

YOUR GUIDE TO ACTIVITIES AND EXCURSIONS OUTSIDE OF HAVANA



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VINALES

Harking back to the days when Cuba was a paradise amid a patchwork-quilt of lush vegetation and verdant farms, Vinales remains a traditional Cuban township. It is here, among craggy eruptions of limestone known as mogotes, that much of the country's tobacco is grown.



BOOK A SALSA LESSON

No one can say they've been to Cuba without having experienced the national dance of salsa for themselves. Although it might be off-putting to watch the locals dance the night away without even seeming to try, don't miss your chance to learn a few quick steps for yourself while in Vinales. Lessons can be got around town, including at the Casa de Cultura.

EXPLORE THE SANTO TOMAS CAVES

Discover America's second largest cave complex, a beautiful labyrinth of chambers, passages, stalactites and stalagmites that wind their way over eight separate levels and delve for 46 kilometres beneath the earth. Within the complex you'll also find murals created centuries ago by indigenous Indians, and be able to rest on the same rocks used as shelter by both runaway slaves and Cuban revolutionaries. Guided tours explore the Great Cave's one kilometre length over 90 minutes, while a small museum provides further information about the historic use of the caverns.

TAKE TO TWO WHEELS

The traffic-free roads around Vinales make it the perfect place to jump on a bike. Easily and cheaply rented from a variety of stores and casa owners in the town, it's a great way to explore the region's surrounds. Cycle sedately down to the river for a swim, pedal passed fields of rust-brown tobacco plants waiting to be harvested, or simply ride out into the countryside to admire the natural beauty of the mogotes which make this part of Cuba so special.

LEARN HOW TO COOK CUBAN CLASSICS

Opt for a cooking lesson at one of the township's casa particulares and you'll learn a little about the history of Cuban cuisine. More importantly, you'll discover the local secrets of how to get the likes of arroz moro (rice and black beans) or huevo habaneros (eggs with tomatoes, peppers and onions) tasting just right, while also being able to enjoy the fruits of your labour.

SOAK UP THE SUN AT CAYO JUTIAS

This three kilometer stretch of sand appears as if by magic from the mangroves of the tiny island. A pleasant 65 km ride from Vinales, you don't even need to get your feet wet if you don't too, since the key is connected to the mainland by a pedraplen, or causeway. One of the most tranquil beaches Cuba has to offer, it is also home to the very cute Jutias tree rat – a rodent similar to an enlarged version of a guinea pig!

HEAD OUT ON FOOT

Footpaths crisscross Parque Nacional Vinales, with many trails flat and easy to complete without needing excessive levels of fitness. Try the Coco Solo and Palmarito Magotes trail, which covers both the Valle de Silencio (Valley of Silence), and the psychedelic Mural de la Prehistoria. While you'll be out for around six hours on this path, there are also plenty of shorter walks that provide equally stunning views of the mountains around the town.

JUMP IN A BOAT TO CHECK OUT CUEVA DEL INDIO

The Cueva del Indio (or Indian Cave) offers the chance to explore underground from the comfort of a boat. An ancient site of indigenous Guanajatabey Indian settlement and prehistoric art site, boats journey a short stretch of the tranquil waters of the San Vicente River as it flows through natural limestone tunnels of intriguing rock formations below ground. Accompanied by the tales of the boat captains, it's a unique experience indeed.

RELISH A LAZY COUPLE OF HOURS AT A HOTEL POOL

There's no better way to cool down again than with a couple of hours beside a hotel pool. The Hotel Los Jazmines on a hill on the outskirts of Vinales has a large pool with spectacular views over the valley. It can be used for a few dollars even if you're not a hotel resident, making it a popular hangout on weekends.

ENJOY TRADITIONAL CUBAN RHYTHMS

Even if you're not up for dancing the salsa, sit back and relax in the convivial atmosphere of the township's bars or live music venues. Vinales is full of them. The one with the best reputation in Vinales is probably the Casa de Cultura, in the main square. It's the place to see and be seen, with live music beginning around 9 pm each night.

CHECK OUT THE MURAL DE LA PREHISTORICA

A multi-coloured extravaganza of a mural, this artwork stretches for 120 m across a vertical section of limestone surrounded by forest at the foot of the Magote Pita. Though kitsch to some, it is the work of local artist Leovigildo Gonzalez Morillo, who used the mural to tell the region's history. Created in 1961, it took a team of 18 four years to complete.

DELVE INTO THE FOLIAGE OF JARDIN DE CARIDAD

Jardin de Caridad covers a vast expanse of land on the outskirts of Vinales. A bounty of hundreds of sweet-smelling orchids edge the paths, alongside oddities such as the plastic heads of dolls, while free range turkeys happily gobble in the grounds.

LUNCH AT AN ORGANIC FARM

It's time to lunch at an organic farm with stunning views of your surroundings. El Paraiso is a slice of paradise in the Valley of Silence, located in Viñales, Cuba. It's part organic farm or finca and part family-run restaurant owned by Wilfredo and his daughters.

ENJOY TRADITIONAL CUBAN PRODUCTS OF CIGARS AND RUM

Take a tour of the renowned Fabrica de Tabacos Francisco Donatien Cuban cigar factory in Pinar del Rio, which rolls out some of Cuba's finest: the Trinidad, Cohiba & Vegeros brands. Then head to the Fábrica de Bebidas Casa Garay. Workers here use a secret recipe to distill sweet and dry versions of the city's signature liquor, Guayabita del Pinar guava brandy. Multilingual factory tours are topped off with a taste of the brew in the sampling room.

LAS TERRAZAS AND SOROA

Las Terrazas and Soroa lie just 70 km or so from Havana. However, they offer visitors a whole other side to the island than the capital does, with these small countryside towns a paradise of lush eco-resorts.



VISIT THE RUINS OF OLD COFFEE PLANTATIONS

Coffee was first planted around Las Terrazas in the 1790s, and the ruins of the old plantations here are a wonderful way to spend the day. One of the best preserved is Cafetal Buenavista. Here you'll uncover the remains of the bean drying houses, an ox-driven grinder, and former slave quarters two centuries old. There are also irresistible views, and a pleasant restaurant.

SWIM IN THE LOCAL RIVER

The Baños del Rio San Juan are a number of dedicated bathing points shaped from the natural banks of the river. They provide a fantastic way to cool off when Cuba's heat might get a little too much, and also have a lovely setting for a picnic or place just to relax one afternoon. Picnic tables overlook the baths, as do a number of cabanas – small three-sided shelters that offer some privacy without hiding or spoiling the river's natural beauty.

FOLLOW A HIKING TRAIL

A good number of hiking trails of various lengths wind their way through the mountainous scenery around Las Terrazas, which has been part of a UNESCO biosphere reserve since 1985, and Soroa. Not only are these trails great for hikers, but also for bird spotters – woodpeckers, the Cuban tody, and Cuban trogon have all been sighted in the area. Offering phenomenal viewpoints too, don't miss Soroa's Mirador de Venus.

DELIGHT IN SOROA WATERFALL

The waterfall El Salto, which tumbles more than 22 metres through the dense foliage into a natural pool, and is not only a delightful spot to end a gentle hike through the jungle, but also form a series of crystalline pools that are just perfect for swimming in.

EXPLORE SOROA ORCHID GARDEN

Stretching over a hillside dotted with greenhouses, ferns, and mature trees, the Soroa Orchid Garden is home to several thousand orchids belonging to 700 different species. This tranquil spot was founded in 1943 as a place of study for Cuba's orchids, but now has plants from around the world. To get the most out of your time at the Orquideario, as it's known locally, make sure you take the services of a guide, who's expert knowledge is unrivalled.

GLIDE ALONG A ZIP-LINE

For those feeling adventurous, the Zip-line Canopy Tour in Las Terrazas is a unique adventure. The Canopy Tour is a nearly 2km aerial tour using steel cables to whiz above Las Terrazas' fascinating scenery. Here, you will find highly trained personnel and professional equipment. This activity is weather dependent and can be paid for locally.

VARADERO

For many, this energetic beachside paradise is the place to spend the days between the sea and sand of an all-inclusive resort, although there's a lot more to this thin peninsula than just that!



RELAX ON THE BEACH

As one of Cuba's prime beach destinations, visitors are greeted by kilometre after kilometre of wide, pristine stretches of fine white sand alongside sparkling turquoise waters and thick natural vegetation that is home to all manner of endemic wildlife. What's more, in 2019 Varadero was named the second-best beach in the world in the TripAdvisor Travellers Choice Awards!

EXPLORE THE UNDERWATER WORLD

As well as splashing around in the water, you should most certainly explore beneath its surface. Scuba diving is one of the most popular things to do in Varadero, and there are more than 30 established diving sites in the waters around the peninsula. It doesn't matter if you've never strapped on a pair of flippers, since there are sites that cater for everyone from an absolute novice to a master diver.

HIT THE MARKETS AND SHOPS

The markets dotted throughout Varadero offer an unmissable opportunity to explore all the area has to offer through its stalls. Whether you want traditional food, souvenirs or clothes, the markets have you covered. Prices are generally marked, but feel free to barter to bring the price down. If your time is limited, the best market is perhaps the one located around Beatles Bar (yes, named after the band). When it comes to purchasing rum, there's really nowhere better than Casa del Ron.

EXPLORE VARADERO'S FASCINATING HISTORY

Visit the Museo Municipal for an accessible look at the town from its founding in around 1555, its strategic importance for the Spanish Conquistadors to its current cherished status as Cuba's most popular beach. The Museo Municipal is inside a beautiful colonial home and is located at Calle 57 and Ave de la Playa.

UNCOVER THE MYSTERIES OF VARADERO'S CAVES

Perhaps best avoided if you have a fear of bats, this prehistoric Ambrosio Cave is another glimpse into Cuba's past. The walls of the cave are covered in pictograms depicting humans and animals, a history of a civilisation that became intertwined with Spanish and African culture to form modern Cuba. Alternatively, check out the cool dark waters inside Saturno Cave, where swimming is not only welcomed but encouraged.

TAKE IN A ROUND OF GOLF IN XANADU

Xanadu is a huge mansion built by the multi-millionaire industrialist Irénée du Pont prior to the communist takeover of the island. It's actually a rather classical looking building that suits the landscape, and is not some ostentatious eyesore. Following Du Pont's death in 1963, Xanadu was turned into a golf club, so you can now go for a round before cooling off in the ocean.

MATANZAS

While this capital of the province of the same name may not have hit the big time when it comes to tourist visits, that can only be a good thing for a destination that boasts beaches, caves, and historic sites – all just 90 kilometres east of Havana, and 30 kilometres west of the thriving beach resorts of Varadero.



CITY WALK IN MATANZAS

Matanzas has three rivers (Rio Yumari, Rio San Juan and Rio Canimar) that cross over the city. Matanzas was founded in 1693 and became an important centre for sugar production. During the colonial era there was a huge import of African slaves, working on the sugar plantations. Now days, because of its large Afro-Cuban population the city is still a center of Cuban African traditions and religion. During city walk in Matanzas you will pass by The Museo Farmaceutico – An old style pharmacy with hundreds of porcelain jars. There is also time to admire the Catedral de San Carlos de Borromeo and the Teatro Sauto, a well preserved historic building that hosts ballet, opera and concert performances.

GASP AT THE UNDERGROUND WONDERS OF NATURE

Delving more than 40 metres beneath the Earth's surface and stretching for an incredible 750 metres (that's three-quarters of a kilometre!), Cuevas de Bellamar (Bellamar Cave) is a wonderland of natural rock formations, including stalactites and stalagmites. But don't think you're going to need a torch and a hard hat, this huge cave complex comes complete with nicely-positioned lighting and well-trodden paths that make it suitable for all the family.

WONDER AT THE CONSTRUCTION OF CASTILLO DE SAN SEVERINO

Sitting on the western side of Matanzas Bay, the Castillo de San Severino was finished in 1734. Its original purpose was to protect ship-borne trade in the area, as well as acting as an early defence for Havana slightly further along the coast. Now a National Monument, its stout walls have held both slaves (the story of whom are told in the small museum) and Cuban rebels – it didn't stop being a prison until the 1970s!

EXPLORE THE EXHIBITS OF MATANZAS MUSEUMS

The Junco Palace Museum (sometimes called the Provincial Museum) is the region's de facto history museum, with a main room of intriguing historical artefacts tracing the centuries gone past, and another of artworks collected by the property's original owner – a wealthy sugar baron. The the Pharmacology Museum (Museo Farmaceutico), is the home of a large collection of early pharmaceutical bottles and other items that are just waiting to be Instagrammed. But if you're a big fan of art, be sure not to miss the Museo de Arte de Matanzas. It has a collection of paintings, ethnographic sculptures from 14 different African nations and 80 ethnic groups, and photographs that will expand anyone's ideas of Cuban culture.

TAKE IN THE VISTAS FROM THE IGLESIA DE MONSERRATE

You don't have to be of a religious bent to enjoy a visit to the Iglesia de Monserrate, on the outskirts of the city. Roughly one and a half kilometres from Matanzas' central squares, this church was built and paid for by colonists from Spain's Catalanian region, and is a stunning piece of nineteenth century colonial architecture. But more than just that, for anyone wondering what to do in Matanzas, the church is situated on a lofty hilltop position, providing spectacular views back towards the city.

JUMP ABOARD THE HERSHEY TRAIN TO DISCOVER THE VALLE DE YUMURI

Stretching westward from Matanzas, the Valle de Yumuri leaves the city's streets behind it to form a patchwork of banana groves, maize fields, towering palms, dense forest, and tiny isolated villages. Though intersected by a series of winding, narrow, roads, perhaps the best way to experience this Eden-like scene is onboard the so-called Hershey Train, the only surviving electrified rail line anywhere in Cuba. The brainchild of US chocolate manufacturer Hershey, who were looking for a way of transporting its sugar, the route takes in an array of colourful clapboard valley homes, as well as the lush tropical greenery and farmland for which the region is rightly becoming known.

SANTA CLARA

Santa Clara is the nation's fifth largest city, and one that has held an important part in the country's history since its foundation in 1689. But rather than a staid city resting on its heritage, Santa Clara is one of Cuba's edgiest towns thanks to its youthful population and continuing revolutionary spirit!



UNCOVER SANTA CLARA'S REVOLUTIONARY HERITAGE

Santa Clara was the site of the last battle of the Cuban Revolution in late 1958. A column of troops led by none other than Che Guevara managed to derail a train full of government soldiers and supplies, turning the tide in favour of Castro's revolution. A rail carriage acts as a tiny museum and memorial, the Monumento a la Toma del Tren Blindado, to this fateful day. A more expansive museum can be found on a hill overlooking Santa Clara, where the earthly remains of Guevara have lied in state since his body was discovered in Bolivia in 1997, and is packed full of information on Che and the revolution.

RELAX IN PARQUE VIDAL

Believe it or not, this city centre square is one of Santa Clara's most important sights. A popular place for residents to relax and meet up with friends, Parque Vidal offers shady palm trees under which to escape the sun while listening to the authentic sounds of local musicians as they perform in one corner or the city orchestra as it performs on the square's bandstand. Taking up an entire city block, around the park's perimeter you'll find many of the city's most important and historic buildings, including the Teatro de la Caridad. Here you'll also find the Santa Clara Libre (once more prosaically known as the Santa Clara Hilton), the Marti Library (the former city hall), and the Colonia Espanola de Santa Clara centre of dance.

SAMPLE THE CITY'S NIGHTSPOTS

El Mejunje is not only a popular nightclub, but also the home of Cuba's first official drag act, with performances every Saturday. For a quieter nightcap, head to a bar such as La Marquesina, cafes such as Café Literario, or a paladares restaurant such as El Alba. Conveniently located on the corner of Parque Vidal under the porches of the Teatro de la Caridad, La Marquesina is a Santa Clara

institution. It offers a window into all walks of Cuban life, with its patrons as diverse as farm labourers and office workers. What unites them is the desire for a stress-free beer or rum, in a relaxed atmosphere, although for a rich Cuban coffee head to Café Literario instead.

CHECK OUT THE URBAN ART SCENE

The art group calling themselves Melaito have created a regularly changing wall of colourful works on Carretera Central (a change of name to Marta Abreu street) between Vidaurreta and Carlos Pichardo streets near the main bus station. Since the murals are constantly changing it's difficult to say exactly what you'll find, but themes include ironic side-glances at Cuba's on-again, off-again relationship with the US, making this another must for those wondering what to do in Santa Clara Cuba.

HEAD TO A CIGAR FACTORY

At a Cigar Factory the mystique behind cigar making will be revealed, allowing you to gain a sense of the significance of these beauties. You will also witness first hand the amount of effort, care and tradition that goes into making these Cuban treasures (even non-smokers will find this tour very interesting).

EXPLORE NEARBY REMEDIOS

In Villa Clara province, Remedios looks like many small towns throughout Cuba. However, that's no poke. Its Spanish colonial charm, quiet streets, and lack of overall tourism make it a charming destination and one of our favorites. But Remedios is not like any other small town in Cuba. On the days leading up to Christmas Eve, street celebrations called Las Parrandas take place. Beginning in 1820, Las Parrandas is one of Cuba's oldest festivals. Here you will have the chance to explore the township and visit the Museo Parrandas Remedianas.

ZAPATA PENINSULA

Largely uninhabited, the Peninsula de Zapata is one of the best places in Cuba for wildlife encounters and bird watching, as well as scuba diving, although the country's more recent revolutionary history is still never far away.



DESTRESS ON ITS BEACHES

The region has a good number of fine, palm-fringed beaches on which to unwind for a couple of days. Located within both a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and National Park, you can be sure that their soft bleached sands are going to be unspoilt, with nature spilling right down to the clean, warm waters. One of the easiest to get to is Playa Larga. Not only is this stretch of sand at the end of the road heading south, but it also acts as the location for the headquarters of Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata, making it a great place to base yourself, with plenty of beachside accommodation.

HEAD OUT FOR A WILDLIFE ENCOUNTER

Unsurfaced roads crisscross the park, letting you get up close and personal with all manner of animal and bird species, from pelicans and egrets, to falcons and Cuban Trogons. The mangroves hereabouts also provide a habitat for endless numbers of crabs, giant toads, and the Cuban crocodile, which historically only live within the confines of the park.

SNORKEL OR DIVE TO YOUR HEART'S DELIGHT

The Zapata Peninsula's warm clear waters make it the perfect place to get the swimsuit out and head into the shallows and beyond, either with snorkel and mask or with full scuba diving equipment in tow. You'll find the best choice of kit rental between Playa Larga and Playa Giron, though there are plenty of places you can pretty much park up and jump straight in too. The coral reef is close to shore, making it accessible even for those who find themselves less comfortable in tidal waters, with myriad colourful tropical fish going about their business in the sublime underwater environment.

VISIT CRIADERO DE COCODRILOS CROCODILE FARM

If you failed to catch sight of a Cuban crocodile in its natural environment, have no fear! You're guaranteed a sighting at the Criadero de Cocodrilos crocodile farm at Boca de Guama. Located just off the main road to Playa Larga, the farm has played a major role in bringing the Cuban crocodile back from extinction since it was founded in 1962. With a focus strongly on conservation and breeding, visitors

can see the crocodiles at all the different stages of life, from youngster to fully-grown adult, and even hold a juvenile for a photo op!

ENCOUNTER THE REVOLUTION AT THE BAY OF PIGS

Playa Giron on the Bay of Pigs has some exquisite vistas, and wonderful snorkelling and diving, however it's probably best known as the site at which US-backed counter-revolutionaries stormed the Cuban coast in a failed attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro's regime in 1961. Never one to let an opportunity slide, the Cuban government has since erected a number of propaganda boards, while the Museo de Playa Giron gives the full lowdown, and has exhibits that include a plane and weaponry used in the battle.

DRIFT ACROSS TREASURE LAKE

The Laguna del Tesoro, or Treasure Lake – so named after legends of the indigenous Taino people hurriedly hiding their gold at the coming of the Spanish conquistadors in the 1500s – is also not to be missed. The fact the lake is only reachable by boat only adds to the intrepid feel, while its eastern side is home to the Villa Guama tourist resort, spread over a handful of small islands and constructed to resemble a traditional Taino village.

EXPLORE THE SUGAR MILLS OF AUSTRALIA

The sugar mill office in this small town (the forward headquarters of none other than Fidel Castro himself during the Bay of Pigs invasion) now houses a small counterpart museum to that at Playa Giron. There's also a small museum dedicated to steam locomotives, displaying rail stock originally used to transport sugar cane to the mill. While in Australia you might also fancy checking out Finca Fiesta Campesina, a slightly bizarre blend of theme park and county fair, with a small 'zoo' and bull-riding, which is worth a stop for the coffee and sugarcane alone.

HIKE THE SENDERO ENIGMA DE LAS ROCAS

Employ the expert knowledge of a birding guide to take you on the Sendero Enigma de las Rocas hike, where you can admire the rich flora and fauna in the area, and at the end of the trail there is a cenote (sinkhole) where you can swim to cool off.

CIENFUEGOS

Unique in Cuba in that it was settled by French rather than Spanish immigrants, French heritage continues to demonstrate itself through the Parisian style of many of the city's buildings, and in the names of streets in the UNESCO-listed old town in particular.



TAKE A GUIDED TOUR

The wide boulevards and beautifully laid out parklands of Cienfuegos have long been a draw to visitors, and there's perhaps no better way to delve into the sights, sounds, and smells of the city than on a guided city centre walk. Take in sights including the Italianate Tomas Terry Theatre on Plaza de Armas opposite Parque Jose Marti, and the impressive edifice of the nineteenth century Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción. You'll also be told the history of the Ferrer Palace, stop at the architectural jewel that is the Palacio de Valle, and visit Cuba's only triumphal arch, built to commemorate Cuban independence.

BECOME ENTRANCED BY THE ANTICS OF 2,000 FLAMINGOS

Guanaroca Lagoon is a salt water lake to the southeast of Cienfuegos formed by the River Arimao before it reaches the waves of Cienfuegos Bay. A protected area of land for many years, it boasts a profusion of birds, fauna, and flora. Experts have counted more than 170 different bird species on and around the waters, including the country's national bird, the tocororo. Most famously, the lagoon is home to a huge colony of around 2,000 flamingos. If you're lucky, there's also the chance to catch sight of a manatee.

COOL OFF AT EL NICHU WATERFALLS

Cascading impressively even during the dry season, there is a large natural pool at the base of the falls where it is possible to swim, as well as a number of other smaller equally-inviting pools. To get to them you'll follow the trail through dense forest which is the natural

habitat of various bird and lizard species. Continually a short way beyond the falls and you'll have the added benefit of a viewpoint looking over the surrounding valley too. Should you get hungry, there's a small restaurant serving authentic Cuban cuisine.

ENJOY THE BEAUTY OF THE BOTANIC GARDENS

The Jardin Botanico de Cienfuegos (or Jardin Botanico Soledad) are just 14 kilometres from the centre of Cienfuegos. Founded more than a century ago in 1901, they are one of the oldest gardens anywhere in Cuba. Covering an area of almost 100 hectares, they are home to more than 2,000 species of tropical and exotic plants, including 400 delicate orchids.

ENJOY CIENFUEGOS BY NIGHT

There is a club in the city that was named in loving tribute of Benny Moré, but it might not be what you expect. El Benny Club is more of a cheesy disco (which is not without its charm) than a place to hear traditional Cuban music. You're better off heading to the Cienfuegos Casa de la Musica (there is an identically named place in many Cuban cities and it's a safe bet for a good night out) for something that feels more authentically Cuban. Which is not to say that cheesy disco music cannot be Cuban!

TRINIDAD

Off the beaten path for the better part of a century, Trinidad's rich heritage and achingly beautiful buildings have seen the city turn into something of a living museum, and a magnet for visitors.



TAKE A WALK AROUND TRINIDAD TOWNSHIP

On your guided walk of the Trinidad Township you will get to discover just what makes Trinidad so special, including Palacio Cantero, Canchanchara, Palacio Brunet, Plaza Mayor, Museo Romantico, and a pottery workshop among other sights.

WANDER THE INDUSTRIAL RUINS OF THE VALLEY OF THE SUGAR MILLS

You need to head just a short distance out of Trinidad in order to see the industry on which the town was built. The vast expanses of the Valley of the Sugar Mills (Valle de los Ingenios) were once home to more than 30,000 slaves who were forced to work there. The natural beauty of the valley

sits in stark contrast to the darkness of its history. Most of the infrastructure was abandoned and left to rot, giving the area an eerie beauty among the ruins of some 70 old sugar mills.

TAKE TO THE DANCE FLOOR IN A CLUB WITH A DIFFERENCE

Discoteca Ayala is perhaps better known by its nickname: La Cueva (the cave), because it's well... in a cave. This is a truly memorable night out, and it can feel rather crazy to go up to a cave that has a doorman. You then descend the stairs and find yourself dancing the night away in a massive subterranean space. Legend has it that a serial killer once used the cave as a hiding spot, although this is probably not something you want to think about as you salsa your way about the space.

RUMBA AT THE PALENQUE DE LOS CONGOS REALES

You might wish to sample the delights of Palenque de los Congos Reales. A must for rumba fans, this open patio on Trinidad's music alley has an eclectic menu incorporating salsa, son (Cuban popular music) and trova (traditional poetic singing). The highlight, however, is the 10pm rumba drums with soulful African rhythms and energetic fire-eating dancers. You might also be perfectly content to simply sit in Trinidad's main plaza and watch the city life unfold around you.

OPT FOR A DAY AT THE BEACH

Just outside of Trinidad is Playa Ancón, one of those beaches that seems to be too perfect to actually exist in nature. There are azure waves gently lapping onto white sands, and the only thing you'll need to think about is whether you should get up to buy a drink, or just recline on the sand and wait for the next roaming vendor to bring it to your towel. There are some all-inclusive resorts on the beach, but it certainly hasn't been overwhelmed by these types of developments.

EXPLORE THE WONDERFUL 'MOUTH' OF TRINIDAD

La Boca (The Mouth) is a small fishing village where every wonderful stereotype about such a place seems to be true. You can quite literally sit by the ocean and watch fish being hauled out of the water and then carried to local restaurants where they're cooked in the most delicious of ways. Should you decide to linger, La Boca has a few accommodation options to choose between, with some visitors preferring to stay here and make the short trek into Trinidad instead.

HIKE ACROSS TOPES DE COLLANTES NATIONAL PARK

The national park in the Sierra del Escambray mountain range has some signposted trails, with Salto del Caburni Trail maybe the most enjoyed. At just 8 km in length to complete a round trip, it doesn't require huge levels of fitness either, although there are steeper sections for which previous hiking experience is recommended. It begins at the Casa de la Gallega, a graffiti-covered building serving basic lunches, before passing through eucalyptus forest that is also home to 40 different varieties of coffee plant. The reward for all this effort is a waterfall of the same name, where the cool waters gush spectacularly down almost 65 m, and where it's possible to bathe in one of a number of swimming holes which result.

EXPLORE THE TRINIDAD ART SCENE

Trinidad also has a burgeoning arts scene. At the Arts & Crafts Market, located in front of the Casade la Trova, you can find souvenirs, handmade textiles and crochet work. You should also visit Taller Alfarero. Handmade pottery has put Trinidad on the map. Taller Alfarero is a large factory where you can view local artists hand making ceramics from a traditional potter's wheel. It is also a great place for you to buy handmade ceramics for a reasonable price. Casa del Habano also offers one of the best places in Trinidad to buy rum and cigars from. Finally a visit to Galeria La Paulet is one of the best places to buy local art. It has an interesting selection of probing, mainly abstract art that only can be found in Trinidad, Cuba.

ENJOY A CATAMARAN CRUISE

The Marlin Marina Trinidad is located about 15 km south of Trinidad on the Peninsula Ancon. Make sure you arrive at the marina before 09.00 hours (09.00am) to board either a catamaran (60 seats) or a sailing boat (up to 10 places), depending on the number of participants. Soon the town of Trinidad and the small fishing community of Casilda and its bay become smaller as the ship heads off towards Cayo Blanco (not to be confused with other keys with a similar name, such as the one near Varadero). The bar on board is open and drinks are included. The rich seabed of Cuba's waters reveals itself at the coral reef, Las Mulatas, where you can snorkel and explore the underwater treasures. Snorkel equipment is on board and is included. A lunch of seafood is served on the island, Cayo Blanco, and it would be a real punishment not to laze at this pristine beach, after lunch. At the end of the afternoon, you will sail back to the marina.

CASA DE LA MUSICA TRINIDAD

Trinidad's Casa de la Musica is a warm embrace of music that has become one of the city's must-see attractions. Located in the area beside the Cathedral in Plaza Mayor, this casa of rhythm comes to life every evening thanks to live salsa bands doing their stuff for free (though tips are very welcome). Add to the music inexpensive drinks and the starry sky of this wonderful open-air space, and you have a night you won't forget in a hurry!

BICYCLE HIRE

Hire a bike and explore World Heritage Trinidad and the surrounding areas. One option is to ride out to the coast and explore Playa Ancon, Playa La Boca and Bahia Casilda.

SANCTI SPIRITUS

The city of Sancti Spiritus is one of Cuba's oldest Spanish settlements. Founded in 1514, the city has an intriguing history and a charming centre, yet remains something of a hidden gem.



UNCOVER THE CITY'S LONG HISTORY

One of the original seven settlements founded by the Spanish on their colonisation of the island in the early 1500s, there's a well-preserved colonial heart. The city boasts Cuba's oldest bridge, and more significantly, its oldest church. Two blocks south of the town's main square, the Iglesia Parroquial Mayor dates back to the early sixteenth century, and has fantastic views from its bell tower.

VISIT THE COLONIAL ART MUSEUM

Set within the stunning palatial home of the Valle Iznaga family, who fled Cuba after the success of Castro's revolution having made their fortune in sugar, the Museo de Arte Colonial has been owned by the state since 1961, with 90% of its contents original to the mansion. An incredible collection of treasures to say the least, with an eclectic

assortment of artworks that range from French Limoges porcelain to Baccarat crystal chandeliers. The mid-eighteenth century American-bought piano is the star attraction, as it's one of only two found anywhere on the island.

TAKE A TRIP TO THE LIBRARY

The Biblioteca Publica Provincial Ruben Martinez Villena (or simply Biblioteca Provincial in short) started out life in the late 1920s as a meeting point for a group of elite and socially progressive residents. More recently it became a public library, though the interior is still bedecked with a glittering array of Carrara marble sculptures, painted ceilings, and stained glass within a central dome that's well worth stopping by to admire.

CAMAGÜEY

The UNESCO-enshrined winding pastel-coloured streets ooze history, while Cuba's third-largest city has also become a bastion of art, meaning there's plenty of things to do in Camagüey however long your visit.



HEAD BACK A HUNDRED YEARS AT THE MUSEO IGNACIO AGRAMONTE

The Museo Provincial Ignacio Agramonte features antique furniture and a large art collection dating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which spans both traditional and contemporary work by famed Cuban artists. But even if you don't consider yourself an art buff the museum should still make it to your list of things to do in Camagüey due to its location within a huge Spanish cavalry barracks dating back to the 1840s.

LINGER IN SUNNY SQUARES

The city's plazas offer important open spaces for residents to relax and catch up with friends. Full of local ambience, Plaza del Carmen is much more laid back than some of the city's more frenetic spaces, and has a great location on the eastern side of the beautifully photogenic church of Our Lady of Carmen. Recently renovated from its previous ruinous state, the plaza's cobbled central area is dotted with the tinajones clay pots that have become the symbol of the city, and also includes life-sized sculptures of residents enjoying the city amid the square's low-slung yet colourful buildings.

MAKE AN APPOINTMENT WITH LIVING ARTISTS

Two of Cuba's most imaginative artists, husband and wife team of Joel Jover and Ileana Sanchez welcome visitors to their home-cum-gallery on Plaza Agramonte, to view their latest works, play with their pet chihuahuas, and explore their collection of antiques. Alternatively head to the studio space of Martha Jimenez Perez. Overlooking her most famous of works, The Gossipers (Chismosas) in Plaza del Carmen, her studio is a functioning space full of half-finished painting and ceramics.

PICNIC IN THE PARK

Cuba's largest urban park, Casino Campestre is a wonderful green space, across the Rio Hatibonico from Camagüey's old town, that dates back to the 1860s. The basketball stadium incorporated within the park hosts regular games of one of Cuba's favourite sports, while

the park is also a place for families to come and enjoy a picnic beside monuments to the likes of Mariano Barberan and Joaquin Collar Serra, two Spanish aviation pioneers who completed the first non-stop flight between Seville in Spain and Camagüey in 1933.

GET LOST IN THE OLD TOWN

Unlike most of the other seven original Spanish settlements on Cuba, which were constructed on a neat grid-pattern, Camagüey comprises narrow twisting streets that can very often lead to dead-ends. The maze-like 'pattern' of streets linking plazas in the old city is said to have been to make defending the city from pirates all the easier. Head out for a wander among the alleys for yourself and you'll discover a whole host of gems, from hidden squares and intriguing architecture to kids having impromptu basketball matches and residents watching the world go by from their front steps.

TAKE A BICYCLE TAXI TOUR

You will no doubt be eager to explore, and your introduction to the maze-like streets of the city will be with someone else taking care of the navigation. You will be taken on a guided tour on the back of a bicycle taxi, allowing you to see the best of the city while not needing to actually use your feet. Your guide will also take you to admire the Principal Theater (built in 1850); the Puerto Principe Cemetery (created in 1814 and the oldest of the cemeteries that are being used in Cuba); the Ignacio Agramonte Museum (history and decorative arts) and the Amalia Simoni Manor (decorative arts and pieces of furniture that illustrate 19th century costumes).

VISIT NEARBY BAYAMO

At the foot of the Sierra Maestra, unspoiled Bayamo, the 'capital' city – for what it's worth – of Granma Province, is an intriguing, rather romantic town, one of those places you can truly imbibe the 'yesteryear' quality of Cuba's provincial lifestyle, particularly in the cut-off East. Most people get around by horse 'bus' – communal taxis following designated routes, with the rest on bike or foot, and only a lucky smattering have a car.

HOLGUIN

Founded right back in 1545, today Holguin is Cuba's fourth largest city. However, its relatively limited number of tourists means it's one of the best places in Cuba to experience the authentic life of Cuba's people away from the camera lens' of the international media.



TACKLE THE HILL OF THE CROSS

458 steep steps lead to the top of the Hill of the Cross, or Loma de la Cruz, which offers panoramic views right across the city. It's a particularly popular place to head in expectation of sunset, with the colours uninterrupted by surrounding buildings. Standing at 261 metres above sea level, it is, needless to say, topped with a wooden cross, which is said to protect the city's residents and was visited by the Pope just a few years ago. Before you head back down (there's a road should you prefer), enjoy a drink at the café-bar by the summit.

UNEARTH PRE-COLOMBIAN HERITAGE AT EL CHORRO DE MAITA

Ringed by traditional thatched round houses, the museum of El Chorro de Maita is the place to come to explore a cultural heritage nearly lost after the conquest of the Spanish. As you explore the museum's round houses, guides will give you the low-down on pre-Christian ritual, the perfect introduction to the site's burial ground. Dating back to the thirteenth century, it contains the skeletal remains of

62 tribe members, including children, in what is considered a unique view into the past.

PICK UP SOME ARTS AND CRAFTS

At the daily arts and crafts market you'll find everything from shaped ash trays (ideal for those Cuban cigars you've probably also purchased), beautifully made models of the country's classic cars, carved dancers and musicians, clocks shaped like rum bottles, and even sundresses. Don't be scared to haggle for the best bargains!

SAIL TO CAYO SAETIA

Connected to Holguin by a bridge, Cayo Saetia was once the private home of Fidel Castro himself. However, sailing across from Holguin remains the finest way to first set foot on this cay, now a three-star resort. Tourists mainly head to the island for its fine powdery white sand beaches, beautiful shallows, and forested interior, although Jeep safaris of the island are still on offer too as a way of exploring its native and not-so native wildlife (which once included camels and zebra).

SANTIAGO DE CUBA

Another one of the original seven settlements founded by the Spanish colonists, Santiago dates back to 1515. Serving as the Cuba capital until 1589, it was here that the island's first cathedral was built in 1528.



INVESTIGATE THE CITY'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE REVOLUTION ON A CITY TOUR

The first shots of the Cuban revolution were fired in the Cuartel Moncada former military barracks, now a museum. But it was also in Santiago de Cuba that Castro declared his communist revolution victorious from the balcony of Santiago's city hall on January 1 1959. After his death, his ashes were interred in the city's Santa Ifigenia cemetery, where you'll also find those of Jose Marti, Cuban national hero and poet. Don't miss the changing of the guard ceremony that takes place here every half an hour throughout the day.

TEST YOUR RHYTHM WITH SON DANCING IN THE EVENING

It's from son that better-known salsa ultimately derived, and the city is very proud to show off its unique heritage. Though Carnival in July is when the whole city goes crazy, you won't have any trouble finding a dance hall to check it out for yourself. There's the city's offshoot of Havana's Tropicana Nightclub, with other venues including the Casa de la Trova, and the Casa del las Tradiciones.

COMBINE SHOPPING WITH SIGHTSEEING

The ancient Castillo de San Pedro de la Roca – universally better known as El Morro – has vendors aplenty offering a fine range of wooden and woven crafts, from domino sets to sun hats, and generally at very good prices. Alternatively, you could head to Enramadas Street, one of the best shopping streets in downtown Santiago. This pedestrianised thoroughfare not only has a whole host of small stores to pop into and check out, but pleasant shade giving trees to sit beneath and plenty of bars and cafes should you wish to stop for a little longer.

ENJOY A COCKTAIL WHILE ADMIRING THE VIEW

Head to the top of the towering Melia Hotel Santiago de Cuba and you'll find phenomenal 360-degree views of the city – ancient and modern – with the beautiful mountains providing an equally fine backdrop come day or night. Another great option is the rooftop patio on the fifth floor of the Hotel Casa Granda on Cespedes Square. It can get busy, so make sure you grab a seat when you can, to make the most of their talent at cocktail making.

RELAX IN PARQUE CÉSPEDES

The perfect introduction into everyday Cuban life, Parque Céspedes is not just a place to picnic or relax in the shade of a palm, but also a vibrant meeting spot for friends and family, and a place to check out the country's next music stars, all surrounded by Spanish-era architecture and the bronze bust of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, the park's namesake, who ignited the battle for Cuban independence in 1868.

EXPLORE PARQUE BACONAO

Spanning 800 square kilometres of verdant land between the river Baconao and Santiago de Cuba, this UNESCO Biosphere Reserve acts as a vital habitat for many of Cuba's endemic species, though must visit for its life-sized dinosaur models and its outdoor car museum.

RELAX ON CAYO GRANMA

Boasting stilted wooden homes that form a traditional coastal fishing community, Cayo Granma is an idyllic spot to spend a couple of days. An authentic destination is which to absorb all that makes the country and its people so special, there's also the chance to get out and about by hiking to the key's highest point at the whitewashed Iglesia de San Rafael, or to enjoy seafood barely out of the water at the Palmares and El Cayo restaurants.

BARACOA

The first landing point for Christopher Columbus in the New World, Baracoa remains relatively isolated and traditional, especially compared to Havana. But that's not to say it doesn't also boast a wealth of attractions.



CHECK OUT THE FORTIFICATIONS

Like many Cuban cities, Baracoa has many remnants of fortification, speaking of a more troubled time in the nation's history. Be sure to see the Fuerte Matachín, was built in 1802. There's also the Fuerte La Punta, built the next year, which is now largely comprised of a restaurant, though there's a beautiful small beach next to the fort. You might also want to have a look at the Hotel Castillo, which was once a fort (known as El Castillo), with views that are unbeatable.

EXPLORE THE ABUNDANCE OF NATURAL LANDSCAPES

From the town there are many outdoor excursions to go on, each making use of its beautiful surroundings. Explore the bountiful rivers in the area or go boating between the tall cliffs at the mouth of Yumuri River. You can also explore the lush jungles in the foothills of El Yunque, an imposing flat-topped mountain that dominates the local landscape.

SAVOUR THE LOCAL CUISINE

Its lush environment has made Baracoa one of the country's predominant areas of cocoa production, with many chocolates produced in the city as a result. There's also an abundance of banana and coconut crops in the countryside around the town. But one of the best ways to sample all the local cuisine has to offer is by settling down to a scrumptious BBQ lunch by the river, a tranquil spot where it's easy to lose yourself (mentally if not physically) for a couple of hours.

SEE THE CROSS OF LA PARRA

It has been carbon-dated to more than 500 years old, and was supposedly brought to Cuba by Christopher Columbus himself

(although this debateable when you learn that the wood used is indigenous to Cuba). It certainly was created at this time, possibly on the orders of Columbus. It can be seen (in a protective glass case) at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Ascension.

VISIT THE MUSEUM OF FUERTE MATACHIN

Local history is on display here, from pre-Columbian archaeological finds, to the years of pirate activity, documents and paintings relating to the Spanish colonial area, and exhibits on the War of Independence and the Cuban Revolution.

CLIMB EL YUNQUE

You cannot fail to see "the anvil" as it dramatically juts out from the ground, overlooking Baracoa and the ocean. This distinctive flat-topped mountain is at the heart of a UNESCO biosphere reserve, and it's thought that there are still many types of flora and fauna that have not yet been recorded in the reserve. The hike to the top is not as difficult as you might imagine, and can be done in around 2 hours. There is also the option to hire a vehicle (and driver) and be driven to the summit.

RAFT THE RIVER TOA

You can travel up Cuba's largest river on a 'cayuca', a raft similar to the one used by the native Indians, giving you an excellent view of the soaring Pico Galán, (over 3,000 feet) and the many waterfalls cascading into the river.

SWIM AND SNORKEL AT LA MAGUANA

An isolated beach to beat all isolated beaches. This idyllic stretch of sand is ideal for swimming and snorkelling, with local fisherman cooking their catch for you while you watch.

VIVA CUBA

