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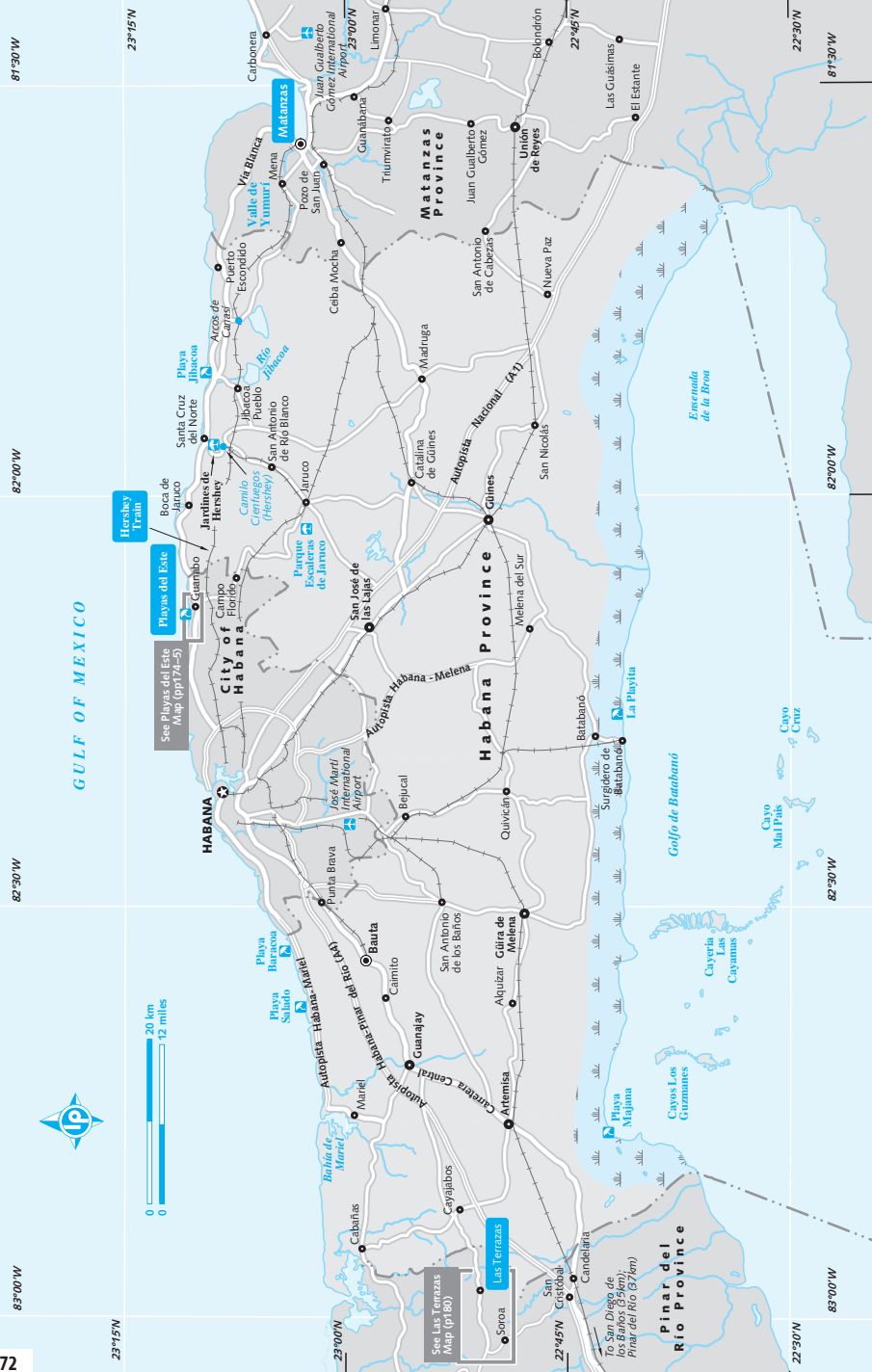
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Excursions ■



Excursions

Habana lies at the epicenter of a verdant and agriculturally rich rural region, much of which is well worth exploring in its own right. Bereft of the ugly urban sprawl of other Latin American cities, the capital is surrounded on three sides by Habana province, a vast swathe of well-tilled patchwork fields and palm-dotted colonial towns that is frequently ignored by travelers breezing through from Varadero or Pinar del Río. One of the reasons for this is the lack of decent transportation in the area, meaning that travel without a car is often challenging, though by no means impossible. Indeed one of the region's highlights is a journey in itself – the legendary *Hershey Train*, a stop-at-all-stations electric locomotive that rattles its way sedately from Casablanca to Matanzas in much the same way that it did almost 100 years ago.

Habana's magnificent coastline splays out on both sides of the capital, holding a plethora of bays and beaches. To the west lie the rocky shores of Playa Salado and Playa Baracoa, while to the east you'll find Playa Jibacoa and a 9km ribbon of golden sand known as Playas del Este. While not quite worthy of the resort status of Varadero, this is Habana's down-at-heel Coney Island and, not surprisingly, the place is packed on summer weekends.

While the area around Habana is mainly flat, the terrain to the west rises precipitously as you reach the border with Pinar del Río province. Encased here in beautiful pine-filled forests lie two of the capital's most popular back-to-nature getaways: Las Terrazas, a friendly ecovillage, and the spa town of San Diego de los Baños, where people have been lapping up the medicinal waters since the early 17th century. If the verve of crowded Habana gets too hot for you to handle, these two rural havens are excellent escapes.

BEACHES

The Cuban archipelago boasts over 300 beaches and the vast majority of them can be found on the country's north coast. Habana's own idyllic tropical paradise lies 20km to the east of the city at **Playas del Este** (p174), a colorful collection of popular beaches that stretch from Bacuranao to Guanabo.

NATURE

Recently heralded by the WWF as the world's most sustainable country, Cuba is never short of rustic environmental surprises. Nature enthusiasts will love **Las Terrazas** (p179), a model ecovillage nestled picturesquely in the midst of a Unesco-protected nature reserve that is rich in birdlife, indigenous plants and forward-thinking agricultural practices.

SPAS

Cuba has a surprising number of health spas and thermal baths thanks to a relative abundance of underground natural springs. One of the most celebrated bathhouses is the Balneario at **San Diego de los Baños** (p176), a rural spa complex that has been popular with Cubans for over a century but has only recently been discovered by a growing trickle of foreign visitors.

JOURNEYS

'The road is life,' wrote Jack Kerouac, and seldom have four words had such a compelling effect on adventure-seeking travelers. Should you be the sort who gets ants in your pants after five days walking around the monuments of the Cuban capital, consider taking a journey east into the hinterland of Habana province, where you can poke your nose around some of the areas that the tour agencies never intended you to see. Considered to be the city's best backdoor escape, the rattling *Hershey Train* (p177) leaves Casablanca five times a day for Matanzas, stopping at over 40 eccentrically named stations along the way. Don't miss it.

PLAYAS DEL ESTE

In Cuba you're never far from an idyllic diamond-dust beach, and Habana is no exception. Indeed, the city's very own pine-fringed Riviera, Playas del Este, begins just 18km to the east of the capital at the small resort of Bacuranao, before continuing east through Tarará, El Mégano, Santa María del Mar and Boca Ciega to the town of Guanabo, 27km from Habana. Although none of these places has so far witnessed the kind of megadevelopment reminiscent of Cancún or Varadero, Playas del Este is still a popular tourist draw card and, during the summer months of July and August, this is where all of Habana comes to play and relax on the soft white sands and in the clear aquamarine waters of the beautiful Atlantic coastline.

But while the beaches might be postcard perfect, Playas del Este can't yet boast the all-round tourist facilities of other Cuban resorts such as Varadero and Cayo Coco, much less the all-out luxury of celebrated Caribbean getaways. Come here in the winter and the place often has a timeworn and slightly abandoned air and, even in the summer, seasoned beach bums might find the tatty restaurants and ugly Soviet-style hotel piles more than a little incongruous.

But for those who dislike modern tourist development or are keen to see how the Cubans get out and enjoy themselves at weekends, Playas del Este is a breath of fresh air.

Interestingly, each of the six beaches that dot this 9km stretch of attractive coastline has its own distinct flavor allowing travelers to shop around until they find something to suit their individual tastes. **Tarárá** is a yacht and diving haven, **Santa María del Mar** is where the largest concentration of resorts (and foreigners) can be found, while at the rustic Cuban end of the strip, **Guanabo** has its own vibrant local community, complete with shops, a nightclub and plenty of cheap *casas particulares* (private houses that let out rooms to foreigners).

The hotel area of Santa María has seen an elevated security presence in recent years that – while keeping prostitution at bay – has eliminated much of the area's local color, and at

times Santa María can be like a graveyard. You'll find Cuban families on the beach at Guanabo, Cuban holidaymakers and gay couples at **Boca Ciega**, foreign tourists and their friends at Santa María, and men and women in search of each other at the western end of **El Mégano**. A very pretty part of Santa María is accessible from the parking area on Calle 13.

There are no 'sights' to speak of in Playas del Este. Rather, people come here either to relax or to play on the beach. There are a number of **Club Nautica** points spaced along the beaches east of Club Mégano, where you can rent equipment such as pedal boats, kayaks, snorkeling gear, banana boats and catamarans; a paddle around the coast exploring the mangrove-choked canals is a pleasure. Other beach toys like windsurfers, water bikes and badminton gear may also be available; many people rent this sort equipment all along the beach to Guanabo, but check gear carefully as we've received complaints about faulty equipment.

At the time of research, the yachting and diving facilities at Marina Tarará had been temporarily relocated to the Marina Hemingway (p185) in the west. A number of Playas del Este's hotels were also taking part in the Misión Milagros project (p189) and as a consequence were closed to tourists.

Information & Sights

Banco Popular de Ahorro (Av 5 No 47810 btwn Calles 478 & 480) You can change money here.

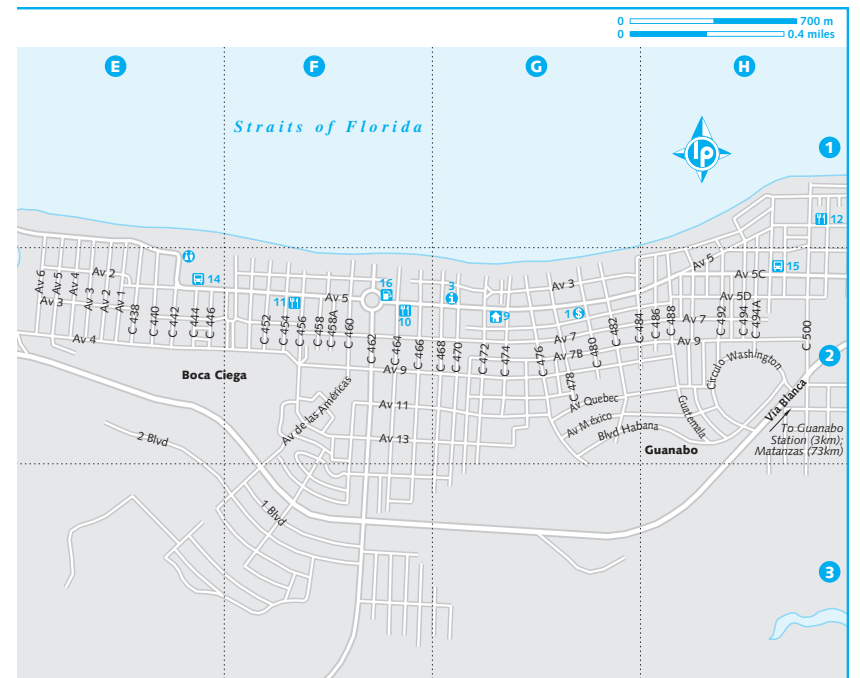
Clinica Internacional Habana del Este (Av de las Terrazas, Santa María; ☎ 24hr) This clinic also has a pharmacy on site.

Club Nautica (Playa Santa María del Mar; ☎ 10am–4pm) Club Nauticas are located along the coast, but the most central is outside Club Atlántico in the middle of Playa

Santa María del Mar. You can rent pedal boats (CUC\$6 per hour), banana boats (CUC\$5 per 5 minutes), kayaks (one-/two-person CUC\$2/4 per hour), snorkeling gear (CUC\$4) and catamarans (CUC\$12 per hour).

Infotur Guanabo (☎ 7-96-68-68; Av 5 btwn Calles 468 & 470; ☎ 8.30am–5.30pm) Tourist information office.

Infotur Santa María (☎ 7-96-11-11; Av de las Terrazas btwn Calles 10 & 11; ☎ 8:30am–5:30pm) Another tourist information office facing a popular strip of tourist beach.



TRANSPORTATION

Distance from Habana 18km

Direction East

Travel Time 20 minutes

Bus Bus 400 leaves every 30 minutes or so from the corner of Calle Gloria and Agramonte (Map p220) in southern Habana Vieja. Hop on at this stop and you'll have a good chance of getting a seat. The bus proceeds along the Vía Blanca and turns off into Boca Ciega to Guanabo. For Playa Santa María del Mar, get off in Boca Ciega and walk 2km west along the beach road. For Playa El Mégano get off at the El Mégano sign on the Vía Blanca and walk 1km north down the hill toward the ocean. The bus costs 5 pesos (CUC\$0.25).

Car Leave Habana Vieja via the harbor tunnel and proceed along the Vía Monumental. Approximately 2km after the Estadio Panamericano exit veer left onto the Vía Blanca. Look to the left for signs to Playa Bacuranao, Villa Tarará and Playa El Mégano.

Taxi A standard air-conditioned taxi to Playas del Este costs approximately CUC\$20. Shop around and you should be able to get something a little cheaper.

Eating

Bim Bom (cnr Av 5 & Calle 464; ice creams CUC\$1-3; ☺ 11am-1am) Need a break from the beach? Get your ice creams here.

Pizzeria Mi Rinconcito (Av de las Terrazas & Calle 4; mains CUC\$2-3.50; ☺ noon-9:45pm) This place has pizza, pasta and salads. It's regularly recommended for its pizza.

El Cubano (Av 5 btwn Calles 456 & 458; meals CUC\$6-8; ☺ 11am-midnight) A spick-and-span place with a full wine rack, checkered tablecloths and good chicken cordon bleu.

El Piccolo (☎ 7-96-43-00; cnr Av 5 & Calle 502; meals CUC\$7-10; ☺ 11am-midnight) This place is considered by many *habaneros* (inhabitants of Habana) to be the best pizza restaurant in Cuba, and they're not far wrong. Although it's out of the way and a little more expensive than the Playas del Este's other pizza joints, it's well worth it.

Sleeping

Villa Playa Hermosa (Islazul; ☎ 7-96-27-74; Av 5D btwn Calles 472 & 474; s/d low season CUC\$16/18, high season CUC\$20/35; ☺ ☺) This villa has 47 rooms in small

single-story bungalows with shared bathrooms and TV. It's a popular spot with vacationing Cubans, so expect music, dancing and drinking to all hours.

Aparthotel Las Terrazas (Islazul; ☎ 7-97-13-44; Av del Sur btwn Calles 9 & 10; 1/2/3-bedroom apt low season CUC\$36/54/63, high season CUC\$50/75/88; ☺ ☺) This place has relatively comfortable apartments with cooking facilities, fridges and TVs. The split-level pool is inviting and the disco, set away from the hotel, is a popular nightspot.

Hotel Blau Arenal (☎ 7-97-15-20; s/d incl full board low season CUC\$70/100, high season CUC\$95/150; ☺ ☺) Playas del Este's most stylish option, this modern hotel is on the Laguna Itabo. It has 166 rooms set around a translucent pool; ground-floor rooms have patios, but suites are much larger and cost about 20% more.

Villa Los Pinos (Gran Caribe; ☎ 7-97-13061; fax 97-15-24; Av de las Terrazas No 21 btwn Calles 5 & 7; 2-bedroom house low/high season CUC\$120/160; ☺ ☺) A terrific option if you're after private accommodation with style. The collection of houses here have kitchens, TVs and a personal feel; the majority also have swimming pools.

SAN DIEGO DE LOS BAÑOS

San Diego de los Baños, 130km southwest of Habana, is a tiny resort town nestled between two mountain ranges that is considered to be Cuba's best spa. It is also one of its oldest, dating back to the early 1600s, when a leprosy slave stumbling upon its medicinal waters took a revitalizing bath and was miraculously cured. Thanks to the area's proximity to Habana, a small settlement grew up on the site of San Diego's natural mineral springs in the ensuing years and in 1891 the Spanish established the first spa under medical supervision here.

The **Balneario San Diego** is a slightly decrepit bathing complex where thermal waters of 30°C to 40°C are used to treat muscular and skin afflictions. It's a perfectly reasonable place to visit as long as you don't turn up expecting five-star spa facilities or the Cuban version of Banff Springs. Mud from the mouth of the Río San Diego is used here for mud baths, but

the sulfurous waters of the natural mineral springs are potent and immersions of only 20 minutes per day are allowed. Massage is also available, along with other health services including 15-day courses of acupuncture. These facilities are among the finest in the country and many Cubans are prescribed treatment here by their family doctors.

If you're looking for cold water, you can swim at the **Hotel Mirador pool**.

Five kilometers directly west of San Diego de los Baños is **Parque La Güira**, which holds the former Hacienda Cortina, a large sculpture park built during the 1920s and '30s. Entered via a huge crenellated gateway, the artificial ruins include a Chinese pavilion and attractive clusters of bamboo. It's worth a quick stop if you're passing through – though more for its slightly surreal atmosphere than for the sights themselves. A huge state-operated restaurant is situated just above the park, but the cabins here are reserved for vacationing military personnel. The park is a nature reserve, and is a favorite spot for **bird-watching**.

During the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara transferred headquarters of the Western Army to **Cueva de los Portales**, 11km west of Parque La Güira. The *cueva* (cave) is in a pretty area 1km off the main road, and was declared a national monument in the 1980s. A small museum contains a few of Che's rough belongings. Three other caves called **El Espejo**, **El Salvador** and **Cueva Oscura** are up on the hillside. Together these sites make a cool side trip not just for Che aficionados, but for nature lovers as well.

Sights & Activities

Balneario San Diego (☎ 8-3-7812; ☺ 8am-4pm) Offers mud baths (CUC\$20) and 20-minute mineral baths (shared/private pools CUC\$4/6). Massages (CUC\$25) are also available, as are 15-day courses of acupuncture.

Hotel Mirador pool (admission CUC\$1; ☺ 9am-6pm)

Eating

Restaurante La Güira (Parque La Güira; meals CUC\$5) A notoriously ugly place with undependable opening hours; don't bank on much more than a quick drink here.

Hotel Mirador Parrillada (☎ 8-7-8338; meals CUC\$7) The hotel has an open-air *parrillada* (grill restaurant). There is also a proper restaurant inside the hotel itself serving Cuban cuisine.

Sleeping

Carlos Alberto González (Calle 21A No 3003 btwn Calles 30 & 32; r CUC\$20) Carlos runs a local casa particular that has been enthusiastically recommended by readers. If this place is full, the owners can point you in the direction of a few others.

THE HERSHEY TRAIN TO MATANZAS

To catch a colorful and vivid glimpse of bucolic Cuba just outside the city limits, there's no better method of transportation than the *Hershey Train*, an antiquated electric locomotive that plies its lazy route from Casablanca station to Matanzas five times a day, stopping at just about every house, hut, horse stable and hillock in between.

Built in 1921 by US chocolate czar Milton S Hershey (1857–1945), the line was originally designed to link the giant sugar mill in the town of Hershey with Habana and Matanzas. But running along an isolated rural route, the railway quickly became a lifeline to local communities in the area and an indispensable part of the provincial transportation network.

TRANSPORTATION

Distance from Habana 130km

Direction West

Travel Time 2½ hours

Car It's a fairly straightforward drive down the Autopista Habana–Pinar del Río to the San Diego de los Baños exit (Km 102). From here the town is 21km to the northwest along a narrower country road.

Taxi As there is no regular bus service to San Diego de los Baños, getting there without a car can be problematic (although it's a popular trip with long-distance cyclists). A taxi from Habana will cost approximately CUC\$80 to CUC\$90. A better option is to travel by bus to Las Terrazas (p181), stop overnight, and then pick up a taxi the next morning to take you the last 60km to San Diego de los Baños.

Hotel Mirador (Islazul; ☎ 8-7-8338; s/d low season CUC\$30/37, high season CUC\$34/41; ☺ ☺) A pleasant hotel situated adjacent to the hot springs, the Mirador has comfortable rooms with fridge (some with views) and a pleasant swimming pool. Service is helpful and friendly.

In 1959 the Hershey factory was nationalized and renamed **Camilo Cienfuegos** after Cuba's celebrated rebel commander, but the train continued to operate, still – unofficially – keeping hold of its old chocolate-inspired nickname. In true postrevolutionary 'waste not, want not' fashion, it also continued using the same tracks, locomotives, carriages, signals and stations, and became – quite literally – a chugging antique box on wheels.

An excursion on the *Hershey Train* to Matanzas isn't a luxury outing. Leaving five times a day from Casablanca station on the east side of Habana harbor, the train is famous for its slowness; travelers should be aware that many of the route's 40-plus stations are situated in the middle of nowhere, a good 5km hike from the nearest settlement. Furthermore, timetables are sketchy and erratic, and are regularly interrupted by such spontaneous calamities as 'cow on the line' or 'train shut for cleaning.' But for adventurous travelers, therein lies the beauty. This is Cuba as the Cubans see it – the journey is a microcosm of rural life, with all its daily frustrations, foibles and, um, fun.

Once you're on the train, it's really up to you where you get off. Beach bums can disembark at **Guanabo** and wander 2km to the north for a taste of Habana's rustic eastern resorts (p174) and plenty of welcoming *casas particulares*. History buffs can get off at **Camilo Cienfuegos** and stroll around the ruins of the old Hershey sugar mill or wander a kilometer or so to the north for lunch in the rural ambience of the **Jardines de Hershey**. Other attractions include **Playa Jibacoa**, the small settlement of **Arcos de Canasí** and the beautiful **Valle de Yumurí**.

If you want to make the excursion into a two-day trip, continue on to Matanzas where you can stay overnight in a *casa particular* and come back the next day on a more comfortable and rapid *Viazul* bus.

WHEN SUGAR WAS KING

Sugarcane was first introduced into Cuba by the Spanish in the 16th century. With its flat rolling plains and fertile limestone soil, the island provided ideal growing conditions for the new crop, and within decades sugar had become Cuba's biggest export. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the island played second fiddle to the French colony of Haiti as a world sugar producer but, following Toussaint L'Ouverture's bloody slave rebellion in 1791, thousands of French planters fled west to Cuba, bringing with them their business know-how and modern sugar-production techniques.

In the two centuries that followed, Cuba grew from a nascent sugar economy into the world's biggest exporter, with a huge influx of African slave labor pushing production through the roof and creating vast fortunes for the country's new class of land owners. Soot-stained sugar mills dotted the Cuban countryside, fields of cane swayed like giant grass in the tropical breeze and strapping armies of muscular *macheteros* (sugarcane cutters) hit the fields from November to June to take part in the backbreaking *zafra* (sugar harvest). But the boom wasn't to last. Devastated by the two independence wars in the late 19th century, when huge areas of cane fields were razed, the industry faced ruin and production fell into a seemingly terminal decline.

Fatefully, it was only a temporary blip. Pulled out of the mire in the early 1900s by profit-hungry American businessmen who brought up struggling Cuban mills and land on the cheap, sugar made an unlikely comeback that was as dramatic as it was sweet. Cuba's second big sugar high took place between 1915 and 1920, when the world sugar price hit \$0.22 per pound and production peaked out at over four million tons annually. Huge amounts of money were made almost overnight in an era that became known as the 'dance of the millions,' and Habana reaped the economic benefits with a lavish public-works program that saw the construction of such landmark buildings as the Presidential Palace (now the Museo de la Revolución; p81), the Estación Central de Ferrocarriles (p71) and the US\$17 million Capitolio Nacional (p79). But Cuba's overreliance on its sweet-tasting mono crop would come back to haunt it.

Following the 1959 revolution, one of the first belligerent acts of the US government was to cancel Cuba's preferential sugar quota in retaliation for Castro's ongoing nationalization campaign. However, the 'punishment' soon backfired. The very next day the Soviet Union stepped in and bought up the same hefty quota lock, stock and barrel, and a new 30-year Soviet-Cuban alliance was sealed right under Washington's nose.

Sugar production in Cuba peaked in 1970 when a bumper harvest hit nearly 10 million tons but, thanks to foreign competition, antiquated production techniques and the massive growth of the tourist economy, it's been declining ever since. In 2002 the government shut down 70 of its 150 sugar mills in a drastic restructuring campaign. One notable casualty was the Camilo Cienfuegos (Hershey) mill (p177). Here, as in other sugar towns, all laid-off workers have been offered graduate study programs and continue to draw their full salaries (around 400 pesos a month). The aim is to raise the basic level of schooling among ex-sugar workers from ninth to 12th grade, although it's still too early to measure the program's success. By 2004 annual sugar production in Cuba had leveled out at 2.5 million tons.

Eating

Cremería Atenas (Plaza de Vigía; ☎ 9am-9pm) A tasty ice-cream joint next to the Café Atenas in the Plaza de Vigía in Matanzas.

Jardines de Hershey (☎ 692-20-26-85; Camilo Cienfuegos) If you're disembarking at Camilo Cienfuegos (Hershey), these unkempt yet beautiful gardens 1km to the north have an attractive but basic eating option in an open-sided thatched-roof restaurant in the grounds.

Café Atenas (☎ 45-25-34-93; Plaza de la Vigía, Matanzas; ☎ 10am-11pm) Matanzas' best eating place is opposite the Teatro Sauto on Plaza de la Vigía. It offers pizza, spaghetti, sandwiches, beer, coffee and stupendous chicken-and-shrimp bruschettas, and has friendly service.

Sleeping

There are currently no hotels that accept foreigners in central Matanzas. If you decide to overnight in the city, you can try one of the following congenial *casas particulares*.

Hostal Alma (☎ 45-24-78-10; Calle 83 No 29008 btwn Calles 290 & 292; r CUC\$20-25; ♿) Alberto Hernández rents two rooms in a colonial house with a roof terrace, sun lounges and a pleasant central courtyard. Meals are available. Alberto is an excellent host and an expert on Matanzas' history.

Hostal Azul (☎ 45-24-78-10; Calle 83 No 29012 btwn Calles 290 & 292; r CUC\$20-25; ♿) A huge colonial

TRANSPORTATION

Distance from Habana 98km

Direction East

Travel Time Three to four hours

Bus *Viazul* runs three times a day from Matanzas to Habana at 9am, 12:15pm and 7pm. The journey takes two hours and costs CUC\$7.

Ferry To get to Casablanca train station for the start of this excursion, take the ferry across Habana harbor from the Muelle Luz in Habana Vieja. Ferries run every 10 to 15 minutes and cost CUC\$1. The crossing takes 10 minutes and delivers you right next to the station.

Train The *Hershey Train* runs five times a day, leaving Casablanca station (☎ 862-4888) at 4:43am, 8:35am, 12:39pm, 5:21pm and 9:17pm. Ideally the journey takes three hours to reach Matanzas (CUC\$2.80), but it's nearly always late. See p188 for further details.

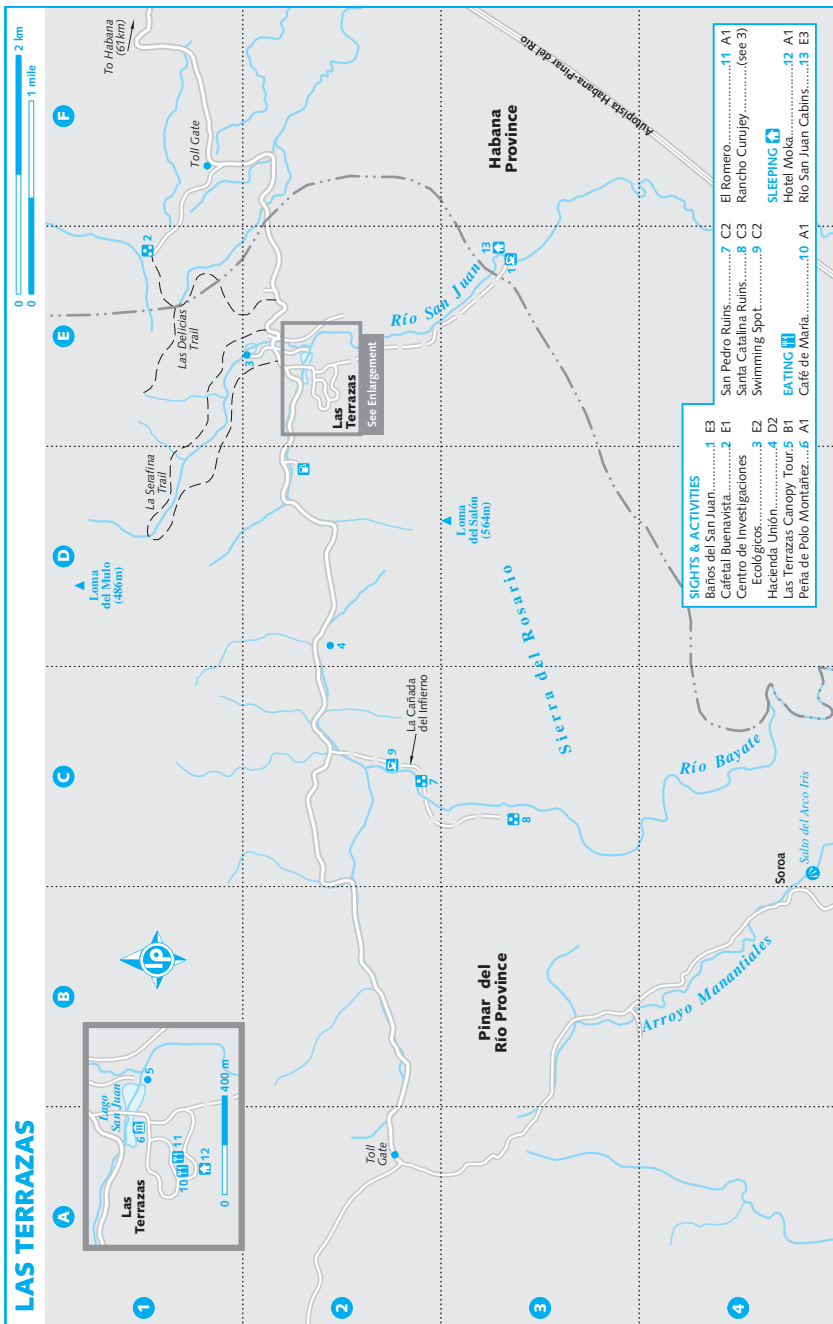
room in quiet house; Yoel Báez and Aylin Hernández are very attentive hosts. Hostal Azul shares a phone with Hostal Alma.

Anita & Luis Alberto Valdés (☎ 45-24-33-97; 2nd fl, Calle 79 No 28205 btwn Calles 282 & 288; r CUC\$25; ♿) This place has two bedrooms with separate bathrooms. Top hosts and huge, delicious meals.

LAS TERRAZAS

The lush, ecofriendly community of Las Terrazas, 60km to the west of the capital, is one of Cuba's most innovative and inspiring environmental projects. During the early 20th century, the mountains in the area had been denuded by a combination of fire and short-sighted agricultural techniques, and their inhabitants lived in poor and difficult conditions. To counter the problem, a reservoir was created in 1971, and a model settlement was built beside it, taking its name from the hillside terraces that had been planted with pines to prevent erosion. The experiment was so successful that in 1985, 25,000 hectares around Las Terrazas were declared the Reserva Sierra del Rosario, Cuba's first Unesco-sanctioned biosphere reserve.

In 1990, the then minister of tourism Osmani Cienfuegos (brother of the revolutionary hero Camilo Cienfuegos) approved plans for an upmarket ecotourism resort in Las Terrazas as a means of providing employment for the village's 890 inhabitants. Between 1992 and 1994, a 'green' hotel was built with workers drawn from Las Terrazas and it quickly became a model for hotels of its kind. A vibrant arts community with open studios and woodwork and pottery workshops took hold in the village to service the new ecotourists, and the settlement prospered, even producing its own national celebrity in the shape of Polo Montañez, a local lumberjack and singer who managed to knock out two best-selling albums before his death in a car crash in 2002. Cienfuegos (now in his eighties) is still heavily involved in Las Terrazas, and is regarded as the motivating force behind its success.



With 117 species of birds and 800 different types of plants, Las Terrazas is a popular place for **hiking**. Due to poor signage and the area's protected status, guides are generally necessary; they can be arranged at Hotel Moka or the Centro de Investigaciones Ecológicas. The two most popular hikes are the two- to three-hour **La Serafina** and **Las Delicias** trails. More-adventurous travelers will enjoy the 13km **Cascadas del San Claudio** trail, which takes walkers to a 20m-high waterfall with access to a natural swimming pool and offers the possibility of overnight camping. Other outdoor activities include **horseback riding**, **swimming** in the river and **canopy tours**.

About 1.5km up the hill from the eastern toll gate are the ruins of the **Cafetal Buenavista**, a coffee plantation built in 1802 by French refugees from Haiti. During the 19th century there were 54 similar coffee estates around Las Terrazas, although coffee isn't grown commercially here anymore. The huge **tajona** (grindstone) at the back of the property once extracted the coffee beans from their shells before the beans were dried on huge platforms. The ruins of the quarters of some of the 126 slaves held here can be seen alongside the drying platforms. The attic of the master's house (now a restaurant) was used to store the beans until they could be carried down to the port of Mariel by mule. There are decent views from here.

From just below Hotel Moka, a 3km road runs down the Río San Juan to small falls and natural swimming holes called the **Baños del San Juan**. This popular spot has naturally terraced rocks with clean, bracing waters cascading into a series of pools. If it's too crowded for your taste, you can head downriver to more private pools.

Hacienda Unión, 3.5km west of the Hotel Moka access road, features a country-style restaurant and a set of old coffee-estate ruins.

On La Cañada del Infierno (the Trail to Hell), midway between the Hotel Moka access road and the western toll gate, a road follows the Río Bayate down to the 19th-century **San Pedro** and **Santa Catalina** coffee-estate ruins. A kilometer off the main road, a bar overlooks a popular **swimming spot**.

The lakeside house of Polo Montañez is now a small museum called **Peña de Polo Montañez**, which contains various gold discs and assorted memorabilia. It's right in the village.

Sights & Activities

Baños del San Juan (admission CUC\$3) This is a series of small falls and natural swimming holes. There's a simple restaurant here serving palatable plates of fried chicken, rice and salad for a few convertibles.

Centro de Investigaciones Ecológicas (☎ 82-77-29-21) Arranges horseback riding (CUC\$6 per hour) and two- to three-hour guided hikes (CUC\$20 for one or two persons). The trails are poorly marked, so you really do need a guide.

Las Terrazas Canopy Tour (☎ 82-77-85-55; tour CUC\$25) The only canopy tour in Cuba can be arranged down by Lago San Juan. It is very popular.

Eating

Café de María (coffee CUC\$1-2; ☎ 9am-9pm) This tiny café right next to El Romero makes what is, without a doubt, the best coffee in Cuba. The aromatic brew is grown locally (ie on the other side of the patio) and is organic. It's so delicious, it's almost worth making the trip out from Habana just for this.

Rancho Curujey (meals CUC\$4-8; ☎ 9am-9pm) This is a rustic thatched-roof bar-restaurant situated next to the Centro Investigaciones Ecológicas and overlooking a

beautifully picturesque lake. The food is standard *comida criolla* (rice, beans and pork).

El Romero (☎ 9am-9pm) A full-blown ecorestaurant that specializes in vegetarian fare. This place uses homegrown

TRANSPORTATION

Distance from Habana 60km

Direction West

Travel Time 45 minutes

Bus There are no direct buses from the capital to Las Terrazas, but a daily transfer bus from Habana to Viñales via Soroa can drop you near the Hotel Moka. Inquire at Havanatur (p67) in Habana for times and schedules.

Taxi A return taxi, stopping off for three to four hours in the village, should cost about CUC\$65.

Tour All of the Habana tour agencies (p66) offer day trips to Las Terrazas. The excursion includes transportation, a hike, a tour of the local community, a visit to the Cafetal Buenavista, a swim in the Río San Juan and lunch. The tour's cost is approximately CUC\$39.

organic vegetables and herbs, and solar energy, and keeps its own bees. Browsing the menu – replete with hummus, bean pancakes, pumpkin-and-onion soup and extra-virgin olive oil – may make you think you’ve woken up in San Francisco.

Sleeping

Río San Juan Cabins (s/d CUC\$13/22) These five riverside cabins are 3km south of Lago San Juan. Book at Hotel Moka.

Hotel Moka (☎ 82-77-86-00; s/d low season CUC\$60/80, high CUC\$75/110; 🚽) Melting into the surrounding woods and containing a tree growing through the airy lobby, the Hotel Moka is one of Cuba’s most interesting and well-maintained places to stay. The 26 bright, spacious rooms have fridge and satellite TV, and activities ranging from horseback riding to guided hikes can be arranged on site.

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