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# Chasing

by Christopher P. Baker

*Eighteen years have passed since I first rode my R100GS to the Bay of Pigs during a three-month-long, 7,000-mile exploration of Cuba as a professional journalist. Eighteen years spent dreaming of leading the first U.S. group motorcycle tours of the island.*

**F**inally... I'm so stoked, I can't suppress my glee any longer. "Weeeeeheeee!"

As the group files in one by one, I direct the participants to park their *Beemers* and *Harleys* outside the Bay of Pigs Museum and line up beneath the wings of a British-made Sea Fury that saw action defending Cuba against the CIA-sponsored invasion, in April 1961, by a Cuban-American exile army. Then I ride my *F800GS* into the midst of the group and have a museum guide shoot a photo for posterity beside a giant billboard that reads: "PLAYA GIRÓN [Cuba's term for the Bay of Pigs]. THE FIRST ROUTE OF U.S. IMPERIALISM IN LATIN AMERICA."

"Congratulations!" I exclaim. "You've just made history. You're the first yanqui motorcycle group to explore Cuba end-to-end since the U.S. embargo was enacted in 1960."

Only 90 miles separate Key West from Havana, yet in many ways the Florida Straits is the widest moat in the world. Nonetheless, Uncle Sam bars U.S. citizens from solo travel to Cuba (exemptions exist for Cuban-Americans, journalists, humanitarian and religious travel, etc.). And shipping a bike from the United States? Forget it! Since my solo journey in 1996 you can count on one hand the number of Yankees who've ridden through Cuba.

Fortunately, in January 2011, President Obama inched the door open by creating a new license category permitting any U.S. citizen to legally travel to Cuba for educational cultural exchanges run by companies and institutions that could now apply for such a mandate.

In 1995, I contacted Skip Mascorro, founder of Texas-based tour company *MotoDiscovery*, for advice on planning my journey. We stayed in touch. Last year he asked me to draft a license application and sample itinerary. Bingo! In January 2013, 14 eager motorcyclists flew south from Miami to participate in a 14-day all-Cuba program under a special license issued in April 2012 by the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which oversees



**Che Guevara, the Argentinian revolutionary who became Cuba's Minister of Finance & Industry, is the most iconic figure in Cuba.**

# Life

## Motorcycling through Castro's Cuba

... Hasta la  
Victoria  
Siempre.





**Top** The tránsito escort on his Yamaha 250 Virago watches while the group gasses up in Santiago de Cuba.

**Above** The group enters Santiago de Cuba, Cuba's original capital dating back to 1514.

all regulations related to travel and trade with Cuba.

Since the “people-to-people” (P2P) license prohibits recreation and “tourism,” our motorcycles were used for the purpose of transportation between our requisite P2P exchanges. Those slice-of-life engagements with Cubans—from tobacco farmers to *Harlistas*, owners of pre-revolutionary *Harleys*—guaranteed a richly rewarding immersion with Cuba’s profound history and culture as we rode a 2,000-mile counter-clockwise circuit from Havana to Baracoa, at the eastern tip of the island.

Because shipping a motorcycle across the Florida Straits is virtually impossible, our bikes—a combination of *BMW F650s* and *F800s*, plus four *Harley-Davidsons*—were supplied by a Danish company, *Motorcycle Tours Cuba*, that has been offering two-wheel tours for Europeans since 2009 (U.S. citizens are barred from participating). The company also arranged a support van to carry our gear. Cuba’s Havantur state tourism agency supplied a driver and local guide.

The visitor’s first reaction is that of being caught in a 1950s time warp. Cars from the Eisenhower era are everywhere: Chrome-laden *DeSotos*. Corpulent *Buicks*. Stylish *Plymouth*

*Furies*. And other relics of Mafia-era ostentation putter along beside modern Japanese taxis, sober Russian-made *Ladas*, and dour 650cc *Urals* with sidecars. Then a *Knucklehead* from the 1940s thunders past. It’s hard to stay focused on the road as we test our bikes along the Malecón Boulevard sinuously fronting Havana’s shoreline.

Prior to the Revolution, *Harleys* were standard issue for Cuba’s police and the military. Then Cuba spun off into Soviet orbit. No more *Harleys* were imported, thanks to the U.S. embargo (Cubans call it *el bloqueo*, the blockade) that still hangs like an axe over Cuba. Thereafter, Soviet bloc *Urals*, *MZs* and *Jawas* flooded Cuba over four decades. Keeping the *Knuckleheads* going is a testament to Cuban resourcefulness, ingenuity, and indefatigable optimism in the face of shortages and other difficulties we can barely imagine.

“El cubano inventa,” says Luís Enrique Gonzáles Saenz, President of Cuba’s *Harlista* club, explaining how Havana’s proudly fanatical owners of antique *Harleys* go to extreme (even absurd) lengths to keep their *hogs* running.

We begin our tour at the workshop adjoining Luís’ home in Havana’s once tony Vedado neighborhood. “What we can’t fix or cannibalize from other motos or cars we make ourselves,” explains Luis, my co-guide throughout the tour. “We tailor pistons and virtually any other part you can think of right here. Hecho en Cuba, chico!”

The Doobie Brothers’ “Taking it to the Streets” surges from the speakers of Luís’ blood-red *Street Glide* as we hit the Autopista Nacional, Cuba’s only freeway, and crank up to 120 kph, heading east. Luís rides lead. I ride sweep at the rear. Betwixt, our 14 trip members are instructed to ride at their own pace, although no diversions from the fixed route are allowed. The concrete eight-laner runs through open countryside flat as a carpenter’s level. We have it virtually to ourselves save for the occasional yanqui jalopy, Soviet tractors, and creaky wooden carts pulled by oxen, dropping long stalks of cane as they go.

I’m thrilled to be back in the saddle, retracing my journey through a country I’ve grown to know well and love dearly. Enraptured, I cook down the highway, the *F800* purring sexily as it eats up the hardtop in a sensuous intertwining of glorious harmonics and warm, perfumed air.

After 142km we turn south for the Bay of Pigs and arrive at the climactic spot where socialism and capitalism squared off in 1961. Cuban families and Canadian package tourists slathered with suntan oil splash about in the shallows. It’s difficult with the sun beating down on a beach as silvery as mountain snow to imagine that blood and bullets had mingled with the sand and the surf here five decades before.

Farther east we stop to get “Sugar 101” from macheteros—sugarcane harvesters—in coarse work clothes and straw hats, slashing at the tall cane with short blunt-nosed



**Above** A crowd gathered wherever the group stopped, as here in Sancti Spiritus.



**Right** Members of the group learn from Luis Enrique González how Cuba's Harlistas keep their pre-revolutionary Harleys running.

machetes. Hard, dirty work. We pass thatched homesteads—bohios—and ox-drawn ploughs tilling the palm-studded land. Then Trinidad comes into view. Founded by conquistador Diego Velázquez in 1514, this cobbled colonial town—a UNESCO World Heritage Site—has sidestepped the currents of time. We slip uphill through maze-like cobbled streets that echo to the clip-clop of hooves. “Horse-whisperer” Julio Muñoz even brings his horse inside his eighteenth-century colonial home to demonstrate “New Age” equine techniques with which he hopes to change Cuba’s macho cowboy culture.

Our route is a magical mystery tour of such fascinating people-to-people encounters: A visit to a rural clinic to learn about Cuba’s community health system... an Afro-Cuban santería religious ceremony... a family-run marble-sculpting cooperative... In Guantánamo, we even pick up two tránsitos—motorcycle cops—to

escort us through the Cuban military zone (the taciturn Policia Nacional Revolucionaria on their undersized *Yamaha Viragos* eventually thaw as Luis and I coax them to spill the beans about tránsito training).

“The enemy shall not pass our frontier!” screams a billboard outside Guantánamo. Others reading “Patriotism or Death!” and “The U.S. blockade: The longest genocide in history!” leave no doubt that we’re in a Communist nation pitted against Uncle Sam. Images of Fidel are everywhere, too, betraying a cult of personality second only to that of revolutionary icon Che Guevara. I feel like we’re chasing Che down the highway.

Yet everywhere we go, we’re feted. Wherever we stop, Cuban males give us high fives. “Phew!... hombre!” they exclaim, marveling at the exotic *Beemers*. “What marque is this? How big is the engine?” And, inevitably, “How fast does it go?” You’d have thought we’d landed in flying saucers.

It seems a strange juxtaposition. Rousing anti-imperialist murals offset

**Che Guevara’s remains are interred beneath a giant monument to the revolutionary in Santa Clara.**



by three generations of Cubans—most well-nourished, well-shod and clothed, and beaming benignly—sending reassuring waves to us yanquis. It seems so innately Cuban: The considerate expression of a people uncommonly gracious and generous to a fault.

Arriving at Baracoa is its own adventure as we roar up La Farola, a steep mountain highway (completed since the Revolution) with nerve-wracking bends that switchback up and over the Sierra Cristal via the valley of the Río Yumurí. With its bridges cantilevered magically from the mountainside, La Farola strikes me as a marvelous piece of engineering. Beyond the summit the world falls away as the road spirals down to Baracoa, hovering on the distant horizon beneath a brooding twilight fusion of valley and molten sky.

Time-worn Baracoa was founded in 1511 as Cuba's first city. Cusped within a bay spread-eagled beneath a huge flat-topped formation surrounded by rainforest, it resembles a mini *Macondo*, the surreal setting for Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Cuba is the flattest isle of the Greater Antilles. Our route is mostly level, melding occasionally into uplands with sweeping bends. Well-paved, too. West from Baracoa, however, the shoreline highway whittles down to an unpaved scrambler trail—a real roller-coaster—pitted with potholes brimming with a blood-red bouillabaisse accumulated with recent rains. This 40-km-long enduro section adds a welcome and adventurous challenge sandwiched

between two weeks of non-technical riding. I ride the trail standing up as I haul along in third gear. I'm normally a 1200GSA rider. By comparison, the F800 seems so incredibly light and responsive—a bike tailored for touring Cuba.

Finally in Santa Clara, where Che Guevara looms large over the Plaza de la Revolución, one of our tour group fires an impressive burn-out then pops a wheelie in front of the revolutionary's vast monument and mausoleum. Back in Havana we clamber into '50s classic convertibles and journey metaphorically back in time to the Tropicana, the world-famous cabaret now in its eighth decade of Vegas-style stiletto-heeled paganism. As far as adventure motorcycling goes riding Cuba was tame. But socialism and sensuality? Secret police and sexy showgirls? Cuba is nothing if not surreal!

Just 90 miles from the malls and McDonalds of Florida, we'd journeyed to the soul of a haunting realm full of eccentricity, eroticism, and enigma. **ADV**

*Christopher P. Baker is a professional travel journalist, lecturer, and tour leader. His more than 25 books include MI MOTO FIDEL: MOTORCYCLING THROUGH CASTRO'S CUBA (National Geographic), winner of two national book awards. He contributes to CNN and has written and photographed for publications as diverse as Elle, Motorcyclist, National Geographic Traveler, and Newsweek.*



The group poses in front of the Ministry of Interior building, in Havana's Plaza de la Revolución.

