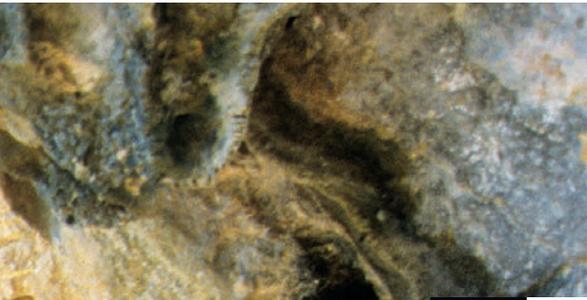


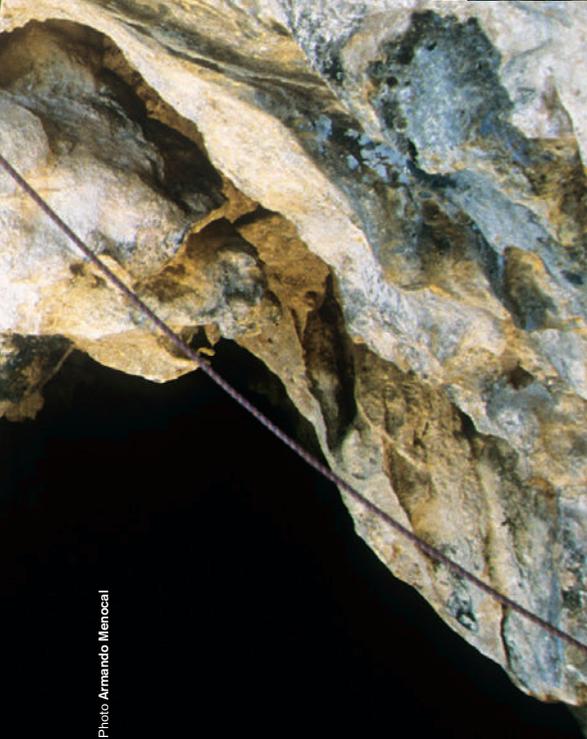
# First Sinner in Paradise

Photo © 2009 Beth Wald



Left: **Aníbal Fernández** on The Wasp Factory 7b+ (5.12c), Cueva Cabeza de la Vaca, Viñales Valley

Below: **Aníbal Fernández** on Milenio 6c+ (5.12a). Typical of many rock climbs in the Viñales Valley, Milenio ascends high above the tobacco and malanga fields



## Story by Armando Menocal

**“There are tons of climbers** here from the whole world, and many *chicas* as well, the weather is perfect and there are new routes. *La vida es bella!* Life is beautiful!”

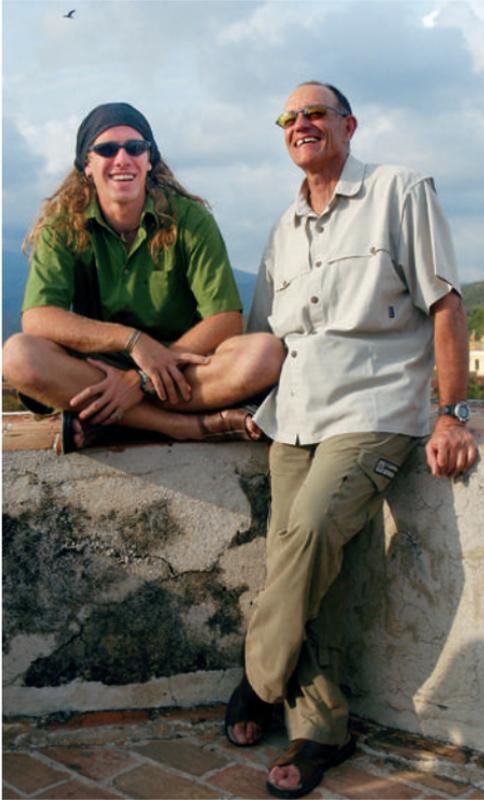
That was the message – in its entirety – from Aníbal Fernández, my friend, climbing and guiding partner, and Cuba’s most prominent climber. Aníbal was a force of youthfulness and exuberance. It was easy for me to envision him as I sat at the computer reading the message from my snowbound Wyoming home in the winter of 2003: a 23-year-old Don Juan, blue-eyed, with long blond dreadlocks.

In 1999 I had been one of four U.S. climbers who were the first foreigners to go to Cuba to climb – and give bolts, drills, and gear for any Cuban climbers we could find. On our last day of climbing, we had been joined by an earnest teenager with short cropped blond hair. We did not know it at the time, but Aníbal had gone AWOL from the army and hitchhiked all day to climb with us. After I dropped Aníbal in Havana, he went straight to the brig for two weeks. As he later told me, he was not going to miss his first genuine climbing experience, and he didn’t care what the army did to him.

Still, our first meeting and his trip to the brig didn’t clue me in to what was coming. Over the next decade, Aníbal was to expose me to a redefinition of the term that each of us as climbers believe we know better than any other: commitment. Climbing is a freedom taken for granted in an open society. I was to see that to climb in an authoritarian country, however, takes a demoralizing and stiff-necked commitment to climbing.

Aníbal’s upbringing was not typical, especially for crushingly poor, communist Cuba. Aníbal’s mother, Esther, is an actress and director, who has travelled with stage productions

Below: **Aníbal Fernández** and author **Armando Menocal** in Trinidad in 2003 working on Geographic Expedition's Eco-Tour



to Europe and is accustomed to hosting cutting-edge artists. Esther also is a classic Spanish beauty, a *triguena*, with light olive skin and lustrous black hair. His father had been an army colonel and commanded Cuban troops in Africa. He chose to resign his military commission just months before he would be eligible for a lifetime pension, a telling act whose import was not lost on officials. Independence and tacit affirmations are family traits.

Fascinated by nature and the outdoors since his early teens, Aníbal got involved in exploring river descents and deep caves. He learned about ropes, carabiners, bolts, and living outside, skills fundamental to the initial development of rock-climbing.

Aníbal says that “people actually cringed” when he, at 13, started to ask about the possibility of climbing in Cuba. “The whole idea seemed absurd,” he said, but “I was enough of a rebel to push forward and ignore the naysayers.”

Aníbal recruited a small group of cavers who taught themselves to climb. He cut the seat belts from his dad’s Lada for a harness and bought some muddy ropes from other cavers. For instruction, they had a Petzl catalog. By the time foreigners arrived with real gear, Aníbal and the other neophytes were top roping and using caving bolts, pitons and homemade chocks to lead their first routes.

“The entire story of how we actually learned to climb and managed to survive,” Aníbal now says, “is tedious, but like every Cuban story, ours is loaded with passion, laughs, tears, blood, scars, friends, enemies, misunderstandings, exile, rhythm and romance.”

Aníbal was to become Cuba’s strongest climber and was involved in every stage of the development of climbing in Cuba. He put up at least 200 routes. Never one to work a route, Aníbal’s hardest lead was a 5.12d. However, many of the classic multi-pitch, wildly overhanging climbs that define Cuba’s “sport climbing” are Aníbal’s. I put “sport climbs” in quotes, because many have a big wall character and require techniques like tag ropes and back clipping on rappel.

Babalú Ayé, for example, is a touchstone of all climbs in Cuba at 5.10d. The 150 m high and 400 m wide central wall is hung with massive tufas and stalactites look like gargoyles when seen from afar. It feels remote: no other routes or climbers; it is far from town or villages; and from its belays, there are views across a 150 square kilometres of rolling, verdant farmlands and forest. It's a bolted adventure in an imposing setting, with steep moves and challenging descents.

Aníbal himself can't pick a favourite or most memorable route. Instead, he recalls a route named Ashe Oggun in a remote valley, far from the climbing center of Viñales. "Four pitches at 5.11, no bolts except the third belay, and never been repeated," is his description. "That's how I would like to climb, always, onsight, first ascent, clean, at my limit, finding the route up a nice unclimbed wall, with a good friend and no audience."

Over a decade, Aníbal motivated and mentored an entire generation of Cuban climbers. In Cuba, with leadership came responsibilities. Almost all donated gear went to him, and he alone was trusted to distribute it to neophytes and not hoard or exploit it, as he could so easily have done. His activism helped to create strong, independent groups of climbers in La Habana and Viñales. Individual climbers in remote provinces were training on wedges nailed to trees and inviting Aníbal to come and explore their local, unclimbed crag.

Nothing signalled that climbing had arrived in Cuba, and in a big way, more than a poster that appeared all over of Aníbal climbing Mucho Pumpito in the Viñales Valley. British climber and writer

Mikey Robertson called Mucho Pumpito "the best 5.10 I've ever done, and in the top five of all climbs." Lynn Hill said it's "the juggiest climb I've ever done." But she added, "It is so overhanging that if there weren't jugs, the climb would be astronomically harder!"

Big, eye-catching photos on a huge poster of Aníbal's near horizontal body, with his long blond hair hanging straight down, clearly showed the radically overhanging angle of Mucho Pumpito. Flashy, beefcake, hedonist, the poster of Aníbal was far from the norm in Cuba, where billboards, posters, even graffiti on the sides of building are restricted to socialist exhortations for productivity and sacrifice. The poster was an advertisement for "Hollywood," a brand of cigarettes. Cigarette and beer ads seem to be the exception to socialist stoicism.

In Cuba, there are few celebrities. Certainly there is that fellow with the beard who has been Maximum Leader for 50 years, but whose name is rarely spoken – just stroke your chin, everyone will know who you mean. Perhaps the stars of the current Cuban TV soap opera. That's about it.

For a few months, a 23-year old Cuban climber was a recognizable celebrity. During that time, Aníbal and I were leading a group on an eco-tour. We stopped at a souvenir shop in Trinidad. There on the wall, behind the young Cubana at the register, was the Hollywood poster. She started out by speaking in English to Aníbal, and before he could correct her, I said to her in Spanish, he's not only Cuban, he's on that poster behind you. It was as if that other Cuban celebrity had walked into the store.



All was not perfect, however. Aníbal was bold, jubilant and outspoken. Asking questions drove him out of college in just a few weeks. Cubans like him, who had grown up knowing only the Revolution (always in caps and always only the Revolution), learned to accept things as they were, and be “a Cuban with crossed arms” – mum and consenting.

Even his defiant deadlocks got Aníbal in trouble. In Viñales, our climbing retreat, with all the cloak-and-dagger of a small town, the local police told Aníbal that they “knew” all Rastafarians used drugs. But then, the same cops also told us that they “knew” all climbers needed drugs to climb – how else could they risk their lives? It was too easy for us to ridicule their groaners and shrug them off. Cuban climbers have been harassed and threatened by an officialdom that can’t decide whether it will authorize climbing, and pretends that until it does so, it isn’t an appropriate activity for Cubans. Foreigners, however, are free to climb.

Eventually, even his 15 minutes of fame and his voracious drive to put up breathtaking

Left: A barefooted **Aníbal Fernández** on the walls of El Morro Fortress or Castillo de los Tres Reyes del Morro, the 400-year-old castle that guards the entrance to Havana Harbour

routes in a virgin area could not hold Aníbal in Cuba. Aníbal had been run out of Viñales and jailed for days. Even his mother had to concede he was living on borrowed time. Any misstep, even unspoken defiance like his father, would put him in prison. He left Cuba.

He currently resides in Toronto, with his wife, Kerry, and dog, Oso, far from the subtropical jungles of his youth. Aníbal says living *en el norte* – in the north – has taught him how to climb with fingers numbed by cold stone, to sling up a bear bag while camping, and to wait patiently for his next climbing trip. He still feels strongly connected to the climbing in Cuba and returns annually to play on the magnificent stone.

Listen to Aníbal Fernández' words, and reflect on your own commitment to climbing:

“I suffer everyday for having to live away from my island and my people, from that seductive chaos that is life in Cuba. I hate having to become something else, learn new manners, follow new schedules. I never wanted to emigrate. I can't help but feeling in exile. Every day there isn't a moment when I would not leave it all and return to La Habana, but I could never accept being persecuted. I am getting used to carrying the island around with me.”

When Aníbal told me that, I was climbing with the third generation of Cuban partners, the previous ones having escaped from Cuba – until, that is, officials banned me from Cuba as well. I had become too prominent as one who had helped Aníbal to create an independent Cuban climbing community, free of control or dependence, and the primary developers of climbing in Cuba.

I too am an exile. Cuba remains at the heart of our lives.

*In 2009, Armando Menocal and Aníbal Fernández published their guidebook, Cuba Climbing (quickdrawpublications.com). Armando Menocal was born in the U.S., but his roots are in Cuba. His great-grandmother was a cousin of Mario García-Menocal, a rebel who fought to liberate Cuba from Spanish rule and governed as President of Cuba from 1912 to 1921. In 1990, he founded The Access Fund, the largest organization of climbers in the U.S. In 2009, Armando started Access Pan Am, a grass-roots effort of climbers, organizations and corporate supporters, to keep climbing areas open and to protect the climbing environment in the Western Hemisphere.*