

# CUBA CLIMBING



Left: Reiniel Sosa on Wasp Factory 5.12c

Below: Painting of Mogote La Feita

# La vida es bella!

Story and Photos by Armando Menocal

“Rock is rock it’s true, but climbing in Cuba isn’t like climbing in any other place. Climbing in Cuba is as much about Cuba as it is about climbing.” Author Jonathan Miles

When did I first become aware that Canadian climbers had claimed Cuba as one of their favourite winter climbing venues? Basically we saw almost no Canadians and then, seemingly, the Canadian invasion was there. I recall that, whenever it was, we christened it ‘The Year of the Canadians.’

In 1998, I returned to Cuba, earnest to rediscover the country of my ancestry. I had last visited 40 years before, only a few months before Fidel Castro’s successful revolution claimed power. Cuba and I took opposing paths. As Fidel was establishing a government that he was to dominate for longer than any 20th-century ruler, I headed west, living and climbing in the Sierra and Yosemite, starting the Access Fund, and eventually landing in the Tetons, working as a guide for Exum Mountain Guides.

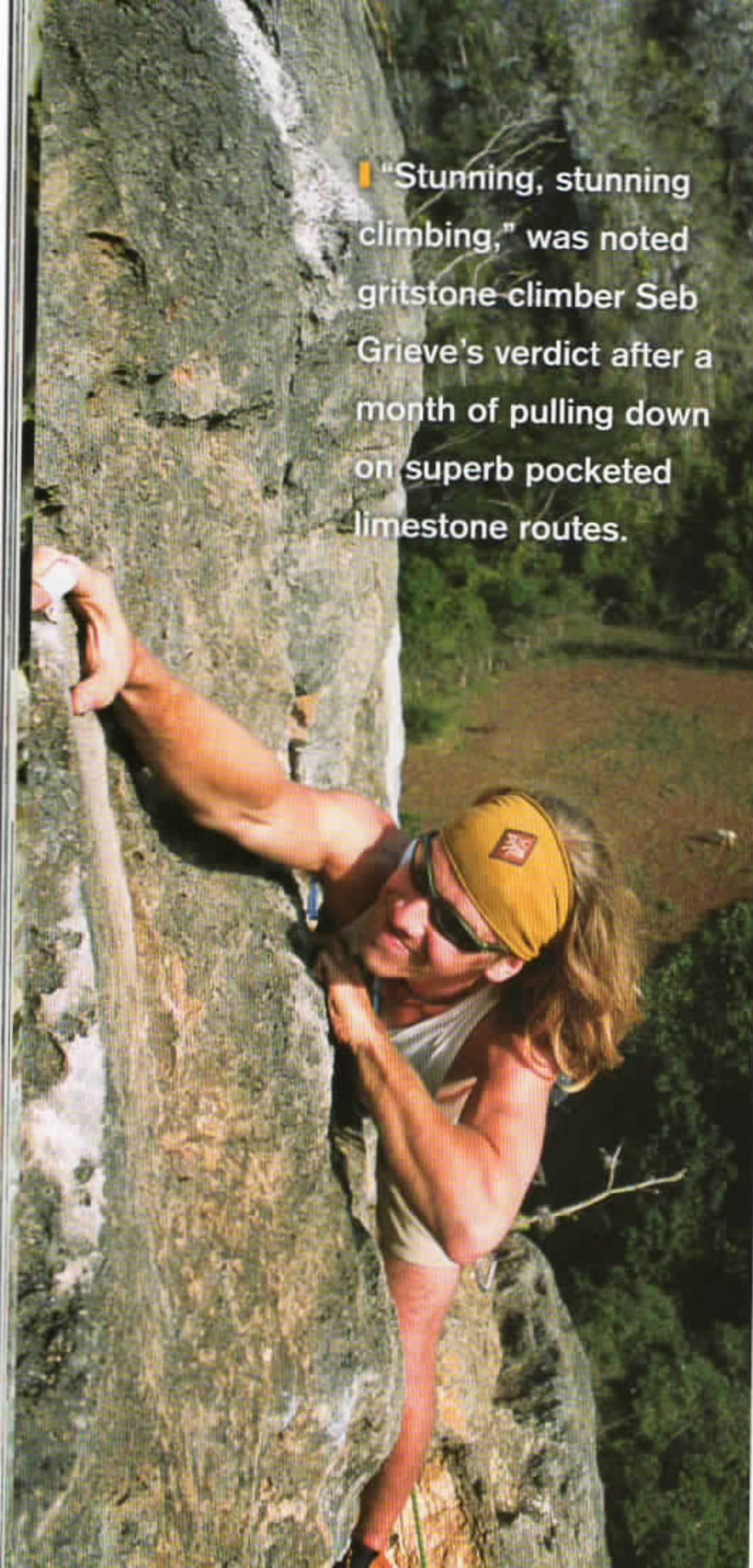
Climbing was not in my reflections as I stood in front of the dilapidated apartment building in Havana Vieja that had been home to my mother’s family, and that I had visited most summers as a little boy. I turned away from the rundown, ancient building and ended the search for our family roots. I was to learn that Cubans surrender their homes and go into exile abroad, but their dwellings stay behind



to be inhabited by another generation until they leave.

With a few days left in Cuba, I headed to the Valley of Viñales for no other reason than that my guidebook called it a “miniature Yosemite.” Viñales is not a miniature Yosemite. Rather the valley resembles a Chinese landscape painting, particularly in the morning mist, with cliffs towering above verdant forests of pines and palms, thatch-roofed houses and red-soiled farms. The rock was chiselled, sculpted, and pocketed bullet-hard limestone and all of it was unclimbed.

I didn’t know that in that brief exploration, I had fallen for Viñales, and fallen hard. How often in our adventures do we say we’ll return soon? Years later we ask ourselves what happened to our professed commitment. Not this time. I was back in Viñales in two months with climbing partners in search of routes up its tropical walls. I returned four times that first year alone. I was to spend most of the next six winters there.

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a yellow headband, sunglasses, and a light-colored tank top, is climbing a vertical limestone rock face. She is using her hands to grip the rock. The background shows a lush green landscape with trees and a body of water.

“Stunning, stunning climbing,” was noted gritstone climber Seb Grieve’s verdict after a month of pulling down on superb pocketed limestone routes.



#### **The Climbing**

In Viñales, I discovered what Cubans call mogotes: 300 metre-high, freestanding hummocks covered by a tangle of palms, plants, pines and vines. Water moving over and through porous limestone has sculpted the rock faces, and where the rock is so overhanging that the jungle growth cannot find purchase, there are stupendous limestone caverns and vaults, bulging with tufas and hung with stalactites. It is a rock climber’s fantasy to climb this unique architecture of roofs, alcoves and grottos. In Cuba’s overhead caverns, the tufas and stalactites come down from above and are suspended around you, sometimes literally behind you, offering a saving stem in space. This is three-dimensional climbing.

These gravity-forged features range from



Left: **Anibal Fernandez** on Huevos Verde con Jamon 5.11c

Above: **Josue Millo** bouldering next to El Mogote del Valle

handhold-sized stilettos to giant inverted statues. Multi-pitch climbs such as Cuba Libre, Bababu Aye and Dagas del Cielo (aptly, in English, Daggers from the Sky) involve repeatedly ascending into alcoves, then through roofs, and into higher, bigger grottos.

Cuba is big wall sport climbing. Its longer routes almost always require technical descents with trail ropes anchored to the wall. There is the real possibility of being stranded in space if you blow it.

The crusts of the faces are three dimensional as well, overlaid with pockets, incuts of all sizes, and overflow stone that leaves slots for hands, threads or knees. The varied karst limestone can also form delicate yet stout lattices and honeycombs. Pulling down on these triggers a high pucker-factor. There are few pockmarks, dimples or crimps. The features are supersized.

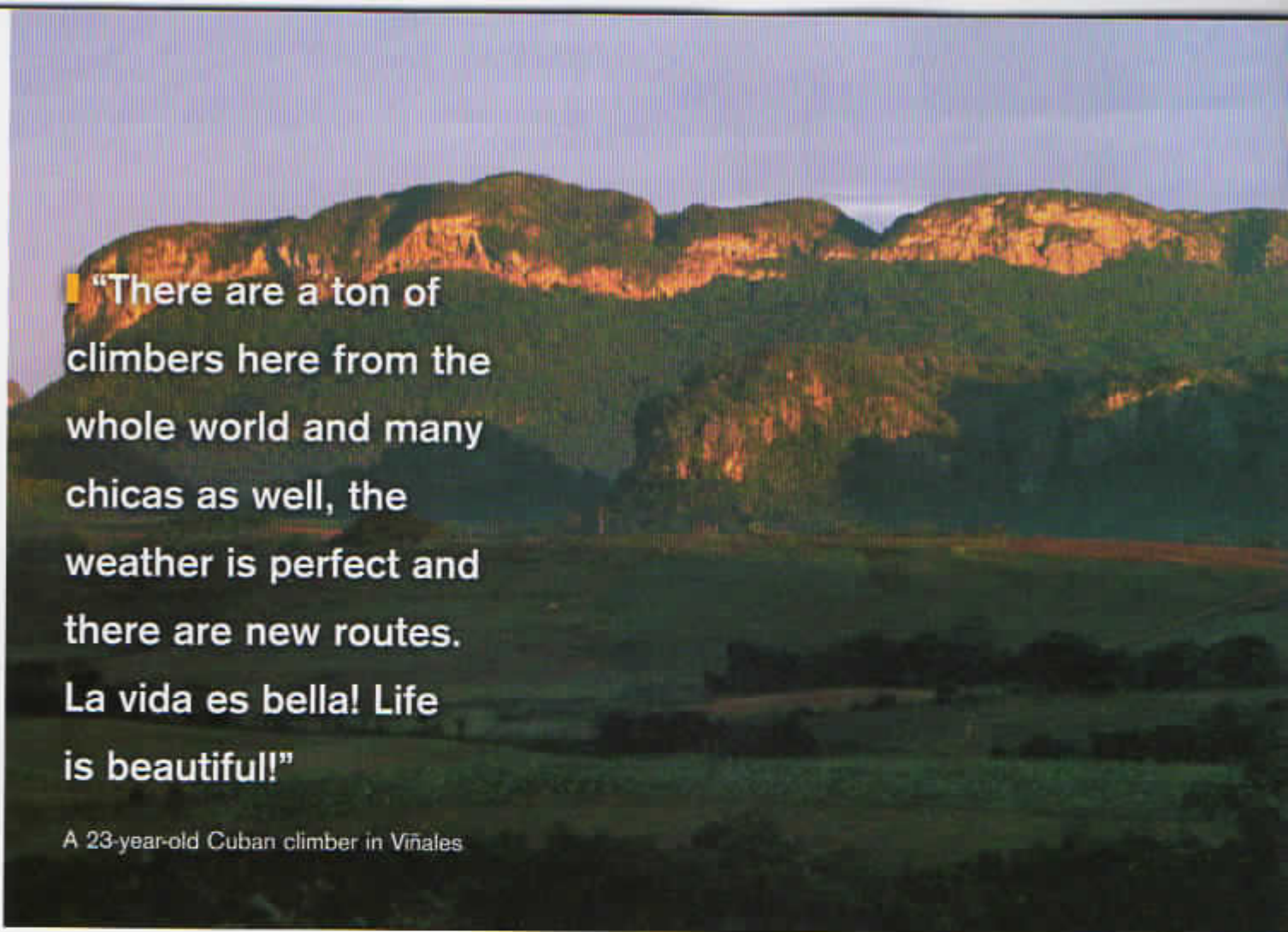
"Stunning, stunning climbing." That was the verdict of Seb Grieve, the noted gritstone climber, after a month of pulling down on superb Cuban limestone.

Grieve and his Sheffield partners travel the world in search of perfect new routes. The six of them included two of the world's

best, Neil Gresham and Tim Emmett. They arrived with honed, rock-hard bodies. In Cuba, however, their evenings started with salsa lessons, and then a full night of dancing in the Viñales clubs. They went out in tank tops and some young gay men cooed, "we have to become climbers!"

The Brits managed to make it to the crags by 2 p.m. and they added many hard routes, including Tim Emmett's The One Inch Punch, Hard F8b, 5.14a. Tim calls it, "the best route I have ever done." His description of the crux is: "Once you get to the rest at the hole, shut your eyes, think of Bruce Lee and dispatch it." Grant Farquhar, another of the gritstone men, was "totally blown away by the fantastic climbing and culture." Grant also recognized the special "privilege to be able to put the first route up a fantastic cliff of columns and tufas, and realize that it is the only route on the whole cliff."

Perhaps most incredible are the many unexplored and unclimbed walls. Climbers have only picked off the lowest lying fruit. Eighty per cent of the routes are on Mogote del Valle, the mogote that is easy walking from town.



“There are a ton of climbers here from the whole world and many chicas as well, the weather is perfect and there are new routes. La vida es bella! Life is beautiful!”

A 23-year-old Cuban climber in Viñales

### The Canada-Cuba Connection

Sometime during those first couple climbing seasons, Paul Laperrière, a Quebecker and owner of a climbing holds company, found his way to Cuba. Like me and many other climbers, Paul was to become a Cubaphile.

About then, in 2003, *Gripped* ran a half-page article letting folks in on the emerging secret of Cuba. “While the climbing is in its infantile stages, what exists is spectacular.”

It seems obvious that we should have anticipated the invasion by Canadian climbers. Canadian tourists are the largest visitor group travelling to Cuba. Awesomely cheap travel packages were drawing, but isolating, Canadians on the sunny beach resorts. It was rare to meet a Canadian in a small village like Viñales, staying in Cuban homes, and on the budget-travel circuit.

In those early years, climbing developed in spurts, almost always when foreign climbers appeared with climbing gear, and especially power drills and bolts. But it would be wrong to think that climbing began and was developed only by foreign climbers. When we first arrived, there was a small group of Cuban cavers, who used their caving gear and information from an occasional climbing magazine to climb.

We left our gear for the Cubans on our first trip, and then started to bring shoes, harnesses and ropes for them. By word of mouth, other climbers began to learn to do the same. The first time I realized that a tradition of visiting climbers supporting the local climbers had been established was when Ivan Hughes and his wife-to-be, Angela, showed up in Viñales one day in the 2003 season with a duffle bag of climbing gear for the Cubans. Today, Ivan is director of the Squamish Mountain Festival, but in 2003 he owned a bar in Vancouver, and he

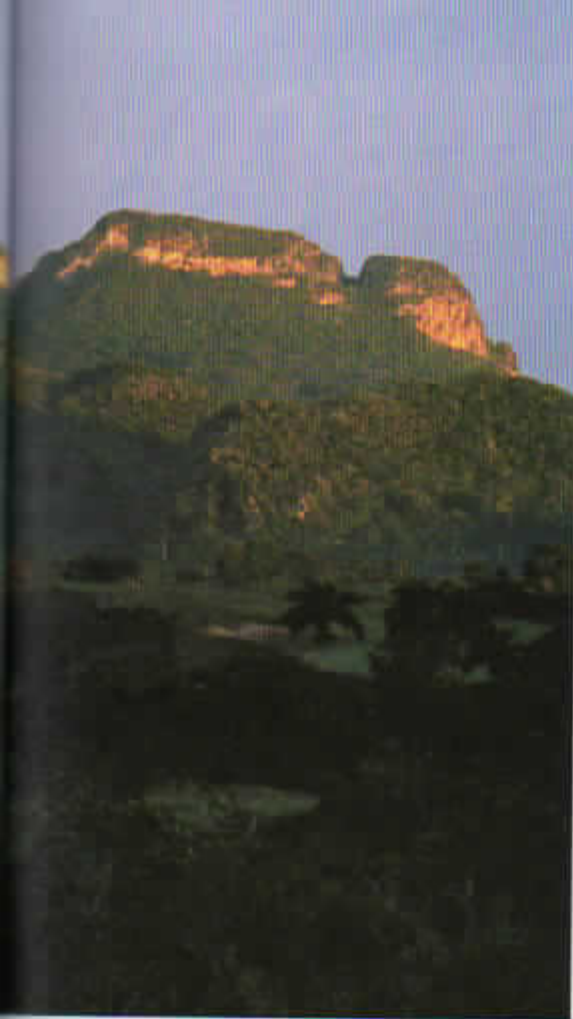
and Angela held a big party to raise gear for the Cubans. The cover charge was a donation of gear.

Like many other climbers, I’ve left gear for Sherpas in the Himalayas. It is helpful and appreciated, but it does not allow indigenous climbers to take the lead in exploring routes in their own country. In Cuba, route exploration and development takes power drills and bolts. One bolt and hanger, even if available for purchase, which they are not, would cost only slightly less than a month’s salary for a Cuban; an entire route, a year’s pay. A Bosch or Hilti drill could take a lifetime. I brought a couple of used drills for the Cubans to help them start putting up routes, and then Paul Laperrière donated a new 36 volt Hilti. When we can, we send bolts.



Left: Sierra La Guasasa

Opposite bottom: Che is the icon of Cuba and paintings or posters of Fidel are rare. This painting of Castro hangs on a bohio, a traditional thatched roof house in Vinales



Today, the overwhelming majority of routes in Cuba have been put up by Cuban climbers. Where else in the developing world is there a major climbing destination developed by locals?

Cuban Anibal has by far the most routes. At one time, Fernández appeared likely to develop a phenomenal climbing record. Fernández, who may have been Cuba's first climber, started his caving and explorations at the age of 11. However, as is true of all of the first and second generations of Cuban climbers, he has left Cuba. Today he lives in Toronto. And he and I are completing a guidebook to Cuba – to be published in Squamish, B.C., closing the circle on the Canada-Cuba connection.

"Rock is rock it's true, but climbing in Cuba isn't like climbing in any other place. Climbing in Cuba is as much about Cuba as it is about climbing." With those words, author Jonny Miles captured the essence of climbing in Cuba.

Cuba conjures up visions of romance, music, beauty, and intrigue. Upon "discovering"

Cuba on October 27, 1492, Christopher Columbus described the island as "the most beautiful thing human eyes could ever behold." Ernest Hemingway, Winston Churchill and Graham Greene all fell in love with Cuba. "Cuba was bound to seduce me. From the natural beauty of the island to the smiling, friendly people, to the musical, magical nights, I can't wait to get back," was the rapturous exultation of a partner after one of our first trips.

Few visitors to Cuba come away equivocal. Cuba makes you commit. Most become passionate about Cuba. It reaches into you emotionally. Cubans are sensual, musical and mystical. They shout across courtyards and streets every detail of their daily emotions and calamities. It's in-your-face living that's not for the timid or bashful. The island's music reflects its people's vitality and driving physicality.

Cuba is full of bright colours and seductive images. Visual opulence is everywhere. The Viñales Valley is no exception. It has been declared a UN World Heritage site because

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The lightest  
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more!

Just 23 g.  
Carato: 115,  
nanogrammo: 23000000000,  
Pound: 0,05, Oz: 0,81,  
グラム 23, 克 23.  
Gate opening of 8 mm.  
Open gate strength: 7 kN.





Armando Menocal on  
Cuba Libre 5.12a

of its outstanding karst landscape, traditional methods of agriculture that have survived unchanged for several centuries and a rich colloquial culture reflected in its villages and music.

The valley's only town, Viñales, has only a dozen streets. The majority of the people live in traditional thatched-roof Cuban bohios and farm the rich, red soil that is perfect for growing tobacco. About 10,000 people are scattered throughout the valley. Plows and carts are ox- and horse-drawn. The local guajiros, or farmers, are seldom without a horse and machete.

Climbs are approached through 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.

Viñales remains a cozy, rural town. Despite its popularity with tourists, Viñales has no large hotels, restaurants or souvenir shops. Its greatest charm is that within a day or two you feel at home, comfortable with its small-town ambience.

Once, after a day of climbing, I hitched a ride back to town on a tractor. Without a word from me, the farmer wound his way through town, stopped in front of my place and turned to me, as though to say, "here you are."

The lush Viñales Valley has recently seen visits from many leading climbers, such as Lynn Hill, Timmy O'Neill, Jim Donini, Marc Bourdon and David Brasco, one of Spain's most prolific climbers. Articles about Cuba's spectacular climbing appear regularly. Today there are 300 routes 30 to 200 m high, which is more than enough to keep a visiting climber busy for weeks. Still, it's not yet world-class. Joshua Tree, near Los Angeles has more than 6,000 established climbing routes.

Cuba offers perfect climbing days, mild weather and everything from isolated beaches to caving and cock-fights on rest days. Add an exciting, sensuous nightlife, the gregarious, vivacious Cuban people, and Cuba may already be the best outdoor adventure experience anywhere.

*Armando Menocal is a professional climbing guide who lives in Wyoming. He was also a founding member of the Access Fund, the American climber's access group.*