



Business Enterprises for Sustainable Travel

# BEST

## Community Profile

Volume 4 Number 5

### Las Terrazas Complejo Turistico

Category	Ecolodge
Ownership	State/community owned and operated
Location	Pinar Del Rio, Cuba
Recognition	1985, UNESCO biosphere designation
Practice Keywords	resource conservation; guest involvement; green building; community engagement

### Las Terrazas Complejo Turistico

Thriving with Nature (and Tourists)

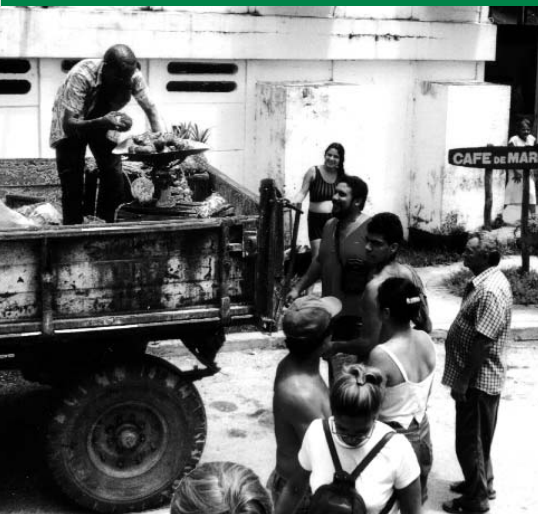
In the 1990s, Cuba's government opened wide its doors to international visitors—and their money. In 2002, 18 to 21 percent of total Caribbean visits were made to Cuba. That translates to 1.8 million tourists, including about 200,000 Americans. The number of U.S. travelers is expected to grow to nearly 4 million visits—with 1.5 million stays of one week or longer—within three years of lifting the current U.S. travel restrictions. Needless to say, this will have a tremendous impact on a nation of 11 million people.

The incipient tourist boom is a growing asset in the preservation and restoration of natural and cultural resources. Nowhere is this more apparent than at Las Terrazas Complejo Turistico in the province of Pinar Del Rio, about 75 kilometers west of Havana.

The story of this 12,355-acre *complejo* (complex) in a narrow valley beside an artificial lake is a multifaceted one. In the late 18th century, French settlers, fleeing the revolution in Haiti, were the area's first inhabitants. They tried, without much success, to grow coffee. Their methods led to some clear-cutting and significant erosion of the surrounding hillsides. That erosion advanced as *campesinos* (peasants) arrived to harvest forests for timber and charcoal.

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the area was one of the poorest in the province, both economically and ecologically. In 1967, within the revolution's first decade, the government sponsored a massive reforestation effort, enlisting local companies to plant 10 million trees across 5,000 hectares. Those efforts were so successful that UNESCO designated the area a biosphere reserve; the Sierra Del Rosario Biosphere Reserve is now one of six in Cuba.

In the early 1990s, then-Minister of Tourism Osmany Cienfuegos recognized both the area's ecological draw as a tourist destination and an ecolodge's close fit with the community's goals. After an extensive consultation with local residents, \$6 million in government funds were allocated to build the Hotel Moka, which is located midway between the community and the biosphere.



## What to See and Do at Las Terrazas

### Rancho Curujey—Administrative Center

- Lakeside relaxation
- Paddleboat rentals

### Hotel Moka

- Environmentally friendly structure
- Pool, tennis court, restaurant, bars, etc.
- Horseback riding
- Two main trailheads within easy walking distance
- Guided tours in conjunction with Ecological Reserve Center

### Las Terrazas Community

- Unique architecture: orange and blue concrete with red-tiled roofs
- Mercedes' paladar—acclaimed private restaurant
- Maria's Café—locally grown coffee
- Alberto's Woodworking Shop
- Lester Campo's studio (Cuban artist who has won worldwide acclaim)
- Polo Mantenez original studio (recently deceased Cuban singer with award-winning albums across Latin America)

### Buena Vista Coffee Plantation

- Ruins of 18th-century Haitian coffee plantation
- Ocean views to both north and south (narrowest part of the country)
- Stone-wall complexes used for drying coffee beans
- Exhibition of tools and implements used in coffee farming
- Restored old farmhouse (lunch available)
- Caoba trees (planted to shade coffee bushes)

### Ecological Research Center

- Staff of two directing biologists, a geographer, a forestry expert, an ecologist, and a geologist
- Educational information about the biosphere and its development
- Guided tours of the biosphere (arranged from the hotel)

### La Loma de Taburete

- Hiking at the mountain where Che Guevara trained his fighters before his last trip to Bolivia



## “Tan Verde Que Es Possible”

Las Terrazas is described as *tan verde que es posible*—as green as it gets. Some long-time community members observe that the reserve is much better protected and cleaner since tourism came. At the same time, it is portrayed as an extraordinary place to live. As Miguel, a long-time resident who works at the reserve's Ecological Research Center, puts it, “Everyone is a little better off here. Everyone has electricity and running water, and everyone has a telephone. Not many people have seen it, but when they do, they often want to live here.”

How does this extraordinary place earn such high marks in so many areas, particularly when it was developed so rapidly as a tourist site?

## A Community Involved in Its Own Destiny

When the Cuban government decided to reshape this impoverished and depleted area, it turned to the people who knew it best: the local residents. As families were gathered into the central residential community, they retained the right to opt out of certain aspects of communal living. And as Cienfuegos began to consider turning Las Terrazas into a premier tourist destination, he sent out psychologists and sociologists to interview every local resident to ensure that the development coincided with their interests.

While the tourist destination was being created, local radio and newspapers offered a forum for debating its merits. At each step, local labor was used whenever possible, from building the structures to staffing the hotel and serving as drivers and guides. And because of Las Terrazas's isolation (it is reached by a four-kilometer road connected to Havana by a single major highway), even the highly skilled people brought in to run the Ecological Research Center became part of the community.

Today, two elected community members decide how the community's share of funds from tourism—about one-third of the hotel's net intake—are allocated. Over 85 percent of Las Terrazas residents are now involved in tourism, and five percent continue to work on continued reforestation at the reserve. And Jose Garcia, one of the community's founding designers, became director of Hotel Moka in early 2002.

## A Home for Diverse Species

Las Terrazas is unique because the human community lives within the protected wilderness. Officially, the reserve is divided into three zones: mixed use, conservation/science, and transition/buffer. The highest levels of protection are around the river headwaters that run north to the ocean.

Located at the narrowest part of the island, the reserve is an important migratory stopover for many birds and hosts 109 species, among them the highly valued Cuban *trogon*. The island's humid, tropical climate promotes a proliferation of evergreen trees and an estimated 800 species of plants, many of which are not found outside of Cuba.

In opting to reforest with cedar, mahogany, hibiscus, and teak—in addition to fast-growing pine—the government has made a long-term commitment to environmental restoration; some of these species take 60 years to reach full maturity. Some of the trees are cultivated through natural succession, while others are deployed in plantation-style pairs.

Controlled cutting of precious woods (i.e., teak and mahogany) is allowed beyond a certain tree diameter. But this is a thriving environment. As a technician at the Ecological Research Center notes, “You cannot recognize this landscape in photos from 30 years ago; some of the growth occurs so quickly that we must check on it weekly.”

## A Hotel Welcoming to Both Locals and Tourists

Hotel Moka is situated midway between the community and the protected areas. Guests are encouraged to visit—and shop—in both places. Constructed using Cuban labor and as much local material as was available, the unique Spanish-style building is hidden in the hillside, avoiding tree removal. The white stucco, glass, and wood structure is relatively small, containing only 25 rooms and one suite, although it possesses such four-star amenities as a pool, a tennis court, and multiple bars.

Hotel Moka follows such basic ecopractices as providing energy-efficient light bulbs, encouraging towel conservation, and requiring a room key for electricity to flow (so lights and air conditioning cannot be left on when the room is vacant). Ecosystem managers have taken a biological approach to destroying insect nesting sites in places where they might prove a nuisance to hotel guests. In addition, management has adopted a strategy to encourage longer guest stays, which lead to greater return and less environmental impact. And in a unique program tying the reserve's Ecological Research Center, the hotel, and the community together, 69 local children were trained in a recycling program called “ProNaturaleza.”

The ties between the hotel and the community are very strong—and work both ways. When the hotel opened in 1994, 26 community marriages were celebrated there and many hotel guests participated. Community members work in the hotel and are able to tell guests when craft shops and other local attractions are open.

## Benefits...

### To the biosphere, the complejo, and Hotel Moka

Preservation of natural and historical resources.

Access to a workforce dedicated to their success.

Greater autonomy from central authority.

Increased flow of funds dedicated to preserving the restored environment.

### To the local community

More immediate access to services (education, healthcare, child-care, and other essential public services) than in many rural areas.

Employment in tourism and environmental conservation.

Greater participation in planning and other decisions that will affect the community.

Ability to purchase surplus supplies from the hotel at reduced cost and within shorter time frames than provided by external supply chains.

Opportunity to learn about other parts of the world through visitors.

### To visitors and guests

Safe destination with a relatively low crime rate.

No major health concerns (except hepatitis A in certain areas with bad sanitation).

Sense of the local community, its history, its life, and culture.

Access to an extraordinary natural environment, including both a diverse bird migration stopover point and Cuba's only view of both coasts.

Opportunity to contribute to continued conservation of the restored biosphere.

Opportunity to contribute directly to the community through patronage, local purchases and gratuities.



Some food from organic gardens in the community finds its way to the hotel restaurant's tables, although much of the food served there is brought in frozen. However, guests are known to frequent the local *paladar* (a private restaurant), which has a menu more highly recommended than the hotel's. In addition, when the hotel has a surplus of maintenance supplies or equipment, the community is allowed to buy them at cost, saving not only money but also the time it takes to request and ship items from Havana or beyond.

## Development Has Economic Implications

Although the Cuban government does not release profit and loss information, tourism seems to be a good thing for the Las Terrazas community and its precious restored ecosystem. Transactions are completed in U.S. dollars, generating much-needed income for both organizations and individuals.

The complejo itself is doing well, by all accounts; the hotel's director reports that Hotel Moka was able to repay its initial government loan and increase profits in 2001. Furthermore, the complejo broke away from its state-run *hoteler* group and became its own independent company (autonomy almost unheard of in the Cuban tourism sector).

## Best Practices and Notable Lessons

Las Terrazas is a unique environment incorporating a protected biosphere reserve, a thriving residential community, and a growing tourism operation. It has been described by many as "socialism that works." There are certain elements that have broader applications outside Cuba, including:

**Community participation in planning** One of the primary elements in Las Terrazas' success is that tourism was introduced only after the community—and the biosphere—

was already firmly in place. This has forced tourism development to conform to the community rather than the other way around.

**Strong ongoing community involvement** Under the Las Terrazas model, the local community and the tourist offering have not only been interdependent at inception but residents also have a continuous say in many aspects of development. This allows for growth that sustains—rather than challenges—the local culture and community.

**Revenue sharing** Tourism revenue at Hotel Moka is split three ways between reinvestment in the hotel, the sponsoring entity (the state), and community upkeep. This has increased local commitment to the ecolodge's success.

**Openness** Unlike many state-run tourist operations, curiosity among visitors to Las Terrazas is encouraged. This has helped to keep the tourist experience unique and promote cultural interaction.

**Keeping the model local** Complejo directors—and Cienfuegos himself—envisioned a tourist experience based on the specific attractions the biosphere and the community have to offer. The whole concept of "complejo" has included a vigorous effort to create a diversity of unique tourist offerings.

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### About the author

Emma Stewart, a graduate of Oxford University, is a doctoral candidate in environmental policy and corporate social responsibility at Stanford University. She has served on the project team for the MacArthur Foundation pilot project on sustainable tourism, created a new business school course on sustainable tourism, and received a Mellon Fellowship for her ongoing work on the development of sustainable tourism practices in Cuba.

Steven Skyles-Mulligan of Evoke Strategies provided valuable editorial direction.

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### About The Conference Board

The Conference Board creates and disseminates knowledge about management and the marketplace to help businesses strengthen their performance and better serve society. As a global, independent, public-purpose membership organization, we conduct research, bring executives together to learn from one another, convene conferences, publish information and analyses, make forecasts, and assess trends.

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### About BEST

Business Enterprises for Sustainable Travel (BEST) is an initiative of The Conference Board, in association with the World Travel and Tourism Council. Several foundations, including the Ford and Charles Stewart Mott Foundations, provide support.

BEST serves as a leading source of knowledge on innovative travel and tourism practices that advance business, community, and travelers' interests. BEST profiles cutting-edge businesses, community organizations, and travelers in the growing field of sustainable travel and tourism.

You are invited to submit other examples for consideration for future BEST profiles.

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### About the World Travel & Tourism Council

The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) is the global business leaders' forum for travel and tourism. Its 112 members are chief executives from all sectors of the industry, including accommodation, catering, entertainment, recreation, transportation, and other travel-related services. Its central goal is to work with governments to realize the full economic impact of the world's largest generator of wealth and jobs—travel and tourism.

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