



## Where sun, soft sand and the history of Cuba come together

Santa Clara a jump-off spot to twin-isle paradise

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The Province

Ernesto "Che" Guevara de la Serna loved Cuba so much, he invaded it.

Today there is another invasion, this one by Canadian tourists armed with digital cameras and a strong loonie.

Of the two million visitors to Cuba last year, more than 600,000 were Canadians. And, with the U.S. trade embargo, they practically have the island to themselves.



Traditionally, the snowbirds landed at Varadero, the "Cuban Riviera." But, now, they have a tempting, new resort area: Cayo Ensenachos and Cayo Santa Maria.

CREDIT:

Cayo Santa Maria and Cayo Ensenachos - hand-picked by Fidel Castro as Cuba's newest resort area - boast long stretches of flour-soft, white sand.

Development of these two gorgeous little islands was made possible by the building of a 48-km causeway connecting the cayos to the mainland and the historic city of Santa Clara.

The causeway, which took 10 years to build, boasts more than 40 little bridges and a taller span that allows the fish to pass through the area with the water's natural currents. This environmentally friendly project was given an international engineering award.

On my one-week tropical getaway with Transat Holidays -- a 6 1/2-hour direct flight, Vancouver to Santa Clara in north central Cuba -- I stayed at two all-inclusive resorts (Royal Hideaway Ensenachos and Meliá Santa Maria) on two different islands, and sampled two others (Meliá Sol and Las Dunas). A third, a Barcelo property, is slated for completion by December.

Tourism development in the area was inspired by Fidel Castro himself, who, I'm told, came to swim and sun on the beaches that are reputed to be the best in the country.

As soon as you enter one of these all-inclusives, you quickly settle into the pampered pace of resort life. The latin beat emanating from strategically placed hidden speakers puts you in a relaxed state of mind. Exotic drinks ease inhibitions and you easily strike up conversations with your fellow traveller who, most likely than not, will be from Quebec.

The Royal Hideaway at Ensenachos compared favourably with any of the five-stars I've had the privilege to stay at, such as the Allegro Papagayo in

Costa Rica, the InterContinental in Ixtapa and the Riu Palace in Los Cabos (the latter two in Mexico). But the cluster of luxury villas at Ensenachos -- at 27 hectares, the only concept resort of its kind in Cuba -- blew me away. I had my own private butler at my call to pick me up in her golf cart or to take me to one of two beaches, one of several specialty restaurants or to the main hub on this far-flung tropical retreat for an evening of top-quality entertainment.

My villa, with its marble and earth-tone tiles, boasted two TVs, DVD player, a dining/living area, spacious bedroom, two bathrooms, a kitchenette and a private Jacuzzi hot tub on the oceanside.

Unlike your average Cuban, I got to choose from a number of TV channels, including CNN, Britain's Sky TV and even one in Russian. My radio brought in stations from Miami, that capitalist hotbed of Cuban exiles. How does all-day reggae sound?

Life's good here at Megano beach. The sand is as soft as talcum powder, the skies blue, a soft breeze fans us, and the warm waters of the south Atlantic draw us like a magnet.

Meliá Santa Maria and the two sister resorts of Meliá Sol and Las Dunas are much more intimate than Ensenachos and compact enough that you can walk around with ease. The beaches, offering sporting activities such as snorkelling, Hobie Cat catamaran sailing, sea kayaking and beach volleyball, are within easy reach by elevated boardwalks through the thick coastal vegetation.

To get a feel of the real Cuba, however, sign up for the many excursions. The most popular is the tour of nearby historic Santa Clara.

On our trip, we visited a cigar factory (forget automation, everything is done by hand). A shrine to the revolution reminds workers -- and visitors -- that this is still a communist country. A portrait of Guevara is front and centre. He personally toured the factory as minister of industry.

To say Che is a cult figure in Cuba, and especially in Santa Clara, is an understatement. Here he is a god.

A gigantic bronze statue of him in military fatigues, a carbine in hand, dominates the revolutionary square. It is here that we were quietly ushered into his mausoleum that contains his, as well as his comrades' earthly remains after the debacle in Bolivia where, on another of his revolutionary escapades, he was captured in battle and, later, executed -- some say by orders of the CIA.

Next door to the mausoleum is a museum focusing on all things Che -- a history buff's dream destination in itself.

A tour of Santa Clara is a real eye-opener. It's like stepping back to the 1940s and '50s. Our modern, air-conditioned, Chinese-built bus wove delicately around '52 Pontiacs, '55 Chevies and Soviet-era automobiles such as Ladas and Moskvitches. But the most fun part was trying to avoid the horse-drawn buggies, pedicabs, scooters, motorbikes and bicycles of all shapes and sizes.

As part of our Santa Clara tour, we also stopped at Remedios and boarded a steam train that once hauled cane to the sugar factories that satisfied the sweet-tooth cravings of the Soviet Union until it collapsed and brought down the Cuban economy with it.

If you have ever dreamed of driving in the Dakar car rally, our next excursion is for you.

The self-drive Jeep safari took us into a UNESCO-designated biosphere reserve area. Getting there via country roads was like taking an Indiana Jones ride at Disneyland: Potholes that would swallow a Lada, bull-headed oxen that wouldn't get out of the way, wide-eyed kids darting into traffic to offer us flowers. You get the picture.

Our first pit-stop was for lunch at a hacienda overlooking a verdant valley punctuated by royal palms. The estate was once owned by an American entrepreneur who ran a sugar mill. After the industry was nationalized, he fled to the U.S., and his ranch-style house became a holiday getaway for workers and tourists.

The best part of the biosphere/Jeep safari experience was a hike into the hills, where we learned of health properties of various plants and were fortunate to have the national bird of Cuba (the Toco-ro-ro) alight on a branch beside us. The combination of colours in its plumage -- red, white and blue (the same as in the Cuban flag), is a rarity in nature, I was told.

Our hike culminated in a visit to a cave, which is the source of a river that creates pools allowing for a cooling dip after a hot hike up the mountain.

Guevara was right at home in these hills, using them as hideaways in his deadly cat-and-mouse game with the troops of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista.

If Che were alive today, he would certainly approve of the friendly takeover by Canadians of Cuba's beaches. There's no beating around the bush, they come with no political baggage, they're orderly, polite, and they contribute heavily to the Cuban economy.

And, if they get off their sun-burned butts, they will learn about a little-known Canadian contribution to the success of the Cuban revolution.

In a jumble of boxcars at a memorial to the derailment of an armoured train at Santa Clara, is the ultimate weapon in Che's victory over Batista.

It's a Canada Dry bottle with a wick in it, the kind that Che and his comrades-in-arms used to firebomb the train and turn the tide of the revolution. Touche!

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## **IF YOU GO**

- General tourist information at [www.gocuba.ca](http://www.gocuba.ca)
- Getting there: A package deal with direct charter flight from Vancouver to Santa Clara, Cuba, is offered by Transat Vacations ([www.transatholidays.com](http://www.transatholidays.com))

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