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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.