

AS WE SOON LEARN, FEARS ARE THERE FOR A REASON, AND THE REALITIES BEHIND THEM ARE OFTEN HARD TO ESCAPE.

ROB PIZEM, HAVE A CIGAR (7A+), LA COSTALANERA

CUBA:

FEAR ME,
FEAR ME
NOT

WORDS BY MIKE BRUMBAUGH
PHOTOS BY ANDREW BURR

Cuba. This one small island nation stirs up a distinct mental picture in nearly everyone's mind. We've all heard the stories, but it seems as though nobody has actually been there. It's like the sweet forbidden fruit, so close (only 90 miles from Florida) and yet so far away. For Americans, there is one consistent theme in all discussions about traveling to Cuba: Fear. We fear getting sick, how we will be received, what the rock will be like, and most importantly, getting busted upon reentering the States. But, I've never been one to put much stock in fear, and I'm admittedly a good salesman. So, in March of 2006 I, along with four other adventurous Gringos, headed down to Havana, Cuba for a bite out of the off limits apple. As we soon learn, though, fears are there for a reason, and the realities behind them are often hard to escape. This is our story.

ROSIE LA REVOLUTIONARY
LIGHTS A STOGIE



HOOKED ON FEATURES YOU CAN RIDE LIKE A HORSE. ROB PIZEM AND CAPTAIN HOOK (7A), CUBA LIBRE WALL, EL PALENQUE



FIELDS OF TOBACCO SHACKS



THE FIERY SUNSET OF VIÑALES



UNKNOWN, UNRATED, AND UNAVOIDABLE. ROB TAKES TIME TO ENJOY THE UNIQUE, UNDEVELOPED BLOCS OF MOGOTE DOS HERMANOS, VIÑALES VALLEY

Andy Burr, Clay Cahoon, Rob Pizem and I all breeze through customs. No questions about the bikes or computer we've brought with us to leave with local churches. Not so much as a sideways glance over the pile of climbing ropes, funny looking shoes, and strange metal objects. We pantomime climbing motions and repeatedly say to the officers, "Escalar! Escalar!" They smile and just waive us through. Once outside of customs, though, our celebrations quickly fade as there is no sign of Rosie Cahoon, Clay's wife and the fifth member of our team. 15 minutes roll by. Then 30. Then an hour. We have no idea where she is, and it's impossible to get any kind of information. After an hour and 45 minutes, we enter full panic mode and fear that the trip might be over before it ever even starts. Finally, following two hours in the dark, Rosie appears, a little shaken up, but none the worse for wear. As we hightail out of the airport we learn our first lesson: don't have the sole woman of the group carry all the chalk for the week. A large bag of white powdery stuff tends to raise suspicions in Cuba.

A casual two-hour drive lands us in the idyllic town of Viñales, home to the bulk of Cuba's amazing limestone crags. What little beta we could glean back home all pointed to Viñales as the spot to be, and for good reason. Renting a room in someone's home is the most economical way to reside while in Cuba. Our 'casa particular' is an incredible old coffee plantation surrounded by fruit trees and enough flowers to be a botanical garden. The house is owned by Edgar, who is also a local climber and will serve as our invaluable tour guide and source of information for the week. Unfortunately, the Communist party officials in Viñales have recently declared that no 'casa particular' can house more than 2 foreigners at any time. No big deal for Clay and Rosie who easily find another room to rent at the other end of town. For Andy, Rob, and I, however, somebody is going to be odd man out. Our brilliant solution is to have one of us sleep in the van, which will be parked on a side road each night. Fear rears its head again.

Day one has us at Cueva Larga, a wild slot canyon that is an easy 20-minute hike from Edgar's house. The climbing is characterized by short technical slabs, along with a few slightly overhanging jug routes housed by a gash in the rock that is about 100 yards deep, 100 feet high, and no more than 15 feet wide. After climbing a couple of short 5.10ish routes, I start on another fun looking warm-up. Forty feet

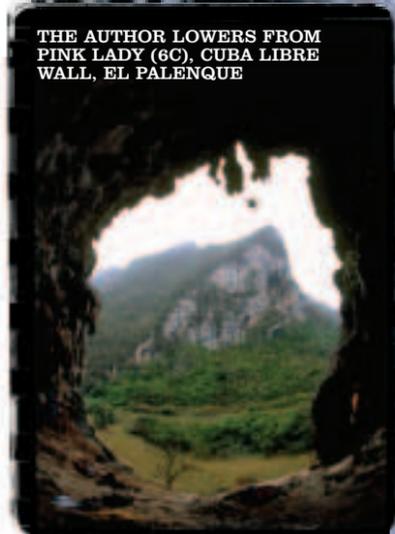
into the climb I am pulling up rope to clip when the perfect jug that my left hand is wrapped around suddenly explodes. As I am hurtling towards the ground (and certain injury or even death), the fear of 'no-such-thing-as-search-and-rescue' is at the forefront of my mind. Being medi-vaced to a Cuban hospital was one of the things on my most feared list for this climbing trip, but unfortunately it looks like my fear is about to become my reality. Believe me, even though Michael Moore might say the Cuban healthcare system is better than ours, you don't want to test his theory. A perfect belay from Rob keeps me off the deck. After quick inspection, and finding that I can still feel all of my limbs, we ascertain that I've got a cut in the back of my head and my elbow looks like it's got a softball inside of it. Not the best, but I'll live.

The rest of the day has me on belay duty as Rob, Clay and Rosie climb some more excellent routes in the cave before heading over to the dead vertical crimp festival found at the Yunta Wall. Although the temps are hot and the wall is in the sun, a slight breeze keeps things reasonable. The fact that there is absolutely no boot rubber on any of the holds - absolutely nothing is polished - adds to the enjoyment level of the climbs.

The climbing in Viñales is unlike anything we have ever done before. One of the standout walls of the area, Cueva de Cabeza la Vaca has everything from a 40-foot tall cave requiring dead-horizontal climbing to the wall's premier line, the Wasp Factory, which offers 110-feet of overhanging moves on crimps, jugs, and out-of-this-world tufas that you can stand on, bear-hug, chimney behind, and even ride like a horse. Fear of dying from stings was in the forefront of all our minds as hundreds of wasps flew in and out of holes across the wall. After acclimating to the steepness of the wall, and realizing that the wasps really weren't all that interested in us, we settled down for a great day of climbing. Stacked with routes in the 5.12 and 5.13 range, the wall is not ideal for the beginner. Though the few 5.10's on the far right side make the area a reasonable choice for everyone.

Adding to the mystique of the zone, the back of the steep cave has a tunnel burrowed through the entire mountain. A five-minute walk through the tunnel (headlamp required) ends in an entirely different valley, overlooking vast tobacco fields. Though only a short distance from the front side of Viñales, this neighboring valley seems like worlds

THE AUTHOR LOWERS FROM PINK LADY (6C), CUBA LIBRE WALL, EL PALENQUE



THE NEIGHBORING VALLEY SEEMS LIKE WORLDS AWAY AS THE ONLY BUILDINGS SEEN ARE THE THATCH-ROOFED BARNES USED FOR DRYING THE ABUNDANT TOBACCO LEAVES.





“BELIEVE ME, EVEN THOUGH MICHAEL MOORE MIGHT SAY THE CUBAN HEALTHCARE SYSTEM IS BETTER THAN OURS, YOU DON’T WANT TO TEST HIS THEORY.”



VIÑALES PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

GOOD MORNING HAVANA! THE STREETS OF CUBA WAKE UP

away as the only buildings seen are the thatch-roofed barns used for drying the abundant tobacco leaves. Just outside of the tunnel lies a vivid blue and grey swath of bullet stone, 100-feet high, that offers up primarily vertical routes on crisp crimps with the occasional overhanging bulge, a stark contrast to the insane angle of Cueva de Cabeza la Vaca.

After spending 2 days getting thoroughly worked at Cueva de Cabeza la Vaca, we head to Cuba’s “big wall”, La Costalenera, a 20-minute drive from Viñales. Our jaws drop as we park beneath the massive wall. Nearly 500-foot tall and overhanging the entire way, La Costalenera is the least visited area in Viñales, due to its comparatively committing nature. The two standout lines at La Costalenera are Have a Cigar and Mucho Pumpito. When inquiring about climbing in Cuba, I was told by Jim Donini that Mucho Pumpito was “the pumpiest 5.10 in the world”. Big words from a man not known for overstating a climb’s stiffness. After a warm up pitch of steep 5.9, Mucho Pumpito rears back to an angle normally reserved for routes well into the 5.12 range. However, because every single hold is a handlebar that you could use as a pullup bar, the grade remains remarkably pedestrian. After overgripping said jugs for 80 feet, I start to feel the pull of the ground some 250 feet below me and soon find myself begging Rob to “Take!” My bruised ego recovers only after reminding myself that many climbers, much stronger than I, have failed to onsight the line.

Clay works for a certain climbing equipment in Salt Lake City, a fact that means he gets a smoking good deal on gear. Unfortunately, it seems he forgot this minor detail and brought a rope that appears to have caught more than its healthy share of whippers. Three pitches up the consistently overhanging Have A Cigar and Clay is seriously pondering the haggard state that his rope is in. The crux fourth pitch climbs out an insane roof section steep enough that it would fit right in at Maple’s Pipedream or the Red’s Motherlode. The only difference is that this roof is 400 feet off the deck. While 5.12 is all supposed to climb the same, it’s obvious that gravity is pulling harder on Clay than normal as he fears his rope could snap and send him spiraling 400 feet to the deck below. Clay delicately makes his way through the pitch, doing his best to make sure his rope avoids the knife-like tufas. Fortunately, the tattered rope gets Clay and Rosie safely back to the ground. The next day a lucky Cuban farmer gave the worn out rope a happy new home. Even today there is a horse or cow tied up to that farmer’s tree using Clay’s old cord. Recycling at its best.

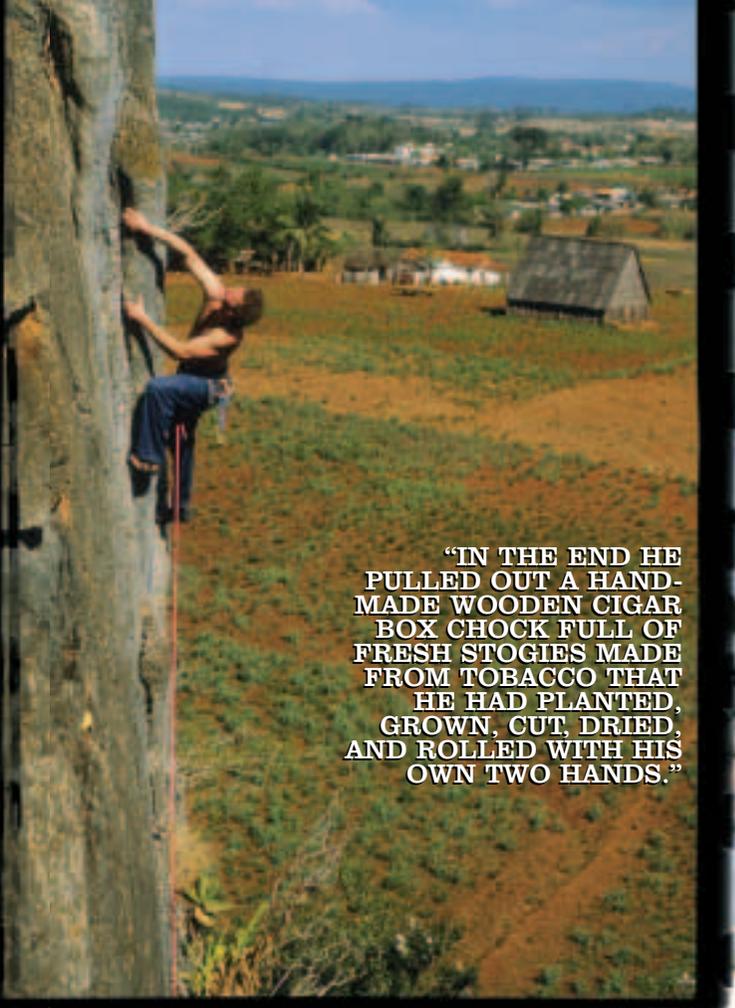
As word of Cuba’s amazing scenery has gotten out, tourists from around the world have begun to journey to the amazing Viñales valley. But, with more people and easier access comes the increased risk of gumbies killing themselves. On one of our last days in Cuba, a “guide” is belaying his pretty young English tourist who is obviously not experienced at climbing. As the route traverses up from left to right, the girl’s toprope inexplicably comes unhooked from the anchors. Watching from a route nearby, we look on in horror as she continues to climb up, oblivious to the fact that she is anchored only by the luck that her rope is draped over a tufa with a bush on top of it. As she nears the top of the climb, we clip her rope back into two opposed ‘biners’, tell her guide to take, and try not to throw up when we realize how close we came to witnessing somebody die.

Perhaps every American’s greatest fear when visiting Cuba is the fear of getting busted. It’s on all of our minds, but nobody wants to talk about it. Before we left Viñales, we had befriended the farmer whose land we walked across most days to get to the climbing. Each morning he would greet us with a warm smile and free reign on his abundant fruit supply. It seemed like the least we could do was offer him our used ropes to use on his farm. The ingenuity of the Cuban people is simply amazing, and we knew that our old ropes would soon be made into bridles, hammocks, and

ROSIE CAHOON ON ESCABIOSIS (5.11C)
ON THE JARUNQUINO WALL



THIS IS CUBA! ROB PIZEM, IMMERSIVE IN AN
UNMISTAKABLY CUBAN LANDSCAPE, CLIMBS
RANAS PELVIS (6C+), GUAJIRO ECOLOGIO



**“IN THE END HE
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FARMER MANUELA, VIÑALES VALLEY

even saddle pads. As prideful as he was creative, our farmer friend was determined to pay something for the ropes — and the more we resisted his offers, the more bent he was on giving us something. Our insistence that his hospitality had been more than enough did nothing to deter him. In the end he pulled out a hand-made wooden cigar box chock full of fresh stogies made from tobacco that he had planted, grown, cut, dried, and rolled with his own two hands. I thought Andy was going to cry he was so happy. Given that Rob, Andy and I were all on the same flight home to Denver, I only knew that I didn't want any part of Andy in the airport. As we tried to convince him that the cigars were certainly not worth getting arrested over, Andy just smiled and told us that even if he “had to keester them” he was getting those precious cigars home.

They say that facing your fears is actually good for you. So when you're pondering where to head on that next climbing vacation, contemplate Cuba. It's cheaper and closer than Thailand or Europe, the stone is amazingly good, and the people are incomparably friendly. If you go, you won't be disappointed. You're certain to return with sore tips, incredible memories, and the guarantee that you'll get the opportunity to look your fears square in the eye — and then clip a nice fat bolt and forget all about them. **UC**