



Cienfuegos Province

43 / POP 408,825

Includes ➔

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Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Restaurante Villa Lagarto (p245)
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- ➔ Paladar Aché (p245)

Best Architectural Icons

- ➔ Palacio de Valle (p240)
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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: the result today is a dazzling treasure box of 19th-century architectural glitz.

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 Parque Natural Topes de Collantes.

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 Tainos, who called their fledgling principalty 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 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 – 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 interesting, 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 Paseo del Prado (commonly shortened to 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 from the country’s economic woes, Cienfuegos seems to positively glitter. It’s not just Unesco money filtering through. The industry ringing the far side of the Bahía de Cienfuegos – a shipyard, the bastion of Cuba’s shrimp-fishing fleet, a thermoelectric plant and a petrochemical hub – constitutes some of the country’s most important. This, together with a pervading sense of tranquility resonating through

spruced-up colonial streets refreshingly free of *jineteros* (touts) and a revitalizing seaside vibe make the city as alluring today as Moré found it 60 years ago.

History

Cienfuegos was founded in 1819 by a pioneering French émigré from Louisiana named Don Louis D’Clouet. Sponsoring a scheme to increase the population of whites on the island, D’Clouet invited 40 families from New Orleans and Philadelphia, and Bordeaux in France to establish a fledgling settlement known initially as Fernandina de Jagua. Despite having their initial camp destroyed by a hurricane in 1821, the unperturbed French settlers rebuilt their homes and – suspicious, perhaps, that their first name had brought them bad luck – rechristened the city Cienfuegos after the then governor of Cuba.

With the arrival of the railway in 1850 and the drift west of Cuban sugar growers after the War of Independence (1868–78), Cienfuegos’ fortunes blossomed, and local merchants pumped their wealth into a dazzling array of eclectic architecture that harked back to the neoclassicism of their French forefathers.

D-day in Cienfuegos’ history came on 5 September 1957 when officers at the local naval base staged a revolt against the Batista dictatorship. The uprising was brutally crushed but it sealed the city’s place in revolutionary history.

Modern-day Cienfuegos retains a plusher look than many of its urban counterparts. And now with some much-needed Unesco money on board, as well as the city’s growing industrial clout, the future for Cienfuegos and its fine array of 19th-century architecture looks bright.

Sights

Parque José Martí

Arco de Triunfo

LANDMARK

(Map p238; Calle 25, btwn Aves 56 & 54) The Arch of Triumph on the western edge of Cienfuegos’ serene central park catapults the plaza into the unique category: there is no other building of its kind in Cuba. Dedicated to Cuban independence, the Francophile monument ushers you through its gilded gateway toward a marble statue of revolutionary and philosopher José Martí.