



Villa Clara Province

42 / POP 803,690

Includes ➔

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Best Restaurants

- ➔ Restaurante 'El Bergantin' (p271)
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Best Local Life

- ➔ Parque Vidal (p253), Santa Clara
- ➔ La Marquesina (p262), Santa Clara
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Why Go?

What is that word hanging in the air over Villa Clara, one of the nation's most diverse provinces? 'Revolution', perhaps? And not just because Che Guevara liberated its capital, Santa Clara, from Batista's corrupt gambling party to kick-start the Castro brothers' 55-year (and counting) stint in power. Oh, no. Ultra-cultural Santa Clara is guardian of the Cuban avant-garde (having the nation's only drag show and its main rock festival). Meanwhile, the picturesque colonial town of Remedios and the beach-rimmed Cayerías del Norte beyond are experiencing Cuba's most drastic contemporary tourist development, a gargantuan undertaking which will over the next two years earn it position *numero dos* in the lengthy list of top Cuban holiday hot spots.

This region is indelibly stamped with Che's legacy and associated sights. Yet it should also win your heart for hosting the nation's most frenzied street party (Remedios), for its highs amongst the glimmering Escambray peaks and their adventure possibilities (around Embalse de Hanabanilla) and for its lows along the lolling white-sand strands off its northern coast (Cayo Santa María).

When to Go

- ➔ There's no better time to visit Villa Clara than December. Specifically, Christmas Eve. Swap your cold Christmas for the Caribbean's hottest street party in Remedios.
- ➔ Head over to the Cayerías del Norte for the start of the high season (December through March), when the chances of the skies raining on your beach parade are as low as they get.

History

The Taíno people were the first known inhabitants of the region, but a re-creation of a settlement at a hotel outside Santa Clara is their only surviving legacy. Strategically located in the island's geographical center, Villa Clara has historically been a focal point for corsairs, colonizers and revolutionaries vying for material gains.

Pirates were a perennial headache in the early colonial years, with the province's first town, Remedios, being moved twice and then abandoned altogether in the late 1600s by a group of families who escaped inland to what is now Santa Clara. Later, the area's demographics were shaken up further by Canary Islanders, who brought their agricultural know-how and distinctive lilting Spanish accents to the tobacco fields of the picturesque Vuelta Arriba region. In December 1958 Ernesto 'Che' Guevara – aided by a motley crew of scruffy *barbudos* (bearded ones) – orchestrated the fall of the city of Santa Clara by derailing an armored train carrying more than 350 government troops and weaponry to the east. The victory rang the death knell for Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship and signaled the triumph of the Cuban Revolution.

Things have calmed down since then, but provincial goings-on continue to keep everyone on the edge of their seats: resort development in the province's north has continued unabated since the 1990s and will have clocked up an astonishing 17,000 new rooms by 2017, potentially morphing tourist capacity to Varadero-like levels. Naysayers cite the adjacent Unesco Buenavista Biosphere Reserve and the damage this could wreak on this internationally important marine habitat.

Santa Clara

POP 239,000

While Varadero courts beach-lovers and Trinidad pulls in history geeks, gritty Santa Clara doesn't stand on ceremony for anyone. Smack bang in the geographic center of Cuba, this is a city of new trends and insatiable creativity, where an edgy youth culture has been testing the boundaries of Cuba's censorship police for years. Unique Santa Clara offerings include Cuba's only official drag show, a beauty pageant for transvestites and the best rock festival in the country, Ciudad Metal. The city's fiery personality

has been shaped over time by the presence of the nation's most prestigious university outside Havana, and a long association with Che Guevara, whose liberating of Santa Clara in December 1958 marked the end of the Batista regime.

History

A good 10,000 miles out in his calculations, Christopher Columbus believed that Cubanacán (or Cubana Khan, an Indian name that meant 'the middle of Cuba'), an Indian village once located near Santa Clara, was the seat of the khans of Mongolia; hence his misguided notion that he was exploring the Asian coast. Santa Clara proper was founded in 1689 by 13 families from Remedios, who were tired of the unwanted attention of passing pirates. The town grew quickly after a fire emptied Remedios in 1692, and in 1867 it became the capital of Las Villas province. A notable industrial center, Santa Clara was famous for its prerevolutionary Coca-Cola factory and its pivotal role in Cuba's island-wide communications network. Santa Clara was the first major city to be liberated from Batista's army in December 1958. Today, industries include a textile mill, a marble quarry and the Constantino Pérez Carrodegua tobacco factory.

Sights

Santa Clara's sights are liberally distributed to the north, east and west of Parque Vidal. All are within walking distance, with the big Che sight, Conjunto Escultórico Comandante Ernesto Che Guevara, 2km from the center.

Parque Vidal

Parque Vidal

SQUARE

A veritable alfresco theater named for Colonel Leoncio Vidal y Caro, who was killed here on March 23, 1896, Parque Vidal was encircled by twin sidewalks during the colonial era, with a fence separating blacks and whites. Scars of more recent division are evident on the facade of mint green **Hotel Santa Clara Libre** on the park's west side: it's pockmarked by bullet holes from the 1958 battle for the city between Guevara and Batista's government troops.

Today all the colors of Cuba's cultural rainbow mix in one of the nation's busiest and most vibrant urban spaces, with old men in *guayabera* shirts gossiping on the