



# Cienfuegos Province

📍 43 / POP 408,824

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## Best Paladares

- ➔ Restaurante Villa Lagarto (p252)
- ➔ Paladar Aché (p252)
- ➔ El Tranvia (p252)

## Best Architectural Icons

- ➔ Palacio de Valle (p247)
- ➔ Casa de la Cultura Benjamin Duarte (p246)
- ➔ Teatro Tomás Terry (p245)

## Why Go?

*Bienvenue* (welcome) to Cienfuegos, Cuba's Gallic heart, which sits in the shadow of the crinkled Sierra del Escambray like a displaced piece of Paris on Cuba's untamed southern coastline. French rather than Spanish colonizers were the pioneers in this region, arriving in 1819 and bringing with them the ideas of the European Enlightenment which they industriously incorporated into their fledgling neoclassical city.

Outside of the city, the coast is surprisingly underdeveloped, a mini-rainbow of emerald greens and iridescent blues, flecked with coves, caves and coral reefs. The province's apex is just inland at El Nicho, arguably the most magical spot in the Topes de Collantes nature park.

Though ostensibly Francophile and white, Cienfuegos' once-muted African 'soul' gained a mouthpiece in the 1940s in Cuba's most versatile musician, Benny Moré. He wasn't the only Afro-Cuban improviser. Nearby, Palmira is famous for its Catholic-Yoruba Santería brotherhoods, which still preserve their powerful slave-era traditions.

## When to Go

- ➔ Cienfuegos' high season doesn't really get going until January and runs through to April, when beach-lovers and divers hit the Caribbean coast.
- ➔ Party-goers will prefer August and September when, despite the imminent hurricane season, the Cienfuegos carnival and the biannual Benny Moré festival respectively can be enjoyed.
- ➔ Up at El Nicho in the Sierra del Escambray, travel is tougher in the wet season (August to October) due to difficult road conditions.

## History

The first settlers in the Cienfuegos area were Taínos, who called their fledgling principal-ity Cacicazgo de Jagua – a native term 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 circumnavigation of the island. He liked the bay so much he built a house there. The pirates followed: during the 16th and 17th centuries buccaneering raids got so bad the Spanish built a bayside fort, the imposing Castillo de Jagua – 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) singer Benny Moré once said

of his home city in the song ‘Cienfuegos’. 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 some of Cuba’s prettiest buildings.

While much of Cuba is visibly reeling in the current economic crisis,



## Cienfuegos Province Highlights

**1** Stroll amid eclectic 19th-century architecture in gorgeous **Parque José Martí** in the capital (p245).  
**2** Chill out in style amid the magnificent rooms, beautiful bars and colonial luxury of **Hotel la Unión** (p250) in Cienfuegos.

**3** Stay in an amazing casa particular in Cienfuegos’ classic neighborhood of **Punta Gorda** (p247).  
**4** Track the legends of the Santería religion in **Palmira** (p255).  
**5** Bask at, or dive off, the

beach in **Rancho Luna** (p255)

**6** Spot pink flamingos and pelicans at the little-visited **Laguna Guanaroca** (p257).  
**7** Hike to bracing **El Nicho** (p257) and cool down underneath an invigorating waterfall.