



LEFT: Jose Luis Fuentes on *Yumita Linda* (5.11b). RIGHT: El Morro Lighthouse and Havana Bay.

weeks before Fidel Castro surrendered his 50-year reign, and the country's energy was electric. After tufa tugging in Viñales, the unofficial climbing capital 100 miles west (see *Classic Climbs*, p.72, for more), I found myself adopted by Havana climbers eager to show me their urban training zone. Although two other areas lie within striking distance of Havana—Jaruco (11 sport climbs), to the east; and Boulder (13 routes, bouldering), near the Almendares River—El Morro, because of its stunning ambiance, has the edge. Even with only seven climbs from 5.8 to 5.11+, it remains the place to train.

Climbing began at El Morro in the late 1990s, when legends like Anibal Fernández began scaling her walls. Now, a decade later, small groups continue to follow in Fernández' footsteps, arriving after work in search of a pump. El Morro's walls tell stories of their own: rusted bolts (the hangers often stolen) accent the eroded, neglected, and masonry-patched faces. And though the would-be

jugs from cannonball blasts were repaired centuries ago, the occasional shifted block offers a welcome rail or pocket on the steep faces. I discover this during an afternoon visit.

After jumping from our taxi, my Havana friends and I scuttle along El Morro's eastern flank—the same approach used by English troops in their successful eighteenth-century assault—praying stealth will allow us to avoid any unwanted attention.

"Ah! The police are here!" curses José, our crew's charismatic leader. Fearing we'll have to pay bribes or have our gear "confiscated," we cautiously descend into the moat, flirting with a 60-foot plummet off the eroded slabs. Hidden at the crag's base, Cuban youth drink rum and make out in the shadows.

"What about the police?" I ask José, gesturing toward two nearby cops. "A problem?"

"No," he says, smiling and looking back. "Today, I think is OK."

After sending *Yumita Linda* (*Pretty Little Tourist*, 5.11b) and working the bouldering traverse, I finish up with El Morro's newest route, *Salida Illegal* (*Illegal Exit*, 5.11+).

"One day, we will have bolts," says Ri-

cardo, the route's proud creator. "You will lead."

At day's end, as the sun slides behind Old Havana, the Cuban climbers launch headfirst into the sea.

"Go, go, *gringo!*" they taunt. "Jump!" Feeling like an ambassador for the Western world, I hurl myself into the deep waves. Treading the cool waters of the Gulf of Mexico, I watch El Morro—without a doubt, Cuba's coolest climbing gym—turn amber in the fading light.

—Michael J.P. Hall



MICHAEL J.P. HALL (BOTH)

EL CASTILLO ILLEGAL

El Morro, the heart of Havana climbing

IN CUBA, climbing is an "unauthorized" activity, one that provides no revenue for the government. Still, a scrappy scene thrives, despite Cuban climbers' dependence on gear donations from foreigners and a need to keep the activity largely secret. Nowhere is the Cubans' dilemma more evident than at El Castillo de los Tres Santos Reyes Magos del Morro—Castle of the Three Magnificent Holy Kings of El Morro, aka El Morro—a sixteenth-century edifice two minutes from central Havana.

Standing resolutely above the choppy, turquoise waters of Havana Bay, El Morro is an unmistakable symbol of colonial might. Built by the Spanish, it survived a few tumultuous centuries of attacks and regime changes before solidifying its position as a point of strategic defense. During the Spanish reign, massive limestone bricks were cut from the coastline, and then dropped into place both to create the oppressive, 70-foot seaward walls and a deep landward moat. The castle was soon outfitted with a battery of cannons named "The Twelve Apostles," her mighty walls absorbing thousands of cannonball blasts over the centuries.

I came to Cuba in February 2008, just

El Morro 411

VISIBLE FROM HAVANA'S FAMOUS MALECÓN (SEA WALL), El Morro is accessible via taxi—the two-minute trip costs just a few pesos. Your best bet is to have Cuban climbers give you the tour and to keep the climbing gear under wraps. Upon arrival, head northwest toward the water, passing a cement platform housing a 30,000-volt generator (don't touch!). Just beyond is the climbing moat. Be very careful near the (crumbling) edges, as there are no guardrails.

WHAT TO BRING:

Cuban climbers need gear: bolts, hangers, harnesses, shoes, draws, 12-volt batteries, and chargers. There are only two racks in all of Cuba, so know your donations will be used! For more, visit cubaclimbing.com.

RECOMMENDED ROUTES:

- **Paso de los Vientos** (5.10): The first route at El Morro! Toprope (or test your courage on lead) as you work up a windy and exposed north face on ancient, rusty bolts, the waves breaking below.
- **Yumita Linda** (5.11b): El Morro's only safely functioning lead route climbs the east-face corner. A balancy crux on pebbles at the fourth bolt gives it the 5.11 rating.
- **Salida Illegal** (5.11+): This is the crag's most promising route, featuring sustained climbing on thin features. Bring a six-meter cordelette for the anchor.

—MJPH