

# Guantánamo Province



Notorious for its US naval base and famous the world over for a trite song about a *guajira* (country bumpkin), Guantánamo's reputation as a dumping ground for ailing Cold War anachronisms is only half-deserved. Bisected by the velvety Sierra del Puril and punctuated by isolated pockets of self-sufficient rural smallholdings, the country's most easterly province is Cuba's wettest, driest, hottest and most mountainous region. It was also the first area to be colonized by the Spanish.

In ethereal Baracoa you will find one of the island's most magical places, a Cuban Shangri-La with Coco palms and jungle-covered mountains encasing the kind of mind-propelling, dream-invoking cityscape that even Tolkien couldn't have invented. Further up the coast, in the Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt nature goes haywire in a protected area that ecological experts consider to be one of the richest tracts of virgin forest in the Americas.

From an anthropological standpoint Guantánamo's pre-Columbian legacy is unique. Home to the last surviving vestiges of indigenous native culture in Cuba, the province has revealed ceramic pots, ancient idols, intricate petroglyphs, and mystical Indian cemeteries in the hunt to piece together the final remnants of the oft-misunderstood Taíno Indian civilization.

Cocooned in the extreme south, heavily fortified Gitmo (American slang for the Guantánamo naval base) boasts a golf course, five cinemas, a high security prison and Cuba's only McDonald's restaurant. You can espy all of these strange capitalist incongruities over an ice-cold beer in the Malones look-out. Democracy or hypocrisy...? You decide.

## HIGHLIGHTS

### ■ Cold War Conundrum

Espy the US naval base at inglorious Gitmo (p436)

### ■ Coffee, Coconuts & Cacao

Sample the culinary secrets of seaside Baracoa (p443)

### ■ Rollercoaster Ride

Up and over La Farola (p437); take the high road to Baracoa on a bicycle

### ■ Green Party

Keep vigil for manatees and explore in Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt (p446)

### ■ Caribbean Ideal

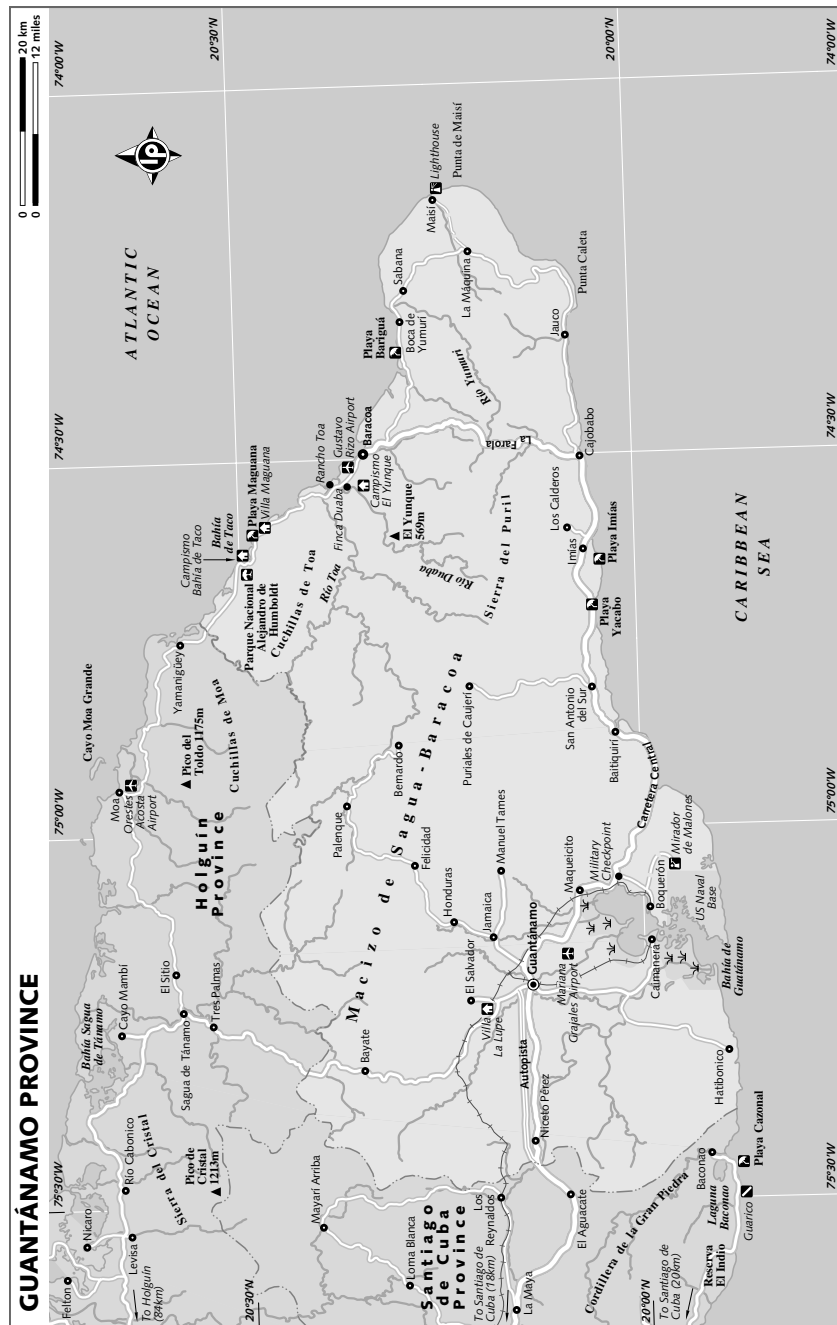
Do absolutely nothing on magnificent Maguana Beach (p446)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 21

■ POPULATION: 516,311

■ AREA: 6186 SQ KM



## History

Until the arrival of the Spanish in the late 15th century, Taíno Indians populated the mountains and forests around Guantánamo forging a living as fishermen, hunters and small-scale farmers. Columbus first arrived in the region in November 1492, a month or so after his initial landfall near Gibara, and planted a small wooden cross in a beautiful bay he ceremoniously christened Porto Santo – after an idyllic island off Portugal where he had enjoyed his honeymoon. The Spanish returned again in 1511 under the auspices of Columbus' son Diego in a flotilla of four ships and 400 men that included the island's first governor Diego Velázquez. Building a makeshift fort constructed from wood, the conquistadors consecrated the island's first colonial settlement, La Villa de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción (Baracoa), and watched helplessly as the town was subjected to repeated attacks from hostile local Indians led by a rebellious local *cacique* (chief) known as Hatuey.

Declining in importance after the capital moved to Santiago in 1515, the Guantánamo region became Cuba's Tibet – a mountainous and barely penetrable rural backwater where prisoners were exiled and old traditions survived. In the 18th century, the area was re-colonized by French immigrants from Haiti who mastered the difficult terrain in order to cultivate coffee, cotton and sugarcane on the backs of imported African slaves. Following the Second War of Independence a brand new foe took up residence in Guantánamo Bay – the all-powerful Americans – intent on protecting their economic interests in the strategically important Panama Canal region. Despite repeated bouts of mud-slinging in the years since, the not-so-welcome *Yanquis*, as they are popularly known, have repeatedly refused to budge.

## GUANTÁNAMO

☎ 21 / pop 210,408

Despite its notoriety in the ongoing fisticuffs between Cuba and the US, Guantánamo is one of the country's least-visited cities. Culturally vibrant yet visually unremarkable, the municipality is famous for its sportsmen (who between them have brought back 11 Olympic gold medals) and its unique

blend of rootsy Afro-Cuban music known as *changüí*.

'Discovered' by Columbus in 1494 and given the once-over by the inquisitive British 250 years later, the initial settlement of Santa Catalina del Saltadero del Guaso was founded in 1819 between the Jaibo, Bano, and Guaso rivers by French plantation owners on the run from Haiti. In 1843 the town changed its name to Guantánamo and in 1903 the bullish US navy took up residence in the bay next door. The sparks have been flying ever since.

Guantánamo has little in the way of standard tourist sights and for foreign travelers the accommodation options are limited. Those on a tight itinerary might be better off heading straight for Baracoa, but for diehards intent on seeing the 'real' Cuba – warts and all – this could be your bag.

## Orientation

Mariana Grajales airport (airport code GAO) is 16km southeast of Guantánamo, 4km off the road to Baracoa. Parque Martí, Guantánamo's central square, is several blocks south of the train station and 5km east of the Terminal de Ómnibus (bus station). Villa La Lupe, the main tourist hotel is 5km northwest of the town.

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**Librería Asdrubal López** (Calixto García No 951; ☎ 9am–noon & 2–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat)

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Etcas** (cnr Aguilera & Los Maceos; per hr CUC\$6; ☎ 9am–6:30pm) Four computers.

### LIBRARIES

**Biblioteca Policarpo Pineda Rustán** (cnr Los Maceo & Emilio Giro; ☎ 8am–9pm Mon–Fri, 8am–5pm Sat, 9am–noon Sun) An architectural landmark.

### MEDIA

**Venceremos & Lomería** Two local newspapers published on Saturday.

**Radio Trinchera Antimperialista CMKS** Trumpets the word over 1070AM.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Farmacia Principal Municipal** (cnr Calixto García & Aguilera; ☎ 24hr) On the northeast corner of Parque Martí.

## EAST MEETS WEST

In common with many ethnically diverse nations around the world, Cuba enjoys its fair share of regional rivalry. From simple fun-poking to full-on cultural stereotyping, the two camps divide up east/west along an invisible line running somewhere east of Camagüey.

Traditionally it's those from the Occidente who have always enjoyed the better standard of living. Basking in their relative prosperity you'll often hear westerners half-jokingly refer to their poorer Oriental counterparts as *palestinos* for the longstanding eastern tendency to migrate west in search of work.

The exodus has snowballed in recent years. Among Cubans it is no secret that nearly 85% of Habana policemen are *palestinos* and that the bulk of Varadero's Vegas-style hotel blocks were built with the hard-earned sweat of itinerant eastern labor.

But it's not all one-way traffic. Identifiable by their lilting musical accents and '¿Que bola, compay?' (How you doin'?) greetings, the inhabitants of Cuba's Oriente region – despite a traditionally lower earning potential – revel in their image as feisty revolutionaries and jealous guards of Cuba's world-famous musical legacy.

**Hospital Agostinho Neto** (☎ 35 54 50; Carretera de El Salvador Km 1; ☎ 24hr) At the west end of Plaza Mariana Grajales in front of Hotel Guantánamo. It will help foreigners in an emergency.

## MONEY

**Banco de Crédito y Comercio** (Calixto García btwn Emilio Giro & Bartolomé Masó) Two branches on this block.  
**Bandec** (cnr Ahogados & Calle 4) Big new branch near Hotel Guantánamo.

**Cadeca** (cnr Calixto García & Prado; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) Sells Cuban pesos and cashes traveler's checks.

## POST

**Post office** (Pedro A Pérez; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) On the west side of Parque Martí. There's also a DHL office here.

## TELEPHONE

**Etsca** (cnr Aguilera & Los Maceos; ☎ 9am-6:30pm)

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Reservaciones de Campismo** (Flor Crombet No 410; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri)

## Dangers & Annoyances

Guantánamo is a big city with a mellow town feel that pickpockets sometimes exploit. Stay alert especially on public transport and during Noches Guantanameras (p435).

## Sights

The quirky collection at **Museo Municipal** (cnr José Martí & Prado; admission free; ☎ 2-6pm Mon, 8am-noon & 3-7pm Tue-Sat) includes prerevolution

day passes to the naval base and the antique Harley Davidson used to shuttle secret messages during the revolution. Don't miss the cigar bands in the back gallery.

The **Parroquia de Santa Catalina de Riccis**, in Parque Martí, dates from 1863. In front of the church is a statue of Major General Pedro A Pérez, erected in 1928. The seated Martí statue here is particularly striking, as are the tulip fountain and provençal colored bandstand.

Local architect Leticio Salcines (1888–1973) left a number of impressive works around Guantánamo, including the market building **Plaza del Mercado Agro Industrial** (cnr Los Maceos & Prado), the **train station**, and his personal residence, the 1916 **Palacio Salcines** (cnr Pedro A Pérez & Prado; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri), a triumph of eclecticism and a monument said to be the building most representative of Guantánamo. The Palacio is now a small museum exhibiting colorful frescos, Japanese porcelain and a rusty old music box that pipes out rather disappointing Mozart. A guided tour (CUC\$1) makes the dull exhibits infinitely more interesting. On the palace's turret is *La Fama*, a sculpture designed by Italian artist Americo Chine, that serves as the symbol of Guantánamo, her trumpet announcing good and evil. Salcines also designed the beautiful provincial library **Biblioteca Policarpo Pineda Rustán** (cnr Los Maceo & Emilio Giro), which was once the city hall (1934–51). Trials of Fulgencio Batista's thugs were held here in 1959, and a number were killed when they snatched a rifle and tried to escape.



For a fuller expose of Guantánamo's interesting architectural heritage you might want to stop by at the **Oficina de Monumentos y Sitios Históricos** (Los Maceos btwn Emilio Giro & Flor Crombet). Ask about a map of city walking trails. You'll find more fascinating historical and geographical facts about the city in the **Pabellón Guantánamo** (Pedro A Pérez No 953), a small expo center displaying key information about the city.

The huge Sovietlike **Monument to the Heroes**, glorifying the Brigada Fronteriza 'that defends the forward trench of socialism on this continent,' dominates Plaza Mariana Grajales, the gigantic square opposite Hotel Guantánamo. Electrifying mass rallies occur here on May Day.

## Sleeping

**Hotel Guantánamo** (Islazul; ☎ 38 10 15, 38 10 25; Calle 13 Norte btwn Ahogados & 2 de Octubre; s/d low season CUC\$20/24, high season CUC\$23/30; ☎ ☎ ☎) Guantánamo's modern, four-story signature hotel on Plaza Mariana Grajales in Reparto Caribe is currently serving the Misión Milagros program (p449). Travelers should check out the similarly priced La Lupe or choose from one of a dozen amply-furnished casas particulares in town (p434).

**Villa La Lupe** (Islazul; ☎ 38 26 34, 38 26 12; Carretera El Salvador Km 3.5; s/d low season CUC\$20/24, high season CUC\$23/30; ☎ ☎ ☎) Located 5km outside of town on the road to El Salvador, Villa La Lupe – named after a song composed by

### CASAS PARTICULARES – GUANTÁNAMO

With the Hotel Guantánamo given over to Misión Milagros and La Lupe situated 5km out of town, the city's accommodation options have been reduced to a core of about a dozen well-maintained *casas particulares*:

**Cira Alberti Otero** (☎ 32 65 46; José Martí No 819 btwn Prado & Aguilera; r CUC\$20-25; ♿) Rents out two rooms, each with private bath. There's a roof terrace and cooking facilities here.

**Elyse Castillo Osoria** (☎ 32 37 87; Calixto García No 766 btwn Prado & Jesús del Sol; r CUC\$20-25; ♿) This place has rooms with refrigerators and is licensed to rent to both Cubans and foreigners.

**Lissett Foster Lara** (☎ 32 59 70; Pedro A Pérez No 761 btwn Prado & Jesús del Sol; r CUC\$20-25; ♿) One of Guantánamo's (and Cuba's) most comfortable *casas*. There's welcome hot water and a little porch overlooking the street action here. Lissett speaks fluent English.

**Osmaida Blanco Castillo** (☎ 32 51 93; Pedro A Pérez No 664 btwn Paseo & Narciso López; r CUC\$20-25; ♿) Two rooms with private bath. Large roof terrace and bar. Meals available.

**Ramón Revé Durand** (☎ 32 21 59; Pedro A Pérez No 670A btwn Paseo & Narciso López; r CUC\$20-25; ♿) One of the city's original *casas* open since 1997; TV, fridge and spotlessly clean.

Rebel army commander Juan Almeida – is an attractive rural resort with a welcome mix of Cuban and foreign clientele. The best accommodation is provided in sturdy cabins situated around a central swimming pool and the adjacent restaurant, which serves the usual staples of pork and rice, overlooks an attractive river where young girls celebrate their *quinciénas* (fifteenth birthdays). For music geeks the words of Almeida's famous song are emblazoned onto a nearby wall.

### Eating

**Restaurante La Cubanita** (José Martí No 864; meals 50 pesos; ☎ 6-10am, noon-2pm & 5pm-midnight) If you eat but one meal in Guantánamo, make sure it's here. Portions of pork, salad, *congrí* (rice flecked with beans) and *mariquitas* (green banana chips sliced longways) are huge at this peso paladar (private restaurant).

**Paladar Tokio** (☎ 38 23 82; Calle 3 btwn Calles 8 & 10) An out-of-town option (it's in the Santa María district) which specializes in *lomo* (smoked pork).

**Restaurante Vegetariano Guantánamo** (Pedro A Pérez; ☎ noon-2:30pm & 5-10:30pm) Vegetarians can break out of their daily cheese sandwich and tortilla treadmill at this unusual meatless establishment, next to the Casa de la Cultura – the menu is in *moneda nacional* (Cuban pesos).

**Plaza del Mercado Agro Industrial** (cnr Los Maceos & Prado; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Sat, 7am-2pm Sun) Guantánamo's public vegetable market is a red-domed Leticio Salcines' creation and rather striking – both inside and out.

**Agropecuaria** (Calle 13) The city's other outdoor market is opposite Plaza Mariana Grajales, just west of the Hotel Guantánamo; it sells bananas, yucca and onions by the truckload. Check out the large sign outside displaying the medicinal and nutritional value of plants and food.

Other places to get a cheap snack:

**Pizzería Holguín** (Calixto García) On the west side of Parque Martí, next to Cine Huambo. Sells peso pizzas to those with the patience of a saint.

**Panadería La Palmita** (Flor Crombet No 305 btwn Calixto García & Los Maceos; ☎ 7:30am-5pm Mon-Sat) For fresh bread.

**El Rápido** (cnr Flor Crombet & Los Maceos; ☎ 10am-10pm) Pizza, fried chicken and ice cream.

**Coppelia** (cnr Pedro A Pérez & Bernabe Varona) Several blocks south of the park.

### Drinking

**La Ruina** (cnr Calixto García & Emilio Giro; ☎ 10am-1am) This shell of a ruined colonial building has 9m ceilings and a crusty feet-on-the-table kind of ambience. There are plenty of benches to prop you up after your nth bottle of beer and a popular karaoke scene for those with ambitions of the singing variety.

**Taberna Noche Tropical** (☎ 38 16 01; cnr Calle 15 Norte & Ahogados) Nearby the Hotel Guantánamo, this is the place to grab a late-night Bucanero on your way back to La Lupe.

### Entertainment

Guantánamo was the hometown of Elio Revé (1930-97), former leader of the Orquesta

Revé, who popularized *son-changüí*. Today you can still hear groups playing this combination of urban dance music and rural Afro-Cuban drumming.

The city's strong musical tradition is borne out in the scope and quality of its music venues.

**Casas de la Trova** (admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8pm-1am) Guantánamo is the only place in Cuba outside Habana with two houses of *trova* (traditional poetic singing/songwriting) one on Parque Martí with low-key folk listings and the other on Máximo Gómez No 1062 with a slightly edgier beat.

**Casa de la Música** (Calixto García btwn Flor Crombet & Emilio Giro) There's also this well-maintained venue with Thursday *rap peñas* (rap concerts) and Sunday *trova* matinees.

**Tumba Francesa Pompadour** (Serafín Sánchez No 715) This peculiarly Guantánamo nightspot situated four blocks east of the train station specializes in a unique form of Haitian-style dancing. Programs, which are generally listed on the door, include *mi tumba baile* (Tumba dance), *encuentro tradicional* (traditional get together) and *peña campesino* (country music).

**Casa de la Cultura** (☎ 32 63 91; admission free) In the former Casino Español, on the west side of Parque Martí, this venue holds classical concerts and Afro-Cuban dance performances.

**Club Nevada** (cnr Pedro A Pérez & Bartolomé Masó; admission CUC\$1) For the city's funkier disco head to this tiled-terrace rooftop, blasting all the salsa and disco standards you've tolerated thus far.

**Cine Huambo** (cnr Calixto García & Flor Crombet) and **Cine América** (Calixto García), a block north, next to the Cubana office, are both near Parque Martí.

Saturday nights are for Noches Guantánameras when Calle Pedro Pérez is closed to traffic and stalls are set up in the street. Locals enjoy whole roast pig, belting music and copious amount of rum. Watch out for the drunks!

Baseball games are played from October to April at the Estadio Van Troi in Reparto San Justo, 1.5km south of the Servi-Cupet.

### Shopping

**Fondo de Bienes Culturales** (1st fl, Calixto García No 855) This place next to Pizzería Holguín, on the east side of Parque Martí, sells handicrafts.

**Photo Service** (Los Maceos btwn Aguilera & Flor Crombet) Films, prints, and batteries sold here.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

**Cubana** (☎ 3-4533; Calixto García No 817) flies five times a week from Habana (CUC\$124 one way, 2½ hours). There are no international flights to this airport.

#### BUS & TRUCK

The Terminal de Omnibus, 5km west of the center on the old road to Santiago de Cuba (a continuation of Av Camilo Cienfuegos), has Astro buses to Baracoa, Camagüey, Habana, Holguín and Santiago de Cuba leaving daily. On some of the Baracoa services, you have to change buses at Imías.

There are **Viazul** (www.viazul.com) buses daily to Baracoa (CUC\$10, 9:30am) and Santiago de Cuba (CUC\$6, 5:25pm).

Trucks to Santiago de Cuba (five pesos) and Baracoa also leave from the Terminal de Omnibus; though foreigners are sometimes prevented from using them. One reader reported taking a 20-centavo city bus marked 'Paraguay' to 'El Punto,' where he was able to catch a truck to Baracoa.

Trucks for Moa (seven pesos) park on the road to El Salvador north of town near the entrance to the Autopista Nacional.

#### CAR

The Autopista Nacional to Santiago de Cuba ends near Embalse La Yaya, 25km west of Guantánamo, where the road joins the Carretera Central. At El Cristo, 12km outside Santiago de Cuba, you rejoin the Autopista. To drive to Guantánamo from Santiago de Cuba, follow the Autopista Nacional north about 12km to the top of the grade, then take the first turn to the right. Eastbound, be aware of a police checkpoint near the end of the Autopista Nacional, a few kilometers short of Guantánamo. Any local will know the route and speed traps well (another benefit to sharing extra space in your car with a rideless Cuban).

#### TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 32 55 18; Pedro A Pérez), several blocks north of Parque Martí, has one departure for Habana (CUC\$32, 9:05pm) on alternate days. This train also stops at Camagüey (CUC\$13), Ciego de Ávila

(CUC\$16), Guayos (CUC\$20, closest you can get to Sancti Spiritus on this line), Santa Clara (CUC\$22) and Matanzas (CUC\$29). There was no Santiago de Cuba service at the time of writing. Purchase tickets in the morning of the day the train departs at the office on Pedro A Pérez.

### Getting Around

A one-peso bus departs for the airport from the **Cubana office** (Calixto García No 817), two hours before Cubana flights. From the airport, follow Cuban passengers onto this bus.

**Havanautos** (☎ 35 54 05; Cupet Guantánamo) is by the Servi-Cupet gas station on the way out of town toward Baracoa. If you couldn't get a car in Santiago, you should be able to pick one up here.

**Oro Negro** (cfr Los Maceos & Jesús del Sol) is another option to fill up on gas before the 150km trek east to Baracoa.

Taxis hang out around Parque Martí or you can call **CubaTaxi** (☎ 32 36 36). The Bus 48 (20 centavos) runs between the center and the Hotel Guantánamo every 40 minutes or so. There are also plenty of bici-taxis (bicycle taxis).

### GUANTÁNAMO US NAVAL BASE

'I eat breakfast 300 yards from 4000 Cubans who are trained to kill me' retorted Jack Nicholson aka Colonel Jessop, in the movie *A Few Good Men*. Such Hollywood-scripted outbursts of no-holds-barred paranoia have a certain ring of authenticity about them. With 3000 permanent military personal, two airstrips, dozens of high-security watchtowers and docking space for more than 40 warships; inglorious Gitmo – as generations of US servicemen have unaffectionately come to call it – has outgrown its initial purpose as a coaling and naval station designed to ensure the 'maintenance of the independence of Cuba.'

Procured via the infamous Platt amendment in 1903 following the cessation of hostilities in the 1898 Spanish-American war, the *real* reason the US bamboozled the Cuban government into signing away this 116-sq-km wedge of sovereign territory was to protect the eastern approach to the strategically important Panama Canal. In 1934 an upgrade of the original treaty reaffirmed the lease terms and agreed to honor them indefinitely unless both gov-

ernments accorded otherwise (some hope!). It also set an annual rent of 2000 gold pieces or US\$4000, a sum that the US generously continues to cough up but which Castro vehemently refuses to cash, storing it instead (it is rumored) in the top draw of his office desk. Until 1958, when motorized traffic was officially cut off between Guantánamo and the outside world, hundreds of Cubans used to commute daily into the base for work. Although this labor force has dwindled to a trickle in the years since, there are, as of 2006, (amazingly) two elderly Cubans still making the daily journey.

Expanded post-WWII, the oldest US military base on foreign soil has hovered intermittently between tense Cold War battleground and the most virulent surviving political anachronism in the western hemisphere. Indeed, these days maintaining Cuban independence is probably the last thing on the American government's mind. Immediately after the 1959 revolution, the Castro regime asked the US to return the base to Cuban sovereignty. Predictably, the Americans – locked in a Cold War deadlock with the Soviet Union and fearing Castro's imminent flight toward Moscow – steadfastly refused. As relations between the countries deteriorated, Cuba cut off water and electricity to the base, and the US troops on duty were denied permission to leave.

The recent history of the facility is infamous. In January 1992, 11,000 Haitian migrants were held here, and in August 1994 the base was used as a dumping ground for 32,000 Cubans picked up by the US Coast Guard on their way to Florida. Of these, some 8000 of the old, young and sick were later allowed into the US on humanitarian grounds, and another 2000 returned voluntarily to Cuba. In May 1995 the Cuban and US governments signed an agreement under which most of the remaining 22,000 Cuban refugees at Guantánamo (18,000 of them young men between 18 and 21) were allowed into the US. Since then, illegal Cuban immigrants picked up by the US Coast Guard at sea have been returned to Cuba.

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, the US has held more than 600 prisoners at Guantánamo Bay without pressing criminal charges. Mostly denied legal counsel and

family contact while facing rigorous interrogations, the detainees (some as young as 13 and one as old as 98) have mounted hunger strikes and there have been dozens of suicide attempts. Following protests from Amnesty International and a UN report which conceded that aspects of the camp regime 'amounted to torture'; the US released a small group of prisoners. However, as of early 2006, 490 remained with only 10 facing trial. For good up-to-date information you can visit Human Rights Watch at [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org).

A 2006 British-made movie called *The Road to Guantánamo* directed by Michael Winterbottom traces the story of three British men from Tipton in the West Midlands who were picked up in Afghanistan in 2002 and sent to Guantánamo for alleged Al-Qaeda links. The men were released without charge in 2004. They had been on their way to Pakistan to organize a wedding.

### AROUND GUANTÁNAMO US NAVAL BASE

A distant view of the base can be obtained from the **Mirador de Malones** (admission CUC\$5, drink included; ☎ 8am-3pm) on a 320m-high hill just west of the complex. Opened in 1992, the *mirador* (viewpoint) is operated by the Cuban tourism organization Gaviota. The entrance is at a Cuban military checkpoint off the main highway, 27km southeast of Guantánamo. You then drive another 15km south toward the sugar exporting port of Boquerón, and on up to the viewpoint. Just before the final climb to the *mirador*, there's a large bunker containing a large-scale model of the base, which guides use to highlight points of interest. Using a telescope made in Kentucky, you can observe the US flag fluttering at Northeast Gate and pick out American vehicles driving along the road. Contrary to what some people may tell you there is no visible sign of the 'golden arches.'

### Sleeping

**Hotel Caimanera** (Islazul; ☎ 9-9414; s/d with breakfast low season CUC\$20/24, high season CUC\$23/30; Ⓟ ♻️) This hotel is on a hilltop at Caimanera, near the perimeter of the US naval base, 21km south of Guantánamo. It's not at all convenient for regular travelers; only groups of seven or more on pre-

arranged tours with an official Cuban guide are accepted. Besides, the view is much better from the Mirador de Malones.

### Getting There & Away

You can't just arrive unannounced at the checkpoint, but have to arrange bookings beforehand at the Baracoa and Santiago de Cuba **Gaviota offices** (Baracoa Hotel Castillo ☎ 4-5165; Santiago de Cuba ☎ 68 71 35; Villa Gaviota, Manduley No 502, Vista Alegre). If you don't have your own transport, a round-trip taxi with wait will cost in the vicinity of CUC\$40.

### SOUTH COAST

Leaving Guantánamo in the rearview mirror, you quickly hit the long, dry coastal road to the island's eastern extremity, Punta de Maisí. This is Cuba's spectacular semidesert region where cacti nestle on stony hillsides and prickly aloe vera poke out from the dry scrub. Several little stone beaches between Playa Yacabo and Cajobabo make refreshing pit stops for those with time to linger, while the diverse roadside scenery – punctuated at intervals by rugged purple mountains and impossibly verdant riverside oases – engages throughout.

At the far end of deserted Playita de Cajobabo, just before the main road bends inland, there is a **monument** commemorating José Martí's 1895 landing here to launch the Second War of Independence. A colorful billboard depicts the bobbing rowboat making for shore with Martí sitting calmly inside, dressed rather improbably in trademark dinner suit, not a hair out of place. It's a good snorkeling spot, flanked by dramatic cliffs. The famous **La Farola** (the lighthouse road) starts here. Finished in 1964, the project was one of the earliest engineering triumphs of the revolutionary government. This spectacular highway snakes its way through the Sierra del Puril mountains from the arid coast of Cajababo to the tropical paradise of Baracoa covering 55km and rising to an elevation of 600m. It is listed as one of the seven man-made wonders of Cuba (and one of only two outside Habana). Cyclists take a deep breath...

### Sleeping & Eating

**Campismo Yacabo** (☎ 8-0289; per person CUC\$4) This place, by the highway 10km west of Imías, has 18 new cabins overlooking the



## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS & TELEPHONE

**Etecta** (cnr Antonio Maceo & Rafael Trejo; per hr CUC\$6; ☎ 7am-10pm) Internet and international calls.

### LIBRARIES

**Biblioteca Raúl Gómez García** (José Martí No 130; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat)

### MEDIA

**Radio CMDX 'La Voz del Toa'** Broadcasts over 650AM.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Farmacia Principal Municipal** (Antonio Maceo No 132; ☎ 24hr)

**Hospital General Docente** (☎ 4-3014) Two kilometers from town, on the road to Guantánamo. Will treat foreigners in an emergency.

### MONEY

**Banco de Crédito y Comercio** (☎ 4-2771; Antonio Maceo No 99; ☎ 8am-2:30pm Mon-Fri)

**Banco Popular de Ahorro** (José Martí No 166; ☎ 8-11:30am & 2-4:30pm Mon-Fri) Cashes traveler's checks.

**Cadeca** (José Martí No 241)

### POST

**Post office** (Antonio Maceo No 136; ☎ 8am-8pm)

### TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Campismo Popular** (☎ 4-2776/4-5263; José Martí No 225; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Tue & Wed)

**Cubatur** (☎ 4-5306; Calle Martí No 181; ☎ 8am-noon, 2-4pm Mon-Fri) Tours to El Yunque and Parque Nacional Alejandro de Humboldt.

## Sights & Activities IN TOWN

The hopelessly dilapidated but charming 1833 **Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción** (Antonio Maceo No 152) on Parque Central houses the Cruz de La Parra, said to have been erected by Columbus near Baracoa. Though carbon dating disproves the legend that Columbus brought the cross from Europe, an exhaustive investigation by Cuban and foreign scholars indicates that this is indeed the last remaining cross of the two dozen or so the Spaniards erected throughout Latin America (the one in Santo Domingo is a replica). Mass is at 6pm daily and also 9am on Sunday. Knock on the last door on Calle Maceo to gain access outside of Mass hours. Donations are accepted.

Facing the cathedral is a bust of Indian chief Hatuey, who was burned at the stake near Baracoa by the Spanish in 1512 (see the boxed text, below). Also on Parque Central is the neoclassical **Poder Popular** (Antonio Maceo No 137). A municipal government building, it's not open to visitors.

To see a couple of dozen *torcedores* (cigar rollers) rolling cigars, visit the **Fábrica de Tabacos Manuel Fuente** (José Martí No 214; ☎ 7am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 7am-noon Sat). The **Centro de Veteranos** (José Martí No 216; admission free) displays photos of those who perished in the 1959 revolution and in Angola.

Baracoa's **Museo Municipal** (cnr José Martí & Malecón; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm), in the Fuerte Matachín (1802) at the southern entrance to town, has pretty bay vistas out-

side and a powerful sculpture of Hatuey at the stake inside. There's a good overview of local history, including the guitar of local *trovador* (traditional singer) Cayamba ('the singer with the ugliest voice in the world') and ephemera relating to pouty Magdalena Menasse (nee Rovieskuya, 'La Rusa').

Another Spanish fort, the **Fuerte de la Punta**, has watched over the harbor entrance at the other end of town since 1803. Today it's a restaurant serving ice-cold beers and killer views.

Baracoa's third fort, **El Castillo de Seboruco**, begun by the Spanish in 1739 and finished by the Americans in 1900, is now Hotel El Castillo (p442). There's an excellent view of El Yunque's flat top from the swimming pool. A stairway at the southwest end of Frank País climbs directly to the castle.

Baracoa's most impressive new sight is the **Museo Arqueológico** (Calle Moncada; admission CUC\$2; ☎ 8am-6pm), situated in Las Cuevas del Paraíso about 800m from the Hotel El Castillo. The exhibits in this small but well-stocked museum are showcased in a series of caves that once acted as Taíno burial chambers. Among nearly 2000 authentic Taíno pieces are unearthened skeletons, ceramics, 3000-year-old petroglyphs and a replica of the *Idolo de Tabaco*, a sculpture found in Maisí in 1903 that is considered to be one of the most important Taíno finds in the Caribbean. Get one of the staff to show you round and ask about the hikes (see p444).

### SOUTHEAST OF TOWN

Southeast of town are two natural wonders that together make a nice day trip. Passing the Fuerte Matachín, hike southeast past the baseball stadium and along the beach for about 20 minutes to a rickety wooden bridge over the Río Miel. From April to June, you'll have to take a skiff across the flooded river mouth before reaching the **bridge** (admission 1 peso; ☎ sunrise-sunset). After the bridge, turn left until you come to a Gaviota hut, where you have to pay CUC\$2 to proceed further. If you continue left for 15 minutes you come to **Playa Blanca**, an idyllic spot for a picnic or sunset cocktails.

If you go to the right at the Gaviota hut and follow the dirt road through coconut groves and past clapboard houses for 45

minutes, you'll come to the blue-and-yellow **homestead of Raudeli Delgado**. For a donation (CUC\$3 to CUC\$5 per person), he'll lead you on a 30-minute hike, through coconut and citrus groves to a *mirador* that takes in the lush coconut plantations below and the blue sea beyond. After a short, steep descent into a lush canyon, you come to **Cueva del Aguas**, a cave with a sparkling, freshwater swimming hole inside. Ask about the coconut oil Raudeli's family makes; it's a cure for sun-cracked skin.

### NORTHWEST OF TOWN

Heading northwest out of town toward Moa, take the one lane road for 2km toward the airport where a break in the low-lying scrub leads to **Playa Duaba**. This is where Antonio Maceo and Flor Crombet landed in 1895 and it's a beautiful band of dark beach backed by mountains. The water gets better further from the river mouth. The *jejenes* (sand fleas) are ferocious in the late afternoon. Fifty meters further along the road is the tranquil monument to the rebel landing.

### Tours

A variety of tours can be arranged in any of the Baracoa agencies (opposite) and include: El Yunque (CUC\$18), Playa Maguana (CUC\$18), Parque Nacional de Humboldt (CUC\$28), River Toa (CUC\$11) and Boca de Yumurí (CUC\$15).

### Festivals & Events

During the first week of April, Baracoa commemorates the landing of Antonio Maceo at Duaba on April 1, 1895, with a raucous **Carnaval** along the Malecón. Check the **Casa de la Cultura** (☎ 4-2349; Antonio Maceo No 124 btwn Frank País & Maraví) during Carnival, as it presents a concurrent *Semana de la Cultura* that week. Every Saturday night, Calle Maceo is closed off for **Noche Baracuense**, when food, drink and music take over.

### Sleeping

**Hotel La Rusa** (Cubanacán; ☎ 4-3011; Máximo Gómez No 161; r CUC\$46; ☎) At last, a hotel with a history! You can't miss this three-story yellow beauty right on the Malecón. Basic but cozy, the 12 simple rooms have little balconies, some overlooking the sea. The hotel was built by local celebrity Magdalena

### A REBEL'S REBEL

Never mind Castro, Che and Camilo, it was a 16th-century Taíno Indian chief named Hatuey who was Cuba's first *guerrillero* (rebel fighter). Hailing originally from Hispaniola, Hatuey had experienced the brutal savagery of Spanish avarice first hand by the time he arrived in Cuba with more than 300 men in around 1511. Unwilling to witness another massacre on the same scale, he circulated among Cuba's indigenous Taíno wielding a basket of gold and jewels. 'Here is the God the Spanish worship,' he admonished disdainfully. 'For these they fight and kill.'

Incapable of matching the Spanish for weaponry, Hatuey and his supporters employed simple guerrilla tactics, surprising the invaders in small groups before dispersing into the mountains to hide. After holding out for some months in this way the valiant Hatuey was betrayed by a traitor, an act that enabled the Spanish to track him down and place him under arrest.

Sentenced to death in keeping with Spanish inquisitional justice, Hatuey was brutally tortured before being tied to a stake to face death by public burning. Before the pyre was lit a priest offered him a cross and asked him if he would like to go to heaven. 'Are there people like you in heaven?' the Indian allegedly questioned. When the priest replied 'yes' Hatuey answered that he wanted nothing to do with a god that allowed such evil deeds to be carried out in his name.

Rovieskuya, a Russian woman who inspired Alejo Carpentier's *La Consagración de la Primavera* and aided Castro's rebels during the revolution. Former guests include Errol Flynn, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. It's a popular place, still.

**Hostal La Habanera** (Cubanacán; ☎ 4-5273/74; Antonio Maceo No 68; r CUC\$46; 🏠) Atmospheric and inviting in a way only Baracoa can muster, La Habanera is a recently renovated, pastel-pink hotel where the cries of passing street hawkers compete with an effusive mix of hip-gyrating music emanating from the Casa de la Cultura below. The four front bedrooms share a street-facing balcony replete with tiled floor and rocking chairs,

while the downstairs lobby boasts a bar, a restaurant, and an interesting selection of local books.

**Hotel El Castillo** (Gaviota; ☎ 4-5165; Loma del Paraíso; s/d low season CUC\$40/54, high season CUC\$42/58; 🏠 🏠) Another famous Baracoa hotel is this historic castle, once part of the Spanish fort. It's a relaxed, friendly place, with only 34 rooms (some dark and dampish) and there's a superb view of the bay and El Yunque from the pool (open to nonguests for a small fee). The hotel also organizes day trips to El Yunque and Río Toa among other places. It is a five- to 10-minute walk from town up the steps on Frank País or Calixto García.

### CASAS PARTICULARES – BARACOA

Hospitable Baracoa has more than 150 casas and some of them are real gems. The food here – which is distinctly different (and better) than in other parts of Cuba – is also well worth trying.

**Andrés Abella** (☎ 4-3298; Antonio Maceo No 56 btwn Peralejo & Coliseo; r CUC\$15-20) Large room, friendly; also rents out No 53.

**'Casa Colonial' – Gustavo & Yalina** (☎ 4-2536; Flor Crombet No 125 btwn Frank País & Pelayo Cuervo; r CUC\$15-20; 🏠) Big rooms sleep three.

**Denny Rodríguez** (☎ 4-2431; Rupert López No 86 btwn Limbano Sánchez & Lope Pena; r CUC\$25; 🏠) Big, private, with TV and fridge.

**'El Poeta' – Pablo & Daimi** (☎ 4-3017; Maceo No 159 at Ciro Frías; r CUC\$20-25) Pablo is a local poet who is regularly on the radio.

**Elsa Figueroa Toirac** (☎ 4-2460; José Martí No 152; r CUC\$15-20; 🏠) Central, two rooms.

**Eugenio Ona Abella** (☎ 4-3310; Moncada No 18B btwn José Martí & República; r CUC\$20) Private, good meals.

**Idania de la Cruz Blanco** (☎ 4-3885; Antonio Maceo No 80 btwn 24 de Febrero & Coliseo; r CUC\$15-20; 🏠) Colonial house, roof terrace, friendly.

**Isabel Artola Rosell** (☎ 4-5236; Rubert López No 39 btwn Céspedes & Ciro Frías; r CUC\$15-20; 🏠) English spoken.

**Isabel Castro Vilato** (☎ 4-2267; Mariana Grajales No 35; r CUC\$20; 🏠) Colonial house, terrific garden, porch, meals.

**Josefina Guilarte** (☎ 4-3532; Flor Crombet No 269; r CUC\$15-20) Meals served, quiet, out of center; also rents out 265A.

**Lidia Cobas** (☎ 4-3464; 10 de Octubre No 21C; r CUC\$15-20)

**Lourdes Balga** (☎ 4-3218; Av Malecón No 72; r CUC\$15-20) Room near Coroneles Galano that can sleep three; friendly.

**Lucy Navarra Rodríguez** (☎ 4-3548; Céspedes No 29 btwn Rubert López & Maceo; r CUC\$20; 🏠) Lovely local character with clean, friendly colonial house. There are two rooms here and two terraces on different levels.

**Miriam Zoila Montoya** (☎ 4-3529; José Martí No 301; r CUC\$15-20)

**Nelia Y Yaquelin** (☎ 4-3625, 4-3353; Mariana Grajales No 11 btwn Calixto García & Julio Mella; r CUC\$15-20; 🏠) Two rooms.

**Nelsy Borges Teran** (☎ 4-3569; Antonio Maceo No 171 btwn Ciro Frías & Céspedes; r CUC\$20; 🏠) Several outfitted rooms, great roof terrace, views.

**Nilson Abad Guilaré** (☎ 4-3123; Flor Crombet No 143 btwn Ciro Frías & Pelayo Cuervo; r CUC\$25; 🏠) Fantastic self-contained apartment with brand new fixtures. Kitchen, terrace with sea views and scrumptious Baracoan cuisine.

**Williams Montoya Sánchez** (☎ 4-2798; José Martí No 287; r CUC\$15-20; 🏠 🏠) Serves meals.

**Hotel Porto Santo** (Gaviota; ☎ 4-5106; Carretera del Aeropuerto; s/d low season CUC\$40/54, high season CUC\$42/58; 🏠 🏠 🏠) A modern, airy hotel with exposed-beam ceilings situated 200m from the airport and 4km from the town center. There are 36 rooms here and the setting is dreamlike, especially at night with the sound of the crashing waves drifting in through your window. A stairway leads down to a tiny, storm-lashed beach.

### Eating

After the dull monotony of just about everywhere else, eating in Baracoa is a full-on sensory experience. Cooking here is creative, tasty and – above all – different. Local delicacies include *cucurucho* (grated coconut mixed with sugar, honey and guava, wrapped in a palm frond), fish with coconut sauce, *bacán* (pulped plantain and coconut milk) and *teti* (a tiny red fish indigenous to the Río Toa).

**Paladar El Colonial** (José Martí No 123; mains CUC\$10; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Baracoa's only paladar is also one of the best in Cuba. The down-to-earth family restaurant is run out of a handsome wooden clapboard house that feels more Jamaican than Cuban. The unposted menu changes regularly and depends on the daily catch. Try the swordfish, octopus or the prawns, and ask about the traditional Baracoan coconut sauce.

**Cafetería El Parque** (Antonio Maceo No 142; 🍴 24hr) The flowering terrace, occasional live bands, pool table, fried chicken, ice cream and cold drinks mean this place is Baracoa's main hangout. It's a Palmares-run place right across from the central park and a good spot to connect with the locals.

**Restaurante La Punta** (Fuerte de la Punta; 🍴 10am-11pm) In an old fort overlooking the Atlantic, this historic restaurant was undergoing a refurbishment as this book went to press. The revamp looked quite promising.

**Casa del Chocolate** (Antonio Maceo No 123; 🍴 7:20am-11pm) Only in Cuba! A chocolate house with – wait for it – no chocolate. The quickest way to check out Baracoa's on-off supply situation is to stick your head around the kitchen door and hail one of the bored-looking waitresses. But be warned. The paltry cups of muddy liquid that pass for chocolate in this establishment are nothing like the steaming mugs of bedtime cocoa you might have tasted in childhood.

**Pizzeria** (Antonio Maceo No 155) This fly-blown place sells acceptable three-peso pizza; skip the *tocino* (bacon) variety.

Two other half-decent places right on the park include friendly **Restaurante Yaima** (Antonio Maceo No 143), with basic peso meals served in an agreeable atmosphere (read: napkins) and **Restaurante 485 Aniversario** (Antonio Maceo No 139; mains CUC\$4; 🍴 11:30am-2pm & 6-9pm), with good fried chicken and fish. El Rápido, at the Servi-Cupet at the southeast entrance to town, serves the usual chow at cut rates.

### SELF-CATERING

**Tienda La Yumuri** (Antonio Maceo No 149; 🍴 8:30am-noon & 1:30-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) Get in line for the good selection of groceries here.

**Mercado Agropecuario** (cnr 24 de Febrero & Malecón) The selection at Baracoa's market makes it abundantly clear how remote you really are, ie if it isn't growing right here, right now, you won't find it.

**Dulcería La Criolla** (José Martí No 178) This place sells bread, pastries and – when it feels like it – the famous Baracoan chocolate.

**Empresa Cubana del Pan** (José Martí btwn Céspedes & Coroneles Galano) This shop has regular 10-peso short loaves, and also fruit bread.

### Drinking & Entertainment

**Casa de la Trova Victorino Rodríguez** (Antonio Maceo No 149a) Cuba's smallest, zaniest, wildest and most atmospheric *casa de la trova* (trova house) rocks nightly to the voodoo-like rhythms of *changüi-son*. Order a mojito (rum cocktail) in a jam jar and sit back and enjoy the show. The crazy MC is an act in his own right and the house rules conform to that age-old *trova* assertion: 'if you can sing or play an instrument, show us what you can do.' Bring your own guitar and see what happens!

**El Ranchón** (admission CUC\$1; 🍴 9pm) Atop a long flight of stairs at the western end of Coroneles Galano, El Ranchón mixes an exhilarating hilltop setting with taped disco and salsa music and legions of resident *jineteras* (women who attach themselves to male foreigners for monetary or material gain). Maybe that's why it's so insanely popular. Watch your step on the way down – it's a scary 146-step drunken tumble.

**Casa de la Cultura** (☎ 4-2349; Antonio Maceo No 124 btwn Frank País & Maraví) This venue does a good rumba show incorporating textbook



### GO FURTHER INTO THE COUNTRYSIDE

To explore beyond the standard travel-agency itinerary, ask around at the Museo Arqueológico (p441) about a number of interesting hikes south of Baracoa in the vicinity of Playa Blanca, Yumuri and the nearby Majayara Peninsula.

Set up in 2003 under the auspices of distinguished Cuban archaeologist Roberto Orduñez Fernández, the museum and its staff can offer an interesting clutch of archeologically-inspired trips including **Pintura Rupestres** (see some ancient Taíno paintings, and visit a native suicide site: CUC\$18), **Tumba de Guamá** (visit a native tomb near isolated Playa Cajaujo: CUC\$15) and **El Camino de Piedra** (hike an old native Taíno trail close to a hill overlooking Baracoa: CUC\$8). These hikes were still being developed at the time of writing and could be subject to change. For archaeological fiends, however, there is no doubt that Baracoa's potential is enormous.

Cuban styles of *guaguancó*, *yambú* and *colombia* (subgenres of rumba). Go prepared for *mucho* audience participation.

**La Terraza** (Antonio Maceo btwn Maravi & Frank País; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 9pm-2am Mon-Thu, 9pm-4am Fri-Sun) This is a rooftop disco with occasional hot salsa septets.

**Café El Patio** (Antonio Maceo No 120) This venue has a nice courtyard for a drink; and no cover charge.

**Cine-Teatro Encanto** (Antonio Maceo No 148) Baracoa's only cinema is in front of the cathedral.

From October to April, baseball games are held at the Estadio Manuel Fuentes Borges, southeast along the beach from the Museo Municipal.

### Shopping

Good art is easy to find in Baracoa and, like most things in this whimsical seaside town, it has its own distinctive flavor.

**Fondo Cubano de Bienes Culturales** (Antonio Maceo No 120; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun) This shop sells Hatuey woodcarvings and T-shirts with indigenous designs.

**ARTex** (Calle Martí btwn Céspedes & Galano) For the usual tourist fare check out this place.

**Taller La Musa** (Antonio Maceo No 124) Call by this outlet in the Casa de la Cultura where you can seek out innovative local artist Andreas Borges and his imaginative work.

### Getting There & Away

The closest train station is in Guantánamo, 150km southwest.

### AIR

**Cubana** (☎ 4-5374; Calle Martí No 181; ☎ 8am-noon; 2-4pm Mon-Fri) has two weekly flights from Habana to Baracoa (CUC\$135 one way, Thurs-

day and Sunday). There is also a Sunday-only flight from Santiago (CUC\$32, 30 minutes).

Be aware that the planes and buses out of Baracoa are sometimes fully booked, so don't come here on a tight schedule without outbound reservations.

### BUS

The **national bus station** (☎ 4-3670; cnr Av Los Mártires & José Martí) has **Astro** (☎ 4-3670) buses to Santiago de Cuba and Habana on alternate days. For some odd reason, the bus to Guantánamo is only for people connecting there with trains. Tickets in Convertibles are sold from 8am to 4pm.

**Viazul** (www.viazul.com) buses leave for Guantánamo (CUC\$10, three hours), continuing to Santiago de Cuba (CUC\$16, five hours) daily at 2:15pm. Bus tickets can be reserved in advance through **Cubatur** (☎ 4-5306; Calle Martí No 181) for a CUC\$5 commission.

The **intermunicipal bus station** (cnr Galano & Calixto García), has two or three trucks a day to Moa (90 minutes, 78km, departures from 6am) and Guantánamo (four hours, 150km, departures from 2am). Prices are a few Cuban pesos. If you can't find a truck right to Guantánamo, take anything as far as San Antonio del Sur, where you'll find onward trucks.

### Getting Around

The best way to get to/from the airport is by taxi (CUC\$2) or bici-taxi (CUC\$1), if you're traveling light.

There's a helpful **Havanautos** (☎ 4-5344) car-rental office at the airport. Cheaper **Vía Rent a Car** (☎ 4-5135) is inside the Hotel Porto Santo. **Servi-Cupet** (José Martí; ☎ 24hr) is right

at the entrance to town and 4km from the center, on the road to Guantánamo. Drivers hightailing it to Habana should note that the northern route through Moa and Holguín is fastest but the road disintegrates rapidly after Maguana Beach.

Bici-taxis around Baracoa should charge five pesos a ride, but they often ask 10 to 15 pesos from foreigners.

The Palmares Café in the main park rents cycles for CUC\$3 per day. The ultimate bike ride is the 20km ramble down to Maguana Beach, one of the most scenic roads in Cuba. Lazy daisies can rent mopeds for CUC\$24 either at Palmares Café or **Hotel El Castillo** (☎ 4-5165; Loma del Paraíso).

### NORTHWEST OF BARCOA Sights & Activities

The **Finca Duaba** (☎ noon-4pm Tue-Sun), 6km out of Baracoa on the road to Moa and then 1km inland, is designed to give visitors a taste of country life. On this verdant farm you'll see profuse tropical plants, enjoy a swim in the Río Duaba, and be served a massive Creole lunch (CUC\$12 per person).

The **Río Toa**, 10km northwest of Baracoa, is the third longest river on the north coast of Cuba and the country's most voluminous. It is also an important bird and plant habitat. Cocoa trees and the ubiquitous coconut palm are grown in the Valle de Toa. A vast hydroelectric project on the Toa

was abandoned after a persuasive campaign led by the Fundación de la Naturaleza y El Hombre convinced authorities it would do irreparable ecological damage; engineering and economic reasons also played a part. **Rancho Toa** is a Palmares restaurant reached via a right-hand turn-off just before the Toa Bridge. You can organize boat or kayak trips here for CUC\$3 to CUC\$10 and watch acrobatic Baracoans scale Coco palms. A traditional Cuban feast of whole roast pig is available if you can rustle up enough people (eight usually).

Most of this region lies within the Unesco Cuchillas de Toa Biosphere Reserve, an expansive area of 208,305 hectares that incorporates the Alejandro de Humboldt World Heritage site. This area contains the largest rainforest in Cuba with trees exhibiting many precious woods. The region also has a high number of endemic species.

One of Baracoa's most challenging day trips is summiting **El Yunque** (569m). It's not a high hike, but the views are stupendous. **Cubatur** (☎ 4-5306; Calle Martí No 181, Baracoa) offers this tour daily (CUC\$18 per person, minimum two people). The fee covers admission, guide, transport and a sandwich. The hike is hot (bring sufficient water). If you have a car or bike you can arrange your own guide at the campismo for a few fewer pesos. Take the road toward Moa for 6km and then turn left into the spur to the campismo.

### MERMAID OR MANATEE?

The slow-moving Caribbean *manatí* (manatee) is descended from a land mammal that returned to life in the water. It can grow up to 4.5m long and weigh as much as 600kg. Graceful but ugly, manatees have small heads, thick necks and a wide bristly snout. Their poorly developed eyes have glands that secrete an oily substance for protection against salt water.

An adult manatee has a thick tapered body ending in a wide horizontal tail flipper. It uses two front flippers to swim and to bring food to its mouth. The manatee's ribs aren't attached to a rib cage, meaning that its lungs are crushed if the animal lies on its belly on dry land. To avoid suffocating, a manatee caught by low tide will flip over onto its back and wait for the water to return.

Unlike whales and seals, manatees never take to the open ocean. They prefer to linger around thick plant growth and graze on seaweed in brackish coastal waters, estuaries, and rivers, where they consume up to 50kg of plant life a day. While grazing in the shallows with its head and shoulders above the water, a manatee resembles a human figure, which perhaps gave rise to mermaid legends.

Although the manatee has no natural enemies except humans, it has become endangered due to hunting, injury from boat propellers and habitat destruction. In Cuba it has been a protected species since 1973 though local factors such as sugar-factory waste and large-scale tourist development, have served to hinder its conservation.

Four kilometers on is the trailhead and the campground. Bring a swimsuit for a dip in the Río Duaba afterward.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Campismo El Yunque** (☎ 4-5262) This rustic place is beautifully located at the foot of the mystical El Yunque Mountain, 6km north of Baracoa on the road to Moa, then another 4km inland on a rough road through a cocoa plantation. There are 14 wooden cabins, sleeping four or six people. This is normally a Cubans-only place, but you can try your luck at the Campismo Popular office in Baracoa (p440).

**Villa Maguana** (Gaviota; no phone; s/d with breakfast low season CUC\$45/60, high season CUC\$50/65) For a dreamy night or two away in one of Cuba's most exotic little hideaways pay a visit here. The villa faces an idyllic, palm-fringed, white-sand beach, 22km northwest of Baracoa. Formerly a quaint guesthouse with four rooms plus porch rockers fronting a lawn adjacent to a beach, the villa was undergoing renovations at the time of writing with another 10 rooms due to be added on. Hopefully the extension won't take too much away from what was an astoundingly beautiful setting. News and reservations for Villa Maguana can be had through Hotel El Castillo in Baracoa (p442).

Palmares has a small snack bar on Playa Maguana that sells cold drinks, fried chicken and sandwiches. There's also a rustic restaurant with a barbecue that can lay on a fine seafood lunch. Snorkeling is available from boats at a nearby reef. There's no hire kiosk as such but the local boatman has a habit of finding you just when you need him.

## PARQUE NACIONAL ALEJANDRO DE HUMBOLDT

Designated a Unesco World Heritage site in 2001, this beautiful national park, characterized by its steep pine-clad mountains and creeping morning mists, possesses an unmatched ecosystem that is, according to Unesco, 'one of the most biologically diverse tropical island sites on earth.' Perched above the Bahía de Taco, 40km northwest of Baracoa, Humboldt contains some of Cuba's most pristine forest, protecting 59,400 hectares of land and 2641 hectares of lagoon and mangroves. With 1000 flow-

ering plant species and 145 types of fern, it is far and away the most diverse plant habitat in the entire Caribbean. Due to the toxic nature of the underlying rocks in the area, plants have been forced to adapt in order to survive. As a result endemism in the area is high; indeed almost 70% of the plants found here are endemic, as are many vertebrates and invertebrates. Several endangered species can also be found here including Cuban Amazon parrots and the hook-billed kites. The last ivory-billed woodpecker ever sighted was spotted here in the late '80s and has been heard (but not seen) since then. Recognized for its unique evolutionary processes, the park is heavily protected and acts as a paradigm for the Cuban government's environmental protection efforts elsewhere.

### Activities

The park contains a **visitors center** (☎ 38 14 31) staffed with biologists plus an extensive network of trails leading to waterfalls, a *mirador* and a massive karst system with caves around the Farallones de Moa. Three trails are currently open to the public and take in only a tiny segment of the park's 59,400 hectares. More development is in the pipeline. The available hikes are: **Balcón de Iberia**, at 5km the park's most challenging loop; **El Recrea**, a 2km stroll around the bay; and the **Bahía de Taco circuit**, which incorporates a boat tour (with a manatee-friendly motor developed by scientists here) through the mangroves and the bay, plus the 2km hike. Each option is accompanied by a professional guide who will teach you all you need to know about Cuban flora and fauna. Prices range from CUC\$5 to CUC\$10, depending on the hike.

### Sleeping

Lodging is periodically available at the bare-bones Campismo Bahía de Taco. Book ahead at the **Campismo Popular** (☎ 4-2776/4-5263; José Martí No 225) in Baracoa or inquire at **Hostal La Habanera** (☎ 4-5273/74; Antonio Maceo No 68).

### Getting There & Away

You can arrange a tour through an agency in Baracoa or get here independently. The road is rough but passable in a hire car if driven with care.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'