



BA



“They can tell if you’re lying — a flush to the cheeks, or a nervous movement of the hands,” I say.

“Just don’t lie,” whispers Lynn as we step into the “Nothing to declare” line in Houston Airport’s antiseptic customs hall. Uniformed officers with blank faces and drug-sniffing dogs traipse amongst the tanned tourists arriving from Cancun.

“If they don’t ask, don’t tell,” quips Brittany. She looks uncharacteristically anxious. One line over, Ned struggles with a cart that’s piled high with duffel bags, topped with a stroller and a car seat. Naomi, carrying baby Finella, holds Ruby’s hand and prompts her, “Wasn’t Mexico fun?”

We pass without incident, and I breathe in relief as the U.S. Customs official waves me through. But as I’m about to step through the double-glass doors into my own country, I notice that they’ve pulled Timmy aside.



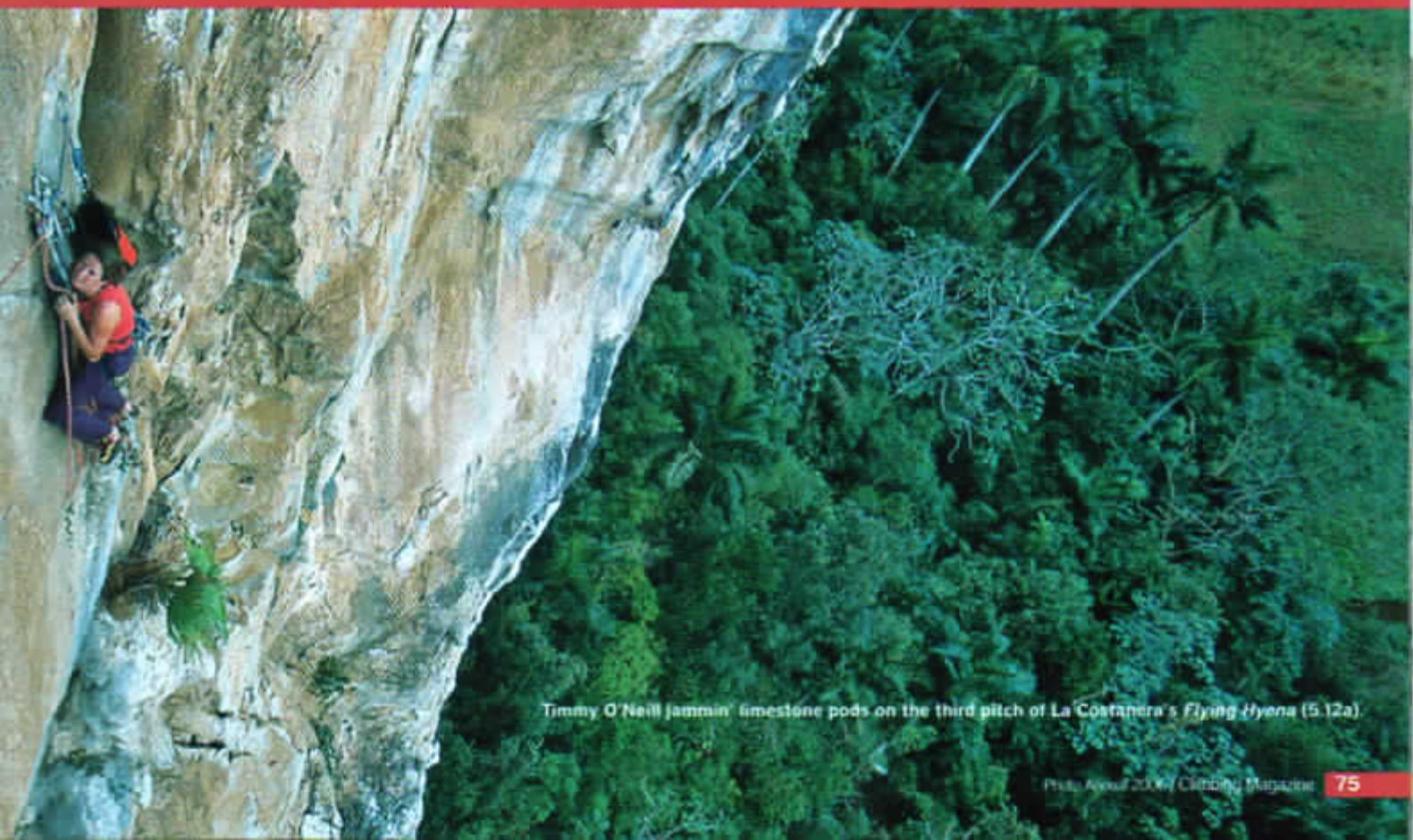
NINED

limbing in the forbidden paradise of Cuba

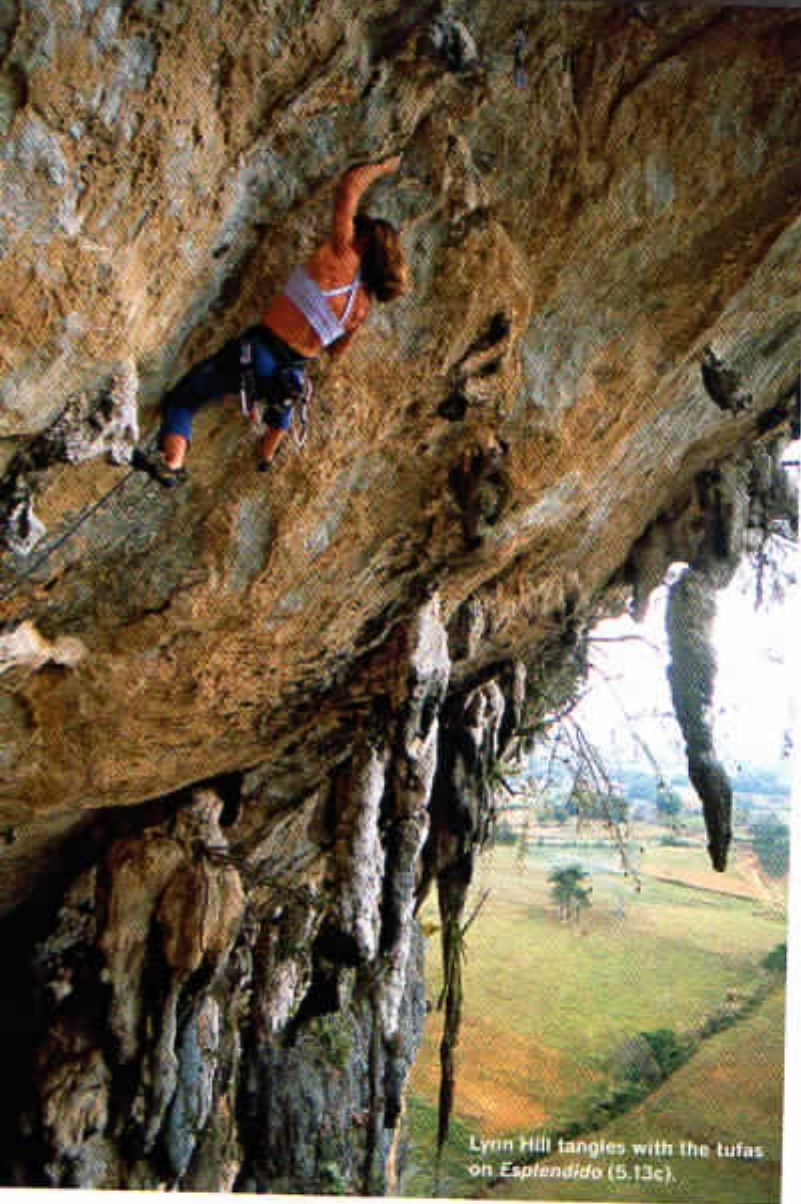
NO FASCISMO



Story and photos by Beth Wald



Timmy O'Neill jammin' limestone pods on the third pitch of La Costanera's *Flying Hyena* (5.12a).



Lynn Hill tangles with the tufas on *Espendido* (5.13c).



I had visited Cuba several years prior to photograph Havana's music scene, and I knew that Cuba's charms — the warmth and openness of the people, its tropical light and fragrant decay, its surreal politics, and the improbability of its location just 90 miles southwest of Florida — were well worth the risk. So Lynn and I made a plan, mentioned it to a couple of friends, then a few more ... Poor Anibal must have regretted his offer when, over a year later, he met us at the Havana airport and we had morphed into a traveling circus of climbers, boyfriends and girlfriends, and babies, with a matching assortment of gear and luggage. Traveling with Lynn was her nine-month-old baby, Owen, already on his third international climbing trip, and her partner, Brad. Timmy, accompanied by girlfriend, Morning Glory, couldn't pass up a chance to wisecrack in Spanish; and Naomi, along with her husband, Ned, and their children Ruby (age four) and Finella (nine months), was escaping another Colorado winter. Rounding out the cast of characters were our slackline hula-hoop master, Jim, our Brazilian friend Juliana, itinerant climber Brittany, and myself, along to document it all.

After a whirlwind stayover in Havana, we cram ourselves into two vans and head west to Viñales, in the Piñar del Rio province. The sprawling Viñales valley, Cuba's only extensively developed climbing area, is impossibly picturesque. Limestone domes called *mogotes* tower over patchwork fields that are green with tobacco, or red with bare dirt plowed by teams of oxen (which replaced tractors when the Soviet Union collapsed and with it Cuba's support system). *Guajiros* (country folk or farmers) on scrawny horses clip-clop lazily down dirt roads, past whitewashed clapboard shacks and weathered tobacco-drying sheds. No one in the valley is in much of a hurry. Like most Cubans, the people of Viñales happily stop and talk to a stranger, or invite a sweaty photographer into their rustic homes for a bracing cup of muddy Cuban coffee.

With all this natural beauty to explore, great faces to photograph, and fascinating conversations to have, who has time for climbing? Ostensibly,



Lynn and I first met Anibal Fernandez, one of Cuba's young rock-climbing stars, in Boulder in 2002 while he was on a tour of the United States, and he reciprocated our friendship by inviting us to climb in Cuba. I immediately said yes, despite the fact that I risked prosecution and a hefty fine by the U.S. Government under the antiquated "Trading with the Enemy" act. Along with the nearly 50-year-old trade embargo, the act was applied to isolate Fidel Castro and encourage popular uprisings against his regime; in reality, it has only made Castro a hero for standing up to the United States, and inadvertently given him a ready excuse for his country's failing economy.



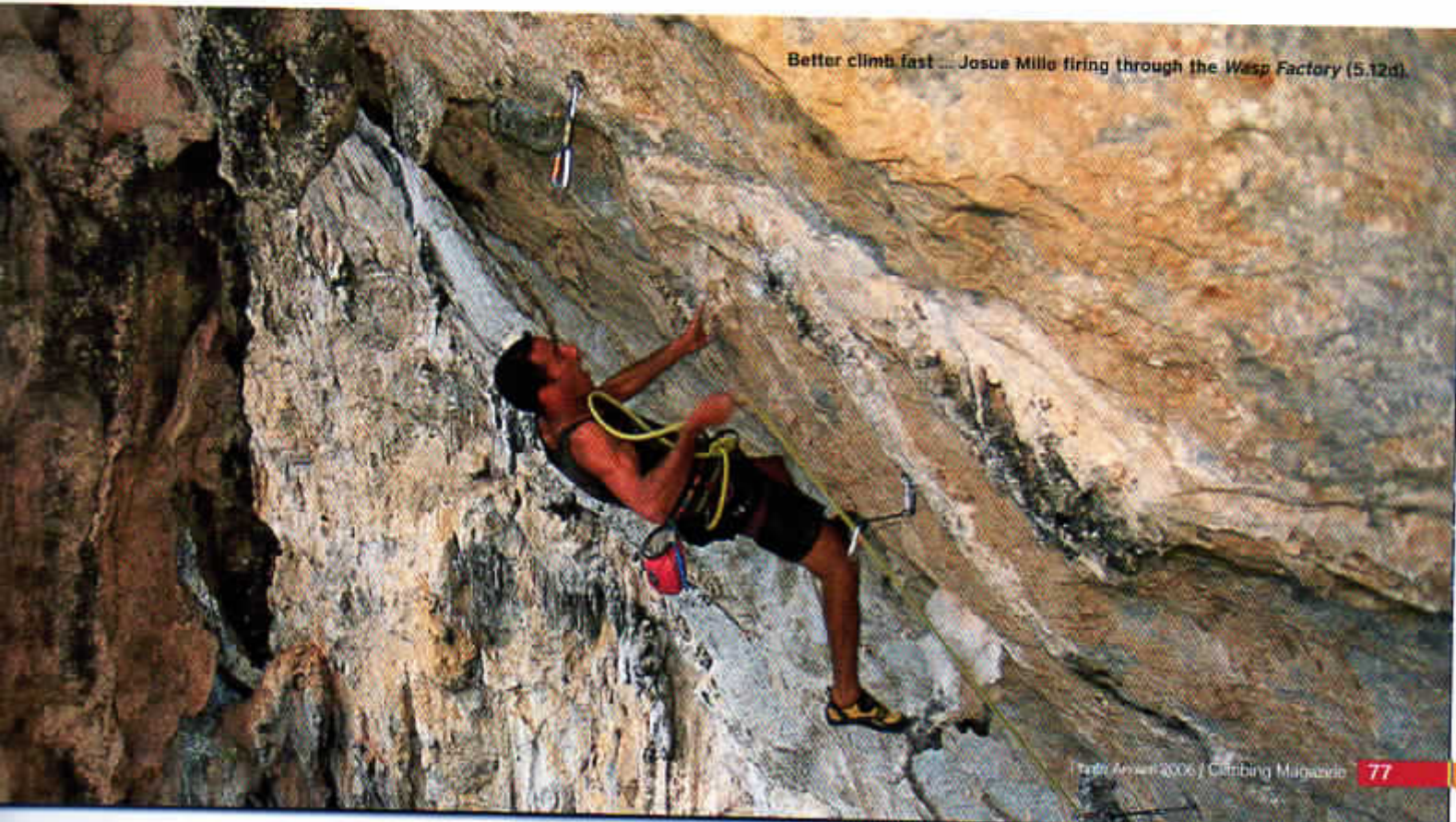
we're here to climb, and the locals are anxious to show off their crags. Although Cuba has only recently appeared on the international climbing radar, Fidel Castro once said that "the Revolution was the work of climbers and cavers." Fidel, Che Guevara, and their bands of rebels used Cuba's rugged mountain caves and cliffs as strategic hide-outs; from here they planned and launched the offensives that, in 1959, toppled the corrupt dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. Four decades later, a handful of indomitable Cuban climbers, armed with

machetes and antiquated caving equipment, launched their own campaign on the mogotes of the Viñales Valley, creating — along with their American and European comrades — amazing routes that wind steeply through stalactites, or commence in the bowels of a cave and lead out horizontally toward the light.

On a typical morning, Lynn, Naomi, and I leave Brad and Ned in charge of the kids and walk through the peaceful streets of the small

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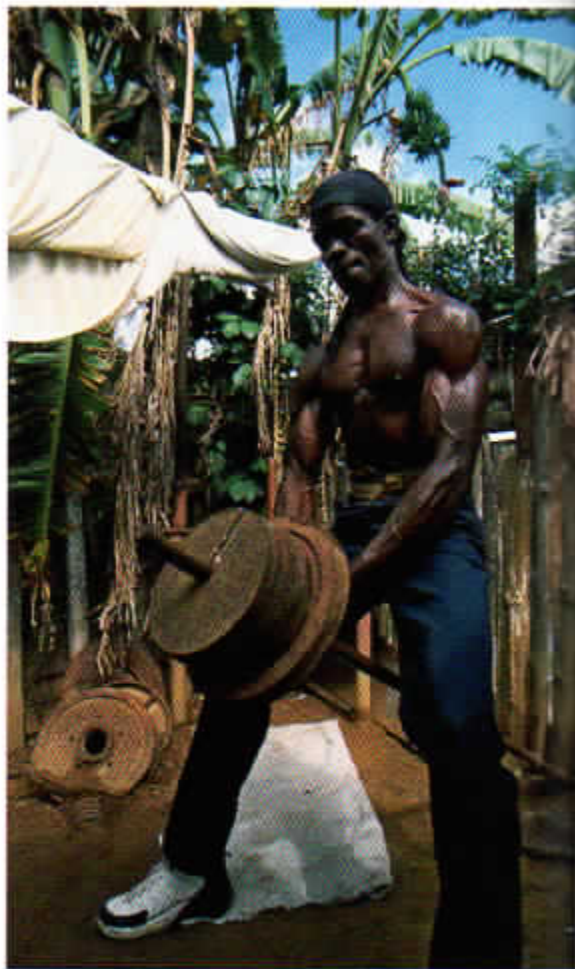
Better climb fast ... Josue Milla firing through the Wasp Factory (5.12d).

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town of Viñales into the countryside, passing Raul's farm, waving to him as he plants corn in a freshly plowed field. As we surmount the steep steps up to the *Cueva Cabeza de la Vaca* (Cow's Head Cave, where most routes are 5.11 and above), we find busy Cuban climbers. Anibal climbs languidly, almost absentmindedly clipping bolts, his long blond dreadlocks following gravity, betraying the route's angle. Although only in his mid-20s, Anibal has been climbing since the age of 11 and is the author of some of the most dramatic routes in Viñales — or in Cuba for that matter — including five-pitch enduro tests on the La Costanera cliff, the area's tallest wall, and several scary trad routes that follow sharp, humid cracks. Anibal is also the last of the first cadre of Cubans to establish hard routes in Viñales — most of the others have found ways to leave. Despite several trips to the United States and Europe, Anibal has always returned, but in a few months he, too, will emigrate to join his new wife in Toronto, and the next generation will inherit Viñales' mogotes. Young climbers like Josue Millo, who is tall and spidery with short dark hair, endless good humor, and a restless work ethic (he speaks good English and is a government-certified guide); Jusnier Blanco, known as "Turbo," a short, curly haired farmer's son; and Turbo's girlfriend, Ana Marie, a dark, energetic wispy teenager with reddish-black hair, find climbing an exciting alternative to rural life's dull routine.

Lynn warms up while Naomi engages a strenuous line that begins in the cave's throat. I look around for angles and anchors. The mogotes are relentlessly steep and crowned with a tangle of strange, succulent Dr. Seussian vegetation, barring my hiking to the top and dropping a rope. Instead, I must cajole someone to fix a line.

Lynn decides to try the Viñales testpiece, *Esplendido* (5.13c), and I convince Josue to hang a rope on *Wasp Factory* (5.12d) just to the left. "Strange name," I muse as I jumar up, stopping to photograph Lynn. Moving higher, I notice a half-dozen wasps angrily buzzing around my rope. As Lynn climbs toward the crux, I try to concentrate on shooting and not on the potential for multiple wasp stings and anaphylactic shock. I gingerly move up, the wasps converge, and I notice a huge nest near my anchor — I'm a sitting duck, but I manage to squeeze off



Naomi Guy hangs on to *Captain Hook* (5.12a).

a few frames. The wasps are now close enough for me to see their hideously jointed, three-inch-long bodies. Luckily, Lynn whips, and I rap — *fast* — not bothering to see if the insects pursue. The Cubans laugh at my panic — later they tell me that they often carry insecticide on certain routes.

With the children in tow, Brad, Ned, and Timmy arrive to swap childcare duties for an energetic turn on the sharp end. Afterwards, we all walk back together, stopping at Raul's fruit stand to buy fat papaya and the strange *mamay* — brown and rough on the outside, slimy and sweet inside. Ruby plays with Raul's grandkids, who are suntanned and farm hardened, while Timmy, Ned, and Turbo share a hand-rolled cigar, blowing fragrant smoke into the soft dusk.

A day on Viñales limestone is inevitably followed by an evening at one of Viñales' two bars. Here, the Cuban climbers gather on the sidewalk outside their favorite establishment and pass around a bottle of rum, while inside the music throbs over the sweaty dancers. Brittany and I join them most nights, sipping beers, watching Anibal

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HE LOOKS SERIOUS AS HE APPROACHES, AND WE GATHER ROUND. "I'M SO F*ED!" HE SAYS.**



and the others flirt with young European tourists. I try to avoid the humiliation of being dragged onto the dance floor, where I will inevitably demonstrate my uptight Yankee upbringing and total lack of rhythm while Cuban hips shimmy in dizzying patterns. Better to buy another cerveza, lean

back, and watch as Turbo and Ana Marie effortlessly and sensually weave salsa moves across the floor.

That cerveza is *prohibido* to U.S. gringos, however. In fact, buying *anything* in Cuba is illegal in the eyes of the U.S. government. As we near the end of our trip, we purge ourselves of all vestiges of having visited Cuba. Throughout the trip, Naomi and Ned have told Ruby that we're in Mexico; as an additional precaution, they ship their Cuban souvenirs and art from Cancun during

a layover (one cannot fly directly to Cuba from the United States, but must go through another country — Mexico, Canada, and Jamaica are the most popular). Morning Glory and I leave our Cuba guidebooks at a Havana guesthouse, and I bury my photo notes in my luggage. The day before we leave,



I read on the *New York Times* website that the Bush administration has stepped up its enforcement of the Cuban travel ban.

Back in the Houston Airport, we nervously await Timmy at the gate for our connecting flight. Finally, we see him coming down the concourse. He looks serious as he approaches, and we gather round. "I'm so f***ed!" he exclaims to our collective gasp, which is followed by a moment of tense silence. Then Timmy starts laughing. "Just kidding!" he says. "Actually, they looked through my bags and asked where I was coming from ... I said Mexico, technically true since I was in the Cancun airport for a couple hours ... and then, they let me go. I'm glad that's over." And so were we ... not glad that the trip was over, but glad that we had successfully traversed the border between two nations.

These days, photographer Beth Wald trains her cameras on a wide variety of subjects, from adventure to environment to culture. Based in Boulder, Colorado, she returned to her roots as a climbing photographer in 2004 to document Cuba's wild crags.