



Matanzas Province

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Best Places to Eat

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Best Places to Stay

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Why Go?

With a name translating as ‘massacres,’ Matanzas province conceals an appropriately tumultuous past beneath its salubrious reputation for glam all-inclusive holidays. Once pillaging pirates ravaged the region’s prized north coast; two centuries later, in April 1961, another group of mercenaries grappled ashore in the Bay of Pigs under the dreamy notion that they had arrived to liberate the nation.

The province’s modern-day drawcard is Varadero, the vastest Caribbean beach resort and tropical mecca for international mass-tourism, stretching 20km along the sandy Península de Hicacos.

But Matanzas’ Cuban soul lies west in its scruffy-yet-pulsating port capital. While glitzy Varadero has spawned high-rise hotels, music-rich Matanzas city has given the world rumba, *danzón* and countless grand neoclassical buildings.

Southward, wild Península de Zapata is the Caribbean’s largest swamp, a protected area guarding Cuba’s widest variety of ecosystems. Nearby, the Bay of Pigs now attracts more divers than invaders with fantastical off-shore coral walls.

When to Go

December through to April is when the all-inclusive hotels in the province’s tourist set-piece, Varadero, hike prices for the *temporada alta* (high season). This is the best time for beach-basking: the hurricane season is over and the weather is hot without being unbearable. Hit Matanzas city around October 10th for the annual rumba festival.

NORTHERN MATANZAS

Home to Cuba's largest resort area (Varadero) and one of its biggest ports (Matanzas), the northern coastline is also the province's main population center and a hub for industry and commerce. Despite this, however, the over-riding feel is distinctly green, and most of the region is undulating farmland – think a cross between the North American

Prairie and the UK's Norfolk Broads – occasionally rupturing into lush, dramatic valleys like the Valle del Yumuri.

Matanzas

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Sprawled around a vast bay of the same name, visually arresting Matanzas is one of Cuba's cultural giants, awaking slowly from



Matanzas Province Highlights

- 1 Unlock the buried secrets of dusty **Matanzas** (p196), the 'Athens of Cuba'
- 2 Check out a performance at Matanzas' resplendent **Teatro Sauto** (p198)
- 3 Immerse yourself in the crystalline waters of **Playa Coral** (p201) for a spot of snorkeling
- 4 Go tandem skydiving over diamond-dusted **Varadero** (p209)
- 5 Kick through the ruins of **San Miguel de los Baños** (see p223)
- 6 Discover the vast, varied vegetation zones of the **Ciénaga de Zapata** (p227)
- 7 Discover the plunging drop-offs and colorful coral walls diving off **Playa Larga** (p228)