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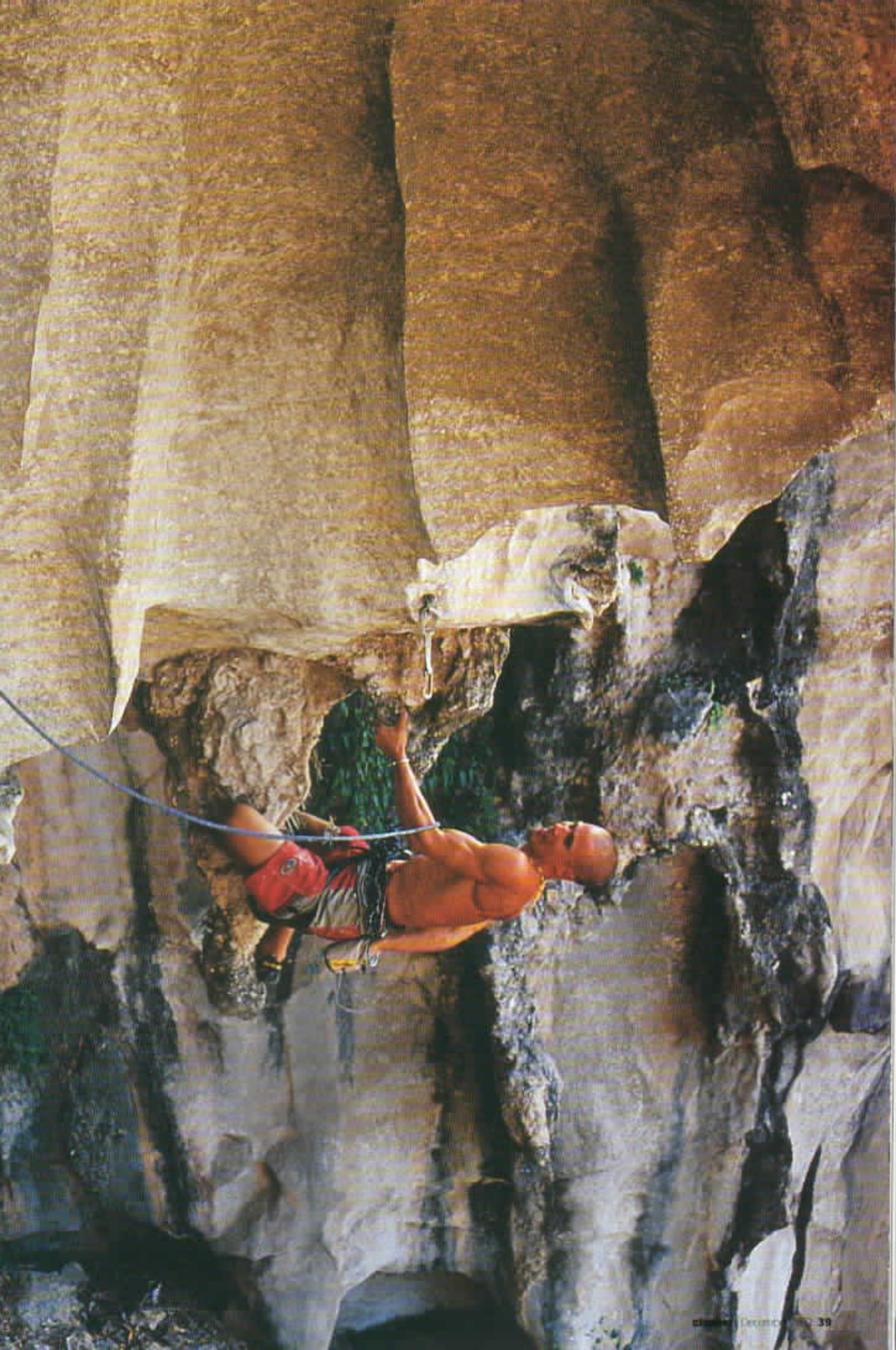




The Young Men and the Sea

Whatever you think of its politics, Cuba remains one of the most romantic climbing destinations on Earth. The island may be caught in a time warp but the climbing certainly ain't, as **Mike Robertson**, our answer to Ernest Hemingway, discovered...

Photography Mike Robertson



Opening Spread: Neil Gresham on the now entirely free first pitch of **Have a Cigar** (8a), Costanera.

Right: The boy finally bagged it on his penultimate day. Tim Emmett on the first ascent of **One Inch Punch** (8b), Cueva de Cabeza la Vaca, the hardest route in the Caribbean. The route overhangs some 60ft. After nine days' effort Tim went to warm up on the moves and suddenly found himself clipping the chains...

Opposite: Seb Grieve riding his **Moscow Mule** (7b) Cuba Libre Crag.

The wasp took me at the ninth bolt placement. I'd already dangled up there on ridiculously steep ground for over three hours, drilling off hooks, threads, nuts, whatever I could hang myself on. And, with what looked like just one more runner to gain a belay position on the house-sized tufa snaking out into space behind me, the nest appeared. Small and not so alarming – unless, that is, you took into account the twenty or so orange and black beasts, their long, wiry legs trembling and gyrating in time with the breeze-blown movements of their lofty apartment.

We made the decision, Neil and me. And the stick was duly hauled up. But at this point, I wasn't privy to two things; the sheer speed of the colourful insects, and the intrinsic strength of the tiny nests themselves. We got set, with Neil ready for rapid belaying action below, and myself, clumsily armed for battle with a 3-metre stick and a somewhat brief pair of shorts.

OK, you live and learn, Neil lowers me, as blood seeps slowly from my left eyelid, and we sit and contemplate a later re-match with the flying circus above. Yeah, this is Cuba. And this is war.

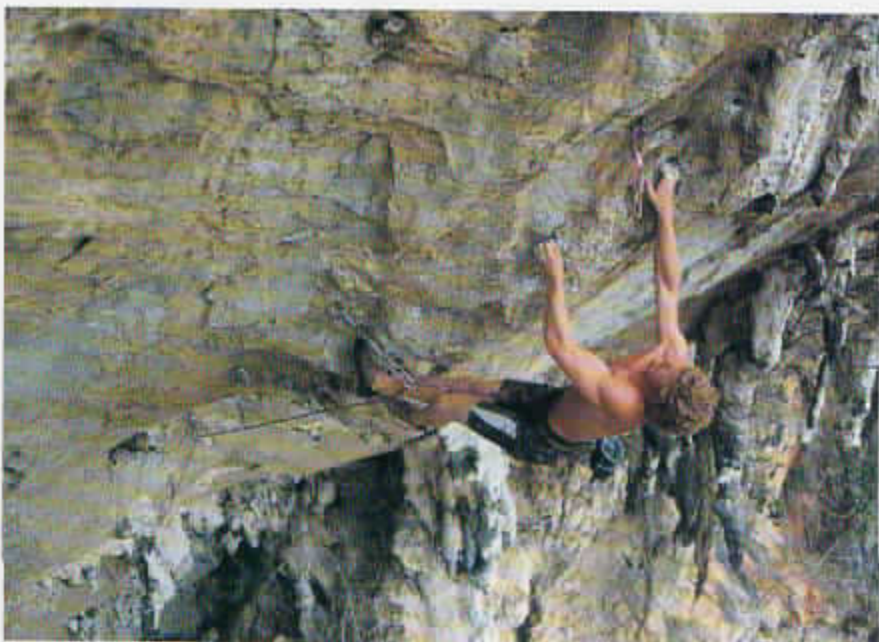
In Fidel Castro's Cuba, nothing is entirely usual. From the smallest green hummingbird to the colossal, lumbering mogotes – massive limestone humpbacks dragging their cacti tendrils across the bright terracotta soil of the island, attendant tobacco drying barns bearing silent testament to the leaf-fermenting process of Cuba's most famous export. It is a land of consequences, of anomalies, and of bizarre extremities. Hemingway discovered the richness of both the people and the land when he lived here; Graham Greene visit-

ed, and made us smile with *Our Man in Havana*, the story of a covert weapon contrived from vacuum cleaner parts. Yet, for theatricality, we merely need to glance at Castro's regular forays on Cuban television; here the grand maestro appears in his element, every crease of his face serving to impress his rhetoric upon his captive audience.

Yes; in Cuba, the goalposts are constantly shifting, the taxes awaiting, the information slow to arrive, the rations always here sometime tomorrow. At least eighty per cent of Cubans are impoverished, yet they remain passionate, vibrant. You can see it in their faces when they play their music, you can see it in their bodies when they dance, and you can see it in their smiles when they climb. It's the look of freedom.

Take 2. Neil has donned more clothes than anyone in the simmering Caribbean heat could normally endure; two pairs of trousers, socks, a rain jacket with hood, and a mosquito net over his face. He's sweating. The aim is to unhinge the wasp nest whilst they're unawares (is that possible?). We're new to this game and, in a few hours from now, a little too late, we're going to be told about a much better way to deal with our wasp problem...

So Neil climbs to the ninth runner, the final moves on our future line barred by something the size and shape of a tiny, flaccid balloon. The fellas are still



The Viñales Crag

Following is a selection of routes from the Viñales region. Four crags: Milenio Wall, Cueva de Cabeza la Vaca, Cuba Libre, and Costanera.

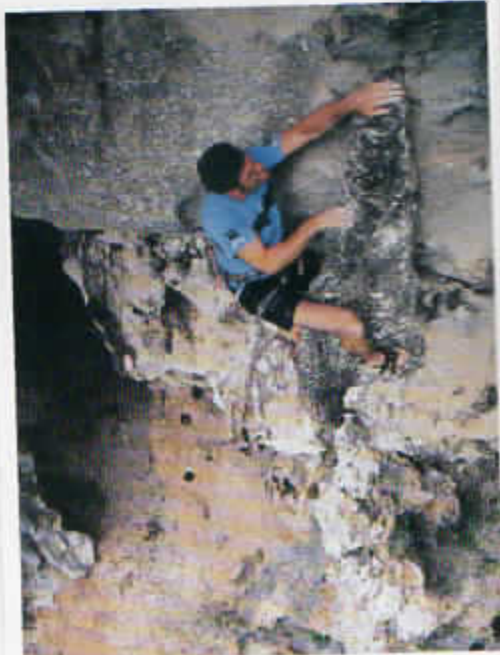
The information currently held on the cubaclimbing.com website gives US grades; plans are about to change Cuban routes to French sport grades, and these have been given here.

Routes are generally batted with a 60m rope taken for granted. If in doubt, trail a second rope.

Milenio Wall

Close to Viñales, and exceptionally picturesque

- 1. Guao, Guano y Espina** (6a, 6a+, 6a+) Fernando Pauleta, Carlos Pineda, David Ryan. A long classic, of its grade. 'Guao' is Cuba's version of poison ivy. It hurts; watch out for it!
- 2. Milenio** (6a, 6b+, 6c+/7a+) Vitalio Echazabal, Anibal Fernández. Take a full rack. 'Vity' has since made himself scarce in Spain.
- 3. Huevos Verde con Jamon** (6b+, 6c+) P1: Carlos Pineda, Armando Menocal, P2: Vitalio Echazabal, Anibal Fernández. Watch out for the wasps!
- 4. Filo de Cuchilla** ('Razor's Edge') (6a+, 6a) David Ryan. The dominating grey arête.



Seb Grieve on the first pitch of his very own **Captain Hook** (7a), Cuba Libre Crag.



Photo Mike Robertson. Topo Alan James



there, staking their turf, shooting the shit. Long yellow legs everywhere. Final preps, and the long stick is hauled, unfurls itself.

"You ready, then?" come the words, down to me:

"Always, for you," goes back.

"Here we go," says Neil. "And when I say down, I mean..."

Of course, merry hell ensues, with the fellas bouncing repeatedly off Neil's combined specs and mozzie net. No-one wants to give up their home without a fight, and these insects are designed to do just that. I drop Neil to the foot of the crag in rapid time, and we look up while the wasps attempt to regroup. Ten metres to the left of us, a gothic and grossly intimidating cave sprouts no less than a thousand or so similar nests: all small, but all fiercely defended.

"Why do they want to live on *this* route?" he asks me.

Craig Luebben started it, of course, along with U.S. Access Fund founder Armando Menocal. Craig, the wily Colorado *R&I* correspondent, decided to brave the US embargo and pay a visit to Cuba in 1999, putting up, amongst other things, the classic overhanging line of *Cuba Libre* (F7a+). Thus Cuba's climbing history (excepting some ancient pegs left by a pair of anonymous Spanish climbers twenty-odd years ago) started right there. It's a bit like *Right Wall* discovered here last decade. And be assured of this: the surface is still barely scratched, the equipping completed so far leaving vast areas of potential unexplored. The countless *mogotes* are manifest, the number of conceivable routes unimaginable.

What of the locals? As you'd expect, communism has had a negative effect on climbing, specifically the fundamentals, such as equipment and travel.

Indeed, the logistics of Havana climbers travelling the 150km to *Vinales* are more cumbersome than you'd imagine – to leave your home province is to forfeit your food rations, as well as tackle the journey via a series of tortuous lorry rides, sharing with anything up to fifty other folk. When you add to that a Cuban wage, which, even allowing for the Peso exchange rate, may well

Cueva de Cabeza la Vaca

Tufa central, and steep! The F8b overhangs by 60ft.

- 1. Wasp Factory** (7b) Neil Gresham, Mike Robertson. The scene of the Brit's first tumble in the jungle. A magnificent line.
- 2. The Colony** (8a+) Neil Gresham. 12m, and bloody desperate at the top! Lower off twice from the top of the crag – it's big.
- 3. One-Inch Punch** (8b) Tim Emmett. Tremendous; the 'Rose & Vampire' of Cuba. It's



Photo Mike Robertson, Tom-Kar James

be just a few Dollars a month (a Cuban brain surgeon reputedly earns a mere \$18 a month, and a teacher about \$8), and you begin to see the scale of the problem. Step up once more Armando Menocal: a retired lawyer with his finger firmly on the pulse, and the ability to talk some of the U.S. climbing companies into sharing some of their wares with the Cubans. Amongst those companies are Prana, Boreal, La Sportiva, Sterling, Petzl and the massive Nike, and long may it continue.

The second affliction facing the local climbers is the in-built desire amongst Cubans to get out of Cuba; one or two of them, having been officially invited to Spain to climb, arrived in Europe and simply vanished. The only Cuban climber thus far to travel and make the return is Havana strongman Anibal Fernández, a climber very clearly in two minds about Cuba's prospects, and what the future holds for him. This situation is the norm rather than the exception: everywhere you go in Cuba, you'll meet people who would rather be somewhere else. For us fortunate and comparatively wealthy visitors, the island is paradise: for most Cubans, the lack of



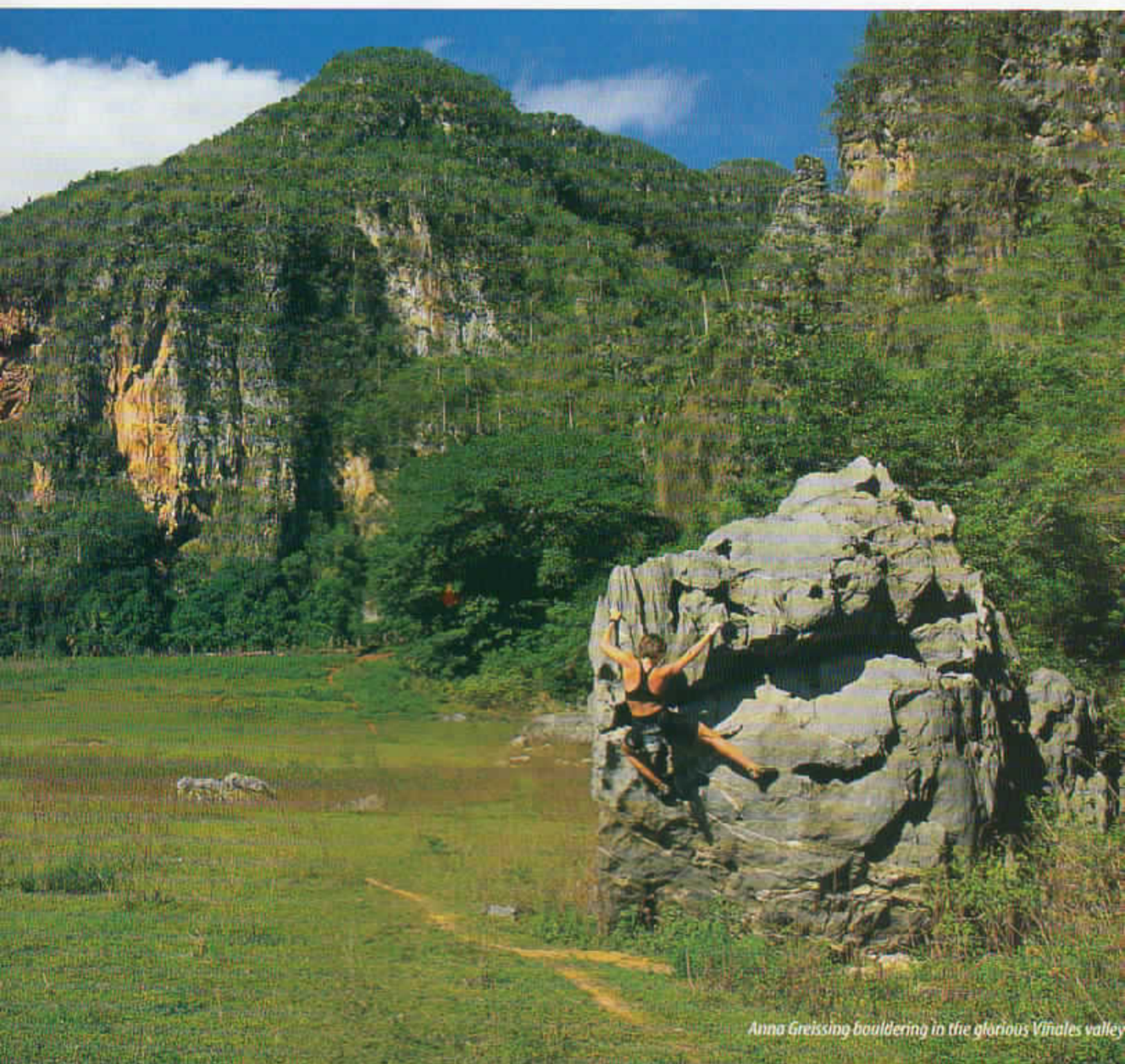
Photo Mike Robertson, Tom-Kar James



Cuba Libre

Absolutely dripping with tufa! Very overhanging, but with a lot of unexpected rests.

- 1. One Percent** (6c) Cameron Cross. A veritable weaver!
- 2. Pollo del Mar** (7a) Grant Farquhar. Very, very exposed. Take a second rope to abseil off.
- 3. Medico de Salsa** (7a+) Grant Farquhar. A harder start to previous route.
- 4. Pink Lady** (6c) Mike Robertson. Ridiculous territory for the grade.
- 5. Moscow Mule** (7b) Seb Grieve. Lots of sneaky rests on this one.
- 6. Captain Hook** (7a, 7b+) Seb Grieve. Magnificent first pitch, reachy second...
- 7. Our Man in Havana** (7b) Grant Farquhar. Link this with first pitch of Captain Hook to give the best two-pitch outing on the crag.
- 8. Cuba Libre** (5+, 6a+, 7a+) Craig Luebben, George Blackieck. The original classic. A thoroughly wild top pitch!
- 9. The Rum Diaries** (7b+) Charlie Woodburn. Gives Cuba Libre what it might have been looking for – sustained moves for the grade. Long, and wicked!



Anna Greissing bouldering in the glorious Vinales valley

money and the bureaucratic repression makes them more inclined towards the western world.

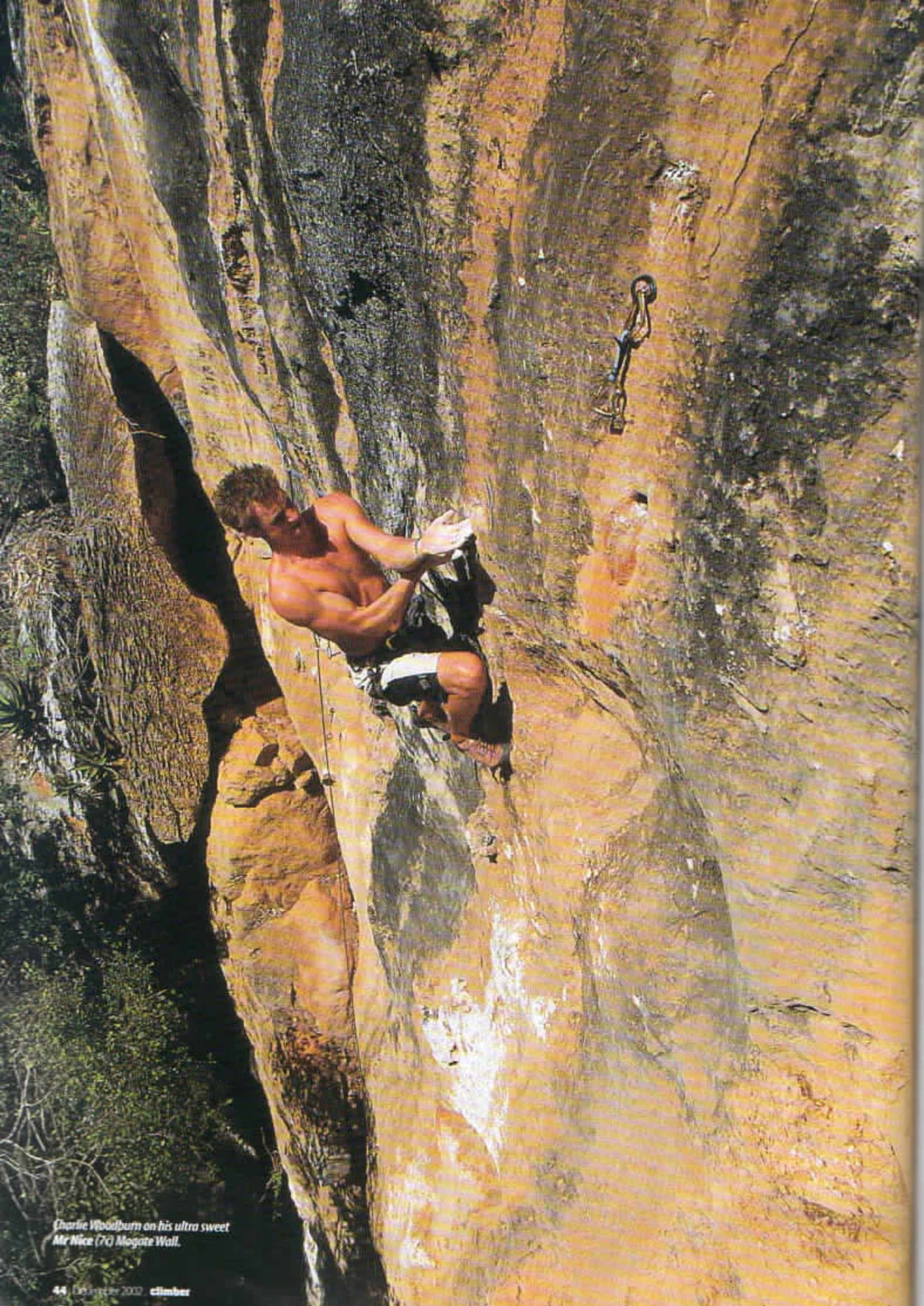
The wasps finally gave up their unequal struggle, as we smeared the local farmer's cyanide-based dust on the site of their nest. The *guajiros* (peasant farmers) have much of this in their sheds – much of Cuba is relentless jungle, and they need many weapons in their armoury.

The Wasp Factory (7b) was thus born, and became an instant hit. A long, insanely steep line of tufas, with three separate cruxes. And our team were now firmly in the groove. Seb and Grant strode across the valley to *El Palenque* and set to work on the glorious *Cuba Libre* crag, and the rest of us... we did the same, and anywhere else we could cut a trail to. The drill was booked three days in advance, and the routes fell thick and fast; I managed a 25-foot fall off sketchy hooks with drill on shoulder in order to top out on a brand-new 55-metre face route with Austrian climber Anna Greissing (*Jungle Warfare* 6b+, 6c), and Tim set about the mean, bulging wall to the right of *Wasp Factory*, to emerge, after eight consecutive days of diarrhoea (and a significantly lighter bloke) with the magnificent *One Inch Punch*

– the Caribbean's hardest route, at F8b. Neil added a powerful top pitch to the *Factory* – *The Colony* (8a+), and removed the aid/log start from Luebben's classic first pitch of *Have A Cigar* at the brilliant *Costanera* crag just to the north; now a brutal 8a indeed, and one which Luebben himself has since voiced much praise for. Charlie found the equivalent of Devon's *Ferocity Wall* in Cuba (although it proved to be much, much longer than we thought it'd be), and drilled the easiest line on the crag – *Mr Nice*, at 7c... Back at the 45-degree *Cuba Libre* Crag, the routes fell with the regularity of the cocktails themselves; Grant jiggled precariously across the tremendously exposed *Medico de Salsa* (7a+), Seb conquered *Moscow Mule* (7b) and the well-positioned 2-pitch *Captain Hook*



Anna Greissing on the first ascent of *Jungle Warfare* (6c).



*Charlie Woodburn on his ultra sweet
Mr Nice (7C) Mogote Wall.*

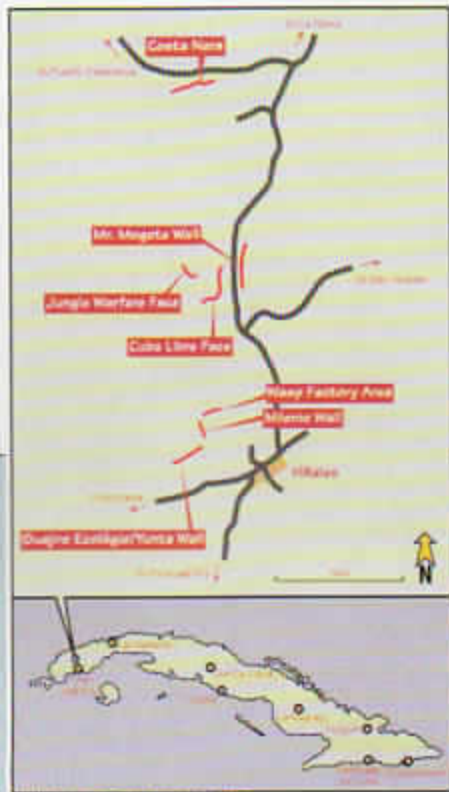
Costa Nera

A stunning multi-pitch venue, with perfect rock. Take a second rope for abseiling off the routes.

- 1. Wish You Were Here** (6c+) Cameron Cross, Craig Luebben. A full rack is essential.
- 2. Mucho Pumpito** (6a, 6a+) Cameron Cross, Craig Luebben, David Ryan. The second pitch is dumbfounding, taking an exposed, overhanging 30m arete on huge buckets. Possibly the best pitch of its grade in the world.
- 3. Pssst** (5b+, 6a+, 7a) Cameron Cross, Craig Luebben. Shares the second pitch with Mucha.
- 4. Have a Cigar** (6a, 6c, 6c) Craig Luebben, Cameron Cross. A classic. The third pitch is stupendous. You can avoid the desperate first pitch by...
- 5. Pablo's Squirmfest** (6a) David Ryan. ...using this fine little pitch.
- 6. Flyin' Hyena** (5.5+, 6c, 6c+, 7a+) Cameron Cross, Craig Luebben, Armando Merino. An superb name for the best multi-pitch route in Cuba; monstrous, and absolutely breathtaking. Starts up a massive, Kazari-style vine. Five pitches of utter perfection.
- 7. Chicken Run** (6c+) Anibal Fernández, David Ryan. The huge and brilliant corner system.

(7b, 7b+) to the right, and Charles did the original class act of *Cuba Libre* itself no harm whatsoever when he ground-upped a long and superb direct start to the finale, at 7b+.

And then, quite suddenly, we found ourselves talking of airport buses and goodbyes. Glorious, idyllic Cuba; unimaginable sun-swept beaches, tufa-ridden rock, crazy, passionate natives, the softest touch of truest heaven. Yes, I think we may need to return. ☺



COMMUNICATIONS: Reasonable in the capital, with phones and one or two spacious internet cafes. You might even find your WAP phone works in Havana. When in Viñales, however... just forget about it.

MUST HAVES: Much DEET (and then some). Diarrhoea tablets, antihistamine cream, Savlon, and stomach settlers. Bring all your slide film, camera spares and old-style head torch batteries, plus your bolts, drill and 240v charger.

FURTHER READING: *Lonely Planet - Cuba*; *Fodor's guide to Cuba*; *Our Man in Havana*, by Graham Greene; and the superb cubaclimbing.com

WITH THANKS TO: Mountain Hardware, Five Ten, Black Diamond, Powerbar and Wild Country.

(Note: trip consisted of British team of Tim Emmett, Grant Farquhar, Neil Gresham, Seb Grieve, Mike Robertson and Charlie Woodburn.)



Costa Nera

Photo Mike Robertson, Topo Alex James

CUBA: In Brief

FOUND: In the Caribbean, with a mere 100 miles separating the island from Florida's coastline. Mexico is just to the west, and Jamaica lies a little way to the south.

NOTED FOR: Cigars, sugar cane, the theatrical Fidel Castro and the ridiculous embargo forced upon the country by the U.S. Add to this the percussionists and saxophonists, the blazing sunshine and the idyllic beaches. And, of course, the glorious Karst limestone of the Viñales (Bin-aah-les) valley...

POLITICS: Communist. Cuba is currently under the leadership of the ageing Castro – a persuasive politician with blanket control and a presidency dating back to 1959.

VISAS: Known as 'tourist cards' by the Cuban authorities. Available from the Cuban embassy at 167 High Holborn, London WC1V 6PA (09065 266607), for £15. Don't forget it, because you won't board the flight in the UK without it.

CURRENCY: Welcome to the minefield! A combination of Pesos (the local currency), and US Dollars (usual for tourists, although Pesos can sometimes be used by visitors. The diversity in prices (\$1 = 25 pesos) will confound you. Simply work it out as you go along.

CLIMATE: Yep: hot! Like Jamaica, a tropical oceanic climate gives much heat and humidity, with distinct wet and dry seasons. The island has never recorded a freezing temperature; leave your duvet at home.

BEST TIME TO GO: Quite possibly between Christmas and the end of March, when the weather proves slightly more palatable (cooler) for us soft-fingered Euros. The wet season runs from May to October, and should be avoided (like the plague).

CAPITAL: Havana (*La Habana*). Full of people, hustlers (*jineteros*), and things to gape at. The old town provides the obvious tourist attractions; try just wandering aimlessly at some point, though, because you're likely to find something a little... different.

GETTING THERE: Try either Cubana Airlines (cheap, but with a poor safety record), Air France (fly from either Manchester or Heathrow to Paris, then direct to Havana), or Iberia (London - Madrid - Havana). An Air France flight will be upwards of £460.

WHERE TO STAY: It's got to be Viñales! Talk to Oscar Jaime, on: laermita@laermita.co.cu (mark for his attention, it's not his computer), or write to him at Adele Azcuy N.43, Viñales 22400, Pinar Del Rio, Cuba (write in Spanish, if you can). Cater for the expense of 520 or so per person a day, including meals (the Cuban dictator 'relieves' Oscar of most of this, in *Casa Particulares* taxes).

TRANSPORT: It's best (and much cheaper) to manage without your own wheels, both in Havana and getting to/around Viñales itself. Use a combination of taxis and buses, and – with the aid of your thumb – cars, trucks, horse carriages, motorcycle sidecars, tractors and oxen.