

The Best of Cuba

Cuba is unlike any other place on earth. What draws people to this fascinating Caribbean island is much more than beaches, sun, and cheap drinks, though there is plenty of all three for those who want them. One of the last Communist-bloc nations left, it doesn't suffer from the drab and desultory demeanor of its disappeared peers. Cuba's rich culture, unique political history, and continued survival through ongoing economic hardship make it one of the most eye-opening countries that experienced travelers can still discover. Seeing the best of Cuba means grooving to its intoxicating music, marveling at how Cubans improvise on a daily basis to make ends meet, and visiting a land in which the past 50 years seem to have passed by in some odd state of frozen animation.

1 THE BEST CUBAN TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Patronizing *Paladares* and *Casas Particulares*:** The best way to appreciate Cubans, as well as to have the opportunity to exchange ideas about Cuba and the outside world, is by stepping inside a *paladar* restaurant or a *casa particular*, the Cuban version of a simple bed-and-breakfast. These private initiatives, heavily taxed by the state, are one of the only ways Cubans can earn badly needed hard currency, and they allow travelers a rewarding chance to see the country beyond the state-run hotels and restaurants.
- **Exploring *la Habana Vieja* (Old Havana):** No trip to Cuba is complete without at least a day (or more) spent in *Habana Vieja*. The streets and alleys of this colonial-era city center have been immaculately restored. You'll feel sucked back in time as you visit the plazas, churches, and forts here. Be sure to take a break from sightseeing and museum-hopping to stock up on souvenirs at the Calle Tacón market, your best one-stop shop in the country for this sort of stuff. See "What to See & Do" in chapter 5.
- **Spending an Afternoon at the *Callecón de Hammel*:** This short alley is lined with Salvador González's colorful murals and punctuated with scrap sculptures and shrines to Afro-Cuban deities. If you can make it on a Sunday afternoon in Havana, you'll be treated to a popular Afro-Cuban dance and music celebration. See "What to See & Do" in chapter 5.
- **Walking along *Havana's Malecón*:** Your best bet is to start in *Habana Vieja* and work your way toward the Hotel Nacional in Vedado. Take your time to stop and sit on the sea wall for a spell, and be sure to talk to some of the locals on your way. If you time it right, you will reach the Hotel Nacional in the late afternoon—a good time to grab a cool drink and enjoy the setting sun from the "Compass Card" outdoor terrace. See "What to See & Do" in chapter 5.
- **Celebrating *Las Parrandas*:** As the end of the year rolls around, the little colonial town of Remedios gears up to host *Las Parrandas*, one of Cuba's grandest street parties and religious carnivals. Everything culminates on Christmas Eve in an orgy of drums, floats, and fireworks. See "Santa Clara" in chapter 8.
- **Hopping a Steam Train to the Valley of the Sugar Mills:** The colonial mansions in Trinidad were built with the

riches of a booming Cuban sugar trade of the 18th and 19th centuries. The best way to see the Valle de los Ingenios, an extraordinarily lush valley once home to 60 sugar mills, is aboard a vintage 1907 American steam train to one of the sugar estates, Manaca-Iznaga, where you can survey the valley's many shades of green from a fantastic tower. See "Trinidad" in chapter 8.

- **Following in Fidel's Footsteps:** Waging a guerrilla war against the Batista dictatorship, Fidel Castro and his young comrades hid out in the Sierra Maestra mountains in the late 1950s. Their small-scale rebel base camp was never discovered, but visitors today can hike a trail through remote cloud forest up to Comandancia de la Plata, the command post where Fidel turned a country on its

head. It's a fascinating glimpse of history from up close. See "Bayamo & the Sierra Maestra" in chapter 10.

- **Joining a Carnival Conga Line:** In the intense heat of summer, Santiago de Cuba explodes with the island's best carnival, an evocative celebration of the city's Afro-Caribbean roots. Ripe with rumba music, conga processions, booming percussion, fanciful floats, and wild costumes, it's a participatory party that has nothing to do with those cheesy conga lines people do on cruise ships. See "Carnival & Other Santiago Festivals" in chapter 11.
- **Beach time:** Lying on one of Cuba's white-sand beaches sipping a *mojito* (Cuban rum cocktail) before dipping into the sparkling waters of the warm Caribbean sea is one of the best things you can do.

2 THE BEST HISTORICAL SIGHTS

- **Catedral de San Cristóbal and Plaza de la Catedral,** Havana (☎ 7/861-7771): Havana's cathedral and the plaza it sits on are perhaps Old Havana's most distinctive historical sites. The twin towers and worn baroque facade of this ancient church are beautiful both by day and night. The small plaza it fronts is an atmospheric cobblestone square surrounded by perfectly restored colonial-era buildings with shops, museums, galleries, and restaurants. See p. 110.
- **Museo de la Ciudad,** Havana (☎ 7/861-6130): Old Havana's preeminent museum displays colonial-era art and artifacts. It's worth the price of admission alone to stroll the rooms, outdoor courtyards, and interior veranda of the former Palacio de los Capitanes Generales (Palace of the Captains General), which houses the museum. See p. 112.
- **Parque Histórico Morro y Cabaña,** Havana (☎ 7/863-7063 for El Morro, and ☎ 7/862-0617 for La Cabaña):

Across the harbor from Old Havana, the Morro & Cabaña Historic Park complex is comprised of two major forts charged with protecting Havana's narrow and strategic harbor entrance. There's a lighthouse, several museums, restored barracks, batteries of cannons, and a handful of restaurants to explore, and a nightly *cañonazo* (cannon blast) ceremony is held here. See p. 118.

- **Cementerio de Colón,** Havana (☎ 7/832-1050): Columbus Cemetery is an impressive collection of mausoleums, crypts, family chapels and vaults, soaring sculptures, and ornate gravestones. All of the dead are laid to rest above-ground, and you'll be awed by the surfeit of marble and sun-bleached alabaster. The whole thing is laid out in an orderly grid of streets. See p. 116.
- **Monumento Ernesto Che Guevara,** Santa Clara (☎ 42/20-5878): Featuring a huge sculpture of the revolutionary hero overlooking a vast plaza, this

place is deeply revered by Cubans. Underneath the statue is a museum with exhibits detailing the life and exploits of “El Che,” as well as a mausoleum holding Guevara’s remains and the tombstones of 37 other revolutionary fighters killed with Guevara in Bolivia. See “Santa Clara” in chapter 8.

- **Trinidad:** The entire town of Trinidad qualifies as a historical site. The impeccably preserved relic—several blocks square of perfect pastel-colored mansions, churches, and cobblestone streets—is one of the greatest collections of colonial architecture to be found anywhere in the Americas. The star among Trinidad’s colonial set pieces is the **Museo Romántico** (☎ 41/99-4363), in an 18th-century mansion right on the main square. See “Trinidad” in chapter 8.
- **Plaza San Juan de Dios, Camagüey** (☎ 32/29-1318): This dignified square is the highlight of Camagüey’s colonial quarter, one of the largest in Cuba with more than a dozen 16th-, 17th-, and 18th-century colonial churches. Marked by cobblestones and colonial houses with red-tile roofs and iron window grilles, the understated plaza is home to a 17th-century baroque church and hospital of the order of San Juan de Dios. See p. 228.
- **Museo El Chorro de Maíta, Guardalavaca** (☎ 24/43-0421): Guardalavaca is in the midst of the most important archaeological zone of Native American

groups in Cuba. This small museum site is a Taíno burial ground from the late-15th and early-16th centuries, the biggest and finest American Indian cemetery discovered in Cuba. The well-preserved remains of more than 100 members of the community reveal important clues about native groups after the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. The museum displays ceramics and objects found at the site. See “Guardalavaca” in chapter 10.

- **Casa Velázquez (Museo de Ambiente Colonial Cubano), Santiago de Cuba** (☎ 22/65-2652): Diego Velázquez founded the original seven *villas* (towns/settlements) in Cuba, and his 1515 mansion in Santiago de Cuba, the oldest house in the country and one of the oldest in the Americas, is still standing. Today it’s a museum of colonial furnishings from the 16th to the 19th century. Individual pieces are splendid, but none manages to upstage the historical impact of the restored house itself. See p. 270.
- **Castillo El Morro, Santiago de Cuba** (☎ 22/69-1569): Although nowhere near as expansive as its sister fort in Havana, this massive fortress is nonetheless quite impressive. You can almost feel like you’re part of the history here while walking the mazelike alleyways, and the views are wonderful as well. See p. 271.

3 THE BEST OF NATURAL CUBA

- **The Viñales Valley:** This broad, flat valley is punctuated by a series of limestone karst hill formations, or *mogotes*. The views from the small mountains surrounding the valley are spectacular. The area provides great opportunities for hiking, mountain biking, bird-watching, and rock climbing, and there
- are plenty of caves to explore. See “Viñales” in chapter 6.
- **Las Terrazas:** This planned ecotourism project is set amid the Sierra del Rosario Biosphere Reserve. There are a host of trails and attractions here, including lakes, swimming holes, and a zip-line canopy tour. The bird-watching is

excellent. See “Sierra del Rosario Biosphere Reserve & San Diego de los Baños” in chapter 6.

- **Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata:** The Zapata Swamp National Park is a massive expanse of mangroves, swamp, and wetlands housing an abundant variety of flora and fauna. The area is a mecca for bird-watchers, naturalists, and anglers. Your best bet for exploring the park is Playa Larga, a simple beach-resort area catering to scuba divers. See “The Zapata Peninsula & Playa Girón” in chapter 7.
- **Parque Nacional Topes de Collantes:** The dense pine-covered mountains of the Sierra del Escambray lurk on the outskirts of Trinidad, and the Topes de Collantes National Park is a lovely, cool refuge from the town’s stone streets. It’s great for hiking, with several well-established trails, the best of which culminate in refreshing waterfalls. See “Trinidad” in chapter 8.

- **Baracoa:** Cuba’s first settlement, overlooking a beautiful oyster-shaped bay, remains a natural paradise, with thick tropical vegetation, 10 rivers, and a distinctive flat-topped mountain called El Yunque, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve that beckons hikers. Travelers into rafting, beaches, and boating will also find ample opportunities to explore this isolated area. See “Baracoa” in chapter 10.
- **Sierra Maestra:** The highest and longest mountain range in Cuba, the Sierra Maestra is full of lore for Cubans—it’s where Fidel Castro and his band of rebels hid out and waged guerilla warfare against the Batista government in the 1950s. Stretching across three provinces, its peaks are almost on top of the rocky southern coastline. The Gran Parque Nacional Sierra Maestra and Parque Nacional de Turquino are perfect for hikers and nature lovers. See “Bayamo & the Sierra Maestra” in chapter 10.

4 THE BEST OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

- **Landing a Marlin or Sailfish:** If you really want to emulate Ernest Hemingway, you’ll head out to sea to fish. The waters off Cuba’s coast are excellent for sportfishing year-round. Big game fish are best sought off the northern coast, while bonefish and tarpon are better stalked off the southern coast. Nautica Marlin (www.nauticamarlin.com) and Gaviota (www.gaviota-grupo.com) run a string of marinas with modern, well-equipped sport-fishing fleets all around Cuba’s coastline.
- **Rock Climbing the *Mogotes* of the Viñales Valley:** Although in its infancy, rock climbing is a rapidly developing sport in Cuba, and Viñales Valley is the place to come and climb. More than 60 routes and 100 pitches have been marked and climbed, and more climbs are constantly being uncovered. See “Viñales” in chapter 6.
- **Scuba Diving at María la Gorda:** Cuba has many excellent dive destinations, but María la Gorda probably edges out the rest by having consistently excellent conditions, a variety of sites, an amazing setting, and an excellent dive operation. However, there’s excellent diving off much of Cuba’s coast, and if you want to combine diving with other attractions, you can do so from just about any destination on the island. See “María la Gorda” in chapter 6.
- **Bird-Watching in the Zapata Peninsula:** A dedicated (and lucky) bird-watcher might be able to spot 18 of Cuba’s 24 endemic species in the swamps, mangroves, and wetlands of the Zapata Peninsula. In addition to the

endemic species, ornithologists and lay bird-watchers can spot more than 100 other varieties of shore birds, transients, and waterfowl in this rich, wild region. See “The Zapata Peninsula & Playa Girón” in chapter 7. Other top bird-watching destinations include **La Güira National Park** (see chapter 6), as well as the areas around **Cayo Coco** and **Cayo Guillermo** (see chapter 9) and **Baracoa** (see chapter 10).

- **Hiking and Rafting in Baracoa:** Baracoa, long isolated by impenetrable tropical vegetation, steep mountains, and rushing rivers, is an adventurer’s dream. El Yunque, a curiously flat-topped limestone mountain, is home to dozens of bird species, orchids, and unique tropical

plants and forest; it’s also great for climbing. The Río Toa, the widest river in Cuba, is one of the few spots in Cuba for rafting. See “Baracoa” in chapter 10.

- **Hiking Pico Turquino:** Pico Turquino, tucked within the celebrated Sierra Maestra National Park, is the highest peak in Cuba at just under 2,000m (6,562 ft.). The trail to the summit is swathed in cloud forest and tropical flora. Mountaineers in good physical condition can do the 15km (9-mile) round-trip journey in a day, but most camp overnight below the summit. The panoramic views of the coast and Caribbean Sea are breathtaking. See “Bayamo & the Sierra Maestra” in chapter 10.

5 THE BEST BEACHES

- **Playa Paraíso and Playa Sirena:** These two connected beaches are the most outstanding of the uniformly spectacular stretches of sand along the length of Cayo Largo del Sur. Located on the more protected western end of the island, these are broad expanses of glistening, fine white sand, bordering the clear Caribbean Sea. There’s a simple beachside restaurant on Playa Paraíso, and not much else here—and that’s a large part of their charm. See “Cayo Largo del Sur” in chapter 6.
- **Varadero:** This is Cuba’s premier beach-resort destination, and it ranks right up there with the best in the Caribbean. We personally prefer some of the island’s less-developed stretches of sand. But if you’re looking for a well-run all-inclusive resort loaded with amenities and activities, Varadero is a good choice. The 21km (13 miles) of nearly uninterrupted beach here is fabulous. See “Varadero” in chapter 7.
- **Playa Ensenachos and Playa Mégano:** Located on the tiny islet of Cayo Ensenachos, which is part of la Cayería del

Norte, these protected crescents of sand drop off very gently, allowing bathers to wade 90m (295 ft.) or more out into the calm, crystal-clear waters. You’ll have to shell out big bucks to visit these beaches, either staying at the Occidental Royal Hideaway Ensenachos or paying its hefty day-use fee. Both of these beaches are astoundingly beautiful, but we slightly prefer Playa Mégano. See “Santa Clara” in chapter 8.

- **Playa Ancón:** A wonderful white-sand beach and close runner-up to the more spectacular beaches of Cuba, attractive Ancón has one huge advantage: It’s just minutes from one of the country’s true treasures, Trinidad, and perfectly positioned for those who’d like a bit of colonial culture with their sun and sand (or vice versa). With good diving and one very nice resort hotel, it’s sure to be built up soon. See “Trinidad” in chapter 8.
- **Cayos Coco and Guillermo:** These tiny cays off the north coast, separated from the Cuban mainland by a long man-made causeway, are tucked into shallow waters that flow into the Atlantic. There’s

barely a sign of the “real Cuba,” but what you do get is stunning, unspoiled beaches, excellent diving, and a full contingent of watersports. See “Cayo Coco & Cayo Guillermo” in chapter 9.

- **Cayo Sabinal:** If it's seclusion and pristine nature you're after, find your way to this small cay on the northeastern coast. It has brilliant beaches protected by stunning coral reefs and almost no facilities to speak of. With its rich flora and fauna, Cayo Sabinal is an ecotourist's dreamland. See “Camagüey” in chapter 9.

- **Guardalavaca:** Probably Cuba's prettiest resort area, Guardalavaca is a hot spot, but not overheated like Varadero. The area, a prime archaeological zone of pre-Columbian Cuba, is one of lush tropical vegetation, brilliant white sands, and clear turquoise waters. Long stretches of coastline are interrupted by charming little cove beaches, and some of Cuba's finest resort hotels are here. See “Guardalavaca” in chapter 10.

6 THE BEST RESORT HOTELS

- **Paradisus Varadero,** Varadero (☎ 45/66-8700): This is the Sol Meliá's fanciest resort hotel in Varadero, with expansive grounds, a huge free-form pool, and all the activities and amenities you could hope for. There's a variety of dining options and they create the feel of an intimate, romantic getaway better than any of the other large resort hotels in Varadero. See p. 167.
- **Tryp Península Varadero,** Varadero (☎ 45/66-8800): This is my top choice for a family resort in Varadero and an excellent all-around resort in its own right. The setting, facilities, and service are all tops, and the rooms are quite spacious and well equipped. The children's pools and play area are the best in Cuba. See p. 169.
- **Meliá Sol Cayo Santa María,** Cayo Santa María (☎ 42/35-0200): This resort is yet another of the Sol Meliá's excellent all-inclusive properties. This one is located on a very beautiful and very isolated patch of beach in la Cayería del Norte. The facilities are certainly top-notch, and the setting is just spectacular. See p. 184.
- **Brisas Trinidad del Mar,** Península Ancón, Trinidad (☎ 41/99-6500): This resort hotel on Playa Ancón has excellent sea and mountain views and is

only minutes from the most beautiful colonial city in Cuba. The well-conceived design echoes the handsome architecture of Trinidad. See p. 202.

- **Meliá Cayo Coco,** Cayo Coco (☎ 33/30-1180): Of the several fine hotels on Cayo Coco, Sol Meliá's top property on the cays is the most sophisticated and stylish, with cool bungalows overlooking a natural lagoon, elegant decor throughout, good restaurants, a beautiful pool area, and a great stretch of beach on a natural cove. See p. 218.
- **Sol Cayo Guillermo,** Cayo Guillermo (☎ 33/30-1760): Relaxed and unpretentious, this lively resort hotel is less staid and prepackaged than many of the big hotels on the cays. The cheery bungalow-style rooms are perfect for a younger crowd. See p. 221.
- **Paradisus Río de Oro,** Playa Esmeralda (☎ 24/43-0090): Perhaps Cuba's most sybaritic all-inclusive resort hotel, this sprawling Sol Meliá property hugs a rocky cliff and is distinguished by some of the most luxuriously designed grounds you'll find anywhere. Rooms are large, refined, and private. Sunbathers will have a hard time deciding between the terrific main beach, the nearly private small cove beaches, and

the extraordinary pool area—not to mention the massage hut that hangs out from the cliff over the sea. See p. 239.

- **Hotel Cayo Levisa**, Cayo Levisa (☎ 48/75-6506): Land one of the oceanfront bungalows here and you may never want to leave this idyllic little island resort. For those on a budget, these standard beachfront bungalows are a passport to paradise. See p. 146.

- **Villa Las Brujas**, Cayo Santa Maria (☎ 42/35-0199): Perched on a rocky outcrop over the turquoise Caribbean, the very reasonably priced, stylish, comfortable, individual and duplex villas here are connected by a raised, rugged wooden walkway through scrub and mangrove and face a long stretch of beautiful white-sand beach. Staff members are very friendly here, too. See p. 186.

7 THE BEST HOTELS

- **Hotel Florida**, Havana (☎ 7/862-4127): This is probably my favorite of the Habaguanex properties in Old Havana. The building features a wonderful open-air central courtyard, checkerboard marble floors, and oodles of colonial-era charm. The whole operation is elegant and refined, and located right on the pulse of things on busy Calle Obispo. See p. 88.
- **Hotel Saratoga**, Havana (☎ 7/868-1000): Set right on the Paseo del Prado, with stunning views of El Capitolio from many of its rooms, this new hotel has the most comfortable and luxurious rooms of any hotel in or near Habana Vieja. Add to that a wonderful rooftop pool and bar, and this hotel is clearly one of the top choices in the city. See p. 89.
- **NH Parque Central**, Havana (☎ 7/860-2667): This modern, upscale hotel dominates the northern end of Havana's small Central Park. It boasts luxury spacious rooms and marble bathrooms and a lovely rooftop pool. Its ultramodern annex, the NH Parque Central Torre hotel, is due to open by the end of 2008. See p. 89.
- **Hotel Los Jazmines**, Viñales (☎ 48/79-6205): With a spectacular setting on a hillside overlooking the Viñales Valley, this is hands down the best option in town. If you land one of the third-floor rooms with a balcony, you'll

forgive the somewhat smallish rooms and minimal amenities. Los Jazmines makes a great base for exploring this region. See p. 139.

- **Grand Hotel Iberostar Trinidad**, Trinidad (☎ 41/99-6073): This new hotel has seriously upped the bar in terms of comfort and luxury in Trinidad. Set fronting a quiet little park in the heart of downtown, this is clearly the top high-end choice in Trinidad. See p. 200.
- **Hotel La Unión**, Cienfuegos (☎ 43/55-1020): Housed in a marvelously restored colonial mansion right in the heart of downtown Cienfuegos, this is one of the nicest boutique hotels in the country. With a couple of interior courtyards, neoclassical furnishings, and architectural touches, La Unión captures the elegance and charm of Cuba's bygone era. It's worth the small splurge for one of the spacious junior suites. See p. 191.
- **Hostal del Rijo**, Sancti Spíritus (☎ 41/32-8588): The concept of small boutique hotels with historic character is catching on in Cuba, and this boutique hotel in unassuming Sancti Spíritus is among the best of its kind in the country. In a beautifully restored colonial mansion, it has massive rooms with restrained decor, and it just might rank as the best hotel bargain in Cuba. See p. 211.

- **Gran Hotel**, Camagüey (© 32/29-2093): In the heart of Camagüey's colonial quarter, this 1930s hotel has real old-world character, a selection of atmospheric bars, and a small terrace pool. The Gran Hotel offers tons of style at a bargain price—especially if you get one of the spacious corner rooms. See p. 229.
- **Hotel El Castillo**, Baracoa (© 21/64-5194): This hotel has history, charm, and a location to die for. Inside the walls of one of the town's oldest fortresses, up on a hill where the pool comes with splendid panoramic views of Baracoa and the bay, this is the kind of place you won't want to leave. Relaxed and unpretentious, it suits Baracoa perfectly. See p. 259.
- **Hotel Casa Granda**, Santiago de Cuba (© 22/65-3021): It's not Santiago's biggest or most expensive hotel, but the Casa Granda, in an elegant landmark building on Parque Céspedes in the heart of the city, is the place to stay if you want to be in the heady mix that is the Oriente region's capital. Renovation has dramatically improved the rooms, and the terrific terrace bars are among the best people-watching places in the city. See p. 275.
- **Hostal Basilio**, Santiago de Cuba (© 22/65-1702): This little hotel is in a beautifully restored old home in the heart of downtown Santiago de Cuba and now operates under the boutique Hoteles E brand. The good-size rooms have very high ceilings with ornate crown molding. Throughout the hotel, you'll find attractive tile work on the floors, wainscoting, and smart bathrooms. See p. 275.

8 THE BEST CASAS PARTICULARES

- **Casa de Evora Rodríguez**, Havana (© 7/861-7932): This top-floor “pent-house” belonging to the welcoming Evora has stunning panoramic views and the top-floor flat is full of potted plants. See p. 93.
- **Casa Sandra**, Havana (© 7/832-402): On the 13th floor of a 1950s block of flats, this enormous flat has spectacular views of Vedado and the Malecón. The rooms are spacious and attractively decorated and guests share a nice living room. Run by Lilly and her family, this is a gorgeous place to stay. See p. 97.
- **Casa Amistad**, Cienfuegos (© 432/51-6143): Run by the superfriendly and knowledgeable Armando and Leonor, this colonial house with a wonderful front living room has two rooms and some hearty home-cooked food; the house is a stone's throw from Parque José Martí. See p. 192.
- **Hostal Casa Muñoz**, Trinidad (© 41/99-3673): Historic Trinidad is well stocked with beautiful colonial houses and rental rooms, but this one is distinguished by its impressive living room and ever-expanding facilities; its informative host is a photographer who knows Trinidad like the back of his hand. See p. 201.
- **Casa Font**, Trinidad (© 41/99-3683): A gorgeous late-18th-century colonial house in the heart of the old center, this family home has a great collection of antiques and a light, airy feel. For a *casa particular*, this is about as grand as it gets: chandeliers of Baccarat crystal, thick wood doors, colonial- and republican-era oil paintings, and mediopunto (stained-glass, fan-shaped) windows above the doors. See p. 201.
- **Hostal Florida Center**, Santa Clara (© 42/20-8161): This is a gorgeous

1876 colonial house filled with interesting historic furniture and blessed with a flourishing garden and welcoming host, Angel. The food served here is some of the best in Cuba. See p. 181.

- **Casa La Colina**, Baracoa (☎ 21/64-2729): One of the things that makes Baracoa so extraordinary is its spectacular natural setting, and this handsome house has a fantastic terrace with panoramic views of the entire town and the bay leading out to the sea. The rooms are large and comfortable, and your host is a charm. See p. 260.
- **Casa Daniel Salomón Paján**, Baracoa (☎ 21/64-2122): This is one of the friendliest *casas* in Cuba. Daniel works at the museum and knows a lot about Baracoa's history. He has one comfortable room with a large bathroom and a central covered patio. See p. 260
- **Casa Maruchi**, Santiago de Cuba (☎ 22/62-0767): A lovely colonial

house with a wonderful patio stuffed with orchids and other plants is run by the friendly Maruchi. Two chic, comfortable rooms with exposed brickwork, Spanish colonial furniture, lace bedspreads, and candlesticks are off the patio. See p. 276.

- **Casa Hugo & Adela**, Santiago de Cuba (☎ 22/62-6359): Most of Santiago's best *casas* are in the leafy outer neighborhoods, but if you want to be in the thick of Santiago, with a comfortable room and a huge private rooftop terrace overlooking the old city and harbor, grab this room. See p. 276.
- **Casa Asensio**, Santiago de Cuba (☎ 22/62-4600): Facility-wise, this house may be unrivaled in Cuba. It's a very large apartment with its own kitchen and a massive, private rooftop terrace. It's perfect for anyone planning to stay awhile to explore Santiago de Cuba and the surrounding area in depth. See p. 277.

9 THE BEST RESTAURANTS & PALADARES

- **Café del Oriente**, Havana (☎ 7/860-6686): Arguably the most elegant restaurant and cafe in Habana Vieja, this place serves well-prepared and creative international fare in a beautiful room just off the Plaza San Francisco. When the weather is nice, you can even sit at an outdoor table right on the plaza. See p. 102.
- **El Templete**, Havana (☎ 7/866-8807): This is truly fine dining portside in Old Havana, with outside seating with road-side and harbor views and sophisticated interior dining. See p. 110.
- **La Guarida**, Havana (☎ 7/862-9047): Atmosphere, fame, good food, and good times all combine in equal measure at perhaps the most famous *paladar* in Cuba. To walk up the rickety steps to this third-floor private restaurant is an experience in itself. See p. 105.
- **Roof Garden Restaurant**, Havana (☎ 7/860-8560): The creative French-inspired menu and stunning setting make this probably the best high-end dining option in Havana. Try for a window table on the elevated area ringing the restaurant. See p. 103.
- **La Cocina de Lilliam**, Havana (☎ 7/209-6514): Lilliam Domínguez has raised the bar for *paladares* around Havana. Her delicious *criolla* cooking always makes the most of whatever ingredients are locally available, and her softly lit garden setting is stunning. See p. 107.
- **La Fonda de Mercedes**, Las Terrazas (☎ 8/577-8647): Working out of her apartment's simple kitchen, Doña Mercedes Dache serves up wonderfully prepared *criolla* cuisine. Meals are served on large tables in an open-air terrace

overlooking a mountain lake. If you come to Las Terrazas, don't leave without eating here. See p. 143.

- **Paladar Estela**, Trinidad (☎ 41/99-4329): A colonial house with a pretty garden patio dining area, this private home restaurant in the heart of the historic quarter of Trinidad serves epic proportions of well-prepared Cuban specialties. The friendly owners also rent a room. See p. 203.
- **La Campana de Toledo**, Camagüey (☎ 32/28-6812): Located on one of the most authentic and elegant colonial squares in Cuba, this handsome, rustic restaurant with a pretty patio is a great spot for a midday break from the heat or a relaxed dinner. Dishes are more imaginative than the basic Cuban fare at most state-run establishments. See p. 231.
- **Hostal Florida Center**, Santa Clara (☎ 42/20-8161): This is a popular *casa particular* serving dinners with enormous platters of delicious seafood and chicken, plus salads and fruit dishes. The garden is candelit at night. See p. 182.
- **La Colonial**, Baracoa (☎ 21/64-5391): The government seems to support the competition of private restaurants only nominally, and this is the last surviving *paladar* in Baracoa. The nicely decorated colonial house easily outclasses the
- state-run options in town, and it has good service and a changing menu with several fresh fish dishes. See p. 261.
- **Restaurant El Morro**, Santiago de Cuba (☎ 22/69-1576): Perched along the cliff next to the El Morro fortress, with spectacular views of the Caribbean, this popular open-air restaurant is a good-value lunch spot. There are plenty of fish dishes and a fixed-price midday meal, all served under a canopy of hanging plants that help patrons beat the heat. See p. 280.
- **ZunZún**, Santiago de Cuba (☎ 22/64-1528): One of the few upscale dining experiences in eastern Cuba, this elegant restaurant has several small, private dining rooms scattered throughout a large 1940s house in one of Santiago de Cuba's most pleasant suburbs. Attention to detail and presentation—dining elements seldom given much thought in Cuba—are a welcome surprise. It's best known for its top-quality seafood. See p. 279.
- **Paladar Salón Tropical**, Santiago de Cuba (☎ 22/64-1161): One of the most elegant *paladares* in Cuba, this attractively decorated place offers a smorgasbord of tasty choices. It's just such a shame that the service is glacially slow. See p. 279.

10 THE BEST OF CUBAN MUSIC & NIGHTLIFE

- **Tropicana**, Havana (☎ 7/267-1010): This is the original and still reigning cabaret show in Cuba. The Tropicana has been at it for over 60 years and it shows no signs of slowing down. The sea of lithe dancers, the exuberance of their costumes, and the sheer excess of it is worth the trip. It all occurs under the stars in the shadow of tall overhanging trees. There's a second Tropicana in Matanzas for visitors to Varadero, and another in Santiago. See p. 127.
- **El Gato Tuerto**, Havana (☎ 7/838-2696): The mood is dark and bohemian, although the decor mixes Art Deco and kitsch in equal measure. The nightly show usually features three or four distinct acts, which can range from sultry boleros to up-tempo jazz. A storyteller, poet, or comedian might perform between sets. See p. 128.
- **La Zorra y El Cuervo**, Havana (☎ 7/833-2402): This is Havana's best jazz club, and that's saying a lot. The vibe is

mellow and unpretentious in this compact basement club, but the music and acts are usually culled from the best Cuba has to offer. See p. 128.

- **Callejón de Hammel**, Havana. At noon each Sunday, this is the site of a weekly Afro-Cuban music and dance show and celebration headed up by the renowned folkloric group Clavé y Guaguanco. The vibe is fantastic. See p. 114.
- **Trinidad**: Trinidad's popularity has ensured a steady menu of live-music offerings. Cuban bands play under the stars on the steps of the **Casa de la Música** until more energetic dancing and music get underway inside. The **Palenque de los Congos Reales** regularly hosts an outstanding folkloric Afro-Cuban music and dance performance. Small, relaxed spots like the patio bars **La Canchánchara** and **Ruinas de Segarte** feature live *son*. If that's too traditional, then check out **La Cueva**, a funky dance club in a cave. See "Trinidad" in chapter 8.
- **Casas de la Trova**, Camagüey and Santiago de Cuba: Perhaps the country's

two best *Casas de la Trova*, the traditional Cuban live-music spots, are in Camagüey and Santiago de Cuba. Camagüey's casa is agreeably low-key, while Santiago's is legendary, having given birth to dozens of Cuba's most respected musicians and bands. Both are great places to mix with locals, try out some dance moves, and sip a *mojito*. See "Camagüey" in chapter 9 and p. 284 in chapter 11.

- **Casa de las Tradiciones**, Santiago: This neighborhood music venue oozes charm and authenticity. It's not touristy and makes for a great night out regardless of the changing musical genre. See p. 283.
- **Calle Antonio Maceo**, Baracoa: Tiny Baracoa rocks at night with its own little version of Bourbon Street. People spill out of a half-dozen cafes, bars, and live-music venues, shifting gears from traditional *trova* to *son* and dance music to full-throttle dance club. Amiable emcees entertain audiences with romantic poetry and humor. See "Baracoa" in chapter 10.

11 THE BEST OF CUBA ONLINE

- **<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba>**: Hosted by the University of Texas Latin American Studies Department, this site houses a vast collection of information about Cuba. This is hands down the best one-stop shop for Web browsing.
- **www.cubanacan.cu**: Cubanacán is probably the largest state-run tourism company, with hotels, transportation, and receptive tourism arms. They also have the best-developed website of the handful of state-run agencies, though that's not necessarily saying much.
- **www.cubasi.cu**: CubaSí is the best of the state-sponsored, all-purpose information sites on Cuba. It has an English-language mirror of the principal site, as well as a good search engine and easy

links to an online version of the Cuban telephone book.

- **www.casaparticular.info**: We find this the best of the clearinghouse sites for *casas particulares*. It has lots of links to *casas* in the main tourist destinations around Cuba.
- **www.cubamania.com**: This site is a lively, sometimes conflictive and controversial, forum site for all things Cuban, but there's plenty of good information to be had here.
- **<http://havanajournal.com>**: This site run out of Cape Cod collates an interesting and diverse amount of news, tourism, and culture stories. The forums are also lively and useful; it's an excellent resource.