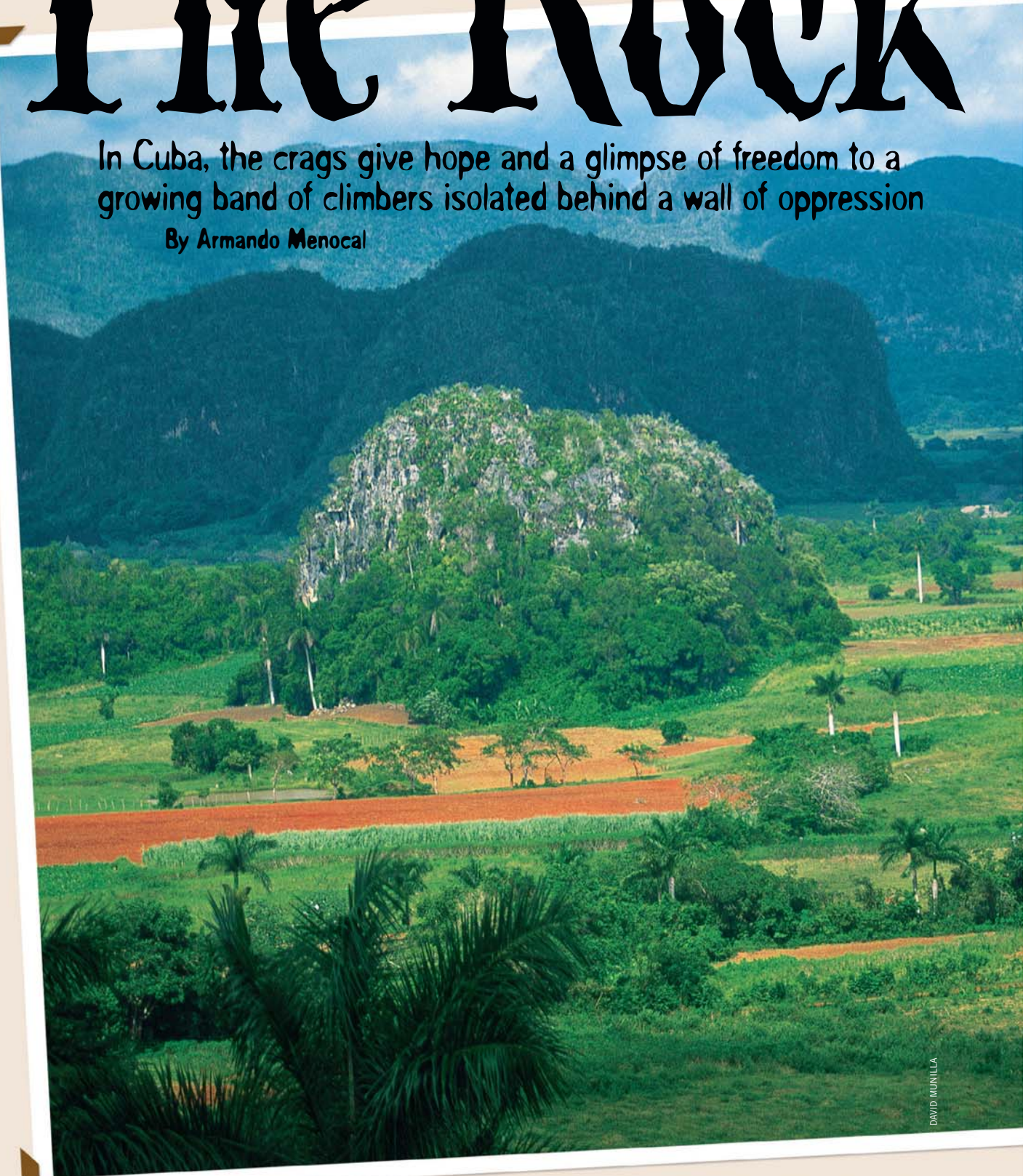
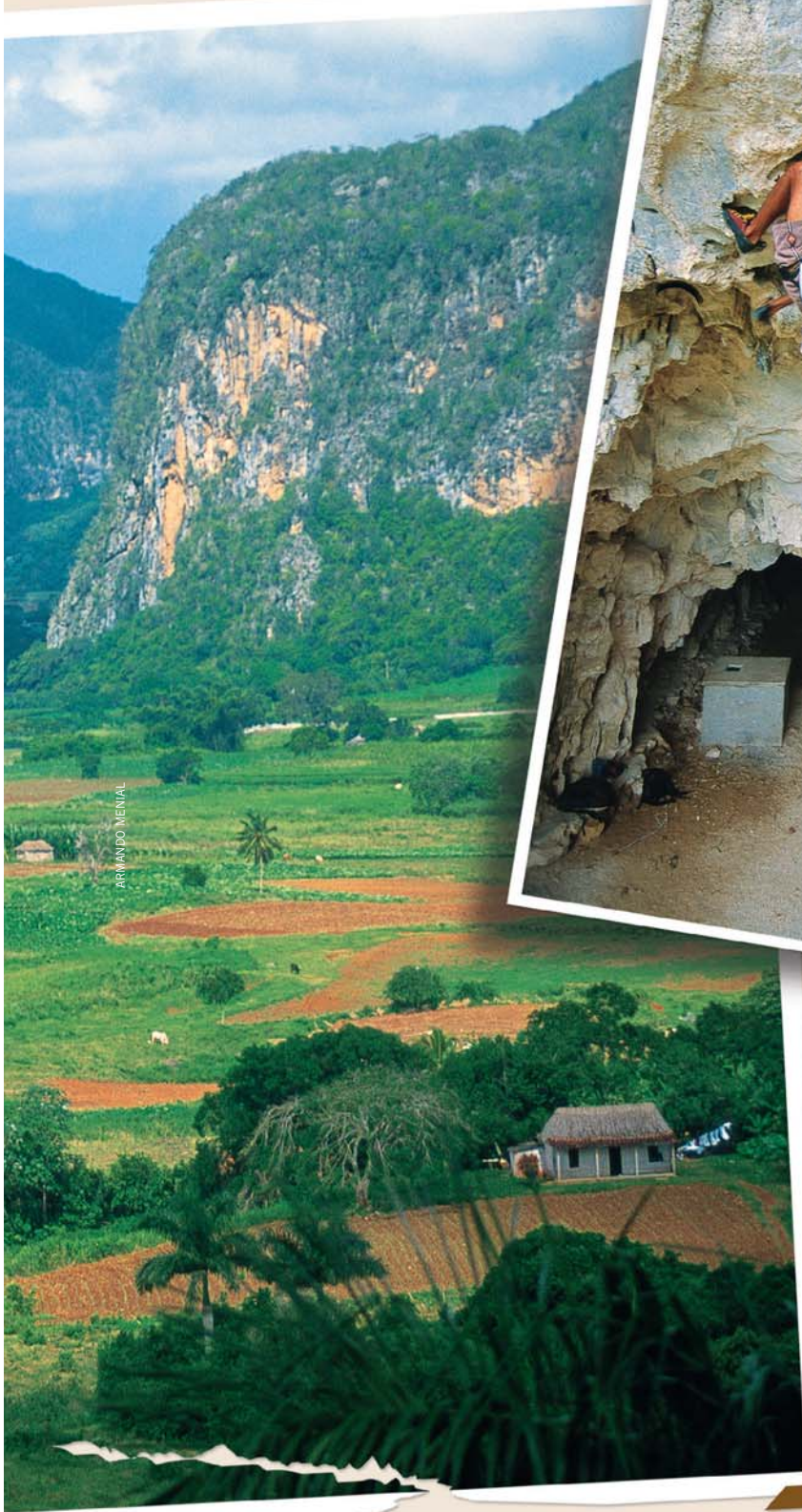


The Rock

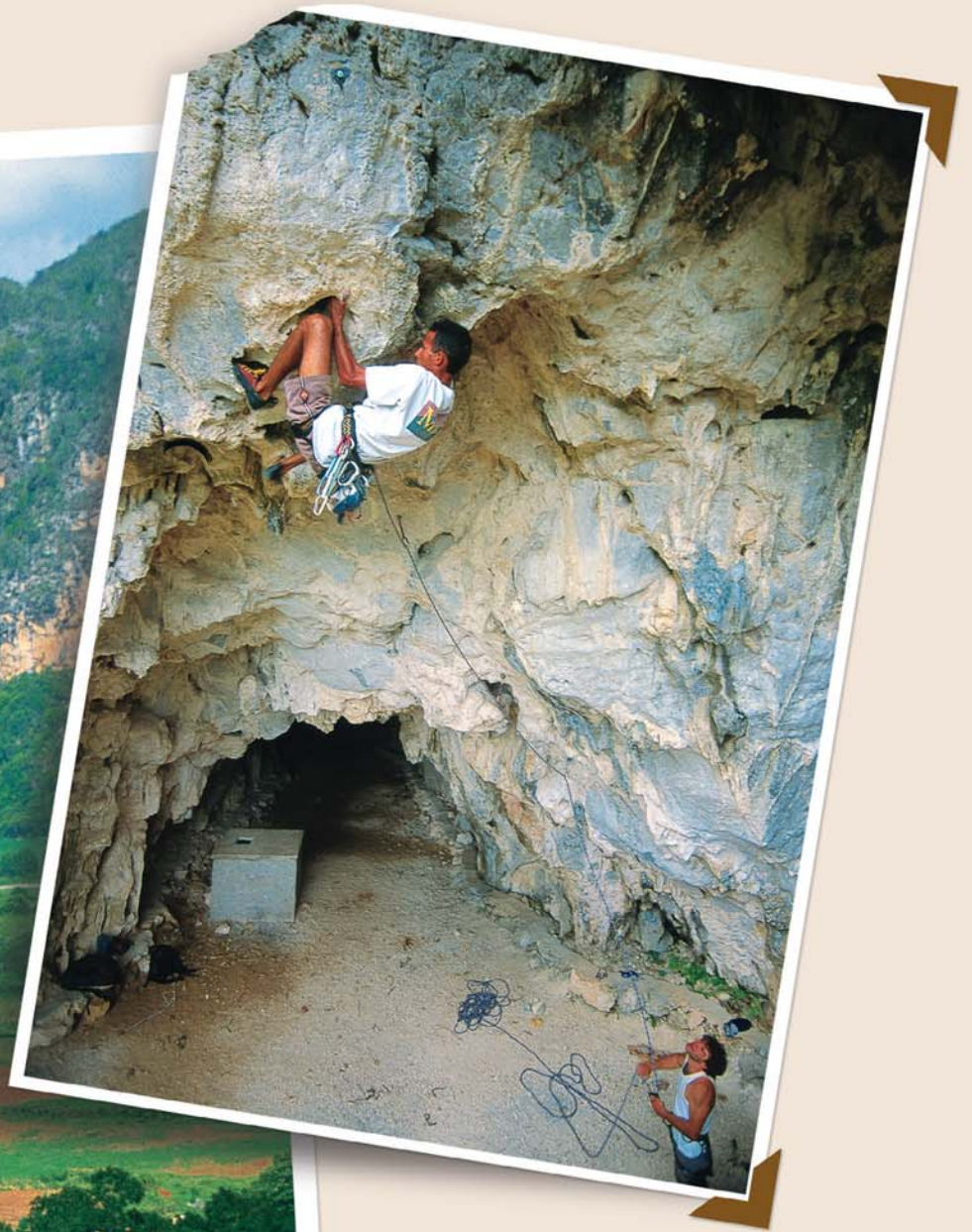
In Cuba, the crags give hope and a glimpse of freedom to a growing band of climbers isolated behind a wall of oppression

By Armando Menocal

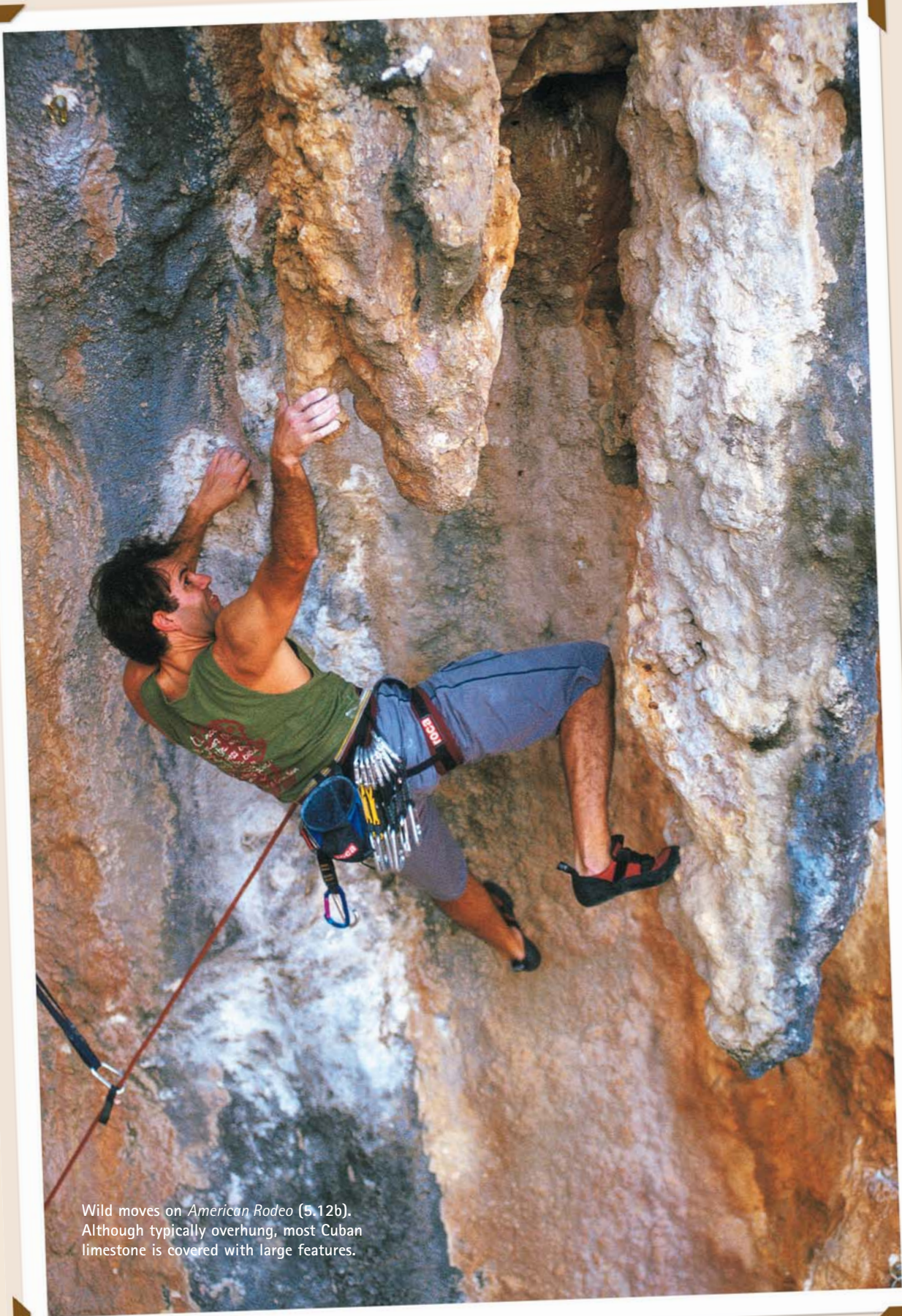




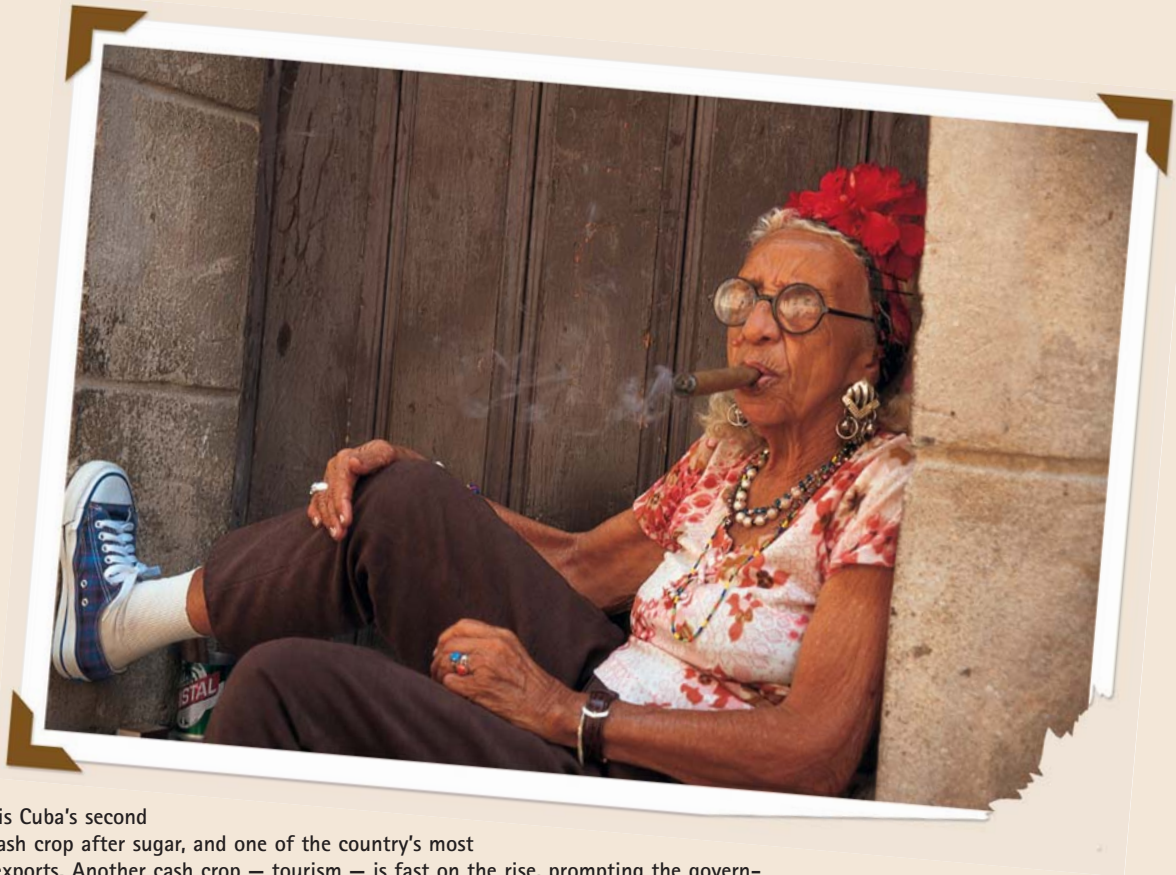
ARMANDO MENIAL



Nice place to visit ... The lush Viñales valley in mountainous western Cuba. Only 90 miles from Florida and home to the best limestone this side of Thailand, the island nation has recently seen an influx of climbers from all over the world, raising eyebrows among Cuban officials. Inset: Viñales' leading native climber Josué Millo yanking on *Malanga Hasta la Muerte* (5.12d/.13a).



Wild moves on *American Rodeo* (5.12b).
Although typically overhung, most Cuban
limestone is covered with large features.



Tobacco is Cuba's second largest cash crop after sugar, and one of the country's most famous exports. Another cash crop — tourism — is fast on the rise, prompting the government to segregate its top hotels, beaches and restaurants, banning Cubans from enjoying their own resources.

“Your father spent three years in jail as a dissident, your mother is a Jehovah’s Witness and your brother is a homosexual,” I said to the Cuban climber Josué Millo, as if this was breaking news to him. “In Cuba, you are a man without hope. Your neighbors spy on you and your government harasses you. None of your family will ever get a good job.”

“I know, man, I know,” Josué said, but with a chuckle of resigned acceptance.

The two of us had pulled up to a curb across from the local police station, in the town of Viñales in western Cuba, patiently waiting for other climbers to join us and share a cab for the four kilometers to El Palenque. A bar by day and Vegas-style cabaret by night, El Palenque is a natural grotto of limestone stalactites, pockets and knobs, and is the most indulgent crag this side of Thailand. Bouldering on the dozen or so problems is nothing if not novel: Squeeze a few stalactites, then belly up to the bar for super-chilled beer or frosty *mojitos*. In the evenings, scantily clad mulatto dancers swing their buttocks and breasts as patrons puff intoxicatingly on robust Cohibas.

Josué and other local Cuban climbers had been told by the local *policia* not to climb with

foreigners — the state’s latest effort to protect its communist ideals. Yet here he was — the only one the government could not scare — cragging with me, an American. It is no surprise that Josué is Viñales’ strongest climber (pulling down 5.12c after just two years) and leader of the small but growing band of *alpinistas*.

Yesterday, the manager of El Palenque told Josué not to come around with foreign climbers.

Although the government desires tourists dollars, it deeply fears interaction between foreigners and Cubans, believing tourists could undermine its authority.

“He said that they might place a bomb,” said Josué. “Imagine that — a bomb on a climb!”

While Josué and I chatted he took great care to keep the door of the taxi open, hiding us from view of the police. Even Josué, for all of his bravado, knew not to push his luck too far.

Valley of Hope

The Lonely Planet guidebook on Cuba calls Viñales a “miniature Yosemite, with the most spectacular scenery in all of Cuba.” As a longtime

Yosemite climber, I doubted that, but in 1999 could no longer resist going there.

I returned to Cuba after a 40-year absence to find my family roots, see firsthand the relic to a failed revolution and to check out Viñales. My mother was born and raised in Cuba, and my great-grandfather was a cousin of Mario Menocal García, president from 1912 to 1921, who fought to liberate Cuba from Spanish rule. Cuba’s most famous classical painter, Armando Menocal, shares my given name.

In Viñales I found a large, open valley ringed by mountains cut with dramatic, overhanging limestone faces. One-thousand-foot freestanding crags called *mogotes* tower above verdant forest of pines and palms, thatch-roofed houses and red-soiled farms. While

much of mountainous western Cuba boasts limestone cragging, Viñales, with routes up to 500 feet high, is pre-eminent, home to the majority of the island’s 140-odd routes. In fact, the area hosts “one of the coolest walls I’ve seen in North America — a five-pitch wall topped by a 40-foot roof so featured with buckets and stalactites that it goes at 5.12b,” says Colorado climber Craig Luebben. Luebben accompanied me on my second trip to Cuba in 1999, and has since pioneered so many routes the locals call



Havana's famous Sea Side Street. Right: Rest days in Cuba offer a host of unusual spectacles.



GREG VON DOERSTEN; RIGHT: ARMANDO MENOCCAL

him “Mr. Mogote.” One of his new routes, *Cuba Libre* (5.12), is an incredible line with a wild, stalactite-dripping and pocketed 20-foot roof on the third pitch.

Since our initial climbs in Viñales, the valley has become a national park and eco-tourism has taken hold. Official “guides” and “rangers” now accompany tourists on hikes through the tobacco farms and around the mogotes. Watching rock climbers is included on the officially authorized hiking circuit. For climbers, the area remains virtually untapped. Uphill from El Palenque, for example, you find a 1,300-foot cave band bristling with stalactites. The valley alone, says Luebben, “has several lifetimes of killer routes to be climbed.”

Behind the Iron Curtain

Despite living among stunning and fertile lands roughly the size of Pennsylvania, most of the 11 million Cuban people are subjected to extreme poverty under a Soviet-style communist government. Cuba has struggled on despite losing economic and material support when the Soviet Union collapsed over a decade ago, and despite a nearly 40-year-old U.S. trade embargo that makes even visiting the island problematic.

Fidel Castro, the island’s obstinate 76-year-old president, calls Cuba a “Phoenix rising from the ashes,” yet the average annual income is \$1,700 and the monthly allotment of staples such as rice, sugar and cooking oil given to each citizen barely makes it to the middle of the month. Most rural Cubans live in thatched-roof “bohios” with dirt floors. They cook over woodstoves and spend

evenings by candlelight. Electricity may run nearby, but only citizens in good standing with their local “Committee to Defend the Revolution” may tap it. Despite such hardships, most villagers are warm and friendly to Americans — once they even sent hot lunches to us out at the crags.

Cuba is a paradox. As a socialist country, Cuba claims a classless society, yet it is really divided into two classes: people with dollars, and people with lower-valued pesos. Oddly, the government of Cuba practices apartheid, excluding Cubans from its own resorts and hotels, which it saves

Gato is so passionate about climbing that when he successfully led a 5.11d for the first time he cried as he was being lowered.

for foreign tourists. Almost everyone can read, but Cubans are denied freedom of speech and press. According to Human Rights Watch, reporters are routinely arrested for straying from the party line — one outspoken journalist was conveniently imprisoned for six months for “hoarding toys” that had been paid for by exiled Cubans in Miami, and which he had planned to give to poor children in his area. Other reporters have been imprisoned for up to six years for insulting Castro.

Free education is available to all in Cuba, but doctors, teachers and engineers might earn just \$30 a month, and moonlight as waiters or peddle rickshaws to make ends meet. Any free enter-

prise, however, such as renting a room, serving a meal — even selling lemonade at a stand — is prohibited unless explicitly sanctioned, taxed and regulated by the government. Impoverished families even get hassled for letting foreigners stay at their homes for free.

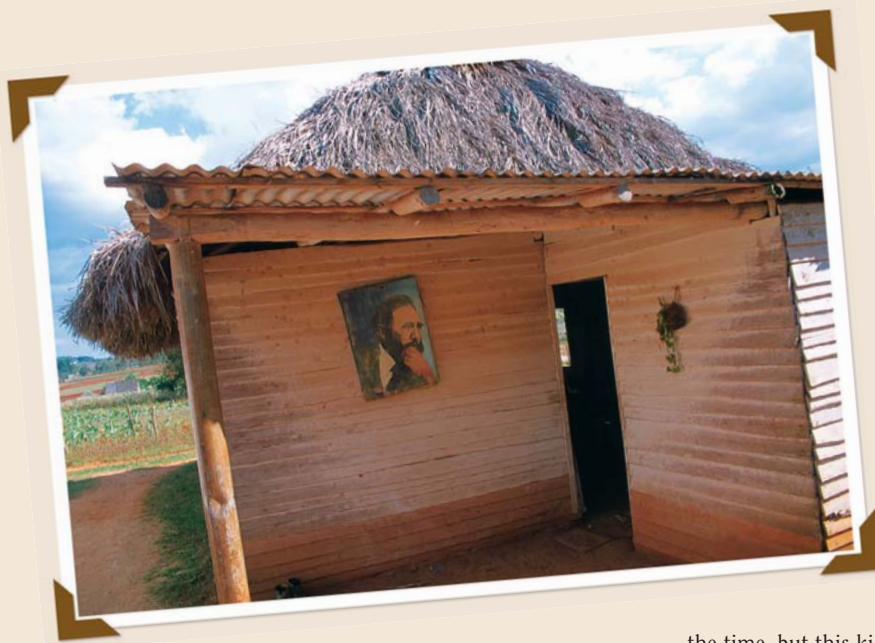
After the evaporation of the massive Soviet subsidy in 1990, the Cuban government turned to tourism to sustain its huge social welfare bureaucracy. Although the government desires tourists dollars, it deeply fears interaction between foreigners and Cubans, believing tourists could undermine its authority.

Despite what the Viñales police told the Cuban climbers, no law prevents a foreigner and Cuban from climbing together. Instead, local officials, eager to wield their power, simply decided that Cuban climbers should stay to themselves. Nonetheless, when I’m in Cuba I climb mostly with Cubans, and many of the country’s major routes have been done by joint Cuban-foreign teams. Unfortunately, it is always the Cubans, and not visitors, who pay the price for breaking rules, written or unwritten.

Once for example, we took an unofficial taxi, a vintage 1958 Chevy that belonged to the driver, Joaquin, who was only licensed to carry Cubans, not tourists. Joaquin, with eight of us in his taxi, was nabbed at a roadblock outside of Viñales. His car was confiscated. Despite our protests, all we could do was name the new route we did that day *Confiscado*. Months later I learned that Joaquin got his car back, after paying a hefty fine in dollars, the equivalent of several years of work as a taxi driver.



The American Cameron Cross on *Mr. Mogote* (5.12a). At five pitches long, it's one of the Viñales valley's lengthier undertakings. Note the tufa formations left and below the climber.



You say you want a revolution?
Typical Cuban *boho*, home to
most rural workers.

The Long Climb to Freedom

“The Revolution was the work of climbers and cavers.” Castro made that remark shortly after winning a bloody war and wresting control of the government in 1959. Castro may have been talking about the fact that the revolutionaries used the caves and mountains of Cuba as their bases and hiding spots. Then again, he may really have thought himself a climber. While he was fighting the revolution in Cuba’s Sierra Maestra mountains, Castro unsuccessfully attempted to climb Pico Turquino, Cuba’s highest peak, at 6,561 feet.

Because of Cuba’s isolation as a Soviet satellite and the country’s relatively low standard of living, rock climbing has only slowly taken root. In the early 1990s a small group of cavers in Havana, eager to apply their spelunking skills to the numerous limestone crags, taught themselves to climb using donated gear and articles in an occasional climbing magazine.

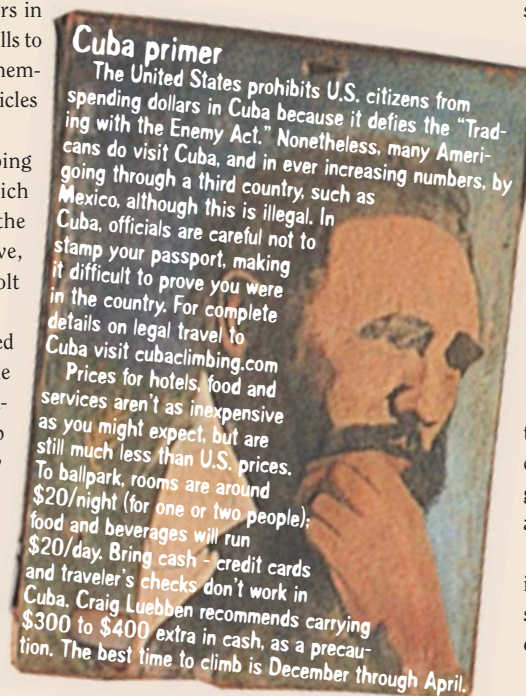
The Cubans’ initial approach to climbing fit their equipment and experience, which at that point was limited to exploring the island’s many caves: drop in from above, drill an anchor and top rope the route. Bolt hangers were removed for reuse.

On my second trip to Cuba, accompanied by Luebben, we climbed and explored the length of the island with two of the Havana-based climbers, Vitalio and Carlos. Our group discovered climbing possibilities in a few areas in central and eastern Cuba, but none with the staggering potential of Viñales on the western end of the island.

On our last day in Viñales, we were joined by another eager Cuban, Aníbal, also from Havana. I did not know it at

the time, but this kid with cropped blond hair was AWOL from the Cuban army and hitchhiked to Viñales to climb with the visiting Americans. After we dropped him back off in Havana, he went straight to the brig for two weeks.

Aníbal was one of the original core of the Havana climbers that also included Vitalio, Jorge Mederos, Carlos, and Ananay Jiménez. Vitalio, the most talented natural climber, was also the gear wonk, making homemade nuts and hooks, and stitching packs on a foot-pedal sewing machine. Mederos had just obtained his degree as an entomologist, and wanted to study insect ecology in Cuba’s jungle canopies. He would have to do it without access to libraries or research available on the web; even after I got him a computer, he was not permitted access



to the web. Mederos was also the non-stop jester. A short man, he looked even more farcical next to his taller and much bigger mulatto wife.

Most Cubans willing to comment on the regime or Castro do so only jokingly. When the electricity goes out — a common occurrence — Mederos goes out on his balcony and sings the Cuban national anthem. A neighbor then steps outside, and yells, “Viva Fidel.”

Of the Cubans who were the first generation of committed climbers, only Aníbal remains in Cuba today. Climbing has been the vehicle for the others to escape.

Carlos and Aníbal came to the U.S. in 2001 for a rock-guide course created for them by Exum Mountain Guides. Aníbal took full advantage, climbing walls ranging from the Rockies to Canyonlands to Yosemite, including ascents of *Zodiac* on El Cap and the *Regular Northwest Face* route on Half Dome. But after two months he returned to Cuba: “I missed Cuba so much,” he says, “There are so many routes to put up.”

But, says Anibal, “My climbing partners, Vitalio and Mederos, are not there anymore.”

Carlos dropped out of the guide course and stayed in San Francisco where he was granted asylum. When asked how he feels about not returning to Cuba, Pinelo tells the story of another defected Cuban who “goes into a room, takes out the light bulbs, closes the windows and puts on a tape of one of Fidel’s speeches” to combat homesickness.

Vitalio, who was once caught trying to escape Cuba by sea, now resides in Spain, where he hopes to gain residency. “I miss Cuba very much,” he says. “And the wonderful times climbing there, and I know that it may be a long time before we can share them again.”

Cuba is like a heart torn in two. People leave their homes and go into exile abroad, but their dwellings stay behind to be inhabited by another generation, many of whom also leave in second and third generations of defections.

Although Cuba’s total climbing population is just some two dozen climbers, including its star, Josué, the number is slowly growing and enthusiastic. In the spring of 2001, Anibal arrived

The U.K.'s Neil Gresham, part of a strong international team that visited Cuba last winter, powering out *The Colony* (5.13c) in the Viñales valley.

in Viñales with his latest convert. Dark and thin, Jorge is aptly called Gato — “Cat.” At 17, he was just spending his days sitting on the stoop in front of his Havana house. He started climbing with Aníbal and developed a daily bouldering habit. Gato is so passionate about climbing that when he successfully led a 5.11d for the first time he cried as he was being lowered.

Hope for the Future

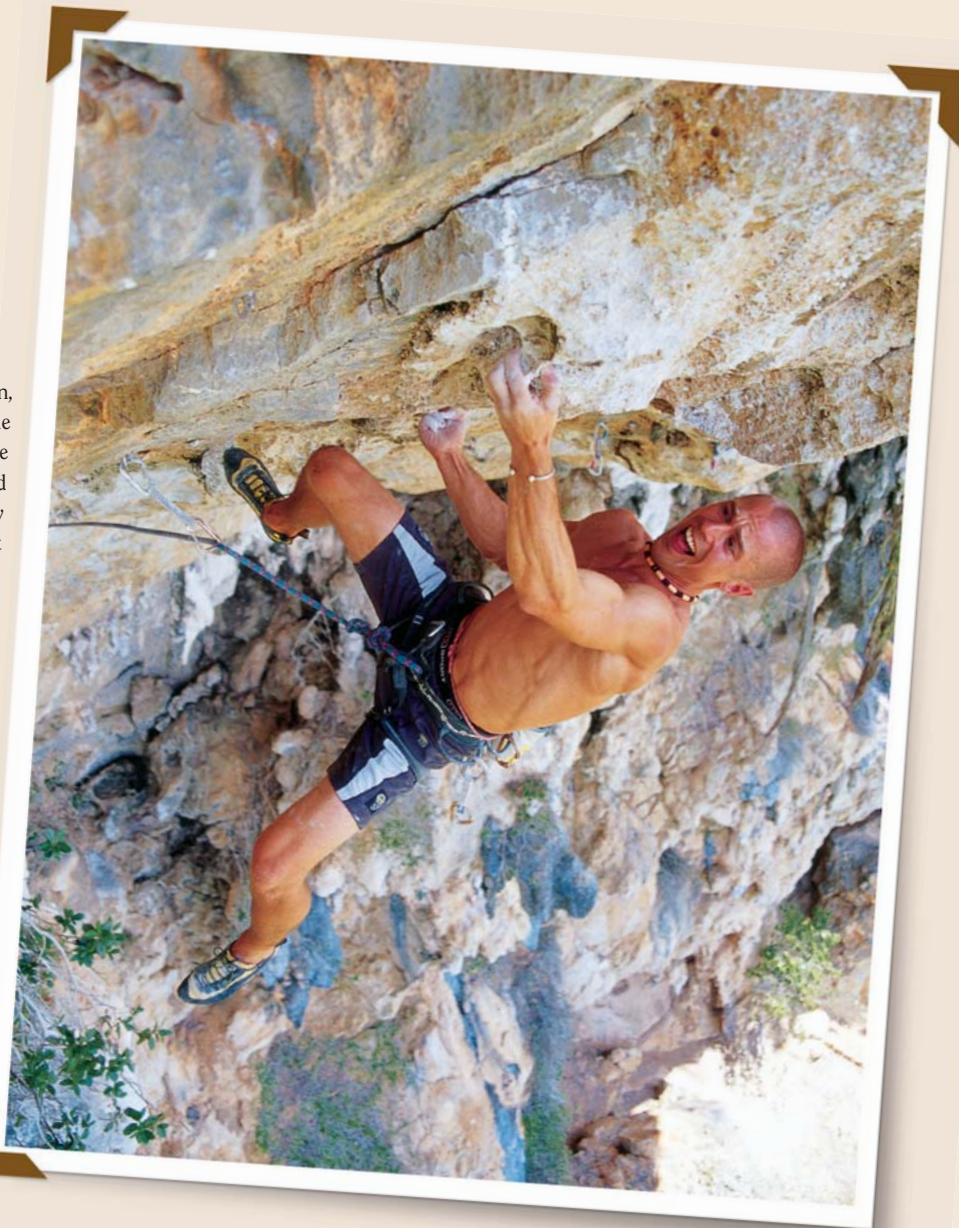
After spending the majority of four winters there, I am a fixture in Viñales, yet local officials still ask for my permit to climb, or ask who gave me permission to climb, although no law says that foreigners need permission. Recently, two officials in Havana told a Cuban climber and me that all climbing in Viñales had been prohibited. Then, a little later in the same interview, the officials told us they were bringing 800 foreigners to climb to Viñales. Two weeks later, the Cuban and I were climbing together in Viñales, along with a dozen foreigners and a large contingent of Havana climbers. The closure and 800 climbing visitors never materialized.

In 2001 a security agent came to Viñales snooping on me. He asked everyone I might have come in contact with what I did, who I met, what I read, what I said about the Cuban government. The investigation left me in a panic: Why would I be the target of investigation? What could happen to me?

My Cuban friends, however, placed no importance on it. Being investigated by the state is all the Cubans know and is as unremarkable as water is to fish.

One Viñales local told me that the police tried to recruit him to spy on climbers, but he said no. In fact, the Cuban climbers already thought that this guy was a spy, and doubted his denial, telling me that the police-recruitment story was fabricated to mislead us.

A few days later, we were returning to Havana



MIKE ROBERTSON

from Viñales. Five of us were riding with our regular Viñales chauffeur, Lugo, in his official mini-van taxi. With me were four Cubans: Laura, Aníbal, Abel and Gato. The five of us exceeded the limit of riders for the cab by one, and we stuffed Gato in the cubby hole between the ceiling and the massive stack of our packs, covered him with a foam pad and jokingly told him that he shouldn't move if we were stopped — an unlikely event in an official taxi.

As soon as we pulled onto the autopista, however, there was a roadblock and we were waved over. Lugo immediately pulled out his documents for the officer. Another policeman, a big man, opened the hatch and pulled away the foam pad. Gato laughed at being caught — until the cop gave him a stern look.

The officer walked around the taxi, looking us

over carefully through the windows. When he returned to Lugo, he asked: “Are these foreigners and Cubans?”

Lugo said, “Yes.”

“What country?” asked the officer.

“They are *alpinistas*,” replied Lugo.

The officer hesitated, motioned Lugo to the front of the car and asked in a low voice, “What country is *Alpinista*?”

“No, no — it is a sport,” Lugo explained.

The edges of the officer's mouth slowly turned up into a small smile. He handed Lugo back his documents, and, with a subtle flick of his wrist, waved us through.

Armando Menocal is a human-rights and environmental activist, a climbing guide, and founder of The Access Fund.