



Cienfuegos Province

43 / POP 408,825

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Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Restaurante Villa Lagarto (p245)
- ➔ Paladar Aché (p245)
- ➔ Restaurante Las Mamparas (p245)
- ➔ Casa Prado Restaurante (p245)

Best Places to Sleep

- ➔ Bella Perla Marina (p241)
- ➔ Hotel la Unión (p242)
- ➔ Angel y Isabel (p242)
- ➔ Hostal Palacio Azul (p243)

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.

Beyond 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 Sierra del Escambray.

Though ostensibly Francophile and white, Cienfuegos' once-muted African 'soul' gained a mouthpiece in the 1940s with local-born Mambo king Benny Moré and in the Catholic-Yoruba Santería brotherhoods, which still preserve their slave-era traditions in the town of Palmira.

When to Go

- ➔ High season between January and April sees beach lovers and divers hit the Caribbean coast.
- ➔ Despite the imminent hurricane season in August and September, partygoers enjoy the Cienfuegos Carnaval and the biannual Benny Moré festival.
- ➔ Wet-season road conditions between August and October makes travel tougher at El Nicho in the Sierra del Escambray.



Cienfuegos Province Highlights

1 Parque José Martí (p243) Strolling amid grand eclectic 19th-century architecture in Unesco-listed Cienfuegos.

2 Punta Gorda Enjoying a perfect sundowner in a once priceless, still handsome hotel, yacht club or private residence on this gorgeous peninsula.

3 El Niño (p250) Escaping to the jungle-like

landscapes of the Sierra del Escambray to cool down underneath an invigorating waterfall.

4 Palmira (p250) Tracking the legends of the Santería religion in this unlikely Afro-Cuban outpost.

5 Jardín Botánico de Cienfuegos (p240) Beholding the astounding collection of plants and trees

at Cuba's oldest botanical garden.

6 Castillo de Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles de Jagua (p239) Visiting one of the only military bastions on Cuba's south coast.

7 Laguna Guanaroca (p241) Spotting pink flamingos and pelicans at this little-visited protected area.

Cienfuegos

POP 165,113

In his song 'Cienfuegos,' Benny Moré described his home city as the city he liked best. He wasn't the settlement's only cheerleader. Cuba's so-called 'Pearl of the South' has long seduced travelers from around the island with its elegance, enlightened French airs and feisty Caribbean spirit. If Cuba has a Paris, this is most definitely it.

Arranged around the country's most spectacular natural bay, Cienfuegos is a nautical city founded in 1819 by French émigrés, whose homogeneous grid of elegant classical architecture 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

stately Paseo del Prado and graceful park; and Punta Gorda, a thin knife of land slicing into the bay with a clutch of outrageously eclectic palaces built by the moneyed classes in the 1920s.

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