



# Varadero & Matanzas Province

45 / POP 692,536

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## Why Go?

With a name translating as 'massacres,' Matanzas province conceals an appropriately tumultuous past beneath its modern-day reputation for glam all-inclusive holidays. In the 17th century pillaging pirates ravaged the region's prized north coast, while three centuries later, more invaders grappled ashore in the Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs) under the dreamy notion that they were about to liberate the nation.

The Bahía de Cochinos attracts more divers than mercenaries these days, while sunbathers rather than pirates invade the northern beaches of Varadero, the vast Caribbean resort and lucrative economic 'cash cow' that stretches 20km along the sandy Península de Hicacos.

Providing a weird juxtaposition is the scruffy city of Matanzas, the music-rich provincial capital that has gifted the world with rumba, *danzón*, countless grand neoclassical buildings and Santería (the province is the veritable cradle of Afro-Cuban religion). Tourists may be scant here outside of Varadero, but soulful, only-in-Cuba experiences are surprisingly abundant.

## When to Go

- December through April the all-inclusive hotels in the tourist set-piece, Varadero, hike prices for the *temporada alta* (high season), the best time for beach-basking.
- Hit Matanzas city around October 10 for the annual rumba festival, Festival del Bailador Rumbero.
- November to April are the best months for bird-watching in the Ciénaga de Zapata.

## 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, the over-riding feel is distinctly green, and most of the region is undulating farmland – think a cross between North American prairie and the UK's Norfolk Broads – occasionally rupturing into lush, dramatic valleys like the Valle de Yumurí, or sinking into enigmatic caves outside Matanzas.

### Varadero

POP 27,630

Varadero, located on the sinuous 20km-long Hicacos peninsula, stands at the vanguard of Cuba's most important industry – tourism. As the largest resort in the Caribbean, it guards a huge, unsubtle and constantly evolving stash of hotels (over 50), shops, water activities and poolside entertainment; though its trump card is its beach, an uninterrupted 20km stretch of blond sand that is undoubtedly one of the Caribbean's best. But, while this large, tourist-friendly mega-resort may be essential to the Cuban economy, it offers little in the way of unique Cuban experiences. For these you'll need to escape the wristband wearing crowds from Canada and Europe and dip into the readily accessible hinterland for nearby 'reality checks' in Matanzas, Cárdenas or Bahía de Cochinos.

Most Varadero tourists buy their vacation packages overseas (you need to book in advance to get the best rates) and are content to idle for a week or two enjoying the all-inclusiveness of their resort (and why not?). However, if you're touring Cuba independently, and want to alternate your esoteric rambles with some less stressful beach life, Varadero can provide a few nights of well-earned sloth after a dusty spell on the road. For spur-of-the-moment stop-offs there are plenty of economical hotels and *casas particulares* in Varadero town at the western end of the peninsula that are baggable on the spot.

### Sights

For art and history, you're in the wrong place; nevertheless, there are a few sights worth checking out if the beach life starts to bore you. Varadero town's two central

squares, **Parque de las 8000 Taquillas** (sporting a small subterranean shopping center) and **Parque Central** are disappointingly bland, save for a somewhat out-of-place colonial-style church, **Iglesia de Santa Elvira** (Map p204; cnr Av 1 & Calle 47), one block east.

### Parque Josone

PARK

(Map p204; cnr Av 1 & Calle 58; ☀ 9am-midnight) If you're set on sightseeing in the town, ensconce yourself in this pretty green oasis. These landscaped gardens date back to 1940 and take their name from the former owners, José Fermín Iturrioz y Llaguno and his wife Onelia, who owned the Arechabala rum distillery in nearby Cárdenas and built a neo-classical mansion here: the Retiro Josone.

Expropriated after the Revolution, the mansion became a guesthouse for visiting foreign dignitaries. The park is now a public space for the enjoyment of all – you may see Cuban girls celebrate their *quinciénas* (15th-birthday celebrations) here. Josone's expansive, shady grounds feature a lake with rowboats (CUC\$0.50 per person per hour) and water-bikes (CUC\$5 per hour), atmospheric eateries, resident geese, myriad tree species and a minitrain (CUC\$1 for a ride). There's a public swimming pool (admission CUC\$2) in the south of the park and the odd ostrich lurking nearby. Good music can be heard nightly.

### Museo Municipal de Varadero

MUSEUM

(Map p204; Calle 57; admission CUC\$1; ☀ 10am-7pm) Walking up Calle 57 from Av 1, you'll see many typical wooden beach houses with elegant wraparound porches. The most attractive of the bunch, Varadero's Museo Municipal, has been turned into a balconied chalet displaying period furniture and a snapshot of the resort's history. It's more interesting than you'd think.

### Mansión Xanadú

NOTABLE BUILDING

(Map p206; cnr Av las Américas & Autopista Sur) Everything east of the small stone water tower (it looks like an old Spanish fort, but was built in the 1930s), next to the Restaurant Mesón del Quijote, once belonged to the Du Pont family. Here the millionaire American entrepreneur, Irénée, built the three-story Mansión Xanadú. It's now an upscale hotel atop Varadero's 18-hole golf course with a top-floor bar conducive to sipping sunset cocktails.