

Surrounded by fragrant forests, abundant coconut palms and citrus groves, and rivers still fished according to the moon, Baracoa, Cuba's oldest, most isolated town, is home to a vibrant cuisine which leaves the rest of the country's 'pork, rice and beans' reputation in the dust. Lydia Bell digs in

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAMA KNIGHT

RIVERS RUN THROUGH IT



From top: a street scene; preparing vegetables in a rustic kitchen. Opposite, clockwise from top left: cacao pods; enjoying a cup of good hot chocolate; Zoila at her farm in El Güirito; the artisan chocolate made at Zoila's plantation; coffee at Rancho Toa; sweet *cucurucho* cones, packed with coconut, papaya and honey

Travel information

Baracoa is a municipality and town in Cuba's Guantánamo Province, near the country's eastern tip. Journey time is around 24 hours. Time is 4 hours behind GMT. Currency is the Cuban convertible (CUC) and the Cuban peso (CUP). In June the average high temperature is 31C and the average low temperature is 25C.

GETTING THERE

Air France flies to Santiago de Cuba with two stops. From there Baracoa is 5 hours by bus viazul.com or 3.5 hours by taxi. airfrance.com
Virgin Atlantic offers non-stop flights from London Gatwick to Havana. A connecting flight from there takes around 2.5 hours. virginatlantic.com

RESOURCES

Visit Cuba is the official tourist board and its website is packed with information to help you get the most out of your trip. visitcuba.com

FURTHER READING

Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba by Tom Gjelten (Penguin, £14.99) explains why Bacardi products are not something you'll find in Cuba. The book, published in 2009, studies the company's fascinating backstory, covering key periods in Cuban history along the way.

CARBON COUNTING

To offset your Carbon emissions when travelling to Baracoa, visit climatecare.org and make a donation. Return flights from London produce 2 tonnes of CO₂, meaning a cost to offset of £14.98.

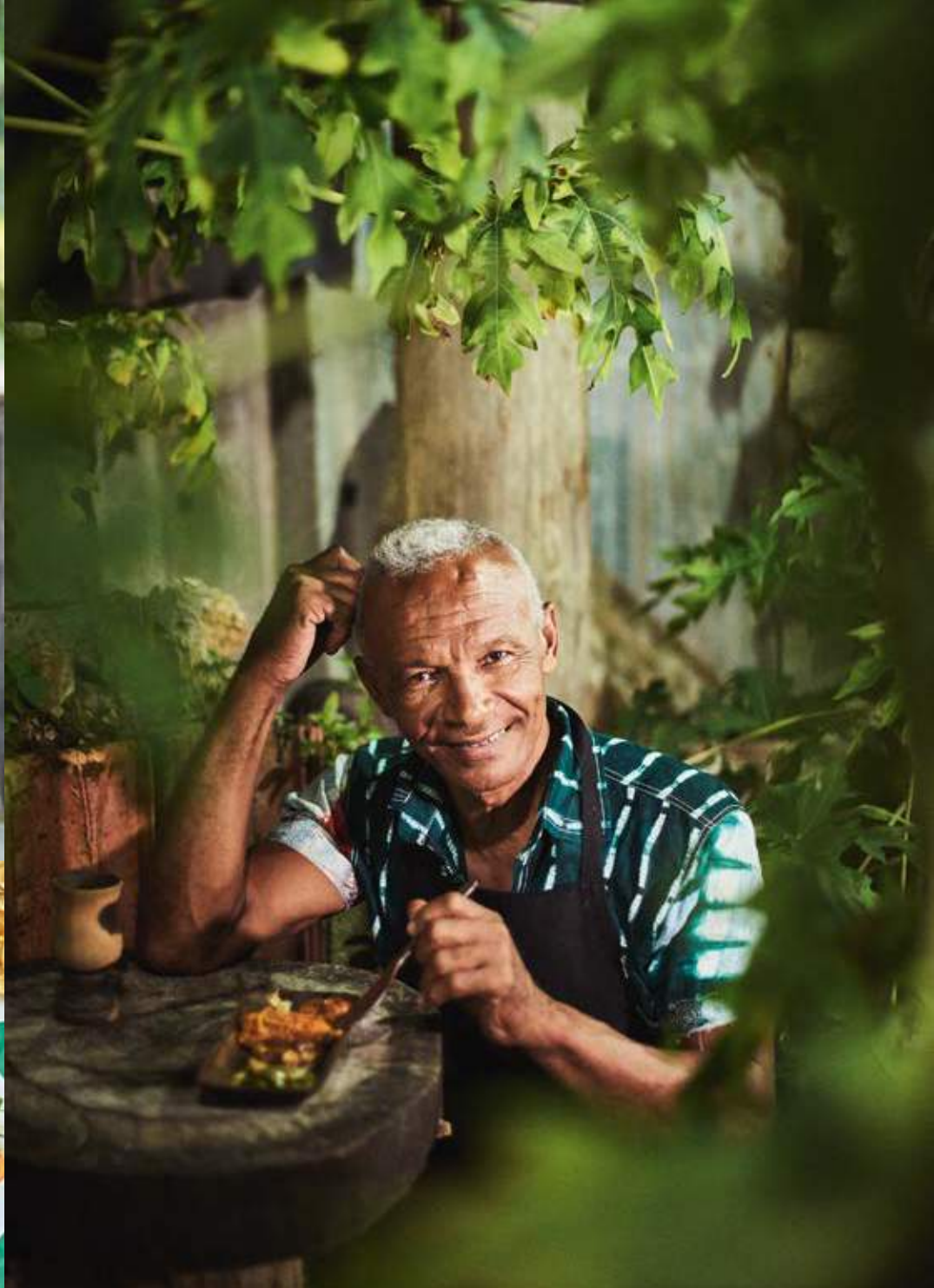
In 1965, the sequestered coastal town of Baracoa was revealed to the world. In the summer of that year, engineers unveiled 'La Farola', the 60km-long road that skims the Sierra del Purial on Cuba's east coast. Along its vantage points, vendors cram the fruits of Baracoa's pastures through your car window in a hint of what awaits: armfuls of tangerines, cocoa butters, *yemitas* (balls of coconut and chocolate) and *cucuruchos*, banana leaves folded into a cone and filled with a sugary mass of coconut, honey and orange. If there's a better drive-thru in the world, I'm yet to find it.

With its mountainous hinterland, tropical forests, magical river deltas, unblemished coastline, Edenic national park and veiny preponderance of crystalline rivers – 29 in total – this is Cuba's best side. Blessed with the country's highest levels of rain, it's also the most fertile. While the rest of Cuba suffers produce shortages that make running a restaurant in Havana challenging to say the least, Baracoa is pregnant with coconut, cacao and coffee, and heavy with the fruit trees and vegetables that have created its culture of excellent food. Where you'll struggle to find a lettuce leaf in certain seasons in Havana, in Baracoa you can feast on chard, beets, cabbage, okra, gumbo, squash, taro, aubergine, green and red sweet peppers, almonds, sesame and cashew nuts and more.

Baracoense cuisine stands apart from the pork, rice and bean paradigm associated with much of the rest of the country. The town's official historian, Alejandro Hartmann, estimates that around 4,000 Cubans here are genetically more Taíno than not. While 'hidden' Amerindian influence permeates Cuban culture, Baracoa is visibly pre-Colombian in a way that's rare. You can see it in its inhabitants' beautiful burnished skin and angular cheekbones. The tendency to tack planting and harvesting to the moon is Amerindian. As are their aromatic coconut sauces, banana leaves used in cooking, some vegetables (yuca, maize, and sweet potato) and spices, as well as the instruments they use to cultivate the land.

A good place to grasp the basics of Baracoense cuisine is at Rancho Toa, a thatched alfresco restaurant at the bewitching delta of that eponymous river. The river turns inky while they bring us the dishes of generations. There's *ajiaco*, a stewy soup of root vegetables – malanga, pumpkin and ripe plantain, fragranced with pulled pork and chicken. There's *bacán perdido*, grated plantain with coconut milk, coriander and oregano. There's *calalú* curry. There's a coconut water, orange juice, passion fruit and Ron Cubay cocktail, served in a hollowed grapefruit with a bamboo straw. Sometimes the *bacán* is flavoured with *tetí*, —————>>





Right: an idyllic national park eating spot. Opposite, clockwise from top left: some of the abundant fresh local produce at Rancho Toa; Aristides at restaurant Baracoando; a car park in Playa Manglito fishing village; the lush banks of the River Toa; an aerial view of the river valley; octopus at Bar de Tato beach shack in El Güirito



'While the rest of Cuba suffers produce shortages that make running a restaurant in Havana challenging to say the least, Baracoa is pregnant with coconut, cacao and coffee, heavy with fruit and vegetables'

a tiny, algae-feeding see-through fish considered a delicacy. They shoal in the Toa, Duaba and Yumurí rivers between July and December. Baracoans have been fishing *tetí* by the *luna menguante* – the waning moon – since everyone here was indigenous.

As the light fades, we drift to the black-sand beauty of the mouth of the River Duaba, where fishing families have set up camp for these months. Tonight, though, it's not *tetí* time: they are harvesting baby angula eels that wiggle in like soporific tadpoles.

There's mystery around the *tetí*; my chat with the fisherman, who's been catching it since he was ten, upholds this. He can't tell me what kind of fish they are, when exactly they arrive, or why. 'We think they travel in a shoal. But I don't know.' The other fishermen nod sagely. I give up and, watching the driftwood campfires light up the beach, decide to take a dip in the ocean under the glittering stars. Dazzling phosphorescence follows my every movement.

The next day, we visit the hamlet of El Güirito to find out about ancestral beats and cuisine. El Güirito is a dirt-road village home to Grupo Kiribá y Nengón, a music and dance troupe tasked with keeping alive 19th-century *kiribá* and *nengón* country music and dance, the antecedents to *changüí*, *son* and *salsa*. Unlike rapid *changüí*, *nengón* is an elegant, elderly swaying. Men in *guayaberas* (four-pocket shirts) and straw hats lead women in pale-blue dresses to skim the floor with their feet in a sweeping motion. As well as the usual Cuban guitar (*tres*), *tambour* (African drum), bongo, maracas, *clave* (that lends a distinct, clonking rhythm) and *güiro*, a hollowed-out gourd with ridges scraped with a stick, the band also includes the *marimbula*, a plucked box more common in Jamaica.

Today they are having a *fiesta campesina*. Inside an open-sided shack kitchen, a large iron cauldron perched on flaming rocks bubbles away leftover breadfruit for the pigs. Smoke billows off the wood fire that still powers most kitchens in these parts. Apart from the classic Cuban slow-roasted pig on a spit, the food that comes out of the kitchen in hollowed and polished

Where to eat

Prices are per person for three courses and two drinks, unless otherwise stated

Baracoando Theatre-set-beautiful *paladar* (private restaurant) on the edge of town where vegetarian supremo Aristides Smith prepares a buffet dinner of foraged and organic delights nightly. Around £4, not including alcohol, plus a donation. *Maceo 96 y, Cerca de Via Azul* (entrance through back patio), 00 53 21 642199

Bar de Tato Classic Caribbean feet-in-the-sand affair providing good fruit cocktails and juices and a delicious smorgasbord of super-fresh fish and seafood. Around £8. *Playa Manglito beach*, 00 53 53 628584

Cafeteria Victor Let Victor welcome you into his little blue house right at the end of the beach, so you can feast on mammoth portions of freshly caught snapper in coconut sauce, *tostones* (fried plantain) and passion fruit mojitos. Around £9. *Casa de Victor, Playa Maguana*, no telephone or website; just go to the beach and ask for Victor

La Cocina de Ortiz Local Ineldis Trutié Ortiz, who returned home to Baracoa after having trained in Havana's best restaurants, hasn't opened his restaurant yet, but will cook in a friend's restaurant for you, or at home. Around £12, not including alcohol. *Calle Rafael Trejo 15*; 00 58 00 1237/00 53 55 800 1237 (mobile), email ortizwhite@nauta.cu

El Edén Family permaculture farm 25km from Baracoa town where meals can be arranged by appointment using the freshest organic farm-to-plate ingredients. Suggested donation for farm visit and meal £8pp. *Quibiján*, no telephone; book through cubaprivatetravel.com

El Poeta, Baracoa Romantic little *paladar* with a vintage record player turning out bolero. Local dishes include a Taino-inspired *tamales* and homemade ice cream served in a cacao pod. Around £15. *Calle Antonio Maceo*, entrance via *Ciro Frias y Cespedes*, 00 53 21 643017

Rancho Toa, Baracoa An idyllic thatched restaurant serving up *ajiaco* soups (root vegetables laced with pork); *bacán perdido*, *calalú* (callaloo) curries, and more. Around £12. *Mouth of the River Toa on the Moa road*, 00 53 21 645224; no telephone; book through cubaprivatetravel.com



Clockwise from top: hunting for river prawns; the resident dog at Villa Paradiso; one of the property's bedrooms; local fare at Rancho Toa. Opposite, clockwise from top left: river prawns for the menu; a Grupo Kiribá y Nengón dancer; fishing on the River Duaba

'Everywhere in Baracoa are cacao plantations, their trunks dripping with the pods key to this area's identity. Seventy-five per cent of Cuban cacao is from here and the town is perfumed with the smell of chocolate from the factory Che Guevara opened in 1963'

Where to stay

Hostel Río Miel An undeniably nondescript concrete hotel but with well-kept, comfortable rooms, on the sea wall of Baracoa town. Doubles from £45. *Calle Ciro Frías, 00 53 21 641263, gaviotahotels.com*

Hotel El Castillo Carved out of a honey-coloured, mid-18th-century Spanish fortress, El Castillo has featureless rooms but a swimming pool as well as a wonderful panoramic view. Doubles from £45. *Calle Calixto García, 00 53 21 45195, gaviotahotels.com*

Villa Maguana A small government-run collection of timber-built casitas on an idyllic palm-drenched beach 20km north of Baracoa on Playa Maguana, with a tiny restaurant. Doubles from £74. *Moa Road km 22, 00 53 21 641204, gaviotahotels.com*

Villa Paradiso Baracoa Three rooms are on offer in this gourmet household run by Roberto and Manuel, which sits on a hillside with an incredible view over Miel Bay. Doubles from £25. *Moncada 92B, 00 53 53 019085, villaparadisobaracoa.com*

coconut shells and gourds is atypical for Cuba. There's *calalú* in leche de coco, *bacán* (plantain dough made with coconut milk, coloured with red annatto seed, stuffed with crabmeat and wrapped in banana leaf); crab in an enchilado sauce, *fufú* (garlic-mashed plantain), fried *guapén*, similar to breadfruit, malanga fritters in coconut oil, okra in tomato sauce, and fried dorado.

It's time for the chocolate chaser. Cacao plantations are ubiquitous to Baracoa, their trunks dripping with pods. Seventy-five per cent of Cuban cacao comes from here and the town is perfumed with the smell of chocolate from the factory Che Guevara opened in 1963. But the best place to see how it meshes into Cuban culture is at Zoila's place, in the village of El Güirito, where you'll find beautiful hand-printed artisanal bars of chocolate. At her cottage, Zoila machetes open a pod to remove the seed, which is sweet to suck. She explains how she ferments the cacao, skims it off, then dries, roasts and grinds it – each stage of her meticulous process. 'Families make it at home,' she shrugs. 'I grew up watching my mother make chocolate for the workers on our farm.'

I taste her earthy unsweetened cocoa; her raw bars, smokily tasty; her cocoa balls made for grating into hot chocolates, puddings, and cakes. I also taste her sweet stuff: the bonbons sweetened with honey from her bees; a rich, sweet mocha; and her *chorote*, a hot chocolate made with cocoa, coconut milk and plantain flour. 'It's great for children who won't drink milk,' she says.

It's a glittering, sunny afternoon, perfect for spending on the beach, so we head to the fishing village of Playa Manglito. Fishermen drift to and fro, reggaeton parties





Right: a typically colourful street scene. Opposite, clockwise from top left: pastel facades of town buildings; fresh langoustines ready for the kitchen; a man catches crab on the river; Baracoa city limits; the beautiful Miel Bay; friends enjoy an alfresco game of dominoes; the view of Baracoa from Villa Paradiso



'Fishermen drift to and fro, reggaeton parties unfold, women sell cocoa butters and jewellery made of seeds, and children dip in and out of protected reef waters teeming with lobster and octopus'

unfold, women sell cocoa butters and jewellery made of seeds, and children dip in and out of protected reef waters teeming with lobster and octopus. We settle down at beach-shack restaurant Bar de Tato to marinated lobster with tostados, drinking icy Hatuey beer. Tato sets out a table and chairs on the sand. His maracuyá, mango and guanabana juices are refreshingly sweet in the sticky heat and we talk, laugh and swim until the sun fades out of the cornflower sky.

We are staying at Villa Paradiso, a *casa particular* (house with rooms to rent) on a hill overlooking Miel Bay. While we are only six blocks from Baracoa's downtown, the hummingbird-filled garden of ornamental plants and lemon, guava, soursop, plantain and avocado trees are countryside-worthy. Best of all, it's run by Manuel Riquenes, an academic from Santiago de Cuba, and his partner, Roberto Jovel, a Salvadorian-Canadian sociologist – foodies who have taken to Baracoa like ducks to water. Also in residence is a fluffy Havanese dog, a cat and a misanthropic parrot. Over a breakfast of treacly coffee, poached eggs, fresh tropical juices, homemade jams and

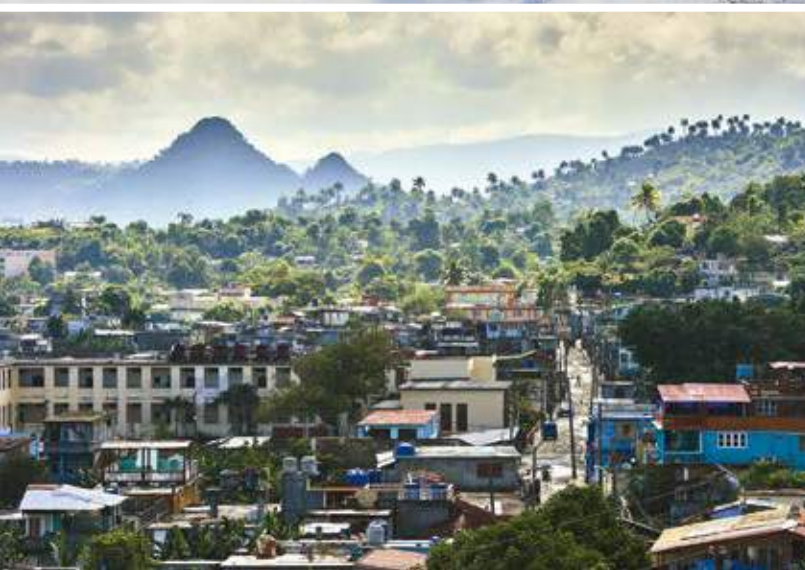
tart country cheese, Roberto says that Baracoa has taught him to eat with the seasons. He talks about his suppliers: a tiny organic urban farm created from a cleared dump for chard and beets; local permaculturists for ginger, cinnamon, fennel and river prawn; a cacao farm for everything cocoa-related; Alexander de Humboldt National Park eco-farmers for fruit vinegars.

Everything they produce is inspired locally, from the organic cocoa and herbal teas infused with mint from their garden, to the chocolate and almond ice cream, mango or soursop sorbet, and ripe plantain cake. There are river prawns flambéed with Cuban rum or poached in coconut milk, flavoursome lamb casseroles and slow-roasted herbed pork, plus dressings and condiments made with smoky dried peppers, chives, coriander and the liquorice-like anisito herb. Roberto waxes lyrical about a vegetarian restaurant in town, so we head down. Baracoando appears to be a shack made out of recycled planks tacked onto rough limestone walls and reclaimed by —————>>

Food glossary

- Achiote** Known outside as *annatto*, an orange-red condiment and food colouring derived from the seeds of the achiote tree
- Ajiaco** A thick, stewy soup with a rich fragrance combining root vegetables such as malanga, pumpkin and plantain with chicken and pork and coloured with *achiote*. Cubans regard this as the 'fusion' dish that best showcases their Spanish, African and indigenous heritage
- Bacán** The plantain dough *tamal* (as opposed to the usual corn-based dough) made in Baracoa, with crabmeat, wrapped in banana tree leaves
- Bolas de Guineo** Plantain balls simmered in coconut-milk sauce
- Cacao** The name of the trees on cocoa plantations that bear cacao seeds in large, oval pods growing on their trunks. Also refers to the raw cacao beans that boutique chocolatiers come to Cuba in search of, purchasing for their bean-to-bar creations. *Bolas de cacao* refers to pure, roasted and ground cacao balls
- Café** Coffee. Coffee plantations are everywhere in Baracoa and its hinterland. The traditional preparation of the beans is to roast them over a wood fire in an iron cauldron before grinding them
- Calalú** Callaloo. The spinach so prevalent in Jamaican cuisine is found more regularly in the cuisine of Eastern Cuba
- Camarones de río** The local river prawns, which are speared and collected. Langoustine-sized, their meat is extremely sweet and tender
- Casabe** A Taino-bequeathed flatbread made with shredded and dried yuca and a dietary staple since pre-colonial times
- Coco** Coconut is at the core of Baracoan cuisine. *Leche de coco* is the coconut milk which many Baracoans cook their protein and vegetables in.

- Agua de coco* is coconut water. *Coco loco* is when the coconut water has a splash of rum added
- Cucurucho** Literally meaning 'cornet', this is a cone-shaped palm leaf which encases a sticky mixture of coconut, papaya, honey, and usually orange (but sometimes guava or pineapple)
- Fufú de Plátano** Mashed green plantain usually also containing onion and garlic, and sometimes flavoured with pork meat, salted and laced with fresh lime juice
- Malanga** The taro root vegetable that is used to make delicious fritters. Not to be confused with yuca, which is what Cubans call cassava, which is boiled, then served in a mojo sauce, or made into heavy, rough fries and served with a garlicky sauce
- Maracuyá** Passion fruit. More common in the east of the country, maracuyá is used to make fresh tropical juices, mojitos, and even as part of an acidic vinaigrette
- Miel** Honey. Bee hives are everywhere, and decent honey can be found at every breakfast table between February to October. Thanks to Cuba's prohibition of pesticides, Baracoan bees are thriving, mainly feeding on mango tree flowers and juniper tree flowers, floral and aromatic in scent
- Pulpo** Octopus. Enjoyed Cuba-wide in stews, *enchilado* (tomato, chilli and cumin-based sauce) or as a ceviche or carpaccio, but particularly fresh and abundant in Baracoa
- Teti** The tiny, savoury, transparent fish which have been harvested by fishermen for decades under the fading light of a waning moon, and which are used to pep up all manner of dishes from July to December





'In a thatched tree house we feast on the river prawns that the boys were spearing, served in a bitter orange salsa laced with oregano and coriander, the softest fufú, dressed in chive vinaigrette, and yuca in mojo'

banana plants, driftwood and creepers. In an open-front garden, rough-hewn wood tables fill an open terrace. It's like a fabulous theatre set. Amid a still life-worthy kitchen of hanging bananas and garlands of onions and garlic, the owner, Aristides Smith, is enthusiastically grating ginger. Baracoa's last hurricane in 2016 decimated the town with 6m-high waves. Aristides shows me a home video of the water rushing into his house: it's like something out of *Titanic*. The house was ground-zeroed and Aristides scavenged whatever materials he could get his hands on, from rejected doors to telegraph poles. The result is madly beautiful.

Smith, apart from being an anthropologist, documentary-maker and *babalawo* (priest of the Yoruban religion of old) is a self-taught chef. Tonight there's ripe plantain, *pepinillo* (gherkins), pan-fried okra and peppers, sides of chard and pumpkin, tamales, maize fritters or *buñuelos*, cassava bread laced with herbs, and aubergines pimped up with salsas. There's chickpea salsa, coriander vinaigrette, salsa *vitanova* (a sort of tomato sauce *con picante*) and a guacamole made with bitter passionfruit. There's pesto from pepper, which becomes tamarind-like when dried. Because he believes food is a human right, he asks for £3 – everything else is by donation. He refrigerates nothing and forages in the mountains and rivers for ingredients and medicinal herbs, 'after the rain, or early in the morning, while the dew is on them, so they have a good energy'.

The next day, just when we think that the good energy cannot get any better, we discover the aptly named El Edén. Baracoa is on the cusp of the vast Cuchillas del Toa Biosphere Reserve, filled with

waterfalls, rivers, and dense endemic flora. Enveloped in it is the gorgeous, 124km River Toa and its basin, where the trees are emerald and the waters clear as a bath. Less than 20km downriver, where the road towers over a bend in the river at Quibiján, we clamber down a muddy path and call over to houses on the other side until they bring a balsa raft. Two teenage boys are spearing *camarones del río* – river prawns – which they collect on a belt.

This is El Edén, an idyll occupied by a family of eight who run a permaculture farm. They raise horses, chickens, pigs and rabbits, tilapia, goats, sheep, bees, turtles and guinea pigs. They fish for river prawns and tend plantations of coconut, cacao, and fruit trees.

'Since we started practising permaculture, we've been healthier and happier,' the mother tells me. She explains how they steam coconut oil to put off bees; how cedar and oregano repel insects; how to attract insects to rags soaked in car oil; how they'll produce biomethane from pigs' and goats' excrement; how the rubbish is encircled by palms to absorb odours; and about their composting.

By the time we finish chatting, the platters are prepared. In a thatch-topped tree house we feast on the river prawns the boys were spearing, served in a bitter orange salsa laced with oregano and coriander. There's the softest *fufú*, dressed in chive vinaigrette, and yuca in a garlicky, bitter orange *mojo*. It's the best meal I've had in Baracoa, and served in a valley with the scale and beauty of the one in *Jurassic Park*. It's everything that I love about Baracoa rolled into a single moment, and I don't want to leave. So I don't. Instead, I curl up in one of their hammocks and fall asleep. □



Clockwise from top: a local man with his cockerel; a beach shack cook readies a fish for the grill; the Baracoando kitchen; river prawn enchilada at El Edén. Opposite, clockwise from top left: the *fiesta* feast; one of the dancers; tropical foliage; a roadside *parador*; making rum cocktails

