



CUBA'S UNDERGROUND MOVEMENT

AN INCREDIBLE DISCOVERY
MAY BE JUST THE BEGINNING

BY SASHA DIGIULIAN
PHOTOS BY CAMERON MAIER

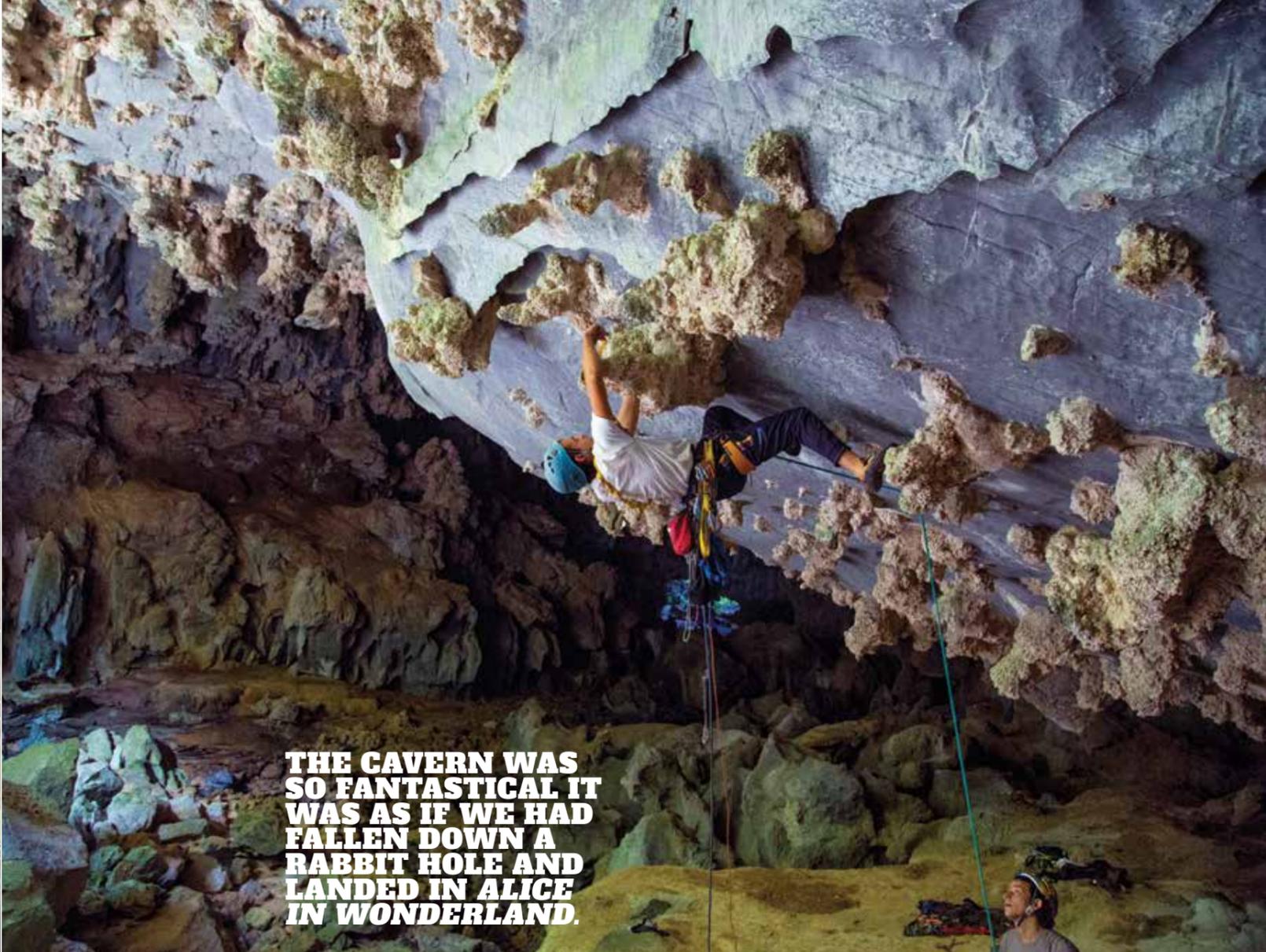
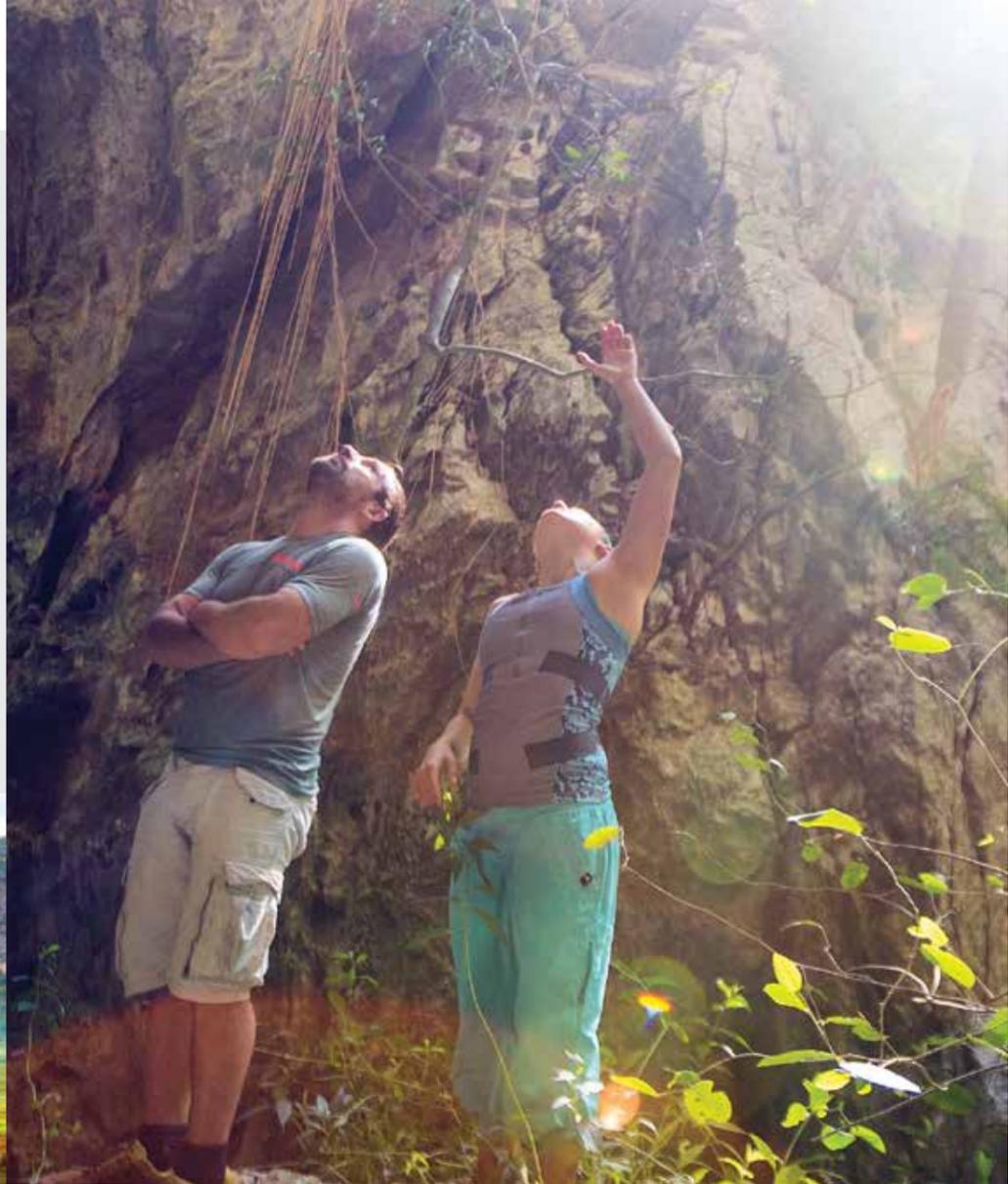
As we hiked across grassy flatlands to the Salon de los Gigantes, an enormous cave near Viñales, Cuba, we had no sense that epic climbing lay just ahead. Then the entrance to a cavern appeared. I stepped in and went slack-jawed—a rope-length overhead hung some of the most spectacular tufas I'd ever seen. The cavern was so fantastical it was as if we had fallen down a rabbit hole and landed in *Alice in Wonderland*. Equally incredible, this world-class crag didn't have a single route.

Over the next 10 days our crew of local developers, Yaroby Garcia Martinez, Fidel Almeida, Jorge "Tito" Morales, and the legendary German climber Alex Huber, would bolt two lines out the cave, send one and explore.

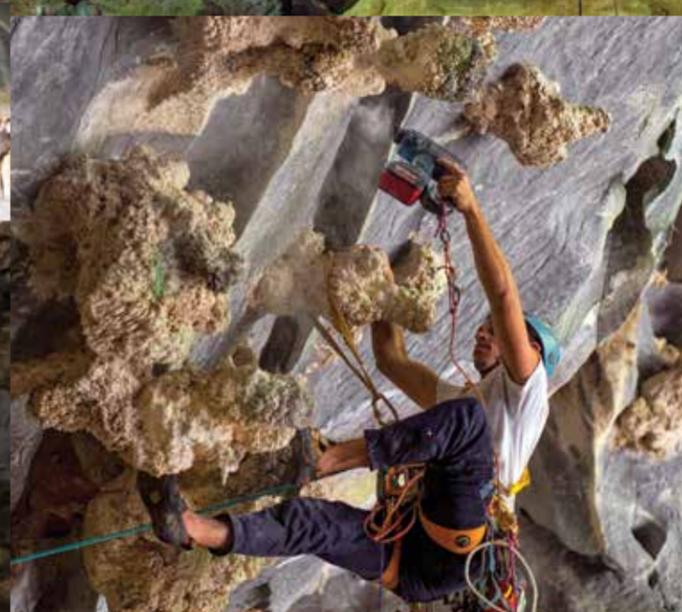
Despite a history that dates back to the 1990s and numerous magazine articles, climbing in Cuba is just beginning. Besides finding the Salon de los Gigantes, we visited established crags that still have potential for amazing new climbs, and saw untold areas and crags without a single route. In fact, the potential for Cuba is so vast it could become a major destination. **Just add bolts.**

WELCOME TO CUBA

Cuba is only 90 miles from the United States, but it is over 50 years away. The first thing we noticed when we stepped out of the airport in Havana was the vintage cars from the 1950s, the result of an embargo that goes back over 50 years. During our three-hour taxi ride from Havana to the climbing center of Viñales, we felt like we were in a time machine. In the Viñales valley (photo, below), horses were hitched just outside of residences. Viñales is also the hitching post for 80 percent of Cuba's climbing, roughly 200 routes, many established by Armando Menocal, Cameron Cross and Craig Luebben in the late 1990s.



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EQUIPPING THE ROUTE

We selected a line that stacked out a pattern of tufas that seemed more like petrified vegetables than stone.

Drilling out the often horizontal roof was arduous, and going ground up—the only way possible—we had to sling and hang from tufas that looked as if they had been sprayed on the wall. In the above photo and the one to the right, Tito Morales shows how the work is done. Eventually, our line grew to over 100 feet.



YAROBY SAID HE PREFERENCES TO BOLT ROUTES RATHER THAN CLIMB THEM.

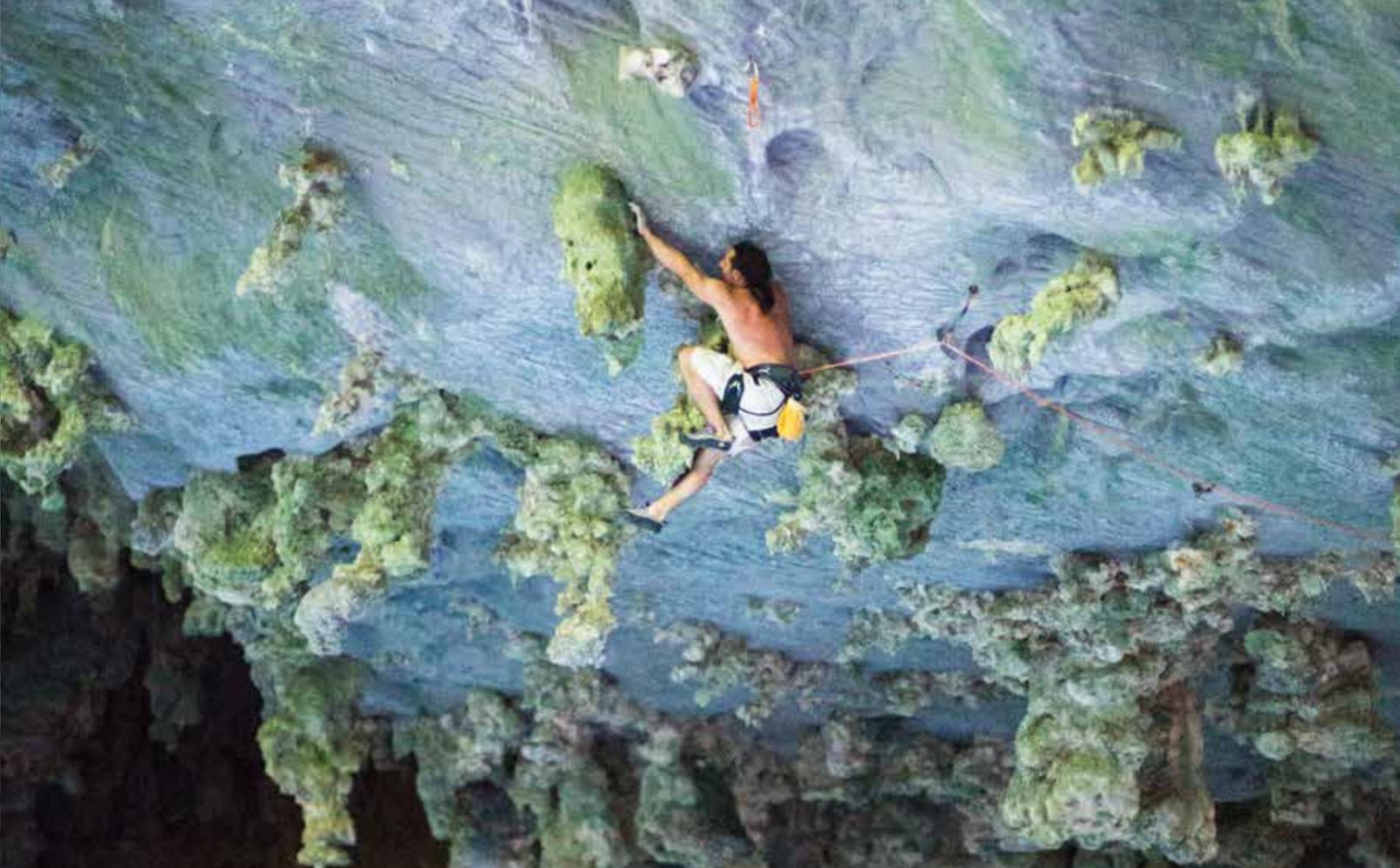
THE FANATIC

Yaroby Garcia Martinez, in the photo to the right, is one of Cuba's main developers and one of the most fanatical first ascensionists I have met. He is fearless when it comes to exploring new climbs to bolt, and his energy and psych are contagious. He said he prefers to bolt and to develop climbs rather than climb them. For him, his passion is in this exploratory mission of the sport. Together we made a good team because, honestly, I prefer to climb than to bolt!

THE CUBAN SANCTION

For the Cuban government to recognize and support a sport, it has to be globally recognized or in the Olympics. Since climbing is neither, in 2013 the government demolished the climbing gym in Viñales and banned climbing. Climbing, though, continued. During our trip we were free to climb and explore under the guise of "trekking," an acceptable definition that lets the sport fly under the radar.

Since climbing isn't an official sport, there are no climbing-gear shops—Cuban climbers such as Fidel Almeida and Rafa Levya Caberea, in the photo to the left, rely on visiting foreigners for their ropes, harnesses, shoes and other equipment.



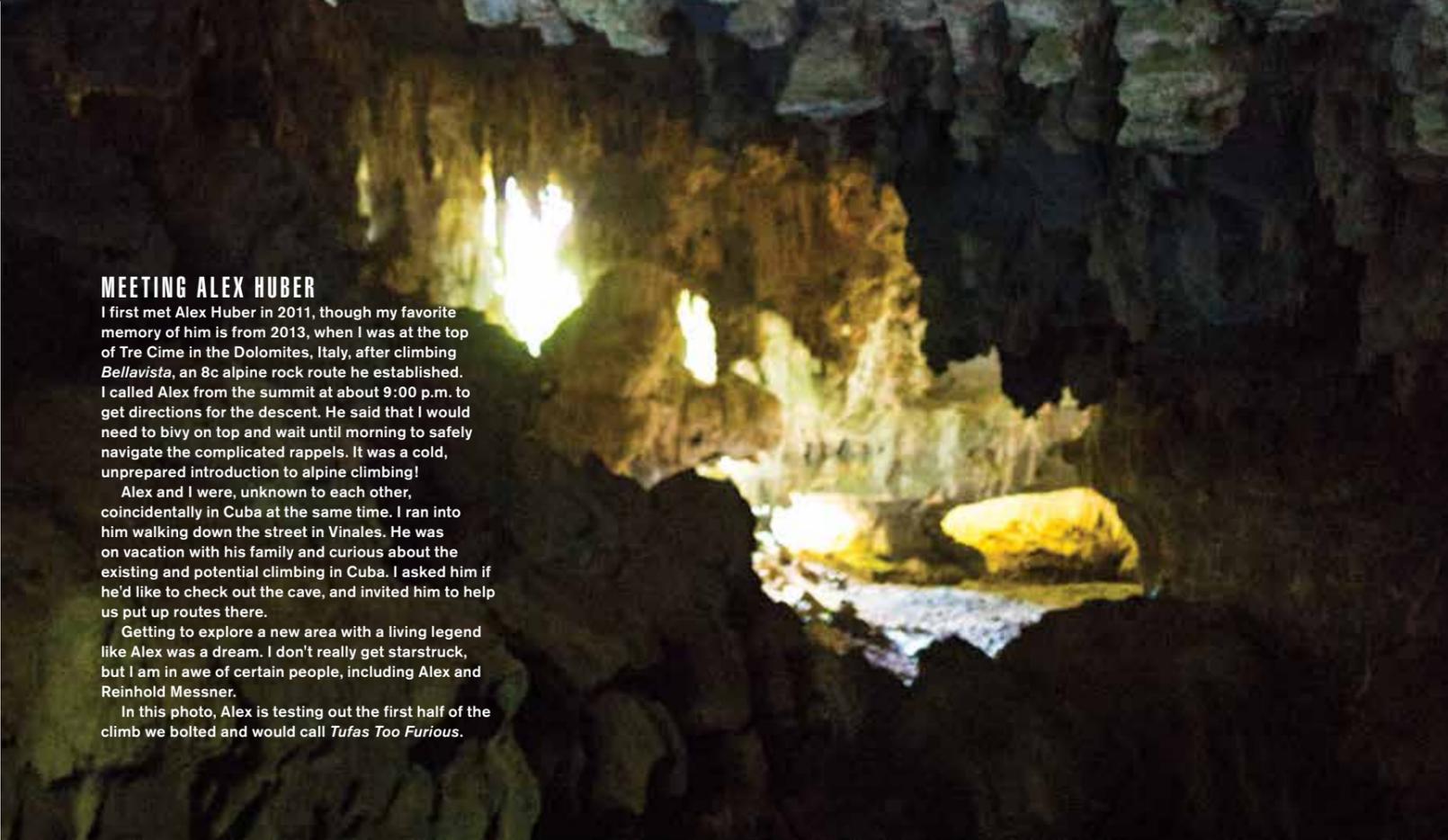
MEETING ALEX HUBER

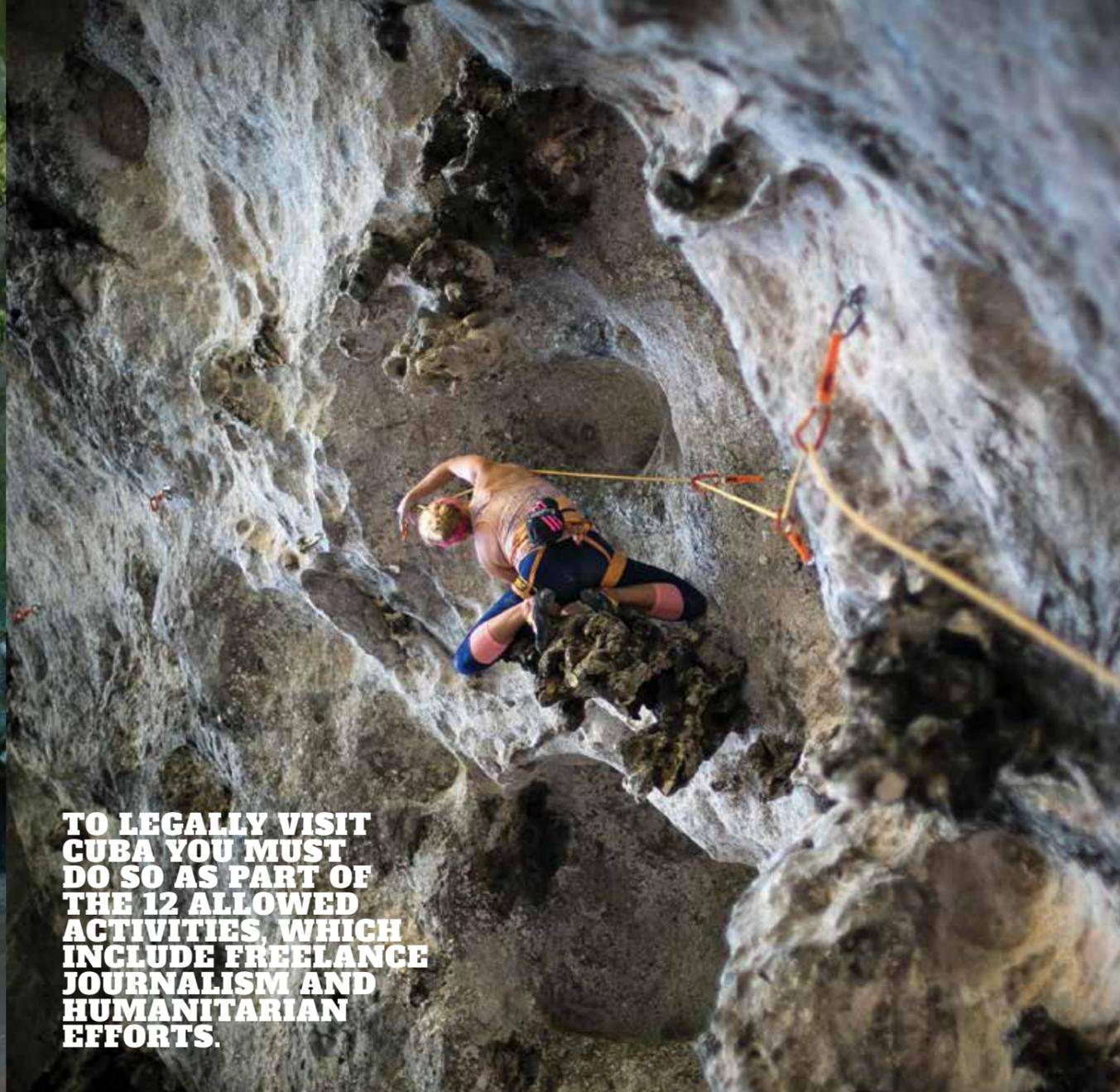
I first met Alex Huber in 2011, though my favorite memory of him is from 2013, when I was at the top of Tre Cime in the Dolomites, Italy, after climbing *Bellavista*, an 8c alpine rock route he established. I called Alex from the summit at about 9:00 p.m. to get directions for the descent. He said that I would need to bivvy on top and wait until morning to safely navigate the complicated rappels. It was a cold, unprepared introduction to alpine climbing!

Alex and I were, unknown to each other, coincidentally in Cuba at the same time. I ran into him walking down the street in Viñales. He was on vacation with his family and curious about the existing and potential climbing in Cuba. I asked him if he'd like to check out the cave, and invited him to help us put up routes there.

Getting to explore a new area with a living legend like Alex was a dream. I don't really get starstruck, but I am in awe of certain people, including Alex and Reinhold Messner.

In this photo, Alex is testing out the first half of the climb we bolted and would call *Tufas Too Furious*.





TO LEGALLY VISIT CUBA YOU MUST DO SO AS PART OF THE 12 ALLOWED ACTIVITIES, WHICH INCLUDE FREELANCE JOURNALISM AND HUMANITARIAN EFFORTS.

FIRST PROJECT

Tufas Too Furious was actually our second route choice. On our first day we bolted the line you see here. We didn't get to complete it because the top was swarming with wasps. Our unfinished line was less inverted and had a chimney, but was as interesting as *Tufas Too Furious*, deeper in the cave.

ALONG FOR THE RIDE

This taxi driver (right photo) shuttled us around every day, blasting American rock music the entire 90-minute drive to the cave and back.



CUBA LIBRE

Cuba has been closed to American tourism since the early 1960s, when the two nations nearly fought in a nuclear conflagration. Despite that, Cuba became a popular vacation destination for Europeans and Canadians. In the above photo, I tackle Craig Luebben's superb *Cuba Libre*, a three-pitch 7a+ and one of Cuba's first routes, from 1999, on the Cuba Libre wall.

Today, relations with the United States have warmed, the embassy in Havana has reopened, and travel restrictions have relaxed, although tourism per se remains illegal. To legally visit Cuba you must do so as part of one of the 12 allowed activities, which include freelance journalism and humanitarian efforts. Be advised that credit cards typically don't work in Cuba. Bring cash. For more information on legal travel to Cuba, go to www.treasury.gov/resource-center.

THE SEND /

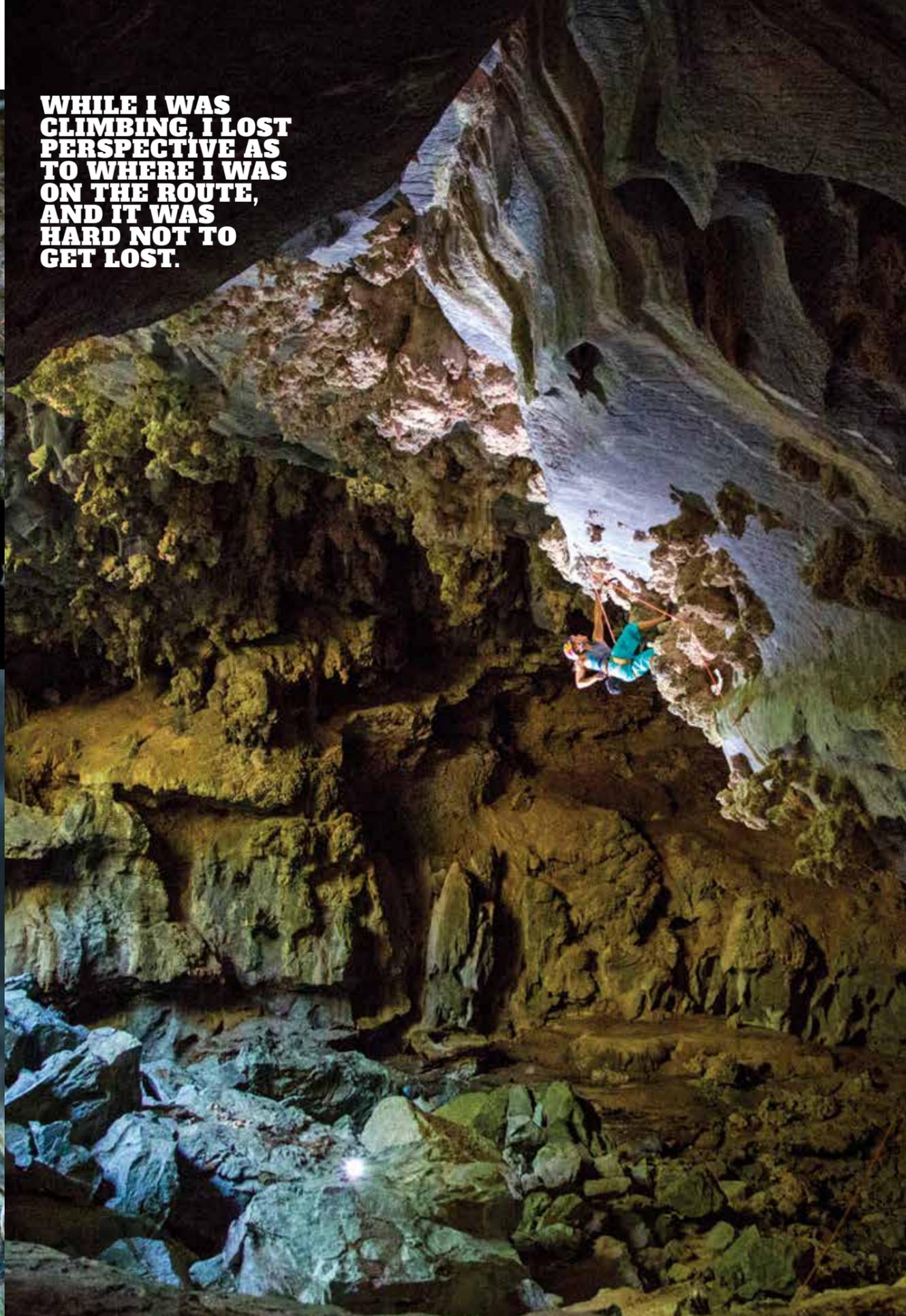
The photo to the far right is the first ascent of *Tufas Too Furious*, which we climbed in two sections because of an obvious break where we could switch to a second rope to avoid rope drag. This first section that I am on was around 8a, and the route overall was about 8c. It was actually challenging to associate a grade with this type of climbing because the nearly horizontal movement was so different from normal overhanging pulling.

In the lower photo I'm just beginning *Tufas Too Furious*, and have about 20 more bolts' worth of climbing to go. Climbing through the sea of tufas was confusing, and I sometimes got lost and headed out on the wrong tufas.

The near right photo is the final section of *Tufas*—daylight at last!



WHILE I WAS CLIMBING, I LOST PERSPECTIVE AS TO WHERE I WAS ON THE ROUTE, AND IT WAS HARD NOT TO GET LOST.



Sasha DiGiulian
sponsored athlete and jerky lover

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