

Our 15th Year

ROCK & ICE

OCTOBER 1999 #95

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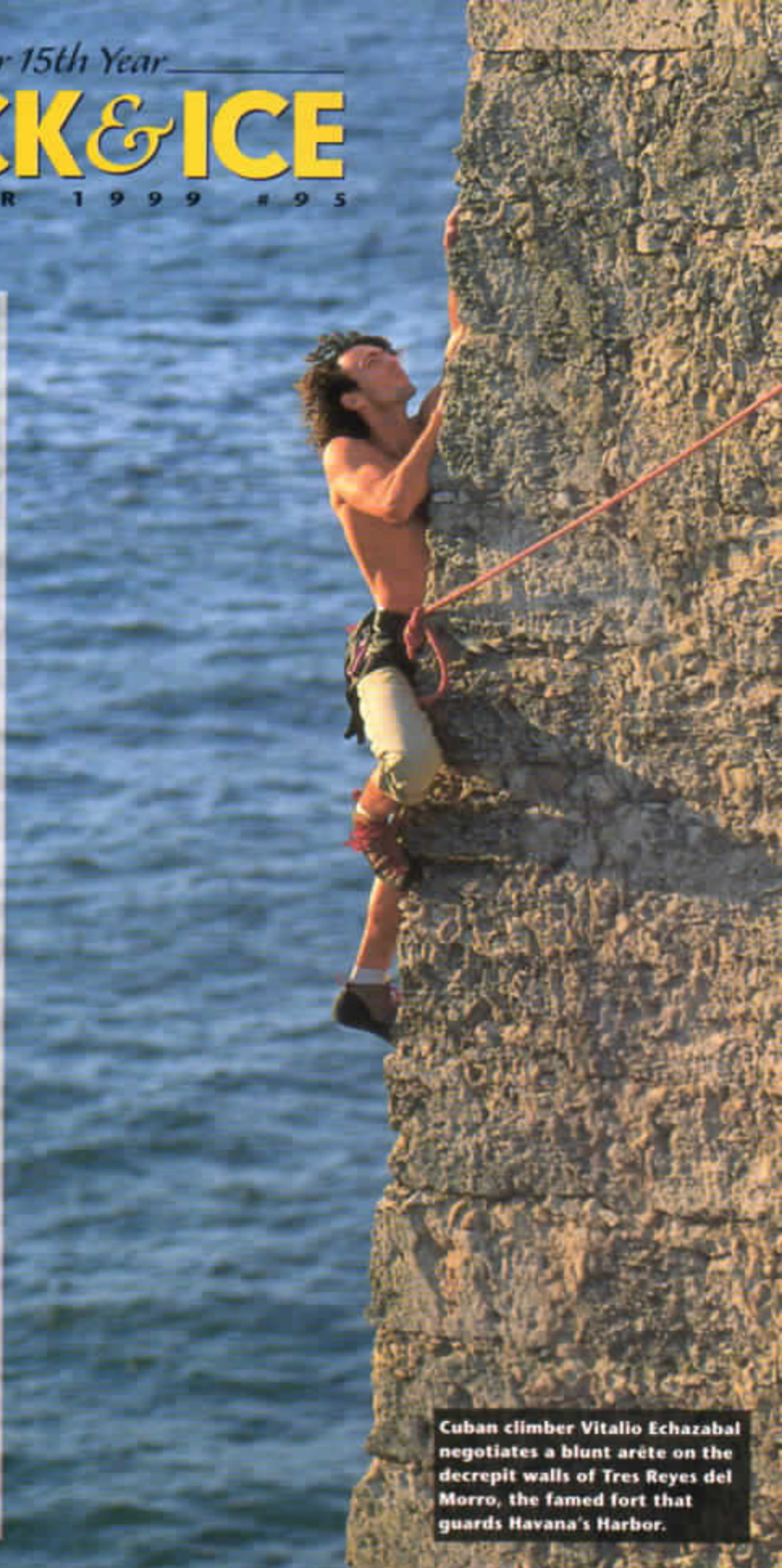
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On the cover

Focused but not spooked, Tiffany Levine slots a piece and muscles up the first pitch of Atlantis (5.10b), one of the many moderates at California's Needles (p. 42).

Photo by Jim Thornburg



Cuban climber Vitalio Echazabal negotiates a blunt arête on the decrepit walls of Tres Reyes del Morro, the famed fort that guards Havana's Harbor.

Cuba Libre!

CLIMBING ON THE ISLAND OF REVOLUTION

Story and photos by Craig Luebben



JUST A STONE'S THROW FROM FLORIDA, yet worlds away, the forbidden island of Cuba faces an uncertain future as one of the last bastions of communism. Cubans anxiously and nervously await the change that is sure to occur at the end of 73-year-old Fidel Castro's reign. The question on everyone's mind is what's to come — democracy or dictatorship? One thing is certain, however: With some of the best limestone in the America's and a population of warm, inviting citizens, Cuba is set to become a favorite destination for climbers, no matter what political road the island's government takes.



ON THE STREETS OF CAMAGUEY, CUBA,
CLIMBER CARLOS PINELO PONDERES HIS FUTURE.

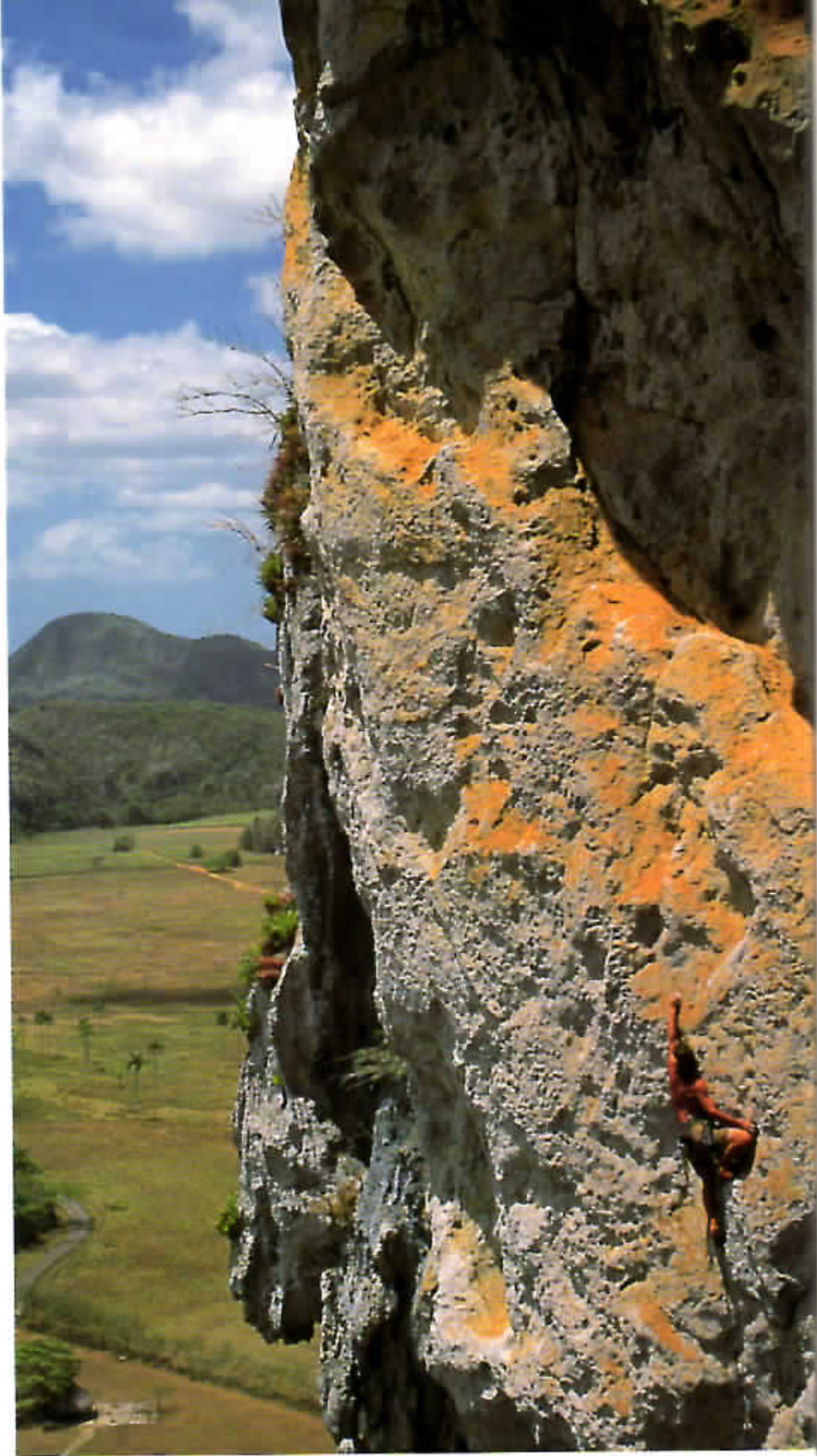
"**Oh** shit! Rock-
kkkkk!" I
screamed, as a
stalactite the size of a junior high kid
ripped through the sky. From the
ground, 15 Cuban lumberjacks looked
up anxiously as Cameron, five pitches
off the deck and halfway through a
pumpy, 40-foot roof, whipped onto
the rope. The lumberjacks had been
watching us for days — they moved
logs while we drilled bolts — and
had fondly begun calling us *gringos*
locos. Now they would think we were
completely nuts.

We were climbing a 350-foot limestone cathedral that arched high above the lumberyard near Cuba's Vinales Valley. Trippy tufa columns dribbled down the wall, and stalactites dripped from the huge roof. At the first belay ledge we found three rusty Italian pitons strung with tattered cord. A local farmer told us that a pair of Spanish women had left them 20 years earlier. Two pin scars on the second pitch marked the Spanish high-point. The wall above looked improbable, but we managed a dot-to-dot link-up of giant tufas. On the first redpoints of our new route, we wrapped our legs around the mammoth stalactite on the fifth pitch for a hands-off rest. Then the rock spear splintered off the face, sending Cameron tumbling to the sky.

Caribbean climbing pioneer Skip Harper spent five years convincing me to visit Cuba. With Skip, I'd made successful climbing expeditions to Cayman Brac, Puerto Rico and Mona Island. Cuba turned out to have the best climbing of any of these islands, and the chance to delve into a society and culture so far removed from our own was incomparable.

The adventure started long before we set foot on Cuban soil, with the challenge of finding a legal way onto the island. American citizens who spend money in Cuba risk a

CAMERON CROSS TAKES THE BEAUTIFUL, S.11C DIRECTISSIMA UP THE SMOOTH, WHITE FACE OF THE THIRD PITCH OF MIL MACOTE. CROSS AND AUTHOR CRAIG LUEBBEN BIVIED IN THE CAVE BELOW THIS PITCH DURING THEIR TWO-WEEK STAY IN CUBA.



\$50,000 fine for "trading with the enemy." No one has yet been prosecuted for merely traveling to the island, but we didn't dare risk such a ludicrous penalty.

So, long before we left we began a protracted series of email communications in search of some local Cuban climbers. With perhaps only 20 climbers and two climbing clubs, in Havana and Camaguey, the Cuban climbing scene is small, to say the least. The difficulties of transportation on the island and the almost total absence of gear — a doctor's salary for an entire year barely buys a rope and shoes — explains why climbing is in its infancy. We eventually tracked down the Club de Escalada Arne Saknussem, the climbing branch of Havana's Speleological Society, and were able to locate some of the friendly locals. Carlos Pinelo, a microbiologist who does bloodwork for Cuba's elite athletes at the National Sports Institute, arranged for an official invitation from the club to climb in Cuba, with transportation, food and accommodations provided.

It's a cliché, but true — arriving in Havana was like traveling back in time. Vintage Chevies, Dodges and Fords cruised the streets, along with bicycles, rickshaws, horse-drawn carts and smoke-belching buses. Once a thriving city built on sugar and tourism, Havana suffered from nearly 40 years of socialism and was crippled in the early 90s by dwindling subsidies from the crumbling Soviet Union. While some areas have been restored to their former glory days — when rich Americans visited for sex, drugs, booze and cigars — much of the city is still in shambles. Trash litters the streets, raw sewage plugs some of the gutters, and Cubans pack the ailing buses almost to bursting.

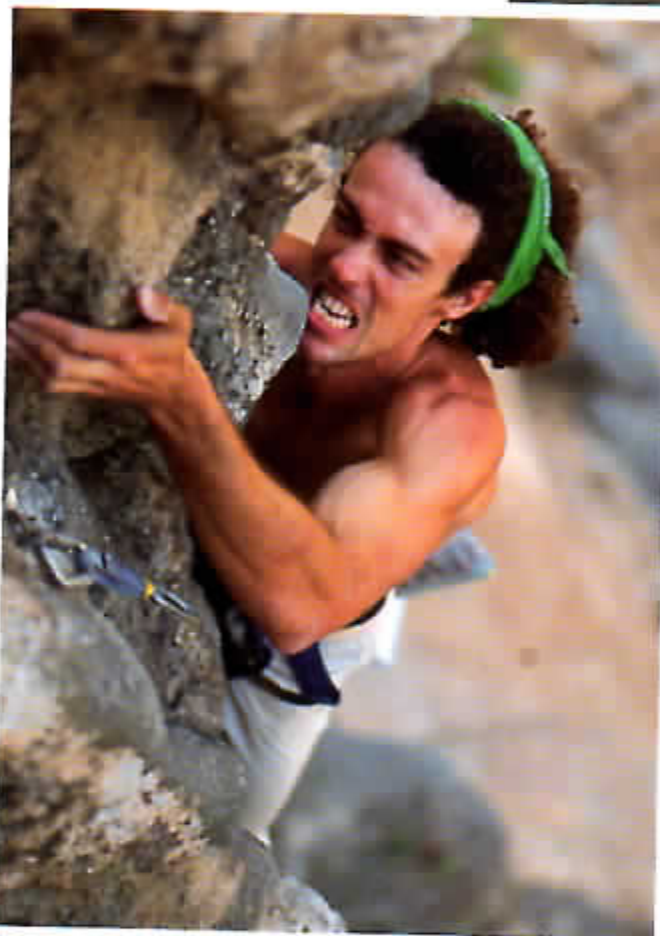
Soon after we arrived, I presented a slide show to Havana's climbing club at the Sports Institute. Afterward, Carlos, his climbing partner Vitalio Echazabal and a handful of other club members took us to top rope the walls

of Tres Reyes del Morro, the famous fort guarding Havana's harbor. Vitalio is a natural climber, with a body like a European rock star — wide shoulders, huge lats, a tiny waist and legs and wild curly hair. In spite of inadequate gear and virtually no mentors to teach him, Vitalio has reached the 5.11 level in a single year of climbing. The young Cuban was eager to show us around the fort's routes, including an arête created in 1898. The scar of a line was leftover from when a US battleship, fighting to claim Cuba and Puerto Rico from Spain, blasted the ten-foot-thick stone wall with its cannons.

I originally dreamed of climbing sea cliffs in Cuba, but the fort was as close as I would get. Instead, we headed for the quaint, western town of Vinales. Skip's research had turned up the prospect of good lime-

stone near the small town, and we figured that, at 10 miles and 1,000 vertical feet from the sea, the region's cool, dry and breezy conditions would make an ideal climbing setting.

The first views, however, were discouraging. The huge mounds of limestone, called *mogotes*, that rose above the lush tobacco fields were almost entirely wrapped in a thick cloak of vegetation. But as we explored the valley, we began



to spy long faces of clean, overhanging limestone with caves, pockets, stalactites, tufas and columns. Only two other climbing teams — the Spanish group 20 years earlier and a Cuban-Colombian team that opened two traditional lines — had developed routes in the valley. We had stumbled across a bountiful expanse of untapped limestone.

The first cliffs we explored in the Vinales Valley were near El Palenque, a tourist attraction built inside a cave where runaway slaves once took refuge. By day, it's a bar and restaurant; at night it transforms into a saucy cabaret and disco. We quickly set to work on a small wall close enough that the complex rhythms and staccato vocals of the club's music floated over to us on the breeze. When the drill dust



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: HIS SKULL ON THE VERGE OF EXPLODING, CUBAN VITALIO ECHAZABAL PULLS OFF HIS FIRST 5.11B LEAD ON THE THIRD PITCH OF FLYIN' HYENA. CUBA'S BUILDINGS AND PUBLIC PLACES ARE PLAGUED WITH GOVERNMENT PROPAGANDA LIKE THIS MONTAGE — "HEROIC FOREVER!" — IN SANTIAGO DE CUBA. IF THE MURALS ARE SLIGHTLY DISTURBING TO THE AMERICAN EYE, THERE IS PLENTY TO DELIGHT THE WESTERN TOURIST AS WELL. COCO TAXI, ANYONE?



settled at the Palenque Wall, we had created five one-pitch sport routes ranging from 5.10a to 5.11b.

We settled into a comfortable routine of working new routes by day and hanging out with our host, Oscar Rodriguez, in the evenings. The gloom of Havana is washed over by a happier existence in Vinales. Oscar embodied this happy-go-lucky attitude, with unmatched hospitality, a loving

heroes Che Guevara, Fidel Castro and Jose Marti, and slogans such as "Long live free Cuba!" and "Patriotism or death!" are everywhere. Often, however, government meddling is far more overt. One day, our taxi was stopped just outside of town by government inspectors, who informed us that the taxi was not certified to transport tourists. Later that day, the pesos-only taxi was impounded.

Many Cubans feel frustrated and trapped by these intrusions — the "revolution" controls their every step, and poverty is widespread. After the fall of the Soviet Union, foreign aid dwindled to nothing and Cubans endured a harsh period of scarcity, deemed the "special period." The economy nearly collapsed, and food shortages were rampant. Thousands of Cubans took to the sea like lemmings, and many died. Because of its embargo policy, the United States did nothing to help. The country eventually got back on its feet, but just barely. Today there is enough food, but Cubans often have to brave long lines to get their rations of rice and bread. Cubans are forbidden to eat luxuries such as beef and lobster — these are reserved for the government to sell to tourists. Raging electrical blackouts plague Cuba — often the whole town of Vinales goes black for three or four hours at a time.

Most tourists, predominantly from Canada and Europe, never see this side of Cuba, riding around in their air-conditioned buses and staying in luxury hotels. In fact, the government strongly discourages contact between tourists and Cubans. A recent crackdown has made many Cubans, especially women, afraid to be seen with foreigners lest they be suspected of hustling or prostitution. It's too bad — when we were able to spend time with rural Cubans, we found them to be some of the warmest people we'd

ever met, even to us Americans, whose country is openly hostile toward Cuba.

Through Carlos and Vitalio we met Miguel Angel. Some nights we'd sit in Miguel's rocking chairs, listen to the jazz of Charlie Parker and discuss current events. One such evening, Miguel seemed tentative.

"You're from Colorado, right?" he asked. "A school in Colorado was just bombed and numerous students were shot," he explained, referring to the Columbine High massacre.

"What is Colorado like? That could never happen here," he said in disbelief.

I was ashamed. As Americans, we tend to lock down on the world with a sense of self-congratulatory superiority, particularly "rogue nations" like Cuba. And while Cuba has its share of problems, violence there is rare, except perhaps government-sponsored violence against dissidents and crime in the dregs of Havana.



OXEN-DRIVEN PLOWS AND LUSH TOBACCO FIELDS ARE A COMMON SIGHT IN RURAL CUBA. HIGH ABOVE, CAMERON CROSS RAPPELS A FIXED ROPE WHILE CLEANING THE FOURTH PITCH OF MR. MAGOTE.



attitude toward friends and family and an industrious nature. Oscar prepared countless meals of rice, beans, salad, fried *melange* (a root similar to a potato) and pork or chicken, and we'd spend the long evenings feasting together and sharing conversation. After dinner we'd head to either El Palenque or Casa Dago, a small neighborhood nightclub. Casa Dago was usually alive with spirited Cuban songs performed by as many as seven musicians on guitar, trumpet, saxophone, a decrepit piano and flawless percussion.

To diminish competition to government-owned businesses, Casa Dago was limited to 12 patrons, even though it had room for 30. One night, after finding too many people inside, the inspectors closed the nightclub for three years. This sort of government oppression is felt across Cuba, where the streets and open spaces are awash with propaganda. Billboards and buildings are painted with images of revolutionary



ABOVE: CROSS MOVES CONFIDENTLY ON BIG BUCKETS AT THE LIP OF THE 40-FOOT ROOF ON FLYIN' HYENA (5.12A). ALL ACROSS THE VINALES VALLEY WE SAW UNCLIMBED CLIFFS THAT LOOKED SURE TO HAVE SOLID ROCK.

If you go At publication, the US embargo on Cuba is alive and well, meaning that Americans are still prohibited from spending US\$ on the island. However, tourists of other nationalities — and defiant or savvy US citizens — can fly into Havana for an unsurpassed cultural vacation. Be sure to get a visa before you arrive. The budget traveler can get by on around \$25 a day; double that, and you'll be living large. Vinales is 15 miles northeast of Pinar del Rio and between two and three hours drive from Havana — depending on whether you rent a taxi (\$40) or car (expensive), or take the bus (\$10-\$15). You'll find plenty of lodging opportunities in private homes in Vinales; just ask around. Don't forget to reserve \$15 for your departure from Havana. Without paying the tax, you won't be permitted to leave.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF CUBA

1493 The Pope grants control of Cuba to Spain

1512 The Spaniards begin a brutal campaign of slaughtering and enslaving Cuba's indigenous Tainos population.

1790-1810 Over 100,000 slaves are brought from Africa to Cuba to labor in the sugar industry.

1808 In an attempt to gain military supremacy in the Gulf of Mexico, President Thomas Jefferson attempts to purchase Cuba from Spain.

1868-1878 Guerrilla warfare breaks out in Cuba, with revolutionaries trying to end Spanish control of the island. Casualties are high on both sides: 30,000 Spaniards and 250,000 Cubans.


1895 Revolutionary leader Jose Martí and general Maximo Gomez renew the assault on the Spanish rulers of Cuba. By riding straight into the Spanish front line, Martí martyrizes himself and becomes one of the most prominent Cuban revolutionary heroes.

1898 President William McKinley sends the warship USS Maine to Havana harbor to protect US citizens living there. The Maine mysteriously explodes in the harbor, and the US declares war on Spain. In less than 3 months, the Spaniards are defeated. US military occupation of Cuba begins.

1902 Cuba finally gains independence, though Washington still maintains a hold on Cuban politics. Over the next few decades, investment capital pours in from the US, and the wealth created by Cuba's sugar and tourism industries is siphoned from the country.

1903 The US annexes Guantanamo Bay in eastern Cuba, creating a permanent naval base.

1933-1958 Fulgencio Batista rises to the top of the Cuban military and takes control of Cuba. He brutally suppresses internal opposition to his government and enters business with the Mafia.



1953 At age 26, Fidel Castro launches a revolutionary attack against the Moncada army barracks in Santiago de Cuba. Sixty-four rebels are captured, tortured and executed. Castro is imprisoned with 25 of his compatriots.

1955 Amazingly, Castro is freed, and he departs to Mexico where he continues plotting his revolution.

1956 After a disastrous boat ride from Mexico, Castro and 81 revolutionaries land in Cuba's Oriente province. Batista's army is waiting, and only 16 revolutionaries survive — including Fidel Castro, his brother Raul and Che Guevara.

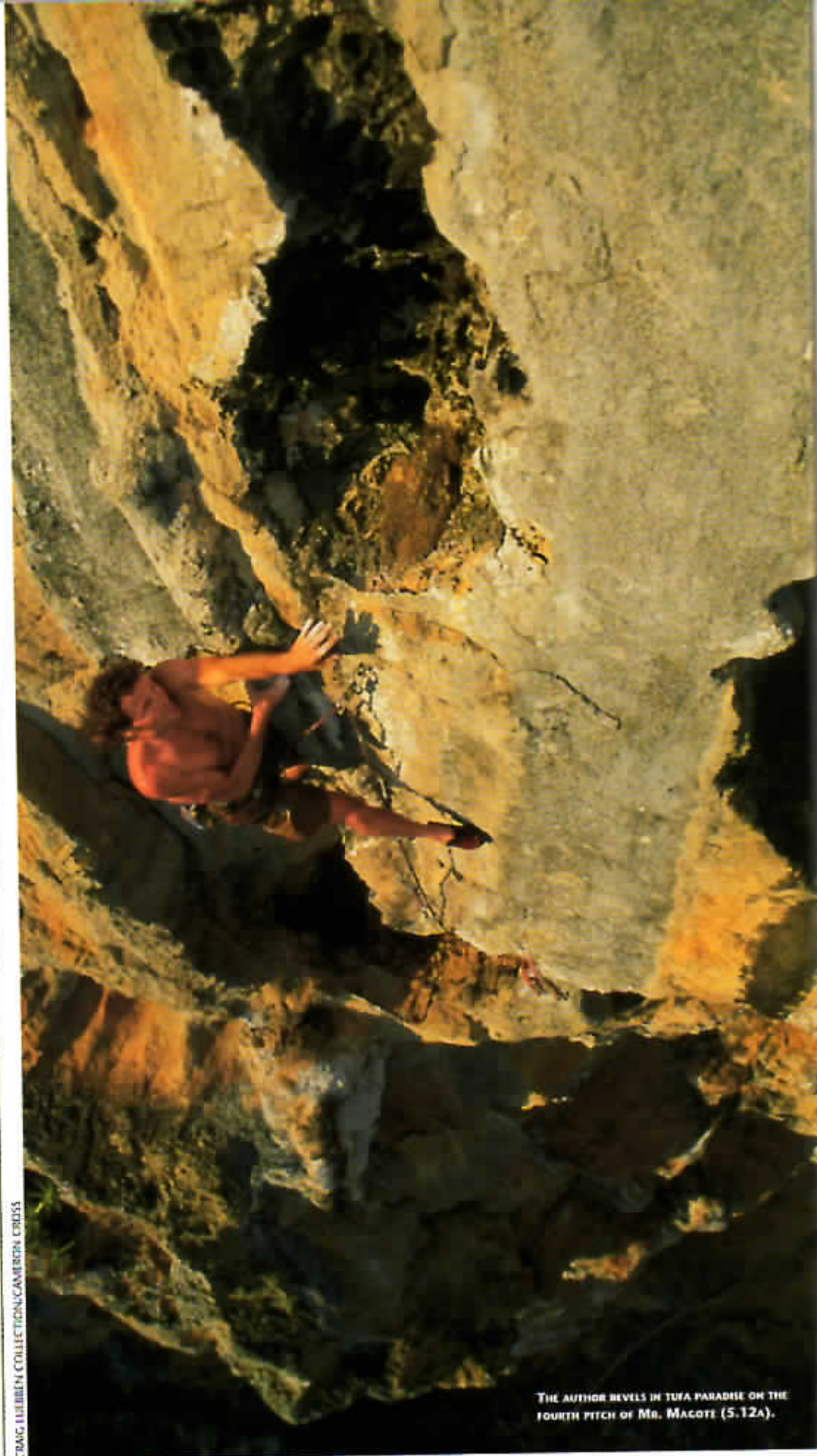
1957-1958 The rebel army grows and launches many successful campaigns from the Sierra Maestra mountains in southeastern Cuba.

1959 The revolutionaries prevail, and Batista escapes into exile with almost \$300 million. Fidel Castro assumes control of Cuba. Soon afterward, the CIA begins plotting to oust Castro in order to protect US commercial interests in Cuba.

1960 Castro fails to hold the elections that he promised. He signs a pact with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, and Cuba becomes a Soviet satellite. President Dwight Eisenhower refuses to purchase the previously contracted Cuban sugar, and Cuba nationalizes all US property on the island. Eisenhower bans exports to Cuba.

1961 Washington breaks diplomatic relations with Havana, and President John F. Kennedy bans US citizens from traveling to the country. The CIA sponsors the Bay of Pigs invasion by a small army of Cuban exiles. Kennedy withdraws air support after the exile forces invade the Bay of Pigs. Castro's forces overwhelm the invaders, killing 114 and capturing 1,189 men. The US denies involvement on the world stage, but the truth soon comes to light. Kennedy later reflects that this was the most embarrassing debacle of his life. Cuba officially announces its conversion to a Marxist-Leninist state.

1962 The Soviet Union places



CRAIG HUBBEN COLLECTION/CAMERON CROSS

THE AUTHOR REVELS IN Tufa PARADISE ON THE FOURTH PITCH OF MR. MACOTE (5.12A).

Cubans may have little material wealth, but they have held fast to their strong personal ties with families and friends and, in spite of the grim circumstances, they seem to still have a powerful hope for a better future.

One Cuban asked me if I knew what communism was. Before I had a chance to respond, he broke in, "It's a period between capitalism and capitalism."

After equipping a number of routes in the Vinales Valley, Vitalio and Carlos accompanied us from northwest to southeast Cuba in search of rock — a total of 1,500 miles round-trip. We found several small outcroppings, including some 60-foot sea cliffs, but nothing to rival the climbing in Vinales.

One dirt road through the Sierra Maestra, the rugged mountains where Fidel Castro launched his revolution in 1958, grew increasingly rough until it was impassable. Rural Cubans soon appeared out of the mountains with shovels and pickaxes. They told us we were the first tourists to pass through in many years, then they kindly re-built the road for us. We were overwhelmed by the Cubans' generosity, as well their ingenuity in the face of a poor infrastructure and a scarcity of resources. Later on that trip, Vitalio and Carlos showed us their packs, which they'd constructed of duffel bags and car seat belts. The craftsmanship was so good you could hardly tell the difference between their makeshift bags and our expensive alpine packs.



Cameron has free-soloed some big routes in the Black Canyon and recently flashed all the pitches on Astro-man. Though he had little aid climbing and lead bolting experience, he jumped right onto the sharp end, drilling bolts from sketchy hooks.

When we arrived in Vinales, I noticed that Vitalio had taken to wearing white knee-length pants and a white tee-shirt — the same ensemble I had worn on the first trip. I was flattered by the gesture, and once again reminded of the youth of Cuban climbing. On our first afternoon back, Cameron, Vitalio and I set to work drilling the final pitch of the project I'd been forced to abandon, and the next day we redpointed all five pitches of Mr. Magote (5.12a).

The new route was just in time — since Armando and his girlfriend were staying at Oscar's house, Cameron and I needed to find other lodging. Realizing that the cave on the second pitch would make a comfortable bivy, we rigged up a fixed rope and set up camp. Each night we'd dine in Vinales, hit the clubs with some locals, then walk or hitch the two miles from El Palenque to the cliff's base. From there, a ten-minute hike and a 120-foot hanging jumar took us to our beds.

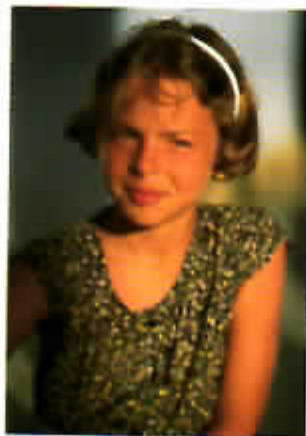
One such evening, while Cameron, Armando and I were sipping Cuba Libres at El Palenque, a bartender introduced himself as Raul. "Raul Castro?" I asked, facetiously referring to Fidel's brother Raul, Cuba's second in command. The bar erupted in laughter, and every time I returned during his shift, Raul and I would play the joke out again.

"Mi nombre?" he'd ask.

"Raul Castro," I'd respond, and the general hilarity would ensue.

Limestone climbing and tropical setting aside, Cuba's appeal to climbers lies in just such experiences. The country's true commodity isn't sugar or cigars, it's a populace of warm, friendly, generous people. Cameron and I bolted four new routes on our second visit and climbed until our forearms were dead. But in the end, it's the Vitalios, the Oscars, the Miguels and the Rauls who will bring me back to this controversial island over and over again.

Though most of his climbing mates spend their time traveling to the icy mountain ranges of the world, Craig Luebber prefers the balmy Caribbean climes. ▲



LIKE GRANDFATHER LIKE GRANDSON ON THE STREETS OF CAMAGUEY. UNCERTAIN AS IT IS, CUBA'S FUTURE LIES IN THE HANDS OF ITS CHILDREN.

nuclear missiles in Cuba, and the world stands on the brink of nuclear annihilation as Kennedy and Khrushchev play a game of nerves. Kennedy demands that the missiles be removed, and Khrushchev refuses. After several tense days, the Russians pull the missiles out. Kennedy orders as many Cuban cigars as he can get, then he imposes the trade embargo on Cuba.

1961-1963 The CIA makes many attempts to assassinate Castro.

1960s-80s Cuba exports revolution across Latin America and in Africa, shipping weapons and soldiers and training guerrillas.

1967 Revolutionary hero Che Guevara is captured and executed by the CIA and Bolivian military.

1989 The Berlin Wall falls.

1991 The Soviet Union begins to collapse and ends its subsidies to Cuba.

1991-1993 Cubans endure the "special period." Hunger is widespread across the country.

1996 After passing through Cuban airspace, a civilian plane flown by Cuban ex-pats is shot down by Cuban fighters in international airspace. Riding the tide of anti-Castro sentiment spurred by the incident, Senator Jesse Helms and Representative Dan Burton push the "Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act" through Congress, severely tightening the trade embargo. Cuban citizens suffer because they cannot receive US medicine or food. Ex-President Jimmy Carter says, "I think of all the things that have ever been done in my country, this is the stupidest."

1992-1999 The United Nations repeatedly condemns the US trade embargo, and Pope John Paul II calls the embargo "unjust and ethically unacceptable." Though talk of opening US-Cuban relations is rife, the Helms-Burton act has made changing the policy much more difficult. President Clinton no longer has the power to lift the embargo without congressional approval.

— C.L.

Back in Colorado, I was burning to finish the route, and I couldn't get Cuba out of my head. I rounded up another team, 56-year-old Armando Menocal, who was on the first trip, and 18-year-old Cameron Cross, and we headed back to the island.