



Chasing Che's Chevy

Christopher P Baker FOLLOWS IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF CHE AND FIDEL AND EXPLORES CUBA'S RUGGED SIERRA MAESTRA MOUNTAIN RANGE BY MOTORCYCLE.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTOPHER P BAKER



I LIKED THE PANACHE OF TOURING CUBA BY moto. I saw myself as a latter-day Che Guevara, whose own motorcycle journey would have been the adventure of a lifetime had he not met Fidel. The bike would turn my own travels into an adventure. And nowhere in Cuba serves up adventure as much as the Sierra Maestra, the rugged mountain range in far eastern Cuba where Che and Fidel launched their Revolution in 1956. The Circuito Sur highway, which wraps around the western Sierra Maestra, delivers adventure in spades – a perfect tropical cocktail of adrenalin-charged curves, rugged terrain and superlative vistas.

The trip begins in earnest west of Bayamo, the history-infused regional capital, where the traffic thins down to a few tractors and wooden carts pulled by sturdy oxen, dropping long stalks of sugarcane as they go. Snowy white egrets lift off from the dayglo canefields studded by royal palms rising like silver-sheathed Corinthian columns. Then I pass a Chevrolet Styleline Deluxe, gleaming as brightly in the Cuban sunlight as the day in 1952 when it rolled off the factory floor in Detroit. Time itself seems to have stopped on the carretera midway between Bayamo and the village of Vequitas. >>





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Clockwise from top left: "Patriotism or death" billboard; The coast road between Marea de Portillo and Santiago de Cuba; The Iglesia Parroquial Mayor de San Salvador church in Bayamo; A bull stands beside a sugarcane field with the Sierra Maestra in the background.



Above: A classic American car parked in Havana.

I feel deliriously light-hearted as I cruise down the empty road with the mountains on one side and the Caribbean Sea on the other.

At the sugar-processing town of Yara I detour south and climb into the Sierra Maestra via a switchback so twisty it makes me feel dizzy. The bike and I cant as one, arcing gracefully through the curves of serried ranges and forbidding valleys. Ideal guerrilla territory. Every other turn offers a heart-stopping drop-off, with spectacular vistas over plains resembling a Spanish mantilla. I pause to breathe in the mountain air and listen to the agreeable silence broken only by bird-song and the buzz of myriad insects.

On the coastal plains south of Manzanillo, another time-worn town,

the sugarcane fields have been burned for the *zafra* (the sugar harvest), and smoke-smudged field hands – *macheteros* – in tattered linens and straw sombreros are slashing at the charred stalks with blunt-nosed machetes. Hot, dirty work. They look as if they themselves have been put to the torch. Black smoke rises in twirling tornadoes, eddying up from centrales that taint the idyll with the sickly sweet stench of molasses.

South of Manzanillo I feel deliriously light-hearted as I cruise down the empty road with the mountains on one side and the Caribbean Sea on the other.

I'm riding with a heightened sense of awareness, so attuned to the BMW and my surroundings – the smells, the sun's rays, the warm wind caressing my skin – that I'm not even thinking.

Beyond Sevilla, the road augers down through a narrow ravine, spilling me onto the coastal plains that run along the southern base of the Sierra Maestra. On the long straight, I move into top gear and open the throttle wide. I cook down the highway, the bike purring sexily as it eats up the hardtop in a sensuous intertwining

of glorious harmonics and warm, perfumed air.

The landscape changes abruptly. I pass goats munching in stony pastures studded with cactus. There's not a store or café for miles and it's a relief to break for a late lunch at Marea del Portillo, where resort hotels stud a vast bay beneath mountains escalating to cloud-draped crescendos.

My map shows the route along the coast as a dirt track as far as Chivirico, just east of Santiago de Cuba, a distance of about 128 kilometres. The enduro course begins a few miles east of Marea >>

GUIDED TOURS

Christopher's tour was organised independently, but similar tours can be booked through Edelweiss Bike Travel. They operate an 11-day motorcycle tour through Cuba that circles much of the island. The tour starts and ends in Havana and passes through Vinales, Santa Clara, Trinidad and Moron. The price includes rental of a Harley Davidson Fat Boy motorcycle with unlimited mileage, accommodation in comfortable hotels, most meals, insurance, tour guide and a support vehicle to carry luggage.

Rates: from US\$6,330 (about A\$6,110) riding two up with twin share hotel rooms or US\$8,070 (about A\$7,790) riding solo with single hotel rooms.

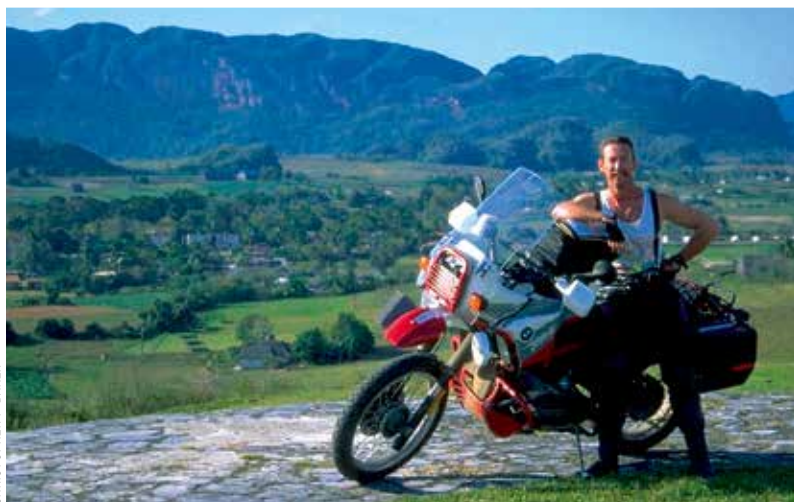
Dates: 1-11 March, 2013; 2-22 November, 2013; 10-20 January, 2014; 28 February-10 March, 2014; 21 November-1 December, 2014.

edelweissbike.com

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del Portillo. I run at the water's edge lined with wild, windswept beaches. Then the trail claws its way over great headlands and hangs suspended in air before cascading steeply to the next valley. In places the angles seem impossible. But the BMW seems not to notice. Amazingly, I pass a five-decades old Chrysler New Yorker chugging uphill in the other direction, impervious to the mountain terrain.

Beyond the Río Macío, marking the boundary with Santiago de Cuba province, I pick up the hardtop again. Copper-colored cliffs loom massively out of

the teal-blue sea. Cuba's highest peaks lie within fingertip distance. The light is fading as I round a final bend and see the wan lights of Santiago de Cuba in the distance. A rubicund radiance mantles the mountains. Slanting sunlight splashes Santiago's rooftops with fiery vermilion. Then the sublime conflagration is extinguished, leaving only a memory of the enchantment of the Cuban landscape at sunset. As I pull up to my hotel and haul my motorcycle onto the side stand, I grin broadly and sigh with satisfaction, knowing that I could never have got so close to so much beauty inside a car.

REVOLUTIONARY RIDE
Left from top: A canon display at the fortress known as El Morro near Santiago de Cuba; The author and his trusty steed.



GETTING THERE

Due to flight restrictions from the United States the best way to access Cuba from Australia is via South America. LAN operates flights from Sydney to Lima, Peru via Santiago, Chile daily with a short stopover in Auckland, New Zealand. Return economy class fares start from A\$2,955 and business class fares from A\$12,645 (on some flights the Santiago to Lima leg is only available in economy) and flight time is around 22-23 hours. LAN also operates direct flights from Lima to Havana, Cuba on Monday, Thursday and Saturday. Return economy fares start from A\$739 and there is no business class available on this route. Flight time is just over five hours. lan.com

Because of the flight schedules it is necessary to spend at least one night in Lima. The Westin Lima Hotel opened in May 2011 and is one of the newest hotels in the city. It's centrally located in the San Ysidro district and only 15 kilometres from the airport, though be warned that Lima's horrendous traffic can frequently make this journey take well over an hour. Rates are between US\$156-520 (about A\$150-502) per night. westinlima.com.pe

WHERE TO STAY

Havana
The Hotel Santa Isabel is a grand colonial palace once owned by the Count of Santovenia. It faces the Plaza de Armas in the centre of Old Havana and rooms have been beautifully restored with original flooring and French doors opening onto a large shared terrace overlooking the Plaza. Former president Jimmy Carter, Jack Nicholson and Sting have all been guests in the hotel's suite. Standard rooms start from A\$175 per night, junior suites from A\$228 per night and the suite from A\$298 per night. hotelsantaisabel.com

Santiago de Cuba
The Meliá Santiago de Cuba is the city's only five-star hotel and is close to the historic centre. It is a large, modern high rise with three swimming pools and a number of restaurants and bars. Standard rooms start from €115 (about A\$144) per night, suites from €145 (about A\$181) per night. meliacuba.com