

Cuba

AN AMERICAN FINDS FREEDOM AND RUNNING

TO MOST AMERICANS, *CUBA LIBRE!* IS A DRINK FOUND IN BARS — a rum and Coke with a squeeze of lime. The cocktail can serve as a metaphor for the place itself, Cuba's national liquor, ironically mixed with America's favorite cola, and enlivened by a splash of Caribbean citrus. But Cuba Libre! also has a deeper, historical meaning as the rallying cry for Cubans fighting for freedom from tyranny and socialistic oppression. ♦ During a month-long running tour of Cuba, I found freedom of another sort. Thanks to the country's socialist government, the state owns most of the land, so I was free to roam the expansive countryside, to explore trails, dirt roads and coastlines. And, perhaps best of all, to enjoy the warm hospitality and vivacious culture of the people of Cuba. ♦ The "forbidden island" is so close to the USA — just 90 miles south of Florida — and yet so far away politically and logistically. Federal regulations restrict visits by U.S. citizens, but if you really want to get there you can (see Trailhead: Cuba). Of the 1.7 million visitors in 2000, an estimated 100,000 were Americans. ♦ Cuba's melting pot of races, ideas, art, music, sensuality and sunshine is so unique that it's hard for a visitor not to fall in love with it. Columbus was the first European to hear the siren song, discovering the island on his first voyage in 1492 and later writing in his journals of a land, "the fairest eyes have seen." ♦ Winston Churchill, Ernest Hemingway, Graham Greene and Stephen Crane are among the countless others who have followed, usually finding adventures that leave them hungering for more. Because beneath every stone in the lush Cuban countryside is a story, and what better way to learn of Cuba's stories than by running over her blood-stained stones?

Libre!

ADVENTURE IN A TROPICAL PARADISE *By Michael Sandroek*



FORBIDDEN ISLAND: Away from its major cities, Cuba has three unspoiled mountain ranges, hundreds of rural dirt roads and countless trails. Getting to Cuba in the first place can be difficult, but once you get there it's a trail running paradise.

LIKE MOST VISITORS, I fly into Havana and its new airport named after Jose Marti, a poet and national hero killed in battle in 1895. I take a taxi 12 miles into the city with Pablo, one of a new breed of Cuban entrepreneurs licensed (and taxed) by the government to house tourists in what are called *casas particulares*. We stop in bustling, tight, sweaty central Havana at his well-kept apartment.

"How are things?" I ask Nora, Pablo's wife, a woman who in the days to come will hand-wash my running shorts, T-shirts and socks and have fresh mangoes waiting for me after every run.

"No es facile," she says, meaning, "it is not easy."

No es facile — an apt way to sum up not only Cuba's economic situation, which has been dismal since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also running on the island. For while Cuba has three unspoiled mountain ranges along with countless miles of dirt roads, trails and sugarcane and tobacco fields, it often is not easy getting there.

My second day, wanting to get off-road and out of Havana, I walk over to the Capitolio, a nearly exact replica of the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C., and catch a ride on a "camel." These lumbering Soviet-made buses are hooked together in pairs making them look like two-humped camels.

As the bus nears Cojimar, a small fishing village 10 kilometers east of Havana, I meekly call out, but the bus does not stop. Inside a packed camel, no one can hear you, especially if you speak English. Finally, miles later, I make my way over to the door, and at the next stop I tumble out in a heap.

By chance, I land at a great place to run, Playas del Estes, a series of nearly empty beaches that stretch for miles along the coast. There are single-track trails through sand dunes and grasslands, meandering past patches of palm trees and a few cabanas and small hotels. I run along the coast at the water's edge, past concrete shelters built to help repel attacks. Heading west, I continue until I reach Cojimar, where Hemingway used to keep his boat.

Crossing the bridge over Cojimar Harbor, I jog up a hill to Calle Pesuela and the home of Gregorio Fuentes, the captain of Hemingway's ship, the *Pilar*, and his best friend from 1938 until the writer's death in 1961.

Even at 102, Fuentes is full of life and eager to talk. "Did Hemingway run?" I ask.

"No, not much," Gregorio says. "But



OLD MAN AND THE SEA: Captain Gregorio Fuentes (above), Ernest Hemingway's best friend and ship captain, is full of stories but insists the famous author wasn't much of a runner. Rehydrating on Cuban trails is easy (right), as long as you carry a big machete. Scott Dietler from Miami (far right) runs on a dirt trail through a tobacco farm in Valle de Viñales.

he was an athlete, always boxing and concerned with his weight," and with this Gregorio sends a slow-motion jab that stops a few inches from my face.

"Qué quieres tomar?" he asks.

"Water." I answer, feeling very dehydrated from several hours in the hot sun.

"Water!? No!" Gregorio says, shaking his head. He motions to his grandson, who brings me a glass of rum.

"This is where Hemingway used to sit when he came after fishing," Gregorio says, pointing out a chair in the corner of the room. I sit and we talk about Hemingway — and drink — for another hour until the grandson ushers me out, saying it is time for Gregorio's nap. I stumble out and jump into a *taxi particular* parked near the harbor. It is a 1948 Chevrolet with a backseat big enough for me to stretch out on. I give the driver my address and fall sound asleep.



PHOTOS: MICHAEL SANDROCK

NOT ALL MY RUNS ARE like scenes from Hemingway novels, but in Cuba, invariably something unexpected — and fun — comes up.

During my stay, I hook up with a guy named Scott, a runner from Miami. For our first foray, we choose Pinar del Rio, the large, beautiful province west of Havana. Thanks to the holiday season, there is not a rental car to be found. In a gesture of hospitality typical of Cubans, Pablo offers to be our guide and driver in exchange for expenses.



"You can get whatever you need or want in Cuba — as long as you have dollars," Pablo explains.

We head out on the Carretera Central under billboards featuring revolutionary heroes Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos and past acres and acres of lush sugarcane and green, rolling hills.

In the Valle de Viñales — Cuba's tobacco country, which is littered with strange limestone hills called *mogotes* — we stop whenever and wherever we want in order to run. It's a great way to meet the locals, as we discovered one morning.

"Uh, oh," Scott says as we wind along a dirt path between waist-high tobacco plants and past thatched-roofed barns where tobacco leaves lay drying. Looking up, I see our way is blocked by a tough-looking cowboy on a lean horse who looks even meaner. Coming down a nearby hill is an old woman with skin as weathered as the cowboy's saddle. I know the state owns the land in Cuba, but it sure feels to me like we are trespassing. We stop. The cowboy and old woman come closer. "They know we're Ameri-

cans," Scott whispers.

The woman walks up and asks where we are from.

I think of saying Canada, but when I tell her "Estados Unidos," she smiles, the gaps in her teeth looming like black holes. "Oh, Estados Unidos! Bienvenidos!" Her exuberant welcome includes hugs for each of us and a gift of two grapefruits just fallen from the tree in front of her house. After laughing and talking, we continue our run along the soft, red dirt.

"The people in Cuba have nothing," Scott remarks later, "and yet they have no hard feelings towards people from the United States."

OUR JOURNEY CONTINUES south to the coastal town of Trinidad. This UNESCO World Heritage Site looks the same as it did centuries ago when pirates used to come ashore to plunder its riches. It's a town where you could spend your entire vacation. There is incredible snorkeling at nearby Playa Ancon, and there is plenty of dancing and music,

along with the great trails of the nearby Sierra de Escambray mountains. One of the best trails starts near the Topes de Collante spa, formerly a retreat for Cuban army officers, and ends at a waterfall — a cool and refreshing tonic after the steep climb through a forest of green ferns.

There's really no reason to leave Trinidad, but I am eager to reach Santiago de Cuba, the country's second largest city. While Havana looks toward Miami and focuses on the material world, Santiago is thoroughly Caribbean — hot, lusty and vivacious, the birthplace of *son*, the distinctive Cuban dance music.

When the Fidel Castro-led guerrillas were fighting in the mountains, journalist Carlos Franqui wrote that there were 1,001 different kinds of trails in the Sierra Maestra. That is a low estimate, and trail runs in the Sierra are limited only by your time and ingenuity.

Farther east is the Gran Piedra, a massive granite rock (it weighs an estimated 63,000 tons) that is the highest point on this part of the island. When I finish my run to the top, the small viewing area is lined with cheering people who had driven past me on the way up. A steep staircase leads to the top of the Piedra, where Haiti can be seen glistening in the distance across the sea.

One morning I leave my *casa particular* in the center of Santiago looking for some new routes. Pablo finds a local working a field outside of town who agrees to guide me. He points out a trail winding through some thick woods and up a mountain. I tell him I'll wait for him at the top. After a couple of miles, I look back, and there is my guide, jogging barefooted behind me, not even sweating. Keeping a polite distance, he stops when I stop and starts when I start. At the top, my reward is a magnificent view of Santiago harbor, where Spanish Admiral Cervas was routed in the last battle of the Spanish-American War, ending forever Spain's colonial empire.

"I'm thirsty," I tell my guide.

"Venga," he says, and we follow a rocky trail to a small frame house where my guide's brother lives. Atop the house is a cactus, believed by members of the

Santeria religion to provide good luck. My guide's brother comes out holding a machete, and it appears my luck has run out. When I tell him I am an American journalist, he comes closer, holding up the machete. I look behind me and see a cliff with a long drop. I am ready to fall to my knees and plead for mercy, when he leans over in front of me, picks up a coconut, slashes it open and hands it to me.

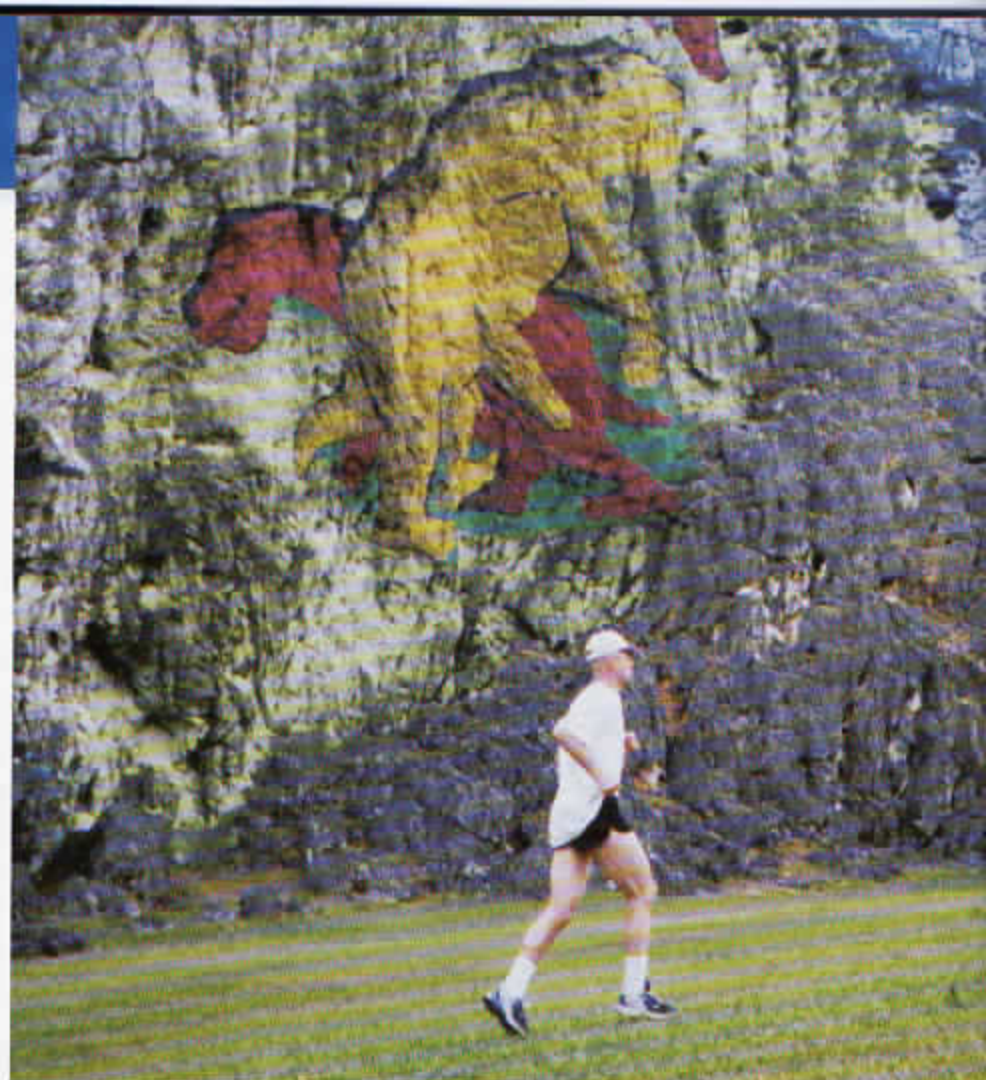
I lean back my head and feel the coconut milk cooling my insides. He offers me another. Before long, I have drained half a dozen coconuts and stuffed myself with the white insides. His wife comes out with a meal of chicken and *congrí* (rice and beans) and — surprise — rum. Because my Spanish is less than perfect, I act out my stories, trying to explain through pantomime what snow looks like.

AFTER LEAVING Santiago de Cuba we head to Camaguey, then on to Playa Giron on the east side of the Bay of Pigs. Forming the west side of the bay, the Zapata peninsula is a large, sparsely populated marshland with the best wildlife on the island. The world's smallest hummingbird, about the size of your thumb, is here along with rare crocodiles, the Cuban lizard cuckoo and the Cuban pygmy owl. There has been no development, and nature has been allowed to thrive.

The sand east along the Bay of Pigs is great for running. I take a worn trail past some royal palms, grazing horses and a double row of tourist cabanas. A Frenchman, wearing one of those bikini bathing suits, is jogging along the beach. We run together for a bit and exchange pleasantries as runners are wont to do the world over.

I feel conspicuously American and wonder how Cubans will respond to me in this, their sacred battle site where the nascent Cuban revolutionary government found its footing.

One of the great pleasures of running in a foreign land is retracing history's footsteps, simply running where the fighting took place, keeping an open mind, weighing both sides and letting history sink in however it wants. Running



COLORFUL CUBA: Author Michael Sandrock runs past El Mural de la Prehistoria near Viñales. The 15-story mural, which represents the evolution of life on earth, was painted by 25 campesinos in 1961 under the direction Leovigildo Gonzalez Morillo, a follower of famed Mexican artist Diego Rivera.

then becomes more than just aerobic exercise; it becomes part of the long, grand story that is our common heritage.

Finishing the hour-long run, I sit on the beach and look over the calm water, imagining the scene 40 years ago when ships unloaded exiled Cubans who attempted, unsuccessfully, to reclaim the island from Fidel Castro and his band of bearded revolutionaries. The sunset is beautiful, as elsewhere in Cuba. This beach, however, is marred by a large concrete wall constructed about 50 meters offshore to prevent any future landings. As if the exiles would try again at the same place after their first disaster.

A hot shower awaits me back at my *casa particular*, along with a feast fit for a marathoner. For \$3, we are presented with more food than I could eat in three days — piles of shrimp, caught this morning in Cochina Bay, rice, yams, lettuce, tomatoes, onions, bananas, mangoes and

oranges. It's topped off by cold Hatuey beer (of this I am glad, as I am very tired of rum by this point).

After dinner, we sit around the kitchen table drinking more Hatuey and talking. Mostly, my Cuban friends talk and I listen. What a delight it is to be around people who love nature, far away from the incessant call of development, subdivisions, fast food restaurants, cell phones, e-mail and the Internet. Here in the solitude of Playa Giron, we talk of politics, ideas, philosophy and nature.

THE NEXT MORNING, my final one in Cuba, I am up early to watch the sunrise. How quiet and peaceful it is, and how unlikely a bloody invasion now seems in this spot. I start on the coastal road toward Cienfuegos, but I'm in the mood to get off-road again. I see no paths, however, into the thick vegetation.

A couple of miles farther, I finally



MICHAEL SANDROCK COLLECTION

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turn at a trail cut through the green jungle. The trail has many sharp rocks and coral on it, but the dirt in between is soft and the footing good. Thirty minutes in, the trail narrows and the trees get denser. Like most runners, I am loathe to ever turn back, and so I continue on, now forced to jump and step over fallen

trees. All at once, I am knocked down by a stubborn vine hanging across the trail that does not break as I expect. Lying stunned on the matted leaves and roots, feeling sharp coral cutting into my back, I look up through the leaves blotting out the hot Cuban sun. I gather my senses, and after a bit of cursing, my first thought is, “What a ridiculous place for an invasion. How could the exiles have chosen such an impenetrable and isolated area to launch their attack?”

After several minutes, I rise and retreat back to the road. The blood that was flowing down my leg has dried, and I run back to Playa Giron feeling utterly whipped.

ON THE THREE-HOUR DRIVE back to Havana later that day, Pablo makes a lunch stop at a *cenote* halfway between the battle sites of Playa Giron and Playa Larga. After dining on crocodile meat, we watch a group of tourists scuba diving in the deep, fresh water of the limestone sinkhole. The embargo, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the battle of the Bay of Pigs all seem far away from this idyllic spot. At least they do until Pablo pulls me aside and whispers that local lore says a bomb still lies at the bottom of the cenote.

“Of course, we don’t tell tourists that,” he confides. “We don’t want to scare anyone off from visiting Cuba.” Then with a big grin, he adds, “Especially Americans!”

Michael Sandrock, who wrote his thesis on “A Farewell to Arms,” is a former 2:25 marathoner and the author of “Running with Legends” (Human Kinetics, 1997).



CHAD LUEBBEN

Trailhead: Cuba

◆ The U.S. Trading with the Enemy Act of 1963 restricts the spending of money related to Cuban travel by U.S. citizens unless they have a license issued by the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). However, enforcement of this act, which forms the basis of the American embargo against Cuba, varies from year to year according to the political climate. The bottom line is that legal travel to the island requires a Treasury Department license limited, according to a recent New York Times article, to journalists “and those engaged in government busi-

ness or cultural exchanges. General tourism and business travel are not allowed.”

◆ If you’re interested in visiting Cuba, start with the Treasury Department’s OFAC department to see if you qualify for a license: www.treas.gov/ofac; (202) 622-2480. Next, check with the following organizations that legally take groups to Cuba:

Center For Cuban Studies: 124 W. 23rd St. New York, N.Y. 10011; (212) 242-0559; www.cubaupdate.org

Global Exchange: 2017 Mission St. No. 303, San Francisco, CA 94110;

(415) 255-7296; www.globalexchange.org

Marazul Tours: Tower Plaza Mall, 4100 Park Ave., Weehawken, NJ 07067; (201) 319-9670; www.marazul-tours.com

◆ Peter Haney, an avid trail runner from Fort Collins, Colorado, is planning a legal two week tour of Cuba for trail runners and road cyclists from April 7-20, 2002. The trip will be coordinated through Global Exchange (see above) and will cost about \$1,800 per person. For more information, call (970) 482-1366 or e-mail him at rncandr000@aol.com.