

By Christopher P. Baker

Chasing Che's Chevy

Cuba's Circuito Sur—circling the Sierra Maestra mountains by motorcycle.

I liked the panache of touring Cuba by motorcycle. 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 the south of the island from where Che and Fidel launched their Revolution in earnest in 1956. The Circuito Sur highway, which wraps around the 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, capital of Cuba's south-eastern Granma province, 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 Day-Glo canefields studded by royal palms rising like silver-sheathed Corinthian columns. Then I pass a Chevrolet Styleline Deluxe, gleaming as brightly in the 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 Vequita.

At the small 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 birdsong and the buzz of myriad insects.

On the coastal plains south of the port city of Manzanillo, the sugarcane fields have been burned for the *zafra* (the sugar harvest), and 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 fires

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Motorcycle magic on Cuba's Circuito Sur.

The rugged terrain of
Cuba's Sierra Maestra.



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 wends 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 cafe for miles and it's a relief to break for a late lunch at the Marea del Portillo beach resort, where hotels stud a vast bay beneath cloud-draped mountains.

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 80 miles. The enduro course begins a few

miles east of Marea 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-coloured 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.



A schoolboy and old man taking life easy...

CUBA

Caribbean charisma in a country of contradictions

The legend lives on—hasta siempre Cuba. Words and Photographs By DEJA DRAGOVIC

It's a sunny Tuesday mid-afternoon and I'm standing on the wide Capitolio stairs waiting for my local guide Juan, a philosophy and communications tutor at the Universidad de la Habana. He's running late and I am getting too much attention from the passers-by. Trying to ignore the salutations and accompanying remarks, I concentrate on a man wedged under a bright green 1950s Chevrolet that has broken down in the

middle of the boulevard, where he is fixing it.

Vibrant vintage Buicks, Lincolns and Fords are passing, along with peculiar limo models of Russian Ladas from the 1960s, all surprisingly still in decent shape. Add to that a few horse-drawn carriages and pick-up trucks jammed with men. No one is honking at him or yelling because he is disrupting the traffic. Instead, bubbly coconut taxis—yellow three-wheelers with a curved roof, a Cuban version of a motorised rickshaw—are whizzing by, completing the picture of eccentric transportation in this city.

Juan arrives and starts poetically describing the history of the city as we head toward Plaza San Cristobal through the dark and narrow streets of La Habana Vieja (Old Havana), filled with people and stray dogs. The number of people is due, Juan says, to the large unemployment rate. They are dancing,

singing, flirting with girls and tourists, reading the papers, smoking, debating, playing chess, playing baseball... The sounds of sensual music are coming from above and every balcony seems to double as storage, holding bicycles and old furniture under washing lines.

School children in white and burundy uniforms are cheerful and untroubled, much like any others

around the world. Except that this is Cuba and this year the country is celebrating half a century since the revolution that made it the only communist country in the Western hemisphere. It's been 47 years since the United States economic embargo and travel ban intended to keep out mainstream westernisation.

And this island is still famed for its resistance and hostility to the U.S. influence in the region. These kids raise their left fists and chant "Seremos como el Che—We will be like Che" every morning, and learn about freedom and human rights—the same freedom and rights that the government still regulates.

That morning I spent meandering among beautiful colonial properties of Havana's Vedado district and stood alone on Plaza de la Revolución imagining the echoes of revolutionary cliques, while admiring a mural reproduction of Alberto Korda's legendary capture of Che Guevara. Mythical Che, looking ahead to his dreams, his gaze full of determination.

We visit the peaceful Plaza San Cristobal and its imposing cathedral, greeting a fortune-teller sitting smoking a large *cohiba* and shuffling cards. She offers to read



Painting by a local artist (above). A church in Trinidad (above right). Three-wheel coconut taxis (bottom right).



ACCOMMODATION Cuban Stays

For an authentic experience, book private lodgings at www.casaparticular.org. **Havana** has several palatial hotels, including **Hotel Inglaterra** (www.hotelinglaterracuba.com) and **Hotel Plaza** (www.hotelplazacuba.com). **Hostal Valencia** is affordable and central. In **Santiago**, **Hotel Casagrande's** rooftop terrace bar offers an unrivalled view of the city and great cocktails. **Varadero** prevails in all-inclusive hotels and family resorts. The **Sol Meliá chain** (www.solmeliacuba.com) are reputable and must-visit places include **El Floridita** bar in **Havana** (www.floridita-cuba.com) and **La Bodeguita del Medio** in **Old Havana**. Book guides, tours and excursions via www.cubadirect.co.uk. Direct flights from London to Havana with Virgin Atlantic (www.virgin-atlantic.com) and Cubana Aviation (www.cubana.cu); to **Varadero** with Thomsonfly (www.thomson.co.uk) and Thomas Cook (flythomascook.com). Check bus schedules at www.viazul.cu and train times at www.hicuba.com/ferrocarril.htm.



Sol Meliá has a good reputation.

my palm, but instead I give her a few dollars for a photograph and we continue walking to the flea market. A few modest handicraft stalls sit alongside an alfresco gallery of original paintings by local artists. We stroll on through cobble streets, dodging holes in the ground and propositions from *jinetes* (hustlers).

Later that evening I join Juan and his friends on the Malecón, a seafront promenade where groups of young, old, lovers and families mingle. They speak confidently and openly about life, politics and religion, explaining the intricacies of contemporary society as they know it, in which the revolutionary past still has a strong influence on education, religion and principles.

On the other hand, the poverty is widespread and people, particularly the young, are yearning for modern amenities and shun their beliefs for extra cash to survive. Some are still studying to be

doctors, language and history specialists, but they say those salaries will not be enough for them and their families. So they try supplementing their income by renting out their flats as *Casas Particulares*, private accommodation. They market them as a great opportunity for travellers to experience and participate in the real Cuban lifestyle and practise their Spanish or rumba.

Soledad rents out her flat and performs with her ensemble in clubs and hotels. Her brother Manuel is rhythmically beating his bongo and says he works in Fundación Havana Club, but often drives a taxi or tours that Juan heads. His girlfriend Alena works

at the prestigious El Floridita in Obispo, a bar/restaurant famous as Hemingway's favourite haunt. She also makes little wooden souvenirs for sale at a flea market and souvenir shops in Varadero.

It is not easy to come by money or a steady job, so many head to Varadero's resorts in season to work as cleaners, drivers and caretakers, where they rely on generous tips from tourists. They are prohibited from approaching the tourists outside their line of work, but secretly offer tours, salsa lessons, hand-made crafts, or even sex, to make extra money. Prostitution is widespread and also depends on tourism, with offers to try "the real Cuban treat" and "dance the real Cuban dance".

The following evening I meet the same crew at La Bodeguita del Medio, an authentic bar in the centre, sporting inscriptions on the walls made by visitors over the years, revolutionary and affectionate slogans and autographs, with "Make Love, Not War" alongside beautiful poetic verses by Borges, Márquez and Cuba's own José Martí.

In the corner, a four-member band is playing softly and I slip them US\$5 for a request of "La Historia de un Amor", to the general amazement of my *compañeros*. Perhaps they expected me to request "Guajira Guantanamera", Cuba's best-known song. La Bodeguita is only narrow, so Manuel and Alena dance outside the bar while we sip delicious mojitos.

Soledad is heading to perform in Santiago's famous music district, Calle Heredia, so I hop on the bus with her. We travel across dusty





A fortune-teller smoking a cohiba.
Opposite: The rooftops of Havana.

Cuba's revolutionary past still has a strong influence on education, religion and principles.

interstates and dirt roads, passing scattered settlements, villages and valleys of banana groves and sugarcane plantations. On the way I spot many revolutionary slogans painted on crumbling walls, such as the prevalent “*Socialismo o Muerte!*—Socialism or Death” and “*Libertad o Muerte!*—Freedom or Death” in red and black block letters. Soledad explains the faded illusion of revolutionary ideals at what is now the end of Fidel’s uninterrupted five-decade rule.

Cuba’s economy has seen some progress since the 90s tourism drive, with steady arrivals and investment from Latin America, Canada and Europe. Due to its isolation and poor infrastructure, Cuba has managed to preserve its diverse, unique fauna and flora and natural attractions. It also has

sustainable development that most other countries are struggling to attain. Although the authorities don’t have the resources to protect the natural habitats, they understand the benefits of keeping out western mass tourism and are working with many conservation organisations and unions to safeguard their riches.

We make a pit-stop in Trinidad, central Cuba, a little town near the Valle de los Ingenios (Valley of the Sugar Mills). Under UNESCO’s World Heritage protection since 1988, it is more manageable than Havana and its neighbourhoods and buildings are in better shape.

Barefoot and shirtless boys play football on the cobbled dusty streets, *guajiros* (farmers) tend their meagre stalls, and no hustlers bother me with offers of tours or

lodgings. It all feels less hurried than in Havana.

We get back on the road to Santiago, which, though much less relaxed than Trinidad, is still welcoming. Dilapidated and crumbling facades surround us, scuffed, neglected and awaiting better times. Some still display revolutionary slogans such as “*Señores Imperialistas, No Les Tenemos Absolutamente Nungo Miedo!*—Dear Imperialists, we have absolutely no fear of you”, a trace of former glory and of a once-ambitious insurgent nation.

We reach the club where Soledad is to perform. Deep African tribal sounds fill the club; Soledad’s rumba is passionate, vigorous and skillful and I admire her moves. Even after a few lessons, I am certain I will never achieve the same vibrancy, even though she assures me I am not bad—for a tourist.

I leave her to her performance and take an overnight train back to Havana, sharing snacks with some traveling locals. Soon after daybreak I arrive in Matanzas, where I disembark for a visit to the nearby popular beaches of Varadero. I think of all the friendly and educated people I have met, making their living far from these postcard-perfect white sandy beaches, flashy all-inclusive package holiday resorts with free-flowing rum.

This is not the anti-capitalist ideal that they fought to uphold. This is not the country of *cohibas* and colourful vintage cars. This is not what Che Guevara meant when he addressed the UN in 1964, speaking of Cuba as “one of the trenches of freedom in the world, situated a few steps away from U.S. imperialism, showing by its actions, its daily example, that in the present conditions of humanity the peoples can liberate themselves and can keep themselves free.”