



Pinar del Río Province

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Why Go?

Bucolic Pinar del Río, with its all-pervading emerald sheen, protects more land than any other province of Cuba. It sports two Unesco Biosphere Reserves (Península de Guanahacabibes and part of the Sierra del Rosario), a Unesco World Heritage Site (the Valle de Viñales) and a patchwork of carefully managed flora and fauna zones. This is also the world's best place to grow tobacco, a blessing that fosters one of Cuba's most quintessential landscapes: fertile, rust-red, oxen-furrowed fields and rustic tobacco-drying houses guarded by sombrero-wearing *guajiros*.

One of Cuba's classic regional stereotypes, the *guajiro* is Pinar del Río personified: an amiable rural hick whose spiritual home is venerable Viñales, a serene visitor-friendly settlement ringed by craggy *mogotes* (flat-topped hills).

Beyond the countryside, Pinar's beach highlights are the idyllic sandy carpets of Cayo Jutías and Cayo Levisa, and María la Gorda on the island's remote tip, where over 50 dazzling dive sites await offshore.

When to Go

Come from May through August to see prized wildlife, such as the Guanahacabibes turtles, October through March for bird-watching, and December through March for the best beach weather. August to early October – hurricane season in a region renowned for its devastating hurricanes – might be best avoided.

History

The pre-Columbian history of western Cuba is synonymous with the Guanahatabeys, a group of nomadic Indians who lived in caves and procured their livelihood largely from the sea. Less advanced than the other indigenous peoples who lived on the island, the Guanahatabeys were a peaceful and passive race whose culture had developed more or less independently of the Taíno and Siboney cultures further east. Extinct by the time the Spanish arrived in 1492, little firsthand documentation remains on how the archaic Guanahatabey society was structured, although some archaeological sites have been found on the Península de Guanahacabibes.

Post-Columbus the Spanish left rugged Pinar del Río largely to its own devices, and the area developed lackadaisically only after Canary Islanders began arriving in the late 1500s. Originally called Nueva Filipina (New Philippines) for the large number of Filipinos who came to the area to work the burgeoning tobacco plantations, the region was renamed Pinar del Río in 1778, supposedly for the pine forests crowded along the Río Guamá. By this time the western end of Cuba was renowned for its tobacco, already home to what is now the world's oldest tobacco company, Tabacalera, dating from 1636. Cattle ranching also propped up the economy. The fastidious farmers who made a living from the delicate and well-tended crops here became colloquially christened *guajiros*, a native word that means – literally – ‘one of us.’ By the mid-1800s, Europeans were hooked on the fragrant weed and the region flourished. Sea routes opened up and the railway was extended to facilitate the shipping of the perishable product.

These days tobacco, along with tourism, keep Pinar del Río both profitable and popular. The region has more or less fully recovered from the two catastrophic hurricanes that hit during 2008, and continues to fly the flag as Cuba's eco-epicenter.

PINAR DEL RÍO AREA

Pinar del Río

POP 191,660

You might well smell Pinar del Río before you see it: Cuba's tobacco capital, plunked in the middle of the fertile Vuelta Abajo, has prospered from its proximity to the plantations from which the best cigars on the planet are made. Not surprisingly, the place boasts its own tobacco factory (open for visits) plus an affable population of leather-faced cigar-imbibing locals keen to show visitors there is more to their sleepy city than smoking *puros* (cigars) and the *jinetes* (tourist touts) for which the otherwise tranquil Pinar used to have an unfortunate reputation.

Pinar del Río was one of the last provincial capitals on the island to take root, and still seems a tad stuck in the slow lane. Overlooked by successive central governments who preferred sugarcane to tobacco, the city became an urban backwater and the butt of countless jokes about the supposedly easy-to-fool *guajiros* who were popularly portrayed as simple-minded rural hicks. But the city fought back. It's overcome neglect, derision and most recently a category 4 hurricane, and is busily overturning its negative connotations. A truly inspirational art scene is now alive and kicking, and there is a glut of

PINAR DEL RÍO STREET NAMES

Locals stick to the old street names; this chart should help.

OLD NAME	NEW NAME
Calzada de la Coloma	Rafael Ferro
Caubada	Comandante Pinares
Recreo	Isabel Rubio
Rosario	Ormani Arenado
San Juan	Rafael Morales
Vélez Caviedes	Gerardo Medina
Virtudes	Ceferino Fernández