



THE HIGHWAY OF

L I F E

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Golden oldies, youngsters and good-timers all are drawn to Route 184 in Cayey, where a sizzling combination of barbecue, music and dance proves that sometimes the journey is indeed the destination

It's hard to say what hits you first – the hip-shaking rhythm of live music, the scent of barbecue or the burst of bright colours in the middle of the jungle – but one thing's for sure: you'll know when you've arrived. La Ruta del Lechón, or “The Pork Highway”, is a concentration of lechoneras (roadside restaurants serving spit-roasted suckling pig) along a stretch of Route 184 in Guavate, an hour's drive from San Juan. What was once local knowledge has become a much-loved destination for the hungry and curious.

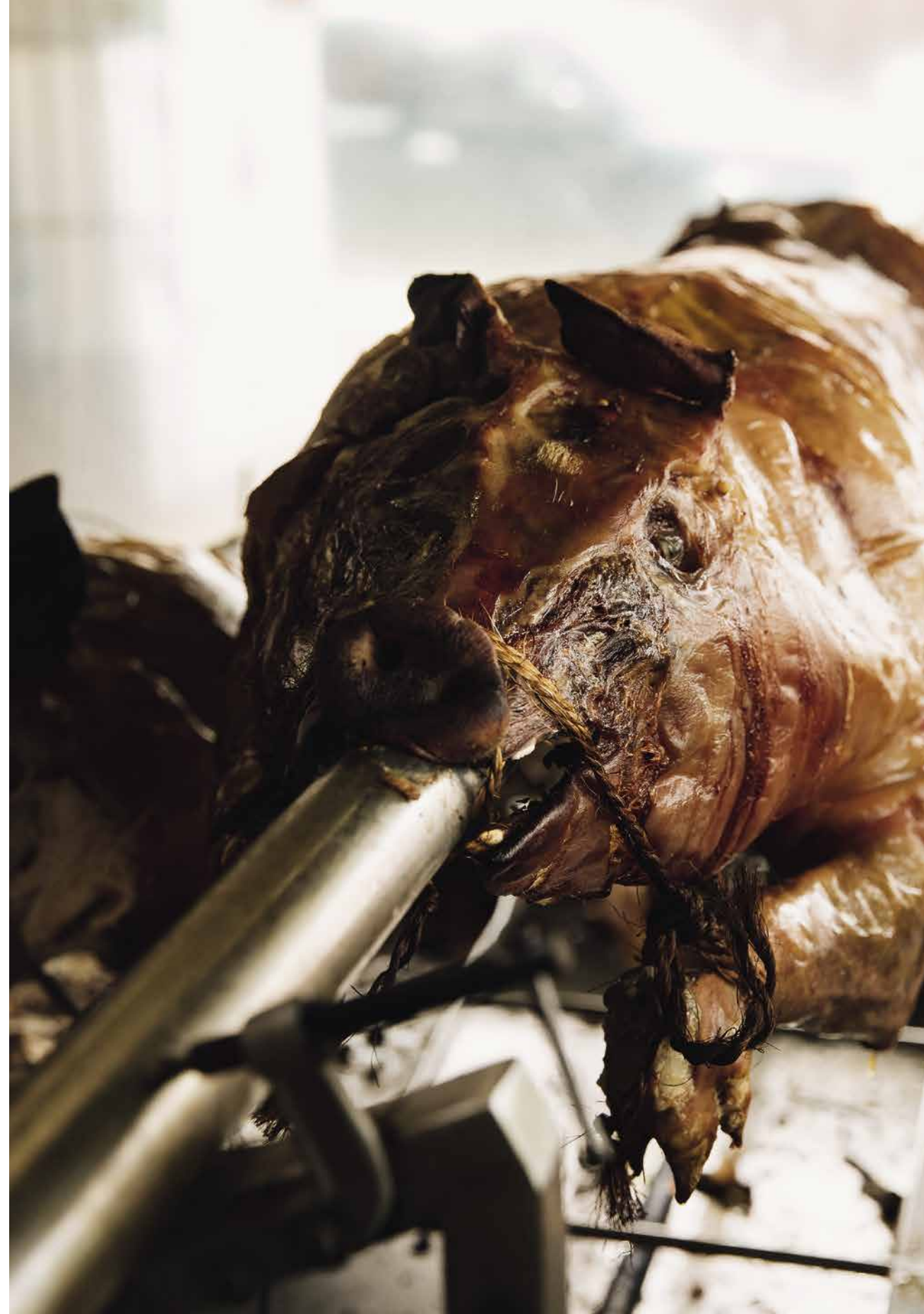
Weekends are peak time for this chinchorrear (restaurant-hopping) tradition. Live music pulsates from adjacent lechoneras, families gather at craft stands and locals join old friends for cold cervezas (beers). Reclining roadside on a folding chair is Norberto, who says he comes every weekend to socialise and soak up the atmosphere. He gestures widely to the bustle around him. “People know that every Sunday, they're going to find everything here,” he says. “The pork restaurants, the music, a lot of handicrafts... You come here, you're gonna have a good time.”

You're also going to have a seriously good lunch. Each vendor displays lechón asado – a whole pig on a spit – marinated in a secret blend of spices and roasted for hours over hot coals. Traditional accompaniments, from fragrant rice to golden tostadas (crispy fried plantain), are piled generously in trays. It's hard to know where to start, so I head to the closest one and get in line.

“Lo que es bueno?” I ask in my hastily Googled Spanish. What is good? The woman waves a hand over the entire selection before me, so I go for it, ordering with the point of a finger: morcilla (blood sausage), tostadas, arroz con gandules (rice with pigeon peas) and, of course, helpings of lechón, the succulent pork that has drawn everyone to this mountain road. Wielding a machete with experienced finesse, a man hacks steaming cuts of pork into succulent morsels that go straight onto a plate.

The food is rustic but tasty – the pork tender, sweet and smoky – and spirits are high. Eating happens on the fringe of the dance floor, where people shimmy and twirl to a live merengue band, dancing like nobody's watching, although they are: clapping, cheering or just relishing the sight of people having a good time. It's like a Sunday roast meets a block party. There's no pressure to join either, yet both are almost impossible to resist.

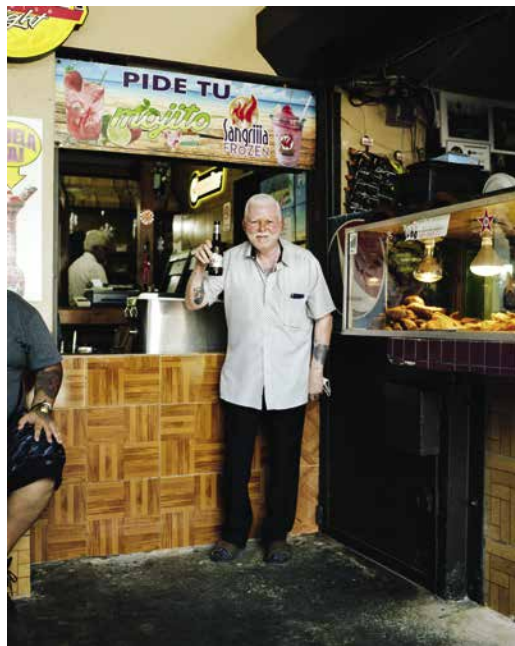
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SNOUT TO TAIL

The whole pig is savoured, not just the golden skin and tender meat: the offal is used in local delicacies like cuajito soup and gandinga stew – both on the lechonera menu.







SWAY WITH ME

The sound of live music fills the halls and the urge to move is palpable. “People come here to dance,” says customer Norberto, as folks of all ages salsa and shimmy to the band. “And if you’ve never danced, you can learn here – this place is the school, and the lessons are free.”

