



Bridges to paradise

A road across the sea brings travellers to a world of splendid isolation off Cuba's coast

January 12, 2008

JOHN MOORE
TRAVEL WRITER

CAYO santa maria, CUBA—The road leads straight into the sea, like a rocky ribbon stretching to the horizon and bisecting the aquamarine waters.

As you glide along the causeway, you're greeted at irregular intervals by signs marking a host of bridges — *puente 1, puente 2 . . .* more than 40 of them.

It's a 50-kilometre, one-hour passage, but there's a reward at the end; it's the gateway to a cluster of islands that offer a tantalizing mix of sparkling seas, immaculate beaches and splendid isolation.

"This area is part of what's known as the *Jardines del Rey* ... the Gardens of the King," explains guide Victor Marti as our bus coasts along the road.

"They have been called that since Spain claimed possession of this region in the 16th century."

Christopher Columbus cruised these waters on his first voyage to the Caribbean.

The islands at the western end of the archipelago — Cayo Las Brujas, Cayo Ensenachos and Cayo Santa Maria — have long been known for their beauty, Marti continues, but because of their remote location off Cuba's northern coast, they remained virtually untouched, except by pirates and fishermen.

But that's changing — fast. Cayo Santa Maria, the largest of the islands, already has three resorts and another is under construction.

"Some estimates suggest that within six years, Cayo Santa Maria will be the second-largest tourist preserve in the



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROYAL HIDEAWAY ENSENACHOS

The Jardines del Rey archipelago off Cuba's northern coast boast stunning natural beauty and some of the Caribbean's finest beaches.

JUST THE FACTS

THE JARDINES DEL REY archipelago is a coral reef system that extends for about 200 kilometres off the northern coast of the province of Villa Clara, about about 400 kilometres east of Havana and about 290 kilometres east of Varadero.

AIR CANADA VACATIONS recently launched all-inclusive packages to Cayo Santa Maria and Cayo Ensenachos. Packages to the Occidental Royal Hideaway Ensenachos (on Cayo Ensenachos), the Melia Las Dunas and

Caribbean, surpassed only by Varadero (also in Cuba)," Marti says.

So how can an area of unspoiled splendour remain unspoiled under the potential tourist onslaught?

Perhaps the causeway itself, which opened the area to the all-inclusive resorts when it was completed in 1999, offers some hope.

"It was entirely constructed from natural materials, only rock and earth . . . no concrete or other foundations," says Marti.

The many bridges were included to ensure an uninterrupted flow of water from the open ocean to minimize damage to the archipelago's ecosystem, he says, and the project has received international recognition, including a 2001 award for having high economic effect with the least environmental impact.

It's apparent that protecting the fragile environment is a priority.

The vegetation grows denser as we approach Cayo Las Brujas, the first island along the causeway, where there's a small airfield for domestic flights, a resort and a marina, the base for catamaran excursions which take guests snorkelling to the offshore reefs or beachcombing on one of the many nearby deserted islets.

Many people feel Cayo Las Brujas is the most beautiful island, says Marti, although it has seen sorrow.

"There's an old story that a local fishermen really loved a young girl, but the girl's parents disagreed with the match and confined her to this island," Marti says.

The fisherman tried to rescue her, but could only reach a nearby island where, Marti says, he settled down to die "heart-broken and intoxicated."

Cayo Santa Maria forms part of a U.N. Biosphere Reserve, which means that it upholds standards of conservation and sustainable development. Mangroves, their tangle of roots and branches clinging thickly to the causeway, provide shelter for hundreds of species of plant life, many species of birds – pelicans, flamingos and turkey vultures ("our sanitation workers," Marti calls them) – as well as lizards, rodents, snakes and a wealth of marine life.

"Any time you do any kind of construction in a natural area, it will have *some* effect," says Maite Alonso Sosa of the Melia Las Dunas resort, one of three on the island. "But everything here has to follow strict guidelines to ensure that the ecosystem is protected. For example, all our buildings and facilities are set well back from the beach . . . there is no construction on the beach at all."

And what a beach it is . . . an enticing 11-kilometre stretch of icing-sugar sand, reached via a long boardwalk which snakes through the jungle of mangrove that engulfs the resort.

The feeling that you've landed in your own private paradise is even more apparent on nearby Cayo Ensenachos, home to the Occidental Royal Hideaway Ensenachos, the only five-star deluxe property in Cuba.

The relatively new resort (opened just over a year ago) sprawls across the entire island,

the Sol Cayo Santa Maria resorts (on Cayo Santa Maria) include roundtrip airfare, accommodation, and transfers. Seven-night packages start at \$1,169. See www.aircanadavacations.com for details.

EXCURSIONS from the resorts include reef snorkelling, catamaran cruises, as well as day trips to Havana and sites in Villa Clara province.

THE CAUSEWAY (official name: the Caibarién-Cayo Santa María Causeway) received the 2001 International Alcantara Bridge Award, given to a project that combines high economic effect with minimal environmental impact.

yet its refined design peacefully co-exists with the landscape.

Golf carts quietly whisk guests along pathways to the spa, the recreational facilities – including a 480-seat theatre – or any of the five restaurants or five bars.

The resort's 506 rooms are dispersed throughout three separate enclaves.

The Royal Spa and the Royal Hideaway are in the main resort, while sheltered at the end of a long peninsula are the ultra-luxurious Royal Suites, offering the pinnacle of privacy and service, including personal butlers ready to attend to every wish.

Royal Suites guests also have the exclusive use of a 2 1/2-kilometre beach, the Playa Ensenachos (there's another beach for guests in the other parts of the resort), which surpasses all others for its fine white sand and calm waters, says general manager Agnes Youkhanna Yousif.

"This is the most beautiful beach in the whole Caribbean," she boasts. "It is absolutely gorgeous and is so secluded. That's makes it possible for us to give our guests the ultimate relaxing and luxurious experience."

An experience that includes sun, sand, service and, hopefully, sustainability.

jwmoore@thestar.ca