

Granma Province



Granma is Cuba's best-kept secret, a province of crenellated mountains and quiet hamlets where the worst kind of hassle you're likely to get is a friendly gnawing from the local village goat. Boasting Cuba's longest river (the Cauto), its second oldest town (Bayamo) and its third highest mountain (Pico Bayamesa, 1730m), Granma is also the birthplace of the Cuban national anthem and has some of the Caribbean's most pristine uplifted marine terraces.

The region reads like a who's who of revolutionary heroes. Cuban independence was first proclaimed here in 1868 when Carlos Manuel de Céspedes released his slaves. Nine decades later, in December 1956, another embattled rebel, Fidel Castro, landed with a party of 82 soldiers aboard a yacht called – surprise, surprise – *Granma* (from which the province takes its name) and boldly set about doing the same thing. Today, Granma's mountainous interior is peppered with monuments and memorabilia recalling its revolutionary past. The pick of the litter is the hike to the lofty heights of La Plata in the Sierra Maestra, Castro's impregnable mountaintop headquarters, now an eerily authentic museum.

Granma is a powerhouse for alternative art with homegrown talents such as Pablo Milanés and Carlos Puebla playing an integral part in the popularization of *nueva trova*, a musical genre that first emerged in the clubs and bars of bayside Manzanillo in the late 1960s.

HIGHLIGHTS

■ Where Mountains Meet Sea

Base yourself in Marea del Portillo (p388) and enjoy the ambience of one of Cuba's nicest all-inclusive resort areas

■ Guerrilla Watching

Trek up to La Plata in Gran Parque Nacional Sierra Maestra (p382)

■ The Long View

From the valley to the ocean, admire the vista from historic La Demajagua (p384)

■ Unesco Site

Archaeological sites and virgin sea-terraces in Parque Nacional Desembarco del Granma (p387)

■ Street Party

Roast pork, street organs and a game of chess in Bayamo's Fiesta de la Cubanía (p376)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 23

■ POPULATION: 835,218

■ AREA: 8372 SQ KM

History

Stone petroglyphs and remnants of Taíno pottery unearthed in the Parque Nacional Desembarco del Granma suggest the existence of native cultures in the Granma region long before the arrival of the Spanish.

Columbus, during his second voyage, was the first European to explore the area tracking past the Cabo Cruz peninsula in 1494, before taking shelter from a storm in the Golfo de Guanacayabo. All other early development schemes came to nothing and by the 17th century Granma's untamed and largely unsettled coast had become the preserve of pirates and corsairs.

Granma's real nemesis didn't come until October 10, 1868, when sugar-plantation owner Carlos Manuel de Céspedes called for the abolition of slavery from his Demajagua sugar mill near Manzanillo and freed his own slaves by example, thus inciting the First War of Independence.

Drama unfolded again in 1895 when the founder of the Cuban Revolutionary Party, José Martí, was killed in Dos Ríos just a month and a half after landing with Máximo Gómez off the coast of Guantánamo to ignite the Second War of Independence.

Sixty-one years later, on December 2, 1956, Fidel Castro and 81 rebel soldiers disembarked from the yacht *Granma* off the coast of Granma Province at Playa las Coloradas. Routed by Batista's troops while resting in a sugarcane field at Alegría del Pío, 12 survivors managed to escape into the Sierra Maestra, establishing headquarters at Comandancia de la Plata. From there they fought and coordinated the armed struggle, broadcasting their progress from Radio Rebelde and consolidating their support among sympathizers nationwide. After two years of harsh conditions, including tooth extractions without anesthesia and eating raw horse meat (only once, but that's enough), the forces of the M-26-7 (26th of July Movement; Castro's revolutionary organization) triumphed in 1959.

BAYAMO

☎ 23 / pop 143,844

Ah...peace at last! For travelers fed up with Cuba's omnipresent army of hassle-heavy *jineteros* (touts), Bayamo is like a breath of fresh air. Made a provincial capital in 1975, when rural Granma was forged out

of the once mighty Oriente, this is a proud and dignified provincial city where you're more likely to encounter guitar-wielding *trovadores* (traditional singers) than faux street salesmen peddling black-market cigars. Even the traffic's lighter here, with the quirky pedestrianized Calle General García folding indistinguishably into leafy and laid-back Parque Céspedes.

History

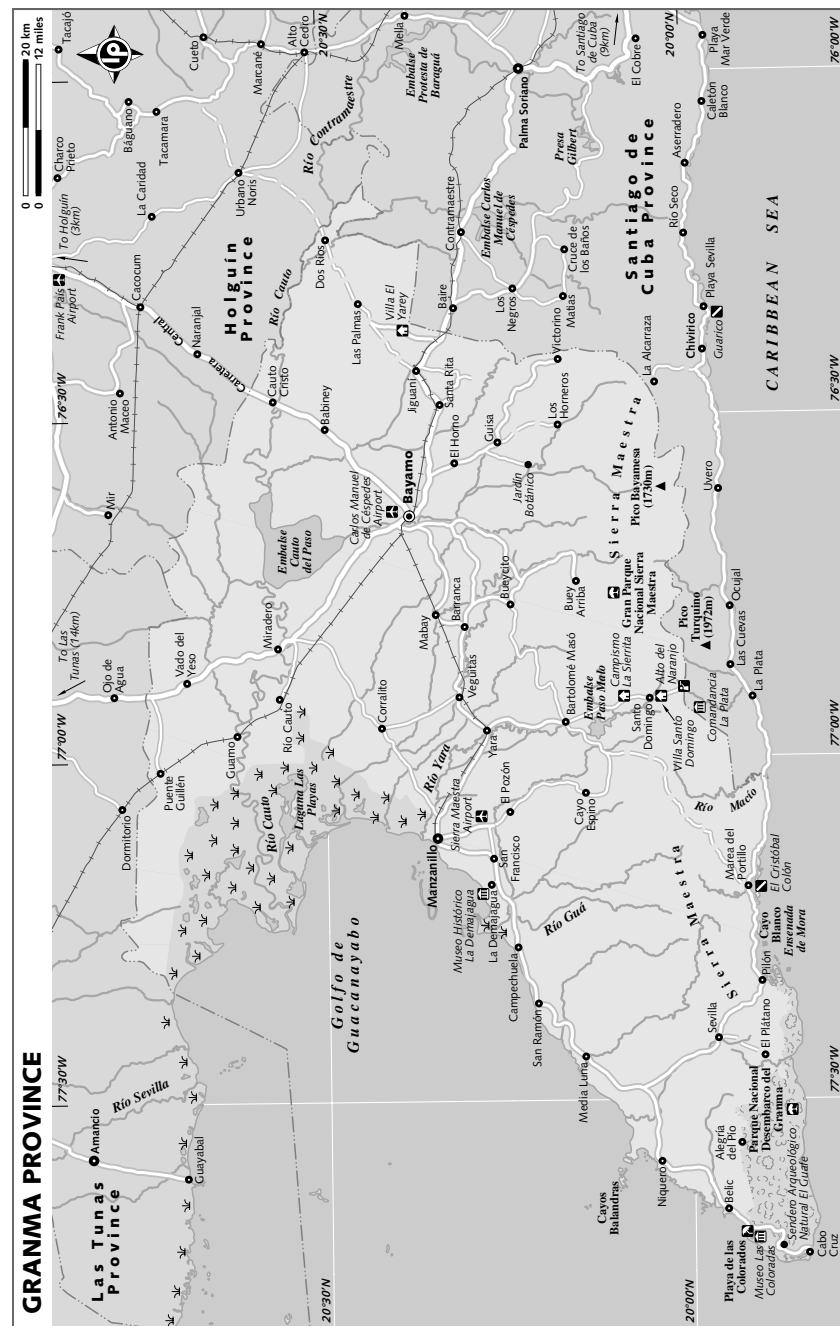
Founded in November 1513 as the second of Diego Velázquez de Cuellar's seven original villas (after Baracoa), Bayamo's early history was marred by Indian uprisings and bristling native unrest. But with the indigenous Tainos decimated by deadly European diseases such as smallpox, the short-lived insurgency soon fizzled out. By the end of the 16th century, Bayamo had grown rich and established itself as the region's most important cattle-ranching and sugarcane-growing center. Frequenting by pirates, the town filled its coffers further in the 17th and 18th centuries via a clandestine smuggling ring run out of the nearby port town of Manzanillo. Zealously counting up the profits, Bayamo's new class of merchants and landowners lavishly invested their money back into fine houses, and an expensive overseas education for their over-indulged offspring.

One such protégé was lawyer-turned-revolutionary Carlos Manuel de Céspedes who – defying the traditional colonial will – attacked and wrested control of the town from its conservative Spanish authorities during the First War of Independence in 1868. But the liberation proved to be short-lived. After the defeat of an ill-prepared rebel army by 3000 regular Spanish troops near the Río Cauto on January 12, 1869, the townspeople – sensing an imminent Spanish re-occupation – set their town on fire rather than see it fall intact to the enemy.

Bayamo was also the birthplace of Perucho Figueredo, composer of the Cuban national anthem, which begins, rather patriotically, with the words *Al combate corred, bayameses* (Run to battle, people of Bayamo).

Orientation

Bayamo turns on Parque Céspedes, also known as Plaza de la Revolución. The



train station is located to the east of the park and the bus station to the southeast; they're about 2km apart. General García (also known as El Bulevar), a bustling pedestrian shopping mall, leads from Parque Céspedes to Bartolomé Masó. Many of the facilities for tourists (including the bus station, Servi-Cupet gas station and main hotel) are along the Carretera Central, southeast of town.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Librería Ateneo (General García No 9) On the east side of Parque Céspedes.

INTERNET ACCESS

Etesca (General García btwn Saco & Figueredo; per hr CUC\$6; ☎ 9am-10pm) Quick, easy access.

Idict (General García; per hr CUC\$6; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Two machines are available.

LIBRARIES

Biblioteca Pública 1868 (Céspedes No 52; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Clinica Internacional (General García btwn Figueredo & Lora; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat & Sun)

Farmacia Principal Municipal (General García No 53; ☎ 24hr)

Hospital Carlos Manuel de Céspedes (☎ 42 50 12; Carretera Central Km 1)

MONEY

Banco de Crédito y Comercio (cnr General García & Saco; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri, 8-10am Sat)

Banco Financiero Internacional (☎ 42 73 60; Carretera Central Km 1) In a big white building near the bus terminal.

Cadeca (Saco No 101; ☎ 8:30am-noon & 12:30-5:30pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun)

POST

Post office (cnr Maceo & Parque Céspedes; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat)

TELEPHONE

Etesca (General García btwn Saco & Figueredo; ☎ 9am-10pm)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Buró de Reservas Islazul (☎ 42 32 73; General García No 207; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

Campismo Popular (☎ 42 42 00; General García No 112)
Cubanacán (☎ 42 79 70; Hotel Royalton, Maceo No 53)
 Arranges hikes to Sierra Maestra (per person for two/three days CUC\$45/65), El Salto waterfall near Marea del Portillo and El Yarey near Jiguani.

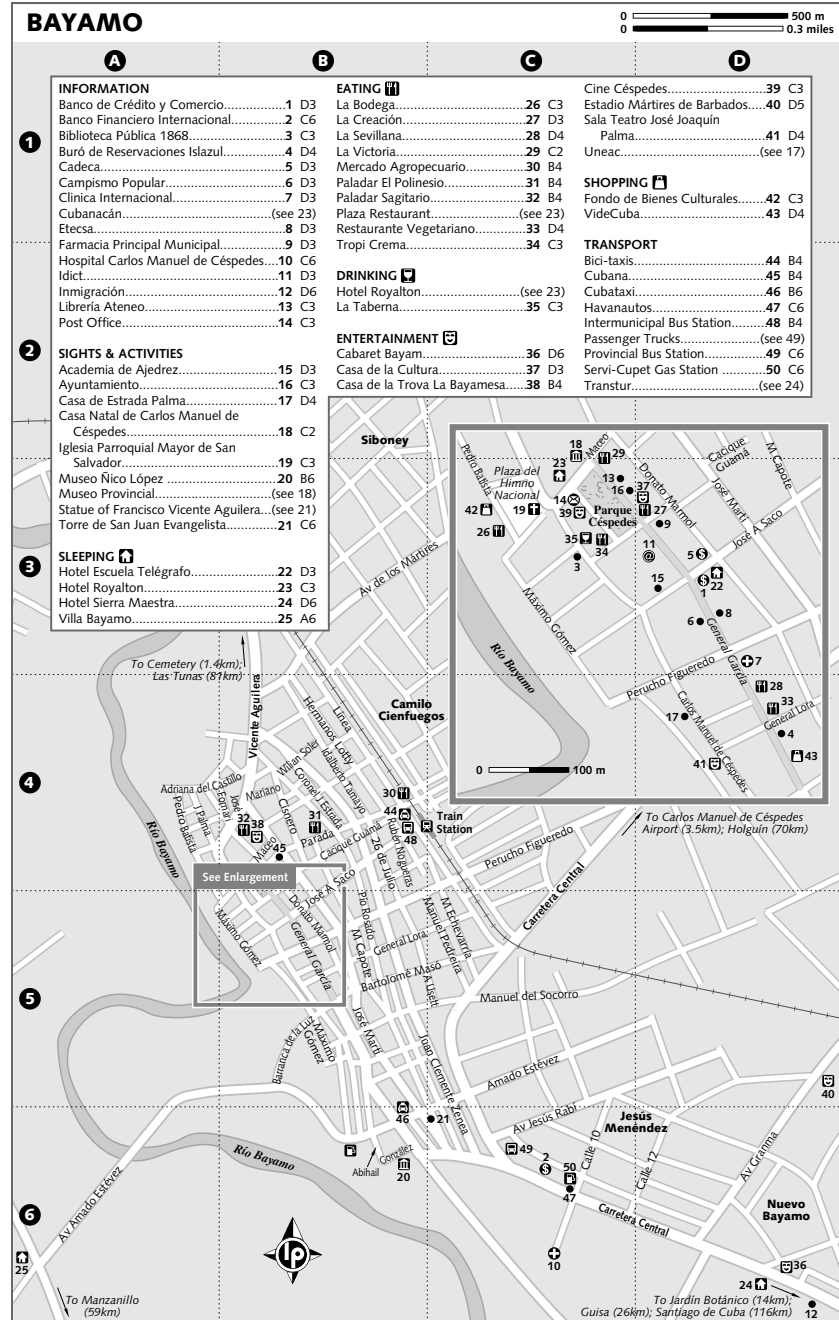
Sights

Parque Céspedes, one of Cuba's leafiest and most hassle-free squares, is an attractive smorgasbord of grand monuments and big, shady trees. There's a bronze statue of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, hero of the First War of Independence, and a marble bust of Peruchito Figueredo, with the words of the Cuban national anthem carved upon it. Marble benches and friendly Bayameses (Bayamo citizens) make this a nice place to linger. In 1868 Céspedes proclaimed Cuba's independence in front of the **Ayuntamiento** (city hall) on the east side of the square.

The so-named 'father of the motherland's' birthplace can be visited in the **Casa Natal de Carlos Manuel de Céspedes** (Maceo No 57; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, 9am-2pm & 8-10pm Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) on the north side of the park. Born here on April 18, 1819, Céspedes spent the first 12 years of his life in this residence, and the Céspedes memorabilia is complemented by a collection of period furniture. It's notable architecturally as the only two-story colonial house remaining in Bayamo and was one of the few buildings to survive the 1869 fire. Next door is the **Museo Provincial** (Maceo No 55; admission CUC\$1), which houses a historical collection.

The **Iglesia Parroquial Mayor de San Salvador** (1740), a block away from Plaza del Himno Nacional, is where the national anthem was first sung, in 1868. The plaque on the facade lists the orchestra members and their instruments in that famous debut, giving you an idea of how deep the cultural patrimony runs here. A mural painted at the front of the church in 1919 depicts the blessing of the flag by Céspedes on October 20, 1868. The only part of the building that survived the great fire of 1869, when retreating revolutionaries set fire to the town, is the striking **Capilla de la Dolorosa** (donations accepted; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat). The chapel's main altar and the statue of the *Virgen de los Dolores* date from 1740.

A lesser-known sight is the **Casa de Estrada Palma** (Céspedes No 158). In 1835 Cuba's first



HERBERT MATTHEWS

On February 17, 1957 Herbert Matthews, a seasoned editorial writer for the *New York Times*, stuffed his notebook into his jacket pocket and hiked, under the guidance of M-26-7 agent Celia Sánchez, up into the precipitous Sierra Maestra Mountains. His aim: to undertake an interview with a young bearded revolutionary named Fidel Castro, a man who – in the minds of most Americans – had been given up for dead after a botched invasion off the Cuban coast two months earlier.

As a political liberal and veteran of the republican movement during the Spanish Civil War, Matthews was immediately taken by the charismatic figure of Castro whose personality he described as ‘overpowering’. ‘This is quite a man’, he wrote enthusiastically, ‘The most dangerous enemy that General Batista has yet faced’.

The reality, of course, was something less dramatic. Still on the defensive after the disastrous *Granma* ambush two months earlier, Castro was down to his last 18 men when the journalist called. Indeed so small was his tiny band of trusted associates that Fidel had instructed his younger brother Raúl to march the scruffily attired survivors around in front of Matthews numerous times in an attempt to dupe the journalist into thinking that he was harboring a reputable military force.

The ploy clearly worked. Published in the *New York Times* on February 24, 1957, Matthews’ blockbuster article made Castro into a figure of romantic myth and helped turn US policy onto a new anti-Batista footing, a factor that ultimately played a large part in the dictator’s downfall.

postindependence president was born here; it’s now the seat of Uneac (Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba; National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists). You might catch a *trova* (traditional poetic singing/songwriting) concert in its cloistered patio. A forerunner of the national anthem, co-written by Céspedes (a man of many talents), was first sung next door on March 27, 1851.

The **Torre de San Juan Evangelista** (cnr José Martí & Amado Estévez) is to the southeast. A church dating from Bayamo’s earliest years stood at this busy intersection until it was destroyed in the great fire of 1869. Later, the church’s tower served as the entrance to the first cemetery in Cuba, which closed in 1919. The cemetery was demolished in 1940, but the tower survived. A **monument** to local poet José Joaquín Palma (1844–1911) stands in the park diagonally across the street from the tower, and beside the tower is a bronze **statue of Francisco Vicente Aguilera** (1821–77), who led the independence struggle in Bayamo.

Nearby, but a little hard to find, is the **Museo Níco López** (Abihail González; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am–noon & 2–5:30pm Tue–Sat, 9am–noon Sun) in the former officers’ club of the Carlos Manuel de Céspedes military barracks. On July 26, 1953, this garrison was attacked by 25 revolutionaries determined to support the assault on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de

Cuba by preventing reinforcements from being sent. Though a failure, Níco López, who led the Bayamo attack, escaped to Guatemala, and he was largely responsible for introducing Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara to Fidel in July 1955; López was killed shortly after the *Granma* landed in 1956.

Activities

Want to improve your checkmate chances? You might just get lucky in Bayamo where every Saturday night a whole army of chess aficionados hits the streets in the quirky Fiesta de la Cubanía. The **Academia de Ajedrez** (José A Saco No 63 btwn General García & Céspedes) is the place to go to improve your pawn-king-four technique. Emblazoned on the wall of this cerebral institution are pictures of Che, Fidel and Carlos Manuel de Céspedes – Cuba’s greatest ever chess king. You can’t miss it.

Festivals & Events

Bayamo’s most engaging nighttime attraction is its weekly **Fiesta de la Cubanía** on Saturday at 8pm. This ebullient and long-standing street party is like nothing else in Cuba. Set up willy-nilly along Calle Saco it includes quirky pipe organs, whole roast pig, a local oyster drink called *ostiones* and – incongruous in the middle of it all – rows of tables laid out diligently with chess sets. Dancing is, of course, de rigueur.

Sleeping

Hotel Escuela Telégrafo (☎ 42 55 10; Saco No 108; s/d CUC\$15/20; ☎) One of Cuba’s impressive Escuela hotels where students learn the intricacies of the tourism trade, the Telégrafo is a commendable advert for the shape of things to come. A friendly and helpful team of staff complement a range of more-than-adequate facilities that include a restaurant, a bustling lobby, and the possibility of taking Spanish lessons (inquire at the front desk). The only real drawback is the lack of hot water.

Hotel Royalton (Islazul; ☎ 42 22 24; Maceo No 53; s/d low season CUC\$21/27, high season CUC\$26/33; ☎) Blending in with the colonial buildings on Parque Céspedes, the Royalton is Bayamo’s best budget choice. Rooms are small but well maintained with the four at the front opening out over one of Cuba’s most understated and leafy squares. You can people-watch over cocktails on the attractive sidewalk terrace, and there’s a broad, breezy lobby and a rooftop terrace.

Villa Bayamo (Islazul; ☎ 42 31 02; s/d low season CUC\$21/27, high season CUC\$26/33; ☎) A bargain place 3km southwest of the town center on the road to Manzanillo, this motel is a good choice if you want to lie around a pool while going easy on your wallet. Locals know this place as ‘Casa Central’ and ‘Hotel XXX Aniversario.’

Hotel Sierra Maestra (Cubanacán; ☎ 42 79 74; Carretera Central; ☎) Inconveniently situated 3km southeast of town toward Santiago de Cuba, the Sierra Maestra was closed at the time of writing to accommodate a Misión Milagros (Miracle Mission; see p449). Check before turning up.

CASAS PARTICULARES – BAYAMO

With the Sierra Maestra Hotel closed temporarily to accommodate a Misión Milagros, Bayamo’s clutch of 30-plus casas are in ever-greater demand. Here are some of the more central options. **‘Casa Buena Vista’ – Valia López Sánchez** (☎ 42 36 59; Vicente Aguilera No 106 btwn Martí & M Corona; r CUC\$20; ☎) Two clean rooms, meals available; ask about dance classes and bike hire.

Dolores Masán Sosa (‘Lolita’; ☎ 42 29 74; Pio Rosado No 171 btwn Parada & William Soler; r CUC\$25; ☎) There are two rooms with air-con, one with fan; rooms have an independent entrance. You can also rent at No 64.

Frank Licea Milan (☎ 42 58 16; Pio Rosado No 73 btwn Parada & William Soler; r CUC\$20) Friendly, older couple with a simple, clean room with bath.

Juan Valdes (☎ 42 33 24; Pio Rosado No 64 btwn Ramírez & N López; ☎) Adequate room near central park; prices are negotiable. There are other casas in the same street.

Lydia J Alvarado Santana (☎ 42 31 75; Donato Marmol btwn Perucho Figueredo & General Lora; r CUC\$20; ☎) Central location, knows other casas.

Casas particulares are starting to pop up in Bayamo; see below.

Eating

Tropi Crema (☎ 10am–10pm) This is the place for peso ice cream, in the southwest corner of Parque Céspedes.

Restaurante Vegetariano (General García No 173; ☎ 7–9am, noon–2:30pm & 6–9pm) If staff arrive punctually, this is a good peso breakfast option, though don’t expect nut roast.

La Sevillana (General García btwn General Lora & Figueredo; ☎ noon–2pm & 6pm–10:30pm) This is the newest eating joint in town, a posh-looking peso place with a no-shorts dress code probably designed to keep the tourists away.

La Victoria (☎ 42 25 31; cnr General García & Maceo; meals CUC\$5) Despite the sign, you won’t find shrimp at this atmospheric, state-run place on the northeastern corner of Parque Céspedes. However, there are pork, chicken and even beef dishes.

Paladar Sagitario (Marmol No 107 btwn Maceo & Vicente Aguilera; meals CUC\$5–7; ☎ noon–11:45pm) This place is super popular for the filling meals (chicken Gordon Bleu) served in its open courtyard.

Paladar El Polinesio (☎ 42 24 49; Parada No 125 btwn Pio Rosado & Cisneros) A better and more affordable bet than Sagitario is this place, which has a lower *jinetero*-to-client ratio.

Plaza restaurant (Maceo No 53; ☎ 7:30am–10pm) The restaurant at the Hotel Royalton is Bayamo’s ‘upmarket’ spot, serving traditional Cuban food on its pleasant patio.

La Bodega (Plaza del Himno Nacional No 34) This eternally popular place opposite the Iglesia

Parroquial Mayor, has a rear terrace with river views.

SELF-CATERING

Mercado agropecuario (Línea) The market is in front of the train station. There are many peso food stalls along here also.

La Creación (☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) This store at the southeast corner of Parque Céspedes sells basic groceries.

Drinking

Hotel Royalton (Maceo No 53) Drinks on the rooftop or sidewalk terraces here are always a good bet.

La Taberna (Céspedes No 65) For something grittier, try this dark, 2nd-floor saloon with faux stained-glass; it's tucked away behind Tropi Crema.

Entertainment

Cine Céspedes (☎ 42 42 67; admission 1 peso) This cinema is on the western side of Parque Céspedes, next to the post office. It could be screening anything – from Cuban animated or dramatic features to the latest flick from Brazil or a Hollywood blockbuster.

Uneac (Céspedes No 158; admission free; ☎ 4pm) You can while away a Saturday afternoon at the bolero on the flowery patio here before making your way to José A Saco for the Saturday Fiesta de la Cubanía (p376).

Sala Teatro José Joaquín Palma (Céspedes No 164) In a stylish old church, this venue presents theater on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights, while the Teatro Guiñol, also here, hosts children's theater on Saturday and Sunday mornings.

Cabaret Bayam (☎ 42 51 11; Carretera Central Km 2; ☎ 9pm Fri-Sun) This venue, opposite the Hotel Sierra Maestra, has shows and dancing.

Estadio Mártires de Barbados (Av Grandma) From October to April, ask about baseball games at this stadium, approximately 2km northwest of Hotel Sierra Maestra.

The **Casa de la Trova La Bayamesa** (cnr Maceo & Martí; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9pm) is one of Cuba's best, and concerts sometimes also take place at the **Casa de la Cultura** (☎ 42 59 17; General García No 15), on the east side of Parque Céspedes.

Shopping

Fondo de Bienes Culturales (Plaza del Himno Nacional No 20) This shop sells mediocre handicrafts.

VideCuba (General García No 225; ☎ 8am-10pm) This outlet will meet your photographic requirements.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Bayamo's **Carlos Manuel de Céspedes Airport** (airport code BYM; ☎ 42 75 06) is about 4km northeast of town, on the road to Holguín. **Cubana** (Martí No 58; ☎ 42 39 16) flies to Bayamo from Habana twice a week (CUC\$103 one way, two hours). There are no international flights to or from Bayamo.

BUS & TRUCK

The **provincial bus station** (cnr Carretera Central & Av Jesús Rabí) has Astro buses twice daily to Santiago de Cuba (CUC\$5), but only one bus a day goes to Holguín (CUC\$5) and Habana (CUC\$30), leaving at 8pm.

Viazul (www.viazul.com) has three daily buses to Santiago de Cuba (CUC\$7, two hours, 4:45am, 9:45am and 11:35pm), and there's a daily bus to Trinidad (CUC\$26, nine hours 20 minutes, 9:40pm). The service to Habana (CUC\$44, 14½ hours, 12:10am, 11:10am and 5:25pm) also stops at Holguín (CUC\$6, two hours 10 minutes), Las Tunas (CUC\$6, 2½ hours), Camagüey (CUC\$11, 5½ hours), Ciego de Ávila (CUC\$17, seven hours 20 minutes), Sancti Spiritus (CUC\$21, 9½ hours) and Santa Clara (CUC\$26, 10¾ hours).

Passenger trucks leave from an adjacent terminal for Santiago de Cuba (seven pesos), Holguín (three pesos), Manzanillo (three pesos) and Pilon (three pesos). You can get a truck to Bartolomé Masó, as close as you can get on public transport to the Sierra Maestra trailhead. Ask which line is waiting for the truck you want, then join. The trucks leave when full and you pay as you board.

The **intermunicipal bus station** (cnr Saco & Línea), opposite the train station, receives mostly local buses of little use to travelers. However, trucks to Las Tunas (four pesos) and Guisa (one peso) leave from here. You might also wrangle space in a collective taxi to hard-to-reach places such as Manzanillo, Pilon and Niquero from here.

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 42 49 55; cnr Saco & Línea), 1km east of the center, has trains to the following destinations.

Destination	Cost (one way)	Departure time	Frequency
Camagüey	CUC\$7	5:20am	daily
Habana	CUC\$26	7:40pm	alternate days
Manzanillo	CUC\$2	6:17am, 10:52am, 4:12pm	daily
Santiago	CUC\$4	4:04pm	alternate days

Getting Around

Cubataxi (☎ 42 43 13) can supply a taxi to Bayamo airport for CUC\$3, or to Aeropuerto Frank País in Holguín for CUC\$25. A taxi to Villa Santo Domingo (setting-off point for the Alto del Naranjo trailhead for Sierra Maestra hikes) or Comandancia de la Plata will cost approximately CUC\$50 round-trip. There's a taxi stand in the south of town near Museo Níco López.

The **Havanaautos** (☎ 42 73 75) office is adjacent to Servi-Cupet, while **Transtur** (☎ 42 41 87; Carretera Central) is at the Hotel Sierra Maestra.

The **Servi-Cupet** (Carretera Central) is between Hotel Sierra Maestra and the bus terminal as you arrive from Santiago de Cuba.

The main horse-cart route (one peso) runs between the train station and the hospital, via the bus station. Bici-taxis (five to 10 pesos a ride) are also useful for getting around town. There's a stand near the train station.

AROUND BAYAMO

For peace, quiet, butterflies and flowers, head to the **jardín botánico** (botanic gardens; Carretera de Guisa Km 10; admission without/with guide CUC\$1/2), about 16km outside Bayamo off the Guisa road. It's on very few itineraries, so you can have the 104 hectares of this tranquil garden to yourself. There are 74 types of palms, scores of cacti, blooming orchids and sections for endangered and medicinal plants. The guided tour (Spanish only) gains you access to greenhouses, notable for the showy ornamentals.

To get here, take the road to Santiago de Cuba for 6km and turn left at the signposted junction for Guisa. After 10km you'll see the botanic garden sign on the right. Trucks leave from the intermunicipal bus station in front of the train station (trips are one peso).

DOS RÍOS & AROUND

At Dos Ríos, 52km northeast of Bayamo, almost in Holguín, a white obelisk overlooking the Río Cauto marks the spot where José Martí was shot and killed on May 19, 1895. It's 22km northeast of Jiguani on the road to San Germán: take the unmarked road to the right after crossing the Cauto.

Sleeping & Eating

Villa El Yarey (Cubanacán; ☎ 42 72 56; s/d low season CUC\$36/58, high season CUC\$43/72) Back toward Jiguani, 23km southwest of Dos Ríos, is this relaxed, attractive hotel with 16 rooms on a ridge with an excellent view of the Sierra Maestra. This accommodation is perfect for those who want calm and placid tranquility in verdant natural surroundings.

Getting There & Away

To get to Villa El Yarey from Jiguani go 4km east of town on the Carretera Central and then 6km north on a side road. From Dos Ríos proceed southwest on the road toward Jiguani and turn left 2km the other side of Las Palmas. It makes an ideal stop for anyone caught between Bayamo and Santiago de Cuba, or those taking the backdoor Bayamo-Holguín route. Public transport here is scant.

YARA

☎ 23 / pop 29,237

Yara is a bustling town in the middle of nowhere, 46km west of Bayamo and 23km east of Manzanillo. Large banana plantations and vast fields of sugarcane surround the town, and rice fields line the road to Manzanillo. After freeing his slaves at La Demajagua, near Manzanillo, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes and his followers arrived here on October 11, 1868 and fought their first battle against the Spanish, as recalled by a monument in Yara's main square. The town is famous for the *Grito de Yara* (Yara Declaration), in which Céspedes proclaimed Cuba's independence.

Just off the square is the **Museo Municipal** (Grito de Yara No 107; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun), which shows a local historical collection.

There's a Servi-Cupet here if you need a gas top-up.

GRAN PARQUE NACIONAL SIERRA MAESTRA

A beautiful mountainscape of soaring peaks, hidden cloud forests and ingratiating local *campesinos* (country folk), the Gran Parque Nacional Sierra Maestra is synonymous with Castro's backs-to-the-wall guerrilla campaign of the late 1950s. Situated 40km south of Yara, up a very steep 24km concrete road from Bartolomé Masó, this precipitous and untamed region contains the country's highest peak, Pico Turquino (over the border in Santiago de Cuba Province) as well as the rebel's one-time wartime headquarters, Comandancia La Plata (see p382).

Information

Aspiring visitors should check the current situation before arriving in the national park. Tropical storms and/or government bureaucracy have been known to put the place temporarily out of action. The best source of information is **Cubamar** (☎ 7-831-3151) in Habana, or you can go straight to the horse's mouth by directly contacting **Villa Santo Domingo** (☎ 23-56-53-02). These guys can put you in touch with the Centro de Información de Flora y Fauna next door (see p382). Additional information can be gleaned at the Cubanacán desk at the Hotel Royalton in Bayamo.

History

History resonates throughout these mountains, the bulk of it linked indelibly to the guerrilla war that raged throughout this region between December 1956 and December 1958. For the first year of the conflict Fidel and his growing band of supporters remained on the move, never staying in one place for more than a few days. It was only in mid 1958 that the rebels established a permanent base on a ridge in the shadow of Pico Turquino, Cuba's highest peak. This headquarters became known as La Plata and it was from here that the combative Castro drafted many of the early revolutionary laws while he orchestrated the military strikes that finally brought about the ultimate demise of the Batista government.

Sights & Activities

All trips into the park begin at the end of the near-vertical, corrugated-concrete ac-

cess road at **Alto del Naranjo**, 5km beyond the tourist accommodation at Villa Santo Domingo (an arduous two-hour walk, or you can hire a jeep for CUC\$35 round-trip). There's a good view of the plains of Granma from this 950m-high lookout, otherwise it's just a launching pad for La Plata (3km) and Pico Turquino (13km).

Santo Domingo is a tiny village that nestles in a deep green valley beside the gushing Río Yara. Communally it provides a wonderful slice of the peaceful Cuban *campesino* life that has carried on pretty much unchanged since Fidel and Che prowled these velvety mountains in the late 1950s. If you decide to stick around take a peek at the local school and medical clinic for a taste of rural socialism in action or ask at Villa Santo Domingo about the tiny village museum. The locals have also been known to offer horseback-riding, pedicure treatments and some classic old first-hand tales from the annals of revolutionary history.

The mountain closes at 4pm and rangers won't let you pass after 1pm, so go in the early morning to maximize your visit. You must leave your bags and cameras at the ranger's hut, 2km before the Comandancia La Plata, as photography is prohibited.

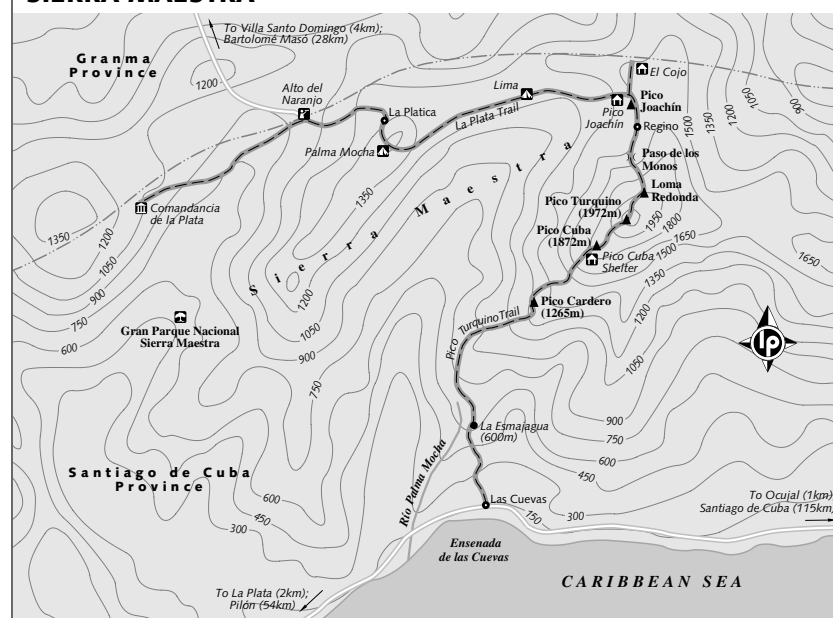
The cloud forest here is quite beautiful. You can cobble together a decent day trip by visiting the Comandancia and hiking to La Platica, 1.5km from Alto del Naranjo (an additional fee may be required).

TREKKING

Certainly Cuba's most popular through-trek (as opposed to the round-trip summit hike up Pico Turquino; see p427) is the rugged, two-/three-day grind from Alto del Naranjo across the Sierra Maestra to Las Cuevas, or vice versa. The terrain goes from mountain to rain forest, with fantastic views, and ends on the inviting shores of the Caribbean.

Guides are mandatory and must be arranged through Flora and Fauna employees at Villa Santo Domingo (p382) or at the **Campismo Popular** (☎ 42 42 00; General García No 112) in Bayamo (p374). The cost is CUC\$30 to CUC\$48 depending on how many days you take. Stock up in Bayamo, carrying everything you'll need, including food, warm clothing, candles and some kind of bed roll

TREKKING GRAN PARQUE NACIONAL SIERRA MAESTRA



or sheet arrangement. Even in August it gets cold at the shelters, so be prepared. Sufficient water is available along the trail.

The trail through the mountains from Alto del Naranjo passes the village of La Platica (water), Palma Mocha (campsite), Lima (campsite), Pico Joaquín (shelter and water), El Cojo (shelter), Regino, Paso de los Monos, Loma Redonda, Pico Turquino (1972m), Pico Cuba (1872m, with a shelter and water at 1650m), Pico Cardero (1265m) and La Esmajagua (600m) before dropping down to Las Cuevas on the Caribbean coast. The first two days are spent on the 13km section to Pico Turquino (overnighting at the Pico Joaquín shelters), where a prearranged guide takes over and leads you down to Las Cuevas. As with all guide services, tips are in order. Pre-arranging the second leg from Pico Cuba to Las Cuevas is straightforward and handled by park staff.

These hikes are well coordinated and the guides efficient (to a fault: don't let them rush you). The sanest way to begin is by spending the night at Campismo La Sier-

rita (below) or Villa Santo Domingo (p382) and setting out in the morning. Transport from Las Cuevas along the coast is sparse, to say the least, with one scheduled truck on alternate days. For this reason, it might be easier to start in Las Cuevas and hike to Alto del Naranjo.

See p427 for a description of the Las Cuevas-Pico Turquino leg in the other direction.

Sleeping & Eating

Before heading into the mountains, backpacker types and Cubans usually bunk down at **Campismo La Sierrita** (☎ 5-3326; cabins from CUC\$16), 8km south of Bartolomé Masó. It's 1km off the main highway on a very rough road. The 27 cabins have bunks, baths and electricity, and sleep up to four people. There's a restaurant, and a river for swimming. If you have a sturdy rental car, the staff might be able to supply you with a guide to take you to the Comandancia La Plata. Otherwise, ask at the desk if there are any planned tours coming up. La Sierrita is often full on weekends, so reservations

from the **Campismo Popular** (☎ 42 42 00; General García No 112, Bayamo) office in Bayamo are essential.

At Bartolomé Masó, 16km south of Yara on the road to Santo Domingo, is **Motel Balcón de la Sierra** (Islazul; ☎ 59 51 80; s/d low season CUC\$18/24, high season CUC\$22/28; P ♻️ 🚰). Snuggled below the mountains, this has to be one of Islazul's best-located hotels. Go for one of the cabanas with terrace and mountain views, and prepare for chilly nights.

The main base for visitors to Gran Parque Nacional Sierra Maestra is **Villa Santo Domingo** (Islazul; ☎ 56 53 02; s/d with breakfast low season CUC\$29/34, high season CUC\$32/37), 24km south of Bartolomé Masó. There are 20 separate cabins next to the Río Yara, at a 200m altitude and the setting, among cascading mountains and wooden *campesino* huts, is idyllic. Geographically speaking, this is the best jumping-off point for the La Plata and Turquino hikes. You can also test your lungs going for a challenging early morning hike up a painfully steep road to Alto Naranjo (5km, 750m of ascent). Other attractions include horseback-riding, river swimming and traditional music in the villa's restaurant. If you're lucky you might even catch the wizened old Rebel Quintet (see opposite). Fidel has stayed here on various occasions (in hut No 6) and Raúl Castro dropped by briefly in 2001 after scaling Pico Turquino at the ripe old age of 70.

Getting There & Around

There's no public transport from Bartolomé Masó to Alto del Naranjo. A taxi from Bayamo to Villa Santo Domingo should cost between CUC\$20 and CUC\$25 one way. Don't pay the driver until you arrive; otherwise you may be dropped off 7km before Villa Santo Domingo, citing steep roads (private taxis, if you can find them, routinely do this). Returning, the hotel should be able to arrange onward transport for you to Bartolomé Masó, Bayamo or Manzanillo.

A 4WD vehicle with good brakes is necessary to drive up to Alto del Naranjo; it's one of the steepest roads in Cuba (if not the world). Russian trucks pass regularly, usually for adventurous tour groups, and you may be able to find a space on board.

MANZANILLO

☎ 23 / pop 110,952

Scruffy, run-down and rough-around-the-edges, bayside Manzanillo looks as if the life has been slowly drained out of it by decades of mean-spirited economic austerity. With just one lackluster hotel and a handful of variable *casas particulares* scattered around a weather-beaten central park, it's barely on the travel circuit at all, though the social life's real enough and the strange neo-Moorish architecture perhaps worthy of an hour or two's silent contemplation.

REBEL HEADQUARTERS: COMANDANCIA LA PLATA

Perched impregably on a mountainside amid a dense tropical cloud forest Castro's wartime headquarters, Comandancia La Plata, is one of Cuba's most rewarding and authentic historical monuments.

Open intermittently for public viewing since 1994, access to the site, which lies within the boundary of the Gran Parque Nacional Sierra Maestra, is closely controlled by the Centro de Información de Flora y Fauna in the village of Santo Domingo. Aspiring guerrilla-watchers must first hire a guide at the park headquarters (CUC\$11), take a bone-rattling Russian truck (or walk) 5km up a precipitous paved road to a viewpoint known as Alto de Naranjo (CUC\$7) and then proceed on foot along a muddy track for the final 3km.

The effort is undoubtedly worth it. Encased in magnificent natural surroundings La Plata is spectacularly unique; a living testament to Castro's indefatigable ability to organize, survive and run rings around an incompetent enemy. Roughshod buildings include a guardhouse (that doubled up as Che Guevara's medical post), a small museum, a press office (that produced propaganda for Radio Rebelde), a kitchen, and La Comandancia itself; Fidel's famous headquarters, a two-roomed all-wood affair furnished rather meagerly with bed, escape hatch, bookshelves, and the original refrigerator complete with bullet hole in the side. Rumor has it that, aside from Fidel, only the influential Celia Sánchez was allowed inside.

THE REBEL QUINTET

Tucked away in the small village of Santo Domingo in the foothills of the Sierra Maestra Mountains, the Rebel Quintet – a band that once enlivened the airwaves of Castro's clandestine Radio Rebelde – offer one of the revolutionary war's more colorful anecdotal stories.

Now well into their 60s, the band grew up in the 1950s as sons of a local *campesino* named Medina, a coffee farmer from the tiny mountain settlement of La Platica and the man who rented Fidel the land to make his secret headquarters at La Plata in 1957.

Recruited into the rebel army more for their musical prowess than their shooting skills, Medina's teenage boys were given rough homemade guitars, old drumming implements and the rather unconventional brief to direct their fast and furious revolutionary songs over small loudspeakers, in an attempt to dispirit an already dispirited enemy.

The repertoire – which is still performed periodically to curious tourists at Villa Santo Domingo (opposite) or the Motel Balcón de la Sierra (opposite) – included such timeless classics as *I Am a Fidelista*, *Respect for Che Guevara* and *Go Away Monkey*.

Back in their '50s heyday, the band were quirky revolutionary mascots and something of a musical thorn in the side for Batista's beleaguered army. The hapless enemy soldiers when taken prisoner were reportedly often confused as to their actual whereabouts; at home, in jail, or at a party!

Founded originally in 1784 as a small fishing port, Manzanillo's early history was dominated by smugglers and pirates trading in contraband goods. The subterfuge continued until well into the 1950s when the city's proximity to the Sierra Maestra led it to become an important supply line for the smuggling of arms and men up to Castro et al in their secret mountaintop headquarters.

In the early 20th century, Manzanillo was to become the unlikely entry point for street organs from France into Cuba (see p384) via the Fornaris and Borbolla families. The city's musical legacy was solidified further in the late '60s and early '70s when it spearheaded the *nueva trova* music revival that swept the country from east to west.

Information

Banco de Crédito y Comercio (cnr Merchán & Saco; h8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

Cadeca (Martí No 184; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) Two blocks from the main square.

Eteca (cnr Martí & General Benítez) Seven blocks west of the post office.

Post office (cnr Martí & Codina) One block from Parque Céspedes.

Transtur (☎ 5-3800; Maceo No 70; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Wed & Fri, 1-5pm Thu) There is no tourist information in Manzanillo though Transtur, which shares offices off Parque Céspedes with Cubana, can help with transfers, taxis and rental cars.

Sights IN TOWN

Manzanillo is spread out and shadeless – not a great town for walking around, though the wooden houses, abandoned towers and chipped cupolas provide quirky visuals. Check out the old **City Bank of NY building** (cnr Merchán & Doctor Codina), which dates from 1913, or the old wooden houses around Perucho Figueredo between Merchán and JM Gómez.

The central square of Manzanillo, **Parque Céspedes**, is striking for its precious *glorieta* (gazebo/bandstand), with its Moorish mosaics, scalloped cupola and arabesque-covered columns. Completely restored in 1999, it fairly glows in the dusk's slanting light. Surrounding the park are buildings echoing this Andalusian-Moorish style, particularly the grandiose shopping arcade on the park's western side.

On the eastern side of Parque Céspedes is the **Museo Histórico Municipal** (Martí No 226; admission free; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Fri, 8am-noon & 6-10pm Sat & Sun). There's an art gallery next door. The **Iglesia de la Purísima Concepción**, across the square, has a gilded main altar.

Manzanillo's most evocative sight is the **Celia Sánchez Monument**, built in 1990 along Caridad. Colorful ceramic murals decorate the stairway between Martí and Luz Caballero. The birds and flowers on the reliefs represent Sánchez, one of the leaders of the M-26-7 movement and longtime aid to

Castro, whose visage appears on the central mural near the top of the stairs. A small **visitors center** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) is adjacent; there are excellent views from here.

OUTSIDE TOWN

The **Museo Histórico La Demajagua** (admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sun), 10km south of Manzanillo, is the site of the sugar estate of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes. It was here on October 10, 1868 that Céspedes freed his slaves, setting in motion the process that led to Cuba's independence from Spain 30 years later. Remains of Céspedes' *ingenio* (sugar mill) are behind the museum. The views from the estate are fine and the long, grassy expanses a novelty.

From here, a broad walkway leads to a monument bearing a quotation from Castro: *Nosotros entonces habríamos sido como ellos, ellos hoy habrían sido como nosotros* (We would then have been as they were, they today would be as we are). Below two huge trees next to the monument are the remains of a steam engine that formerly powered the mill, and hanging nearby is the famous Demajagua bell, once used to call the slaves to work. On October 10, 1868, it tolled announcing Cuba's independence. To get to La Demajagua, travel south 10km from the Servi-Cupet gas station in Manza-

nillo, in the direction of Media Luna, and then another 2.5km off the main road, toward the sea.

Sleeping

Hotel Guacanayabo (Islazul; ☎ 5-4012; Circunvalación Camilo Cienfuegos; s/d low season CUC\$17/22, high season CUC\$18/24; ☎ ☎) Part of Islazul's budget hotel chain, this architecturally incongruous blemish on the landscape, situated inconveniently on the outskirts of sprawling Manzanillo, was given over to a Misión Milagros (Miracle Mission; see p449) as of January 2006 – check with the hotel regarding any update. Until it re-opens Manzanillo's only overnight accommodation is in a handful of centrally located *casas particulares* (see opposite).

Eating & Drinking

The restaurant scene is hurting in Manzanillo. For do-it-yourself enthusiasts, street food is available on weekends in various food stalls scattered around Parque Céspedes. Whole roast pig is a local specialty. Start the food hunt around Parque Céspedes and you should get lucky at one of the following places.

Restaurante 1800 (Merchán No 245 btwn Maceo & Saco; ☎ noon-10pm Tue-Sun) This is the place most locals recommend, and there are adequate steaks and seafood. Your menu will be in Convertibles.

Restaurante Las Américas (Maceo; ☎ noon-2:30pm & 7-10pm) This restaurant has the usual pork and chicken that you will have grown to tolerate.

Pizzería Nápoles (Merchán) Nápoles has pizza and spaghetti for under three pesos. Pay at the cashier and grab a seat; bring your own beverage.

Café 1906 (cnr Maceo & Merchán; ☎ 24hr) This is Manzanillo's most atmospheric hangout, a corner joint with 20 centavo shots of coffee and rum, and lots of locals getting hopped up and zonked out.

Nectar Cremería (Martí; ☎ noon-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-10pm Sun) Come to this place near Maceo for ice cream and pay in pesos. Get in line by taking *el último* (last place in line) across the street in the park.

Cafetería Piropo Kikiri (Martí btwn Maceo & Saco; ☎ 10am-10pm) This place has everything from ice-cream sandwiches to sundaes, available for Convertibles.

CASAS PARTICULARES – MANZANILLO

Ada y Fernando (☎ 5-2522; jerm_7519@yahoo.es; Pedro Figueredo No 105 btwn Matrí & Mártires de Vietnam; ☎ ☎) One block from central park.

Adrián & Tonia (☎ 5-3028; Mártires de Vietnam No 49; r CUC\$20-25; ☎ ☎) Good feedback from travelers on this one.

Villa Luisa (☎ 5-2738; Calle Rabena No 172 btwn Maceo & Masó; r CUC\$20-25; ☎ ☎) Clean, central, price negotiable.

Entertainment

Teatro Manzanillo (Villuendas btwn Maceo & Saco; admission 8 pesos; ☎ shows at 8pm) Touring companies such as the Ballet de Camagüey and Danza Contemporánea de Cuba perform at this lovingly restored venue. Built in 1856 and restored in 1926 and again in 2002, this 430-seat beauty is packed with oil paintings, red flocking and original detail. Staff will be delighted to show you the room where the history of the restoration is explained.

Casa de la Trova (☎ 5-5423; Merchán No 213; admission 1 peso) The spiritual home of *nueva trova*, this is not the hallowed musical shrine it ought to be. There are bolero nights on Tuesdays, and *trova* concerts on Thursdays at 9pm.

Cabaret Salón Rojo (☎ 5-5117; ☎ 8pm-midnight Tue-Sat, 8pm-1am Sun) This place on the north side of Parque Céspedes has an upstairs terrace overlooking the square, for drinks (pay in pesos) and dancing.

Cabaret Costa Azul (☎ 5-3158; cnr Avs 1 de Mayo & Narciso Lopez; ☎ 8pm-2am Thu-Sun) Manzanillo's top nightclub. Hit the lido deck of this mock-up ship overlooking a large stage, where there's a show at 10pm.

Cine Popular (Av 1 de Mayo; ☎ Tue-Sun) This is the town's top movie house.

Getting There & Away

AIR
Manzanillo's **Sierra Maestra Airport** (☎ 5-3019; airport code MZO) is on the road to Cayo Espino, 8km south of the Servi-Cupet gas station in Manzanillo. **Cubana** (☎ 5-4984) has a nonstop flight from Habana once a week on Saturdays (CUC\$103, two hours). **Skyservice** (www.skyserviceairlines.com) flies directly from Toronto in winter.

A taxi between the airport and the center of town should cost approximately CUC\$6.

BUS & TRUCK

The bus station, 2km east of town on the road to Bayamo, has daily **Astro** (☎ 5-2727) buses to Bayamo, Camagüey, Habana, Pilón and Yara.

Buses and passenger trucks run fairly frequently to Yara and Bayamo. To Pilón, there are two or three morning buses. There is one daily bus to both Holguín and Habana, but to reach Santiago de Cuba you must transfer in Bayamo.

Passenger trucks to Media Luna and Pilón depart from the bus station and stop to pick up passengers at the crossroads near Servi-Cupet and the hospital (which is the local hitching stop).

TRAIN

All services from the train station on the north side of town are via Yara and Bayamo. Trains go to the following destinations.

Destination	Cost (one way)	Departure time
Bayamo	CUC\$1.75	10:40am, 2:15pm, 7:40pm
Habana	CUC\$28	5:20pm
Jiguani	CUC\$2.35	10:40am, 2:15pm
Santiago de Cuba	CUC\$5.50	2:15pm

Getting Around

The **Havanaautos** (☎ 5-7204) office is adjacent to the Servi-Cupet gas station, opposite the hospital, 3km south of the city center on the road to Media Luna. There's a brilliant new road running through Corralito up into Holguín, making this the quickest exit from Manzanillo toward points north and east.

Horse carts (one peso) to the bus station leave from Doctor Codina between Plácido and Luz Caballero. Horse carts along the Malecón to the shipyard leave from the bottom of Saco.

MEDIA LUNA

☎ 23 / pop 15,493

The sugar-producing town of Media Luna, about 50km southwest of Manzanillo, is best known as the hometown of Celia

AN ORGAN TO GRIND

Manzanillo is famous for its mechanical organs, first imported into Cuba from France by the Fornaris and Borbolla families in 1876. By 1900 some 200 French street organs were in existence in Manzanillo and, in the ensuing years, Carlos and Francisco Borbolla built about a dozen more full-size organs in a factory that they had set up in the city itself.

The tradition lives on today in Cuban rumba bands; original pipe organs form a central part of weekend street performances in Manzanillo's Parque Céspedes and neighboring Bayamo's weekly Fiesta de la Cubania. Backed up by live percussion instruments the hand-operated street organs churn out a rather unorthodox mix of traditional fairground music blended with a fast and furious rumba beat.

EPIPHANY IN A SUGARCANE FIELD

Picture the scene. It's December 2, 1956 in a remote part of Western Cuba called Las Coloradas and a group of 82 rag-tag soldiers led by Fidel Castro have just been dispatched off the coast from a leaky and overcrowded leisure yacht called *Granma*. Scrambling through a swamp and forced to abandon most of their weapons in the surrounding mangroves, the rebels flail around for three days before finding refuge in a sugarcane field where they lay down exhausted and try to figure out what they should do next.

It's a rude awakening. A few hours later the first hostile shots are fired into the air, a man falls dead and suddenly all around is chaos. In the confusion that follows; the soldiers panic and become separated. One, a 28-year-old Argentine doctor, uninitiated as yet to the brutalities of armed combat, is forced to make a break for it across open ground with little cover. Looking down at his feet he sees his trusted medical kit and a box of ammunition abandoned by a fleeing colleague. He can't possibly carry both items at once, and he has about five seconds to make a simple two-way choice.

A moment of history, a moment of infamy, a moment in which – according to many – a young and idealistic traveler called Ernesto Guevara de la Serna was transformed into the immortal and cold-blooded Che.

The panic wasn't over. Gathering up the discarded box of ammunition, Che was promptly hit in the neck by a stray enemy bullet. Assuming he was about to die he sat down on the ground momentarily and – remembering a story he had once read by Jack London about a man who slowly froze to death in Alaska – prepared himself to face death with dignity. It was Juan Almeida who snapped him out of his stupor. Yelling at him to get up he ushered Che and three other crestfallen survivors out of the blazing cane field and off into the jungle. Che was lucky. His neck wound was only superficial, and despite days spent wandering half-starved around the Cuban countryside, the small group of embattled rebels eventually found food and shelter with a sympathetic peasant known as Guillermo García. It was from García that the soldiers learned that Fidel was alive and well, and still plotting the imminent demise of Batista's government. They met up at a place called Cinco Palmas on December 21. The long, hard fight back from the brink had officially begun.

Sánchez (1920–80). Sánchez is famous for having sent essential supplies to Castro's rebels in the mountains, and after the revolution became one of Castro's closest associates. The **Celia Sánchez Museum** (Paúl Podio No 111; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am–noon & 2–5pm Tue–Sat, 9am–1pm Sun) is a grand old clapboard affair on the main road; it's not far from Media Luna's sugar mill.

Media Luna's **glorieta**, while not as outlandish as the one in Manzanillo, is still a charmer. Grab a three peso ice cream or fruit shake from one of the stalls in the park, and take a look around.

NIQUERO

☎ 23 / pop 20,273

Niquero, a small fishing port and sugar town in the isolated southwest corner of Granma, is dominated by the local Roberto Ramirez Delgado sugar mill, built in 1905 and nationalized in 1960 (you'll smell it before you see it). Like many Granma

settlements it is characterized by its distinctive clapboard houses and has a lively *noche de Cubanilla* when the streets are closed off and dining is at sidewalk tables. Live bands replete with organ grinder entertain the locals.

Ostensibly, there isn't much to do in Niquero but you can explore the park, where there's a **cinema**, and visit the town's small **museum**. Look out for a monument commemorating the oft-forgotten victims of the Granma landing, hunted down and murdered by Batista's troops in December 1956.

Niquero makes a good base from which to visit the Parque Nacional Desembarco del Granma. There's a Servi-Cupet in the center of town and another on the outskirts toward Cabo Cruz.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Niquero (Islazul; ☎ 59 24 98; s/d low season CUC\$16/20, high season CUC\$22/28; P ☎) Right in

the middle of town, this low-key, out-on-a-limb hotel situated opposite the local sugar factory has dark, slightly tatty rooms with little balconies that overlook the street. The service here is variable though the affordable on-site restaurant has been known to rustle up a reasonable beefsteak with sauce. Unfortunately the hotel sustained damage during the 2005 hurricane season so you may find that some things here are still being repaired (the water supply, for instance).

PARQUE NACIONAL DESEMBARCO DEL GRANMA

Ten kilometers southwest of Media Luna the road divides, with Pilón 30km to the south-east and Niquero 10km to the southwest. Belic is 16km southwest of Niquero. It's another 6km from Belic to the national park entry gate (entrance per person CUC\$3).

Parque Nacional Desembarco del Granma protects 27,545 hectares of forests, cliffs and reefs along Cuba's southern coast, between Cabo Cruz and Pilón. In 1999 it was named a UNESCO World Heritage site. The peculiar karst topography and uplifted marine terraces unique to this area offer some of the most pristine coastal cliffs in the Americas. Of the 512 plant species identified thus far, about 60% are endemic, and a dozen of them are found only here. The fauna is equally rich, with 25 species of mollusk, seven species of amphibian, 44 types of reptile, 110 bird species and 13 types of mammal.

In El Guafe, archaeologists have uncovered the second most important community of ancient agriculturists and ceramic-makers ever discovered in Cuba. Approximately 1000 years old, the artifacts discovered include altars, carved stones and earthen vessels along with six idols guarding a water goddess inside a ceremonial cave. As far as archaeologists are concerned, it's probably just the tip of the iceberg.

Sights & Activities

The area is famous as the landing place of the yacht *Granma*, which brought Fidel and revolution to Cuba in 1956 (see opposite). A large monument and the **Museo Las Coloradas** (admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am–6pm Tue–Sat, 8am–noon Sun) just beyond the park gate mark the actual landing spot. The museum outlines the routes taken by Castro, Guevara and the

others from here to the Sierra Maestra, and there's a full-scale replica of the *Granma*.

Eight kilometers southwest of the park toward Cabo Cruz is the **Sendero Arqueológico Natural El Guafe**, a nature/archaeological trail. An underground river here has created 20 large caverns, one of which contains the famous Ídolo del Agua, carved from stalagmites by pre-Columbian Indians. It is a two-hour stroll, during which you can see butterflies, 170 different species of birds (including the tiny *colibrí*), a 500-year-old cactus and orchids. A park guard is available to accompany you and point out interesting features.

Three kilometers beyond the El Guafe trailhead is **Cabo Cruz**, a classic fishing port with skiffs bobbing offshore and sinewy men gutting their catch on the golden beach. There's not much to see here except the 33m-tall Vargas lighthouse, which was erected in 1871. An olive-oil wick provided the light for the lighthouse until gas was installed in 1928. In 1952 the device was electrified. An **exhibition room** (☎ 8am–noon & 1–5pm Mon–Sat) labeled 'Historia del Faro', which has lighthouse memorabilia, is inside the adjacent building; the attendant at the lighthouse shop has the key.

There's good swimming east of the lighthouse and you can walk out to a stretch of reef that has decent snorkeling; watch the strong currents sweeping from west to east here. If you like to fish, Cabo Cruz is the place for you.

Sleeping & Eating

Campismo Las Coloradas (Cubamar; Carretera de Niquero Km 17; s/d low season CUC\$9/12, high season CUC\$11/16; ☎) This place stands on 500m of murky beach, 5km southwest of Belic, just outside the park. The 28 duplex cabins fill fast on weekends and in summer, when locals flock to the beach to party. This is an equipped Campertour facility. Three buses a day from Niquero and more-frequent trucks from Belic come this far. Las Coloradas was badly damaged by the 2005 hurricanes and was still closed for repairs as this book was being written. Cubamar had plans to reopen it as soon as possible.

Getting There & Away

If you don't have your own transport, you can still get over here, but you'll just have

GO FURTHER INTO THE COUNTRYSIDE

Traveling up over the foothills of the Sierra Maestra on the road out of Pilón in the direction of Media Luna you come upon the tumbledown village of Sevilla. Turn left at the bus stop here and head a few more kilometers southwest until you arrive in the small settlement of El Plátano. Here – with some fumbling Spanish and a bit of deft do-it-yourself navigating – you'll find the former **House of Guillermo García**, now a roughshod museum.

Guillermo García was an illiterate peasant who helped reassemble the *Granma* survivors in December 1956 before leading them to safety in the Sierra Maestra. As a reward Fidel made him one of Cuba's five *comandantes* (commanding officers) after the revolution. He is still alive today and lives in Habana from where he has taken an active part in preserving the biodiversity of his home province.

The museum is a small affair containing old photos of the rebels and a map depicting their journey into the mountains. There is a tangible sense of history.

to be very patient. During the summer you may be able to hitch out of Las Coloradas, otherwise it's a tough lift (for information on the risks associated with hitching, see p477). The closest gas stations are in Niquero.

PILÓN

☎ 23 / pop 11,904

Life ain't easy in Pilón, even by Cuban standards. Once upon a time this isolated coastal settlement was a thriving sugar town. But in 2002, the sugar mill shut down and the people – who had once provided vital refuge for the embattled *Granma* survivors – woke up to an uncertain future. Then in July 2005 fate struck again, this time in the form of a massive hurricane that ripped huge chunks out of the scenic coast road. It is a testament to these people that they're still here at all, eking out a living – just.

There's not much to do in the village itself apart from visit the tiny **Casa Museo Celia Sánchez Manduley** (admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) or admire the surrounding mountain and seascapes. From Pilón, the paved road continues 17km east to Marea del Portillo, and all the way to Santiago de Cuba, which is another 180km further on.

Sleeping & Eating

Villa Turística Punta Piedra (Cubanacán; ☎ 59 70 62; s/d/tr CUC\$28/30/35) On the main road 11km east of Pilón and 5km west of Marea del Portillo, this amiable three-star resort made up of 13 rooms in two single-story blocks, makes a nice alternative to the larger hotel complexes a few kilometers to the east. There's

a restaurant here and an intermittent disco located on a secluded sabbat of sandy beach and the staff, once they've recovered from the surprise of seeing you, will be mighty pleased with your custom.

Getting There & Around

There's a bus between Pilón and Santiago de Cuba via Manzanillo on alternate days. Buses also run along the south coast between Pilón and Chivirico on alternate days, but don't bank on any timetables. Public transport in this region is enough to turn your hair gray; ask the locals.

Servi-Cupet is by the highway at the entrance to Pilón and sells snacks and drinks. Drivers should be sure to fill up here, the next gas station is in Santiago de Cuba nearly 200km away.

MAREA DEL PORTILLO

Underrated and understated Marea del Portillo is one of Cuba's nicest all-inclusive resorts. There are just two smallish hotel complexes here wedged into a narrow strip of dry land between the glistening Caribbean and the cascading Sierra Maestra Mountains. In winter it's the warmest spot in Cuba.

Friendly and unpretentious, the two main resorts are kitted out with every creature comfort and outdoor activity available, and the prices are relatively inexpensive too. The only real drawback is the beach, which is of a light grey color and may disappoint those more attuned to the brilliant whites of Cayo Coco.

Close to the Parque Nacional Desembarco del Granma and situated at the far

end of Cuba's most isolated and rugged stretch of coastline, the sense of revolutionary history in this area is both potent and rewarding. The nearest settlement of any note is Pilón, 17km to the west.

Activities

Both hotels operate an all-day hiking and horseback-riding tour to **El Salto**, a waterfall, for CUC\$35 per person including lunch and four drinks (six-person minimum) and trips into the Parque Nacional Desembarco del Granma for a similar price. Other horseback riding costs CUC\$7 per hour.

The **Marlin Dive Center** (☎ 59 70 34, fax 59 70 35), adjacent to Hotel Club Amigo Marea del Portillo, offers scuba diving from CUC\$35 a tank. Deep-sea fishing starts at CUC\$45 per hour for four anglers fishing two at a time.

Sleeping & Eating

Club Amigo Marea del Portillo (Cubanacán; ☎ 59 70 08; s/d all-inclusive CUC\$50/80; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) As all-inclusives go, this little-known jewel has to be one of the most unpretentious and down-to-earth options in Cuba. It's located on a dark sandy beach in the rain shadow of the Sierra Maestra Mountains. The 74 rooms are comfortable and adequate, and the beachside swimming pool, though pleasant, is unusually small. Traffic in the hotel is very seasonal so phone ahead in the quieter months (April to October) as the complex has been known to close.

Hotel Farallón del Caribe (Cubanacán; ☎ 59 40 03; fax 59 70 80; s/d all-inclusive CUC\$55/90; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) What a great setting for an all-inclusive resort: perched on a low hill overlooking the Sierra Maestra, the views across the mountains from the beach bar are magical and, aside from the Club Amigo next door, the surroundings are devoid of any other settlements. Exciting excursions can be organized here at the Cubanacán desk into the Parque Nacional Desembarco del Granma or, if you have your own wheels, you can go off exploring solo along the vista-laden coast road east toward Santiago. The resort is popular with package-tour Canadians.

Getting There & Away

The only scheduled transport along this route is one truck on alternate days from Santiago de Cuba. By the time it arrives at this part of the coast it is overflowing dangerously with people making their way to Pilón.

Getting Around

The hotels rent scooters for approximately CUC\$8 per hour (CUC\$3 for subsequent hours). A rough dirt road crosses the mountains directly from Marea del Portillo to Bartolomé Masó, but a 4WD vehicle, dry weather and considerable driving expertise are required to use it. Be prepared for several steep rocky sections and many fords.

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