

# Las Terrazas

## *and its environment*



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Landscape in las Terrazas © Tania García

Community landscape  
Fuente: Marcia Leiseca



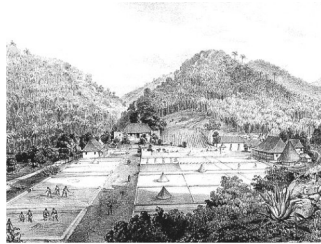
Las Terrazas, the first ecomuseum in Cuba, located in the eastern part of Sierra del Rosario, the mountain range that covers the westernmost tip of the island, was inaugurated in May 2010. Las Terrazas is a symbol of a territory where human actions and landscape transformation during almost four hundred years, constitute an encompassing cultural heritage that provides cohesion and stability to the young Las Terrazas community founded in 1971.

The ecomuseum exhibits the natural, historic and social values representing the territory's identity and the villagers' sense of history and culture. While they, and their ancestors, are the main actors in the dynamic process taking place in the historic and natural sites that make up the museum, the latter becomes an expression of and an instrument for the participation of villagers in the community's present and future development.

In a nutshell, the reference hall of the ecomuseum exhibits and defines the evolution of the area and its sites: the coffee plantation ruins; Aranjuez; natural spaces like the birds paths, the San Juan and Bayate baths and the San Claudio river; part of the area declared as a biosphere reserve; the terrace system and plantation, and Las Terrazas community, as well as the livelihood and lifestyles of its villagers. Touring these places is part of a rich and complex fabric that unveils its culture and the performance of social and economic forces through different periods of time, screened against the backdrop of the Cuban society

The current Las Terrazas community and its environment were part of the El Cusco and San Salvador farmyards in the 16th and 17th centuries. The farm was used for large scale animal husbandry and its forests subjected to indiscriminate logging. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, immigrants, mostly of French origin and coming mainly from Saint Domingue Island, today Haiti, settled in Sierra del Rosario, bringing with them fresh memories of the anti-slave revolution that had taken place there. In a fairly short time, around a hundred coffee plantations bloomed and the estimated slave population in that territory was five thousand.<sup>1</sup>

Writers and travelers visited the region and described the stone paths for carriages, coffee drying-barns, buildings, gardens, gatherings and parties that made their daily life pleasant. Fredrika Bremer described men and women living there as follows: "In times of grandeur it seemed as each of them were a small heaven [...]. They competed with each other in beauty and luxury"<sup>2</sup>. However, in a young lady's notebook, Cirilo Villaverde, one of the greatest Cuban narrators of the 19th century, wrote: "A coffee plantation! Do you know what a coffee plantation is? ¡Ah! It's heaven on earth, if it were not for the many poor devils that suffer, moan and cry perpetually; but otherwise, with the perfumes, harmony and charms of a celestial mansion"<sup>3</sup>.



"La Ermita" coffee  
plantation.  
Engraving.

The rugged features, topography and dense vegetation its forests served as a refuge for the cimarrones, the runaway slaves from coffee and sugar plantations in the region and from the plains surrounding Havana as well.

The decline of coffee plantations began in the mid 19th century due to competition, soil degradation and the sugar cane boom. Coffee plantations were abandoned and nature took over. The names, the direct descendants among the villagers, the coffee plantation ruins and the living memories bear witness of their existence, as well as the words incorporated to the Spanish language, poetizing our buoyant vegetation, like the breadfruit tree, the invasive roseapple, the fragrant colonia and the hundred-year-old mango macho tree providing shade to stone-paved carriageways.

Today, these ruins have become a fossil landscape, remnant of a past the traces of which are still visible. Seventy four of them have been located and characterized for their preservation; six have been rescued to archeological levels, and one --the Buenavista Coffee Plantation--has been restored. Together, they make up what has been named the Coffee Plantation Route, of great cultural and tourist value.

By the end of the 19th century, the region was involved in the War of Independence. Antonio Maceo, Major General of the Liberation Army, toured the region during the invasion of the western part of the country, waging memorable battles. After his death, the Sixth Army Corps, which continued fighting till the end of the war, established its headquarters at Aranjuez, few kilometers from where Las Terrazas community stands today, and one of the historical sites of the ecomuseum. The coffee

plantation ruins were used by the Cuban Army as camps and for other purposes.

The early 20th century was marked by the concentration of land in the hands of few land-owners. Indiscriminate logging continued and most of the forests became vast rangelands for cattle- and hog- raising. The few villagers made their livelihood as agricultural workers and hunters, or making charcoal. Alberto Naite recalls:

*...When I saw these mountains for the first time, as a little boy, you could walk through them without being hit by the sun. La Serafina, Las Delicias, were the barest places... The rest was dense green vegetation [...] Come to think about it, there were very few people living around here. During the twenties, some people came to settle down in the hills and that was when indiscriminate logging began, first for wood and later for the charcoal business.*

We can see traces of how the prevailing exploitation rationale in both soil and forests deeply sharpened during this period. Impoverishment of both nature and people living in the area was the only prospect so far. But not everything was harshness in the mountains. At night, they would gather around the light of an oil lamp to dance, sing and serenade. The *décima* (a ten-verse stanza), the most deep-rooted artistic manifestation in the area, survived through time and even today is part of the cultural heritage of Las Terrazas. Sitting in the darkness of their huts, oral tradition played a very important role. It was the way in which past stories, memories, and knowledge about traditional medicine were transmitted,



José María Martínez Heredia (Bebo), coalman and repentista (improvising Singer) from La Sierra. Las Terrazas founder. Fuente: Marcia Leiseca



Hut in La Sierra, 1968. Fuente: Marcia Leiseca

becoming part of the living heritage of the terraceros (people who live in Las Terrazas).

The first Agrarian Reform was implemented in 1959. Approximately one hundred peasants living in Sierra del Rosario, among the tens of thousands of people who benefitted from this law nationwide, received the property of two *caballerías* (approximately 27 hectares) of land in this territory and they used it to grow minor crops. The practice was to clear a plot of land and cultivate till the soil became so poor that they would have to move on to another plot of land within the property.

The new small farmers joined the scarce population of the area. There was an exchange of knowledge between the two

groups, and a new process of social and economic improvement began for them.

The original forest of Las Terrazas and its surroundings had lost its most valuable trees. Vast areas had been turned into pasture, eroded hills, secondary forests where Mahogany, Majagua, Cedar and Ebony trees, among others, no longer grew.

In 1968<sup>4</sup>, the need to implement economic and social development projects in rural areas led to the integrated development plans. The Sierra del Rosario Plan was one of those projects. With this plan, a new development scheme was put into practice in the area based, for the first time, on a completely different rationale regarding the relationship between villagers and their environment. Under this new rationale, restoration of the environment included also the establishment of the community and the livelihood of the villagers. The project began precisely at the time when environmental movements and ideas were evolving.

The goal of the project was to develop five thousand hectares in the easternmost part of the mountain range, to provide an



improved quality of life for its inhabitants and re-forest with timber species the plundered soil. The method used was terrace cropping, an old system that was adapted to the steep slopes and the use of technology.



Las Delicias terraced basin.  
Fuente: Marcia Leiseca

Many, particularly young people, came to work in the Sierra Project grouped in contingents with meaningful names for Cubans like “Columna Juvenil del Centenario” (Centennial Youth Column) a tribute to the centennial of the first War of Independence against Spain, and Brigada Invasora Che Guevara (Che Guevara Invasion Brigade). They joined the existing labor force made up of construction workers from nearby places, and workers of different trades and origin, as well as thirty engineering students from the Havana University<sup>5</sup>. The few inhabitants of the area gradually joined in.

In eight years time, twenty kilometers of bituminous paved roads and hundred and seventy kilometers of trunk roads to make the 1,360 kilometers of accessible terraces were built following the contours of the slopes, and six million trees of precious wood were planted. The village was also built during that period and was named Las Terrazas. The hard-working spirit that characterized those involved in the project is expressed in the following words:

*Men strived to transform themselves and an environment where a landscape of 19th century coffee plantation ruins and deforested mountains prevailed [...]. Summoned by the mobilizing spirit of the sixties, men and women living in absolute poverty in the hills and those who went to work in the Project, the terraceros, came together in that space. The dialogue among them turned into a transforming force that*

*made possible a new spiritual relationship with nature through work ...<sup>6</sup>*

Las Terrazas is a rural community and the essence of its design, by architect Osmany Cienfuegos, reflects the views of the peasants who would come to live in it. They were summoned not only to build it but also to express their wishes and views during the initial stage of the project. The words pronounced by Cienfuegos on occasion of the Habitat 2010 Award conferred upon him by the National Housing Institute for his contributions to the development of housing and population settlements in our country, express this concept:

*...There was a need to group the scattered population living under conditions of absolute poverty and build a village where those peasants could enjoy what had been denied to them [...]. The urbanization had to follow the same image of the layout of the terraced mountains, following the contours [...]. The village's square would stand at the peak of the elevation, where community facilities would be located. From there, the houses along the zigzagging narrow streets could be seen, some cantilevered and others towards the edge [...]. The village would be tailored made for those who would come to live there. The peasants, who were always consulted, demanded “lots of doors and windows”. Houses and other facilities were to be built respecting such traditions.*

Starting in 1971, the population would enjoy the benefits of a new community: power, piped water, schools (primary and



A community view taken from the Square.  
Fuente: Marcia Leiseca



Community Square.  
Fuente: Marcia Leiseca





The Moka Hotel. Fuente: Marcia Leiseca

secondary education), day-care centers, a doctor and other resources to guarantee public health, among others, as a result of the integrated development program that had begun in 1968.

In 1985, UNESCO declared 25,000 hectares of Sierra del Rosario as Biosphere Reserve, the first one in Cuba. The reserve is characterized by evergreen forests, mainly in acid soil, the best preserved in the country and a highly endemic flora and fauna. The reserve 5,000 hectares of the Sierra del Rosario Plan, the terracing area reforested with trees that restored the value of its original forest, and the community.

The nineties set a new course in the life at Las Terrazas. The beauty of the community and its surroundings was of great cultural value, ideal for tourism. The Moka Hotel<sup>7</sup> and other tourist facilities were built during that decade.

That “integrated development” project was not yet called sustainable development. That crucial question was dealt with at a conference on the Community:

*It would be a fallacy to use the term sustainable development to characterize a new development model in this region after the eighties or nineties [...] The term sustainable development, analyzed only within the context of specific sectors like tourism or nature preservation, without establishing a connection with other facts, will render it meaningless [...]. The sustainable development notion can only be enriched and defined by taking into consideration our social, cultural and political values so as to incorporate our own development concepts to this nomenclature...<sup>8</sup>*

In the case of Las Terrazas, tourist development incorporated the traces of combined actions by men and nature, contrasting at times, complementing at others, occasionally plundering each other, but forging always a culture, a heritage, and a memory that brought about a new cultural landscape. According to architect Isabel Rigol<sup>9</sup>, Las Terrazas Community is “an excellent contemporary example of harmony among architecture, environment, and cultural traditions.”

The Sierra del Rosario Integrated Development Plan remains in the collective memory of the community as “The Plan”. The development project that had began in 1968, became over time the current Las Terrazas Tourist Resort, in charge of managing ecological and cultural tourism. Contributing to the community’s development as well as preserving the historical and natural sites of the ecomuseum are among its goals. That is why after the nineties, with the development of tourism in the area, the Resort demanded a social and cultural project that would cover several community development programs. These programs are based on the principle of incorporating knowledge and traditional practices that will further community involvement in strengthening strategies.

The community is the social core of the ecomuseum, where architectural and urban values and the presence of villagers, descendants of coffee plantation inhabitants, peasants living in the Sierra, and terraceros<sup>10</sup> converge, with their memories and life stories. There are 993 villagers with an average educational level, out of which, 579 are under 35 years old, accounting for 58.3% and revealing a young and renewed population



Craft. Fuente: Marcia Leiseca

in contrast with the national average. The active work force is 615, out of which 62% works in the tourist sector. A unique feature is that 15% of its villagers descend from slaves and landowners and bear the surnames of coffee-plantation owners of this region.

Education has been at the core of villager's development. Today there is a multigrade educational center covering primary and secondary education, and approximately 340 students have graduated in middle-level education since 1991 when the center decided to include this school level. Fifteen per cent of the graduates have followed university studies. The teaching staff is made up of 42 professors, out of which 38 come from native households.

A completely new social practice introduced in the community was the establishment in 1993 of the Neighbors Group, an association of formal and non formal leaders that is renewed every two years. This promotes regular communication with the population and advises political and administrative authorities regarding community matters. It is a social participation experience with very encouraging results. Other interventions have resulted in the establishment of a vegetarian restaurant that besides providing gastronomic service sponsors an interest group in the school to develop new nutritional habits in the population; large-scale planting of fruit trees; the development of craftsmanship as a source of creativity and labor for forty women in the community; the establishment of the Casa de la Memoria (Memory House), a day-time center for the elder in need of company or economic support, that interacts with the Library and the Reference Hall

of the ecomuseum, and where their experiences are systematically registered.

A cultural site very dear to Cubans is Polo Montañés' house<sup>11</sup>, the last place of residence of the artist. His family was among the first to settle down in the community. As it has been said, music has been one of the favorite cultural expressions of the population in this area. The whole musical repertoire broadcast by the radio came to enrich the traditional taste for and promotion of the *décima*, *repentismo* and country music. The town's celebrations were usually animated by local natural musicians. Polo Montañés' natural talent emerged from such local practices. Five of these family musical groups turned professionals as a result of tourist development. They are the ones that usually play at tourist centers and community's festivities.

The Coffee Plantation Route, as one of the ecomuseum's historical sites, has been the subject of an archeological study that began in 1968 and has continued throughout the different stages under the guidance of archeologists and historians<sup>12</sup>. Today, coffee plantations to be preserved and studied have been defined by a field study and field work. The new feature of this stage is the involvement of the community, school students, and specialists of the Reference Hall in this endeavor. Preserving this cultural heritage is a difficult and permanent task due to the characteristics of the environment.

These considerations compel us to reflect on the range of the heritage concept. Everything that has been said so far about Las Terrazas has to do with work and ethics. That was how the life of the



Sierra inhabitants and those who committed themselves to its development was like. Thus, the most valuable heritage and the tradition that must be renewed and kept alive are love for work and the ethics for living in society. Those were the principles of their ancestors, of the mountain range peasants who freely decided to join the Community, and of the workers of the project who finally settled there.

As, Reynaldo Gonzalez, the author of *Conversación en Las Terrazas* state in the foreword: “The initial small circle was gradually broaden and they came across other possibilities of work that today reaffirms an irreversible cohesion and an expanding movement. The foundation of Las Terrazas village did not of course accomplish the Paradise fable but urged the quest for it. It can only be achieved with everybody’s efforts”.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Cuban National Archives, General Government Fund, copy 875, file 2951

<sup>2</sup>Fredrika Bremer, *Cartas desde Cuba*, Editorial Arte y Literatura, Havana, 1981, page 174.

<sup>3</sup>Cirilo Villaverde, “La peña blanca”, *La joven de la flecha de oro*, Letras Cubanas, La Habana, 1984, page 54.

<sup>4</sup>That same date, the Sierra del Rosario Plan requested several research institutes from the Academy of Sciences to conduct a study of the area. One hundred and thirty villagers were living there under poverty conditions. Their huts, almost without exception, were made of palm-tree leaves and earth floor, without sanitation facilities. Three multi-grade schools, scattered throughout the territory, had the difficult mission of providing education to children who had to walk kilometers, crossing streams and rivers, to attend school. In general, they reached the fourth grade.

<sup>5</sup>Engineering students, guided by professors Ignacio Allende and Ángel Hernández, finished their

studies working both in the terrace system and site construction. In this regard, the cooperation of Engineer Luis Pérez Cid was decisive. Some of the students stayed and lived in the community for more than ten years. Likewise, a group of architecture students, under the guidance of Architect Mario Girona, collaborated in the architectural planning of the first forty five houses from June 15 to September 30, 1968. Architect Eduardo Granados and the engineering students worked permanently on the different community projects.

<sup>6</sup>Text of the lecture delivered by Master of Arts María Cienfuegos Leiseca during a field trip to Las Terrazas on occasion of the Heritage, Community and Biodiversity Workshop organized by UNESCO at the Occidental Miramar Hotel (September, 2009.)

<sup>7</sup>Designed by architect Osmany Cienfuegos.

<sup>8</sup>Text of the lecture delivered by Master of Arts María Cienfuegos Leiseca during a field trip to Las Terrazas on occasion of the Heritage, Community and Biodiversity Workshop organized by UNESCO at the Occidental Miramar Hotel (September, 2009.)

<sup>9</sup>Isabel Rigol, “Los paisajes culturales del Caribe. Un legado excepcional”, *Hereditas*, No. 14, National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), 2010.

<sup>10</sup>Initially, the term was used only for those who worked directly in the terracing system in the mountains but over time it was also used for the villagers of Las Terrazas

<sup>11</sup>Polo Montañés (Fernando Borrego Linares, 1955-2001) had a meteoric musical career that made him a prestigious singer at home and abroad. Today, his house is visited by tens of thousands of people.

<sup>12</sup>Researcher and archeologist Rodolfo Payares and a team of the Academy of Sciences began the study in 1968. It was continued by PhD Lourdes Domínguez of the Anthropology Institute in the seventies. In the nineties, the historian Freddy Ramírez carried out studies in the area and collaborated with architect Fernando Paredes in the restoration of the Buenavista Coffee Plantation. They are the co-authors of a book. Currently, Professor Gabino La Rosa, a historian and archeologist, is in charge of the work being done in Sierra del Rosario’s coffee plantations.