

Michèle's Blog – Cycling Cuba 2007

Michèle and Benoît's Cycling Adventure of Western Cuba

Three weeks from mid December 2007 to January 2008.

We used two guidebooks during our trip:

1. Lonely Planet Cycling Cuba, 1st edition, February 2002 (I think this is the *only* edition)
2. Lonely Planet Cuba, 2006

Any cycling routes I refer to are from the “Cycling Cuba” guidebook.

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Day 0: Getting to Havana Cuba from Montreal

Highlights:

- Oh, those cranky Air Canada employees in Montreal
- Our bikes and bags arrive safely in Havana – us too!
- Gorgeous old colonial-style house of Casa Graciela

Reserved a taxi van for 3:30 a.m. since our flight was at 5:30 a.m. We were flying Air Canada from Montreal to Havana via Toronto. We arrived at the airport at 4:00 a.m; the Air Canada ticket agents didn't get there until 4:10 a.m. We had checked in online and were waiting in the very long lineup at "Web Checkin – Drop off bags". The Air Canada agent would not give me a plastic bag to wrap up my paniers. "Only for baby seats," she claimed. Funny that, because the previous two times we flew Air Canada I was able to use those bags. We paid the extra baggage fee for the bikes: \$50 per bike, one way, and no tax since we were flying internationally. At the security check, my face moisturizer (60 mL) was put in a little bag for closer inspection by the liquid and gel security agent. I forgot about my half-finished apple juice – the scan caught it and it was confiscated. We just made it for the last call for our flight to Toronto, even with checking in from home and arriving 90 minutes in advance. The flight was delayed a bit for de-icing the wings of the plane.

No meal service on the flight from Toronto to Havana. We had to buy a gross chicken sandwich for \$6 on the flight. The tourist card (30 day visa) that we needed to enter Cuba was provided by Air Canada on board the plane. On the tourist card, we listed the address of "Casa Graciela", the *casa particular* (Cuba's equivalent of a bed & breakfast) that we had reserved for our first night. It wasn't necessary to fill out a Customs Declaration form. We passed through customs in Havana quite quickly and then nervously waited for our bikes and bags. I didn't realize that you couldn't bring fruit – my lunch snacks of bananas and clementines were confiscated too!

Everything arrived but our bike boxes took a beating. Benoit's box was only being held together by one piece of tape at the top. We met a cyclist from Winnipeg – *he* had Air Canada plastic bags to wrap his paniers (he said that at the Winnipeg airport, there is a big roll of those bags by the Air Canada desk and you just help yourself). He had seven weeks of travel ahead of him in Cuba. The crap thing was that his bike hadn't shown up by the time we left.

We exchanged some Canadian money at the airport into Cuban convertible pesos (CUC\$). The rate was 1.1314 (so \$260 CAD gave me 229.80 CUC\$). Beware of the *other* Cuban currency, the money that the average Cuban would use, that is worth 25 times less than the convertible pesos. The CUC bills have 'Pesos convertibles' written on both sides – some of the other currency bills look almost exactly alike but do not have 'Pesos convertibles' on them. The CUC coins have images of buildings on them, whereas the other currency's coins have people.

Taxi van from Havana airport to Vedado was 25 CUC\$. Our first stop: Casa Graciela, #658 Calle Linea, between A and B, in Vedado. A beautiful old colonial house with columns out front and soaring ceilings. A young guy named Manuel greeted us and showed us to our room. Fifteen-foot ceilings and private bathroom. No toilet seat on the toilet. But there was toilet paper and towels. The room had one double bed and one single bed.

Benoit bought water down the street – he wanted to buy two 1.5 litre bottles but the shop keeper only allowed him to buy one. We put our bikes back together in our room. Only one missing bolt (it must have shaken loose from Benoit's aerobars during the flight) and my bike

seat was slightly ripped. Benoit macguivered something to fix his aerobar. I napped and B went for a stroll on the Malecón. We had dinner at the casa's gorgeous dining room at 7pm: rice, black beans, breaded chicken, plantain (?), tomatoes, cucumber and cabbage, lime carbonated drink and Graciela had someone go to fetch us some beers. Cervezas!

Casa Particulares: We stayed at: **Casa Graciela**, Graciela Ledesma Ramos y Alejandro Séneca, Linea 658 e/ A y B, Vedado, Ciudad de la Habana, Teléfono: 833-5263, Móvil: 052925925, E-mail: Gracielaenlinea@yahoo.es (Graciela was also kind enough to keep our bike boxes for us while we were travelling around). Another casa in Habana, recommended to us by our hosts, Domingo and Esther, from Viñales: **Daniel ó Fina**, Hospital No. 661 Apto. 3A, e/ Salud y Jesús Peregrino, Centro Habana, Ciudad de La Habana, Teléf: 870-0945, daniel_renta@yahoo.es

Day 1: Havana (Vedado district) to Playa Baracoa (approx 27 km)

Highlights:

- Our first desayuno (breakfast) in Cuba
- Cycling along the Malecón in Havana
- Kind woman in Playa Baracoa helps us find a place to stay the night

8:00 a.m. Desayuno: café con leche, jugo de naranja, piña, pan, huevos fritos, mermelada, mantequilla. Breakfast: coffee with milk, orange juice, pineapple, bread, fried eggs, jam, butter. Cost: 30 CUC\$ la habitación (room) + 26 CUC\$ por dos cenas (la cena = dinner) y dos desayunos (el desayuno = breakfast) y dos cervezas (beers). Salemos a las diez. We left at 10:00 a.m.

A few blocks from the *casa* was the Malecón. We got onto that and started cycling west. We got a bit lost on our way out of Havana – many streets aren't marked. Stopped near the Panorama Hotel Havana to reorient ourselves. Bought food supplies at Galerías de Paseo in Vedado (agua=water, crackers and cookies 6.50 CUC\$) and at Supermercado 70 (apples and pears 4.00 CUC\$, chorizo 2.60 CUC\$, juice and jam 5.40 CUC\$ and bread 0.50 CUC\$). I had to line up and pay at four separate places in the Supermercado. Got back on Av 5, the Lonely Planet (LP) Cycling Cuba route. It was *very* hot and sunny. Hotter still when we passed a brush fire in a field.

It was about 23 kilometres to the exit to Playa Baracoa. In the village, we went straight (veering left) where we should have turned right to follow the beach to find the *casa particular* of Juan and Olivia Rodriguez that was recommended in the guide book. A helpful woman came to our rescue as we were consulting the LP book yet again. She took us to her place where her neighbour, Lourdes Oliva González, who also has a *casa particular* (though it was rented) and knows EVERYone in town. She called Olivia, who then drove over to meet us and direct us back to her place. Señora González and her neighbour, the woman who first helped us though we never caught her name, were so friendly. They offered us bananas and bread and showed us photos of family in New Jersey (the woman's daughter) and photos of Canadians from Nova Scotia and Toronto who had stayed at Lourdes' *casa*. To say thanks, I gave the woman a Montreal postcard showing a snowy scene. She was all smiles and said, "Te quiero"!!

At Olivia's *casa* by 2:00 p.m. A very nice room, private entrance, kitchenette (la cocina) with una mesa (table), bathroom (toilet seat, big fluffy white toallas (towels), una ducha (shower) – la agua era un poco fria, the water was a bit cold). La habitación hay el aire acondicionado y una cama doble. The room had air conditioning and a double bed. We brought our bikes inside the kitchenette area. Olivia gave us des llaves (keys). Don't mind me, I'm trying to pick up some spanish words!

Beach walk. Dipped toes in water. A kid approached me asking for clothes for his sister. Had some cervezas (1 CUC\$ each) at a beach bar. Olivia prepared dinner for us: langosta con tomate y pimiento, ensalada (tomate, pepino, repollo), aceite y viagre, pan. Lobster with tomato and peppers, salad (tomato, cucumber, cabbage), oil and vinegar, bread.

Casa Particulares: We stayed at: **Olivia y Juan Rodriguez**, Calle 3A No 14813, Playa Baracoa, Tel: 80-6321. (In the Lonely Planet Cycling Cuba guide, 2002 edition, p.108). The woman who called Olivia to come and fetch us also has a casa in Playa Baracoa: **Lourdes Oliva González** Ave 3ra No. 16043 int. entre 160 y 162 Playa Baracoa, La Habana, (Cuarto, baño, cocina, agua caliente las 24 horas y aire acondicionado) Teléfono: 047-378314, Segunda entrada a mano izquierda despues de la panaderia, Email: lourdes47@enet.cu

Bike stats: Maximum Speed – 27.3 km/h; Average Speed – 14.2 km/h; Distance - 26.308 km

Day 2: Playa Baracoa to (just before) Las Terrazas (approx 55 km)

Highlights:

- What is with these roadside fires?
- Cycling on a really rough road once off the autopista
- Cow crossing and kid with a spinning top
- Stunning views of palm trees, lakes and mountains in the distance
- Squealing pig serenade

Restless sleep. A rooster (gallo?) started crowing at 4:00 a.m. Got up at 6:50 just in time for Olivia to announce that breakfast was ready: café cubano (con azúcar), jugo de piña, huevos fritos y chorizo, piña, pan. Cuban coffee (with sugar), pineapple juice, fried eggs and sausage, pineapple, bread. Cost was 45 CUC\$ total for room (25 CUC\$), 2 dinners (7 CUC\$ each) and 2 breakfasts (3 CUC\$ each).

On bikes by 8:20 a.m. Foggy to start, but soon very hot and sunny. Barely a cloud in the sky. Route to Mariel wasn't eventful except for having to stop because a bridge under repair reduced the traffic to one lane. And we saw lots of vultures flying overhead! Mariel was full of potholes and from there we gasped in the wake of cars and trucks belching fumes. I wanted to wet my head to cool down but we worried that we wouldn't have enough water.

At the exit from the autopista, we found a shady spot to chill out. It's bizarre the juxtaposition of new and really really old, especially in cars. Also striking is to see the open back trucks carrying people to wherever, and the clusters of people waiting by the side of the road for those trucks to stop. One guy walked toward us on the road asking "¿Habitación?" and one girl smiled and waved from the back of a moped. Other than that, the people don't seem

to notice us. Lunch in our shady spot: chorizo with bread and v8-like juice. Traffic was lighter off of the autopista, but we were stopped by cows on the road (a kid playing with a spinning top entertained us as we waited for the cows to cross into the field), and passed another fire, a small one this time, at the side of the road. The road was *rough* at times. My front fender shimmied out of position and started rubbing my front tire. Quick wrench adjustment and we were off. The heat was knocking us out! We started hopskotchng between shady spots on the road. Despite the shitty road, the views were stunning! Palm trees, lakes, mountains in the distance.

A note about the LP cycling guide directions: the odometre readings are essential. You feel like you're in the middle of nowhere, but just where you're supposed to turn according to LP, the turn is there. Very reassuring. At 51.0 km, we turned right but did not see a 'Cayajobos' sign. Nor did we see a Minbas sign at the water tank at 51.9 km. But we found the water tank so that was enough.

Stopped twice to see if we could buy water but no luck either time. One guy we passed asked "¿Habitación" We said "No gracias" and continued on. The road was delightfully smooth after the 51 km mark right turn. Speed was about 24 km/h whereas on the rough part we were crawling at about 9 km/h.

Arrived at a little house perched on a hill with a room for rent sign: HOSPEDAJE; VILLA DUQUE; RENT A ROOM. It was just before going down a hill on the road and before we reached the park reserve (the Reserva de la Biosferea Sierra del Rosario). Squealing, and I mean *squealing*, pigs and turkeys with little chickies and barking dogs and *ça sent la campagne!* But the selling point of the place was the fridge in the room filled with chilled Bucaneros fuerte cervezas and agua (1 CUC\$ each)!! The room had its own shower, one double bed and one single bed, toilet seat, 2 little towels, soap, toilet paper (20 CUC\$ for one night). The room was on the second floor. We could bring our bikes upstairs into the dining area adjoining the room. Cena: pollo, arroz, fritos, papas, sopa, ensalada (tomates, pepinos y repollo), frutas (naranjas, plátanos, guayabas), pulpa de coco con queso, juga de naranja. Dinner: chicken, rice, beans, potatoes, salad (tomatoes, cucumber and cabbage), fruit (oranges, bananas, guava), coconut pulp with cheese, orange juice. So much food!! We could barely finish half of it.

Casa particular: We stayed at **Villa Duque**, about 2 km before the park reserve entrance on the way from Playa Baracoa and about 5 km from Las Terrazas. Look for the HOSPEDAJE / RENT A ROOM sign of a house perched on a hill just before the road goes downhill.

Bike stats: Max 31.2 km/h; Avg 14.0 km/h; Dist 54.972 km

Day 3: Las Terrazas to Soroa (approx 20 km)

Highlights:

- Lovely cycling through the Reserva de la Biosferea Sierra del Rosario
- Get-off-the-bike-and-push climbs!
- Five kilometre walk to make a one-minute phone call (should have taken our bikes!)
- Scrumptuous fish at the *casa* in Soroa

It rained overnight! The clothes I had airing out on our clothesline got wet. Thankfully the señora got up and brought them in for me before they got soaked. There were a few mosquitos

but they don't seem as vicious as in Canada. We kept the windows (metal shutters) closed to keep out the bugs so our room felt a bit stuffy. Nevertheless we slept hard and for the first time I woke up feeling hungry. We asked for only one egg each for breakfast and this time we ate everything! The coffee is good and strong and the guava jam was a treat too. Lots of roosters trying to outdo each other this morning.

On the road by 9:30 a.m. At 2.2 km down the road, the entrance to the park reserve (4 CUC\$ each entrance fee). Guide at the entrance explained in very good english the reforestation project of the reserve. Saw at least six touring cyclists between the entrance and Las Terrazas (another 3 km from the park entrance). Sat at the community centre plaza in the shade. A pack of kids sat staring and giggling. Back on the road by 11:30 a.m. The reserve was lovely! So serene, beautiful views, and very little traffic.

It was really really hot out but most of our way was shaded. We did a little side tour to Baño de Bayate (?) while in the reserve. It was about 1 km down a gravel road at the end of which we found what looked like an abandoned park by some pools of water. Not quite abandoned! There was a lonely park attendant on a chair, some skinny dogs and a bunch of chickens. We decided to have lunch there and then realized that we left the chorizo, bread and apples back in the fridge of the Villa Duque. Instead, we dined on cookies dipped in jam, coriander crackers and some not quite ripe pears. Oh and had one of our sawdusty-tasting but supposed to be good for you granola bars that we brought from home.

A note about LP cycling guide: What LP described as moderate climbs I found difficult. Not quite in shape for those hills. The climbs described as hard were impossible. We had to push our bikes up those parts. It was tough but the views were so stunning that we forgot about our panting and sweating. They must have repaired the road since the printing of the LP book – there were no dangerous potholes on our descent towards Soroa.

We found a *casa* about 4 km south of the Soroa village sign. On the left of the main road. The hostess, Odalys, approached us as we slowed to a stop, having just seen her hospedaje sign. Large room with one double bed and one single bed, shower with hot water, fridge in room, air conditioning, toilet paper, towels, soap, no toilet seat. We could bring our bikes into the room.

At 4:30 we walked to the hotel Villa Soroa (2.5 km from the *casa*) to phone the place we reserved in Viñales to let them know that we'd be late by one day. Also we wanted to buy water and beer (Odalys only had small bottles of water and no beer on stock). We were back just in time for dinner at 7:00 p.m. The best meal yet. Delicious beef and potato stew. Fish (pescado) done in garlic, cumin (comino) and orange/lemon juice. Fabulous! I was beginning to think that the only seasoning in Cuba was salt. Also had rice, plantain chips, tomato and cabbage salad, two kinds of juice - toronja (grapefruit) and something called guayavana (?) – it tasted like nothing I've tried before. Odalys said that the guayavana is a big green spiky fruit grown locally.

Little tiny ants got to our snacks on top of the fridge! We had to sacrifice our crackers to them.

Casa particular: We stayed at **Hospedaje Odalys**, Carretera a Soroa km 5 1/2, Candelaria Pinar del Rio. No phone.

Bike stats: Max 43.7 km/h; Avg 12.4 km/h (those climbs!); Dist 19.826 km from Las Terrazas entrance. (Plus 5 km from Villa Duque)

Day 4: Soroa to San Diego de los Baños (approx 56 km)

Highlights:

- Thirty long straight and boring kilometres on the autopista
- Fresh mango juice at Henry's (Enrique's) house
- Enrique gives us a tour of San Diego de los Baños

Got to get used to the roosters! Woke up at 7:30. Breakfast at 8 a.m. of scrambled eggs, tomato slices, bread, coffee with milk, guava jam, more of that guayavana juice, bananas and pineapple. Total cost: 47 CUC\$ (included 5 CUC\$ for the sandwiches – ham, cheese and tomato – and bananas and 2 CUC\$ for the grapefruit juice that she prepared for our lunch).

On the road by 8:45 a.m. The autopista part was a bit like driving on the 401 in Ontario – that is, long, straight and boring. Obviously with a lot less traffic! Bad road surface connecting the autopista to the Carreterra Central (about 3 km). The road was much improved then and the ride was really lovely.

Arrived San Diego de los Baños around 1:30 p.m. We were escorted into town by a guy named Tony on a bike. Turned out his family runs the *casa* that we were looking for (Caridad y Julio Gutierrez), but that we found out unfortunately was booked up. Tony took us to another *casa* but no-one was there. He went off to look for the owners while we waited and waited and waited. Finally he came back saying that they might be back around 3pm.

We were just about to look for the other *casa* listed in the LP when another guy on a bike showed up. He said his name was Henry and his english was really good. His brother's *casa* was just coming available after two Belgians were leaving. While they cleaned the little bungalow in the backyard, we went to Henry's house for mango juice. A subtitled episode of "Dr House" played on the TV in the background. Henry regaled us with tales of his work (trained as a food chemist) and lots of other things. For example, a bit of local trivia: December 17 is the "day of the dogs" in San Diego de los Baños.

After we grabbed a quick and cold shower, Henry took us on a tour of the village: to the spa, the river and finally to a local bar where we had a beer and talked. Henry offered a cigar to Benoit for him to try one of the local products. Back for dinner at around 6pm: chicken, rice, beans, banana chips, tomato and lettuce salad, lime slices, bananas and fresh grapefruit juice.

A bit more about the *casa*: a small bungalow in the back of the house, separate from the house. Toilet with no seat, shower - could ask for *agua caliente* (hot water) but we didn't bother, soap, 2 small towels, one double bed, big fridge. There was just enough room to put our bikes inside.

Casa particular: We stayed at the Enrique Gil's brother's place in San Diego de los Baños. We forgot to write down the exact address. It was on a street facing a baseball park.

Bike stats (including yesterday since I didn't reset my odometre): Max 43.7 km/h; Avg 14.9 km/h; Dist 75.935 km. (Over 2 days.)

Day 5: San Diego de los Baños to Viñales (approx 67 km)

Highlights:

- Generous supply of fruit and sandwiches from Enrique's brother

- Now I understand ‘Chiclé’!
- Johnny Boy’s cake

Add a whimpering puppy to the roosters crowing and you get an idea of our nighttime serenade! Up at 7:00 a.m., breakfast at 7:45 a.m. of scrambled eggs and ham, crusty mini loaves of bread, lots of tomato slices, bananas, coffee (sugary!) and orange juice. Henry’s (Enrique’s) brother made us ham sandwiches for lunch and gave us a big bottle of freshly-squeezed grapefruit juice and a ton of bananas and grapefruit. They were so generous. And for everything, only: 40 CUC\$. Stopped to say good-bye to Enrique at his juice stand.

Info we got from Enrique: cock fighting on a Sunday afternoon; local cigar maker – two years to ferment the tobacco; best rum straight – Club Havana 7 Years; best rum for mojitos – Mulatto.

On the road at 9:00 a.m. On Enrique’s advice, we didn’t take the route through the park (suggested in LP). He said that it was destroyed by the two hurricanes. Recommended that we take the alternate route to Viñales. He said once we’re there, we can go back and do the last 15 kilometres of the park route (the nicest part) with our bikes unloaded. The ‘alternate route’ was okay until we got near to Consolación del Sur – then the road was jammed with squid trucks making it most unpleasant to ride and hard to breathe. Tried to get \$\$ in the town but at the bank they said they couldn’t for some reason – something ‘no funciona’. Arghhhh I wish my Spanish were better.

We rode 33.5 km of the Carretera Central before the turnoff to Viñales. Stopped by the side of the road for lunch. Not a great spot, but the best we could find. A few crappy parts on the road where there was sticky gravel (temporary?) like they were in the middle of repairing the road. At 49 km, we came to a T in the road and turned right towards Viñales (not marked). Switchback climbs were not too hard, though we dreaded when the belching trucks passed us on the way up. The road climbs, then descends, then climbs again. We thought that the crest was at the Los Jazmines hotel but there were a few mini climbs in between. Not all coasting downhill as we had hoped.

Arrived at Casa Las Palmitas on the street Adela Ascuy (Norte) around 4:15 p.m. Two twin beds, very nice bathroom, two small towels, no soap, air conditioning, fan, kitchen sink, no fridge. We could keep our bikes in the room. Our hosts: Domingo and Esther.

Domingo explained ‘Chiclé’ to us! Kids were always yelling that at me - they were trying to say ‘Chiclet’ as in the chewing gum. I think that they wanted me (or any tourist?) to give them gum!! Now I just have to find out what ‘muchala’ means.

Twenty-four year old student came by to deliver a cake while we were sitting on the front porch. He said making cakes is how he makes money to get by. I missed what he said his name was, but then right after he said that his ‘english name’ is “Johnny Boy”.

Dinner (8 CUC\$ each): fish, potato, onion, rice, black bean soup, salad of tomato cucumber and red pepper, dessert of half grapefruit (edge cut in a zigzag) topped with papaya and orange chunks, and a piece of Johnny Boy’s cake. Walked in the village after dinner, then slept! The fan drowned out any night serenades by pigs and roosters.

Casa particular: We stayed at **Villa Las Palmitas** across from the baseball stadium, Esther y Domingo, Adela Azcuy (Norte) # 13-C, Viñales, Pinar del Río Province, Cuba. Tel: 793366. We found out later that there is another *casa* of the same name in Viñales (perhaps why we got lost trying to find it). Another *casa* in town, recommended by Enrique, is: **Casa Campo**, Sr. Alberto Rodriguez, Calle Sergio Dopico No 2-C, Viñales, Cuba.

Bike stats: Max 39.3 km/h; Avg 14.9 km/h; Dist 67.361 km (we got a bit lost in Viñales

trying to find the *casa*!).

Day 6: Christmas Day in Viñales

Highlights:

- A consumerism-free Christmas day in Cuba
- Went on a hike to find the Mogote Coco Solo but found a cemetery instead

Up at 8 a.m. Breakfast (3 CUC\$ each) of scrambled eggs (B had his with ham), bread, coffee, juice, tons of fruit, little packets of jam (guava and mango) and butter we didn't use. Washed out a huge pile of skinky sweaty cycling clothes and hung them on the line to dry. Sat in the town square for a bit, talked to a sweet old man about fruits and vegetables that we can get in Canada. The bank was closed (Christmas Day) and internet service in town wasn't working so we couldn't send emails to our families as we had hoped.

I felt a strange sadness come over me. I believe in the world that the people of Cuba want to have, but I fear that the capitalist way will win out. I felt ashamed to be so easily recognized as a tourist. I felt ashamed by the thoughts of all the insane consumerism and excess in my own country.

We went to seek out some shade until the hottest part of the day was over, then went for a walk on a trail that was supposed to take us to the Mogote Coco Solo, one of the funny bulbous mountains in the area. We must have taken a wrong turn somewhere because we ended up at a cemetery. From there, we decided to take the nearest road back to town.

We talked about possible plans for the next leg of the trip – Isla de la Juventud? María la Gorda? Right now we're leaning to Playa Larga in La Bahía de Cochinas.

Dinner was plentiful. We asked for fish again. It was so delicious. Red bean soup this time, with potatoes and another vegetable. A deep-fried vegetable too – like a potato a bit. I don't know what it was. Rice and salad of tomato, cucumber and red pepper. Dessert of flan and custard!

Esther was sad that we have to change *casas* tomorrow. We'd like to stay with them longer but they have new guests coming who had booked a month in advance. They're going to find us another *casa* nearby.

Went for a walk in town after dinner – saw a few crowds of people gathered, one group listening to Christmas carols. More like pop tune Christmas songs like “I'm dreaming of a white Christmas.”

Asked at Viazul about buses. Learned a new phrase “*Todavía no sé*” = I don't know yet.

Day 7: Bike Ride from Viñales to Loma Del Mango (approx 24 km return)

Highlights:

- Moved to a new *casa*, Villa Caricia, in Viñales
- Met some Canadians and a Mexican on the way to Loma Del Mango

- Mojitos!

Breakfast at 8:30. It was a little chilly in the morning. Coffee, orange juice, fruit (papaya, banana, pineapple, orange, grapefruit), bread, scrambled eggs, and little almond biscuits. Paid the bill at Villa Las Palmitas: 95 CUC\$ for two nights, two dinners, two breakfasts and all the waters, beers and juice that we had.

Packed up and moved to Rocky and Felicia's *casa* (a relative of Domingo's). They have a coffee plant outside their house! Their son Sergio speaks english and is a doctor, specializing in the throat I think. The *casa* is just across the street from 'Villa Nelson' with a Lonely Planet logo on it. Sweet little room with two twin beds, bathroom with shower, towels, toilet paper, seat on toilet, no soap. We could keep our bikes in their house for safekeeping.

After setting up a bit, we went to the banco – a bit of a wait, 35 minutes in total, to change \$\$\$. On 400 CUC\$ there was a 45 CUC\$ charge. I'm interested to see what other charges I'll be dinged on using my credit card.

In the early afternoon, we went for a bike ride to the Cueva Indio and El Palenque area. We turned left off the road past the San Vincente restaurant and climbed a long windy road up to Loma Del Mango. Loma means mountain in Spanish. Gorgeous views and absolutely no traffic! We met some Canadians, Adriana and Carla, and a Mexican, Fernando, on crappy rental bikes. Adriana and Carla are students at University of Victoria. Carla and Fernando continued on, and we turned back with Adriana to keep her company on the way back.

Stopped at El Palenque cave bar for a couple of Bucaneros. Adriana paid 1 CUC\$ to go further into the cave, while we watched her bike. We chatted a bit when she came back. She studies Spanish and Poli Sci at UVic. Then we cycled back to town together.

Rocky (I have no idea if that's how he spells his name, but that's what it sounds like!) made us mojitos upon our return. Oh ya, I almost forgot: we can get Spanish lessons from their neighbour who is a professor of Spanish. We need it!

Dinner: bean soup with cumin, rice, salad of cucumber, tomato and green tomato, banana chips, fried chicken and french fries, dessert of fruit (bananas, pineapple and papaya). Rocky offered Benoit a cigar after dinner as a gift (un regalo). He smoked the whole thing! After dinner, we walked to clear our heads and to aid digestion of the huge meal.

Everyone in Cuba seems to have a hard time pronouncing Benoit's name. Rocky asked me if Benoit prefers to be called 'Benito' or 'Alberto' (Albert, his middle name, appears on his passport). I said 'Benito' would be better. Since the Cubans pronounce the 'ch' as in 'church' and also pronounce every syllable, my name comes out sounding more like 'Mitch-EL-ay'.

Casa particular: We stayed at **Villa Caricia**, Dr. Sergio Vento, Calle Camilo Cienfuegos No 7-A, Viñales 22400, Cuba, Tel: (048)69-54-86, email: sergioj@princesa.pri.sld.cu Our hosts: Rocky (sp?) and Felicia. Their son, Sergio, is a surgeon and throat specialist. He speaks english.

Bike stats : Max 40.2 km/h; Avg 13.4 km/h; Dist 23.779 km.

Day 8: Walking Tour of Mogotes around Viñales (~4 hours)

Highlights:

- Mogotes (those bulbous limestone mountains) in the Viñales countryside

- Juan, the campesino, rolls organic tobacco cigars
- Adriana and Carla, the Canadians we met yesterday, translate for us
- Chewing on sugar cane sticks!
- Spanish lesson with Professor Pérez
- David, the Winnipeg cyclist we met at the airport, turns up in Viñales

The nights are a bit chilly but wow, that doesn't stop us from sleeping like logs. Up at 7:30, breakfast at 8:15. Breakfast: fruit (grapefruit, papaya, bananas, oranges, pineapple), coffee with milk – though I think I'm starting to prefer coffee with sugar only – grapefruit juice freshly squeezed (I'm definitely getting spoiled on that), tortilla de huevos, pan and honey. In Cuba, a 'tortilla' is like a plain omelette.

A woman came at 8:30 to take us to our hiking guide for the day. At first, we thought she was the guide that we had asked Rocky to arrange for us. We didn't understand why she was always so far ahead of us on her bike. Finally we arrived at a farm where we met our actual guide. The guy, I never caught his name, told Benoit almost immediately that he too was born in 1971. His price to be our guide was 4 CUC\$ per person per hour. I had to pee and he pointed to a stable telling me it was a 'baño grande', a big bathroom. Then we were on our way.

We walked through fields of pineapple, black beans, avocado trees, mandarin, orange, grapefruit, banana and rice fields (dry now). We saw a hurricane shelter. Lots of animals. Tobacco fields everywhere. Passed through our guide's fields where his horses were. He told us he has six horses. Oh and five kids!

We climbed to the top of a big hill to a magnificent view. But it was *hot* and we were red-faced and sweaty by the effort. Our guide said that next time he'd take a horse even if the tourists wanted to walk. The expression on his face got me laughing really hard. That, and when he tried to pronounce the word 'river'. He said that he wanted to learn more english to help him with being a guide, but man oh man, the 'er' part of 'river' made his face go into contortions. He told us that at school he was only taught Russian.

He took us to a farmer's house, Juan, who grows organic tobacco. The people we met yesterday, Adriana and Carla and Fernando, were already there! Small world. It was great because they could translate for us (Adriana and Carla are taking Spanish Studies) as Juan described the process of growing tobacco, pruning the plants and the different parts of the plant that go to the government etc.

Juan rolled each of us a cigar, made from his purely organic tobacco. The tip he sealed with a mixture of honey, lemon and rum. Adriana and Carla told us that they had some \$\$ stolen from their *casa*. They didn't know what to do because their señora was so nice. At the campesino's (farmer's) place, they served us coffee and a plate of fruit. We smoked some of the cigars that Juan made for us, and later he went with Benoit to the sugar cane stalks to cut us some sticks of sugar cane to chew on. The Canadians and Fernando left on horses to catch a bus to Havana. Soon after an Italian couple arrived on horses for their turn learning about Juan's cigars. We returned to Viñales for afternoon beers and bocadillos (fried ham and cheese sandwiches) at the *casa*.

We bought postcards on the way to Esther and Domingo's place for a coffee. They had invited us back to their place after we moved to a new *casa*. We chatted with them as much as we could in our broken spanish! Despite that, they even invited us back again for mojitos tomorrow.

On our way back to the *casa*, we ran into David again, that guy from Winnipeg that we met at the Havana airport. He did get his bike finally, though he said that it arrived a day late. We gabbed to David a bit about our travels so far, then we had to go for our spanish lesson from the neighbour next door. Oh my wow, we learned so much! I hope it sticks.

Dinner: banana chips, fish and lime, bean and vegetable soup (brownish beans this time), rice, french fries, salad of tomato cucumber and cabbage, fruit for dessert. Always tons and tons of food.

David came by after dinner with his bike. We sat outside with beers and mojitos and chatted about cycling trips. He's been with his bike to India, Ireland, Newfoundland, the Philippines and to Spain (Barcelona). He said he first would take his bike just to have transport in the city, then later he got interested in touring by bike. We moved our conversation to a bar on the main street of the town. A salsa band was playing in the corner of the patio.

David had us dying with laughter at his tales of his life as a Winnipeg dentist working on contract in the north of Manitoba where the big danger is 'muskeg', like a sort of quicksand that traps people and ATVs alike. I laughed the most about him being stuck up north with only the CBC to watch and how he got addicted to watching a show about a Franciscan monk who solved mysteries in the fifteenth century. Only on the CBC!

It was an earplug sleep night with the neighbour's (not the spanish prof, I hope) tunes blasting our ears apart.

Day 9: Bike Ride to the Gran Caverna de Santo Tomás (approx 42 km return)

Highlights:

- Sending emails and postcards
- Cycled by Mural de la Prehistoria
- Tour of the caves at Santo Tomás
- Mojitos with Esther and Domingo

Breakfast – same as yesterday – though this time I had my coffee without milk. We wrote our postcards and went to send a few emails to family to let them know that we're alive and well. We paid 6 CUC\$ for a card giving us one hour of internet time, then had to wait about 45 minutes for the only computer that was working. Trying to send the postcards was also fun. At the *correo*, what we thought was the postoffice, we were told that we had to go somewhere else to buy stamps! We found a little booth across from the town square selling stamps and the people there said they'd take care of mailing our postcards for us.

At around noon, we got on our bikes to cycle to the Gran Caverna de Santo Tomás, a huge cave system about 20 kilometres from Viñales. On our way, we passed by La Mural de la Prehistoria, that was originally commissioned by Diego Rivera. Now it seems a bit too touristy for its worth.

At Santo Tomás, we took the cave tour for 10 CUC\$ each. Joining us on the tour was a german couple and our guide. The tour lasted about one and a half hours. It was pretty cool. Once deep in the cave, our guide asked us to turn off the headlamps on our helmets. We were in complete and total darkness.

We were tired and hungry at the end of the tour which made the ride back to Viñales even harder. That and a bug flew in my eye. Ouch my eye was stinging. We stopped by Esther and Domingo's on our way to our *casa*. We were supposed to have mojitos with them at around 4:00 p.m. but we showed up around 5:30. (We didn't realize that the cave tour was so long.) But Esther and Domingo didn't seem to care at all and served us mojitos all the same. Back to our *casa* by 6:40 p.m., just in time for a shower before dinner.

Dinner: black bean soup, rice, deep fried vegetable (something like a potato, but I don't know what it is), cucumber and tomato salad, french fries, fried chicken and fruit for dessert and two frosty BEERS!

Bike stats : Max 45.2 km/h (on a very bumpy descent); Avg 14.9 km/h; Dist 41.668 km.

Day 10: Day Trip by Taxi to the Beach at Cayo Jutías

Highlights:

- Handwritten spanish guidebook from the professor next door
- Crazy (and expensive!) taxi ride in an ancient Lada
- Mini ambling crabs in the sand and starfish under water
- Surprise visit from David who proposes a cave exploring expedition

Desayuno: café con azúcar, jugo de naranja, pan, tortilla con jamón y tomates, frutas (plátanos, toranjas). Breakfast: coffee with sugar, orange juice, bread, plain omelette with ham and tomatoes, fruit (bananas, grapefruit).

The spanish professor from next door stopped by to drop off something for us. He had written out by hand a guide of things to order for breakfast and dinner at the casas where we will be staying. So kind!

We gathered our beach stuff and headed to the town square in the hopes of finding two other tourists to split a taxi to Cayo Jutías. We ran into David who was in line to use the internet. He said that he was sick yesterday with fever and chills, that he thinks he got from eating some questionable lobster a day or two ago. He's heading out tomorrow for María la Gorda.

We talked to a couple from Spain who were riding these really cool foldable mountain bikes. They said that cycling in Spain is really good and gave us the name of a website listing homes to stay in (www.warmshowers.org). We also met some Canadians from Calgary who were heading to the beach, but they were already five in a cab. Finally, we decided to go alone, and got in a rusty old Lada that would take us to Cayo Jutías for 45 CUC\$. We thought that the price would include the toll fee but alas it didn't so we paid an extra 10 CUC\$ (5 CUC\$ per person) at the gate. All the displays on the dashboard of the Lada weren't working – the speedometre was at 0, the oil at 0, the gas at 0, I just prayed that the taxi driver knew that there would be enough gas in the car to get us there and back.

The water at Cayo Jutías was turquoise and warm like bath water and the sand sparkling white. Little crabs in shells were ambling by us all the time. We found a little semi-isolated spot in some driftwood branches. The only people we saw were conch shell seekers and those looking for even more isolation.

My legs were splotched with mosquito bites, about 19 at last count. At first I was raving that the bites didn't itch, and that I didn't notice getting bitten, but that didn't last long.

Soon my bites were red, swollen and ITCHY! Today marks the halfway point in our three week trip. It feels like we've been here a lifetime.

We drank beers, read a bit, and splashed around in the water with our snorkels and masks. I saw a few blue and yellow fish and lots of starfish decorating the sand under water. I bought a beer for our taxi driver, Hernando, who looked bored bored bored as he waited for us at the beach bar. We stayed until about 5:00 p.m. then started the long windy journey by car through the hills back to Viñales. Hernando told us that 30 Cubans had just been caught in a boat trying to cross over to Florida. The smell of the old Lada made me think of Rich's MGB. The engine had that sound like it had been taken apart and put back together many times. I think Rich would like this aspect of Cuba, that the average person here can become a master mechanic at keeping the old cars running.

We got back to our *casa* with plenty of time for a shower and packing up our things for our departure tomorrow. Cena: noodle soup with cumin, rice, pork chops with onions, french fries, salad of tomato, cucumber and radish. Dessert of a pile of fruit – banana, papaya and pineapple.

We were packing up our stuff to leave when David arrived to propose a change in plans. He found out about a swimming hole in a cave in a mogote not far from here. So we decided to stay in Viñales one more day and to go cave exploring with David. We went to sleep later than usual – I had restless dreams that David wasn't really a dentist from Winnipeg but a pirate involved in an elaborate scam to take our money!

Day 11: Cave Swimming at La Cueva de Toño Blanco

Highlights:

- Cave tunnel at Cueva de la Vaca
- Locals with bright lights lead us to the cave swimming hole
- We meet our walking guide again – this time he's on a horse!

Woke up at 8:25 feeling bleery eyed. Breakfast – same as yesterday except with small buns instead of bread. Rocky prepared us a small lunch for our cave hike – 2 bocadillos, a ton of little bananas and 1.5 litres of pineapple juice. We told them that we wanted to stay one more day in Viñales before heading out for good. Felicia always greets us with a question in Spanish, usually asking how we slept, followed by “¿Bien o mal?”. She makes answering so easy!

David showed up around 9:00 a.m for our cave expedition. First we walked up Adela Ascuy Norte to a trail that goes to Cueva de la Vaca, up a set of concrete stairs to a tunnel cave with views out either end. Lots of goats like that cave too, apparently. We met those Canadians from Calgary again – they were setting up for some rock climbing on the mogotes.

We asked for directions from every farmer that we met as we continued along our way to La Cueva de Toño Blanco, a cave in the Mogote Palmarito with a natural swimming hole in it. I think Toño Blanco is the name of the farmer whose fields are right by the cave entrance. We thought the cave would be isolated but in the end we found it by following a bunch of guided tourists who were on horseback. They led us to the cave entrance (that we could have found ourselves) and deep into the cave to the swimming hole (that might have been tricky to find on our own). David had brought lights, one for each of us, but it sure helped to have locals there who knew the way in the cave and who were carrying big bright lights.

The cave pool was a bit of a way in, over a few wooden bridges and over slippery footing. At the pool, we hesitated at first but soon slipped into the water. Its temperature was 70 degrees Fahrenheit, according to the gauge on David's watch. The water was a bit murky but cool and refreshing and not deep at all. We donned our snorkels and masks and used the underwater lights that David provided for us to explore the cave pool. It was exhilarating though slightly spooky. Some other tourists came in the water too, one Canadian woman from Campbell River BC and a man from Israel. David ventured much farther than me and Benoit, going over a little wall into a connecting pool.

One of the Cuban guides escorted us back to daylight with one of the bright lights. At the exit to the cave we ran into our walking guide from the other day! He was on horseback this time, and wearing spurs. I think we traumatized him by getting him to walk for four hours. He couldn't stop talking about it. I sat with him and his pals while Benoit and David scrambled up the rocks at the cave entrance. The Cubans looked on, shaking their heads and calling them "dos locos", two crazy guys.

Our clothes dried off as we walked back to Viñales. We stopped for a bit to eat the lunch that Rocky had packed for us. We arrived back at the *casa* around 4:00, had a few beers though David only drank juice – he was taking antibiotics for whatever was making him ill. Now he wonders if it was the water or ice he had at the Playa del Este all-inclusive hotel where he stayed for his first few days in Cuba. David has even more crazy stories of his dentistry work in northern Manitoba. That guy should write a book.

Cena: beans mixed with rice, salad of tomato and cucumber, pork chops and onions, french fries, fried potato-like vegetable (no, I haven't found out what it is yet), fruit for dessert (papaya, pineapple, banana).

The señora did some laundry for us. Clean towels! Clean undies! We're running low on soap (it's hard to get in Cuba) and we've almost used one roll of toilet paper that we brought just in case.

Domingo dropped by after dinner. I think there's a little friendly rivalry between him and Rocky over who has the best *casa*. Domingo asked me why we didn't stop by his house on our way back from the cueva (cave) pool. I said that his front door was closed but then he said that we should have just knocked. Benoit told me that Viñales feels a bit like Volonne, the village in which his grandparents live in France, where you have to stop by for a visit whenever you pass by someone's house.

We packed up our stuff and tried to get some sleep despite the music (from the town plaza?) pounding in our ears.

Day 12: Viñales to Sandino (approx 106 km)

Highlights:

- Switching to Plan B
- Best cycling so far – rolling hills, smooth road, lovely scenery, friendly people, and very little traffic!
- Ran into David again on the road to Guane
- Chased by a guy desperate for our business
- Cycling in the dark on New Year's Eve (not recommended)

Up at 6:40, breakfast – same! – at 7:00. We loaded up our bikes, said goodbye to Rocky and Felicia and went to catch the 8:00 a.m. Viazúl bus to Havana. It was not looking promising when we arrived at the bus. The bus looked full. Benoit waited with our bikes and I went to ask about tickets. In the Viazúl ticket office, the woman asked if I had reserved seats – no-one told me that we needed to reserve, or even that we could reserve! When we had inquired a few days before, the Viazúl guy said that we just needed to show up fifteen minutes before the bus leaves to buy tickets. We weren't alone though: I saw many other people in that office looking bewildered and confused at not being able to get on that damn bus.

Our plan had been to take the bus to Havana arriving at 11:00 a.m., and from there catching the noon bus to Varadero that would get us to resortville at 3:00 p.m. In Varadero, we were only going to stay long enough to buy supplies of food and water for the road and get right on our bikes for 12 km to Cárdenas where we were sure to find a *casa* for the night. From Cárdenas, it would have been a two-day bike ride south to Playa Larga on the Bay of Pigs where we were thinking of hanging out for five or six days. Supposed to be lots of good snorkelling at the Bahía de Cochinos. But the travels gods decided for us that it was not to be.

So we had to change to plan B. Instead of relying on buses or trains, we decided to get back on our bikes and rely only on ourselves. There was another bus to Havana at 2:00 p.m. but we didn't feel like waiting around for it. Our plan B: buy some water, crackers and cookies for the road and head south to María la Gorda. The first 40 or so kilometres were the loveliest of lovely. We went through Pons, La Cabeza and then took the road toward Guane. Rolling hills, friendly people, mostly smooth road, beautiful scenery and almost no traffic. We crossed a few wood plank bridges on the way. A little tricky to cross on a bike – you just have to make sure that your tires don't go through the slats.

We stopped for lunch at the third wood plank bridge, eating the bocadillas and bananas that Rocky packed for us (we had planned to eat them on the bus to Havana). It was nice to see some healthy horses on the way, with nice shiny coats and big plump horse bums.

As we were taking five in the shade, David passed us on the road. We meet again! He had left Viñales an hour after we did. So then we were three to ride together. Stopped at the Río Cuyaguaje under a bridge. I dipped my toes and Benoit and David dipped their heads in the cool cool water. It was another hot and gloriously sunny day.

We arrived in Guane, where we had hoped to spend the night, at around 5:00 p.m. The hotel was full. I was kind of glad because it looked a little run down. Some guys tried to find us a *casa* but with no luck. One guy was much more persistent in his search. At first we followed him but then he started taking us to some sketchy looking areas where there were no legal *casa* signs. A legal *casa particular* for tourists has to display a sign, blue on white, that sort of looks like a shelter over a bed.

We decided then to push on to Sandino, another 20 kilometres away. It was about 5:30 p.m. by this time and it would be dark soon. We found a 'Rent a room' sign in the next town, Isabel Rubio, that was 5 kilometres away, but sadly there was no room available. The persistent guy from Guane had chased us there, five kilometres yelling and whistling on a crappy kid's bike with no brakes. We told him no gracias, that we didn't want to double back to Guane (and we wondered, but not aloud, what kind of *casa* this guy would find for us). He seemed to get it, though he was pissed off, and I thought he had left us alone. But then he appeared again behind us as we cycled out of Isabel Rubio. He was yelling "Chino! Chino!" at David who is of Chinese origin. That was when I started to freak out. I didn't know it then, but at the same time Benoit was getting really scared too. Finally, though, the guy's persistence wore out and he gave up the chase.

Our next challenge was cycling in the fading light. It was getting dark very quickly and there

were no lights on the road. Before leaving for Cuba, our Cuban friend Roberto had advised us never to ride our bikes at night. We were expecting to follow his advice, but thankfully at the last minute I packed some little LED bike lights, just in case! So we all had front flashy LED lights, and David and I had the red rear LED lights. Benoit rode in the middle since he didn't have a rear light. With the lights and our reflective panniers, we were somewhat visible. Still, it was very scary. There was total darkness around us. It was almost impossible to see the road. And there were some extremely drunk people about, it being New Year's Eve and all.

It was a strange sort of sensory deprivation trying to cycle in complete darkness. I could feel the bumps in the road but I couldn't see when they were coming. My front light just barely picked up Benoit cycling ahead of me. I had to ask him to warn me if he was going to slow down or stop – if he didn't tell me, then by the time I saw that he had stopped, I'd have crashed into him. The only way I got through my fear was to concentrate on pedalling. I also kept reassuring myself that bicycles are inherently stable (who was that British physicist that published articles about his URB, the unrideable bicycle that he tried to design but in fact was still kind of rideable?).

I don't know how we got there in one piece, yet we did arrive in Sandino at around 7:15 p.m. Somehow we managed to turn down the right street and to ask the right person about directions to a *casa*. A young kid led us to one, running ahead of us and we followed numbly on our bikes, not quite believing that we had made it to Sandino. Time seemed to have slowed down as we rode in the blackness. At the *casa* finally, though it was a little confusing at first – was there a room for us or wasn't there? It's not legal in Cuba for three people to share one room. We needed two rooms, one for me and Benoit, and one for David. Was there one room or two available? It wasn't clear and we were too exhausted to think properly. In the end, there was one room for me and Benoit at the *casa* that the young kid had taken us to; and the family there found a room for David at a nearby *casa*. Though David came over to join us for dinner where we were staying.

Dinner: lots of water, roast pork (really yummy!), potatoes, banana chips, salad of green tomato, cabbage and green beans (the beans from a can), and rice mixed with black beans. Benoit and I had two beers each. No dessert.

Our room was very simple with a double bed, a bathroom, shower with lukewarm to cold water, soap, toilet paper, no lid on toilet, fan, air conditioning and towels. It was 25 CUC\$ per night, 7 CUC\$ each for dinner and 4 CUC\$ each for breakfast.

Happy New Year! We're off to bed at 11:30 p.m. Exhausted. Oh, almost forgot, Benoit broke the cap off his front tooth while trying to bite the end off of a cigar. He had that cap on his tooth since he broke it as a kid in grade 7.

Bike stats : Max 42.2 km/h; Avg 15.6 km/h; Dist 106.180 km.

Casa particular: We stayed at **Sunso y Gina**, Zona: O casa # 22, Sandino, Pinar del Río, Tel: 3131. We recommend that you phone ahead to reserve; and don't cycle at night!

Day 13: Sandino to María la Gorda (approx 68 km)

Highlights:

- Shadeless ride until the village of Manuel Lazo
- Wonderful shade and crazy bird calls in the park reserve
- Stripes of amazing blue colour in the sparkling water

- Hotel cats!

A note about the dogs we have seen here – most of them don't give a shit about humans. There are a few sad-looking dogs with hopeful eyes that come up tails a-wagging looking for some gentle petting. Very rarely do the dogs come chasing after us.

Up at 7:00 a.m. for a chilly shower to wash my hair. The water was warm for about two seconds. Breakfast at 8:30. Benoit and I had the 'tortilla' eggs and David had his fried. Also we were served bread, very liquidy honey, a fruit plate of bananas oranges and papaya, coffee and what we hoped would be juice but what seemed to be a Tang-like drink. We were too afraid that it was made with tap water to try it. On our bikes by 10:15 a.m. It was shadeless riding for a long while: 20 kilometres to Mañuel Lazo. There, we stopped for a big bottle of limón pop. Then we bought some bananas from a street vendor (6 bananas for 20 centavos of *moneda nacional*) and from another vendor woman on a bike (6 for 1 peso of *mn*). Which was the more reasonable price, I don't know. We took lots of shade breaks until reaching some lovely vegetation that covered most of the road in shadow! There were some crazy bird calls that we could hear as we cycled through the park reserve.

Just at the turn towards Bajada, a man and a woman on the road asked us if we were looking for a *casa*. We went to check out the place, but the rooms seemed rather shabby. The rooms had a shared bath (shower), each room was 15 CUC\$, dinner was at 10 CUC\$ and breakfast at 3 CUC\$. The only thing going for it was the great location on the beach. BUT there was a ton of dog shit everywhere and there was no legal casa sign on the house. So we went on to the María la Gorda hotel where we had reserved for one night. The road was bu-u-u-umpy for most of the last 14 kilometres before the hotel. We had a nice tail wind though. The water was sparkling with stripes of amazing blue.

Finally we arrived at the hotel around 5:00 p.m. We booked a cabaña for 98 CUC\$ – it was a little bungalow for three people with three single beds, television, air conditioning, fan, patio, bathroom with shower that had amazing water pressure and hot hot water. Breakfast was included in this price.

We unpacked, showered and did a bit of laundry by hand that we hung up on bungee cords that we criss-crossed inside the cabaña. Then we went hunting for food: checked out the buffet first, then went back to the bar/restaurant near the reception offering an "à la carte" menu, but then we decided that that was too expensive for our tastes and returned to the buffet which cost 15 CUC\$ each, drinks not included. There were about fifteen cats milling about outside the restaurant waiting for scraps from the people sitting on the patio.

Buffet: pork, fish, chicken, rice, bread, green tomatoes, cucumber, pasta salad, and for dessert, custard, fruit, and almond cookies. There was other food to choose from, but the stuff I just listed was the least questionable.

My thighs got burned by the sun today. All I have to soothe them is that cool ice gel and the air conditioning.

Bike stats : Max 24.3 km/h (no hills!); Avg 15.8 km/h; Dist 68.219 km.

Hotel: We stayed at **Hotel María la Gorda**, Gaviota, Tel: 827-8131.

Days 14 – 17: María la Gorda

Highlights:

- Gusty northwesterly wind blows in and scares away most of the tourists (thank you, travel gods!)

- Colourful coral reef fish
- Dance of the eagle rays
- Beach picnic and snorkelling on David's birthday (Jan 5)

Day 14: Awakened by the wind and soon after the power went out. The helicopter-like ceiling fan whumped to a halt. Benoit had a nightmare, one where he was speaking in tongues. He said about five or six "phrases" in some asian-sounding language before I was able to shake him awake. Soon the power came back on, the fan slowly started back to its crazed whirring and I fell back asleep. Up at just before 8:00. The wind was gusting like crazy. We went for the breakfast buffet – not great food (I think we've been spoiled at the *casas*) but it filled the void. There was some fatty undercooked bacon and spongy mini crepes with sugary syrup-like liquid. The winning choices were the eggs sunny side up, the toast and jam, and the fruit (pineapple, orange, grapefruit and papaya). The coffee was watery and lukewarm. David said that the food at Playa del Estes was way worse so he considered this food a big step up.

We checked at the front desk to see if we could stay longer and there was no problem. At first, the guy at the desk was making us worry that the hotel was all filled up. But by this time, the northwesterly wind was really blowing in, whipping up the waves to a foaming frenzy and blowing stinging slaps of sand on the backs of our legs. I thought that this was the travel gods helping us to stay here a little longer - the wind would scare away the sunworshippers and make room for us! That, and the wind would keep the *hehenes* (sandflies) away.

After breakfast, I did some washing in the sink to hang out for a quick dry in the big wind. Then we donned our swim gear, snorkels and masks and headed for the water. David was decked out in full wetsuit, gloves and everything. He seems a bit more – no, a LOT more – hardcore than us. Benoit and I splashed around in the big waves for a bit and then came back to the safety of the shore. It was trickiest getting back on land with the powerful waves shoving us onto the limestone at the beach's edge. The wind was blowing too much sand into our faces so we headed for some shelter. We spied a grove of trees by the beach, dragged a couple of lounge chairs over and bought some beers from the bar.

A note about voltage: in our cabaña, all the outlets were 220 volts, must be catering to a mainly european crowd. We could use a 110-volt outlet at the hotel front desk.

David had gone out into the water around 11:30 a.m. and finally resurfaced around 1:00 p.m. He said that he saw two eagle rays while he was out snorkeling. We had sandwiches from the bar – pretty tasty grilled things with sliced meat, cheese and cucumber – and of course, a few beers. I splashed around in the waves again. Not for too long though because I found it so exhausting in the powerful surf. Benoit and David suited up again to go surface current riding. I went back to the cabaña for a shower. The water and power were intermittent. Benoit returned around 3:30 p.m. and David came in about an hour after that.

My eye has been itching since Bajada. I think that something stung me just at the inside of my left eye. Not a lot of redness, no pink-eye-like symptoms. It's taking all of my strength not to scratch though!

The wind was not dying down at all, and the clouds were piling up. People were starting to bundle up in any warm clothes that they could find, shivering and shuddering in the wind. It doesn't feel like Cuba here. I haven't used any spanish other than *hola*, *gracias* and *buenas dias*. I wonder if some of the staff here are highly educated but can make more money working in tourism. The waiters never seem to smile.

I paid for four more buffet dinners and three more nights using my credit card. There was a 1.11% surcharge. Again, I wonder how much I'll get hit again by the credit card company.

Dinner was the same as before, though it was to our advantage to get there right when the buffet opened. It was very chilly at the beach as we walked over and extremely windy. At the end of dinner, we met a British diver named Mick who was a bit disappointed by María la Gorda and the weather. He had a double room (well, two twin beds) at the beach for 64 CUC\$ – it would have been 59 CUC\$ without the sea view.

During the night, we heard some scratching in the wall by some kind of animal. We got up and stashed all of our food in the fridge in case that was the attractant. It didn't seem to make much of a difference. Maybe the animal just wanted shelter from the wind.

Day 15: The wind has died down a bit, though not totally. And the temperature has dropped. I've pulled out all my warm Montreal clothes – my fleece jacket, scarf and leggings. Brrrrrrr!!! Breakfast buffet – same old, same old. Very thankful that I can load up on fruit at least. It's a strange place here. I miss the black bean soup of the *casas* and I miss the family atmosphere and I even miss having to struggle in Spanish. The only slightly interesting thing about this place is that I've been speaking french to the tourists, many of whom are from France.

We went for a bike ride along some dirt roads behind the hotel. The roads were pretty rough with limestone rocks so we didn't get far. We ran into a toothless Cuban couple collecting pop cans from the garbage bins of the hotel. And we saw a big bull on one of the roads. We tried to go back on the road towards Bajada but the wind and the cold drove us back.

We said goodbye to Bernardo and Odylle, a couple from Normandie, who were heading back to Havana. We also ran into Mick again, the diver from London, who hated his diving excursion that morning. He said it was the worst fucking dive he's ever been on. He complained that the water was really cold. It was starting to clear and warm up. We grabbed some fins for me and Benoit at the dive shop and ran to put on our swim stuff. The water was WARM when we got in. I don't know what Mick was talking about. We saw some cool fish: sargeant majors, barracuda, grunts or snappers (David is telling me the names of these) and some little bright indigo fish whose name D can't remember. We came in to return the fins for the 3:00 p.m. dive but they didn't need them so back into the water we went. We swam maybe one hundred metres out from shore. The water was 25 degrees Celsius (David's watch told us) out there, like bathtub water really. Though the cruel joke was that the water felt really chilly just at the shore. David stayed in snorkelling a lot longer than me and Benoit. We all had gotten a big chill after leaving the water that we couldn't shake until after dinner.

Bike stats: Max 20.6 km/h; Avg 8.1 km/h; Dist 6 km.

Day 16: Chilly chilly night. I slept with my fleece on and a scarf wrapped around my neck and face. In the morning, sunny with a bit of cloud and more importantly it's warm and not windy! ** Okay, I spoke too soon, the wind picked up a bit. We grabbed fins again from the dive shop right after breakfast and headed for the water. We swam out a bit left of the dive shop pier. About 150 metres out we were treated to an underwater "air show" by a group of eagle rays. I saw six of them swimming in formation. Benoit and David saw another three. I felt honoured to be given the privilege of seeing these beautiful creatures. They seemed to be doing a circular dance for us. Benoit dove down to take a closer look which frightened one of the rays away. With one flick it was off like a shot. Incredible speed. The water was warm but I was getting a chill. I couldn't feel my fingers. I could also feel something stinging my skin – "hydroids", I found out later. Benoit and I came back in to warm up, but the clouds had rolled in and it was c-c-cold. We had sandwiches, beer and ice cream and watched as the new wave of tourists flooded in. David went out in the water again; Benoit and I went for a walk outside the hotel gates along the beach. Coming back from our walk, the clouds had dissipated so we decided to hit the water just one more time. It was about 5:30 p.m., just in time for the

sunset at the beach.

Day 17: David's birthday. He's 41. We got to the breakfast buffet by 8:30. It was warm enough to eat outside. That's where we noticed that the hotel cats are using the beach as a huge litter box. Of course! We stopped by the hotel store and bar to stock up on picnic supplies: cookies, water, chips and sandwiches to go. We rented the shitty fins from the dive shop and headed out the hotel gates on our bikes. About 3 kilometres down the road, we stopped to set up our beach hangout spot. We took turns going in snorkelling in pairs. Although we had locks for our bikes, we didn't feel comfortable leaving all of our stuff unattended. We had seen some people cycle by looking over at where we were. Each of us had two turns snorkelling. For my second turn, I swam out to the point where the reef drops off at an underwater cliff. At about 30 feet depth, I could see sand and coral and then suddenly it drops off to a dark blue abyss. I could only tell how deep it went when David dove down – then I had him as a point of reference.

Back on the beach. In the middle of our picnic lunch, we were joined by two locals on a single bike. They were trying to offer us a meal in a casa for 10 CUC\$ each. Fresh lobster. It sounded tempting but the nearest town was 14 kilometres from the hotel and it would mean cycling back in the dark. Something I don't ever want to do again here. Besides, we had already paid for the boring buffet.

We cycled another 5 kilometres down the road and stopped at a beach covered in coral skeletons and shells. It was like walking across old bones. I guess in a sense that's what it was! Benoit and David went in the water one more time, but the numerous sea urchins and jagged rocks deterred me from joining them. Once they came out of the water, the biting bugs (sandflies?) forced us back on our bikes. On our way back to the hotel, a menacing-looking bull was at the side of the road. It didn't make a move for us but still my heart was pounding over the fear that it would. We passed two guys pushing a huge truck towards Bajada. We were worried that they would have to push it all the way (about 10 kilometres) but they just needed to roll it to a start.

The last buffet dinner...our waiter smiled a bit, finally! We paid our drink bill at the front desk and phoned ahead to Sandino for the *casa*. We found out that the receptionist at the front desk is the next-door neighbour of Sunso and Gina in Sandino. It was good to dust off my Spanish skills again.

We saw a teeny tiny deer near our cabaña. What a lovely way to end our stay.

Bike stats : Max 30.7 km/h (I raced ahead to get that); Avg 13.6 km/h ; Dist 16.301 km.

Day 18: María la Gorda to Sandino (approx 68 km)

Highlights:

- Crazy bird sounds in Parque de Guanahababibes
- Strong head wind all the way
- Ohhhh the itch of my sandfly bites!

Up with the alarm at 7:00 and soon we were off to our last breakfast buffet. I won't miss it, that's for sure. It was sunny and clear, and had the makings of being a scorcher of a day. We said goodbye to our cabaña #55. The only thing I'll miss about it is the hot shower with fantastic water pressure.

On the road at 9:30 a.m. We bought two more big bottles of water for 2 CUC\$ each. In the stores, those bottles go for 0.65 CUC\$. The wind was in our faces most of the way. It cooled us down at least, but it made it really tough on our legs. And the rough road gave me numb fingers and numb bum, much worse than on the way there. We stopped about halfway for some crackers. Then at the village of Mañuel Lazo, we stopped for cola and ice cream, and we stocked up on more crackers and cookies for the road. The clouds had rolled in a bit and the wind in our faces was still really strong.

Stuff to get for future cycling/snorkelling trips:

- fins
- new snorkel and mask?
- compass
- more mini LED bike lights
- bicycle bag (D cathlon sells?) – strong enough to protect a bike during airplane/train transport and that folds to a small size that is easy to carry
- bottle holder for large (1.5L to 2L) bottles
- universal sink plug
- zinc rash cream for saddle sores
- mosquito net
- sandals that can go in water and will stay on your feet

We arrived at Sunso and Gina's *casa* at 3:45 p.m. Four hours and forty-five minutes on the bike; and about two hours of rest breaks. I got a TON of sandfly bites in Mar a la Gorda. When the wind had died down, they came in for a feast of my blood. Their bites are wayyyyyy more itchy than mosquito bites. I have a number of bites in tight clusters, so closely clumped that they resemble braille. My stomach and back are covered in constellations of bites. There is a little raised nodule in the middle of bite and redness all around; and the itchiness seems to be peaking about a day later.

We were serenaded by birds during our ride through the Parque de Guanahababibes. Some birds in particular have a bizarre chirping sound, making one think more of reptiles than birds. Whatever it was, it sounded prehistoric. From afar, those birds looked a bit like black crows.

Dinner at Sunso and Gina's: chicken, rice mixed with black beans, banana chips and greasy potato chips, and a salad of tomato, cabbage and cucumber. I asked Sunso if he could recommend a *casa* in Pinar del R o. He said no problem and that we could call in the morning. The bad news is that he said that they don't have anything to make us a lunch for our ride tomorrow. So we'll have to find what we can on the way. My legs are sore, my bites are itching like crazy and my mood is deteriorating by the minute. I'm dreading another day of cycling into the wind.

Bike stats : Max 22.5 km/h ; Avg 14.2 km/h; Dist 67.922 km.

So far, we have cycled 563 kilometres in Cuba.

Casa particular: We returned to stay at **Sunso y Gina**, Zona: O casa # 22, Sandino, Pinar del R o, Tel: 3131.

Day 19: Sandino to Pinar del Río (approx 75 km)

Highlights:

- Strong wind and saddle sores
- My sandfly bite count
- Pinar del Río hustlers

There are mosquitos everywhere. Drive me nuts! I don't need any more bites. Breakfast at 7:30: bread, honey, eggs ('tortilla' style for me), papaya juice, fruit (banana, orange, papaya) and strong coffee. Sunso phoned ahead to Pinar del Río for a *casa particular* for us. He couldn't explain where it was on the map of Pinar, in my Lonely Planet book, so he phoned the guy (Pedro) back and he couldn't explain either! Finally, Pedro said that he'd meet us at the entrance to the city in his *coche rojo* (red car) near a 'Pepe' sign where there are some palm trees to the right.

It was sunny with a few fluffy clouds as we started cycling, but wow the wind was knocking us out. Benoit was suffering from saddle sores so he ended up taping a T-shirt to his bike seat for extra padding. At 14.1 kilometres from Sandino was a shortcut to bypass the village of Isabel Rubio by a bit. At 31.4 km, we arrived at the village of Sábalo. We bought some bananas (six for 3 national pesos) and some TuKola.

My sandfly bite count: Right leg – 26; Left leg – 4; Right arm – 30; Left arm – 12; Stomach – 14; Back – 14. Egad, that's a total of 100 sandfly bites!

At 53 km, we arrived at the village of San Juan y Martínez. We stopped at the El Rápido stand where we had to turn to pick up the Carratera Central again. I heard that El Rápido is the fast food chain of Cuba. We got chorizo and cheese pizza for 1.50 CUC\$ and two pineapple juices for 0.80 CUC\$ each. We met a Cuban kid there who spoke french really well.

From there, it was about 22 kilometres to the *casa* that Sunso had arranged for us. Pedro, our host, met us on the way into town. We arrived at 4:55 p.m.; not bad considering that we had guessed that we would arrive around 5:00. He pointed to his watch and said 'Ponctual'! It's a good thing that he saw us first, because we didn't see a 'Pepe' sign and we didn't see any palm trees. We followed him in his *coche rojo* to the *casa* on Colón (Sunso had written down 'Union' street; no wonder we couldn't find it on the map). The *casa* is about five blocks south of the main east-west street called Martí. There are two upstairs rooms, each with showers, and a shared kitchenette with fridge. They provided us with soap and one little towel. I had to go ask for a second one. Our room has a double bed and David's room has two twin beds. Best of all, the showers had warm water. Pedro Junior, the son of our host, told us to lock our bikes to a pole in the courtyard. He said that after dinner we could take our bikes inside their house downstairs for safe-keeping overnight.

From Sandino to Pinar, the road was pretty smooth. The amount of traffic increased as we neared the town. The wind died down as the day progressed too. It meant that we felt the sun more, but hey, you can't have it all. Sometimes when we ride into a town or village with our bikes loaded with paniers, I think of those scenes in old western movies when strangers come into town. Everybody stops what they are doing. You can hear the tumbleweed rolling by in the ensuing silence.

Upon our arrival at the *casa*, I could feel my energy drain out of me. I needed a big break! We had some beers and chilled out on the balcony outside our room. Then we found out that we only had 15 minutes to race up to the bus station (according to the guidebook, it closes

at 7:00pm) to see about tickets to Havana. We couldn't buy our tickets for the bus the next morning. The ticket agent told us that we had to get them the day that the bus was leaving. At least, she let us put our names on a reservation sheet. Even walking the few blocks to the bus station, we were hit upon by many hustlers trying to get us to their *casa* or restaurant.

Dinner at 8:00 p.m.: really nice fish, lightly battered and yes fried!, rice, black bean soup, fried plantain chips and a salad of tomato, cabbage and cucumber. No dessert. We asked about dessert too, just some fruit would have been great, but they had nothing to offer. Instead, we went out in search of some ice cream. The only ice cream sold in Cuba seems to be Nestlé and as far as we could tell the prices are fixed – no matter if you're in the fanciest hotel or in the cheapest dive, a small tub of ice cream is 1.25 CUC\$. A few more hustlers latched on to us on our way to and from the El Rápido where we found they sold ice cream. One guy was trying to convince us that it was his birthday. Another guy tried to sell cigars to David. Enrique, our friend from San Diego de los Baños, had told us that the hustlers will try to sell fake cigars made out of banana leaves.

Crashed to bed at 10:30 p.m. If all goes well, tomorrow Havana!

Bike stats : Max 30.9 km/h ; Avg 14.3 km/h; Dist 74.944 km.

Casa particular: We stayed at **Villa Perez**, Sr. Pedro Pérez, Colón #260, % Fran País (Sol) y 2da, Reparto Raúl Sánchez (Llamasare), Pinar del Río, Tel: (53)(48)72-63-78.

Day 20: Bus from Pinar del Río to Havana

Highlights:

- Inspiring chat with an Italian cyclist on the bus to Havana
- Spectacular room at Graciela's House (she kept our bike boxes for us too!)
- Adventures trying to find lunch, rope and a bank

Pedro Junior knocked at our door at 6:30 to wake us up. Good thing too because David slept through his alarm. I practically had to bash his door in to wake him up. Breakfast at 7:00 a.m. Eggs 'tortilla' style, bread, butter, guava juice I think, fruit (papaya, guava, orange, banana) and one miniscule sugary cubano coffee. For the first time on the trip my stomach started to ache and I had a really liquidy dump right after breakfast. Just to be safe, I took an Imodium before getting on the bus to Havana. We said goodbye to David after giving him our email addresses and how to find Enrique in San Diego de los Baños. David had to hit the immigration office to extend his visa before continuing on his journey. The tourist card they gave us in the plane was only valid for 30 days and he is staying for 7 weeks.

In the lineup for tickets at the bus station, we met a Dutch guy and an Italian. The guy from Holland was riding a crappy bike from Mexico. He had been living in Mexico for a bit before coming to Cuba. He was also travelling very light with only a small backpack and a plastic bag hanging from his bike frame. The Dutch guy was planning to stay in Pinar a bit longer but was there to help the Italian to get his ticket to Havana. They had only just met while on the trip to Cuba. The Italian's name was Francisco. He spoke perfect english and had more of a British accent than an Italian one. He said that he had been living/working in London for the past four years. Francisco gave us the heads up about a foldable nylon bike bag from the company Décathlon. That is what he used to pack his bike on the plane from England.

The bus cost 11 CUC\$ each, one way to Havana. They told us no charge for the bikes, but when our bikes were being tagged, we were strongly urged to leave a 1 CUC\$ tip. The bus was almost full with passengers although there was plenty of room underneath for our bikes and bags. As we chatted during the trip, Francesco sparked our interest in doing bike trips in Norway, Japan (islands), England near Cornwall and Devon, and in New Zealand, where he said it was beautiful and the people really friendly. The bus left Pinar del Río at 8:50 a.m., with one 15-minute stop at around 10:00 a.m. where there were toilets and a bar/café. We arrived in Havana around 11:00 a.m. The whole trip was surprisingly easy. From the Viazúl bus terminal, we cycled northwest-ish on Calle 26, then east on Linea to Graciela's house.

At Graciela's, a woman named Santa greeted us. I remembered her from when we were first in Havana, and she remembered us! She hurried us inside, gesturing that if we left our bikes out there for even a minute they'd be gone. Santa led us upstairs to our new room. It was spectacular, that room. It was more than twice the size of our first room, but she assured us that the price was the same: 30 CUC\$ per night. Just outside the opulent room, they had stored our bike boxes. We were so happy to see that our boxes were still around.

That afternoon, we tried to get some food and to run some errands. It turned out to be a bit of an adventure.

- Paladar El Helecho, a restaurant so glowingly described in the most recent LP guide, doesn't exist anymore. The woman who answered when we rang the bell told us that it had been closed for two years.
- Pain de Paris, a little bakery-type food shop had run out of everything to make pizzas and sandwiches. On to try the next place...
- Success! For lunch, we found a smoky bar/eatery that served us very basic pizzas. At least the beers were cold.
- The Banco de Crédito y Comercio on Linea near our *casa* has been replaced with a Banco Metropolitano where they don't do cash advances on credit cards. They sent us to the Hotel Meliá Cohiba on Paseo near the Malecón, but their money exchange wasn't working. They in turn sent us across the street to the Hotel Riviera where, in the basement level, we were able to get a cash advance on Benoit's credit card.
- We tried at a hardware store to buy rope to secure our bikes in the boxes for transport back to Canada. The hardware store didn't have any rope for sale. So, we had to think of another idea: finally, we decided to use cable ties to hold the boxes together.
- We looked at another paladar, called the Decameron, where we could have dinner. We found it, but the door was locked and it looked shut down. We shook the door a bit but this time didn't ring the bell. As we were walking back towards the street, a man came out and said that the restaurant is open. I guess we should have rung the bell that time. He showed us the menu and it had pasta listed on it. It's weird that I crave pasta now. We planned to return for dinner. We walked on the Malecón to watch the waves splash against the sea wall. The wet areas on the sidewalk are slippery as all hell. I nearly did a face plant a few times.

A note about Cuban beer: there were two types that we saw available the most often. Bucanero Fuerte at 5.4% alcohol and Cristal at 4.0% alcohol. In the supermarkets, they go for about 0.90 CUC\$ each, whereas bars and *casas* charge from 1 CUC\$ to 1.50\$ each. The usual price we paid for a Bucanero was 1 CUC\$.

We went for dinner at the Decameron paladar, on Linea # 753 near Paseo. The decor was amazing. One wall was covered with twenty pendulum clocks. The other walls displayed old pistols, walking sticks, an ancient typewriter, and small spider sculptures that resembled Louise Bourgeois' work. For dinner, we each had meat lasagna for 7.50 CUC\$, a glass of wine 3 CUC\$, and a flan 2 CUC\$. As well, we shared a salade Niçoise for 6.50 CUC\$ and a small bottle of carbonated water 1 CUC\$. It was all delicious and we were absolutely stuffed when we left. Including the 10% servicio, our dinner bill came to 35.70 CUC\$. It seemed like a lot to pay compared to *casa* meal prices, but really that was a cheap meal compared to the same kind of thing in Canada.

We could hear fireworks and a band playing from our *casa* when we returned from dinner. I couldn't see anything from our window though. More details about our room: it had tons of closet space with a dozen or so hangers, a small fan and a huge steel fan that looked like it was from the 1930's, air conditioner, small fridge, double bed, reading chair, though the room wasn't well lit. There were four lightbulbs in a ceiling fan that we couldn't turn on. I even tried getting on Benoit's shoulders to try pulling the ceiling fan cords (remember, the ceilings were at least 15 feet high). The bathroom had a shower with lukewarm water, the toilet with seat, toilet paper, two towels but no soap. Outside our room was our private little lounge area with a couch and glass table and a window to open for a fantastic breeze.

Bike stats : Max 28.5 km/h ; Avg 14 km/h; Dist 4.543 km (from the bus terminal to the *casa*).

Casa Particulares: We returned to stay at: **Casa Graciela**, Graciela Ledesma Ramos y Alejandro Séneca, Linea 658 e/ A y B, Vedado, Ciudad de la Habana, Teléfono: 833-5263, Móvil: 052925925, Email: Gracielaenlinea@yahoo.es . Graciela saved our bike boxes for us and we could keep our bikes inside our room.

Day 21: Walking Tour of Central Habana and La Habana Vieja (Approx. 12 km)

Highlights:

- Crumbling beauty of Central Habana and La Habana Vieja
- Uneasiness walking along Calle Concordia
- Black bean soup again – oh how I missed it!

When we get back to Montreal, I want to work on a Spanish phrase book that isn't just filled with complaints. Unfortunately, the phrase book that we brought with us can tell us how to say "There is no toilet paper" and "The window won't open", but we would rather know how to thank people for their kindness and to say that we really enjoyed our stay.

Breakfast at 8:30: orange juice, coffee, bread, eggs, strawberry jam, butter, fruit (pineapple and the best papaya yet).

We don't see as many political signs in Havana as we did in the small villages or in the countryside. In Habana, we saw one billboard that had three faces: Bush + (didn't recognize) = Hitler. The signs in the countryside were nailed to trees, written on cardboard, painted on the road, wherever and however it was possible to write them. Some of the signs I remember: "Un mundo mejor es posible", "Socialismo o muerte", "Patria o muerte", "Viva Fidel y Raúl" and "Volverán nuestros cinco heros".

Around 10 a.m., we left our *casa* to walk along the Malecón to La Habana Vieja. Santa warned us to watch our bags, especially from young kids. It was hot and sunny with a few clouds. At a Cupet gas station, I stopped to take a pee. For toilet paper and the use of a washroom, I paid 0.25 CUC\$. I have no idea if that was the going rate! We saw a lot of guards in front of buildings and patrolling the Malecón. It was hard to be sure exactly what they were guarding. At the edge between Central Habana and the old town was a kind of artisan flea market. It could have been interesting to browse but I almost instantly felt hassled by everyone in there. It left me with no desire to buy anything. We could see lots of scaffolding up and signs indicating that there was a restoration project underway. The architecture as we approached the old town was incredible. Many of the buildings were crumbling yet there was a strange beauty to their decay. The more modern buildings looked ugly and out of place. Entering La Habana Vieja felt very touristy. The surroundings were beautiful but I longed to be invisible so that eager salespeople weren't shaking maracas at us every two seconds. It felt a bit like Old Montreal in the sense that the tourist presence seems to taint the experience. I can't complain, really, as I'm a tourist myself.

We stopped at the Café Santa Domingo for a sandwich, pizza and beers: sandwich especial (jamón, queso, bacon) 3 CUC\$, pizza jamón 3 CUC\$, beer 1.20 CUC\$ each, natilla (custard) 0.45 CUC\$. Then we wandered some streets of Habana Vieja, into a weapons museum and an old cathedral. We cut across Obispo to the Parque Central and then down to the Capitolio Nacional that resembled a mini White House. Our decision to cut across Calle Concordia ended up feeling not so wise. We were only blocks from the Malecón but the neighbourhood made us feel very uneasy. Benoit didn't want to take out his camera. We skirted back onto the Malecón until we reached Linea for the return to our *casa*. Suddenly finding ourselves in the sketchy section on Calle Concordia reminded me a bit of downtown Vancouver: one minute you're in the tourist mecca of Gastown and the next minute you're in the heroin shooting gallery area of Main and Hastings.

Back at the *casa*, my pile of laundry was missing from our room. I hadn't really intended for them to do it for me, but hey, it will be nice to have some clean clothes. It was about 4:30 p.m. by the time we returned. I'm guessing that we walked about 12 kilometres in all. We had bought some beers at a Cupet gas station near the *casa*. As we sipped our Bucaneros, we talked about ideas for the future: cycling or hiking trips, even the idea of setting up a bicycle bed & breakfast with rental and repair shop in France or in New Zealand.

Dinner at 7:30 p.m. at the *casa*: pork in a tomato and pepper sauce, white rice, black bean soup (I had made a special request!), fried cubes of potatoes, sliced tomatoes with green beans (cold and probably from a can). They also served us a big bottle of limón carbonated water but we didn't touch it, having our Cupet beers instead. No dessert with dinner, nor fruit.

Day 22: Bike Ride to Parque Lenin (Approx. 45 km)

Highlights:

- Beautiful huge old trees in Parque Lenin
- Cheap eats at La Rueda bar in the park
- Packing up our bikes for the return trip to Canada

Breakfast at 8:30 a.m. Coffee, papaya juice, bananas, papaya, bread, jam, butter, fried eggs. We headed out on our bikes at 9:30 a.m. for a day trip to Parque Lenin south of the city

near the airport. From the *casa*, it was 2.3 km to the huge José Martí monument, then along Av de la Independencia for 9 km to Av Boyeros where we turned left. Almost 2 km later a road cuts across; it was there that we turned right. It's supposed to be Av Verona but it wasn't marked. It ends at Calzada de Bejucal where we turned right and about 1 km down the road is the entrance to the park. It was a beautiful place with huge old trees. We stopped at an abandoned children's playground area. Everything had a look of neglect. Almost immediately upon our arrival at the abandoned playground, a uniformed guard approached us. He was trying to warn us of something – what, exactly, we weren't sure – though I caught at least that we should watch our bikes and not walk around alone.

From the José Martí monument, it was 14.5 km to the park entrance. It took us about 1 hour, 20 minutes to arrive at the park. The road was busy with traffic, but not scary: everyone driving past gave us a little honk as warning.

We rode around the park a bit, and went to where we thought the hotel restaurant was but found only a semi-abandoned building with what looked like a canteen for the homeless inside. Two men coming out motioned to us the direction of the actual restaurant, beside which was a bar/terrace called La Rueda. Our waitress said that we could get a meal of chicken, rice and salad for only 2 CUC\$ each. It seemed almost too good to be true. But no, our lunch bill totalled 6 CUC\$ which included two Bucaneros. We fed our chicken skins to the bar cats.

On the way back, we picked up more water and beers at a Cupet gas station. On the Av de la Independencia, you really have to watch out for huge open manholes. An entire bike could fall into one.

We were back at the *casa* by 3 p.m. Our last afternoon in Cuba. We took apart our bikes and put them back in the boxes. Just that took us about 1 hour each. Then we packed up the rest of our stuff and waited for dinner. Our last *cena*: green lentil soup (delicious!!), rice, chicken in a tasty sauce, fried veggie chips, tomatoes and green beans, and a bottle of limón. The staff at the *casa* were pulling out all the stops on that meal. The seasoning in the soup and in the sauce for the chicken were delightful. Santa seemed hurt that we hadn't touched the bottle of limón the night before, so we made sure to drink it all this time.

Bike stats: Max 33.2 km/h ; Avg 15.1 km/h; Dist 45.046 km. Total distance cycled in Cuba: 687.54 kilometres.

Day 23: Returning to Montreal from Havana Cuba

Highlights:

- Taxi driver to Havana airport was on Cuba's cycling team
- Bike fees and departure tax at the airport
- Above zero temperatures in January in Toronto and Montreal

Breakfast at 8:00 a.m. Coffee (they gave us lots this time), papaya juice, bananas, pineapple, eggs and bread, jam, butter.

Mañuel reminds us of the servant character Ganesh in the movie *Maya*. He always looks unenthused about having to do anything. This morning it was the same thing. He had to haul his ass out of bed to go and get bread for us, and he didn't look happy about it.

I thought that we had explained clearly that we needed a taxi van to the airport for 10:00 in the morning. Apparently not. Santa had thought that we wanted one for *la noche*. Noooooo!

A minor panic ensued. Graciela, who had appeared this morning, tried to call us a cab but could only find one that could come at 10:30 – we were afraid that that was cutting it too close. Graciela’s husband (?) then raced in his car to a nearby hotel to find us a cab. He found us one by 10:15. It was a mini van with a rack on top. The driver put our bike boxes up top with one skinny bungee cord holding them down. That made us a little nervous, but for some reason I had faith that our bikes would arrive safely. The taxi was 20 CUC\$ – the driver seemed apologetic that it was so expensive because it was a big taxi. I guess that means that we were ripped off a bit when we paid 25 CUC\$ for the taxi upon our arrival in Havana. This taxi driver was really sweet. He used to be on the country’s cycling team but had to give it up because of a back injury. I gave him the last of our Montreal postcards that showed a snow-covered street with a bike leaning up against a gate. I wrote a big “Muchas gracias” on the back. It was a great relief to get to the airport on time and with our bikes in one piece.

It was relatively painless checking in at the airport. The Air Canada agents seemed polite and helpful. Is it only in Montreal that “Air Canada service” is an oxymoron? We had forgotten about setting aside cash for the excess baggage fee for our bikes. It was 50 CUC\$ each. I had to use my credit card again at the money exchange booth to get the necessary cash. That was where we had the worst exchange rate for money in Cuba (a whopping 22% using a credit card at the airport); most places it worked out to be an exchange of 13%. That is, all extra fees included (like from credit card companies), we paid about 113 Canadian dollars to get 100 CUC\$.

Once we got our boarding passes, we went to pay the airport tax of 25 CUC\$ each. They stamp and sticker your boarding pass after you have paid that fee. We had arrived at the airport at 10:50 a.m.; about a half-hour taxi ride from Vedado. By 11:30 a.m, we were checked in, had paid our departure tax and were sitting at an airport bar for some final Bucaneros and a ham and cheese sandwich. Sometimes in menus we saw the weight listed, for example, “Sandwich de Jamon y Queso 230g” and then the price.

Benoit bought a book “Scars in the Memory” with our remaining CUCs. It’s a collection of stories from Cuban authors about life during and after 1959. We killed some more time by eating some ice cream. While Benoit was in the washroom, I witnessed a play fight between the two bartenders and a customer, who looked like he might be an employee somewhere else in the airport. The customer at the bar was trying to read a newspaper and to ignore the stuff that the bartenders were throwing at him. Finally, the guy at the bar could ignore them no more – one bartender threw a full bottle of water at him! – and started trying to unplug the cash register in retaliation. At first, I stared in disbelief because it looked like a real fight was about to break out, but then I noticed that they were all laughing so hard that tears were coming to their eyes.

On to the emigration check in. The agent looked very carefully at me to compare me to my passport photo. She didn’t stamp my passport at all. Then we went through security. I thought my bottle of water would be taken away so I left it out in the open. But they didn’t blink an eye at it. Once past security, there was another airport bar – the Bucanero price was jacked up to 2.50 CUC\$. Airports always find a way to screw you.

The flight from Havana to Toronto was uneventful, though we arrived in Toronto 25 minutes early. It was 7 degrees Celsius and there was not a bit of snow on the ground. There is something seriously wrong with the weather. Our bikes and bags arrived safely in TO for the correspondance onto Montreal. Benoit saw on one of the screens that it was 3 degrees Celsius in Montreal. What!?!? After I had told all the Cubans we met that is it usually minus 20 degrees Celsius in Montreal at this time in January. The TO airport screwed us over, no big surprise, charging \$2 to use an airport cart. Luckily we just had enough Canadian change left over after

buying the crappy Air Canada food (an outrageous \$6 for a mediocre roast beef sandwich and \$2 for a Caramilk chocolate bar). Ridiculous!

Arrived in Montreal safe and sound. One final rip off by our taxi driver who tried to tell us it was \$45 from the airport to our place. We only had the energy to argue him down to \$40. We were exhausted but it was good to be home.

The End