gómez; r CUC\$15) Near train, sleeps three, big patio and fridge, TV, nice bath.

Martí 51 – Laura González Valdés (☎ 2264; Martí Este No 51 Altos btwn Colón & Isabel Rubio; r CUC\$20; 🍴) Central, balcony overlooking the street, awesome private library, colonial atmosphere, meals.

Mayda Martínez (☎ 2110; Isabel Rubio Sur No 125; r CUC\$20; 🍴) Apartment with kitchen, meals.

Mr Aquino (no phone; Av Comandante Pinares Sur No 56-A; r CUC\$20) Fully-equipped independent apartment with kitchen, super-friendly hosts, quiet, good value. On the corner of Máximo Gómez.

Rey & Ely (no phone; Antonio Rubio No 70 btwn Rafael Morales & Ormari Arenado; r CUC\$20; 🍴 🍴) Meals available.

Villa Manolo (☎ 75 41 95; Gerardo Medina No 243 btwn Frank País & 1st, Rpto Raúl Sánchez; r CUC\$20; 🍴)

THE WORLD'S BEST MECHANICS

Fine US workmanship or deft Cuban ingenuity – the secret that keeps 60,000 or so vintage cars chugging like dinosaurs along the streets of Cuba's cities is a matter of some debate.

Hard though it may be to believe, Habana once boasted more cars than anywhere in the Western hemisphere. For nearly half a century the Caribbean market was inundated with Chevrolets, Buicks, Oldsmobiles and Cadillacs, manufactured by Cuba's venerable neighbors to the north. But the revolution changed all that. For a generation of car salesmen, the sight of Castro and his entourage rolling into the capital atop their jeeps in January 1959 was the beginning of the end. Over the ensuing 45 years Cuba was summarily transformed from best-selling car showroom into the Jurassic Park of the motor industry, with only a steady stream of Russian-built Ladas imported during the '70s and '80s bucking the trend.

Forced to adapt in order to survive, innovative Cuban motorists have reinvented themselves as the world's best mechanics. Stick your head under the hood of a vintage '51 Plymouth these days and, chances are, you'll come face to face with a Russian generator, a Mexican battery and pistons borrowed off a GAZ-51 Soviet truck. For classic car collectors it's a glimpse inside the world's biggest motor museum. For the Cubans, it's a case of creative engineering for a population who'd much rather be driving Toyota Yaris.

Shopping

ARTex (☎ 77 83 67; Martí Este No 36; ☒ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) Sells souvenirs, CDs and T-shirts.

La Casa del Ron (Antonio Maceo Oeste No 151; ☒ 9am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat & Sun) Near the cigar factory, sells the same merchandise as ARTex, plus rum.

There's also a Casa del Habano in the street opposite.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Whatever transport needs you have, they can likely be met at the **bus station** (Adela Azcuy btwn Colón & Comandante Pinares). Because **Viazul** (www.viazul.com) buses from Habana only go as far as Viñales, travelers interested in exploring other parts of the province will have to rely on **Astro** (☎ 75 25 72) buses, or take advantage of the transfer bus that now runs daily to María la Gorda stopping in Pinar del Río at 7:30am on the outward leg and 6:30pm on the return. A similar service goes to Habana via Soroa stopping in Pinar at 8:30am and Soroa at 10:15am. For more details contact **Havanatur** (☎ 77 84 94; millo@cimex.cimex.cu) in Pinar del Río.

To get to Cayo Levisa, board the 6:20pm bus to Bahía Honda via Viñales and alight at Mirian, 4km from the Palma Rubia coast guard station, from where boats leave for the Cayo; you'll have to overnight at the station.

Viazul leaves for Viñales twice daily at 11:30am and 4:30pm (CUC\$6) and for Habana at 8:50am and 2:50pm (CUC\$11). Tickets in Convertibles are purchased at the window upstairs (open 8am to 7pm).

Collectivos hanging around outside the bus station will offer you prices all the way to Habana.

TRAIN

Before planning any train travel, check the blackboards at the station for cancelled, suspended and rescheduled services. From the **train station** (☎ 75 57 34; cnr Ferrocarril & Comandante Pinares Sur; ☒ ticket window 6:30am-noon & 1-6:30pm) there's a daily train to Habana (CUC\$7, 5½ hours, 8:45am). You can buy your ticket for this train the day of departure; be at the station between 7am and 8pm. Local trains go southwest to Guane via Sábalo (CUC\$2, two hours, 7:18am and

6:30pm). This is the closest you can get by train to the Península de Guanahacabibes.

Getting Around

There are **Micar** (☎ 77 14 54), **Transtur** (☎ 77 81 78) and **Havanautos** (☎ 77 80 15) car-rental offices at the Hotel Pinar del Río. You can rent mopeds at Transtur (CUC\$24 per day).

Servicentro Oro Negro is two blocks north of the Hospital Provincial on the Carretera Central. Servi-Cupet is 1.5km further north on the Carretera Central toward Habana; another is on Rafael Morales Sur at the south entrance to town.

Horse carts (one peso) on Isabel Rubio near Adela Azcuy go to the Hospital Provincial and out onto the Carretera Central. Bici-taxis cost five pesos around town.

It's not difficult to catch a *botella* (ride) from the outskirts of Pinar del Río to Viñales (10 pesos): wait at the junction of the Viñales Hwy and the northern extent of Rafael Morales where you should see an *amarillo* (see p197).

SOUTHWEST OF PINAR DEL RÍO

Heading into tobacco country, you're escorted southwest out of Pinar del Río city by rows of craning royal palms lining the roadside. Within what seems like minutes you're dipping into picturesque farming region around the town of San Juan y Martínez. Large thatched drying houses float in a sea of tobacco leaves and farmers in signature straw hats tend to their delicate crops. Campismo El Salto, just north of Guane, is a good budget mountain resort. To the west is the freshwater Embalse Laguna Grande, stocked with largemouth bass.

Sights

Well into his eighties now, Alejandro Robaina is the only living person in Cuba with a brand of cigars named in his honor. His famous *vega* (fields), in the rich Vuelta Abajo region southwest of Pinar del Río has been growing quality tobacco since 1845, but it wasn't until 1997 that a new brand of cigars known as *Vegas Robaina* was first launched to wide international acclaim.

Enterprising in more ways than one, Robaina has also unofficially opened up his tobacco farm to outside visitors, and with a little effort and some deft navigational skills, visitors can roll up at the farm and,

CUBA'S TREASURED TOBACCO

There's something strangely incongruous about the transition of a tobacco leaf from the pastoral and lovingly-tended fields of Cuba's Vuelta Abajo to the smoldering, nicotine-stained lump of ash on the end of a Players cigarette. Not that the early Spanish colonizers knew much about lung cancer.

On his first visit to Cuba in 1492, Christopher Columbus encountered Indian medicine men puffing a reed pipe called a *tobago* to inhale smoke from the burning dried leaves of the *cohiba* (tobacco) plant. As part of a fortune-telling ritual, the Spaniards began rolling the leaves into cigars. Tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*) was grown commercially in Cuba after 1580 and by 1700 it was the largest export.

Tobacco plants require fastidious care, involving as many as 150 visits during the growing season. The *vegas* (fields) are plowed using oxen to avoid the compacting that would result if tractors were employed. Corn is often rotated with tobacco to maintain the fertility of the soil.

After seeding at a nursery, it takes about 45 days until the tobacco seedlings are between 15cm and 20cm tall and ready for transplanting. Planting takes place from October to December, and in two months the plants grow to about 1.5m high, with leaves 30cm long and 25cm wide. When the plant has reached the desired height, the central bud is removed to stimulate the growth of the leaves. The finest Corojo tobacco, intended for the outer covering of cigars, is grown under cheesecloth coverings to protect the leaves from the sun's rays. Criollo tobacco, used for filler, is grown in full sunlight. A fully grown plant has six to nine pairs of leaves, and the pairs at each level of the plant must be gathered individually by hand at intervals of about a week as it attains maturity from January to March.

The harvested leaves are sewn together in pairs and hung to dry for about 50 days over wooden poles in special *secaderos* (curing barns), which are oriented to catch the maximum amount of sunlight. At first the leaves turn yellow, then reddish gold. The cured leaves are then bound together and piled in stacks half a meter high for a first fermentation that lasts about 30 days. This reduces the resin in the leaves and produces a more uniform color. The leaves are then moistened and classified, and the thickest parts of the stems are stripped out. The leaves are stacked again in higher bales and left for two months for a second fermentation. After this, they are unpacked and dried on racks, then packed again in special bales called *tercios*, which are covered with *yagua* bark from the royal palm tree. After varying periods of aging, the bales are shipped to cigar factories in Habana.

At the factory the tobacco is shaken out, moistened, and dried again in a special room. The next day the leaves are flattened and their central veins removed, dividing them in two. After sorting, the leaves go to a mixing room where a master blender combines several types to form the *tripa* (filler tobacco) for the desired brand of cigar. The mix of filler determines the flavor of the cigar. The product is then sent to the *galeras* (rolling tables) where each worker makes around 120 cigars a day. To create a cigar, a roller encloses a body of cut filler in a *capote* (binder leaf) and puts it in a press for half an hour. The roller then covers the cigar by hand, wrapping it in a high-quality *capa* (wrapper leaf). The result is something money can't buy in the US.

for a small fee (CUC\$5), get the lowdown on the tobacco-making process from delicate plant to aromatic wrapper.

To get to the **Alejandro Robaina Tobacco Plantation** (☎ 8-79 74 70) take the Carretera Central southwest out of Pinar del Río for 18km, turn left onto another straight road and then left again (after approximately 4km) onto the rougher track that leads to the farm. Tours are generally available from 10am to 5pm every day bar Sunday, but call ahead to check. The tobacco-growing

season runs from October to February and this is obviously the best time to visit.

Sleeping & Eating

Two local, not terribly pretty, beach resorts are on the Bahía de Cortés. They're not bad places to end up, especially for a fresh fish meal.

Villa Boca de Galafre (☎ 84 829-8592; 3/6 beds CUC\$15/20) Has 32 cabins with bath, fans, TV and fridge. The turn-off from the main highway is on the left, 36km southwest of

Pinar del Río; then it's 3km down to the beach. The train to Guane stops on the access road 2km from the resort. It might be closed outside the peak summer season.

Villa Playa Bailén (☎ 829-6145; bungalow CUC\$15) About 44km from Pinar del Río. It's 8km off the main highway and 6km from the nearest train station on the Pinar del Río-Sábalo train line. The basic A-frame bungalows here sleep four people and are right on the beach.

Villa Laguna Grande (Islazul; ☎ 82 84 24 30; s/d low season CUC\$19/24, high CUC\$23/29) This pleasant fishing resort is 29km southwest of Guane and 18km off the highway to María la Gorda. It's one of the Islazul chain's most isolated places. The resort has 12 thatched cabins directly below the dam that created the Embalse Laguna Grande, which is presently stocked with bass, but the fishing facilities are unreliable. If fishing is your goal, inquire at the Islazul office in Pinar del Río before coming here. It's a quiet, good-value place to stay.

There are good private rooms (CUC\$15 to CUC\$20) available in Sandino, 6km southwest of the Laguna Grande turn-off and 89km from Pinar del Río. Try **Motel Alexis** (☎ 84 84 32 82; Zona L No 33; r CUC\$15-20), or nearby Casa de Estrella; both are signposted just off the main highway.

Getting There & Away

Two trains a day travel between Pinar del Río and Guane stopping at San Luis, San Juan y Martínez, Sábalo and Isabel Rubio (two hours). Passenger trucks run periodically between Guane and Sandino, but southwest of there, public transportation is sparse, bar the daily Havanatur Transfer (p200). Be sure to fill your tank up at the Servi-Cupet gas station in Isabel Rubio if you intend to drive to Cabo de San Antonio, as this is the last gasp for gas.

PENÍNSULA DE GUANAHACABIBES

Inhabiting Cuba's western extremity, the Península de Guanahacabibes is a low-lying and ecologically-rich region that supports only a sparse sprinkling of people. There is evidence to suggest that it once played host

to some of the island's earliest inhabitants. Reached via a two hour drive from Pinar del Río, visitors can find cheap accommodation in the gateway settlement of Sandino (which retains a couple of decent *casas particulares*) or press on to the well-known diver's haven of María la Gorda.

PARQUE NACIONAL PENÍNSULA DE GUANAHACABIBES

☎ 82

Flat and deceptively narrow, the elongated Península de Guanahacabibes begins at La Fe, 94km southwest of Pinar del Río. In 1987, 101,500 hectares of this uninhabited sliver of idyllic coastline were declared a Biosphere Reserve by Unesco – one of only six in Cuba. The reasons for the protection measures were manifold. Firstly the reserve's submerged coastline features a wide variety of different landscapes including broad mangrove swamps, low scrub thicket vegetation and an uplifted shelf of alternating white sand and coral rock. Secondly the area's distinctive limestone karst formations are home to a plethora of unique flora and fauna including 172 species of birds, 700 species of plants, 18 types of mammals, 35 reptiles, 19 amphibians, 86 types of butterfly and 16 orchid species. Sea turtles, including loggerhead and green turtles, come ashore at night in summer to lay their eggs – the park is the only part of mainland Cuba where this happens. If you're here between May and October night tours can be arranged to watch the turtles nest. Another curiosity is the swarms of *cangrejos colorados* (red and yellow crabs) that crawl across the peninsula's rough central road only to be unceremoniously crushed under the tires of passing cars. The stench the smashed shells give off is memorable.

To date, Guanahacabibes' value as an archeological goldmine is still in the discovery stage. Suffice to say the area is thought to shelter at least 100 important archeological sites relating to Cuba's oldest and least-known indigenous inhabitants, the Guanahatabey.

Orientation & Information

Although the park border straddles the tiny community of La Fe, the entry to the reserve proper is at La Bajada where you'll find the

Estación Ecológica Guanahacabibes. Just beyond the office the road splits in two with the left-hand branch going south to María la Gorda (14km along a deteriorating coastal road) and the right fork heading west toward the end of the peninsula.

It's a 120km round-trip to Cuba's westernmost point from here. The lonesome Cabo de San Antonio is populated by a solitary lighthouse, the Faro Roncali, inaugurated by the Spanish in 1849. At the time of writing Gaviota had just opened a new marina and villa (see p204). Four kilometers to the northwest lays Playa Las Tumbas, an idyllic beach where visitors to the park are permitted to swim.

There's no charge to visit Hotel María la Gorda and its adjoining 5km beach, both named after a voluptuous Venezuelan who was marooned here by pirates and turned to prostitution to survive. Divers are unanimous about the quality of the reefs here and it's also one of Cuba's prime yachting venues.

Activities

Guanahacabibes is a paradise for eco-travelers, conservationists, divers and bird-watchers. Feathered species on display here include parrots, *tocororros*, woodpeckers, owls, tody flycatchers, and *zunzuncitos* (bee hummingbirds). Hikers and other adventure enthusiasts may find some of the park excursions too limiting, however, and a number of travelers have complained that the beach at María la Gorda didn't quite match up to the publicity photographs.

DIVING

Diving is the real deal in María la Gorda – indeed it is the primary reason why most people come here. Good visibility and sheltered offshore reefs are two of the reasons why enthusiasts make the long trek from the east. Couple this with the largest formation of black coral in the archipelago and you've got a recipe for arguably the best diving reefs on Cuba's Isla Grande.

The action centers around the **International Dive Center** (☎ 77 13 06) at the Marina Gaviota at the Hotel María la Gorda. A dive costs CUC\$35 (night diving CUC\$40), plus CUC\$7.50 for equipment. The center offers a full CMAS (Confédération Mondiale des Activités Subaquatiques; World Underwater Federation) scuba certification course

(CUC\$365; four days) and snorkelers can hop on the dive boat for CUC\$12. The dive center also offers four hours of deep-sea fishing for CUC\$200 for up to four people and line fishing/trolling at CUC\$30 per person, four maximum.

Among the 50 identified dive sites in the vicinity, divers are shown El Valle de Coral Negro, a 100m-long black-coral wall, and El Salón de María, a cave 20m deep containing feather stars and Technicolor corals. The concentrations of migratory fish can be incredible. The furthest entry is only 30 minutes by boat from shore.

Another option is the newly opened **Marina Gaviota Cabo de San Antonio** (☎ 75 01 18) on Playa Las Tumbas at the end of the Guanahacabibes Peninsula. The marina provides easy access to 27 diving sites and has brand new accommodation nearby at the Villa Cabo San Antonio.

EXCURSIONS

The **Estación Ecológica Guanahacabibes** (☎ 82-75-03-66; www.ecovida.pinar.cu; ☎ 7:30am-3:30pm), opposite the meteorological station at La Bajada, arranges guides, specialized visits and a five-hour tour to the park's (and Cuba's) western tip at Cabo de San Antonio. The responsibility is yours to supply transport, sufficient gas, water, sunscreen, insect repellent, and food, which makes the task for independent travelers a little more difficult. During most of the 120km round-trip you'll have dark, rough *diente de perro* (dog's teeth) rock on one side and the brilliant blue sea on the other. Iguanas will lumber for cover as you approach and you might see small deer, *jutías* (edible tree rats) and lots of birds. Beyond the lighthouse is deserted Playa las Tumbas where you'll be given 30 minutes for a swim. Any hire car can make this trip though a 4WD is preferable. The five-hour excursion costs CUC\$10 per person. There's a possibility of other excursions to local communities in the area and the park management, which plans to open a new visitors center by early 2007, has plenty more ideas in the pipeline; call ahead if you're keen.

HIKING

Of the two official hiking trails, **Cueva las Perlas** (Pearl Cave, CUC\$8, three hours, 3km), is superior. Immediately as you enter the trail

you'll see and hear a wide variety of birds, including *tocororos*, *zunzuncitos* (bee hummingbirds) and woodpeckers. After 1.5km you come to Pearl Cave, a multigallery cave system of which 300m is accessible to hikers. The **Del Bosque al Mar** trail (CUC\$6, 1½ hours, 1.5km) is interesting for about five minutes. Too much of this 'hike' is on the blazing road to Cabo de San Antonio. Nonetheless, the guides here are highly trained and knowledgeable, and tours can be conducted in Spanish, English or Italian. There were a number of new trails on the verge of opening as this book was being written. Ask at the Estación Ecológica Guanahacabibes about Sendero La Majagua and Sendero Hoyo del Palmar. There's no reason why you can't hike along the shoreline from La Bajada to María la Gorda, should you be so inclined.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel María la Gorda (Gaviota; ☎ 827-8131; fax 827-8077; s/d/tr incl breakfast low season CUC\$33/46/66, high CUC\$38/56/80; P ♻) This is the most remote hotel on the main island of Cuba and the isolation has its advantages. The adjoining palm-fringed beach is adequate (though not as idyllic as it looks in photographs) and there's a dive site with a vertical drop-off just 200m from the hotel. It's located on the Bahía de Corrientes, 150km southwest

of Pinar del Río (2½ hours by car if you put your foot down). From the park office at La Bajada, where the highway meets the Caribbean, Hotel María la Gorda is 14km to the left, along a rough road.

Rooms are housed either in three pink-concrete, motel-type buildings or in 20 newer cabins set back from the beach. The privacy and comfort afforded by the cabins is infinitely superior. Not that five-star service is much of an issue here. Far from being a posh resort, María la Gorda is a place where hammocks are strung between palm trees, cold beers are sipped at sunset and dive talk continues into the small hours.

Buffet meals cost CUC\$15 for lunch or dinner; reports on the food vary. Water in the hotel shop is expensive, so bring your own or purify the tap water.

Villa Cabo San Antonio (☎ 75 01 18; Playa Las Tumbas) A 16-room villa on the almost-virgin Guanahacabibes Peninsula 3km from the Roncali lighthouse and 4km from the new Gaviota Marina, it has satellite TV, car rental and bike hire.

Restaurante La Bajada (☎ 8:30am-10:30pm) Just next to the meteorological station, this place has (you guessed it) fried chicken, pork filets and French fries – when it's open.

Getting There & Away

A daily transfer operates between Viñales and María la Gorda leaving at 7am and arriving at the peninsula at 9:30am. The return leg leaves María la Gorda at 5pm and arrives in Viñales at 7pm. The cost for a single/return is CUC\$15/25. Inquire at **Transtur** (☎ 79 60 60) in Viñales or **Havanatur** (☎ 77 84 94) in Pinar del Río.

Havanautos (☎ 827-8131) has an office at Hotel María la Gorda. It has a jeep taxi service with driver to Cabo de San Antonio at CUC\$50 for up to four people. It also offers transfers to/from Pinar del Río at CUC\$50 one way for the whole car (or CUC\$120 to/from Habana).

VALLE DE VIÑALES

Embellished by soaring pine trees and scattered with bulbous limestone cliffs that teeter like giant haystacks above the peaceful and well-tended tobacco plantations, Parque Nacional Viñales is one of Cuba's

most magnificent natural settings. Wedged spectacularly into the Sierra de los Órganos mountain range, this 11km by 5km valley was declared a Unesco World Heritage site in 1999 for its dramatic rocky outcrops (known as mogotes), coupled with the vernacular architecture of its traditional farms and villages.

Once upon a time the whole region was several hundred meters higher. Then, during the Cretaceous period 100 million years ago, a network of underground rivers ate away at the limestone bedrock, creating vast caverns. Eventually the roofs collapsed leaving only the eroded walls we see today. It is the finest example of a limestone karst valley in Cuba and contains in Caverna Santo Tomás, the island's largest cave system.

Rock studies aside, Viñales also offers opportunities for fine hiking, history, rock climbing and horseback-trekking. On the accommodation front it boasts four first-class hotels and some of the best casas particulares in Cuba. Despite drawing in day-trippers by the busload, the area's well-protected and spread-out natural attractions have somehow managed to escape the frenzied tourist circus of other less well-managed resorts, while the atmosphere in and around the village remains refreshingly hassle-free.

VIÑALES

☎ 8 / pop 14,279

Founded in 1875, and characterized by its quiet, unhurried streets lined by rustling pine trees, Viñales is a town of creaking rocking chairs and well-polished front porches, where the enthusiastic locals will greet you as one of the family. Along with Baracoa this has to be one of the friendliest places in Cuba and for this reason alone it justifies a two- or three-day lay-over.

Information

IMMIGRATION

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

INTERNET ACCESS & TELEPHONE

Cubanacán (Salvador Cisneros No 63C; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) Service is sometimes erratic here.

Etesca (Ceferino Fernández No 3; Internet per hr CUC\$6) Across from the post office.

MONEY

Banco de Crédito y Comercio (☎ 79 31 30; Salvador Cisneros No 58; ☎ 8am-noon & 1:30-3pm Mon-Fri, 8am-11am Sat)

Cadeca (☎ 79 63 64; Salvador Cisneros & Adela Azcuy; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Sat)

POST

Post office (Ceferino Fernández No 14; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Just off the main square.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Cubanacán (☎ 79 63 93; Salvador Cisneros No 63C; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) Moped rentals and tours, but you can arrange your own tour for less money.

Sights

Viñales has a pleasant main square with the **Casa de la Cultura**, in an old mansion next to the church, offering a full program of cultural activities; an art gallery is next door. The **Museo Municipal** (☎ 79 33 95; Salvador Cisneros No 115; ☎ 8am-5pm) occupies the former home of independence heroine Adela Azcuy (1861-1914) and tracks the local history. Daily hikes can also be organized here.

Look to your left just past the Servipupet on the road north out of town and you'll see a funky, vine-choked gate with fresh fruit hanging from it. This is the entrance to **El Jardín de Caridad** (donations accepted; ☎ 8am-5pm), a sprawling garden almost a century in the making. Cascades of orchids bloom alongside plastic doll heads, thickets of orange lilies grow in soft groves and turkeys run amok. One of the ancient sisters tending the place will likely offer you some conversation and a plate of fruit.

Activities

If you're looking to go for a swim, La Ermita hotel has a seriously beautiful pool-side view (admission CUC\$3; open 8am to 10pm) taking in large swaths of the valley. You can also get a **massage** (CUC\$20-35) here. Hotel Los Jazmines has a pool too (admission including a drink CUC\$5; open 9am to 7pm) and an even better view, though the coming and going of sightseers can sometimes kill the tranquility.

Casa owners in Viñales are particularly adept at being able to rustle up all number of activities more or less on demand. One particularly resourceful couple are **Yoañ & Esthelita Reyes** (☎ 79 32 63; Rafael Trejo No 134)

NORTH OF THE PENÍNSULA

The long, bumpy road from Sandino along the north coast of Pinar del Río to Cayo Jutías is one of Cuba's most isolated and lonesome rides. Public transport is almost nonexistent here so if you intend to ply this route a hire car or an extremely sturdy bicycle is essential (stock up on gas, food and water in Isabel Rubio).

Of the scattered settlements along the route only **Mantua** – site of an important battle led by Antonio Maceo in 1896 – is of any historical note, though the scenery impresses with pine trees and shadowy hills as you push east toward Santa Lucía and the Viñales turn-off.

Accommodation-wise there is a casa particular in Sandino that doubles up as a paladar – **Motel Edilia** (☎ 3843; Zona M No 42; P ♻) – otherwise you are on your own until Puerto Esperanza; splendid isolation.

Eating & Drinking

Because so many *casas particulares* provide meals for guests, Viñales is short on paladares. While you're out hiking, you might get an invitation to eat with *campesinos* (country people): take it and you'll dine fabulously on fresh roasted pork, the best *congrí* (rice with beans) you're likely to have, *yuca con mojo* (yuca with lime sauce) and salad.

Restaurante La Casa de Don Tomás (☎ 79 63 00; Salvador Cisneros No 140; ☎ 10am-9:30pm) The oldest house in Viñales and its most salubrious restaurant. You'll know you've arrived at the right place by the terra-cotta roof and exuberant flowering vines bursting from the balcony. This place has atmospheric patio dining out the back, where you can try *'las delicias de Don Tomás'*, the house specialty with rice, lobster, fish, pork, chicken and sausage with an egg crowning it all (CUC\$10). Chicken and fish dishes are cheaper.

El Estanco II (☎ 10am-11pm) A simple pizza and beer place 1km out of town on the road north, and a decent pit stop. A pizza costs a couple of Convertibles, a plate of spaghetti slightly more.

Other, simpler places include **Restaurante Las Brisas** (☎ 79 33 53; Salvador Cisneros No 96; ☎ 11am-2pm & 6-9pm), a not half bad peso restaurant where you can fill up for under CUC\$4, and take-out **peso pizza** (Salvador Cisneros No 130).

Viñales' *mercado agropecuario* (agricultural market) is about 100m from town at the west end of Salvador Cisneros down the road toward Dos Hermanas. Get your peso rum and Convertible bread here.

Entertainment

Centro Cultural Polo Montañez (Cisneros, cnr Joaquín Pérez, in main square; admission CUC\$1) This is Viñales' newest and hottest nightclub, named in honor of the local *guajiro* hero turned international icon (see p193). An intimate ambience and a kicking sound system make this place one of the best music venues in the province. Drinks and snacks are also available during day hours. Evening shows warm up around 10pm. Relegated down the list somewhat are old favorites **Patio del Decimista** (Salvador Cisneros No 102; admission free; ☎ music at 9pm), serving live music nightly along with cold beers and **El Viñalero** (Salvador

Cisneros No 105) across the street. **Cine Viñales** (cnr Ceferino Fernández & Rafael Trejo) is a block south of the main square.

Shopping

You can get postcards, T-shirts and CDs at **ARTex** (Salvador Cisneros No 102) and cigars at **Casa del Habano** (Carretera de Puerto Esperanza Km 1; ☎ 9am-5pm).

Getting There & Around

BUS

The **Astro ticket office** (Salvador Cisneros No 63A; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-3pm) is opposite the church on Viñales' main square. The daily Astro bus to Habana leaves at 2:30pm (CUC\$8) and a comfortable Viazul bus for Habana via Pinar del Río departs at 8am and 2pm daily (CUC\$12). There's also a daily Havanatur transfer service to María la Gorda (7am) and Habana via Soroa and Las Terrazas (8am). New routes have also been added for Cayo Levisa and Trinidad. Cubanacán and Transtur can give you details.

CAR & MOPED

To reach Viñales from the south, you take the long and winding road from Pinar del Río; the roads from the north coast are not as sinuous, but are pretty drives. The wildly scenic mountain road from the Península de Guanahacabibes through Guane and Pons is one of Cuba's most spectacular routes. Allow a lot of travel time.

The following agencies have offices in Viñales:

Cubanacán (☎ 79 63 93; Salvador Cisneros No 63C;

☎ 9am-7pm) Mopeds CUC\$24 per day.

Havanaautos (☎ 79 63 90) At the Servi-Cupet; rents mopeds.

Micar (☎ 79 63 30; Salvador Cisneros final)

Transtur (☎ 79 60 60; Salvador Cisneros) Beside the church; rents mopeds.

A Servi-Cupet gas station is at the northeast end of Viñales town. Taxis parked alongside the square will take you to Pinar del Río (CUC\$10), Palma Rubia (CUC\$25) for the boat to Cayo Levisa or Gran Caverna de Santo Tomás (CUC\$16). All prices are approximations.

VIÑALES BUS TOUR

Modeled on Varadero's opened topped double-decker, the Viñales Bus Tour is a

hop-on-hop-off minibus that runs nine times a day between all of the valley's main sites. Starting and finishing in the village's main park the whole circuit takes an hour and five minutes with the first bus leaving at 9am and the last at 7:10pm. There are 18 stops along the route and all are clearly marked with route maps and timetables. For more information inquire at **Transtur** (☎ 79 60 60; Salvador Cisneros).

PARQUE NACIONAL VIÑALES

☎ 8

Parque Nacional Viñales' extraordinary cultural landscape covers 15,000 hectares and supports a population of 25,000 people. A mosaic of communities grows coffee, tobacco, sugarcane, oranges, avocados and bananas on some of the oldest landscape in Cuba. The park is administered through the spanking new **Parque Nacional Viñales visitors center** (Carretera a Pinar del Río Km 2) on the hill just before you reach Los Jazmines hotel. Inside, colorful displays map out the park's main features. Hiking, information and guides are also on hand.

Sights

Four kilometers west of Viñales village is the **Mural de la Prehistoria** (admission CUC\$1). On a cliff at the foot of the 617m-high Sierra de Viñales, the highest portion of the Sierra de los Órganos, this 120m-long painting on the side of Mogote Dos Hermanas was designed in 1961 by Leovigildo González Morillo, a follower of Mexican artist Diego Rivera (the idea was hatched by Celia Sánchez, Alicia Alonso and Antonio Nuñez Jiménez). It took 15 people five years to complete it. The huge snail, dinosaurs, sea monsters and humans on the cliff symbolize the theory of evolution and are either impressively psychedelic or monumentally horrific, depending on your point of view. You don't really have to get up close to appreciate the mural, but the admission fee is waived if you take the delicious, if a little overpriced, CUC\$15 lunch at the site restaurant (see p211). Horses are usually available here at for a short ride around the park or a longer excursion through the valley.

A kilometer beyond the turn-off to Dos Hermanas, a dirt road leads toward the mountain community of **Los Aquáticos**. Los Aquáticos was founded in 1943 by follow-

ers of visionary Antoñica Izquierdo, who discovered the healing power of water when the *campesinos* of this area had no access to conventional medicine. They colonized the mountain slopes and several families still live there. Unfortunately, the last patriarch practicing the water cure died in 2002, taking the tradition with him, but you can still visit. Los Aquáticos is accessible only by horse or on foot. Ask at your casa for guide contacts; horses can be hired from farmers living near the trailhead (CUC\$10 per person for a three-hour tour with Spanish-speaking guide). From the main road it's 1km inland to the trailhead (just across the stream) of La Ruta de las Aguas. After your visit, you can make this a loop by continuing on this road (fork left at the same stream, recrossing it a few hundred meters to the east) another 3km to Campismo Dos Hermanas and the cliff paintings; it's a wonderfully scenic route (the complete Los Aquático/Dos Hermanas circuit totals 6km from the main highway).

North from the **Cueva del Indio** (☎ 79 62 80; admission CUC\$5; ☎ 9am-5:30pm) is the prettiest part of Viñales, but the cave itself, 5.5km north of Viñales village, is a shameless tourist trap. An ancient indigenous dwelling, it was rediscovered in 1920 and motor boats now ply the underground river through the electrically lit cave. Souvenir vendors crowd the entrance, while cheesy musicians serenade you and tour buses roll in belching out large groups.

The **Cueva de San Miguel** is a smaller cave at the jaws of the Valle de San Vicente. You can pay CUC\$1 to enter a gaping cave that leads you 50m or so to the El Palenque de los Cimarrones (see p211).

Activities

CYCLING

Despite the sometimes hilly terrain, Viñales is one of the best places in Cuba to cycle. Try asking about bike rental at the Cubanacán office (p211). If you get no luck there, inquire at your casa particular. Viñales residents have a habit of making marvelous two-wheeled cycling machines appear out of thin air.

HIKING

With the long-awaited Parque Nacional Viñales visitors center now officially open,

information and access to hiking trails in Viñales is better than ever before. At present there are three official valley hikes, all of which can be arranged directly through the center itself, the Museo Municipal or any of the town's tour agencies.

The Cocosolo Palmarito starts on a spur road just before La Ermita hotel and progresses for 11km past the Coco Solo and Palmarito mogotes and the Mural de la Prehistorico. There are good views here and plenty of opportunities to discover the local flora and fauna including a visit to a tobacco *finca* (farmhouse; ask about lunch with one of the families there). It returns you to the main road back to Viñales.

The Maravillas de Viñales trail is a 4km loop beginning 1km before El Moncada, 13km from the Dos Hermanas turn-off. This hike takes in endemic plants, orchids and the biggest ant cutter hive in Cuba (so they say). A caretaker at the trailhead collects the CUC\$1 entry fee.

The San Vicente/Ancón trail takes you out to the more remote Valle Ancón where you can check out still functioning coffee communities in a valley surrounded by mogotes.

These are just the official hikes. There are many more unofficial treks available and asking around at your casa particular will elicit further suggestions. Try the Aquáticos walk with its incredible vistas, the Cueva de la Vaca with its swimming options and the Palmerito Valley, infamous among those in the know for its high-stakes cockfights.

COCKFIGHTING

Illegal but tolerated, Cuban cockfighting is a gruesome mix of virulent spectator 'sport' and frenetic gambling road show. Indeed, at times, it's a toss-up as to which provides the crazier spectacle: the cocks, or the over-the-top spectators who gather enthusiastically to watch their favorite birds fight.

Practiced since the 18th century, cockfighting was first introduced into Cuba by the Spanish and is the only real form of organized gambling to have survived the corruption-cleansing Castro revolution. A decent event can attract more than 500 people and inspire bets of up to 50,000 Cuban pesos (US\$2000). Held in the countryside of rural provinces such as Pinar del Río (Cuba's unofficial cockfighting capital), a fairlike atmosphere begins midmorning and continues into late evening, or until the losing cock is finally killed. Rum, copious betting and plenty of breast-beating male bravado are all part of the unrelenting package.

Cuban cocks – rather like the country's Olympian boxers – are said to be wily, combative and thoroughly pugnacious creatures with fights developing into long, bloody, drawn out affairs that can last for hours. Aspiring spectators be warned, cockfighting is not for the fainthearted.

ROCK CLIMBING

Yet to be 'officially' sanctioned by the major tourist operators, rock climbing in Cuba is still in the developmental stage. As a result, most of the town's budding tour reps will deny any knowledge of it. But rest assured, up in those lofty grey limestone mogotes the scene is huge, and growing.

The first climbers arrived in the late 1990s inspired by descriptions of the Viñales Valley as a miniature Yosemite in the first edition of Lonely Planet's *Cuba*. Teaming up with some enterprising local Cubans they took enthusiastically to the rock faces and, within a couple of years, climbing routes were being opened up all over the mogotes. At last count there were 150 climbs mapped out in Viñales, with names like Rompe los Dedos (Finger Breaker) and Cuba Libre (Free Cuba); more climbs are constantly being mapped.

Of all the outdoor adventures in Cuba, rock climbing is the most DIY by far. Climbers should head to www.cubaclimbing.com for the lowdown and bring extra gear to share (local supplies are ridiculously limited). Center of operations in Viñales village is a casa particular run by Oscar Jaime Rodríguez in Adela Azcuy (see p207).

SWIMMING

One of the nicest natural swimming spots in the area is in the Río Resvaloso near the Cueva de la Vaca. There is another possibility at La Cueva de Palmerito where you can swim inside a cave. Ask the locals for directions. Everyone knows where these places are.

Tours

Cubanacán (Salvador Cisneros No 63C; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Sat) is conveniently located in the center of Viñales village and organizes excursions everywhere from Cayo Levisa to the Gran Caverna de Santo Tomás. Check out the schedule.

Sleeping

Campismo Dos Hermanas (Cubamar; ☎ 79 32 23; rCUC\$15; 🏠) This place, among the mogotes directly opposite El Mural de la Prehistoria, is one of Cubamar's most popular international campismos. The 54 two- and four-bed concrete cabins are frequented by campers, climbers and cyclists; it's a good place to meet other travelers. There's a restaurant as well as horseback riding and other excursions. Several caves are accessible on foot nearby and you can hike back into the valley. An archeological museum is on the premises. It's good value and a pretty place to stay, but fills fast (especially on weekends). This is a full Campertour facility.

Hotel Rancho San Vicente (Cubanacán; ☎ 79 62 01; s/d low season incl breakfast CUC\$40/52, high CUC\$45/60; 🏠 🚰 🚿) Just 7km north of Viñales village and 1km north of the Cueva del Indio, San Vicente is nestled in a grove and the setting is magnificent. The updated wooden cabins (Nos 6 to 43) are the best accommodation option, with lovely natural furnishings, delicious baths and sliding glass doors onto a porch. Put up your feet and look for the 30 to 50 bird species that frequent the grounds or go for a sulfur soak (25°C to 28°C) or massage.

Restaurante Las Magnolias (☎ 79 60 62; d incl breakfast CUC\$25; 🏠 🚰 🚿) Three rooms are for rent at this little house directly across the highway from the Cueva del Indio. Only one of the rooms has a private bath, but kitchens and satellite TV are nice perks.

Eating & Drinking

La Casa del Veguero (☎ 97 60 80; ☎ 10am-5pm) Just outside Viñales toward Pinar del Río, this paladar serves a complete (and tasty) *criollo* (Creole) lunch for around CUC\$10. Adjacent to the restaurant is a *secadero* (drying house) where tobacco leaves are cured from February to May. Visitors are welcome in the *secadero* and you can buy loose cigars here at discount prices.

Mural de la Prehistoria Restaurant (☎ 79 62 60; ☎ 11:30am-7pm) Of all the places clustered within spitting distance of Viñales serving *asado* (roast), this restaurant has the recipe mastered. The pork is roasted and smoked over natural charcoal, giving it a sublime melt-in-your-mouth flavor. You'll have to starve yourself first to justify the CUC\$15 price tag, but you probably won't need to eat for days afterwards.

El Palenque de los Cimarrones (☎ 79 62 90; ☎ noon-4pm) Entered through the Cueva de San Miguel, this place is an odd combination of folklore show, restaurant and plantation slavery museum. The complete Cuban-style lunch is tasty, but the young Cubans dressed as *cimarrones* (runaway slaves) somehow fails to stimulate the appetite.

Restaurante Las Magnolias (☎ 79 60 62; ☎ 10am-6pm) The coziest place to eat near the Cueva del Indio, it's across the highway from the cave; it serves lobster and a number of cheaper options.

Entertainment

The Disco-Bar Cuevas de Viñales at the entrance to the Cueva San Miguel sometimes runs a cabaret show at night; ask around for details. During the day it's a nice cool bar. There's a lit passageway 150m through the mogote to El Palenque de los Cimarrones (see above).

Getting Around

Bike, car, moped or the Viñales Bus Tour (p208); take your pick.

WEST OF VIÑALES

At El Moncada, 14km west of the Dos Hermanas turn-off and 1.5km off the road to Minas de Matahambre, is **Gran Caverna de Santo Tomás** (admission CUC\$8; ☎ 8:30am-5pm), Cuba's largest cave system. There are over 46km of galleries on eight levels; 1km on the sixth level, 42m above the valley, is accessible to visitors. There's no artificial lighting, but headlamps are provided for the 90-minute guided tour. Things to see include bats, stalagmites and stalactites, underground pools, interesting rock formations and a replica of an ancient native Indian mural. Specialists should contact the **Escuela de Espeleológica** (☎ 8-79 31 45) for more information. Near the cave entrance is a massive poured-concrete **monument**

erected in 1999 to Los Doce Malagones, 12 locals who eliminated a counterrevolutionary band in the hills in 1959, giving rise to today's Cuban militias. A **museum** (admission CUC\$1; ☎ 10am-10pm) with a veteran docent is on site.

CAYO JUTÍAS

Cayo Jutías is one of northern Pinar del Río's few secluded beaches and one of those 'best-kept secret' locations that is rapidly becoming more developed. If you thought that Cayo Levisa was too crowded for you, this could be a good place to try as an alternative.

In the late 1990s, the cayo was linked to the mainland by a massive *pedraplén* (causeway) that offers a dramatic view of the province's mountains in profile. The access road begins about 4km west of Santa Lucía. At the beginning of the causeway, 4.5km off the coastal road, you will need to pay a CUC\$5 per person entry fee. Nine kilometers from the main highway is a metal lighthouse, the **Faro de Cayo Jutías**, erected by the USA in 1902. The route ends at a picturesque white beach caressed by crystal-clear water, 12.5km from the coastal highway.

There's the **Restaurante Cayo Jutías** (☎ 9am-5pm) here which specializes in seafood. You can base yourself here while engaging in a couple of water-based activities such as kayaking and snorkeling (equipment is available for hire from a small hut on the beach), but the main attraction is the location itself, quiet and relatively undiscovered – at least until the tour buses come rumbling in at about 11am. Tours from Pinar del Río or Viñales cost between CUC\$25 to CUC\$53 depending on whether you include a guide and/or lunch in the package. Otherwise you will have to make your own transport arrangements. The fastest and by far the prettiest route to Cayo Jutías is via El Moncada and Minas de Matahambre through rolling pine-clad hills.

Santa Lucía is a small town known mostly for its huge thermoelectric power plant and sulfuric acid factory. However, there are a couple of private casas particulares here; ask around for further information. Otherwise your only accommodation option in this town is to pitch a tent.

NORTHERN PINAR DEL RÍO

Considering its relative proximity to Habana, Northern Pinar del Río Province is a remote and largely unexplored area. Facilities are sparse and roads are rutted on the isolated Gulf of Mexico coast, though visitors who take the time to make the journey out have reported back stories of memorable DIY adventures and famously hospitable locals.

PUERTO ESPERANZA

☎ 8

Puerto Esperanza (Port of Hope), 6km north of San Cayetano and 25km north of Viñales, is a sleepy little fishing village visited by yachts sailing around the country. According to town lore, the giant mango trees lining the entry road were planted by slaves in the 1800s. A long pier pointing out into the bay is decent for a jump in the ocean. Otherwise the clicks haven't worked here since...oh...1951.

Sights & Activities

Puerto Esperanza's sights are not the domain of guidebook listings. Rather this is the kind of low-key, put-down-the-Lonely-Planet sort of place where it's more fun to unravel the social life on your own. Discover some weirdly transcendental Santería ritual or take a spontaneous tour around your neighbor's tobacco plantation in search of pungent peso cigars.

Sleeping & Eating

The town has six legal casas.

Villa Leonila Blanco (☎ 79 36 48; Calle Hermanos Caballeros No 41; r CUC\$15; ☎) The super-nice couple at Leonila Blanco rent two big rooms with shared bath, garage and meals. They also have an independent house.

Other options:

Villa Maribel (☎ 79 38 46; Calle Maceo No 56; r CUC\$15) Another good option which rents two interconnecting rooms that can sleep up to six; meals served.

Villa Dora González Fuentes (☎ 79 38 72; Pelayo Cuervo No 5) This casa is enthusiastically recommended by readers.

Getting There & Away

There's a handy Servi-Cupet gas station at San Cayetano. The road to Santa Lucía and

Cayo Jutías deteriorates to dirt outside of San Cayetano: expect a throbbing backside if you're on a bike or moped.

CAYO LEVISA

More oft-visited than Cayo Jutías, Cayo Levisa sports a midrange hotel, passable restaurant and fully-equipped diving center, yet it still somehow manages to retain an idyllic tropical-island feel. Separation from the mainland obviously helps. Unlike Jutías to the west there's no causeway here and visitors must make the 35 minute journey via boat from Palma Rubia. Most agree the trip is worth it. Three kilometers of white sand and sapphire waters earmark Cayo Levisa as Pinar del Río's best northern beach haven. Part of the Archipiélago de los Colorados, American writer Ernest Hemingway first 'discovered' the area in the early 1940s after he set up a fishing camp on Cayo Paraíso, a smaller coral island 10km to the east. These days Levisa attracts up to 100 visitors daily as well as the 50-plus hotel guests. While you're not going to feel like Robinson Crusoe here, it does make a refreshing alternative to some of Cuba's larger beach resorts.

Sights & Activities

Scuba diving is offered at CUC\$36 for one to four dives, including gear and transport to the dive site. Two hours of snorkeling plus gear costs CUC\$12.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Cayo Levisa (Cubanacán; ☎ 7-66 60 75; s/d low season CUC\$59/74, high CUC\$65/83; ☎) Has a new 40-room capacity in cozy *cabañas* with private bath. The room prices include transport to the island and a welcome drink, but beware of water shortages, dull food and occasionally stropic staff. This is a terrific place to kick off your shoes for a few days and relax, if the tour groups and mosquitoes don't overwhelm you.

Getting There & Away

The landing for Cayo Levisa is 21km north-east of La Palma or 40km west of Bahía Honda. Take the turn-off to Mirian and proceed 4km through a large banana plantation to reach the coast-guard station at Palma Rubia, from which the boat to the island departs. The Cayo Levisa boat leaves

at 10am and returns at 5pm, and costs CUC\$25 per person round-trip including lunch. For a few extra Convertibles you can organize a snorkeling trip. From the Cayo Levisa dock you cross the mangroves on a wooden walkway to the resort and gorgeous beach along the island's north side. A transfer bus from Viñales now plies this route (see p208).

BAHÍA HONDA & AROUND

The scenic, winding road to Habana through northern Pinar del Río Province is a pretty and relaxing alternative to the Autopista. Rice paddies lie in the river valleys and you pass a succession of picturesque thatched farmhouses. Travelers rave about this route. Make sure you bring plenty of camera film and pencil in a full quota of 'view' stops.

Bahía Honda itself is a small bustling town with a pretty church. Close by the purple shadow of the Pan de Guajabón (699m) marks the highest point for miles around. Despite your relative proximity to Habana you'll feel strangely isolated here, particularly as the road deteriorates after the Palma Rubia turn-off.

There's no real accommodation options in the area and few places to eat. If you're desperate you could try **Motel La Mulata** (r from CUC\$10), 27km west of Bahía Honda and 1km off the main road, though some travelers have complained they've been turned away on the pretext it's a Cuban-only place.

SAN DIEGO DE LOS BAÑOS & AROUND

☎ 8

San Diego de los Baños, 130km southwest of Habana, is a friendly little town nestled between two mountain ranges that is considered to be Cuba's best spa resort (although Baños de Elegua in Villa Clara runs a close second). It is also one of its oldest, dating back to the early 1600s when a sick slave stumbling upon its medicinal waters took a revitalizing bath and was supposedly cured. Thanks to the area's proximity to Habana, a small settlement grew up on the site in the ensuing years as the healing waters' reputation spread and in 1891 the Spanish established the first spa here under medical supervision.

The village sits on the Río San Diego, the river that separates the Sierra de los

Órganos to the west from the higher Sierra del Rosario to the east. The Sierra de Güira on the Pinar del Río side of San Diego de los Baños is a nature reserve with pine, mahogany and cedar forests, and a favorite spot for bird-watchers.

Sights & Activities

The **Balneario San Diego** (☎ 3-7812; 🕒 8am-4pm) is a modern bathing complex where thermal waters of 30°C to 40°C are used to treat muscular and skin afflictions. Mud from the mouth of the Río San Diego is used here for mud baths (CUC\$20). The sulfurous waters of these mineral springs are potent and immersions of only 20 minutes per day are allowed (CUC\$4/6 for collective/private pools). Massage is available at CUC\$25 and many other health services are offered including 15-day courses of acupuncture. These facilities are among the finest of their kind in the country and many Cubans are prescribed treatment here by their family doctors – otherwise the clientele is made up of passing foreign visitors.

If you're looking for cold water, you can swim at the Hotel Mirador **pool** (admission CUC\$1; 🕒 9am-6pm). Two blocks over from the Hotel Mirador is the gracious old **Hotel Saratoga** (1924), complete with columns, mosaic tiling and elderly Cubans working the rocking chairs on the porch.

Five kilometers west of San Diego de los Baños is **Parque La Güira**, the former Hacienda Cortina, which consists of a large sculpture park built during the 1920s and '30s by wealthy lawyer José Manuel Cortina. Entered via a crenellated gateway the artificial ruins include a Chinese pavilion and clusters of bamboo. It's worth a quick stopover if you're passing through, more for its slightly surreal atmosphere than for the sights themselves. A huge state-operated restaurant is just above Parque La Güira, but the cabins here are reserved for vacationing military personnel.

During the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara transferred the headquarters of the Western Army to **Cueva de los Portales**, 11km west of Parque La Güira and 16km north of Entronque de Heradura on the Carretera Central. The cave is in a pretty area, 1km off the main road, and was declared a national monument in the 1980s. A small museum contains a few of

Che's roughshod artifacts including his bed. Three other caves called El Espejo, El Salvador and Cueva Oscura are up on the hillside. Together these sites make a cool side trip not just for Che aficionados, but for nature lovers as well.

Sleeping

IN TOWN

Hotel Mirador (Islazul; ☎ 7-8338; s/d low season CUC\$30/37; high CUC\$34/41; 📶 🚰 🚿) Foreigners usually stay at this attractive, two-story hotel adjacent to the hot springs. It's a modernized hotel dating from 1954, with comfortable rooms with fridge (some with views) and a pleasant swimming pool. The service here is helpful and friendly and the mineral baths are just across the road.

There are two or three decent *casas particulares* dotted around in San Diego de los Baños. Other places that come highly recommended are the houses of **Carlos Alberto González** (no phone; Calle 21A No 3003 btwn 30 & 32; r CUC\$20). If this place is full the owners can point you in the direction of a few others.

WEST OF TOWN

Like a faded Hollywood starlet with a habit, Cabañas Los Pinos is beautiful, but hit the skids long ago. In the Sierra de Güira, 12km west of San Diego de los Baños via Parque La Güira, it's a terrific camping spot if you've got gear. The best place to ask for directions/details is at the Hotel Mirador. Los Pinos was built in the early 1960s by Castro's secretary (and respected revolutionary leader in her own right), the late Celia Sánchez, whose circular cabin stands in the center of the eerie, shuttered complex. It's an idyllic location, standing on a ridge below the mountain peaks, and it's an excellent bird-watching base. Los Pinos would make a perfect ecotourism resort were it ever restored. Until that happens you'll probably have the place to yourself.

Motel Las Palmas (Parque La Güira; r CUC\$17) Has nine air-con rooms with bath, fridge and TV. Mostly Cubans stay here.

Cueva de los Portales (☎ 3-2749) Five kilometers west of Los Pinos, are six basic *cabañas* (CUC\$5 per person). You may be able to pitch a tent (CUC\$3 per person) in the forest near the cave, but the mosquitoes are fierce.

Eating

Hotel Mirador restaurants (Islazul; ☎ 7-8338; meals under CUC\$7) The open-air *parrillada* (grill restaurant) at the Hotel Mirador is quite good. There is also a proper restaurant at the hotel serving Cuban cuisine.

Getting Around

There's a Servi-Cupet at the entrance to San Diego de los Baños from Habana. Horse carts shuttle between San Diego de los Baños and Parque La Güira for a couple of pesos. If you're planning to cycle over the mountain to Cabañas Los Pinos and Guevara's cave, beware of dangerous pot-holes and loose gravel on the steep downhill stretches.

SOROA

☎ 82

Soróa, 95km west of Habana, is the closest mountain resort area to the capital and makes a popular day trip. It's above Candelaria in the Sierra del Rosario, the easternmost and highest section of the Cordillera de Guaniguanico. Soróa is nicknamed the 'rainbow of Cuba', and the region's heavy rainfall (more than 1300mm annually) promotes the growth of tall trees and orchids. The area gets its name from Jean-Pierre Soróa, a Frenchman who owned a 19th-century coffee plantation in these hills. One of his descendants, Ignacio Soróa, created the park as a personal retreat in the 1920s, and only since the revolution has this luxuriant region been developed for tourism. This is another great area to explore by bike.

Sights & Activities

All Soróa's sights are conveniently near Hotel & Villas Soróa, a large motel complex offering horseback riding. Next door is **Orquideario Soróa** (☎ 77 25 58; admission CUC\$3, plus camera CUC\$2; 🕒 9am-4pm), built between 1943 and 1953 by Spanish lawyer Tomás Felipe Camacho in memory of his wife and daughter. There are 700 orchid species (most voluminous blooming from December to March), 6000 ornamentals and various growing houses and research facilities. Visits are well guided in Spanish or English; although some orchid enthusiasts have expressed disappointment at the quality and quantity of what's on show. The Orquide-

ario is currently connected to the University of Pinar del Río.

Down the road is the entrance to a park featuring the **Salto del Arco Iris** (admission CUC\$3), a 22m waterfall on the Arroyo Manantiales. It's at its most impressive in the May to October rainy season, otherwise it's a trickle. You can swim at the foot of the falls. Entry is free for Hotel & Villas Soróa guests.

On the opposite side of the stream from the waterfall parking lot is the **Baños Romanos** (per hr CUC\$5; 🕒 9am-4pm), a stone bathhouse with a pool of cold sulfurous water. Ask at Villas Soróa about the baths and massage treatments. It's a half-hour scramble up the hill from the bathhouse to the **Mirador**, a rocky crag with a sweeping view of all Soróa.

Castillo de las Nubes is a romantic castle with a circular tower on a hilltop above the Orquideario. There are good views of the Valle de Soróa and the coastal plain beyond from the ridge beyond the bar. The restaurant has the liveliness of a crypt, but you might grab a drink from the bar (open 10am to 5pm).

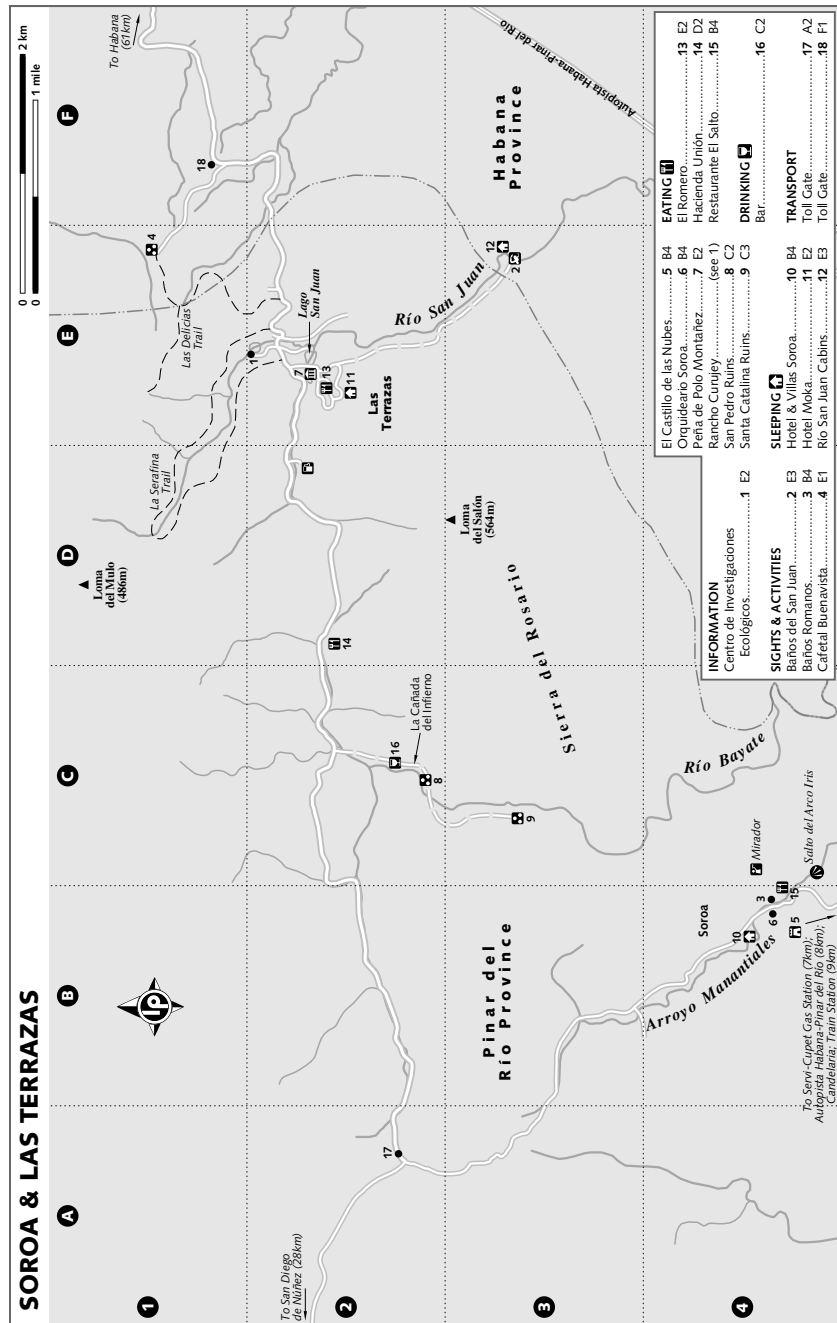
Sleeping & Eating

Several signposted houses on the road from Candelaria to Soróa, 3km below the Hotel & Villas Soróa, rent rooms.

Maité Delgado (☎ 522-70069; Km7 Carretera a Soróa; r CUC\$20; 📶 🚰 🚿) The accommodation is within easy walking distance of all the Soróa sights and the family is pleasant. If it's full, the owners will point you in the direction of a few others further down the road.

Hotel & Villas Soróa (Cubanaçá; ☎ 77 82 18; s/d low season incl breakfast CUC\$38/48, high CUC\$45/55; 📶 🚰 🚿) Nestled in a valley on spacious grounds amid stately trees and verdant hills. The 80 rooms have fridges, good beds and nice touches like incandescent light. Try for a room on the front row above the swimming pool. A fabulous alternative is to take one of the private villas (low season CUC\$43 to CUC\$72) in the wooded slope above the Orquideario administered by the hotel. They sleep one to five people, have kitchens, fridges and satellite TVs; six have swimming pools, which may be dry: great for boarders!

The only place to eat outside the hotels/casas is the Restaurante El Salto, opposite the Orquideario and next to the Baños Romanos.



Getting There & Away

A transfer bus now passes through Soroa daily leaving Viñales at 8am and arriving in the village at 10:15am. The bus then goes onto Habana, arriving in the capital at 11am. On the return leg, the bus leaves Habana at 1pm, arriving in Soroa at 4pm and Viñales at 5:40pm. For more information contact **Transtur** (☎ 79 60 60; Salvador Cisneros) in Viñales or **Havanatur** (☎ 77 84 94) in Pinar del Río.

The only other access to Soroa and the surrounding area is with your own wheels: car, bicycle or moped. An Astro or Viazul bus will drop you off at Canadleria 10km to the south, but from there you'll have to hitch a ride to Villa Soroa (for information on the risks associated with hitching see p477).

Servi-Cupet is on the Autopista at the turn-off to Candelaria, 8km below Villa Soroa.

LAS TERRAZAS

☎ 82 / pop 1200

The quaint, leafy community of Las Terrazas in eastern Pinar del Río, near the border of Habana Province, dates back to a reforestation project in 1968. The surrounding mountains had been denuded by a combination of fire and shortsighted agricultural techniques, and the inhabitants lived in poor and difficult conditions. A reservoir was created in 1971, and beside it a model settlement was built, taking its name from the hillside terraces planted with pines to prevent erosion. The experiment was so successful that in 1985 this area was declared the Reserva Sierra del Rosario, Cuba's first Unesco-sanctioned Biosphere Reserve.

In 1990, then minister of tourism Osmani Cienfuegos (brother of revolutionary hero Camilo Cienfuegos) approved an upmarket ecotourism resort here as a means of providing employment for the village's 890 inhabitants. Between 1992 and 1994 a hotel was built with workers drawn from Las Terrazas and it quickly became an archetype. A vibrant art community with open studios, woodwork and pottery workshops has taken hold and the settlement's biggest success story has been none other than *guajiro* music hero, Polo Montañez. Cienfuegos, who had a hand in the original reforestation project, is still heavily involved

in Las Terrazas and regarded as the motivating force behind its success.

Las Terrazas is 20km northeast of Hotel & Villas Soroa and 13km west of the Habana-Pinar del Río Autopista at Cayajabos. There are toll gates at both entrances to the reserve (CUC\$3 per person). The reserve's **Centro de Investigaciones Ecológicas** (☎ 77 29 21) is next to Rancho Curujey, a bar overlooking a bulrush-fringed lake, a few hundred meters east of the Hotel Moka access road. Here you can arrange guided hikes on La Serafina and Las Delicias trails, costing CUC\$20 for one or two persons (two to three hours). Hotel Moka also organizes these and other hikes. Unfortunately the trails are poorly marked, so you really do need a guide. It's said that 83 species of birds can be seen in the reserve.

Sights & Activities

About 1.5km up the hill from the gate on the Cayajabos side, 6km from Hotel Moka by road, are the ruins of the **Cafetal Buenavista**, a coffee plantation built in 1802 by French refugees from Haiti. During the 19th century there were 54 similar coffee estates around Las Terrazas, although coffee

GO FURTHER – EXPLORE THE SIERRA DEL ROSARIO RESERVE

Inaugurated as the first of Cuba's six Unesco biospheres in 1984 the Sierra del Rosario reserve juxtaposes complex geological and biological structures with the remnants of the first major coffee plantation in the Americas.

Renowned for its excellent bird-watching possibilities, the park management has sought to protect the area's delicate ecosystem through reforestation programs and the development of bio-fertilizers.

A recent, more challenging addition to the reserve's small clutch of rather tame hikes is the 13km **Cascadas del San Claudio trail**, which takes walkers to a 20m waterfall with access to a natural swimming pool. Ask about this at the park headquarters. The hike's relatively new, but if you can muster a group together and are willing to accept the services (and cost) of a local guide, there's a chance they might let you camp out overnight.

isn't grown commercially here anymore. The huge *tajona* (grindstone) at the back of the property once extracted the coffee beans from their shells. Next the beans were sun-dried on huge platforms. Ruins of the quarters of some of the 126 slaves held here can be seen alongside the driers. The attic of the master's house (now a restaurant) was used to store the beans until they could be carried down to the port of Mariel by mule. There are decent views from here.

From just below Hotel Moka, a 3km road runs down the Río San Juan to small falls and natural swimming holes called the **Baños del San Juan** (extra CUC\$3). This popular spot has naturally terraced rocks with clean, bracing waters cascading into a series of pools. If it's too crowded for your taste, you can bushwhack downriver to more private pools. There's a simple restaurant here serving palatable plates of fried chicken, rice and salad for a few Convertibles.

Hacienda Unión, 3.5km west of the Hotel Moka access road, features a country-style restaurant, horses available for riding (CUC\$6 per hour) and a set of old coffee-estate ruins.

At **La Cañada del Infierno** (The Trail to Hell), midway between the Hotel Moka access road and the Soroa side entrance gate, a road follows the Río Bayate down to the 19th-century **San Pedro & Santa Catalina coffee-estate ruins**. A kilometer off the main road, a bar overlooks a popular swimming spot.

The former lakeside house of Polo Montañez is now a small museum called **Peña de Polo Montañez** containing various gold records and assorted memorabilia. It's right in the village overlooking the lake.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Moka (☎ 77 86 00; hmoka@teleda.get.cma.net; s/d low season CUC\$50/60, high CUC\$65/85; 📍 🚗 🚲) Melting into the surrounding woods and with a tree growing through the airy lobby,

the Hotel Moka is one of Cuba's most interesting and well-maintained hotels. Blending effortlessly into the surrounding woodland, the 26 bright, spacious rooms have fridge and satellite TV and activities ranging from mountain biking to fishing. Horseback riding and guided hikes are also on offer. This place regularly receives recommendations. Through the hotel front desk, you can rent five separate villas down by the lake. Guests have access to all the facilities and services at the hotel.

Limited accommodation is now also provided in five cabins 3km away in **Río San Juan** (s/d CUC\$13/22). Bookings can be made through La Moka.

El Romero (☎ 9am-9pm) This is the most interesting place to grab a bite. It's a full-blown eco-restaurant (unique in Cuba) specializing in vegetarian fare. El Romero uses home-grown organic vegetables and herbs, solar energy and keeps its own bees. You might think you woke up in San Francisco when you browse the menu replete with humus, bean pancake, pumpkin and onion soup and extra virgin olive oil.

Getting There & Away

Although there are no public buses into the Sierra del Rosario reserve, you can make use of a new and reasonably priced transfer service running daily between Viñales, Soroa, Las Terrazas and Habana (CUC\$12). It passes through Las Terrazas at approximately 10:30am on the way to Habana and 3:45pm on the return leg to Viñales. You can book your space with **Transtur** (☎ 79 60 60; Salvador Cisneros) in Viñales or **Havanatur** (☎ 77 84 94) in Pinar del Río.

Getting Around

The 1950s-style Essto station, 1.5km west of the Hotel Moka access road, is one of Cuba's quirkiest gas stations. Fill up here before heading east to Habana or west to Pinar del Río.