



Secret paradise: Cayo Santa Maria and island of Ensenachos, cherished as ideal fishing spots and hideaways, offer the ultimate in remote holiday

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Paradise lost? Here's where to find it -- a group of tiny islands that sparkle in turquoise waters, just north of the mainland of Cuba.

Poised to become the next "must-go" destination of the Caribbean, Cayo Santa Maria and the nearby island of Ensenachos have long been regarded a secret paradise in Cuba.

It's believed explorer Christopher Columbus once trod across the islands' shores during his chance encounter with Cuba.

Locals have long cherished the islands for providing ideal fishing spots and perfect hideaways. Even Cuban leader Fidel Castro used to regularly swim and relax here at prettier-than-a-postcard beaches.

"This area is really special -- it's a remote, natural part of Cuba with virgin and spectacular beaches, where [people] can find seclusion and tranquility, complete with exceptional resorts," says Carlos Zambrano, director of the Cuba Tourist Board.

Those beaches -- long stretches of flour-soft white sand bordering crystal-clear warm water -- prompted Castro's government to identify the area in the 1970s as a potential hot spot for tourism, which industry officials promise will continue to operate as usual, despite recent questions about Castro's health.

One major obstacle existed in developing Santa Maria and Ensenachos for tourists -- a wide expanse of water. The solution was to begin constructing a 48-kilometre causeway from the mainland to the islands in 1989, which took 10 years to complete.

Most impressive, however, is the environmental care Cuba exercised during construction. The base of the causeway is built of seven million cubic metres of natural materials -- dirt, gravel and rock.

There are almost 50 bridges on this stretch of road, which has created channels that allow fish to continue moving through the area with the water's natural currents. The causeway became such an environmentally friendly feat, it was given an international engineering award from Spain.

And it became the gateway to the islands of Santa Maria and Ensenachos,

which represent two different experiences for visitors.

The much smaller Ensenachos is the type of enticing Eden often featured in commercials, where gentle waves lap the shore and the water dances in unbelievable shades of green and blue.

It definitely rates as one of the prettiest beaches I've ever seen. If you visit the beach to take in the sunrise or sunset, there's a good chance you'll have it all to yourself. Even in the middle of the day, there are only a few dozen guests sharing the stretches of sand and surf.

The one-year-old Royal Hideaway all-inclusive resort has taken over the island of Ensenachos, but has done so with great care. Groups of bungalows are discreetly located within acres of tropical trees and meticulous gardens.

The resort has some of the nicest rooms and best food found in Cuba. The weekly lobster night at the buffet is a highlight, as is a stop at the cooking bar in the Japanese restaurant, the salsa lessons by the pool and the Cuban orchestra concerts in the resort's palatial lobby.

Just a few kilometres away from Ensenachos is the livelier 12-square-kilometre island of Santa Maria.

The waves at the beach are bigger, the crowds larger and the activities more numerous. Just visit the all-inclusive Melia Cayo Santa Maria resort to get a great sampling -- archery, tai chi, yoga, salsa classes, water aerobics, Spanish lessons, tennis, a climbing wall, Cuban cooking, countless beach activities, nighttime shows ... It's one long list.

The resort's dining choices are numerous and well above average, too, which is worth noting in a country where options are sometimes limited because of the American trading embargo that prohibits importing many items.

Those choices -- both where to dine and stay -- will increase, however, as the area grows. So far, the only accommodations on the islands are Royal Hideaway Ensenachos with its 500 rooms, and Santa Maria's three hotels with 300, 358 and 944 rooms, respectively. But development plans call for the number of rooms to balloon to 10,000 within a decade. Activities for tourists are also expected to grow.

Even though the islands of Santa Maria and Ensenachos are removed from the mainland, several excursions are available to visitors that showcase parts of the "real" Cuba. One such trip takes you to Santa Clara, the city into which most visitors fly when visiting this area. (Transat Holidays has direct flights to Santa Clara from several Canadian cities.)

A highlight of the city is Revolution Square, home to a museum that pays tribute to Cuban hero Che Guevara. Photos, displays and documents give visitors a better understanding of this complex revolutionary, whose remains are kept in an adjacent mausoleum.

Although it's a 2 1/2-hour drive, another worthwhile excursion is the city of Trinidad, which houses the country's best-preserved colonial architecture. With its 17th-century buildings, cobblestone streets and numerous museums, UNESCO has declared much of Trinidad a World Heritage Site.

"There are so many different things to do here," says Carolle Landry, Transat Holidays' supervisor in the area. "Plus, it's so beautiful."

Exactly what most of us are looking for in paradise.

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FACTBOX: If you go

- To book a Transat Holidays package to Santa Maria or Ensenachos, or for other Cuba options, go to transatholidays.com; call 1-866-322-6649; or talk to your travel agent.

- More info on the Royal Hideaway Ensenachos is at royalhideawayensenachos.com; details on Melia Cayo Santa Maria are at solumeliacuba.com.

- General info on Cuba can be found at gocuba.ca.

SIDEBAR: C is for Cuba

Planning a visit to Cuba? Here are a few travel tips to keep in mind.

Cigars: Smoke one. Cubans make the best cigars in the world, and they cost less than half what you'd pay at home. The finest? The Cohiba, favoured by Castro until he stopped smoking in 1989.

Cuba Libres: Drink them. This cocktail of rum, cola and ice was invented to toast Cuban independence in 1902. The rum is smooth and often cheaper than water.

Che: Real name Ernesto Guevara. He was an Argentine revolutionary who went to Cuba, helped Castro spread the revolution, and became a Cuban hero.

Cars: Ride in them. Because the U.S. imposed a trade embargo on Cuba in 1959, no new American cars have been imported since then. Many of these carefully tended cars are now taxis.

Capone: Learn colourful history. Mobster Al Capone built a mansion (now a restaurant) in Varadero, a must-see resort destination that boasts plenty of sunshine and stories.

Canadians: We're loved. Cubans know our former leader, Pierre Trudeau, as a great friend to Castro. Plus, Canada continued to do business with Cuba even when the Americans stopped.

Castro: Ask about him. Many Cubans have seen or met this colourful Communist -- and they often have an interesting tale to tell.

Cash: Bring it. Debit machines are non-existent, credit card connections are unreliable and charge cards or traveller's cheques from U.S. institutions (such as American Express) aren't accepted. Canadian dollars are best; they can be exchanged for Cuban convertible pesos.

Cellphone: Don't bring it. For "security reasons," Cuba prohibits visitors from bringing cellphones, satellite phones, BlackBerries, walkie-talkies, DVD players

and PlayStations into the country. Cuban customs can confiscate them at the airport, if discovered.

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