

Cuba: A Decade In The Life Of A prAna Headband

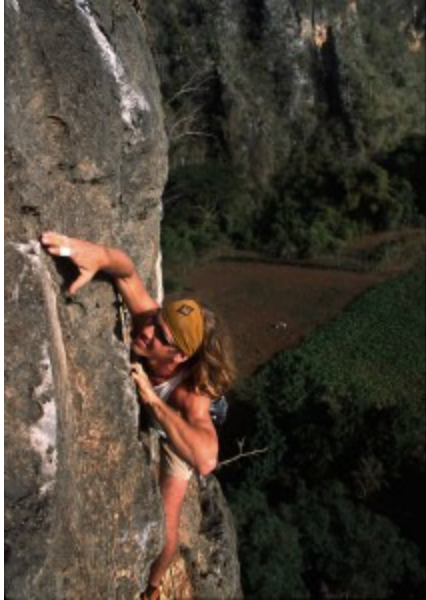


Story and photos by [Armando Menocal](#)

A recent email attached a photo taken by Yarobys García, the Cuban who today is the island's leading climber. The photo from Yarobys showed a very faded mustard-colored prAna headband being worn by a young Cuban named Yandy working a new project. (*Nirvana*, 8a/8a+)>>>



I recognized that headband. Not just one like it. *I knew that particular mustard-colored prAna headband.* I had photos of it being worn by my girlfriend Laura Rodríguez on El Morro in Havana a decade ago, in <<<1999.



I looked through some more of my old photos. I had many images of Aníbal Fernández, the first Cuban climber, wearing that same mustard headband on climbs during the early part of this millennium, perhaps seven or eight years ago.>>>

I looked at more recent images I had received. Last winter Peter Winter, a Canadian climber, had sent me a photo of Yarobys shooting pics for his website. I looked at the image carefully, and yes, Yarobys was wearing the mustard prAna headband (below). Yarobys is an exceptional climber, and committed to the challenge to do new routes and to the tradition of mentorship.



Yarobys established a website on climbing in Cuba, escaladaencuba.com, which is probably the best source of information on new routes and especially new areas being explored by the Cuban climbers. It is difficult for those from other societies to appreciate how remarkable it is for an individual Cuban, outside of a state-run authority, to create a website. I don't know of another.

I checked with Laura and she confirmed it was the same headband in all four photos. The same prAna mustard-colored headband worn by her, Aníbal, Yarobys and Yandy from 1999 until now.

I realized that it was possible to trace the remarkable development of climbing in Cuba through the lives of prAna headbands. The Cubans climb despite a crushingly poor, authoritarian government that threatens them with prison

for climbing, while welcoming foreign climbers. With their stiff-necked commitment to climb, especially to put first ascents on the stone of their own country, the Cuban climbers have created something that I believe is unique in climbing.

Cuba may be the only climbing destination in the third world where the vast majority of the first ascents have been done by local climbers. Is there somewhere else in Latin America, Asia, or Africa where the majority of climbers are visiting foreigners, but the first ascents have been done by the native climbers?



The first time I realized that we had we had created something special by helping to start and sustain a strong community of Cuban climbers was a cool evening in 2002. I was on *Salvador Cisneros* avenue, the pine-tree lined main street of Viñales, a small, remote town in western Cuba, where farmers on horse back or on horse drawn carts out-numbered the 1950s American behemoth classic cars from Detroit.>>>

I was walking with Laura and Josué Millo, a local who at that time had been climbing for just a year. From 2001 to 2005, however, Josué, and Aníbal Fernández were to dominate climbing in Cuba, creating the majority of new routes. We were heading for one of the main street clubs where we would go nightly to hear live, pulsating music.

A group of four young men crossed the street and stopped right in front of us. Speaking English, but with a heavy eastern European accent, one of them asked, “You climbers, right?”

I answered, “yeah, but how did you know we are climbers?”

Three years earlier, I had been one of four U.S. climbers who were the first foreigners to go to Cuba to climb its virgin stone. Since our initial climbs, Viñales had been declared a [U.N. World Heritage](#) site and become a national park. Eco-tourism has taken hold. However, in 2002, climbing had not yet become a central activity in the [Viñales valley](#), and we were surprised to be picked out as climbers – in fact, detected at night and from across the street. How had these strangers so easily known we were climbers?

“Your clothes,” came the answer, in the same heavy accent that we were to learn was Polish. We looked down as he pointed at Josué’s shorts, right at the diamond patch with the prAna logo. These were four Polish sport climbers who had just arrived in Cuba and were looking for beta on the crags. They picked us out from a pair of prAna shorts.

It was true, *all* the Cuban climbers wore prAna shorts, in fact also prAna pants, shirts, and hoodies. The Best Dressed Climbers on Earth! was the tag given to the Cubans by a *French sport climber*.



This had happened because of a tradition and system of donated gear, clothes, even power drills and bolts. Our original team of Americans wanted not just to explore climbing in Cuba, but to climb with Cubans. One of us, [Craig Luebben](#) from Colorado, put on a slide show on our first day in Havana. Craig had brought his slides in support of his recent book on how to ice climb! Didn't matter, Craig's images and translated talk were infectious.

That same day, the half-dozen Cubans took us to climb at their local crag, El Morro, the 400 year old fortress that guarded the entrance to [Havana Harbor](#). Its 50 to 60 foot walls of immense limestone blocks towered above the sea and the castle's sandy moats, providing ideal, accessible climbing walls. The Cuban climbers shared the castle with sandlot baseball games, kids diving into the sea, and cavers practicing rappelling the walls and jumaring back up. Local photographers posed Cuban girls in evening dresses next to the sea to chronicle their <<<[quinceñeras](#), their 15th birthday and prelude to womanhood.

We weren't introducing the Cubans to climbing. The Cubans were showing us their resourceful, vibrant spirit.

At El Morro, Craig pulled out a duffel loaded with shoes and harnesses he had brought in case we found any climbers in Cuba. His novel idea to bring shoes and harnesses for Cubans who wanted to climb grew into the tradition of foreign climbers leaving their gear and eventually led to a full-fledged donation program supported by a dozen climbing companies that permitted the Cuban climbers to take the lead in exploring routes in their own country. Craig Luebben was tragically killed climbing in the Cascade range, Washington, USA, on August 9, 2009.

PrAna was one for first companies to help. Mike Hill would put aside "seconds" for us to take to Cuba. It was clothes that prAna would never sell. Pants, shorts, and shirts with missing seams and torn or ripped – but with logos that even the isolated Cubans knew meant climbing.

Cubans have kept 50 year-old American cars running, decades after replacements parts were being made. Tears and rips were *nada*. Vity Echazábal, one of the first Cuban climbers, and perhaps the most talented natural climber, was also the gear wonk, making nuts, hooks, and packs. His only equipment was a foot-peddle sewing machine. At times, two people would have to stand with all their weight on the peddle to pierce heavy material. Aníbal Fernández had gone AWOL from the army and hitched to Viñales to climb with the first visiting Americans. The first climbing harness in Cuba probably was the seatbelt Aníbal took from his dad's Soviet-era Lada.

PrAna was not alone. Many other companies began to sign on, sending gear every year with climbers who were visiting Cuba. In the end, the list of donors included ACG/Nike, Boreal USA, Exum Mountain Guides, La Sportiva, MadRock, Marmot, Metolius, Omega Pacific, Misty Mountain, Petzl, Sterling Rope, and Trango.

But most popular among the Cubans was the prAna headgear. I had to ration out the logoed hats, so only the most truly committed climbers got one.

The ultimate prize, perhaps the equivalent of winning the annual U.S. government lottery that lets a few thousand Cubans immigrate, was a prAna headband. Laura would always grab the prAna headbands on arrival. Only when I

brought her replacements could I pry old ones from her and pass them along to the leading climbers, Aníbal in Havana and Josué in Viñales. As climbers left Cuba, they had to leave their prAna headbands to succeeding generations of climbers.



Thus, the mustard-colored headband has had at least four owners in 10 years, and it's still in use.

I searched some more old photos, and found another prAna headband, a grey one, that has also been passed down for years by the Cuban climbers – from Laura wearing it as she belayed Josué in 2001, to when he himself was wearing it climbing in 2005, when his hair had grown enough to justify a headband. (left & below)



Searching farther back, I found a photo of the first prAna headband to make it to Cuba. A blue headband that was worn by Cameron Cross on the second climbing trip that Craig Luebben and I did to Cuba in April, 1999. The image is by Craig, and Cameron is on the roof that caps the last pitch of our route, *Flyin' Hyena* (5.12b/7b), a five-pitch classic that is still the longest climb in Cuba. The subsequent history of the blue headband is unknown. That's fitting, because the route itself is a mystery. On the first ascent, at the end of the first pitch we discovered pitons, perlon, and a carabineer, an obvious rappel anchor from a long-ago unknown attempt to climb the wall.



The donation system succeeded for over a half-dozen years. But eventually the so-called real world intervened. At first, it had been primarily American climbers who went carrying gear to Cuba again and again, obsessed to keep returning, despite U.S. law threatening fines and imprisonment. However, eventually the misguided, spiteful policy of the Bush Administration to stop Americans committing the high crime of going to Cuba took its toll. At one time the U.S. government agency enforcing the prohibition on dollars going to banned countries had 26 agents trying to catch Americans visiting Cuba and only three tracking the international funds to Osama bin Ladin and Sadam Husain.

By 2005, I was climbing with the third generation of Cuban partners, the previous ones having escaped from Cuba — until that is, officials banned me from Cuba as well. I had become too prominent as one who had helped the Cubans to create an independent Cuban climbing community, free of government control or dependence, and the primary developers of climbing in Cuba. Now I too am an exile.



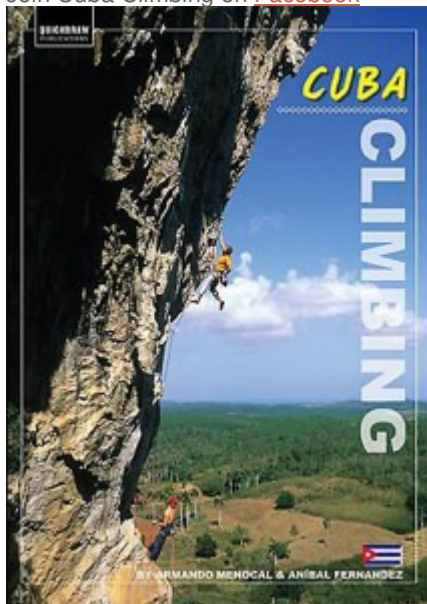
A new prAna headband has not been seen in Cuba for several years. Old prAna logos are being cannibalized. prAna designers may not recognize the pair of pant worn by Josué in this image. He sewed the logo on them himself.>>>

If you're willing to grant a long life to some prAna headbands by taking them and other climbing gear to Cuba, drop us a line at cubaclimbing.com.

And those Polish climbers from 2002? Turned out they were way better at spotting climbing couteur than scooping climbing routes. They put up only one route, on the spectacular wall at *Cueva Cabeza de la Vaca*, adjacent to Cuba's hardest route, *One-Inch Punch* (5.14a/8b+) and popular classic, *Wasp Factory* (5.12c/7b+). Although the route follows an obvious and bullish profile, unfortunately the route is dirty, and has badly placed bolts, one a big no-no in Cuba — a bolt drilled directly into a stalactite!

I think the Poles knew. They named their route *La Mierda*. In English, The Shit (5.11a / 6b+). And they departed with only one route, after lugging to Cuba the accoutrements of sport-route exploration, drill, bolts, batteries, etc. We never even learned their names.

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The first guidebook to Cuba, *Cuba Climbing* (available at [mountaingear.com](#) and [amazon](#)), has just been published. However, as one would expect following the initial decade of climbing in Cuba, the guide is much more than merely descriptions of routes and approaches. It captures the history of commitment and devotion. Its authors, Anibal Fernández and Armando Menocal, are the first Cuban climber and one of the first foreigners, albeit a Cuban-American, to “discover” Cuba’s climbing potential. Passionate about Cuba, their commitment to Cuban climbing has made one an exile and the other banned, inadmissible to Cuba. Perhaps no guidebook has so many contributors, and every one of them donated their images and labors. Images have been contributed by the best professional photographers, such as Andy Burr, Jimmy Chin, Mickey Robertson, and Beth Wald. Every photo, map, and topo is full color.

And unlike other guide, the book includes personal essays with intimate perspectives on the Cuban experience by some of climbing’s best writers, such as Dan Duane, Neil Gresham, and Timmy O’Neil. Craig Luebben’s essay, was written a month before his death.

Craig’s concluding statement, sums up their Cuban obsession: “if I could only keep one set of my climbing adventures over the past three decades, it would be my trips to Cuba.”