



FOR CLIMBING

The CUBAN Climbing Scene
Continues to Grow Despite the
Risk of Incarceration Posed
by an Unforgiving Communist
Government. A Group of
Americans Discover Climbing
as Passive Resistance

By Janet Bergman → Photos by Anne Skidmore

LEFT: Tino Fiumara
sampling the delicious
tufas of the super-
classic *Wasp Factory*
(5.12c) in the Cabeza
de la Vaca cave.

RIGHT: Mural de
la Prehistoria in
Vinales Valley.





LEFT: Yarobys García Martínez

BELOW: The *mogotes* (hills) define the unique landscape of Cuba.

“Climbing tomorrow depends on whether the police come for me tonight,” said Yarobys García Martínez.

Police? My visiting American friends and I shot each other questioning glances, and stood uncomfortably in the 10x10-foot cell-like space, a block away from Viñales’ central plaza. The room was bare save for a magazine-sized picture of Fidel Castro, some yellow wires screwed to the wall and an air conditioner that looked as though it had not run in years. But this nondescript single-floor structure, the “Computer Club for Youths” according to the sign on the door, also doubles as the hub of the emerging Cuban climbing scene. Yarobys, a small-framed employee, grinned and continued.

“There is a large meeting with the local police forces,” he explained calmly, “where they are deciding how to further handle the climbing ban in Viñales.”

Our group—Ray, Tino, Pat, Madeline, Anne and myself—had just arrived in Viñales that evening to climb in Cuba for the next two weeks. All from various places along the Eastern seaboard, we rendezvoused in Cancún, Mexico, and purchased, with cash, same-day tickets to Havana. Due to a long-standing U.S. trade embargo, it is illegal for U.S. citizens to spend money in Cuba without special licenses, making direct travel from the U.S. impossible for most. Hence, many Americans visit Cuba via a stopover in Mexico. Thanks to his informative website on Cuban climbing, www.escaladaencuba.com, we knew Yarobys had the beta we needed.

“OK, then we’ll just go to *La Costanera* or one

of the cliffs a few kilometers away from here,” said Tino in Spanish. A tall Italian-American with wide-open blue eyes and psyche to spare, Tino was one of the few members of our group with conversational Spanish skills.

Yarobys, also with impossibly Caribbean-blue eyes, is 5’2” and wiry, with an Afro of dirty-blond ringlets barely contained by a well-worn Prana headband. He was wearing a fire-engine-red shirt with a demonic fireball in the center.

“You will really enjoy *La Costanera*,” said Yarobys, trying not to tell us more than was necessary. “The rock is fantastic,” he added, politely assuaging our concerned looks. “But it depends.”

“I don’t understand,” Tino said. “What depends?”

“They may decide to come and arrest me tonight or tomorrow.”

“Arrest you for what?”

“For climbing.”



THE ROAD FROM HAVANA to Viñales passes through three checkpoints where drivers stop to register traveling foreigners. Passing the third checkpoint, we continued into town, each house more colorful than the last. Our driver stopped for directions to the home of our local host, Oscar Jaime, and was told to take a left by the bakery, at the statue of Jose Marti. But as we soon discovered, monuments of Jose Marti were as prevalent as billboards of Che Guevara—the directions were not very helpful.

We finally found the concrete home, and as we piled out of the taxi, Oscar opened a creaky green metal gate and walked out to greet us. He was a giant man wearing shorts and a tank top, and had a moustache that pushed up when he smiled.

Oscar’s wife, Leida, warmly welcomed us in a plant-laden courtyard, where their son José Carlos was sitting. Leida ushered us to a large hardwood table under a veranda while she and Oscar brewed coffee.

Casa de Oscar is the only house in Viñales where four separate rooms open to a shared courtyard, where all the guests can sit together for meals. In recent years Fidel Castro, the longstanding Cuban president until his resignation in 2008 and now the First Secretary of the Communist Party, has been permitting tourists to stay in Cuban homes. The catch is that only two guests are allowed to stay at once in a household. Oscar and Leida bent the rule by counting her sister and parents as additional hosts. The three generations of Cubans, all interested in interacting with foreigners, opened their home to us.

We sat down to miniature teacups filled with black jet fuel; Oscar updated us on the weather and what other visiting climbers from



other countries were doing. After coffee, we were shown our accommodations. All the rooms were spacious and clean. Bright white sheets were pulled taut over the beds. Light poured through metal blinds covering all the windows (we never knew if they were for security or cooling or both).

We quickly changed and packed our gear, hoping to get in a few pitches before nightfall. On the way out, Oscar asked what we wanted for dinner and told us what time it should be ready. We looked at each other, shrugged and laughed uncomfortably, unsure of how to react to such hospitality. We told him to decide for us, and hurried toward the *mogotes*—the rounded limestone hills that appear throughout the Cuban countryside.



THE TUFA- AND STALACTITE-RIDDEN caves that most Americans have seen in photos are just the mint in the mojito that is Cuban limestone. Long stretches of white walls boast beautiful, highly textured black streaks, and from high up the multi-pitch pump-fests you can see the azure Caribbean.

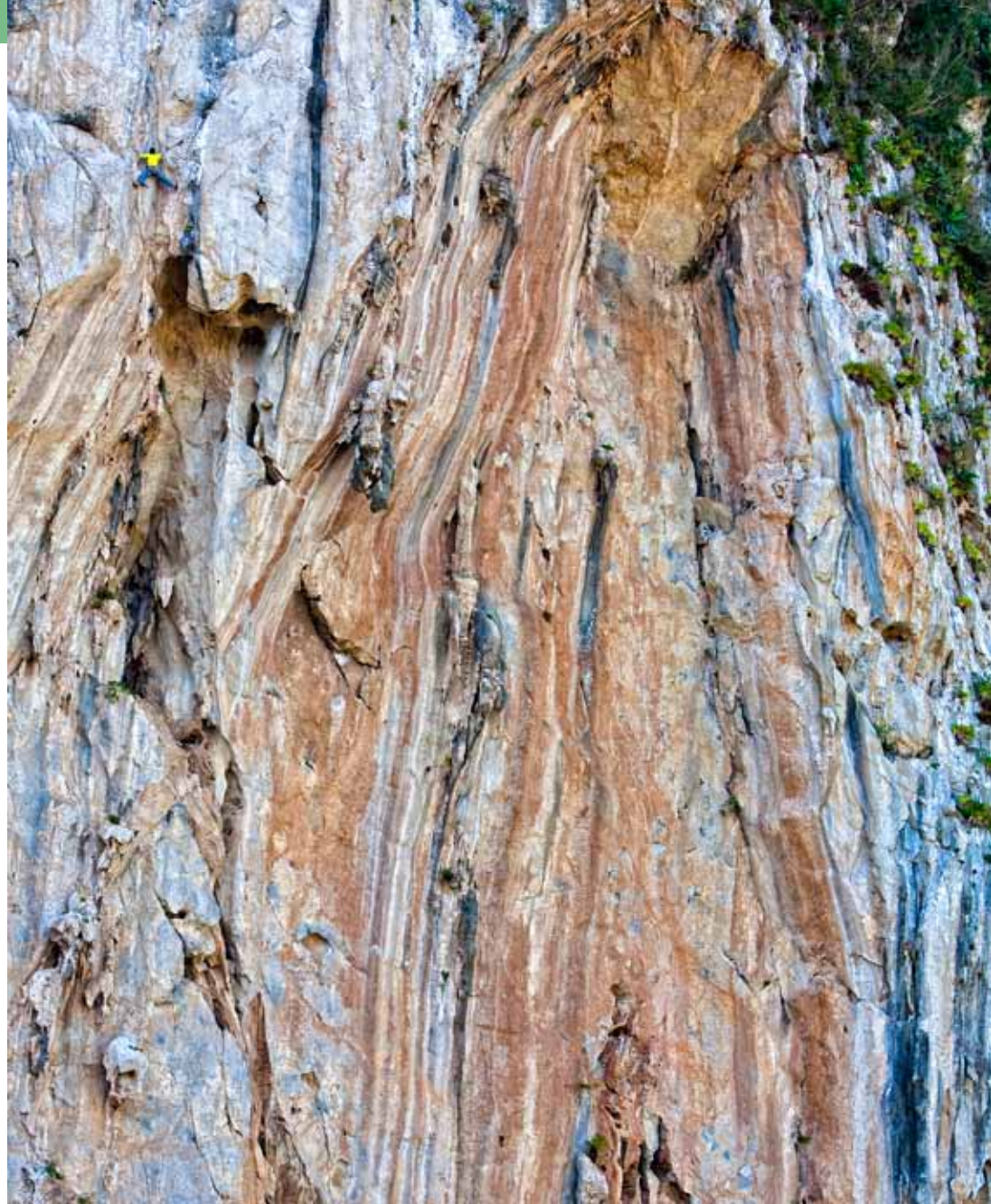
In the early 1980s, two Spanish women (who some now theorize were actually men with long hair) pioneered technical rock climbing in Cuba. However, the sport didn't take off until 1999 when, at age 58, Armando Menocal first visited his mother's native country. Menocal, related to Mario Garcia Menocal, president from 1912 to 1921, became intrigued by a Lonely Planet guidebook's likening of the rock walls around the town of Viñales to a "miniature Yosemite, with the most spectacular scenery in all of Cuba."

With brown eyes, tanned skin and a distinctive gap between his front teeth, Menocal, now 69, was raised in a Cuban-American community in Miami. He moved to San Francisco in the height of the Swinging Sixties, and for 25 years split his time as a civil-rights lawyer and climber, putting up first ascents in the Sierras and internationally, along the way helping to found the Access Fund.

Now based in Wilson, Wyoming, Menocal is a legal consultant and a climbing and skiing guide. He guided eco-travel trips to Cuba until 2004, when new U.S. regulations negated the licenses that had permitted this limited American travel.

Since his first visit, Menocal has returned to Cuba at least 15 times, staying for up to six months at a stretch, equipping routes and teaching climbing to interested locals. The fact that locals and visitor/local teams have established virtually all of the climbing in Cuba is to his credit.

Menocal has dedicated much of his adult life to ensuring we all can climb, but Cuba is



Ray Rice on the second pitch of the classic *Mucho Pumpito* (5.10b), Viñales Valley.

perhaps his greatest challenge and he has been forcibly turned around at the Havana airport the last four times he tried to visit.

"The Cuban government controls every aspect of life, even sports," says Menocal, explaining the authoritarian socialist state. "Climbing is a vehicle that naturally steers Cubans to interact with foreigners. It's also a sport that involves spending lots of time in caves, places where revolutions, like the one spawned by Fidel Castro, are born."

Menocal theorizes that the government and the local police simply don't get climbing. "Climbers are a maverick, independent, laissez-faire type," he says. "That's what the Access Fund does: we advocate against restrictions on climbing. For example, only climbers should decide where a route ought to go. That type of freedom would dumb-

found an official in Cuba."

Since the Viñales park managers and the local police haven't found a way to regulate climbing, they have pronounced it unauthorized for Cubans and have banned Menocal, as the sport's leader, from entering the country. At the same time, the government paradoxically allows, if not promotes, climbing for foreigners.

Such a ban on an American by the Cuban government, which typically welcomes foreigners and their tourist dollars, is rare. First, Menocal was summoned to the local park office for discussions.

"They said climbing is not authorized," Menocal explains. "And I responded, 'Does that mean it is illegal?' and they said it simply is not authorized. 'What do you have to do to get authorized?' 'You have to get a permit.' 'So what can I do to get a permit?' They said, 'No, you

can't get a permit until it's authorized.' ...They put me on notice as a result of that."

Officials then banned all local climbers from climbing. Finally, in September of 2005, Menocal de-boarded in Havana and, under armed escort, was put back on a plane to the States with no explanation. The same thing happened three more times, most recently when we were there in February 2009.

"Of course, the hardest part of being turned around all of those times is not being able to see my fiancée, Laura, who lives in Cuba," he adds. Before they were finally reunited for a short time in Ecuador this past November, he had not seen her for four years.

Though banned, Menocal remains committed to the cause, meticulously updating his exhaustive website www.cubacimbing.com and providing information on climbing beta, places to stay, local climbers to contact for tours and legal advice in case you get caught re-entering the U.S. When he hears about an American trip, Menocal arranges for the visitors to bring the Cubans donated gear such as bolts, shoes and harnesses.



EARLY INTO THE TRIP, Yarobys García Martínez offered to take us to the crag *La Costanera*. We met with him and Marianne Blom Brodersen, a strong Norwegian climber, at the Viñales city square in the morning, and piled into two taxis



LEFT: Marianne Blom Brodersen, a beautiful climber from Norway, joined our group for a full day of climbing.

BELOW: Ray Rice on the second pitch of *Huevos Verde con Jamon* (5.11c) on Milenio Wall in Mogote del Valle.

the middle of the wall. Yarobys and Marianne hopped on a route in between.

After a game of roshambo, I found myself on the lead of the route's only "slab" pitch. I clipped the first bolt and traversed a ramp. The terrain immediately got steep and juggy.

Right hand in a big hueco, right foot on a little nubbin, left foot flagged under, I swung toward the next huge hold. Then suddenly I was flying and bouncing off the slab, finally stopped by the rope about 10 feet below Pat and Ray at the belay.

The huge right hold I had just dislodged exploded on the ground 200 feet below and somewhere from deep within me came the F-bomb, about five times, as the reality of the situation hit me. (Anne, who was out of view, later said she had been sure it was Ray yelling, as the sound was so guttural.)

Two simultaneous thoughts emerged: "I am hurt" and, "I am in Cuba."

Right hand in a big hueco, right foot on a little nubbin, I swung toward the next huge hold. Suddenly, I was flying and bouncing off the slab, finally stopping 10 feet below the belay.

for the five-mile, \$20 roundtrip.

The cabs, mid-sized sedans from the 1980s, ran fine, but had seen a lot of miles judging from the worn upholstery and patch jobs. They wound between *mogotes* to the other side of the national park and we gazed and pointed out windows at unclimbed cliffs in every direction. Just as the terrain spilled into farmland, the cabs dropped us off at what seemed to be the last big formation around.

A 500-foot wall, shaped like the imprint of a faceted gemstone, dripped orange, black and yellow. We dropped our packs at the base and walked along as Yarobys pointed out routes. Tino, Madeline and Anne decided on the two-pitch overhanging ship's prow *Mucho Pumpito* (5.10+). Pat, Ray and I went for the classic five-pitch *Flyin' Hyena* (5.12), right up

My right ankle was already ballooning. I peeled off my climbing shoe and rappelled, tears clouding my vision. Blood rushed to my foot, amplifying the pain.

The other parties quickly rappelled to assist. Tino gave me a piggyback ride while Yarobys and Ray ran down the road to call the taxis back early.

When we finally returned to Oscar's house, his mother diagnosed my ankle by sight.

"It is very swollen," she said in Spanish. "That means it is not broken."

Anne insisted that we immediately go to the hospital for x-rays. Yarobys and Oscar were concerned that the injury happened while climbing, and on Yarobys' watch, too, so we agreed to tell the doctor that I had twisted it while hiking.

I gathered all my money while Oscar went

for his car. Risking trouble since only taxi drivers are allowed to transport foreigners, he drove quickly and carefully to the hospital, staying off the town's main drag.

Oscar pulled the car up to a gray cement structure with no door and latticed cement walls. Anne and Tino jumped out to lend their shoulders.

In a waiting area with polished floors, we sat on wooden benches propped against a whitewashed wall with a handful of other people who were watching TV. Oscar ducked into another room.

Seconds after he returned, two men in white lab coats and camouflage pants shouldered me to the x-ray room. After taking a few images on the antique-looking machine, they escorted me back to the waiting room. Soon they re-emerged with the x-rays, and brought them over to a random woman who was watching TV with everyone else in the waiting room. I



laughed a bit, the first time in a couple hours, wondering why the doctors wanted to show another patient an x-ray of my foot.

The woman, wearing gold jewelry, skin-tight jeans and pointy-toed teal-colored flats, held the x-rays toward the light with her hand decorated with long polished fingernails. I then noticed her matching teal green shirt was a scrub, and realized she was actually a doctor. She came over, grabbed my ankle and prodded around.

"Doloroso?" she asked.

"No entiendo," I said. My (limited) Spanish comprehension had gone completely MIA.

"Doloroso?" she asked more loudly, pressing harder on my grapefruit-sized ankle.

"Si, si! It's painful!" I said, finally understanding. She rolled her eyes and turned away. Soon we were in a new room, and the woman doctor was fitting my ankle with a custom-made plaster splint.

"No es fractura," she said simply. My ankle wasn't broken. Writing on a sheet of newsprint, she prescribed a week of bed rest and ibuprofen and sent me away, not allowing me to leave even a peso, but also not offering a pair of crutches. We were in and out in less than two hours.

Back at Oscar's, we found a festive Sunday afternoon family gathering in progress. Oscar's brother-in-law had caught a *jutia*, or tree rat, about the size of a rabbit and a local delicacy, which was roasting in the outdoor oven. Marianne and Yarobys showed up with chocolate and good wishes for me.

Pat, a carpenter by trade in New Hampshire, sketched out plans for a pair of crutches. Oscar saw the blueprints, then gave a "wait a minute" sign with his finger and disappeared. He returned minutes later with a huge smile and a pair of kid's crutches. We devoured the crispy, well-done *jutia* and toasted to the end of this sour, wild day of our adventure.

Around the table, in the fading afternoon sunlight, Oscar chatted with his in-laws, Pat and Tino drank and joked boisterously, and Yarobys had Ray's ear, talking excitedly about the next cliff he wanted to show us. Madeline and Marianne devised plans to get the group out salsa dancing later that night. Oscar's son José Carlos and his cousin tossed a ball to break in the new baseball mitts we'd given them that day. Anne eventually took a break to sit next to me and observe the scene.

"Well, it's a good thing you got hurt," she joked. "Otherwise we'd still just be out climbing!"



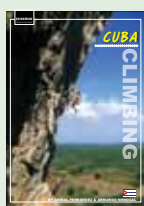
WORKING NIGHT SHIFTS AT THE Computer Club for Kids, which stays open well past midnight, Yarobys García Martínez spends the late hours uploading new climbing photos to his website. Late night is a popular time to visit

CUBA CLIMBING

by Aníbal Fernández and Armando Menocal, \$29.95
www.quickdrawpublications

GUIDEBOOK CO-AUTHOR

Armando Menocal can't speak of Cuba without giving you a big hug and shoulder squeeze followed by, "When are you



going to paradise, my friend?" Armando's love for his root country and its climbing is equally

apparent in the 204 pages of *Cuba Climbing*, the first print guide to some 300 pitches of sub-tropical limestone yanking. Lavishly illustrated, chock full of travel tips, and rich with essays by luminaries including Craig Luebben and Neil Gresham, *Cuba Climbing* makes you wonder why everyone hasn't hopped a plane to the island republic just to sample the buttery rum and hand-rolled cigars, and where the locals practically make you part of the family, often putting you up in their own beds. Oh, and there's climbing, too. The place drips with it. The Cuba Libre Wall hangs with so many tufas it looks like the curing barn to a sausage factory. Another crag, La Costanera, boasts lines up to five pitches high and all on rock so bullet the guide says they all deserve five stars for quality. Then there's ... well, you get my drift.

—D. Raleigh



Yarobys García Martínez on Huracan (5.12d).

the club, and many people come by to e-mail, play video games, watch videos and learn about computers. Because Yarobys works here, the club is the place for climbers to talk shop, see photos and hear about new-route activity.

A couple of local climbers swung by on one of the nights we visited. Leo, clean-cut, young-looking and wearing jeans and a t-shirt, had just finished a work shift at the bakery. Adrian, with longer hair and chalky climbing attire, was apparently nursing an injured wrist. Yarobys pulled up some photos of Cuba's newest super project, *Movimiento de Exploder*, a five-bolt line through a clean, 50-degree overhung wall about a mile outside of Viñales. Everyone crowded in front of the computer screen to check it out.

On the exterior, the scene appeared to be a normal group of climbers getting stoked to go climb. But in fact, climbing and climbers are increasingly threatened in the region.

Yarobys is the strongest and most active Cuban climber. He finds the new crags, bolts the new lines and sends the projects. The police know what he is up to. In any Cuban community, a number of informants work for the government, providing details about those participating in anti-state activity. Yet Yarobys continues to climb despite the possibility of going to prison.

He had been worried about getting arrested the night we arrived, and was distraught when I had my accident while with him at La Costanera. Yet he would still join our rowdy, attention-drawing crew each day, and at night update his website with our activities.

"I am a climber, this is what I do," Yarobys explained. "If I cannot climb I will not be happy. The situation is very unfortunate, but there is little I can do to change it. I do not climb to resist, I climb to climb."

He is a collected individual, and bucking the system just isn't part of his constitution.



Con brazos cruzado is the Cuban saying for accepting whatever the government dishes. No matter what happens, however, Yarobys will not give up climbing.



A MONTH AFTER WE LEFT, in April 2009, while climbing at Cuba Libre, a popular steep wall above the Palenque cave disco bar, the local watering hole and dance club that is literally built in a cave, Yarobys was approached by park rangers and police and brought to the station for questioning. He was told that there had been a file opened on him, the first step in preparing to cite him for the charge of *peligrosidad* (dangerousness).

For decades, the charge of *peligrosidad* has been used to incarcerate those who are non-conformist to the socialist morality, typically gays and political activists. Gorki Águila, aka the “Havel of Havana,” a punk musician in the band Porno Para Ricardo, was famously charged in 2008, but soon released following immense pressure from the international press and human rights organizations. Now on tour to promote his band’s fifth album, *El Disco Rojo (desteñido)*, he recently said in an

interview that “the evil in my country has a name, and it is Fidel Castro.”

Authorities have threatened Yarobys with the same charge. Ironically, Yarobys may be one of Cuba’s best citizens and climbing ambassadors. Raised in a farming family, Yarobys recently completed a half-year training course for communist leaders, which also gave him the opportunity to leave his family’s

the government.’ And it wasn’t that they are dissidents, but they didn’t want the government hassle when all they wanted to do was climb,” says Menocal. “But Yarobys has never said a bad word about the government that I know of, to anybody. I don’t talk politics with him, and we exchange e-mails five or six times a week. What we share is climbing.”

Yarobys has no hidden agenda or closet moti-

“I am a climber, this is what I do. The situation is unfortunate, but I do not climb to resist. I climb to climb.”

fields to work at the Computer Club.

“He’s such an unlikely target for an opponent of the government,” says Armando Menocal. “He and most of these young guys don’t view climbing as associated with politics at all. They don’t want to get involved in politics.”

But that is not the case with everyone.

“Josué Millo and Aníbal Fernández, the leaders of the first two generations of Cuban climbers, would be the first ones to say, ‘Fuck

ventions except for the proliferation of a sport that has changed his life and seeing this region of Cuba transition from being one of the poorer provinces through increased climbing tourism.

Interestingly, the crackdown on climbing that both Yarobys and Menocal have experienced seems to have nothing to do with visiting climbers. Despite all the meetings and threats occurring during our nearly three weeks there, neither the police nor park rang-



FAR LEFT: Pat McElaney on *Wasp Factory* (5.12c) at the Cabeza de la Vaca cave. Here, the goats come up each night to sleep and as a result there is goat poo everywhere. Stinky in the sun!

LEFT: The beautiful Angel, with the kindest blue eyes we had ever seen, smoking one of his own cigars on his land next to the climbing area, Paredón de Josué in Viñales.

ers bothered us once. We found the international scene bustling with other climbers, and none of them reported any trouble either.



ON OUR LAST NIGHT IN CUBA, Oscar and Leida pulled out all the stops. They stuffed us with several versions of fried potatoes, beans, rice, fresh fruit and vegetables, pork and even *pollo del mar* (“chicken of the sea,” our code for lobster, a delicacy the government denies to Cubans but reserves for tourist restaurants).

We sank deeply in our chairs, satiated, when Marianne and her friend José stopped by. José, in a white T-shirt, white jacket and jeans, with locks of hair sneaking out from under a white hat, played his guitar. Oscar fixed him a mojito while he tuned up and played Nirvana riffs. American, Peruvian and Cuban tunes soon filled the room. All of us drummed our feet and smashed the mint at the bottom of our mojitos in rhythm, eyes smiling, not wanting the moment to end.

Sitting with my leg propped up on a chair, I enjoyed watching my friends jump around and show off their newly acquired dancing skills. Yarobys then showed up and sat down next to me. Despite all the action, Yarobys turned toward me, made direct eye contact and flashed a slight smile as we spoke. He has a charming way of making you feel as if you’re the only other person in the world.

Yarobys had just learned that Armando Menocal had been turned around at the Havana airport and sent back to the U.S., yet again. He was clearly disappointed, not having seen his friend and mentor for several years. Uncharacteristically pensive, he wondered if he would ever see him again.

Then he gave me a book. He said he had noticed me practicing Spanish by trying to translate the Spanish version of *The Little Prince*, and suggested that this be my next project. It was a novella, well loved and worn, called *La Virgen De Los Cayos*, written by a local author, Fidel Valverde Montano. I thanked him and promised to return soon.

José switched back to American music, and we all made Elvis proud, singing to “Hound Dog.”

As it turned out, Yarobys would see Menocal just a few months later. That August, Menocal arranged for Yarobys to travel to Squamish, Canada, for the first-ever meeting of Access PanAm, an Access-Fund-like organization Menocal founded to support climbing access and conservation organizations in Latin America.

Yarobys’ pass out of Cuba was a result of both his and Armando’s careful navigation through a difficult bureaucratic system and Yarobys’ own good relations with the ministry that recommends visas.

That trip to Squamish could have been Yarobys’ opportunity to follow a route pioneered by a few daring Cuban climbers before him: defect from Cuba and climb free. Yet Yarobys flew home to Havana. “I’m not going to give in,” he told Armando. “I need to go back and keep doing this.”

When asked about the future of his local climbing scene, he crossed his arms and simply said, “I’m hopeful.”

Janet Bergman, of Madison, New Hampshire, can't wait to get back to Cuba to work her climbing projects and salsa-dancing skills. Her ankle healed up just fine.

Tino Fiumara, of Ardmore, Pennsylvania, coauthored parts of this article.

CUBA LOGISTICS

GUIDEBOOKS AND THE INTERNET ▶ *Cuba Climbing*, by Aníbal Fernández and Armando Menocal, is the first print guide to over 300 pitches of the best tropical limestone this side of Thailand, and is available from Quickdraw Publications for \$29.95 on Amazon or www.mountaingear.com. The website www.cubaclimbing.com was created to help those thinking about traveling to Cuba, and has all the latest information. Also, the young Cuban climbers of Viñales have created www.escaladaencuba.com, a killer source for last-minute climbing news, in Spanish.

Cuba is a major tourist destination, with many good travel guidebooks, but the best is *Cuba Moon Handbook*. Its author, Christopher P. Baker, has also written an outlandish yet thought-provoking adventure book on Cuba, *Mi Moto Fidel*. It describes his three-month exploration of the island on a 1,000cc Paris-Dakar BMW motorcycle.

SEASON AND WEATHER ▶ Cuba can be hot, but not as sweltering or muggy as Southeast Asia due to the island’s gentle moderating trade winds. December through March is perfect. October, November and April have also proved pleasant. Summer is the rainy season, and in fact, hurricanes can occur June through November. But with overhanging routes and north-facing walls, climbing is available all year.

REST DAY ACTIVITIES ▶ Viñales’ charm is that it has remained a cozy, rural town, set within a valley designated as a World Heritage site because of its spectacular natural beauty. Despite its popularity with tourists, Viñales itself has no large hotels, restaurants or souvenir shops. After a couple of days living in town, you will feel at home and at ease.

The approaches to climbs are through the farms and coffee groves. The *guajiros* have befriended climbers. We give them our old climbing ropes, which they use to tie up their horses and oxen, and they share their fruit and tobacco. If you think you can handle a *guajiro*’s biting, rustic cigar, he will hand-roll you a genuine Cuban “puro.”

Nearby are undeveloped, clean beaches. Taxis, motorcycles and scooters are available. The caving opportunities are extensive, including nearby Gran Caverna de Santo Tomás, with excellent guides.

Viñales is one place where most Sundays you can locate a cockfight. It is an exhilarating experience—not the actual act of watching chickens fight, but for the over-the-top emotion and exuberance that fill the people. Officially illegal, cockfighting is tolerated on and off by local officials. Ask around to find out where the “pelea” is. Locals are accustomed to foreigners in attendance, and rarely even object to photography. However, be prepared to run if there is a raid.

With an exciting, sensuous nightlife, and the gregarious, vivacious locals, Cuba offers one of the best adventure experiences anywhere.

HAZARDS ▶ There are no poisonous snakes, such as vipers or cobras, or malaria, typhoid and dysentery. This is fortunate, since there is almost no medicine in Cuba. Also, there are virtually no risks from banditry, hostage-taking, terrorism and artillery-shelling.

The biggest natural hazard is wasps. Some walls have hundreds of hanging nests. Most climbing lines have been cleared, although wasps occasionally reclaim some territory. Usually active nests must be hit or brushed to provoke an attack. Allergic visitors must come completely prepared with an Epi pen (or two) and Benadryl.

Longer routes almost always require technical descents, including following trail ropes anchored to walls. Pay particular attention to the lengths of rappels, and beware of the possibility of being stranded in space.

RECOMMENDED EQUIPMENT ▶ You can get by with just a dozen or so quickdraws and a 60-meter rope. However, for multi-pitch routes such as *Mucho Pumpito* you’ll need two 60-meter ropes to rappel and about 16 draws with extra slings. Bring just a couple of t-shirts and shorts, insect repellent and sunscreen. It’s warm enough that even rain gear isn’t necessary. January and February temps can be cool enough at night for a fleece.

GEAR DONATIONS ▶ The Cubans need climbing equipment, especially bolts. Contact www.cubaclimbing.com, and any gear you get U.S. companies to donate will be shipped for you to carry. The majority of visiting climbers follow a tradition initiated by the first visiting climbers, who left their rack, ropes, shoes and harnesses.

LEGALITY AND ACCESS ▶ Is travel here legal? The answer is always another question: According to which country, the United States or Cuba? Technically, it’s not illegal according to the U.S. to travel to Cuba so long as you don’t spend any money. This technicality, however, seems to tempt visitors to lie—I *didn’t* pay, *someone else did!*—which is not a good idea. Bottom line: almost no one is caught, and if you don’t say anything or lie, nothing more will happen. For a complete explanation of the rules, see www.cubaclimbing.com.