

Adventure

CLIMBING *By Jonathan Miles*

Cuba's Rocky Start

Outside of Havana, a revolution is taking hold, one route at a time. On belay, gringo.

AT DAWN IN VINALES, the children started singing. It was the Día de los Pioneros, when Cuba honors the nation's children — the next pioneers of the revolution. In the schools, pea-sized voices, broadcast over buzzy speakers, howled for socialismo, for revolución, for Fidel. To my untrained ears, jolted from sleep, it sounded as though I had awakened in Oz.

An hour later and a mile outside of town, a different sort of pioneering was getting under way. A dozen American climbers, together with 20 Cubans, were trailblazing routes on the thousand-foot limestone knolls, called *mogotes*, scaling pitch after pitch of virgin rock as the singing drifted up from the valley below.

Notable among them was Armando Menocal, 60, a Wyoming-based lawyer who moonlights for Exum Mountain Guides and is, not so coincidentally, the grandson of former Cuban president Mario García Menocal. Although he wasn't the first to climb here — in 1999, he discovered a few pitons caked in twenty years' worth of rust — Menocal is nonetheless Cuba's climbing pioneer nonpareil. "This area is so full of potential," he said as we bushwhacked through the woolly jungle that cloaks the Vinales valley. Our group was here to scout routes for a series of tours that Menocal will lead for Geographic Expeditions this fall. "I'd hate to put a number on what we've found, like maybe 5 percent," he went on, "but we've barely started exploring what's here."

What's here, in short, is this: 100 square miles of tobacco and malanga fields with soil the color of dried blood, scattered groves of coffee trees, and 25 or so humpbacked *mogotes* dripping with stalactites and tufa columns. For the chalk-handed set, the porous rock pro-

enture

A full-page photograph of a man with long hair, wearing a blue t-shirt, shorts, and a climbing harness, ascending a vertical limestone rock face. The rock is a mix of yellow and grey tones with visible vertical fissures. The climber is positioned in the lower half of the frame, reaching up with his right arm. The background shows some sparse vegetation on the left side.

Limestone cowboy:
Antibal Fernandez
Halfway through
putting up a new
5.11a route, called
Milenio, on Mogote
del Valle, near
Vinales.

vides holds that make even the steepest overhangs climbable, and indeed, more than 60 routes have been pioneered thus far. According to Al Read, Exum's president, it's "one of the last places where an intermediate can put up new routes," and for experts, there are long multipitch faces rated up to 5.12. As Menocal said, "It isn't hyperbole to assert that Cuba — just 90 miles and 43 years removed from the United States — "could become one of the finest climbing areas of the world."

A MINI YOSEMITE

Menocal didn't have climbing on his mind when he first returned to Cuba, in 1998, after a 40-year absence. He went to find those in his family who'd stayed through the revolution and its muddled aftermath. But a single phrase in an old Lonely Planet guide that touted the Viñales valley as "a miniature Yosemite" prompted him to make the three-hour drive there from Havana. "Viñales's *mogotes* don't tower over you the way El Cap does," he says. "But in scouting the walls, I found plenty of reasons to come back."

He returned, in fact, just two months later, after delivering a slide show on climbing in Havana. Armed with shoes, harnesses, and rope, and, as important, guidance and

inspiration, he wasn't after just virgin rock. Like a missionary, Menocal went seeking souls. Three years later, the evangelizing continues. Menocal has made about 25 converts, but it's not always easy. For the Cuban climbers, most of whom live in Havana, taking the overloaded and unreliable buses or hitchhiking to Viñales is just the first of their hassles. With the average monthly wage in Cuba hovering around \$10, forking over \$150 for a length of climbing rope isn't plausible. Nor can the climbers afford lodging; they bunk with hospitable families in Viñales, or in caves, where they cook their communal meals in a deep black iron kettle over an open fire.

For Americans, Cuba is obscenely cheap, but the stiff arm of the U.S. government is the primary snag. Federal law prohibits spending money in Cuba, effectively barring travel there, but — as you, your mother, and probably your dog know by now — hundreds of thousands of otherwise lawful members of our citizenry travel to Cuba via Mexico or Canada every year. The U.S. Treasury Department does, however, license travel for educational, cultural, and other purposes — which is how our group was in country scouting for Geographic Expeditions, whose "conservation tours" will stop at four national parks and wildlife preserves, but also in the *mogote*-studded Viñales valley for roped scrambles and optional climbs.

Rock is rock, it's true, but climbing in Cuba isn't like climbing in any other place. Its uniqueness extends far beyond the technical vagaries of holds and exposure. Climbing in Cuba is as much about Cuba as it is about climbing: It's about ascending amid the thumping bass lines wafting up from El Palenque, a bar/disco carved into the base of one of the *mogotes*, about stopping to watch a few innings of a game at Viñales's baseball diamond, about seeing the Patio del Decimista bar absolutely explode when the band starts, and most of all, about the Cubans themselves. "I've never been anyplace where I spent more time with the people, or where they're as easy to



Los vegueros:
Tobacco harvesters
west of Viñales.

meet," Menocal said. "It's in-your-face living, not for the timid or bashful." Cuba is poor, yes, but the drowsy gray torpor that gripped Soviet-bloc nations never touched the island. Which isn't to suggest that life in Castro's Cuba is all baseball, rum, and mambos — an unsuccessful attempt to reach Miami by raft looms in the past of at least one Cuban climber, and the father of another is serving six years in prison for vague political dissidence.

But there's a certain joy in rediscovering your country through the skeleton of its rock. On the morning after the Día de los Pioneros, Exum guide Dave Ryan tied Josué Millo, a lanky 27-year-old, into a harness for the first time. Unlike most of Viñales's residents, who paused from sweeping their porches to shake their heads at the Lycra-clad climbers passing by, Millo was eager to join them. Ryan figured he'd put Millo on a 35-foot 5.8 wall called the Guides' Route, but his instructions clashed with his broken Spanish. "On belay," he said, explaining the standard ready call to Millo.

"Hombre," Millo nodded, pointing to himself.

"No, no," Ryan corrected, then sounded it out: "On belay."

"Own bee-lay," Millo said. And then he went up. No, not just up: He went up fast, in his tattered rubber street shoes, barely even pausing to plan his next move, ascending so swiftly and so naturally that Ryan, taking in ever more rope, just looked on in amazement. When Millo came back to earth, Ryan said, "I thought you'd never climbed before." Millo shrugged. "Not like this," he said, nodding at the rope. Then he began scrambling up again, another convert delivered into the fold.



NOTES Armando Menocal is leading the first of GEOGRAPHIC EXPEDITIONS' legal, fully guided tours of Cuba's most rugged terrain, from November 3 to 18 (\$4,190; 800-777-8183). For independent travelers, Menocal has posted maps and other climbing information on cubaclimbing.com (see the U.S. government's travel restrictions at travel.state.gov/cuba.html). Casas particulares, Cuba's equivalent of bed-and-breakfasts, cost about \$10 per night. Oscar Jaime's Villa Rosa (011-53-8-93381) is Viñales's de facto base camp for climbers.