



Varadero & Matanzas Province

📍 45 / POP 692,536

Includes ➔

Varadero	200
Matanzas	215
Cárdenas	223
San Miguel de los Baños & Around	225
Península de Zapata	227
Central Australia & Around	227
Boca de Guamá	227
Gran Parque Natural Montemar	228
Playa Larga	230
Playa Girón	231

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Varadero 60 (p210)
- ➔ Salsa Suárez (p208)
- ➔ Paladar Nonna Tina (p209)
- ➔ El Chiquirín (p220)

Best Places to Sleep

- ➔ Hostal Azul (p218)
- ➔ Casa Julio y Lidia (p233)
- ➔ Casa Mary y Ángel (p203)
- ➔ Royalton Hicacos Resort (p206)

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* (ballroom dance), 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 birdwatching in the Ciénaga de Zapata.



Varadero & Matanzas Province Highlights

- 1 Matanzas** (p215)
Unlocking the buried secrets of the long-neglected but slowly re-emerging 'Athens of Cuba.'
- 2 Playa Coral** (p214)
Indulging in a rare opportunity to dive and snorkel from the shore at this north coast beach.
- 3 Cuevas de Bellamar** (p214)
Delving into Cuba's

- deepest cave system just outside Matanzas.
- 4 Varadero** (p202)
Finding your own private nirvana on the sandy expanses of Cuba's longest beach.
- 5 San Miguel de los Baños** (p225)
Admiring forgotten grandeur in long abandoned bathhouses.

- 6 Ciénaga de Zapata** (p228)
Exploring the vast, varied vegetation zones in one of Cuba's last true wildernesses.
- 7 Playa Girón** (p231)
Discovering the plunging dropoffs and colorful coral walls of Cuba's most accessible dive zone.

NORTHERN MATANZAS

Home to Cuba's largest resort area (Varadero) and one of its biggest ports (Matanzas), the northern coastline is also Matanzas Province's main population center and a hub for industry and commerce. Despite this, the

overriding 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.