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from here**





## VIÑALES, CUBA

by Craig Lucbben

A MIST LINGERED OVER THE LUSH, green tobacco fields as a man and his ox worked the red soil. Huge limestone *magotes*, enormous mounds of sculpted limestone, stood like chess pieces above the flat fields. Cameron and I were on our way to some *magotes* a few miles away, just a couple more people ambling along the rutted dirt road in the mid-morning trickle toward town.

Before climbing, we stopped by Manny's. His wife served espresso and freshly-squeezed grapefruit juice, while he showed us his fighting birds. "There's a cockfight Sunday. Do you want to come?" Then, at the edge of town, we waited among Cubans for public transportation — any vehicle that dares to stop. After a few minutes, we pile into a rickety, wood-plank trailer towed by a red tractor with a white star. Off to the crags!

Cameron leads up a tree, slinging its root system for protection, then steps into a bolted, limestone groove and links two pitches into one. A traversing crack leads me to a giant tufa, a half-stalactite frozen onto the wall. Back home, I've become something of an offwidth specialist, able to milk these black holes of features for all they are worth. In Cuba, I've rediscovered

tufas, which I see as anti-offwidths. As I shimmy up this one, which protrudes lavishly from the rock with a merciful array of footholds, handholds and rests, I decide that perhaps I should change my specialty. With tufas, the weak can go elegantly where only mutants ventured before.

As I belay Cameron up to the stance, pondering why we don't have more tufas back home in Colorado, I notice that the beginning of the next pitch is pretty much featureless except for a few small dimples. Cameron doesn't even hesitate; he fires the thin stretch, sails up another tufa and launches out the 40-foot roof on giant pockets and stalactites. Watching him climb, I'm suddenly aware of a generation gap: Like most 20-something climbers, Cameron hikes the roof like I would hike a slab.

Cameron lowers off the top anchors, the Gulf of Mexico looming in the background. If Florida weren't so flat, we'd be able to see it from here. I ease Cameron slightly below my level, pull him in 40 feet on the tag line, extend a hand of friendship, then shove him into a 90-foot space ride. Middle-age retribution!

**details** Lots of climbers are starting to come to Cuba, mostly from Spain, Italy and the United States. The influx means that new crags around Viñales, two hours west of Havana, are being found and developed at a rapid clip. The best seasons for climbing are November through April. Since the climbing is 600

to 1,000 feet above sea level and seven to 12 miles from the coast, conditions are generally mild and breezy. The distance from the ocean also means that bolts don't seem to be corroding like those at other Caribbean crags.

Unfortunately, US citizens are currently discouraged from traveling to Cuba because spending money there breaks the Trading with the Enemies Act. Though the policy is ludicrous, given the current administration, it's unlikely to change anytime soon. That said, you won't find direct flights from the US to Havana. Most Americans go to Canada or Mexico, where they buy a Cuban visa (mandatory) before traveling on to Havana. Expect to pay at least \$700 for your flights.

From the capital, a two-hour bus or taxi ride gets you to Viñales, where you'll need to locate rooms for rent in private homes (*casa particulares*) for accommodation and small family-operated restaurants (*paladares*) for food. The budget traveler can get by on \$25 a day; double that and you'll be living large. The climbing is all around Viñales, accessible on foot or by hitching or taxi.

**resources** For Americans, wading through the logistical and legal quagmire of a trip to Cuba can seem overwhelming. Fortunately, Armando Menocal has created a comprehensive website <[www.cubaclimbing.com](http://www.cubaclimbing.com)> for climbers interested in making the trip. There is an in-depth discussion of legal issues, recommendations for places to stay and eat, and topos of most established climbs on the island. Skip Harper also has a website with some useful route information



OPPOSITE: GEN X CLIMBER CAMERON CROSS MAKES QUICK WORK OF THE STEEPS OUTSIDE OF VIÑALES WITH IMPECCABLE ANTI-OFFWIDTH TECHNIQUE. ABOVE: A SUNDAY AFTERNOON AT THE COCK FIGHTS, VINTAGE CARS AND A GOOD CIGAR — WHAT COULD BE MORE CUBAN?