

## **Trinidad and the Valley de los Ingenios**

Valley de los Ingenios, Valle de los Ingenios or Valley of the Sugar Mills is a series of three interconnected valleys about 12 kilometres (7 miles) outside of Trinidad, Cuba. The three valleys, San Luis, Santa Rosa and Meyer were a centre for sugar production from the late 18th century until the late 19th century. At the peak of the industry in Cuba there were over fifty sugar mills in operation in the three valleys with over 30,000 slaves working in the mills and the sugar cane plantations which surrounded them. The entire area covers 270 sq km (104 sq mi) and includes the sites of over 70 former sugar mills.

Sugar production was an important industry for Cuba from the earliest settlement by the Spanish, who introduced sugar cane to the island in 1512, and trade in the commodity enriched Trinidad and the surrounding areas. The country became the world's foremost producer of sugar during the late 18th and 19th centuries with production of sugar forming the main industry of the island. The climate and soil were perfect for the cultivation of sugar cane, and the good ports and rail and road network allowed for easy transport and exportation of the refined sugar. To prevent the sugar from spoiling rapid transport was necessary and to this end a special railway line was laid down through the valley in the late 1880s, connecting the Valle de los Ingenios with Trinidad and the port at Casilda, 6 km (4 mi) from Trinidad, on the coast. The valleys are provided with water by several rivers, among them Rio Agabama, Rio Caracusey, Rio de Ay, and Rio Tayaba.

Due to the virtual extinction of the native Cubans through contact with diseases brought by the European settlers and attrition through their poor treatment as slaves, it was necessary for the Spanish plantation owners to import slaves from Africa to work in the sugar cane fields and in the mills. The abolition of slavery by the Spanish in 1820 made the practice of importing slaves more difficult, but it was not until the Wars of Independence in the 19th century that the dominance of the area was brought to an end and many of the sugar mills were abandoned or run down.

In 1988, Valle de los Ingenios, together with neighbouring Trinidad, was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Most of the sugar mills are now in ruins but some sites have buildings which remain intact including Guachinango where the plantation house remains and the estate at Manaca Ignaza at which the owner's house, a tower and some barracones, the original slave quarters, are still standing. Although the barracones are now used as housing and are in poor state of repair, the house (which has been converted into a restaurant) and the tower are well maintained. The 45 metre (147 ft) tower was constructed sometime between 1830 and 1835 by the estate owner, Alejo Iznaga.

Ostensibly constructed as a watch tower to allow the guards a 360 degree view of the sugar cane fields in which the slaves were working, it also served a symbol of Iznaga's power both over his slaves and within the sugar producing industry (at one time the tower was the tallest structure in Cuba). A large bell which was formerly housed in the tower and used to toll the end of the slaves' working day is now at the foot of the tower.

Trinidad is a town in the province of Sancti Spíritus, central Cuba. Together with the nearby Valle de los Ingenios, it has been one of UNESCOs World Heritage sites since 1988.

-- Wikipedia [<http://www.wikipedia.org>]