



## CUBA'S BANDIT CLIMBERS

**“Are you climbers?”** asked the guard with a chestnut face, Pancho Villa mustache, and eyes as dark and serious as wasps.

“Sí.”

“Climbing is imposible. Es ilegal,” said the official.

To get to Cuba we had hopped four flights, spent two days on a layover in Cancún, paid out untold dollars, endured three hours in customs, and sat through a jostling van ride west from the capitol city of Havana. Now, the storied limestone of the Viñales Valley was within our grasp, and it was closed to climbing.

After a heated exchange with the guard, we learned that in between the time we had planned the trip and actually gone on it in 2012, the Cuban government had soured on rock climbing. Technically, climbing never had been state-sanctioned and therefore was an illegal activity, but until now it hadn't been on anyone's radar. What had changed? I theorized that the government saw the growing sport and the freedoms it promoted as a threat. Or it hadn't figured out how to

monetize and regulate climbing.

We hung our heads and trundled back down the dusty road toward the farm town of Viñales.

You could say that Viñales rock climbing kicked off in the late 1990s when Armando Menocal, who founded the Access Fund and Access PanAm and is of Cuban lineage, regaled his friend Craig Luebben, an American climber and guide who was always keen for adventure, with tales of Thailand-like limestone just 100 miles off the Florida coast.

Luebben arrived in Viñales drill in hand and set to work on the tufaed limestone, establishing so many routes that the locals nicknamed him “Mr. Mogote,” a nod to the innumerable mogotes, or limestone formations, that encircle Viñales.

In the ensuing decade word spread of the Viñales Valley, and Viñales became a destination for Europeans, Canadians and daring Americans willing to overlook a few American rules.

After being thwarted by the guard, we milled around town, then that evening crept up to *Cueva de la Cabeza Vaca* (The Cow's Head Cave), the area's showpiece crag, to have a look. A few undeterred climbers had taken to the overhanging stalactite-dripping cliff, but it was a young Cuban traversing the base that caught my attention.

Henri had the stout frame of a wrestler and the darting eyes of a kid with something to hide. I made small talk, and he raised his eyebrows in a no-shit sneer when I described our plight.

“Meet me in the plaza tonight, and we will talk about climbing,” he said.

Over dinner, we struggled with our predicament. Why would climbing be banned? Our hostess, Elisa, thought it was an issue of medical services. Other Cubans said the government was afraid because climbers can access places that the government can't.

Relations between the government and climbers had always been thin. While most foreign climbers until now hadn't had too many problems, Cubans caught on the stone could be reported or even arrested.

Now, though, the fate of climbing was uncertain for everyone, and our dreams of quality tugging were being stamped out by a Communist dictatorship.

Cubans have no doubt been dealt a rough hand. Few households earn even \$1,000 a month, and most subsist on a quarter of that and look to tourists and climbers to supplement their incomes by renting rooms and providing meals and transportation. The hardships have forged self-reliance. Expansive backyard gardens of tomatoes, avocados and mangos flourish in the rich, caramel-colored soil, and chickens and pigs roam nearly every yard. Cars are Frankenstein-like assemblies of available parts, and tire-patching shops are open 24 hours a day. Simple pleasures abound—passionate conversation among friends, a late night of dancing to local music, the rich pull of a hand-rolled cigar.

I felt guilty for being upset that we couldn't climb in a place where people thrive even without the liberties, conveniences and luxuries we enjoy in the States. Whether it's a leaky oil pan or a nationwide

## VANTAGE POINT

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ban on their life's true passion, Cubans approach everything with ingenuity and a willingness to deal with the unexpected. Could we do the same?

**We waited for Henri** in the town square that night, our backsides sticking to sweaty plastic chairs, and sipped rum and cola under the buzzing fluorescent lights of a sidewalk bar. Henri materialized out of the shadows shrouded in a hooded sweatshirt and pulled up a chair.

"Mojito!" he said and nervously scanned the surroundings as he crushed a sprig of mint into the bottom of his glass.

"Tomorrow morning we will go climbing," he said. "But right now, we should go to a party." A smirk slowly wiped the paranoia from his face.

The next morning A sugary rum hangover buzzed in my head like a swarm of wasps, and by the time I was fully operational, we were piled five deep into a sputtering 1957 Chevy, reggae pulsing from the speakers. To avoid suspicion, we spilled out of the car half a mile short of our destination and wandered past a crumbling

farmhouse, crossed a chocolate-colored creek, then waded through a cornfield. Leading the charge, Henri ducked out of the stalks and into the jungle. Suddenly, limestone appeared. Gently overhanging and totally engulfed by the surrounding foliage, it was the Cuban Crag X. Not even Google Earth could have found the place.

After having given up on climbing, we happily tied in and lapped the half-dozen routes. The climbing wasn't the 40-meter, overhanging stalactite grappling we had drooled about, but each move felt like a present.

Despite the thrill of climbing on a secret crag, we couldn't escape the feeling that a secret government task force would emerge any minute from the jungle to arrest us and cart us off to a communist internment camp. The normal crag banter was quelled to hushed tones. What would actually happen if we got busted?

Over the next week, Henri and his ragtag climber buddies continued to give us the locals' tour, dodging the guards and telling us that we were the first foreigners to visit that particular crag.

One day Henri brought a new friend along, a muscular and stoic kid with a fresh buzz cut and deep-set eyes. "Yondry" was an art teacher at a local grade school and was surprised that we were surprised that he had climbed 5.13 within his first year of climbing.

Through the laughter and conversation of dinner that night, Yondry leaned across the table as if to tell me a secret. "Tomorrow I think I will

not go to work," he said. "We will go to climb at a new place."

Departing the next morning from a cluster of dilapidated houses down the road, we dashed into the trees to avoid being seen. The new wall, like many of the others we had visited, was almost completely obscured by the jungle. Yondry had bolted four lines so far on the blue, white and orange panel of stone, and he recited the grades of each like a proud parent. Henri pulled a borrowed drill and a sling of bolts and hangers from his pack and motioned for me to take them.

"The line to the right will be very good. You should bolt it," Yondry said.

Despite never having drilled a single bolt, let alone an entire route, I shrugged and agreed. After climbing a parallel line, I set to work with the decrepit drill loaned to them by an older Cuban climber. The rock was solid, and the route barely needed any cleaning save for a few crumbling footholds. I cranked down the last bolt and hit the dirt covered in a slimy mixture of sweat and limestone dust.

Later that afternoon, I tied in and made a whole-hearted flash attempt at the route. Terminally pumped two bolts from the top, I sagged on the rope and shook out my arms. Back on the ground, I untied and offered Henri the sharp end. After several minutes of protest, he accepted. Starting up the steep pods, he moved quickly and fluidly, his compact frame flicking between the holds. Flowing through the pocketed deadpoint crux, he clambered up the final 15 feet of sharp jugs and clipped the chains. With big smiles and a fist bump, we christened the route *El Regalo Perfecto*—the perfect gift.

Drenched in sweat, we lounged in the dirt, laughing and

munching on the fresh pineapples that Henri had brought. For what seemed like the first time, we all let our guard down, content just to be out climbing.

Henri, Yondry and most of the Cuban climbers have never left the island. Maybe they never will. Everything they know about climbing was shared by visiting climbers or learned from the tattered pages of old magazines the guests left behind. Cuban climbers live in a world of circumstantial confinement and rules, and the constant threat of punishment for doing what they love—a life, as Americans, we can't even imagine. Still, as so many of us have found out one way or the other, whether it is sneaking into Cuba or racing a storm to the summit of a Patagonian peak, the freedom of climbing is often worth the risk.

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Postscript: Since 2012, climbing access in Cuba has gradually improved. "Everyone has learned to live with the so-called closure," says Armando Menocal. "Officials pretend that all access is closed, while climbers pretend to obey, as they go about climbing. All sides seem content. The bottom line is that everyone is climbing. New routes, even bolt replacements, are continuing in Viñales. Every few months a ranger will happen upon climbers and politely ask them to move on. No one has ever been cited. Indeed no one has ever seen a copy of the closure, and some doubt it ever was put to paper."

For more information on access, visit [cubaclimbing.com](http://cubaclimbing.com).

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