



An unimaginable adventure in Cuba

• Every year, thousands of climbers from various countries travel to different locations on the planet, intent on facing challenges and opening up new routes • Very few people are aware that the island has great potential for the sport of rock climbing

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY AHMED VELAZQUEZ

I wanted the chance to participate in an adventure that people didn't know took place in Cuba: climbing. Whenever I had heard people talk about the sport, I always associated it with Europe, Asia, North American or countries with great snow-covered mountains.

But I never imagined that our country had so much to offer those worldwide enthusiasts who like to enjoy the abundant scenery, pure air, heights and the massive dose of adrenaline that comes from being attached to ropes, harnesses and an assortment of climbing accessories.

The history of the sport of scaling in Cuba is relatively young. Isolated groups belonging to Cuba's Speleology Society (SEC) had previously been on the rope climbing expeditions in Viñales and the Escaleras de Jaruco that are part of the training.

But it wasn't until 1997 that conditions were created to develop the sport in Cuba. That year Alberto Morales, president of the Colombian Mountaineering Federation, came to the island to teach a climbing course; he left behind the first large route in Viñales, Pinar del Rio, western Cuba.

Later, some well-known U.S. scaling specialists like Skip Harper, Craig Luebben and Armando Menocal came to a very wise conclusion: If there are routes and conditions for climbing all over the Caribbean, why not in Cuba?

So they contacted the Cuban Speleology Society — the organization grouping all the island's climbers — and via the society, began a climbing attempt with a small group of young



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people interested in the sport. In a brief but comprehensive reconnaissance of the island's perimeter, they discovered Cuba's great geographical potential for climbing.

Viñales National Park, 200 kilometers from Havana, was chosen as the starting point to open new routes; there are currently some 100 available.

For people who have no idea about the sport, I should clarify that opening and securing routes requires double the preparation and responsibility, because the safety of subsequent climbers depends on those who initially open up the routes.

Cooperation among climbers is very important, as are prior safeguards in every section. To ascend, the sport's affiliates need to use their toes and even their fingertips.

CLIMBING ALONGSIDE THEM

Cubans who scale are ordinary students and workers who love rocks and crevices and making every movement precise; they love the tension of climbing to a specific height and the final satisfaction of dominating the heights accompanied by a huge adrenaline rush unimaginable to anyone that has never been alongside them.

That's how I first met young Havana resident Aníbal Fernández Cardoso, who has spent 10 out of his 22 years practicing climbing. As well as being president and member of the SEC's Lapiaz group, he's a mountain rescue instructor. In 2000, he was the first Cuban to satisfactorily graduate in the United States as a rock-climbing instructor-guide after attending a course at the EXUM Mountain Guides institute in Jackson, Wyoming. That mountain guides' company, the oldest and most experienced in the Americas, is located in the National Teton Park, the equivalent of the Alps on our continent.

Aníbal told me that after opening up the first routes on the island along with the U.S. "pioneers", when they returned home he began to publicize the island's potential in various specialist magazines, providing information for those who roam the world looking for new places to clamber.

"Specialists who have come here to climb say we have the best limestone rock in the whole of Latin America for this sport," affirms Aníbal.

Since then, climbers from all over the world have arrived, and

there's still much more to explore and mark out. People from Britain, France, Holland, Italy, Germany, Denmark, the United States, Spain, Australia...are witness to the benefits of our ecosystem.

"They have made a large contribution to our training and development as climbers," notes Aníbal, "every time they go back home they take back their experiences with us; they've also donated part of their climbing equipment."

Periodically, Aníbal gives courses for those interested in joining the adventurous sport, and he's happy with what's been achieved so far.

I shared the climbing experience with industrial design student Abel Pérez, plus José Luis Gómez and his girlfriend Yaneisi, a law student.

The most satisfied person who came on the adventure was Catalan Rosa Catalá, a vigorous, extremely happy agricultural worker; she has traveled to Cuba three times to climb with the group of young people. Rosa has been climbing for the last 13 years, scaling the heights in nearly 10 countries. Cuba means something indescribably special to her — she loves the country and will continue to visit.

And they are all well known in the town of Viñales.

WHERE TO CLIMB IN CUBA

Getting to Cuba is no problem for visitors, and they can easily find lodgings in any three-, four- or five-star hotel, though it's advisable to make a prior reservation. Motels and campsites are also available.

The best climbing region is the western province of Pinar del Río, primarily in Viñales Valley's National Park; the Sierra de los Organos also offers plenty of space and many routes.

Other ideal climbing locations are the mountains linking Habana and Matanzas provinces, and Escaleras de Jaruco, Tapaste municipality, Habana province; the Escambray mountain range in the central part of the island, which is a little more difficult to access; and the Sierra de Cubitas, an entire mountain range stretching from the southern coast of Santiago de Cuba to Baracoa near Camagüey in the East.

Keys such as Cayo Coco and the Isle of Youth also provide new places to scale.

Climbers are advised to bring their own sports equipment, as

this type of equipment cannot be rented, a result of the country's economic situation.

In case of emergencies, medical attention and communication is guaranteed throughout Cuba, except in very remote locations. Because this is a relatively new activity for our country, some tour operators don't have much information on it. We recommend that those interested get in touch with the Cuban Speleology Association or with the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment (CITMA) in order to coordinate the relevant permits for national park zones where climbing space is available. The best season for this activity is between the months of October and April when the island's climate Cuba is relatively cooler. Humidity is very high in Cuba, making the effects of the sun more noticeable, but climbers used to scaling in tropical climates will have no problem at any time of year.

Cuba's limestone is very hard and is mostly overhangs; streams and stalactites abound. Those who wish to come and explore new routes should bring stainless steel and titanium equipment and remember to respect the environment.

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