



Valle de Viñales & Pinar del Río Province

📍 48 / POP 595,000

Includes ➔

Viñales	175
Parque Nacional Viñales	183
Cayo Jutías	186
Cayo Levisa	186
San Diego de los Baños	187
Pinar del Río	189
Parque Nacional Península de Guanahacabibes	195

Best Tobacco Tours

- ➔ Alejandro Robaina Tobacco Plantation (p194)
- ➔ Fábrica de Tabacos Francisco Donatien (p189)
- ➔ La Casa del Veguero (p178)
- ➔ Finca Raúl Reyes (p178)

Best Water-Based Fun

- ➔ Centro Internacional de Buceo (p196)
- ➔ La Cueva de Palmarito (p184)
- ➔ Cayo Jutías (p186)
- ➔ Cayo Levisa (p186)

Why Go?

The fragrant aroma of a fine cigar is an unmistakable scent and within Cuba, its smoky drift can be traced back to Pinar del Río province, the world's premier place to grow tobacco. The region is a rolling rustic canvas of fertile, rust-red oxen-furrowed fields, thatched tobacco-drying houses and sombrero-clad *guajiros* (country folk).

Jewels in the crown of this emerald land are the Valle de Viñales, a Unesco World Heritage Site studded with the alluring and distinctive *mogotes* (limestone monoliths) that nigh-on beseech you to get hiking, and Península de Guanahacabibes, a remote Unesco Biosphere Reserve abutting María la Gorda's swath of 50-plus dive sites.

Your obvious base is serene Viñales, a hassle-free village ringed by craggy hills and Van Gogh-like rural beauty, which beckons you to forge into some of the Caribbean's best caves, explore tobacco plantations and secluded swimming holes, lounge on idyllic sandy beaches and lose yourself in a laid-back land where every horizon harbors a host of quintessential 'come to the Cuban countryside' images. So come.

When to Go

- ➔ May through August to see prized wildlife, such as the Guanahacabibes turtles.
- ➔ October through March is best for bird-watching.
- ➔ December through March is ideal beach weather.

History

The pre-Columbian history of western Cuba is synonymous with the Guanahatabeys, a group of nomadic people 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 peaceful, passive Guanahatabeys developed more or less independently of the Taíno and Siboney cultures further east. These people were extinct by the time the Spanish arrived in 1492.

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 and already home to what is now the world's oldest tobacco company, Tabacalera, dating from 1636. Cattle ranching also propped up the economy. The 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 tobacco and the region flourished. Sea routes opened up and the railway was extended to facilitate the shipping of the fragrant weed.

These days tobacco, along with tourism, keeps Pinar del Río both profitable and popular, with Viñales now the third-most visited tourist destination in Cuba after Havana and Varadero.

VALLE DE VIÑALES

Embellished by soaring pine trees and bulbous limestone cliffs that teeter like top-heavy haystacks above placid tobacco plantations, Parque Nacional Viñales is one of Cuba's most magnificent natural settings. Wedged spectacularly into the Sierra de los Órganos mountain range, this 11km-by-5km valley was recognised as a national monument in 1979, with Unesco World Heritage status following in 1999 for its dramatic steep-sided limestone outcrops (known as *mogotes*), coupled with the vernacular architecture of its traditional farms and villages.

Once upon a time the whole region was several hundred meters higher. Then, during the Cretaceous period 100 million years ago, underground rivers ate away at the limestone bedrock, creating vast caverns. Eventually the roofs collapsed, leaving only the eroded walls we see today. It is the finest example of a limestone karst valley in Cuba and contains the Gran Caverna de Santo Tomás, the island's largest cave system.

Viñales also offers opportunities for fine hiking, rock climbing and horseback trekking. On the accommodations front it boasts first-class hotels and some of the best *casas particulares* in Cuba. Despite drawing in day-trippers by the busload, the area's well-protected and spread-out natural attractions have somehow managed to escape the frenzied tourist circus of other less well-managed places, while the atmosphere in and around the town remains refreshingly hassle-free.

Viñales

When you spy a cigar-chewing *guajiro* driving his oxen and plough through a rust-colored tobacco field, you know that you must be within striking distance of Viñales. Despite its longstanding love affair with tourism, this slow, relaxed, wonderfully traditional settlement is a place that steadfastly refuses to put on a show. What you see here is what you get – a tiny agricultural town that just happens to occupy one of Cuba's most beautiful natural corners. Grab a *sillon* (rocking chair), sit back on a rustic porch and enjoy a slice of real rural Cuba.

Sights

Founded in 1875, Viñales is more about setting than sights with most of its activities of a lung-stretching outdoor nature. Nevertheless the town has some engaging architecture and a lively main square backed by the sturdy colonial **Casa de la Cultura** (Map p179), one of the oldest structures in the valley. Next door is a tiny **art gallery** (Map p179) while nearby is an equally diminutive (and recently restored) **church** (Map p179).

Museo Municipal

MUSEUM

(Map p179; Salvador Cisneros No 115; admission CUC\$1; ☎9am-8pm Tue-Sat, to 9pm Sun) Positioned halfway down Cisneros, Viñales' pine-lined main street, the Museo Municipal occupies the former home of independence