

ROCK CLIMBING IN CUBA

One year after Fidel Castro came down from the Sierra Maestra Mountains to claim triumph for the Revolution, he declared: "The Revolution was the work of climbers and cavers. "They, he said, had enabled his guerrilla forces to stay one step ahead of government troops. But climbing as a sport is almost unheard of in Cuba. Armando Menocal wants to change that.

Text and photos
by Armando Menocal

Silhouette of Cuban climber Josu Millo being lowered from top of the hung overhanging cavern called Wasp Factory, with the town of Vi-ales in the background.



Cuban climber Anibal Fernández on the climb named 'Huevos Verde con Jamón' (5.11c/6c+), after a visiting climber brought a Spanish version of the Dr. Seuss classic 'Green Eggs and Ham.' Climbing Cuba's overhangs is possible because the Karst limestone's structure creates a lattice of honeycombs, pockets, and incuts. There are few pockmarks, dimples or crimps. The features are supersized.



In returning to Cuba to find my family roots, my guidebook described the western area of Cuba known as Viñales Valley as a 'miniature Yosemite'. Since Yosemite Valley in California is so popular with international rock climbers, and a place where I had climbed for 25 years, I couldn't resist a detour to one of the island's most beautiful destinations.

Viñales is undoubtedly spectacular, but very different from Yosemite's austere, deep canyons and 3,000 ft polished granite walls. In Viñales, I discovered 1,000 ft freestanding buttes — which the Cubans call "mogotes" — covered by a tangle of palms, pines and vines. In those places where the underlying rock overhangs so much that the jungle growth cannot find a purchase, there are stupendous limestone caverns and vaults, bulging with tufas (WHAT IS A TUFA?) and hung with stalactites. This was three-dimensional climbing.

Would be possible to ascend this unique natural architecture, through roofs and link alcoves, reaching higher, bigger grottos? I wanted not just to explore climbing in Cuba, but to climb with Cubans. I had plenty of questions. Had others attempted to climb those wildly overhanging walls? Were there climbers in Cuba?

No one in Viñales thought that such climbing had ever been attempted. My own scouting revealed no trails to the base of the most promising chambers or other clues of ascents. Things were not looking good, but fortunately I discovered the Cuban Speleological Society.

The Society proposed that we put on a climbing presentation, and see who showed up. We agreed. It was not to be an auspicious start. One of my climbing partners on that first exploratory trip had recently published a climbing book. He volunteered to bring his slide show. The book was on ice climbing —

in a country without a recorded sub-freezing temperature. We arrived the day after the show was originally scheduled. It was in the afternoon at Havana's sprawling Sport City campus. The broken shades could not block the rays of the powerful tropical sun. Making out the images was almost impossible.

The dozen Cuban climbers who came did not seem to mind. Our shared passion was infectious. That afternoon they took us to climb at their local crag: El Castillo de los Tres Reyes del Morro, the 400-year castle that guards 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 climbing walls. We were to discover that the Cuban climbers shared the castle with sandlot baseball games, kids diving from its rocks, and cavers practicing rappelling down and climbing back up ropes. Local photographers posed Cuban girls in evening dresses next to the castle to chronicle their "quince", their 15th birthday and prelude to womanhood.

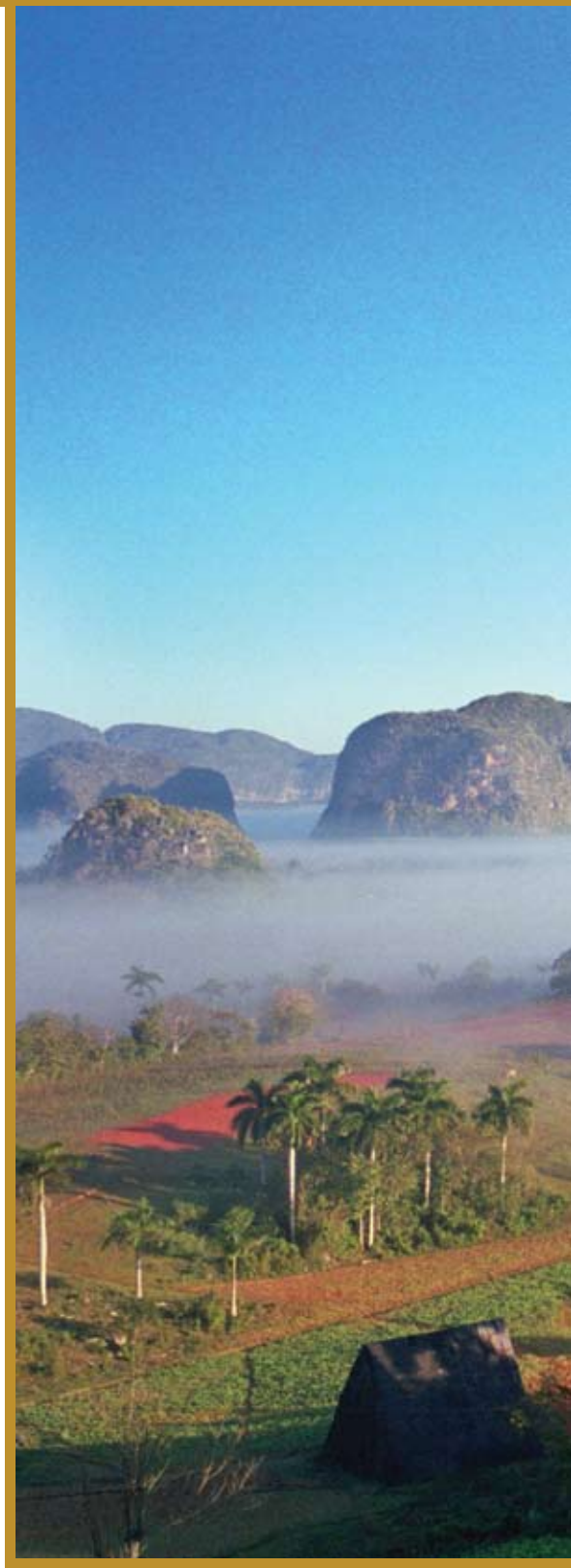
We weren't introducing the Cubans to climbing. They were showing us the resourceful, creative, vibrant Cuban spirit.

Two of the Cubans spent a month with us exploring the full length of the island for climbing sites. Viñales was the best we experienced. From a climber's perspective, its unique high-profile architecture was the most interesting and varied climbing I know of in the Western Hemisphere. Each individual crag in Viñales Valley has a distinct character, yet many are within minutes of one another.

Since our initial climbs in Viñales, the area has been declared a U.N. World Heritage site owing to its outstanding limestone landscape, traditional methods of agriculture that have survived unchanged for several centuries, and a rich colloquial culture reflected in its villages and its music.



Cuban-American Fernando Paulete climbs one of the big walls of Castillo de los Tres Reyes del Morro. Havana's neoclassical gem, Hotel Nacional, can be seen on the sky line. This icon of the city dates from the 1930s, has been restored, and is still where all celebrities who visit Cuba gather.



The Valley's only town, Viñales, is small, just a half-a-dozen streets. The majority of the people live in traditional thatched-roof Cuban farmhouses, called "bohios" in red-soiled valleys, perfect for growing tobacco, between the mogotes. About 10,000 people are scattered throughout the valley. Plows and carts are ox drawn. The local farmers, "guajiros", are seldom without a horse and machete.



BIO OF ARMANDO MENOCA

"...a world-class Wyoming climber who's been helping the Cuban rock-climbing community get off the ground..." Outside magazine

Armando has 38 years of climbing, with first ascents in Yosemite and Sierra Nevada and climbs in Asia, Africa, and South America. Founder of The Access Fund, which works to keep climbing areas open and protect the mountain environment, and the largest climbing organization in America. Author of www.cubaclimbing.com.

You could happily take in Viñales on purely visual terms if you wanted to. Its greatest charm I found is that within a day or two, you feel at home, comfortable in its small town ambience. Once, I hitched a ride on a tractor. Without a word from me, the farmer wound his way through town, stopped in front of at my place, and turned to me, as though to say, "here you are."

Cubans are blunt, witty, spontaneous, passionate, musical and openhearted. Rest days include isolated beaches, baseball, hiking, biking, caving, and illegal cock-fights. Add an exciting nightlife, and of course the gregarious, vivacious Cuban people, and the island becomes one of the best outdoor adventure experiences anywhere. ■