

Santiago de Cuba to Havana

written by Marcus | 13 February, 2018



22nd January to 13th February 2018

“So, why Cuba?” asks David, as we sip on Cuba Libres on his balcony in Havana. We’re still in short sleeves despite it being 9pm on a January evening with the heat of the day stored up in the chipped concrete all around us.

It’s a good question without a single answer. There are many aspects that make this island an appealing prospect for cycle tourists with flat, quiet roads, a few mountains for the grimpeurs, miles of sandy beaches and year round warm weather all wrapped up in a unique culture shaped by a complicated history. Alongside this, the message from other visitors had been a resounding “Go now before it changes!” as if the

western world was waiting offshore about to launch McDonalds restaurants and Tesco supermarkets at any minute. At the risk of sounding like a box ticking exercise, Cuba was also the last of the five remaining communist countries for us to visit and we were curious to see how it compared to the others.

There were a few reasons for us not to go as well though. The governing regime likes to keep control of what happens in their country which imposes certain restrictions on where you can stay which in turn limits where you can get to. As a result many cyclists travel without a tent as camping is prohibited, and stick to the main tourist regions. This style of travelling sounded less appealing with the lack of flexibility, lack of variety and inevitable increase in cost being common criticisms.

But then we found a report from bikepacking.com that gave us hope that there was another way to see the island. Following a mostly off-road route, three Americans rode from east to west and enjoyed the freedom to get away from the more popular areas, camping without being challenged while being welcomed with open arms by everyone they met. This was much more encouraging, and with a tip off for a deal of half price flights the decision was made to give it a go.



With the first turn of the pedals as we rode away from Havana airport my mouth curved into a smile. I'd missed that familiar feeling of freedom that comes from sitting on a bicycle with everything I need attached to it. Behind me Kirsty called out the directions to get us into town before speeding past me as we turned onto the almost deserted highway. There was no doubt that she was pedalling because for this trip we had broken with tradition and brought two bikes. Kirsty's was a vintage Specialized Hardrock bought for £15 from a charity shop while I was on a 30 year old Post Office bike complete with an enormous tray on the front and a Sturmey Archer 3 speed hub spinning away at the back.



Our trusty steeds at the start of their journey



Taking the cat for a stroll

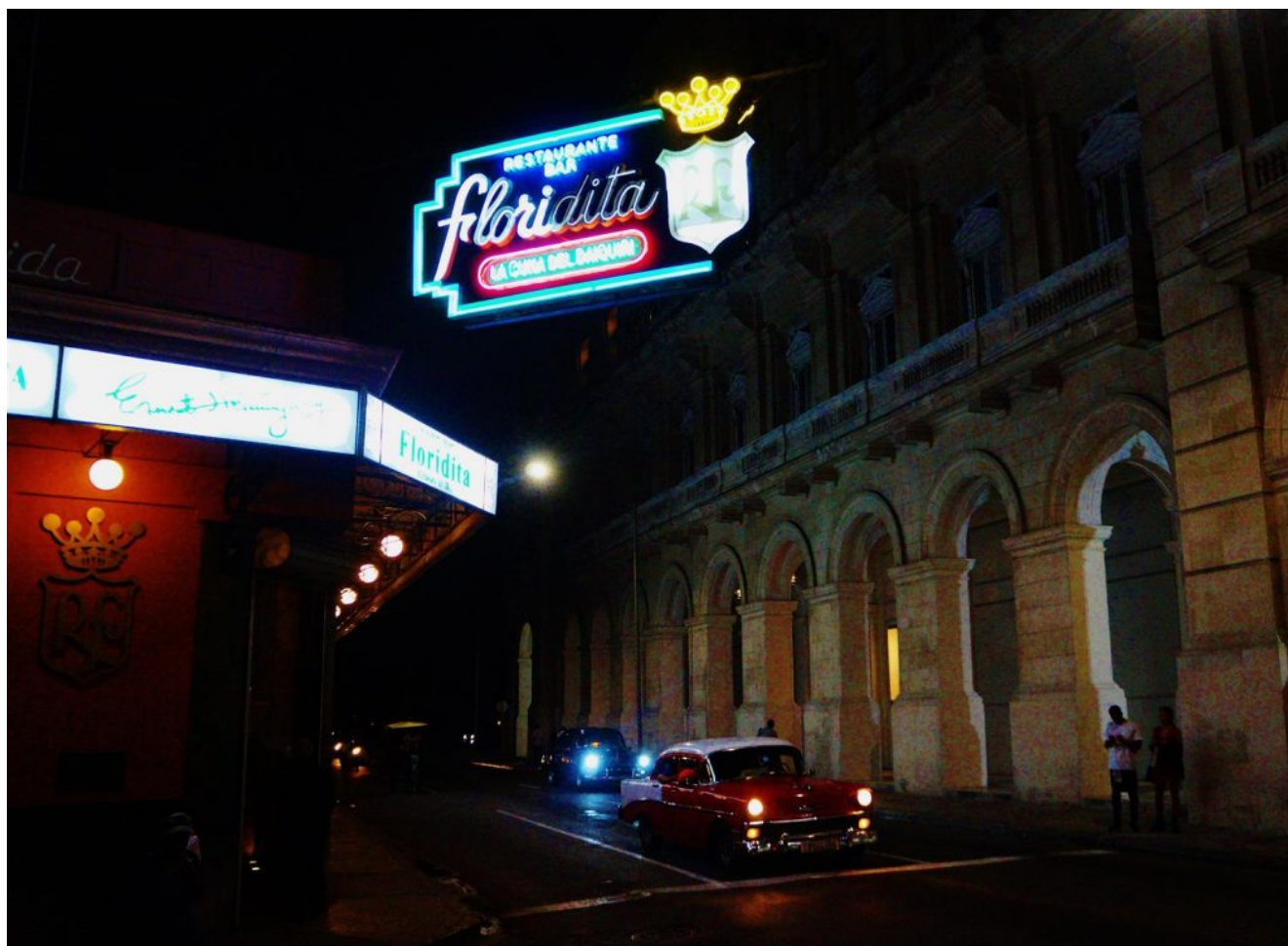




Fidel lives!



Bici-taxi



Ernest Hemmingway's favourite bar



Cigar factory



Fruit market

The first hurdle to our usual way of travelling is that

hosting foreigners in Cuba is illegal without a licence, which makes the concept of WarmShowers and Couchsurfing difficult in theory. You're supposed to stay in government run hotels or casas particulares – a licenced home stay. In practice we found that ex-pats from other countries who live in the suburbs are more likely to get away with it so we found ourselves staying with Maria and Jonathan for the first few days in Havana. A couchsurfing love story, Maria from St Petersburg was hosted by Jonathan in Strasbourg and the visit eventually resulted in a wedding. Through Couchsurfing we also met up with David, a Cuban who loves to help others enjoy his home country. Although we couldn't stay with him, he became an invaluable 'fixer' during our trip and also provided a fascinating insight into life on the island in 2018.



David, our new best friend

After a 17 hour journey on an uncomfortable bus with an over-enthusiastic air con system we arrived in Santiago de Cuba,

1000km east from Havana. David had arranged for us to stay with some of his family here so we spent the first night enjoying some wonderful Cuban hospitality. Fidel was no doubt turning in his grave in the cemetery round the corner as we tucked into rice and beans while our hosts showed us the latest dance moves. Music is intrinsic to everyday life in Cuba with rhumba and salsa rhythms pouring from every open window.



Santiago de Cuba



Marlene and her neighbour, our hosts in Santiago



Fidel Castro – 1926 – 2016



It seemed fitting to be beginning our ride skirting round the Sierra Maestra mountains where Fidel and Che set the wheels of the revolution turning in 1956. The foothills take us up away from the busy city and down past palm trees and colourful adobe houses. Life in this region seems to take place at a leisurely trot with motor vehicles few and far between and one horse power being preferred. Unfortunately one of the few trucks that does pass us manages to pull in a bit too soon after overtaking and forces Kirsty off the road. Her tyres get caught in a rut and she's promptly thrown from the bike. Of course it's her 'bad' knee that takes the brunt of the fall and it loses a layer of skin. It's a painful first day that will leave another scar that tells another story.



Into the Sierra Maestra mountains





By the time we reach the town of Manzanillo the hills have given way to huge plains of sugar cane, their tips bending in our direction of travel as the wind provides some welcome

assistance.



Sugar cane



You're never more than a few metres from a picture of Che

A huge screen in the town square is showing the final of the baseball league between home team Granma province and neighbouring Las Tunas. Everyone seems to be here and when the final whistle blows to seal the victory for Granma it's bedlam. From nowhere drums, cowbells, banners, whistles and stalls fill the square with noise and music and colour so we join in the spontaneous party that parades round the streets. Some of the best experiences when we're travelling happen by chance, a case of being in the right place at the right time.



Manzanillo town watching the big baseball game



Kirsty making some new friends



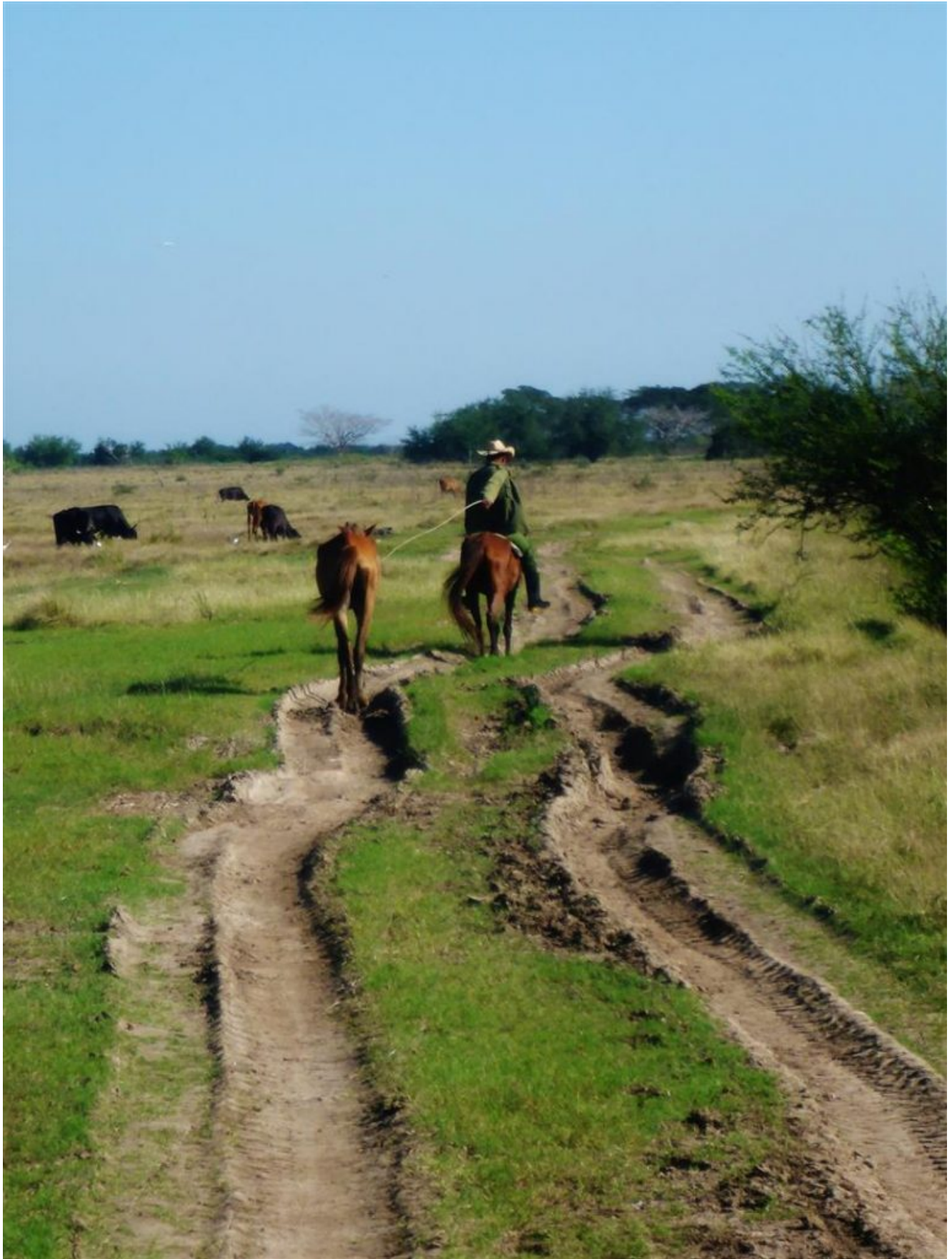
Post match party



Everyone was happy that Granma Province had won

As we continue west we dip on and off the route described in the [bikepacking.com](https://www.bikepacking.com) article. Affectionately named 'La Ruta

Mala' or 'The bad way' it follows rutted, muddy tracks, through thorn bushes that lacerate our legs, and into saddle high undergrowth. When the 'ruta' got a bit too 'mala' we find respite on the smoother carretera central, the main artery across the middle of the island. Although not as exciting as the rough roads this highway does have the advantage of being serviced by occasional roadside cafes to help keep us cool and hydrated as the temperature rise into the mid 30s. For 1 national peso we can buy an ice cream and another peso buys us a coffee. 1 national peso is less than 3 British pence.



Sharing the road



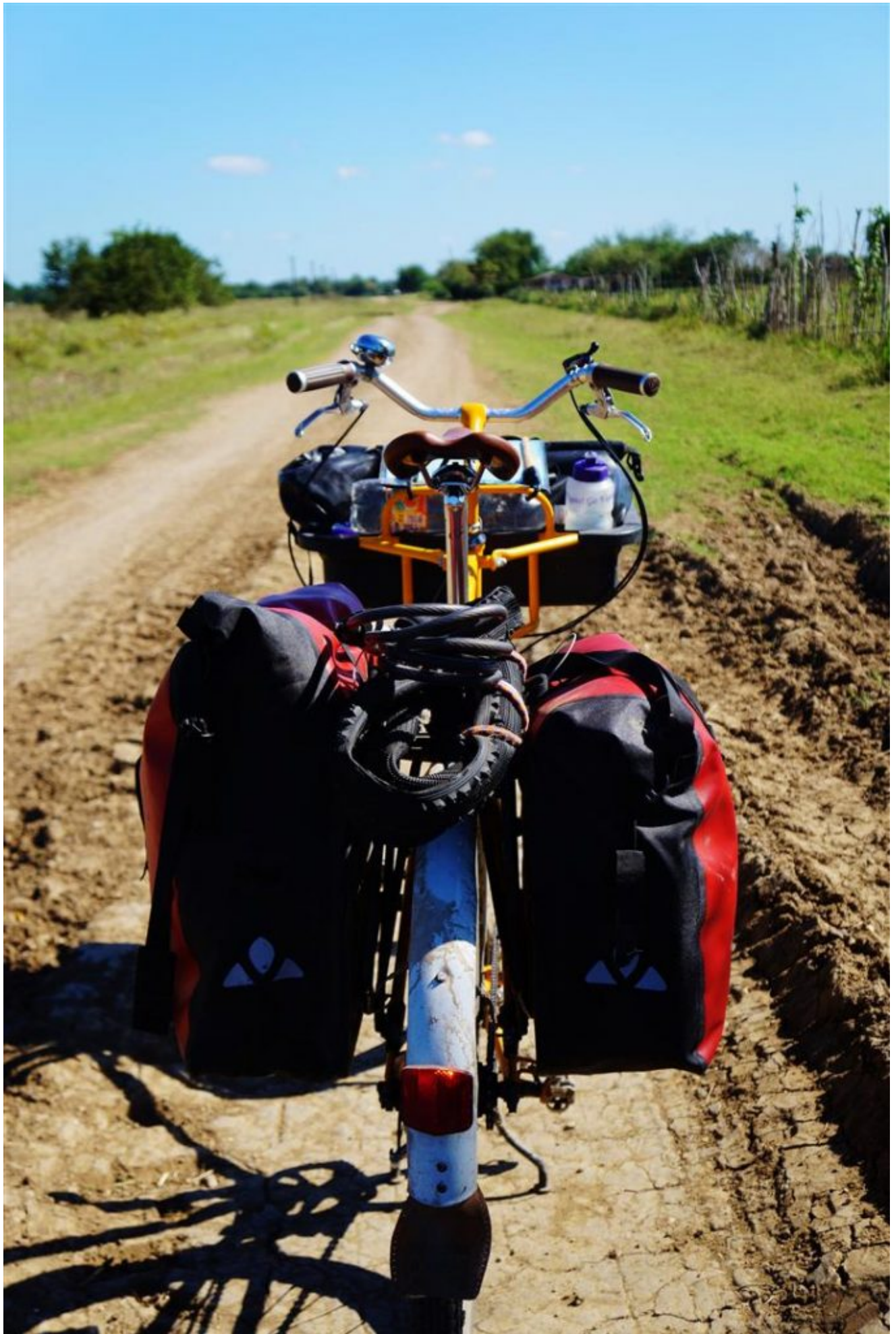
Bloody thorns giving us bloody legs



There's a path there somewhere







Cuba operates a slightly confusing dual currency system with Convertible Pesos (CUC) valued 25 times more than National Pesos (CUP) . Basic goods and services are sold by state run shops that charge in CUP while imported goods and anything intended for consumption by foreigners are charged in CUC. It's not always clear which currency prices are being quoted in and there is the opportunity to pay 25 times more than you should if you get it wrong! It also means that popular tourist destinations are considerably pricier than the more workaday towns that barely anyone visits. That 1 CUP coffee would be 1 CUC in Old Havana.



Strong, sweet coffee



One skill you never lose once you've been cycle touring for a while is the ability to spot a good camp spot. Even after we'd finished our last trip we'd still automatically look out for patches of grass next to rivers, secluded copses or little hill tops that would be ideal for pitching a tent whenever we were out and about. So it wasn't too tricky to find somewhere to sleep each night, off the main road and out of sight. Or at least somewhere where no-one would mind.

There was only one night where we got caught out. As the sun dipped below the horizon we were riding past endless fences on one side and a soggy marsh on the other. Eventually we arrived in a village and asked someone if it was ok to camp on some open ground on the outskirts. A shake of the head was not the response we wanted, but then he offered to drive us to the nearest 'Campismo' – somewhere with pre-pitched tents and cabins. A kind gesture but one that would take us 15km in the wrong direction and leave us somewhere that foreigners were unlikely to be able to stay. Some swift Google translating to explain we had our own tent turned the situation around and we

were ushered into a garden and told we could pitch there. Our immediate neighbours were a flock of chickens and a herd of pigs but inside the tent we were safely in our home from home. These small villages were often filled with animals as cowboys guide their herd down the high street and goats graze the verge. This is the way of life for a large proportion of the population.



Back yard camping



Rice drying in the street







Getting stuck in traffic



It's a tricky place to be totally self sufficient though as buying food to cook for ourselves would have been nigh on impossible. Food shops do exist of course but are hard to find

and have unexpected contents. Peering through a doorway, the first clue that it was a shop would be the set of scales on the counter. Alongside it might be some sacks and a few large jars with unknown contents. The rest of the stock would almost always be made up of rum, cigarettes, flip flops and electric fans. There might be a few slabs of raw meat too if you get there on the right day. Cubans still receive a ration book so these essentials are provided by the state but for visitors who just want a bag of pasta and some tomatoes the shops were sadly lacking.



Essentials for sale: rum, beer and cigarettes

Luckily the abundance of cafeterias in every village provided enough sustenance to keep us going. These state owned establishments have a largely identical menu based on what is available that day. We dined out on rolls filled with eggs or meat or spam for breakfast. Pizzas for lunch then if we found a proper restaurant, dinner of rice and beans, usually with pork and a side salad. These are all charged in national pesos and a day's food cost us about £1 each.



5 peso (15p) Pizzas



The bakery in Dormitorio



Menu de dia





Refuelling



Rehydrating

After crossing the flat, cattle country of the central provinces, the next range of mountains appeared on the

horizon. Before we got to them though we took a detour up to a farm that David had suggested we visit. Finca del Medio began life out of necessity during what Fidel named Cuba's 'Special Period' in the 90's. The collapse of the Soviet Union pulled the plug on a lot of the funding that had kept Cuba going and the state began struggling to support its people. They began to starve. José Casamiro and his family decided to take matters into their own hands and moved out of the city and onto a patch of rough land in the country to try and fend for themselves. 25 years later and they have created a rich and fertile farm that produces 98% of the food that the family and its frequent guests consume. Using permaculture techniques, they grow everything from plantain, yucca, rice, and taro to coffee, tea and sugar. Barely anything is wasted so energy use is minimal. Even the waste from the toilets feeds into a biodigester that then produces gas for the kitchen. They are part of a growing organic movement in Cuba that is spreading amongst smallholders and they hope will spread to the larger farms too.



500km to Havana



Taking a tour of the Casamiro family farm



A feast being prepared



Plantain



José loves to teach other farmers how his family works and on the day we arrive a group from Switzerland are coming to have a look around which is good timing on our part as we join in the feast that has been prepared for them. Two Canadians, Charles and Jonathan, are also staying and are full to the brim with enthusiasm about what they are learning. It's infectious and we can't help thinking about how we could try to reinvigorate our veg patch when we get home. Kirsty gets given some of their homemade honey for her injured knee, one spoonful on the wound and one spoonful to eat.



Jose and his family

Before we leave the next day we get to take part in the family's morning ritual. A strong shot of coffee, made with beans grown on the farm, is topped up with warm milk squeezed straight from the udder of one of the cows. It's about as tasty a cappuccino, and also the freshest that we've ever drunk!



Morning cappuccinos

Heading south from the farm we encounter a few hills that surround the Escambray Mountains and begin following the coast from the popular town of Trinidad. It wouldn't be right to go on a bike tour without a ferry trip so the short hop across the Bay of Cienfuegos allows us to get our boat-fix while also getting us back onto the Ruta Mala. Before turning onto the sandy track we pass the hulk of a never finished nuclear power station. Construction started during more prosperous times but it was never fired up which, given the state of disrepair of everything else in Cuba, is probably a good thing



The Escambray Mountains



Church in Sancti Spiritus





Playa de Luna Beach





Ferry across the Bay of Cienfuegos

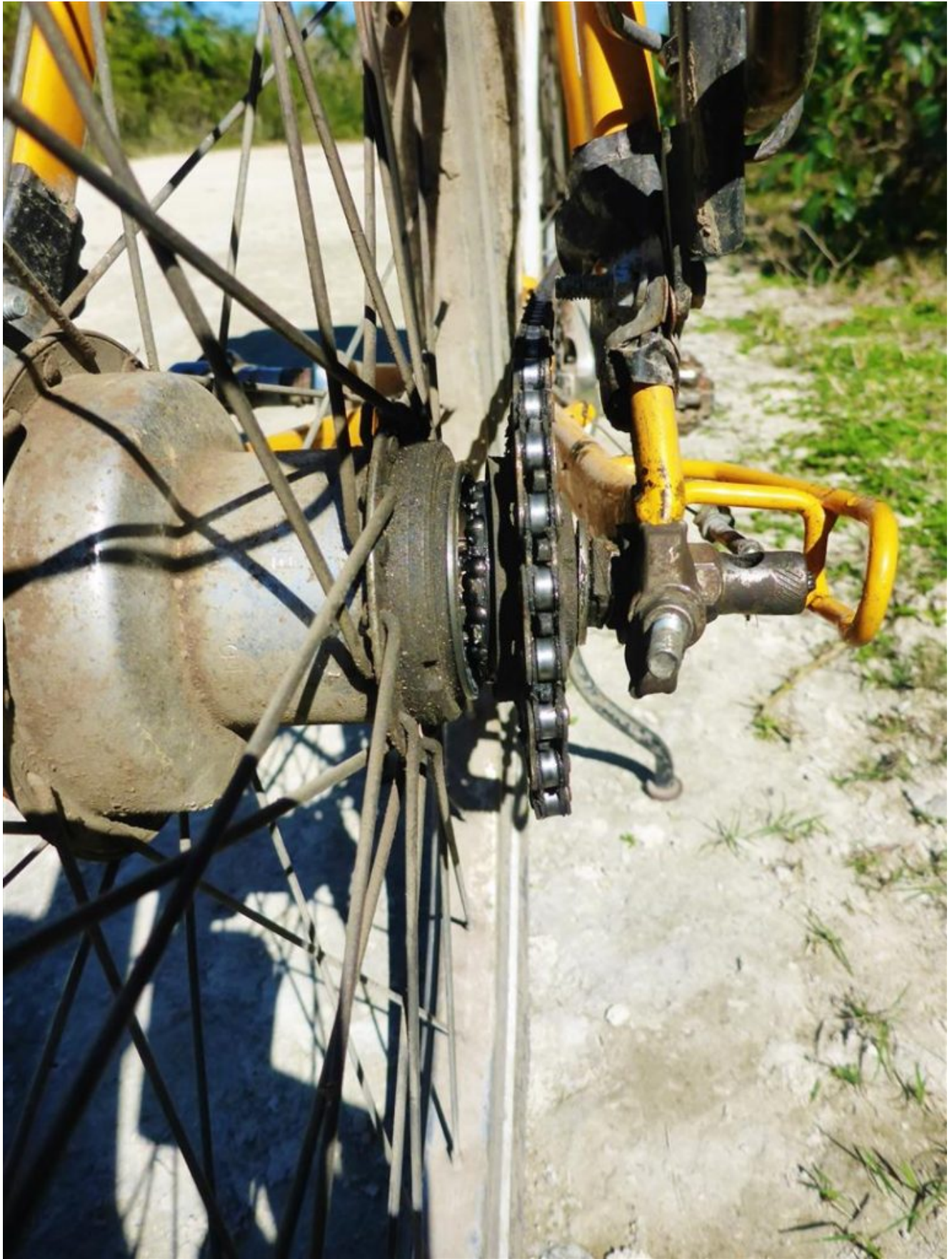


An unfinished nuclear power station



We bump along the sandy track, weaving through trees with occasional glimpses of the sea alongside us. The only other person that we see on the 60km stretch is a man riding along

with a bird cage in his hand. What he's doing out there with a bird in a cage is anyone's guess. Then one of Kirsty's tyres succumbs to the vicious thorns littering the track and not long after I get that sinking feeling too. Up until this point the Sturmey Archer hub has been brilliant. Yes it's only got three gears but that was enough to get me up and down the roads we had been riding. With a tail wind top gear was a bit low but it's all good for the leg speed. Now, however, the hub was to prove less useful. With the wheel off, a few vital bits of metal crumbled and fell into the sand. The washers that hold the axle in place had disintegrated which was a bad thing to happen at this point. Some bodging and over tightening helped get it all back together and working (with some creaking and complaining) for another 10km then a sickening clunk signals a fairly major mechanical incident. Hopping off the bike I can see that bearings are exposed that really shouldn't be seeing the light of day and the wheel is at a jaunty angle. The axle has broken.



This doesn't look right

As we sit and consider our next move a car pulls up and its French occupants ask what the trouble is. We explain and they

offer to find a lift for us. An hour later a spluttering old truck arrives and we gratefully jump in the back. 30 minutes after that and we haven't gone anywhere as it won't start. Actually it had gone about 30m when we tried to push it. Some passing fishermen lend a hand but only succeed in pushing it another 30m so we jump out and I start to run the 15km to the next town while pushing the broken bike. There is some small mercy in this as we soon arrive at a secluded cenote which had been recommended as a swimming spot. On a hot day and after all the pushing this couldn't be more welcome so we dive in the submerged cave before carrying on with the run.



A lift to nowhere



Swimming in the cenote

Our saviour arrives a few km further on in the form of Jeso who invites me to hop on the back of his motorbike and sling the bike across my shoulders. With Kirsty's help we manage to load up and before I know it we speed off in a cloud of dust. Somehow I keep hold of the bike and manage to stay on board and soon we're in Playa Giron where I'm delivered to a guest house and wait for Kirsty to catch up.

Our only hope now is to be able to buy a new rear wheel to be able to continue. The alternative being a bus to the nearest beach resort to spend the rest of the trip under a parasol ordering cocktails. Some enquiries lead us to a mechanic called Pico who we find surrounded by cranks, frames and spanners behind his house. Bikes are valuable forms of transport here so vital parts and components are much sought after. Despite having several wheels hung up on his wall, all of them are spoken for by his customers so he can't sell any

of them to us. We've run out of options so we despondently push down to the bus station. While we wait, Pico's assistant pulls up on his bike clutching an unusual bit of metal. It couldn't be could it? Surely it's not possible to find the axle for an English made Sturmey Archer 3 speed hub here in a little beach town on the south coast of Cuba? He holds it up for inspection and sure enough it's just what I need! \$5 changes hands and I set to work on the pavement next to a cafe. A couple of hours later, and with hands black with oil, the hub is back together. It wasn't a perfect fit but I've got at least one gear and a wheel that goes round which is as much as I can ask for. The beach and cocktails will have to wait!



Pavement workshop



The rack on the front of the P0 bike makes a great tool tray
One of the most famous events following the revolution was the Bay of Pigs invasion and it's alongside this notorious stretch

of water that we are now riding. Everything seems calm and peaceful now as the road follows the deep blue water on one side with dense forest on the other but every now and then a huge billboard reminds us who it was that won the battle.



Camping by the Bay of Pigs



Canopy of stars



“In Giron our party was forged”

Turning inland again, we cross the island passing orchards and huge collective farms. A far cry from what we'd seen at the Casamiro Farm . On the outskirts of Coliseo we stop to watch some children practising baseball with the intention of using the pitch as our campsite for the night. Curiosity gets the better of the children so they drop their gloves and bats to come over to see what we're up to, just as we were hoping they would go so we could get the tent up. Eventually one of the mothers comes to call them in so we ask her if it's ok to camp there. She tells us it's no problem so we begin unpacking with half a dozen excited helpers who then try to all get into the tent with us! Luckily the mother manages to drag them away and we're left to sleep in peace.



At a cafe a man asked if I'd like to hold his bird of prey, so I said yes.



Baseball practice in Coliseo



We're gonna need a bigger tent

We then join the northern coastline and arrive at the city of Matanzas. Like all of the cities we've ridden through the

streets are busy with ancient vehicles that make for great photos but are not so great for the air quality. Clouds of black smoke pour from old Buicks and Russian trucks and we get a lungful as we climb away from the centre. Then we round a corner and suddenly find ourselves in a lush green valley of forests and farmland. This is the Valle de Yamuri and it's incredible that it sits so close to the city but seems a world away.



Into Matanzas



A 'ponchera' repair shop



The Valle de Yamuri

Part way up the valley we stop for lunch and watch a convoy of shiny black 4x4s trundle past. Cameras and phones stick out of each window as their occupants hurry to capture a slice of rural Cuba. These trips are a popular excursion for tourists staying in the nearby resort of Varadero and we see several throughout the day. It must be strange for the people living in the valley to be gawped at like this as if they are exhibits in a safari park. I hope a few of their photos featured two cyclists stuffing their faces though.



Jeep trek passing through the Valle de Yamuri

For the last stretch into Havana we take the Auto Pista which is Cuba's answer to a motorway, only without the motors. It's beginning to get more built up and we pass a huge rum factory, nodding donkeys drilling for gas and industrial plants before reaching the outskirts of the capital.







Looking over Havana from the Castillo del Moro

We'd arranged to meet up with David again so after a shower and good night's sleep back with Maria and Jonathan we pedal over to his flat. "What did you think of Cuba?" he asks. How to answer that? It's a fascinating country and works in a unique way. The lack of commercial activity and advertising make it feel so far removed from almost every other country that we've been to. The commitment to providing free healthcare and education has proved successful at raising life expectancy and literacy rates but has also nearly bankrupted the country. Everyone seems well dressed and healthy yet average wages are just \$30 a month.

"But things are changing" David explains "much too slowly but we'll get there". Licences for private businesses are starting to become available under strict conditions which is a huge change from the 98% state owned system . Since 2015 the internet has become more widely available through specific

wifi hotspots (identifiable by the dozens of people sat around looking at smart phones). Raul Castro is set to stand down in April so some fresh blood may bring new ideas. There was even a glimmer of hope that they could start trading with the US until the change of staff at the White House.



But despite the mistakes and hardship over the years David is clearly proud of his country and what the revolution has achieved. He believes the revolution has shaped them and they can help shape the revolution. Whether it can continue to evolve and survive remains to be seen but Cubans are resilient and resourceful so I'm sure they'll give it everything they've got.



Scaffolding in Havana



A staircase souvenir shop





Havana by night

We leave David with his customary big hug and also with our two bikes. We'd always planned to donate them to a worthy cause as it's so hard to get bikes here and they can make such a difference. David tells us that he plans to take them to his uncle's farm where they will be a great help for his family. It's an emotional farewell as the bikes have served us admirably, if not always reliably. The post office bike was great fun and the tray at the front was handy for carrying awkward items like wet tents and pineapples. But the star of the show has to be Kirsty's £15 Specialized mountain bike. That bike had allowed her to pedal 1200km across Cuba, even carrying most of the bags for the last few days after my wheel broke, and that's a whole lot of adventure for for less than the cost of a slap up meal back home.

Would we recommend Cuba to other cyclists? Absolutely, but go now before it changes. And take a tent.



At journey's end. Spot the difference.



Classic 90's MBUK stickers on the Specialized



Customised mud flap (available from www.chipmumf.etsy.com)



David taking ownership of our bikes



Kirsty



Marcus



Long term Havana resident, Ernest Hemmingway wrote **"It is by riding a bicycle that you learn the contours of a country best, since you have to sweat up the hills and coast down them."**

Below is a map of our route showing where we spent each night. Purple indicates a night in the tent, red are Casa Particulars and green are couch surfing hosts.