

THE CLIMBING LIFE

Outed by The Wall Street Journal

FOR THE PAST EIGHT YEARS I've been carrying on a secret affair—one that I know could result in imprisonment and a heavy fine. But I'd fallen for Cuba and its Karst limestone hard.

My mother was born and raised in Cuba, and on my father's side, my great grandfather's cousins included a former president, Mario Menocal García, and Cuba's most famous classical painter, my namesake, Armando Menocal. I remember playing on a balcony in Old Habana as a six-year-old and

being called "el Americanito" by the waiters at the corner cafe. After a forty-year absence I returned at last to find my family roots—and to check out a mountain region, Viñales, that my *Lonely Planet* guidebook described as a "miniature Yosemite, with the most spectacular scenery in all Cuba." As a longtime Yosemite climber, I'd doubted that possibility, but could not resist taking a look.

In the early morning mist, Viñales' 1,000-foot, overhanging limestone cliffs, bulging with tufas and hung with stalactites, rose above the lush greens of palms and tobacco and coffee fields. A ballsy prospect dawned on me: Would it be possible to climb this unique architecture through its roofs, to link its alcoves up to higher, bigger grottos? Hooked, I returned four times that first year alone, unable to sate my appetite for these walls of sculpted caverns.

Since our first ascents in 1999, the Viñales valley has

been declared a U.N. World Heritage site, made a national park and a destination for ecotourism. The Cubans we taught to climb have become local guides. It all should be idyllic: perfect for the young Cuban climbers, for the park officials and for most of the foreign visitors. For me and for the other American climbers, there is one problem, though, with the arcane name of the "1917 Trading with the Enemy Act," that makes it illegal for Americans to spend money in Cuba, effectively prohibiting travel, with the maximum penalty of a ten-year prison term and a \$250,000 fine.

Most of us are willing, clandestinely, to run that risk for the climbing alone. But as Jonathan Miles wrote in *Advent's Journal* after one trip, "Climbing in Cuba is as much about Cuba as it is about climbing." I was captured, as well, by the island's in-your-face vitality: the blunt, witty, spontaneous, resilient, openhearted Cubans I met; the rich sounds of salsa, timba and reggaeton playing on the streets; and the voices of people shouting every detail of their daily emotions and calamities across the courtyards. Not for the timid or bashful.

As I continued to visit this paradise, the fear of prosecution seemed like working my way up a big wall, slowly adjusting to a vertical world. Over time, it became second nature. I ginked ecotourists to my favorite areas, wrote articles about Cuba, talked to journalists, sold pictures to magazines and newspapers and even created a website, www.cuba-climbing.com, nailing the date of every first ascent I and other Americans had done. Now, let me try to deny that I had been there!

I guess I thought I was immune—until one early morning in November 2006. I was checking my email, when the phone rang. "Armando, it's Jason. I'm in DC on some work, calling you from a street corner. I was walking along and saw the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. It had a photo of a climber on the cover! I couldn't believe it. I bought it, and the article's about you—you and the Cuban climbers!"

While he spoke, the first incoming email arrived. It was from the journalist, telling me

that the article was published and attaching a copy. Of course, I knew that a story was coming out. But I wasn't expecting the dramatic color photo of Cuban Josué Milla, or the bold, front-page headline, "Cuban Rock Climbers Inspired by Foreigners Irk Castro Regime." The story was that young Cubans, "schooled by an influx of foreign rock climbers, have turned [Viñales] into an extreme-sport mecca," and as a result, "rock climbing has emerged as an improbable political battleground between the government and young Cubans eager to embrace the latest foreign fashions." And the foreigner who was responsible: me. It detailed my fifteen or more climbing trips since the late 1990s. I was busted, in flagrante delicto.

Jason's whereabouts jumped back into my consciousness. Washington DC, the US Government, the Trading with the Enemy Act. Suddenly I had a more immediate worry than how the Cuban government might react. Then—I can't make this up—my computer dinged with another incoming message. From: "US Treasury Department," the government agency that prosecutes violations of the Trading with the Enemy Act. Subject: "Civil Penalties." I may have blurted, "Thanks—good-bye," to Jason as I hung up.

This was nothing like being scared on rock. My breath rushed from my lungs as if I'd had a blow to the chest. I'd felt this way only once before, when I was told in Viñales that agents from State Security in Cuba were asking questions about me. Now, it was the US government.

Before I clicked on the "Civil Penalties"

message, I recalled what my Cuban climbing partner had told me after the visit of the Cuban agents: "It's a shame to have to worry about this when all you want to do is climb." I took a deep breath and opened it.

It was a monthly report of fines against other people caught violating the Trading with the Enemy Act.

I hope I'm not on next month's list.

—Armando Menocal, Wilson, Wyoming