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**Bellamar Caves: A Gift of Nature**

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Since you go down the first step, you can start imagining, discovering, and dreaming of this site located in the Western side of Cuba. A great hall, as if it belongs to a fairy tale. You can enjoy magic waters and figures that scare or move you. It all depends on the nature whim. All these wait for visitors in Bellamar Caves, in the city of Matanzas.

Few miles away from the beach resort of Varadero, you can find the oldest tourist resort in Cuba. Jesus Castellanos, with almost four decades of work in Bellamar, is cleared to tell us the story...

### **Is this really the oldest tourist resort in Cuba?**

Yes. The caves were discovered by chance in April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1861. In this farm, property of Don Manuel Santos Pargas, it is said that limestone rocks were extracted to be processed and used in the construction of the Sauto Theater. The Spaniard, who had been miner and speleologist, went down into the hole using a rope and then, he found the first hall. One year later, November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1862, it took place the first trip to this place. Therefore, it is the oldest tourist resort in Cuba.

### **From the scientific and environmental approach, what is the importance of**

**this place, which was —by the way— awarded National Heritage Site?**

“This is a cavern, not a cave. A cave is an underground cavity when it has less than 1,000 meters explored. This one has 3,500 meters. It means it is a cavern, an active cavern, very much alive. It is said it is like a school for speleologists as we can find here everything studied in underground caves. For instance, the Helictite are famous because it is not common to find them and nobody has found a credible explanation as to why they continue growing defying even the laws of gravity.

We also have the popular Fountain of Youth, Love. We also have found fossil remains. We have five levels. The highest is the oldest one.”

**Can you tell us how was the cavern formed?**

This a cavern originated under phreatic conditions. Many have asked if this is a cave of fluvial origin. It was not the river’s flow, but the quiet waters of the phreatic surface. The limestone dissolves easily in water and created the cavities. As soon as this area dries because it gets below the sea level, then it starts a secondary process, which leads to the well-known stalactites and stalagmites. Both processes are active in Bellamar Caves. It is certainly of high interest to specialists as they can find everything here. That is why we ask visitors not to touch rock formations since we have oily hands, dusts, which stop and modify the growing process. As I said to you, it is very much alive.”

**Is there anything interesting, cute, or funny you have experienced here in all of these years?**

One of the cutest things I have ever seen here is couples coming to the Fountain of Love and they hold tight and kiss. Some of them have spent time without doing such a romantic thing. And they do it here. That’s cute!

**What is the origin of such stories?**

Well, it depends on how you want to see them. You can say it is history, or a legend. But it is not. Use your mind, and if you believe everything I tell you, you get closer to the Fountain and you touch it. Then it is happening!

**Translated by Sergio A. Paneque Diaz / CubaSi Translation Staff**

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