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Varadero

Photo: Kamira/Shutterstock.com

possohh/Shutterstock.com

Cuba's quintessential holiday destination is steadily regaining former glory, striding forward to the future where it will once again rank among the finest beach resorts in the Caribbean. Varadero is far from a synthetic vacationer theme park some hold it for - the town is home to nearly 20,000 Cubans and exudes local flavour despite being primarily known for its first-class luxury hotels.

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Evgenia Bolyukh/Shutterstock.com

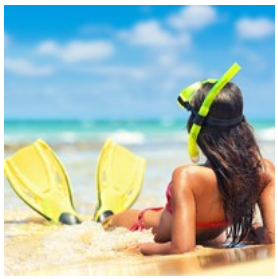
Varadero's momentum as a tourism hub was put to a halt by the Revolution - a nearly 50-year-long break in visitor influx that now shows major signs of revival.
The place name "Varadero" often comprises not just the town proper, but the entire Hicacos Peninsula that juts into the Atlantic reaching out over 20km north from Cuban mainland. On average, the peninsula's width does not exceed five hundred meters, which brings both good and bad with it - the extremely narrow stretch of land makes dining and entertainment venues seem sparse and certainly complicates bar-hopping; on the upside, one is never too far from the beach, being within short walking distance from some of the most stunning white-sand shores on the island at all times.
Central Varadero is the area between roughly Calles 10 and 64 - this is where most life in town revolves around, and where many of the more affordable hotels are concentrated (cheaper options may be found in the western part of Varadero, towards Cuban mainland). The peninsula's east is known for being less populous - this is where the more refined luxury hotels and all-inclusive resorts are to be found.

DO & SEE

Diego Cervo/Shutterstock.com

Although crisp white-sand beaches are Varadero's main draw, the resort town's appeal extends far beyond those alone. Underneath the cerulean waters lie endless marine treasures, from natural sea fauna to an artificially created underwater marine park of sorts (Cayo Piedras del Norte), with (intentionally) sunken vessels and aircraft waiting to be explored by divers and/or glass-bottom boat passengers. There are a few attractive golf courses in the area, along with several small-town attractions. Some 20km out of town lies the so-called Saturn Cave - a natural grotto filled with water, where diving descents are possible.

Diving & Snorkeling



Some of the best snorkeling in the area is to be had at Coral Beach (some 20km west of Varadero), where the underwater world stuns with color and variety. Diving would require you to take about an hour-long boat trip out to one of the many sites around the peninsula.

Some reputable local dive centers include:

Barracuda Dive Center
Retiro Josone, calle 59 y Playa in Varadero

(near Arenas Blancas Hotel)
+53 45 613481

Acua Diving Center
Ave. Kawama 201 (between 2 and 3 Street from Varadero, near Kawama Hotel)
+53 45 668063

Photo: Maridav/Shutterstock.com

Ambrosio Cave

Perhaps the area's most important archaeological site, the Ambrosio Cave contains drawings that date back two millennia, and is a curious attraction for those not threatened by its murky insides (inhabited by dozens of bats and various eerie cavernous creatures).

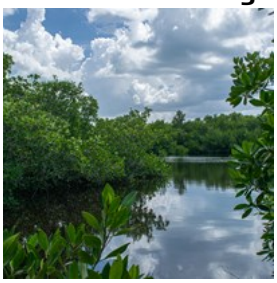
Photo: Ammonite/Shutterstock.com
Address: 1.5 km East Of Camino de Las Antillas, Varadero

Museo Municipal de Varadero

Housed inside a traditional Cuban wood villa, Varadero's Museo Municipal contains period furniture, old home decor items and various exhibits offering visitors insight into the resort town's pre-revolution history and ways of living. Guided tours available.

Photo: Filipe Frazao/Shutterstock.com
Address: Calle 57, Varadero

Varahicacos Ecological Reserve



Consider hiking one of the three trails at the rather compact Varahicacos Ecological Reserve, whose major attractions include the Musulmanes Cave (with human remains dating back over 2500 years on display) and the famous 600-year-old cactus (el Patriarca).

Photo: Tonhio411/Shutterstock.com
Address: Autopista Sur, Varadero

Josone Park

A green oasis in Varadero, Josone is a public park with multiple entertainment facilities, such as rental row boats and water bikes, a tourist train circulating around premises, multiple cafes and restaurants, as well as the on-site villa Retiro Josone, which once belonged to a couple of a local rum distillery owners and was expropriated after the revolution.

Photo: Zbynek Jirousek/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av 1 & Calle 58, Varadero

Parque Central & Iglesia de Santa Elvira

One of the areas central to Varadero's town life, the recently re-discovered Parque Central (bordering on another park - Parque de las Taquilas) is perfectly fit for a refreshing stroll through the greenery in the peak of tropical Cuban heat. Nearby lies the small colonial-era church Iglesia de Santa Elvira.

Photo: Denis Belyaevskiy/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av 44 & 46, Varadero

House of Rum

Those interested in learning more about the production process of Cuba's iconic liquor are more than welcome to join a tour of Varadero's House of Rum, during which visitors will get the chance to savour the iconic drink in its many varieties - from the classic dark and light to chocolate and vanilla-flavoured types.

Photo: terekhov igor/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av 1, Varadero

Mansion Xanadu

Mansion Xanadu is a refined hotel that sits next to a vast, 18-hole golf course. The building itself was once commissioned by a moneyed American entrepreneur, who ordered it be built with the use of top-notch quality materials, such as marble. The mansion was later expropriated by the government, only to become known as the single lavish, Spanish colonial-style hotel in the area.

Photo: zqy723/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av las Américas & Autopista Sur, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 668482
Internet: www.varaderogolfclub.com

Marina Gaviota

Marina Gaviota, at the eastern tip of Hicacos Peninsula - reportedly the largest marina in the Caribbean - is now resting in anticipation of the expected influx of American vacationers. It's Plaza Las Morlas shopping mall, waterside cafes and eateries are all set for the grand welcome.

Photo: Kamira/Shutterstock.com

Delfinario

Set on a natural cove, the Varadero Delfinario invites visitors to see the graceful marine mammals up close and even - if they so desire - go for a swim in their company, all at a rather moderate fee. Dolphins are kept in a favourable natural environment of a sea inlet.

Photo: Elena Larina/Shutterstock.com
Address: Carretera Las Morlas, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 668031

DINING

Evgenia Bolyukh/Shutterstock.com

Although most restaurants in Varadero cater to an international clientele, classics of Cuban cuisine (many of which are a variation on the

theme of rice and beans) are still served at local "paladares" (family-run businesses). One menu item that features prominently on local restaurants' menus is lobster, a marine product reserved primarily for export and foreign visitors, and one whose capture still remains a controversial topic in Cuba. Some local specialities include ajiaco stew, meat empanadas, as well as chicken and pork dishes.

Varadero 60

With its well thought-out, sixties-themed interior and impeccable service, Varadero 60 is undeniably one of the finest dining establishments on the peninsula. The menu prominently features Italian flavours, with lobster and sirloin steak as the house specialties. Seating available indoors and out on the airy veranda.

Photo: Joshua Resnick/Shutterstock.com
Address: Calle 60 & Av 3, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 613986

Paladar Nonna Tina

Italian-run Paladar Nonna Tina serves pizzas done the right way (thin-crusted, baked in a wood oven), with personal and family-sized servings available. Other Italian delights include a whole range of pasta dishes, a couple of meat varieties, and a selection of entrees and appetizers, all at reasonable prices.

Photo: Azeriartvector/Shutterstock.com
Address: Calle 38, Varadero
Opening hours: Sun-Sat 12pm-11pm
Phone: +53 45 612450
Internet: www.paladar-nonnatina.it
More Info: Betwen Ave 1ra and the beach

Paladar Salsa Suarez

Paladar Salsa Suarez tops the list of Varadero's finest - the fine dining restaurant is known for its impeccable service and varied menu, incorporating well-crafted dishes from cuisines the world over, from sushi to traditional Cuban specialties.

Photo: Wasant/Shutterstock.com
Address: Calle 31 No. 103, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 614194
Internet: www.salsasuarezvaradero.com
More Info: Between 1ra and 3ra Ave

Xanadu

The marble-floored Xanadu occupies the insides of an opulent mansion commissioned by an American millionaire several decades ago. Prices bite, but an evening here is worth the experience. Views over the ocean unfold from the top-floor cocktail bar.

Photo: Andrey Bayda/Shutterstock.com
Address: DuPont Mansion, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 668482

La Vaca Rosada

The pleasant rooftop terrace of La Vaca Rosada is a great choice for dining in Varadero. The restaurant serves a wide selection of meat

and seafood dishes, all in a relaxed atmosphere of an airy outdoor seating space. Located in the peninsula's west.

Photo: stockyimages/Shutterstock.com
Address: Calle 21 no.102, Varadero
Opening hours: Tue-Sun 6pm-11.45pm
Phone: +53 45 612307

Dante

One of Varadero's several excellent Italian restaurants, Dante enjoys an idyllic lake setting in the lush Josone Park. The establishment serves up a wide variety of Italian specialties such as pizza, pasta, appetizers and dessert. The wine selection is one of the best in town.

Photo: mythja/Shutterstock.com
Address: Calle 56 & 58, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 667738
More Info: Parque Josone

La Barbacoa

The excellent BBQ restaurant is favoured by vacationers looking to break the routine of all-inclusive hotel dining. La Barbacoa serves a selection of prime cuts of meat and fresh seafood, including lobster. All orders include a side of flavoured bread, rice, vegetables, and potatoes.

Photo: Tatiana Volgutova/Shutterstock.com
Address: Calle 64 & Av 1, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 667795

Kiki's

Kiki's reportedly serves some of the best Italian in Varadero, with pizzas topping the list of menu items most favoured by return customers. The menu features a selection of great value Italian and international dishes (with local specialties such as lobster tail present, naturally).

Photo: Denis Tabler/Shutterstock.com
Address: Calle 5, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 614115

CAFES

paulista/Shutterstock.com

Coffee is an indispensable part of Cuban culture served at most (if not all) Cuban establishments - the world-famous "café Cubano" is essentially a shot of espresso with sugar added in the brewing process. Ice cream is a beloved local treat, and for breakfast, the customary combo is that of a "tostada" (toasted bread with butter) and cafe con leche, often accompanied by fresh fruit.

Panaderia Dona Neli

The extremely popular, government-owned Panaderia Dona Neli operates around the clock and sells excellent, freshly-baked breads and

pastries. Arrive early to avoid lines and pick up products from the latest batch, or ask specifically for the most recently baked items when making a purchase.

Photo: DenisFilm/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av 1 & Calle 43, Varadero
Opening hours: 24/7

La Vicaria

La Vicaria serves non-refined, yet hearty and flavourful Cuban fare at very decent prices - the restaurant is government-run, which makes it one of the most affordable in the area. Portion sizes are rather large, so do bring an appetite. Seating offered in the outdoor patio.

Photo: Lisa F. Young/Shutterstock.com
Address: Ave. 1ra y 38, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 614721

La Bodeguita Del Medio

Stop by the fabled La Bodeguita Del Medio if only to leave a mark of your own - the bar, tables, and walls are all fully coated with messages written or carved by the bar's grateful guests. The establishment also lays claim to inventing the mojito, so if ever there was the place to try one, it's here.

Photo: AbElena/Shutterstock.com
Address: Calle 40, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 667784

El Caney

Set directly by the beach, El Caney is an all-around great choice for either a filling lunch or a sunset dinner. The menu variety is decent (good selection of surf and turf) and prices are fair. House specialties include shrimp and fish fillet with garlic sauce.

Photo: Robyn Mackenzie/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av Playa, Varadero
More Info: Between 42 & 43

Terracita's Cafe

Tucked away between Streets 28 and 29, Terracita's is a pleasant cafe that is nothing like the tattered path leading up to it. Come here for filling, great value breakfasts and lunches, or a snack late in the evening.

Photo: Brent Hofacker/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av 1, Varadero
Opening hours: Tue-Sat 8am-10pm, Sun 8am-2pm
Phone: +53 45 612514
More Info: Between 28 & 29

La Isabelica Casa del Cafe

Varadero doesn't have a lot to boast in the way of coffee shops, but La Isabelica (in Marina Gaviota) is one safe bet when it comes to enjoying a great brew. Coffee comes in multiple varieties, and both sweet and savoury snacks are served to compliment the drinks.

Photo: baranq/Shutterstock.com

Address: Marina Gaviota, Varadero

BARS & NIGHTLIFE

Dmitry Polonskiy/Shutterstock.com

Nightlife in Varadero is geared primarily towards visitors and vacationers, but most clubs welcome a diverse clientele consisting of both Cubans and international travellers. Bar-hopping may be hard to do on your own, since nightlife establishments tend to be quite spread out along the narrow peninsula, so looking into a pub-crawl type program may be a good idea (these often include entry to one of Varadero's festive cabaret shows).

Calle 62

Calle 62 is a place unlike any other - at night, part of the road leading up to the establishment is closed off to traffic and gets turned into a makeshift dance floor. The bar is popular with both locals and tourists, hosts live music shows and invites professional dancers to get the crowd going for the night.

Photo: AlessandroBiascioli/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av 1 & Calle 62, Varadero

Casa de la Musica

One of Varadero's hottest meeting spots, Casa de la Musica is where locals and tourists mingle in the upbeat setting of a modern Cuban nightlife establishment, with regular on-stage live performances and dancing till the late-night hours. Smoking indoors not allowed.

Photo: Mooid Art/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av Playa & Calle 42 & 43, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 668918

La Bamba Disco

Located on Tuxpan Hotel premises, La Bamba welcomes all - hotel guests and visitors from elsewhere alike (this includes both Cubans and internationals). The club is busiest on Friday and Saturday nights, when a clientele of the 20 to 40 age range fills up the dance floor.

Photo: Pressmaster/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av las Américas km 2, Varadero
More Info: Hotel Tuxpan

Mambo Club

One of the venues to not be missed, Mambo is a live music club that regularly puts on great live shows. The club is known for its added open bar service (unlimited drinks included in the entry fee). There is dancing on some nights (and a pool table to make use of as an alternative).

Photo: Mooid Art/Shutterstock.com
Address: Carretera de Las Morlas km 14, Varadero

Phone: +53 45 668565

Bar Mirador Casa Blanca

The top floor of Varadero's opulent Xanadu Mansion is occupied by this luxurious lounge with some of the best views over the charming Cuban sunset. It is one of the resort town's most romantic spots, whose appeal is complimented by a good value happy hour.

Photo: Dmitry Galaganov/Shutterstock.com
Address: Xanadu Mansion, Varadero

La Comparsita

La Comparsita's major draw is the fact that the venue's dance floor is set right under the stars, making it much more airy and refreshing than some of Varadero's popular indoor clubs. Open bar is sometimes included in the price of entry; live music and dance shows are often put on.

Photo: Pressmaster/Shutterstock.com
Address: Calle 60 and Av 3, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 667415

Cabaret La Cueva del Pirata

Located inside a natural cave, La Cueva del Pirata is a busy cabaret popular with the young crowd. Evening start with a rowdy music and dance show, swiftly followed by a night-long dance party for all who wish to stay. Most hotels organize transfers for guests - enquire at you accommodation's reception.

Photo: Bochkarev Photography/Shutterstock.com
Address: Km 12, Carretera Las Morlas, Varadero
Opening hours: Daily 11pm–3am

Havana Club

One of Varadero's favourite nightlife venues, Havana Club is a lively discotheque that attracts both locals and tourists. The party usually starts quite late (usually after midnight), with guests dancing and savouring the excellent mojitos mixed here.

Photo: Ivan Mateev/Shutterstock.com
Address: Calle 61, Varadero

SHOPPING

EsHanPhot/Shutterstock.com

Cigars, rum, coffee and honey are some of the items most sought-after by travellers to Cuba, and rightfully so - these locally-produced products make for perfect gifts and souvenirs, and are often a great bargain to purchase in their land of origin. Products of the non-edible variety include wood handicrafts, Cuban art, music paraphernalia and records. For serious antiques and vintage shopping, it might be worth to plan a trip to Havana, where finds range from rare jewellery to books and magazines.

Taller de Ceramica Artistica

This artisan gallery treats shoppers to a show of craftsmen at work, a glimpse into the back-stage of the production process of some of many items on sale at the adjacent store. Ceramic pieces sold here are hand-made, and make for perfect gifts and souvenirs.

Photo: Skoropadska Maruna/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av 1, Varadero
More Info: Between Calles 59 and 60

La Casa del Habano

With its two locations in Varadero, La Casa del Habano is a boutique that provides visitors to the island with the quintessential Cuban shopping experience - picking out (and, perhaps, trying) authentic local cigars. The shop at the address below features an upstairs cafe serving excellent coffee.

Photo: Jeff Wasserman/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av 1 & Calle 63, Varadero

Varadero Street Market

The street market in downtown Varadero is the best place to go for gifts and souvenirs to bring back home. Items on sale range from small knick-knacks, leather goods and traveller necessities to full-on unique pieces of art, ranging from sculpture to painting.

Photo: Kamira/Shutterstock.com
Address: Calle 54, Varadero

Casa del Ron

Also known as the "House of Rum", this Varadero distillery is among the best places in town to stock up on the island's iconic alcoholic drink (multiple varieties, including flavoured ones, are on offer). Take the tour to learn more about the process of rum-making.

Photo: Africa Studio/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av 1 & Calle 62, Varadero

Librería Hanoi

This central Varadero location is the place to go if you're looking for an old-fashioned, sand-resistant paperback to fill the lazy hours at the beach. The particular outlet stocks a good selection of English-language literature (in addition to the customary for Cuban bookstores ideologically-approved editions in Spanish).

Photo: Yulia Grigoryeva/Shutterstock.com
Address: Av 1 & Calle 44, Varadero

Centro Comercial Hicacos

The selection at Varadero's underground mall may offers a modest yet comprehensive selection of stores to meet nearly all traveler needs. The central location (at Parque de las 8000 Taquillas) makes it an easy choice for anything from clothing to authentic Cuban rum.

Photo: Rawpixel/Shutterstock.com
Address: Parque de las 8000 Taquillas, Varadero

Plaza Las Morlas

The shopping and entertainment center in Varedero's modern marina is still in its early days of development, but already contains several small boutiques (deli foods, clothing, etc.), coffee shops and eateries, as well as a few pastime options such as a bowling alley.

Photo: mTaira/Shutterstock.com
Address: Autopista sur & Final Varadero, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 667330

Plaza America

Varadero's first proper shopping mall still stands, and although the array of shops may seem underwhelming to an outsider, there are some rather useful tourist locales here, such as a bank, pharmacy, a few souvenir shops and stores selling anything a traveler may need.

Photo: WSW1985/Shutterstock.com
Address: Autopista Sur, Varadero
Phone: +53 45 668181

ARTex Store & Handicraft Market

ARTex specializes in all things music, offering a great selection of music and art paraphernalia from T-shirts to records to musical instruments. You'll find the market opposite Acuazul Hotel (Calle 12), while the store itself is just a stone's throw away from Iglesia Santa Elvira.

Photo: gary yim/Shutterstock.com
Address: Calle 12, Varadero

TOURIST INFORMATION

Wilier/Shutterstock.com

Juan Gualberto Gómez Airport

The airport closest to Varadero - Juan Gualberto Gómez Airport - is located about 20km away from town and serves a number of international airlines. Getting here and away is possible by pre-arranged transfer or shuttle as well as taxi. Car hire is also available at the airport directly.

Photo: Juan Garces
Address: Matanzas, Cuba
Internet: www.varadero-airport.com

Passport / Visa

Travelers visiting Cuba are required to hold a valid passport valid for at least 2 months following their travel date, medical insurance, and proof of return tickets. Proof of sufficient funds to support the stay is also required (50 dollars/day).

Citizens of Namibia can stay in Cuba indefinitely.

Citizens of Benin, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kenya, Malaysia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Russia, Serbia and United Arab Emirates can stay for up to 90 days. Citizens of Grenada and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines — up to 60 days.

Pasport holders of Antigua and Barbuda, Belarus, Mongolia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia and Singapore can travel for 30 days, while travelers form Barbados and Dominica are welcome for up to 28 days

The remaining majority of international visitors will need to obtain a Tourist Card, Tarjeta del Turista, that grants permission to stay in Cuba for 30 days and can be extended once for a further 30. The card can be obtained via the airline, travel agent or a Cuban mission abroad.

Citizens of the following countries are not eligible for a Tourist Card and will need to apply for a visa: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, India, Iran, Iraq, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Yemen. Admission is refused entirely to Kosovo nationals.

Those who fly to Cuba from US airports must purchase a "Pink Tourist Card" which is mainly available in the US and fill an Affidavit form, airlines in the US will be able to provide more information about how to purchase the Pink Tourist Card. These Pink Tourist Cards are needed for everyone flying from the US to Cuba on a direct route. Those who enter Cuba from non-US airports must purchase a "Green Tourist Card", which is often less expensive.

Special regulations apply to Cuban-born foreign citizens, who will need to make visa arrangements for a Cuban visa in advance (via a Cuban Embassy), unless they hold a valid Cuban passport.

Photo: ConvertKit/unsplash
Internet: www.visaguide.world/north-america-caribbean/cuba-visa/requirements

Public Transport

A tourist double-decker bus circulates around the peninsula for a flat rate equivalent of a few dollars. The bus operates on a hop on-hop off basis; the entire route takes approximately 2 hours. Mopeds and bikes are available for hire, as are horse carriages (if those are something for you). The Varadero Terminal de Omnibus serves multiple locations across Cuba with Viazul.

Photo: Pierre-Luc Auclair
Internet: www.viazul.com

Taxi

Taxis are available for hire at most hotels. The so-called "coco taxis" (small motorised vehicles) operate as a cheaper variety of taxi (these may be hired on the spot nearly anywhere in Varadero).

Photo: ArrivalGuides

Post

Postage stamps may be purchased at Agencia Postal Principal, Varadero's main post office. Mail may often be dropped off directly at your hotel, or blue post boxes around town.

Photo: Andy Fuchs
Address: Avenida Primera, Varadero
More Info: Calle 39 & 40

Pharmacy

Although there are a few pharmacies in Varadero, it is recommended that you bring any necessary medication along, as pharmacies may sometimes be understocked, with prices higher than elsewhere on imported medication. International pharmacies may be found by the Hotel Varazul in cenetral Varadero, Plaza las Americas shopping mall and further locations.

Photo: Gemma Garner

Telephone

Country code for Cuba +53 International calls are best made from ETECSA offices (Corner of Av 1ra & Calle 30) or with pre-paid cards.

Photo: Jardson Almeida

Electricity

110 Volts, most newer hotels have 220 V sockets. Two- and three-pin plugs are in use, adapter may be necessary.

Photo: Stirling Tschan

Population
27,170 (2010 — latest estimate)

Currency
For many years, there were two currencies in simultaneous circulation. The Cuban Peso (CUP, or MN — moneda nacional) was used exclusively by Cubans, while the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC) was used by foreigners.

In 2020, the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC) was eliminated. Only the Cuban Peso (CUP) remains in use.

Opening hours
Opening hours for many Cuban businesses vary and may not be strictly enforced. As a general rule, most locations operate Monday through Saturday, from around 9am to 5pm (shorter hours on Saturday).

Newspapers
Granma (also in English)
Juventud Rebelde
Trabajadores (also in English)

Emergency numbers
Police 106
Ambulance 104
Fire 105

Tourist information
Infotur
Calle 13, Varadero
(next to Hotel Acuazul)