



Cienfuegos Province

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Why Go?

Bienvenue (welcome) to Cienfuegos province. If Cuba has a Gallic heart, it's hidden beneath the crinkled Sierra del Escambray; if it has a Paris, it is the finely-sculpted provincial capital, glistening pearl-like beside the island's best natural bay.

The original French colonizers arrived here in 1819. They brought with them the ideas of the European Enlightenment, which they industriously incorporated into their fledgling neoclassical city.

Cienfuegos sits on a coast curling like a mini-rainbow of emerald greens and iridescent blues, flecked with coves, caves and sublime coral reefs. The province's apex is just inland at El Nicho, a lush outpost of Topes de Collantes Natural Park.

Though ostensibly white, Cienfuegos' once-muted African 'soul' gained a mouthpiece in the 1940s in perhaps Cuba's most versatile musician, Benny Moré. Nor was he Cienfuegos' only Afro-Cuban improviser: in nearby Palmira, Santería brotherhoods still preserve the traditions of Cuba's hybrid Catholic-Yoruba religious culture.

When to Go

Cienfuegos' high season, such as it is, doesn't really get going until January and runs through to April. Beach-lovers and divers should hit the Caribbean coast then but party-goers will prefer August and September, when despite the imminent hurricane season, the Cienfuegos carnival and the bi-annual Benny Moré festival respectively can be enjoyed. Up at El Nicho in the Sierra del Escambray, travel in the wet season (August to October) is tougher at this time due to difficult road conditions.

History

The first settlers in the Cienfuegos area were Taínos, who called their fledgling principalty, Cacicazgo de Jagua – a native word for ‘beauty.’ In 1494 Columbus ‘discovered’ the Bahía de Cienfuegos (Cuba’s third-largest bay, with a surface area of 88 sq km) on his second voyage to the New World and 14 years later Sebastián de Ocampo stopped by during his pioneering circumnavigation of the island. He liked the bay so much he built a house there. The pirates followed the explorers: during the 16th and 17th centuries buccaneering raids got so bad the Spanish built a bayside fort, the imposing Castillo de Jagua (p244), one of the most important military structures in Cuba.

Cienfuegos

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La ciudad que más me gusta a mí (the city I like the best), reads a billboard on the Bahía de Cienfuegos, quoting the words of native

singer Benny Moré. He wasn’t the settlement’s only cheerleader. Cuba’s so-called Perla del Sur (Pearl of the South) has long seduced travelers from around the island with its elegance, enlightened French spirit and feisty Caribbean panache. If Cuba has a Paris, this is most definitely it.

Arranged around the country’s most spectacular natural bay, Cienfuegos is a nautical city with an enviable waterside setting. Founded in 1819, it’s one of Cuba’s newest settlements, but also one of its most architecturally homogeneous, a factor that earned it a Unesco World Heritage Site listing in 2005. Geographically, the city is split into two distinct parts: the colonnaded central zone with its elegant Prado and Parque Martí; and Punta Gorda, a thin knife of land slicing into the bay with a clutch of eclectic early 20th-century palaces, including Cuba’s prettiest palatial buildings.

While much of Cuba is visibly reeling in the current economic crisis, Cienfuegos seems to positively glitter. It’s not



Cienfuegos Province Highlights

1 Stroll amid eclectic 19th-century architecture in gorgeous **Parque Jose Martí** (p234) in the capital

2 Pamper yourself amid the magnificent rooms, beautiful bars and colonial luxury of **Hotel la Unión** (p242) in Cienfuegos

3 Stay in an amazing casa particular in Cienfuegos’ classic neighborhood of **Punta Gorda** (p238)

4 Track the legend of Benny Moré in **Santa Isabel de las Lajas** (see p244)

5 Bask at, or dive off, the beach in **Rancho Luna** (p243)

6 Spot pink flamingos and pelicans at the little-visited **Laguna Guanaroca** (p245)

7 Hike to bracing **El Nicho** (p245) and cool down in an invigorating waterfall