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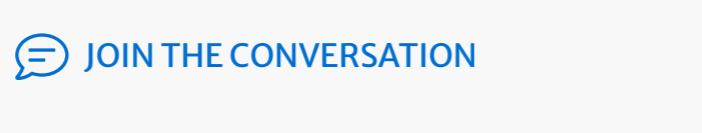
TRAVEL

History looms large at Che Guevara mausoleum and museum

Visit other Santa Clara landmarks, including the Monumento a la Toma del Tren Blindado, an outdoor museum of train cars marking a famous battle, and Loma del Caprio, a hilltop lookout that Guevara frequented.

By Mike Fisher Special to the Star

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A giant bronze statue of revolutionary Che Guevara rises above the Museo Historico de la Revolucion and the Mausoleo del Che Guevara in Santa Clara, Cuba. While there are often lineups to tour the mausoleum and museum, you can usually do so in less than 15 minutes. Cuba Tourist Board



SANTA CLARA, CUBA—When Che Guevara liberated Santa Clara from the regime of Cuban president Fulgencio Batista in 1958, it marked the end of a political era — and the beginning of lineups at what has become the city's star tourist attraction.

It's almost impossible to tour Cuba without seeing Guevara's face on billboards and T-shirts. As this year marks the 50th anniversary of his death, he lives on conspicuously in the city that's home to several looming historical landmarks celebrating the revolutionary and pop icon.

The Museo Historico de la Revolucion and the Mausoleo del Che Guevara (the museum and mausoleum) are must-sees during a visit to Santa Clara, located in Cuba's geographical centre.

ARTICLE CONTINUES BELOW

Guevara led a handful of young fighters to victory over Batista troops travelling by rail. In the Battle of Santa Clara, against overwhelming odds, they derailed the train — and consequently, the dictatorship. Batista fled Cuba days later, Fidel Castro took over and Guevara became a government minister and a potent figurehead.

Guevara was shot dead in 1967 while trying to spark a revolution in Bolivia. His remains, along with those of other guerillas found in the same unmarked grave as his body in 1995, were moved to Cuba in 1997 and are entombed in the mausoleum. Cameras or recording devices aren't allowed inside the sombre and respectfully lit space.



A 10-minute or so moderate hike up hundreds of stone steps on a hillside that overlooks the city of Santa Clara brings you to Loma del Caprio. Che Guevara used the hilltop as a vantage point before his victorious 1958 Battle of Santa Clara. (Mike Fisher)

Fisher, Mike

The museum celebrates his life, from his boyhood as "Ernesto" in Argentina to his vibrant days as "Che" the guerilla fighter.

Having been shushed by smartly dressed attendants in the mausoleum when raising our voices to speak, we were swiftly trained to discuss artifacts in low whispers, which seemed to echo the haunting vibe.

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Guevara's brown saddle, which looked achingly small, his white physician's coat, his black beret with the golden star and his incomplete chess set are among the wide and varied collection of items that form a picture of his life.

Even so, the museum has the haphazardness of a living, breathing man. It speaks in terse snippets of Spanish, and occasionally English, in the text alongside photographs and artifacts that offer little or no explanations.

As I bend over the glass enclosure that housed a carving of Guevara's head on a peach pit the size of a marble, I wondered, who did this, where, why and how — lovingly, I supposed. "Hey, Che, can you move your head a bit to the left, I'm doing another peach pit portrait." There was a vintage Zippy Zither lying on its side, a stringed musical instrument that, who knows, guerillas carried with them in the jungles for lulling in between harsh bouts of warfare.



Britney Hope visits Monumento a la Toma del Tren Blindado, an open-air museum in Santa Clara that features a highlight of the 1958 Battle of Santa Clara led by Che Guevara. The boxcars and a bulldozer used to upend the railway line are on display. (Mike Fisher)

Fisher, Mike

The Guevara that emerges is oddly more fractured and human than the famous image (*Guerrillero Heroico*) that Cuban photographer Alberto Korda snapped in 1960, before Irish graphic artist Jim Fitzpatrick rendered it into what has been replicated worldwide as a symbol of non-conformity and rebellion.

These days, most of us view Guevara through the lens of pop culture, a term that has itself become musty as time relentlessly ticks on.

When leaving the museum, you tumble into sunlight that bathes the grounds and the monument of Guevara rising into the sky, which is emblazoned with the slogan, "hasta la victoria siempre" (ever onward to victory).

As tourists take photos of their friends, family and selves outside, posing beneath the giant Guevara statue and sharing the shots on social media, they are perpetuating the seemingly endless consideration of one of history's most controversial figures — a victory, of sorts, that Guevara could never have seen coming.



Amanda Franchini of Vancouver stands outside the Che Guevara mausoleum and museum in Santa Clara. The grounds include the seven-metre-high statue of Guevara along with sculptures of different times in his life. (Mike Fisher)

Fisher, Mike

Mike Fisher was hosted by Memories Resorts & Spa, which didn't review or approve this story.

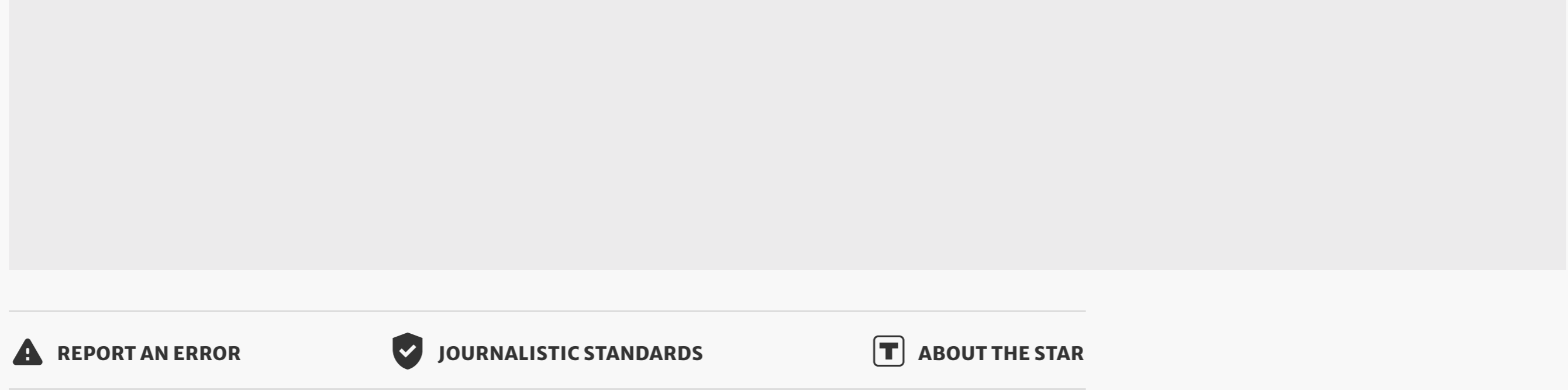
When you go

Get there: I flew [Air Transat](#) ([airtransat.com](#)) direct from Toronto to Abel Santamaria Airport in Santa Clara, the capital city of the Villa Clara Province in Cuba. Air Canada, Sunwing and WestJet also fly to various spots in Cuba.

Explore Santa Clara: I rented a "busy bike" at Parque Vidal, the main plaza in the city's centre, to go explore historic sites in Santa Clara. A "busy bike" is a bicycle with one seat for the cyclist and two more seats for customers at the back. A rental costs about \$15 (Canadian) (with tip) for 45 minutes, a bargain that gave me easy access to off-the-beaten-track side streets.

Stay: I stayed at [Sanctuary at Grand Memories Santa Maria](#) ([memoriesresorts.com](#)), an adults-only property that is part of Memories Resorts & Spa, on the small island of Cayo Santa Maria.

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