

Cuban cycling

Cuba is on the cusp of change. But after a spectacular cycling trip, **Abigail Butcher** hopes it won't change too fast, or too much



Cuban delights: the peninsula at Cienfuegos



We're nearing the end of a two-hour cycle that has taken us along an empty, coastal road with the shimmering Caribbean Sea on one side, the other roughly divided fields broken with horses, cows and goats grazing under the blazing sun. As we draw closer to our destination, Trinidad, we pedal past stalls selling mangos, their fragrance giving me extra energy as I battle against the searing heat.

The last slog up a long, steep hill is rewarded when, at the top, we are greeted with a vibrant, cheerful mural announcing our arrival into the town. I'm in Cuba, and after five days

of cycling we've arrived in colonial Trinidad – a town frozen in time like the rest of this beautiful country. We cycle the last 10 minutes towards our *casa* – the family home where we'll stay for the next two nights – around cobbled streets, past street markets, children playing ball, dogs running around in packs and all generations sitting in their doorways chatting, smoking or laughing as they watch the world go by. Life in Cuba takes place in the street, and to absorb so much as we pass on bicycles is a privilege.

I'm on a nine-day tour with adventure travel company Explore, starting in Havana, pedalling through tropical forests to Viñales in the west, then the infamous Bay of Pigs and Cienfuegos to historic Trinidad before heading back to Havana.

I have had Cuba on my bucket list for donkeys' years. But with the historic shift in relations with the US, this year was time to go. There have been warnings for years that Cuba won't be the same forever, but these recent changes mean the Caribbean island is on the cusp of a tidal wave of change.

The US broke links with Cuba in the 1960s and any travel or trade between the two countries was banned. But in December last year, Barack Obama and Raul Castro (who took over from his brother Fidel in 2006) announced a thawing of relations. The two met for the first time this April, and a month later the US removed Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism and announced plans to resume ferry and air services between the two countries. On 20 July, the countries' embassies ➤

Who's writing?



Abigail Butcher is a freelance journalist specialising in health, fitness and travel with a passion for adventure, contributing to a wide range of publications. She has raced a yacht across the Atlantic, cycled the highest mountain pass in Colorado, trekked and skied the Indian Himalayas and is currently in training for the Oman Desert Marathon. She lives in Lymington, Hampshire, where she spends the summers sailing.

4 MORE... CUBAN ADVENTURES

Abigail Butcher with four more Cuban delights...

1 Walking

Explore offers a similar trip to our cycling excursion, with an eight-day walking tour of Western Cuba, staying in family guesthouses, exploring Havana and hiking through the Topes de Collantes mountainous tropical forest, Viñales and Trinidad. See www.explore.co.uk.

2 Diving

Cuba's warm 24°C (yearly average) waters are clear and pristine with hardly any coral destruction or pollution. The average visibility is 30 to 40 metres, and Cuba is home to 50 species of coral and 200 species of sponge. Captivating Cuba offers tailor-made diving in Maria La Gorda and Cayo Coco & Cayo Guillermo. See <http://captivatingcuba.com>.

3 Sailing

G Adventures offers a six-night sailing trip on a catamaran from Havana through the beautiful turquoise waters of the Canarreos Archipelago, stopping to snorkel or share a drink with friendly locals. See www.gadventures.com.

4 Horse riding

Wild Frontiers offers a 12-day riding trip in the fertile farmland of Pinar del Rio province, in the footsteps of Cuba's traditional *vaqueros* (cowboys). Spend up to five hours in the saddle each day, journeying through the foothills of the Alturas Pizarosas, Viñales Valley, Trinidad and the stunning Escambray Mountain range. See www.wildfrontiers.com.



Onwards and upwards: tough going in the heat

opened in each other's capitals.

The romantic images you see of vintage American cars roaming streets surrounded by crumbling, colonial mansions are accurate, and evidence that Cuba has been in a state of virtual 'lock-down' since the 1960s. Arriving in the country is like stumbling across a lost Amazonian tribe – under Fidel Castro's rule this nation existed almost away from the rest of civilisation.

It's not just changes brought by renewed relations with the US. Raul Castro is phasing out the 50-year-old ration system, allowing property to be bought and sold, and widening communication. Historically subject to the strictest internet censorship in the world, only around seven per cent of Cuba is currently online. But recently

'Life in Cuba takes place in the street, and to pass on bicycles is a privilege'

35 public wifi sights have been set up in 16 cities around the country (albeit too pricey for locals), and Raul has pledged that the entire country will be online by 2020.

All this change in such a short time sounds baffling, and it's also rather sad. There are huge expectations on the lifting of US sanctions, but with this freedom, privilege and opportunity will spring greed. And that will change Cuba for eternity.

We began our tour in Havana where I spent an afternoon wandering around alone, and have never felt so safe anywhere in the world. Meandering the backstreets, taking endless pictures of people, cars and crumbling facades – this is the most photogenic country I have ever visited – I came across nothing more than children playing with tennis balls and the occasional "hola bonita" with no feeling of intimidation. Long may that last.

Earlier that morning we had toured Havana's sites in open-top vintage American cars – most of which are now taxis, and most of which have had their huge gas-guzzling engines replaced with more fuel-efficient versions. How their owners could afford it I don't know. Most people here are employed

by the state on wages equivalent to around £10 a month, including our fantastic guide, Jaime (pronounced Huy-mai). They basically rely on the burgeoning number of tourists for tips.

Massive restoration projects are underway in Cuba's capital, including dredging in the bay to prepare it for an influx of cruise ships. I dread to think how that wonderful, sleepy seafront peppered with the odd bar and craft market will change in years to come.

We drove past the drab government buildings on Plaza de la Revolución (Revolution Square) to the banks of the Almendares River, sticky with chicken feathers from Afro-Cuban religious sacrifices. We continued along boulevards lined with flamboyant, yellow laburnum trees, marvelling

at the eclectic architectural mix, from 1950s American-style houses to colonial homes, drab communist high-rise apartment blocks and empty mansions. It's a pattern we get used to throughout the trip.

We paused in Hotel Nacional, an art deco landmark in Havana, reminiscent of Cuba's 1950s heyday and now a national monument, where the coffee and the view from the terrace are equally spectacular.

Cuba is as famous for its mojito as it is for American cars, and after a hot day cruising the capital, it was time for our first taste of the mint, rum and sugar cocktail so synonymous with this island. Where better than in the rooftop bar of the Ambos Mundos hotel, a former home of Ernest

Hemingway with incredible views of Havana from the roof.

Be warned: as befitting a sugar-producing country, sugar is king in Cuba, and the locals have a sweet tooth. After about day three I was craving salty antidotes to the sweetness.

After a supper of lobster, which is everywhere here and on many menus for £10, it was time to hit the sack before the first day of cycling.

I'd taken my SPD pedals and cleated shoes, and our cycle mechanic Fernando was armed with Allen keys to swap the pedals on my Stevens Galant hybrid bike – comfy for gentle cruising, but rather more heavy than the Trek road bike I ride at home.

The best months to visit Cuba for a bike tour are November to March, ►



Historic centre: in Cuba's capital, Havana



Colourful Trinidad: life in Cuba is on the streets

'The romantic images you see of vintage American cars roaming streets surrounded by crumbling, colonial mansions are accurate'

when it's a pleasant 25°C and less humid than during my June visit, when temperatures averaged 35°C and humidity around 90%. It did mean there were fewer tourists though.

We began by heading out to the eco-village of Las Terrazas near Pinar del Rio in the south west, past countryside of cornfields, palm trees and simple, colourful dwellings, then on into the rainforest reserve, where French settlers created coffee farms. We sipped eye-wateringly strong coffees in Maria's Bar while gazing out over mango, avocado and mariposa – a heavenly type of jasmine tree, and Cuba's national flower – before setting off on an undulating journey through the hills, bound for the fertile Viñales Valley.

Two sweaty hours later we retreated to the cool of our ever-present, air-

conditioned bus after lunch in Soroa, stopping at a tobacco farm to see how these precious leaves are grown, harvested and dried. The Cuban cigar is world famous, and I shall never again see one smoked without remembering how the leaves are painstakingly farmed and cigars made by hand in one of Havana's huge, hot factories.

Discovering the sights and sounds of real Cuba from a bike is a joy. We passed pineapple, banana and mango plantations, tobacco crops and agave trees in rich, red fertile land; guinea fowls and chickens scratching at the roadside, as we came into the Viñales Valley, with a backdrop of abrupt, limestone mountains.

Viñales was our first taste of life with locals in a casa. Cubans with houses big enough have been able to rent out rooms

in the past few years and are doing well. Think basic beds and bedding, towels and plumbing, but you do get extreme cleanliness. The Cubans take immense pride in their houses, and those who have been renting rooms are earning good money, as are the family-run restaurants, or *paladares*, which generally offer better value food than the state-run restaurants.

The food is improving here, along with everything else, but simple also means delicious – almost every menu features grilled fish (red snapper, tuna and mahi mahi prevail), along with shrimps, lobster, pork and chicken, always served with plain white rice and a salad garnish, for between £8–£15.

One member of my group had visited Viñales five years ago, when there were just two *paladares* in the town. Today, the entire main street is taken up with them: more signs that Cuba is changing.

After a quick visit to the cool limestone caves, we cycled through swamps to the Bay of Pigs (Bahía de Cochinos), famous for the failed 1961

invasion by the CIA. Many American lives were lost, but few Cubans (who were ready for the attack), and the road is marked with monuments.

While we cycle, we crunch over dead crabs and swerve to avoid live ones – this Caribbean isle is home to a variety of land crabs that scuttle down to the sea to breed. There's also a crocodile farm worth stopping in – breeding the crocs for preservation and for meat (increasingly eaten by tourists).

On we cycled to Cienfuegos, a city on the southern coast of Cuba and one of the richest, founded by sugar merchants in the early 1800s. The houses are huge here, a throwback from when the town's rich inhabitants built bigger and grander houses to prove their wealth. One, the Palacio de Valle in the bay, is now classed as a national monument, its Moorish turrets typical of much of the town's early architecture.

Cienfuegos – nicknamed Pearl of the South – was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2005, and its colourful centre is my favourite of the whole trip,

with a large, airy main square, Parque José Martí, lined with picture-postcard palm trees and vintage cars.

Nearing the coast, we're gagging for a swim. We might have only averaged around 40km a day, but in this heat and on heavier bikes than I'm used to, it seems like double the distance. We stop to take a welcome dip in the sea at Yaguanabo before cycling on to the pretty painted houses and cobbled streets of Trinidad.

This preserved town is a favourite of many tourists, and it's the place where I saw most evidence of tourism. It's still brimming with Cuban life though, with salsa dancing and fabulous mojitos (costing around £1.50) at Casa de la Musica and a fabulous nearby beach, Playa Ancon, with white sands and clear blue waters (and jellyfish, as I learned to my peril).

I spent two nights in Casa Zenia, which has Tripadvisor stripes for its friendly family (we managed to converse well, despite my lack of Spanish and their lack of English) and

delicious breakfast of home-made pineapple, papaya and guava cake, fruit, eggs, ham and cheese served in a spotlessly clean courtyard.

Every morning, as I stepped out of my air conditioned room into the gathering heat of the day, looked up at the blue sky, at the bright pink bougainvillea growing on the yellow and red walls of the casa courtyard, I made a wish that life could always be this simple. Cuba will change, I just selfishly hope it will not change too fast, nor too much. **AT**

CUBA – DON'T MISS!



- ☛ The Che Guevara memorial in Santa Clara. It's a piece of history you cannot leave Cuba without learning.
- ☛ Paladar La Guarida restaurant: spectacular food, views and client list.
- ☛ Visiting a cigar factory.
- ☛ Buying rum – Havana Club in its varying shades costs \$4-10 CUC.



Hey Che: portrait of the legend



LET'S GO

Want to do what Abigail did? Here's how you can...

Geography

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean, sitting 90 miles off the coast of Key West, Florida. The country is divided into 15 provinces and one special municipality, Isla de la Juventud, spanning 44,200 square miles in all.

Cuba has a population of 11.2 million, with European, African and North American on its native roots. Cuban Spanish is spoken, but English is becoming increasingly spoken – or at least understood!

Despite the American vintage cars, Cuba has a low environmental impact, so much so that in 2006 it was the only country in the world to meet the World Wildlife Fund criteria for sustainable development.

The tour

Explore's 15-day Cycle Cuba tour starts from £2,238 and includes return flights, eight nights' standard hotel accommodation, six nights in *casas* on a bed and breakfast basis, bike hire, transport and the services of a tour leader, driver and cycle guide. See www.explore.co.uk.

Get there

Virgin Atlantic flies directly from London Gatwick several times a week, although we flew Air France via Amsterdam from London Heathrow to Havana.

When to go

Cuba is hot and sunny, with a tropical climate. It cools during the dry season, from November to April, to as low as 15°C, but during the wet season (May to October) expect daily rain showers and hot, steamy temperatures of up to around 35°C. The peak tourist season runs from December to March and July/August.

What to take

I would advise taking your own SPD or basket pedals to make things easier – the terrain is undulating and in the heat you are working twice as hard as at home. Also remember padded shorts, plenty of sunscreen, a helmet and isotonic sports tablets/powder and rehydration powders, to replace lost salts in the heat.

Most everyday items that we take for

granted, from toiletries to clothing to batteries, are in short supply in Cuba, so if you can fit any extras in your suitcase you will make someone very happy with a small gift.

Currency and prices

Cuba operates a dual currency system. Visitors use the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC), which is shown in writing as \$₹. Locals use the Cuban Peso (CUP), which is worth far less than the CUC. Very few places take debit or credit cards, and very few ATMs accept foreign cards, so take the amount of money you will need in pounds sterling (with notes in good condition) and change it at a bank or large hotel. US Dollars are not accepted and you will be charged 10% commission to exchange them.

When paying for items, or a meal, find out beforehand whether the price is in CUC or CUP, and check transaction sums carefully.

When tipping, bear in mind that most Cubans exist on the equivalent of £10 a month, so any extra means a lot to them.