

Las Tunas Province



Unheralded Las Tunas is where the Oriente begins; a flat, featureless drive-by on the road through to Santiago in the east or Camagüey and Habana in the west. Blink and you'll miss it.

But for those with a day or two to spare a stopover needn't be wasted. Despite years of half-hearted neglect, Las Tunas retains its festive attractions. For culture seekers there's a nationally renowned music festival, *La Jornada Culcalambeana*, in honor of local *décima* (eight-syllable verse) poet Juan Nápoles Fajardo; while for beach hedonists there's the refreshingly unblemished coastline of Playa La Herradura to the north – one of the few strips of sand on the Atlantic littoral where you can rent cheap private rooms from Cubans.

The provincial capital of Las Tunas is a diminutive place – more small-town than large city – that fashions itself as Cuba's 'city of sculptures.' To the west lie the vast cattle-rearing haciendas of the country's central heartlands; to the north, soot-stained sugar mills dot a landscape replete with the ubiquitous *caña azucar* (sugarcane).

Elsewhere the province boasts two fauna reserves and more than 35 virgin beaches. Meanwhile in the quiet towns and villages of the rural interior, the people of Las Tunas, unperturbed by tourism, have developed a reputation for being warm and hospitable hosts. If it's peace and tranquility you are looking for, you just might find it here.

HIGHLIGHTS

■ Downtime in Las Tunas

Schedule a stopover in sleepy Las Tunas (opposite), Cuba's self-proclaimed 'city of sculptures'

■ Rustic Rodeo

Check out the dudes with lassos at the Feria Ganado (p343), Las Tunas' celebrated traveling rodeo

■ All-Exclusive

Enjoy peace and tranquility on the resort-free beaches of isolated Playa La Herradura (p345)

■ Pit Stop

Linger awhile in friendly Puerto Padre (p345) where the locals have always got time to talk



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 31

■ POPULATION: 532,550

■ AREA: 6589 SQ KM

LAS TUNAS

☎ 31 / pop 139,637

Referred to alternatively as the 'city of sculptures' or *El Balcón del Oriente* (the Balcony of the Oriente), Las Tunas is devoid of any buildings of architectural note. The city remains a low-rise and unpretentious place that feels more like a sleepy suburb than a bustling business hub. Those on the rebound from Santiago or Camagüey will find the pace of life slower here, though the local people are colorful enough and the hustlers refreshingly low-key.

History

The settlement of Las Tunas was founded in 1759 but wasn't given the title of 'city' until 1853. In 1876 Cuban General Vicente García captured the city during the First War of Independence, but repeated Spanish successes in the area soon led the colonizers to rename it La Victoria de Las Tunas. During the Second War of Independence the Spanish burned Las Tunas to the ground, but the *Mambís* fought back bravely, and in 1897 General Calixto García forced the local Spanish garrison to surrender.

Las Tunas became a provincial capital in 1975 during Cuba's postrevolutionary geographic reorganization.

Orientation

The train station is on the northeastern side of town and the bus station is east of the

center. Most of the things to see are in the center. A *circunvalación* (bypass road) runs around the south side of the city if you want to avoid Las Tunas altogether.

Information

BOOKSHOPS & LIBRARIES

Biblioteca Provincial José Martí (Vicente García No 4;

☎ Mon-Sat)

Librería Fulgencio Oroz (Colón No 151)

INTERNET ACCESS

Eteca (Angel Guardia; ☎ 7am-11pm) Off Parque Vicente García.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Che Guevara (☎ 4-5012; cnr Avs CJ Finlay & 2 de Diciembre) One kilometer from the highway exit toward Holguín.

MONEY

Banco de Crédito y Comercio (Vicente García No 69; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Fri, 8-10.20am Sat)

Banco Financiero Internacional (☎ 4-6202; cnr Vicente García & 24 de Febrero)

Cadeca (Colón No 141; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-1pm Sun)

POST

Post office (☎ 4-2738; Vicente García No 6; ☎ 8am-8pm)

TELEPHONE

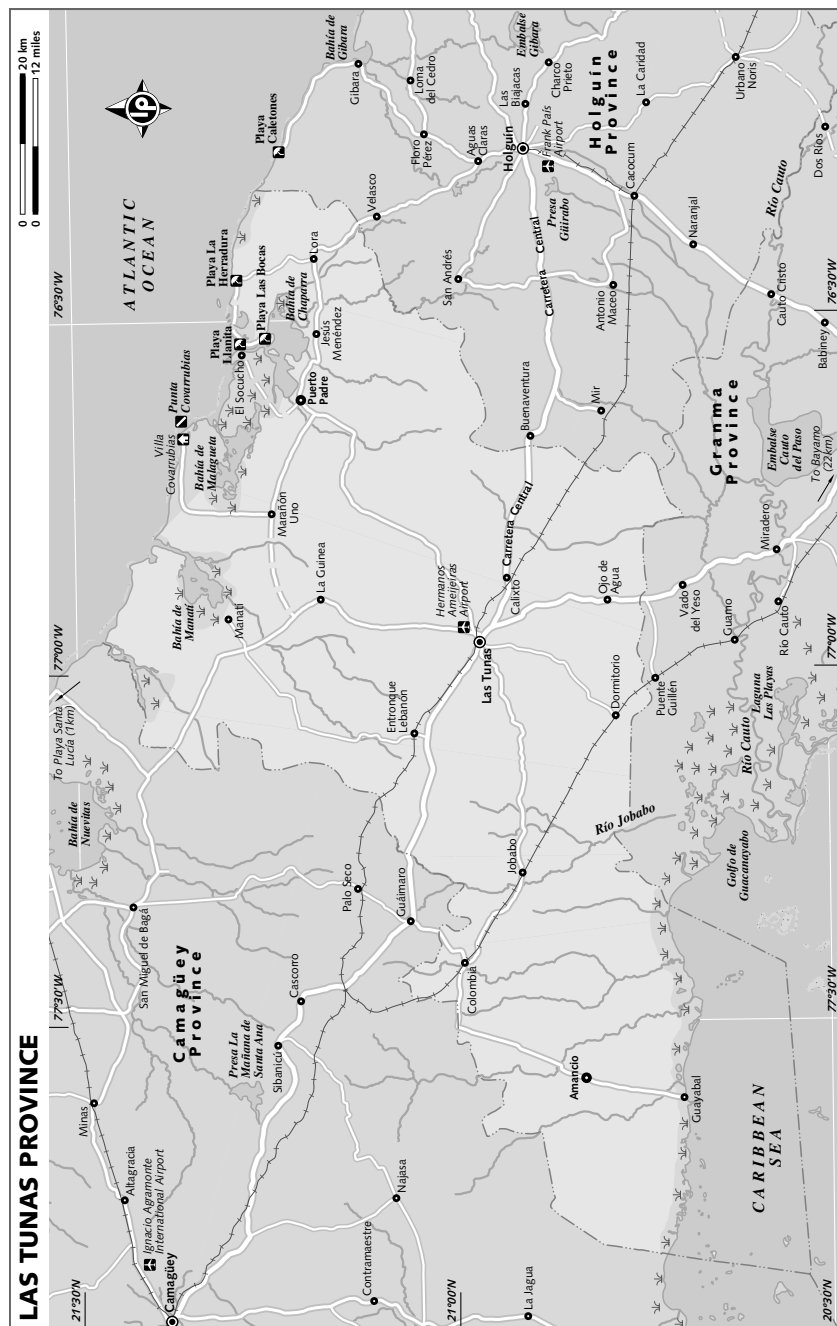
Eteca (Angel Guardia; ☎ 7am-11pm) Off Parque Vicente García.

EL CUCALAMBÉ

Las Tunas is best known for the poet Juan Cristóbal Nápoles Fajardo (1829–62), nicknamed El Cucalambé (the pseudonym is taken from the name of a dance brought from Africa). Fajardo was Cuba's leading 19th-century composer of *décimas*, the rhyming, eight-syllable verses that provide the lyrics for Cuban *son* (Cuba's basic form of popular music). He lived in a farm in El Cornito 7km northwest of the town.

Historically speaking El Cucalambé's poems were groundbreaking. In 1855 Bayamo poet José Fornaris had created a stir with his *Cantos del Siboney* (Songs of the Siboney), which associated the Cuban *guajiro* (country person) with the pre-Hispanic Siboney and Taíno Indians rather than the Spanish conquerors. The Indians were presented as generous lovers of the earth, family and freedom, stereotypical characteristics of the Cuban *campesino* (a person who lives in the country).

Impressed by Fornaris' audacity, El Cucalambé brought out a book of verses a year later in which Blacks, Indians, and Creoles all appear without a Spaniard in sight. By formulating the Cuban character in comic situations, Nápoles Fajardo's *décimas* expressed a latent nationalism that was soon to burst forth in the First War of Independence. His poems were enthusiastically recited at country fairs, cockfights and rural family reunions, and thousands of Cubans still flock to Las Tunas every June for the *Jornada Culcalambeana* (Cucalambé Folklore Festival, see p341).



Sights

Las Tunas' most important site, **Memorial a los Mártires de Barbados** (Lucas Ortíz No 344; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat), located along the Río Hormigo, is an eerie reminder of the 1976 Cubana de Aviación terrorist attack. Flight CU-455 had just taken off from Barbados when a bomb exploded underneath a seat, sending the plane and all 73 people aboard into the sea. The bomber left the package beneath his seat when he disembarked during a routine stopover in Barbados. Individual photos of the victims of the attack – including the entire 24-member Cuban Olympic fencing team – line the museum walls in a poignant condemnation of indiscriminate terrorism.

Housed in the 1920s town hall (the building with the clock above the facade), the **Museo Provincial General Vicente García** (☎ 4-8201; cnr Francisco Varona & Angel Guardia; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 11am-7pm Tue-Thu, 2-10pm Fri & Sat, 3-7pm Sun) documents local history. It's an unremarkable place full of the usual heroic revolution-era memorabilia.

Nearby is the **Memorial Vicente García** (Vicente García No 7; admission CUC\$1; ☎ 3-7pm Mon, 11am-7pm Tue-Sat), commemorating the entry of Las Tunas into the First War of Independence in October 1868 under the command of Vicente García. In September 1876, he captured the town.

If you've time to kill, check out the quirky King Kong-sized pencil which is the **Monumento a Alfabetización** (cnr Lucas Ortíz & Av 2 de Diciembre), marking the act passed in Las Tunas on November 16, 1961 to stamp out illiteracy.

Popularly called the 'city of sculptures' (though it's no Florence), Las Tunas also has a small **Galería Taller Escultura** (cnr Av 2 de Diciembre & Ortíz) which displays local work.

Festivals & Events

Lovers of Cuban country music gather at Motel El Cornito in late June for the **Jornada Cukulambeana** (see p339). It's Cuba's greatest celebration of rural culture, with music, dancing, theater, food and handicraft displays.

Sleeping

Unless you've got a penchant for scruffy, noisy Islazul hotels with cold water, a private room is your best bet for accommo-

CASAS PARTICULARES – LAS TUNAS

Carlos A Patiño Alvarez (☎ 4-2288; Lucas Ortíz No 120; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) Comes with fridge.

'Doña Nelly' – Nelly Tamayo Vega (☎ 4-2526; Lucas Ortíz No 111; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) Colonial house; front porch with rockers.

Marianela Santiago Rodríguez (☎ 4-3259; Lucas Ortíz No 101 Altos; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) Run by a single woman; terrace overlooks the street.

'Villa Blanca' Zoila Pavón Gutierrez (☎ 4-2586; Frank País No 85 btwn Gonzalo de Quezada & I Durañona; r CUC\$20-25; ☎) Two rooms with private baths, convenient to train.

'Villa Rosalba' Enober Guerra Cruz (☎ 4-9042; Ave 2 de Diciembre No 3 btwn F País & J Agüero; r CUC\$25; ☎) One room, meals available.

Yolanda Rodríguez Torres (☎ 4-3641; Lucas Ortíz No 101; r CUC\$25) Independent digs with kitchen, dining and hang-out area.

dation in Las Tunas. Several houses rent clean affordable rooms and are situated on Lucas Ortíz, between the train station and the center (see above).

Hotel Caribe (UniversiTUR; ☎ 4-4262; Lorenzo Ortíz No 64; r CUC\$15-25; ☎) Like other UniversiTUR hotels, this place is designed for foreign students but they might rent you a room if you're desperate. Conditions reflect the cheap prices.

Motel El Cornito (☎ 4-5015; Carretera Central Km 8; r CUC\$20) Another Cuban-oriented place located outside of town near the site of El Culcalambé's old farm. You might get lucky with these basic bungalows. Phone ahead.

Hotel Las Tunas (Islazul; ☎ 4-5014; fax 4-5169; Av 2 de Diciembre; s/d low season CUC\$18/24, high season CUC\$23/30; ☎) This 128-room hotel southeast of the center is Las Tunas' main tourist hotel. On our visit we encountered clogged drains, leaky ceilings, cranky service, aggressive parking attendants and shuttered restaurants.

Eating

PALADARES

Las Tunas has a surprisingly good selection of paladares (private restaurants) serving big portions.

El Bacan (F Suárez No 12; dishes 25-50 pesos) A peso place mounding on the food.

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		38	D3
		39	C2
		40	D3
		41	C2
		42	D2
		43	D3
		44	D3
		45	E1

SLEEPING

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18	C2
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20	C3
21	C3
22	D3
23	E1
24	D2
25	D2
26	D3
27	D3
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39	C2
40	D3
41	C2
42	D2
43	D3
44	D3
45	E1

SHOPPING

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39	C2
40	D3
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42	D2
43	D3
44	D3
45	E1

TRANSPORT

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41	C2
42	D2
43	D3
44	D3
45	E1

Paladar La Roca (Lucas Ortíz No 108; meals CUC\$7-8; ☎ noon-midnight) If you like lamb, this is the place for you; huge portions served in delicious gravy are dished up with rice at this friendly family-run establishment.

Paladar La Bamba (cnr Av 2 de Diciembre & Frank País; meals CUC\$8; ☎ 6-11pm) A superpopular place with tourists and touts that is often full.

RESTAURANTS

La Venecia (cnr Francisco Verona & Vicente García; ☎ 7am-11pm) Smack bang in the middle of town, this peso restaurant housed in a colonial building has an extensive menu, plus balcony dining overlooking the park. This is a good breakfast spot for eggs (two pesos).

Restaurante La Bodeguita (Francisco Varona No 295; ☎ 9am-11pm) This restaurant has tablecloths and a limited wine list and isn't bad for a state-run place. Try the chicken breast with mushroom sauce for around CUC\$5.

Cremeria Yumuri (cnr Francisco Vega & Vicente García; ☎ 10am-4pm & 5-11pm) Las Tunas' substitute Coppelia; pay pesos for sundaes or *tres gracias* (three scoops) in flavors such as coconut and *café con leche* (espresso with milk).

En Familia (Vicente García btwn Ramon Ortuño & Julian Santana; ☎ 11am-11pm) Promising sign, morbid surroundings, scant menu; but if you can rouse the pizza man from his cataleptic slumber you might just get lucky.

Also available:

Dos Gardenias (Francisco Varona No 326; ☎ 9am-midnight) Gussied-up cafeteria serving chicken, sandwiches and pizza for CUC\$1 to CUC\$3.

Café Oquendo (Francisco Varona btwn Vicente García & Lucas Ortíz; ☎ 24hr) Espresso straight (20 centavos) or *rocío del gallo* (rum-laced espresso) for two pesos.

La Caldosa (☎ 4-2743) Legendary place near El Cornito sells rich *caldosas* (stews) for a couple of convertible.

El Rápido (cnr Colón & 24 de Febrero) Those trusty microwaved ham-and-cheese sandwiches, just when you need them.

GROCERIES

Supermercado Casa Azul (cnr Vicente García & Francisco Vega; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) To stock up on groceries (or to break bigger bills), try this supermarket.

Other options:

Panadería Doña Neli (Francisco Varona; loaf CUC\$0.40) Bread is available here.

Mercado agropecuario (Av Camilo Cienfuegos) A small market is not far from the train station.

Entertainment

One of Las Tunas' signature sights is at Parque de Lenin where Calle Vicente García bends into Av 1 de Mayo. Every weekend there is a **Feria Ganado** (Farm Fair; ☎ 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) here with a market, music, food stalls, kids' activities and, if you're lucky, a full-scale rodeo (you'll see the large permanent arena as you walk in). Festivals run from June through to December and locals will tell you, with some authority, that this is

TEÓFILO STEVENSON – CUBA'S HEAVYWEIGHT BOXING CONTENDER

Muhammad Ali might have been the 'Greatest of 'em all'; but how would the so-called 'Louisville Lip' have fared against Cuban boxing legend Teófilo Stevenson?

Born in Puerto Padre, Las Tunas Province in 1952, to a Cuban mother and a father from St Vincent, Stevenson was a teenage boxing prodigy who in 1972, at the age of just 20, won the heavyweight gold medal at the Munich Olympics. In 1976 he repeated the feat in Montreal and in 1980 in Moscow he became only the second boxer ever (after Hungarian Laszlo Papp) to win three Olympic boxing golds. In fact, Stevenson could, arguably, have gone one further at Los Angeles four years later had the Cubans – following the lead of their Soviet patrons – not boycotted the games.

Long feted by the Castro regime as a national hero, Stevenson stumped American boxing promoters in the 1970s when he turned down a purported US\$5 million to go professional and step into the ring with a still active Muhammad Ali. 'Why do I need five million dollars when I have the love of five million Cubans?' he is said to have quipped.

These days Teófilo, who is vice-president of the Cuban Boxing Federation, lives modestly in a sleepy suburb of Habana. Ali remains his close friend and has visited the Cuban twice in Habana, most recently in 1998.

one of the best cowboy *espectaculos* (shows) in Cuba.

Cabildo San Pedro Lucumí (Francisco Varona btwn Angel Guardia & Lucas Ortiz; admission free; ☎ from 9pm Sun) Cultural activities happen at this friendly Afro-Caribbean association; drop in on Sunday for some dancing and drumming.

Cine Disco Luanda (Francisco Varona No 256; ☎ 10pm-2am Sun-Fri, 10pm-3am Sat) The most popular disco in Las Tunas. There's also a cinema here.

Cabaret Taino (☎ 4-3823; cnr Vicente García & A Cabrera; admission per couple CUC\$10; ☎ 9pm-2am Tue-Sun) This large thatched venue at the west entrance to town has the standard featherers, salsa and pasties show. Cover charge includes a bottle of rum and cola.

From October to April is baseball season. Las Tunas plays at the Estadio Julio Antonio Mella near the train station. Other sports happen at the Sala Polivalente, an indoor arena near Hotel Las Tunas.

Also worth checking out:

Bar Las Palmitas (Vicente García; ☎ 24hr) Kick back on the open-air terrace.

Casa de la Cultura (☎ 4-3500; Vicente García No 8) Best place for the traditional stuff with concerts, poetry, dance etc. Look out for the hastily scribbled hand-written posters.

Teatro de Guinól (Francisco Varona No 267; ☎ 10am Sat, 10am & 3pm Sun) Famous puppet and children's theater.

Shopping

Fondo Cubano de Bienes Culturales (cnr Angel Guardia & Francisco Varona; ☎ 9am-noon & 1:30-5pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) This store sells fine artwork, ceramics and embroidered items.

Vide Cuba (cnr Ortiz & Francisco Vega; ☎ 8:30am-9pm Mon-Sat) For your photographic needs, try this place.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Hermanos Ameijeiras Airport (☎ 4-2484), 3km north of the train station, has a nice new terminal building. There are no international flights, but **Cubana** (☎ 4-2702; cnr Lucas Ortiz & 24 Febrero) flies nonstop to/from Habana on Tuesday (CUC\$94 one way, two hours).

BUS & TRUCK

The main **bus station** (☎ 4-3060; Francisco Varona) is 1km southeast of the main square (ask

here for information on Astro buses). The Astro bus timetable is as follows:

Destination	Cost (one way)	Departure time
Camagüey	CUC\$4.50	6:15am
Habana	CUC\$27	7:30pm
Holguín	CUC\$3	1pm
Santa Clara	CUC\$15	8:40pm, alt days
Santiago de Cuba	CUC\$7.50	5:15am

Viazul (www.viazul.com) buses have the following departures; tickets are sold by the *jefe de turno* (shift manager):

Destination	Cost (one way)	Departure time
Ciego de Ávila	CUC\$13	12:15am, 1:25am, 2:40pm, 9:05pm
Habana	CUC\$42	1:25am, 2:40pm, 9:05pm
Sancti Spiritus	CUC\$18	12:15am, 1:25am, 2:40pm, 9:05pm
Santiago de Cuba	CUC\$11	2am, 7am, 3:35pm, 9pm
Trinidad	CUC\$23	12:15am

All Santiago de Cuba buses also stop at Holguín (CUC\$6, one hour 10 minutes) and Bayamo (CUC\$6, 2½ hours). To get to Guantánamo or Baracoa, you have to connect through Santiago de Cuba (an onward bus departs at 7:30am).

Passenger trucks to Camagüey, Holguín, Bayamo and Puerto Padre pick up passengers on the main street near the train station, with the last departure before 2pm. Buy your tickets at the window. It's easier to reach Playa La Herradura from Holguín, but you can take a truck to Puerto Padre and hitch or connect with ongoing trucks there (for information on the risks associated with hitching see p477). If you have problems catching the Camagüey truck, take a bus to Guáimaro from the regional bus station attached to the end of the train station and try again there.

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 4-8140) is near Estadio Julio A Mella on the northeast side of town. See the *jefe de turno* for tickets. As ever, double check these times and prices before you depart:

Destination	Cost (one way)	Travel time (hours)	Departure time
Camagüey	CUC\$5	3	12:30am
Habana	CUC\$27	10	12:30am
Holguín	CUC\$4	2	7:20am, alt days
Matanzas	CUC\$24	10	12:30am
Santiago de Cuba	CUC\$9	3.5	1:50am, alt days

Getting Around

A taxi from the airport to Hotel Las Tunas should cost CUC\$3. **Cubataxi** (☎ 4-2036; Villamar No 34) rents taxis and provides secure overnight parking for CUC\$1 to CUC\$2. Horse carts run along Frank País near the baseball stadium to the town center; a charter trip costs 10 pesos.

Havanautos (☎ 5-5242; Av 2 de Diciembre) is at Hotel Las Tunas. An **Oro Negro gas station** (cnr Francisco Varona & Lora) is a block west of the bus station, where there is also a **Micar** (☎ 4-6263; Francisco Varona) outlet. **Servi-Cupet** (Carretera Central; ☎ 24hr) is at the exit from Las Tunas toward Camagüey.

PUNTA COVARRUBIAS

It seems like the rutted road bumps go on forever before you reach Punta Covarrubias, 49km northwest of Puerto Padre. But after 90 minutes you arrive and it's sublime: 4km of spotless sandy beach, the blue-green Atlantic and the **Villa Covarrubias** (Gran Caribe; ☎ 4-6230; fax 36 53 05; s/d from CUC\$70/110; P ☎ ☎ ☎) the province's only all-inclusive resort. The hotel has 122 comfortable rooms in cabinesque blocks (one room is designed for disabled guests). Scuba div-

ing the nearby coral reef is the highlight. Packages of two dives per day are offered at the Marina Covarrubias for CUC\$45. There are 12 dive sites here. Almost all guests arrive on all-inclusive tours and are bussed in from Frank País Airport in Holguín, 115km to the southeast. It's very secluded.

Self-sufficient travelers can turn in to the beach at the **mirador** (a tower with fantastic panoramic views), 200m before the hotel and pitch camp. Old barbecue pits from parties past allow campfire cooking.

PLAYAS LA HERRADURA, LA LLANITA & LAS BOCAS

Congratulations! You've made it to the end of the road. A captivating alternative to the comforts of Covarrubias can be found at this string of northern beaches hugging the Atlantic coast 30km north of Puerto Padre and 55km from Holguín. There's not much to do here apart from read, relax, ruminate and get lost in the vivid colors of traditional Cuban life.

From Puerto Padre, it's 30km around the eastern shore of Bahía de Chaparra to **Playa La Herradura**. The beach is a scoop of golden sand and the water is clean. There are a couple of houses legally renting rooms (look for the green triangle). A good choice is **Villa Papachongo** (in Holguín ☎ 24-42-41-74; Casa No 137; r CUC\$15; ☎ ☎), right on the beach with a great porch for catching the sunset. Other options are Villa Rocio and Villa Pedro Hidalgo. Ask around. The place isn't big and everybody knows everybody else. If you don't like what you see here, push on to Playa Las Bocas where there are several more houses for rent. There is a small store

THE GAPS ON THE MAP

Languishing in a half-forgotten corner of Cuba's least spectacular province, the sizeable town of Puerto Padre – or the 'city of mills' as it is locally known – is hardly a tourist mecca. But for the die-hard traveler therein lies the attraction. Blessed with a Las Ramblas-style boulevard, a miniature Malecón, and an emaciated statue of Don Quixote standing rather forlornly beneath a small windmill, the town is the sort of place where you stop to ask the way at lunchtime and end up, five hours later, tucking into fresh lobster at a bayside eating joint.

Unshakeable Cuba junkies can scratch beneath the surface at the **Museo Municipal, Casa de la Cultura**, or the 19th-century **Fuerte de la Loma** all on Calle Libertad, or surf the streets in search of friends, conversation or overnight accommodation in a casa particular. Boxing fanatics might want to ask around about local hero Teófilo Stevenson (see p343) whose family home 6km out of Puerto Padre in the barrio of Las Delicias has been known to accept visitors.

To get to Puerto Padre you'll need to hire a car or flag a truck in Las Tunas.

for snacks and an open-air bar at the entrance to town.

Continue west on this road for 11km to **Playa Llanita**. The sand here is softer and whiter than in Las Herradura, but the beach lies on an unprotected bend and there's sometimes a vicious chop. If you're caught without a roof, check out one of the 112 basic cabins at **Campismo Playa Corella** (☎ 5-5447; per person CUC\$5), 5km before Playa Llanita.

Just 1km beyond, you come to the end of the road at **Playa Las Bocas**. Wedged between the coast and Bahía de Chaparra, you can catch a ferry (one peso) to El Socucho and continue to Puerto Padre or rent a room in a casa particular.

Getting There & Away

There are trucks as far as Puerto Padre from Las Tunas, from where you'll have to connect with another ride to the junction at Lora before heading north to the beaches. It's much easier to get up this way from Holguín, but even this way there are only regular trucks to the junction at Velasco, from where you'll have to connect with another ride north.

Driving is the best shot. Head out of Las Tunas 52km north to Puerto Padre (gas up at the Servi-Cupet here), east to the junction at Lora and then north to Playa Herradura. For directions from Holguín, see p357.