

Classic Cuba on Two Wheels

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Do you want to know how to explore the most fascinating routes of the Caribbean on two wheels? As we didn't have our bike, we decided to join a motorbike tour to discover Cuba. The result was an exceptional eleven-day road-trip that put together a good mixture of culture, scenery, history and Caribbean beaches along the tarmac.

The start and finish point of our trip was in Havana. We met the group and our guides in the evening of day one, for our first briefing. With

every single rider sharing the same passion - motorbikes - the ice was broken very quickly. Soon, everyone was engaging in conversations about the motorbikes we had left at home. Our guides had to interrupt the jovial moment to announce a series of rules for the sake of the tour. Rule number one was stated with the necessary gravity it demanded: no alcohol when driving. No one seemed to be disappointed about that, we were a witty but conscientious gang. Anyway, the evenings would offer enough opportunities to indulge in the pleasures of rum!



[previous page] The Bacunayagua Bridge is the highest bridge in Cuba and is often considered one of the seven wonders of civil engineering

One of the days was spent riding the exciting road that twisted through the Escambray mountain range



For the following ten days, we would meet religiously for the briefing of the day, after breakfast, never missing one, despite all of us being eager to hit the road.

First, we left on a loop towards the West, to Viñales, passing through Las Terrazas Reserve. Shortly after leaving Havana, we had our first stop at Port Mariel for some history. In 1978, thousands of people fled the country through this port. It all started when four Cubans crashed a bus into the Peruvian embassy, with the aim of asking for asylum. Hundreds followed their example,

until Fidel announced that the borders were open to whoever wanted to leave. 100,000 Cubans took their chances and left. This was a cunning way for Fidel's regime to get rid of dissidents, yes, but also of imprisoned criminals, all of whom were accepted by the US.

It was lunch time when we made it to Las Terrazas, so we picked a table with a view of the waterfalls and enjoyed the creole food as much as the views. The serenity of the place hardly prepared us for what happened next. We had almost arrived in Viñales when a

Trinidad is one of the highlights of the Edelweiss tour. Waiting by the motorbike, next to the stairs that lead from the Plaza Mayor to Casa de la Musica, in the heart of the city

The bikers enjoying each other's company on one of the breaks along the coast



[top] There was plenty of time for a swim at Playa Ancón, next to Trinidad

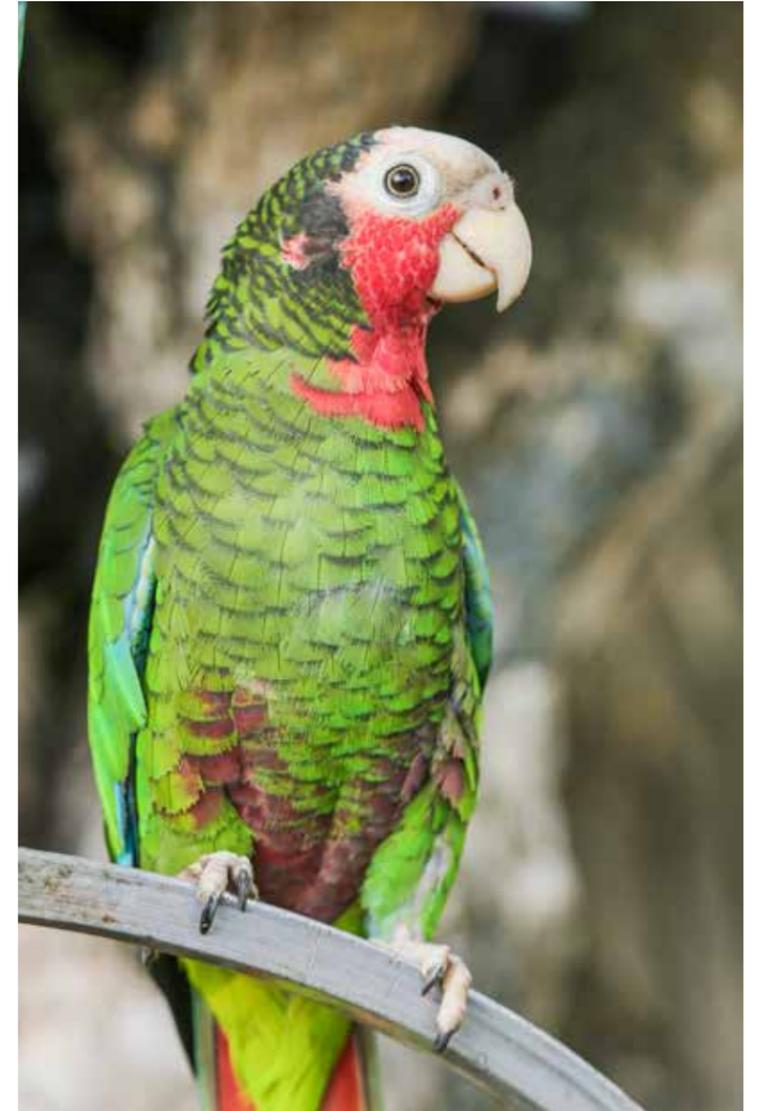
[right] The finca's parrot stays outside welcoming visitors



Jorge's first cohiba cigar, during a stop to visit the factory's museum and the old locomotives



No alcohol while driving, therefore we often stopped for a guarapo (sugar cane juice)





The old timers, mostly American brands, such as Chevrolet, Cadillac, Ford, and Dodge, are known in Cuba as the Almendrones because of their resemblance to almonds

small incident slowed the group down. In front of us, a pack of dogs approached the road to cross it. Jorge reduced his speed expecting the dogs to pass before we reached them, but we were surprised by one of the dogs, who suddenly decided to turn back towards us. The impact was inevitable, and before we knew it we were on the ground. Our fellow bikers behind us immediately came to our rescue (that was when we found out that we were in no shortage of doctors and physical therapists in the group - to our good fortune!). In addition, the good policy of Edelweiss, the tour company, of keeping one guide at the front and

another at the tail of the group, meant there was immediately someone to check on the bike. The guide behind us, Anivar, was also the mechanic. Drivers and machine soon discharged - all's well that ends well - and without any major damage, we were back on the road in less than fifteen minutes.

The next day we concluded the loop and started heading East. The destination was Cienfuegos, the Pearl of the south, and the longest leg on the trip, almost 300 kilometres. However, before setting out, we had to tank up. This is usually a dull task when you are in a group, but, our guides found



an ingenious way to fill up fourteen motorbikes in less than twenty minutes. Everyone filled up from the same pump, while Domenico, the tour leader, noted down the number of litres per driver. At the end of the trip, we paid the accounts according to what each had spent. Brilliant and fast! We were ready to take the highway to the famous Bay of Pigs in the Ciénaga de Zapata National Park. This is the place that made the entire world sweat in 1961, when the US was defeated during their invasion of the Bay of Pigs, a debacle that led to the Cuban missile crisis, and when the Soviet Union agreed to install soviet

missiles on the island. There's no better way to learn about history than visiting the places where it all happened. After class, the break in the playground took us to a refreshing swim at the Cueva de los Peces - a deep sinkhole connected to the sea. We resumed the journey after that, driving another hour before our triumphant arrival at Cienfuegos, where a phenomenal sunset awaited us, along the city's bay! Priceless!

Another day took us to the heart of the Sierra del Escambray. We zigzagged through the lush green jungle until we reached the El Nicho

Cienfuegos is known as the Pearl of the South. Famous for its French architecture, the city was founded in 1819 by French immigrants. The Palacio de Valle is particularly beautiful with its Spanish-Moorish details



Anívar leaving the Alejandro Robaina finca, a farm that grows tobacco leaves in Pinar del Río province

National Park. After a very short hike we reached beautiful waterfalls that culminate in irresistible emerald-green pools. A swim followed by lunch seemed to be one of the groups' preferred activities. When we returned to the motorbikes, we saw what turned out to be yet another common sight throughout the trip: the bikes were surrounded by curious locals, who hardly ever got to see so many big bikes in one go. It was inevitable that wherever we arrived, very often we would be the object of interest and were photographed as much as the local attraction that we had come to visit.

The middle of the trip was a day of rest and it couldn't have been spent

in a better place, Trinidad, the most beautiful of the colonial cities. After a stroll through the historical city centre, half of the group headed to the nearby beach - Playa Ancon, while the other half decided to take another motorbike tour through the Escambray mountain range.

We only woke up to a threatening sky once. The clouds were heavy as we left the hotel, wondering whether we would stay dry all day. The journey took us through the Valle de los Ingenios (see page xxx) to Santa Clara, where the memorial of Che Guevara quietly waits for admirers. The atmosphere is almost religious. Silence is imposed by two guards who stand in the room where



Another favourite: a stop at the El Nicho Waterfalls for a swim in its beautiful emerald-green pools

his bones lie, reinforcing the idea of this being a sanctuary. The guards' fierce eyes seemed to say: "Quiet! There's a hero here." It was in Santa Clara that Che won the last battle of the Cuban revolution, by derailing a train that was taking supplies of ammunitions and weapons to the troops of General Fulgencio Batista, the dictator in charge. Santa Clara's memorial and the armoured train museum are just a few examples of how the revolution serves a new category of tourism: can we call it socialist tourism, or revolution tourism? Every so often we were invited to see the trains that were attacked by Che, or the tanks that were driven by Fidel. Even the Granma, the boat that brought Fidel and his rebels from Mexico and that was practically shipwrecked as they landed, is on display in a

square. Propaganda, even if subtle, is everywhere. Whereas there are barely any monuments of Fidel himself, his dead comandantes: heroes such as Che Guevara and Camillo Cienfuegos, are everywhere. Their images are exploited, perhaps because they are the best mementoes of the revolution. They appear on giant billboards, reminding everyone about the good things the revolution brought to the homeland. 'Patria o Muerte' (Homeland or Death) is one of the mottos most often seen.

We got away without any rain until lunch time, but as soon as we sat down at the table, a storm of heavy rain fell on the bikes, waiting outside. The temperatures didn't drop however, and the rain didn't last long either. So much so, that by

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One of the highlights of Santa Clara was a visit to Che Guevara's mausoleum and museum, where many photos of the revolution are on display

the time we had finished lunch, only the ponds on the street were proof that we had not been dreaming. Soon, we reached an impressive fifty-kilometre-long causeway that took us, literally, through the sea to the Santa Maria key, passing along a big outreach of mangroves, which was the habitat of many birds, including pink flamingos!

Being in such a lovely place, it made all the more sense that the next day would be our shortest leg. With only seventy kilometres to ride until our next accommodation, in Remedios, we stayed at the key the entire

morning, enjoying the sea. We only left after lunch, to visit a tobacco factory, where we had the unique and clandestine experience of smuggling cigars out of the factory's windows - buying them illicitly from workers who make a few extra CUCs this way.

Unfortunately we were approaching the end of the trip, and had to ride back to Havana. The bikes' odometers showed we had ridden around 1,800 kilometres, although the smiles on our faces showed we had been way further than that. What a trip! 🍷