

PERSONAL JOURNEYS | CUBA

Seeing a Country's Wild Side, by Way of the Water

An American kayaks the island, avoiding the tour buses and T-shirt vendors.

By ERIC HISS

As I sit in a damp sea kayak floating in the chop of massive Cienfuegos Bay along Cuba's southern coastline, I know this is it. I'm in full anticipation of one of those moments travelers yearn for — the #wanderlust tableaux we share on social media to wow our friends, family and other followers.

I reach carefully under my kayak's spray skirt to get my 35-millimeter camera without tipping or splashing — but it's just out of my grasp.

We had already been warned that flamingos are skittish and could take off at the slightest disturbance, so it would have to be Plan B — the mobile phone tethered around my neck in a waterproof case. Just as I raise it to focus, gooselike honks break the still morning air as the graceful, flamboyantly pink birds take flight in several columns from a nearby beach. Steadying both my kayak and mobile phone, as I frame the shot, my heart drops as I realize the case is completely fogged over.

Then, almost as if to add insult to injury, one group of about 40 flamingos peels off to the north and heads straight toward me, passing 30 feet off my bow as I gawk with a mix of wonder and withering frustration.

Our small flotilla lets out a chorus of whoops as our guide shouts, "Welcome to wild Cuba."

Moments like these are still rare for most Americans traveling to Cuba. Visitors coming from the United States are much more likely to be on the hunt for a polished-to-perfection pink '56 Chevy cruising the streets of Havana than a flock of flamingos in an isolated lagoon. But beyond the tail fins, tobacco shops and cabaret shows, there is an-



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other side to Cuba: A wild place far from the tour buses and Che T-shirt vendors.

I first encountered this untamed aspect of the largest island in the Caribbean in the late '90s, when, during a brief thaw in United States-Cuba relations, I embarked on a scuba diving road trip along the country's southern coast. Ever since, I have reminisced about those empty beaches, pristine reefs and natural wonders of the Caribbean's most ecologically diverse island.

And although today's uncertain political climate between the two countries may make it feel as if the biggest Cuban adventure is simply getting there, the reality is much different. Traveling with tour operators who have the necessary Treasury Department license makes visiting the island nation legal for citizens of the United States.

My daydreams of returning to Cuba turned into plans and packing lists when a friend who regularly visits the island tipped me off to a travel first for Americans: A small-group kayaking experience along the island's southern coastline. An American company, Cuba Unbound, had secured the permits necessary to organize the trips for American citizens. For me, it represented a long-anticipated opportunity to explore by sea kayak coastal areas such as the Ciénega de Zapata National Biosphere — the largest intact wetlands in the Caribbean.

This is where it should be noted that you don't just go and rent kayaks in Cuba and take off to points unknown as you might at other destinations. Travel into outlying areas beyond the day-trippers' shortlist found in guidebooks is regulated and equipment like quality kayaks is scarce. In short: You need to go with an operator that has already cut through the red tape before navigating the waves of Cuba's more remote coastlines.

Our group of 16 Americans ranged from millennial social media executives to active retirees. One thing we had in common was a passion for adventure and the desire to jump the rails and get away from what is quickly becoming a travel trope in Cuba: the Havana/Varadero/Trinidad triangle. After meeting in the lobby of the Plaza, one of Havana's not-so-graciously fading grand hotels, we hit the open road.

Heading east into the heart of the country on Highway 1, we passed every mode of transport imaginable, from ox carts trundling on the roadside to modern, air-conditioned tour buses. Our first destination was Criadero de Cocodrilos, or Crocodile Farm, where an employee showed us some skulls and a stuffed nine-foot-long specimen of the Cuban crocodile, the island's apex predator.

While leading us to the real thing, he also discussed the reptile's nasty temperament, including a propensity to leap at prey.

After crossing the dusty, palm tree-fringed grounds, we arrived at open-air pens that held hundreds of crocs ranging in age from six months to four years. They were separated by size because, as our guide explained, "Big ones eat little ones." Considering even the two-foot-long snaggletoothed babies lumbering in their pen appeared menacing, as though they could easily remove a few fingers, the crocs quickly earned respect from our group.

This sentiment deepened when we learned some would be released to sustain



IF YOU GO

Cuba Unbound, which is based in Idaho, offers kayaking, cycling, trekking and other Cuba itineraries. The eight-day Cuba kayaking tour meets the United States' "people-to-people" travel requirement for legal travel to Cuba. Rate: \$2,990 per person (does not include air travel). cubaunbound.com

Hostal Enrique y Dalia is a family-run casa particular in Playa Larga with 10 rooms and a full-service restaurant adjacent to the beach. The three-level hostel features a rooftop dining area and deck. Rates are 25 to 40 Cuban convertible pesos, or about \$27.50 to \$44, per night. Meals are extra and modestly priced from 5 to 20 Cuban convertible pesos. Dollars are usually accepted, but a 10 percent tax is added to purchases using United States currency. (For this reason, many travelers to Cuba bring euros, which are not subject to any tax.) enriqueplayalarga@gmail.com

More information about Ciénega de Zapata National Park from Unesco at whc.unesco.org.

populations in Cuba's wild areas including Ciénega de Zapata National Park — our kayaking destination the following day. Others were to be harvested and served as entrees at a nearby restaurant.

After a lunch of cold Cristal beer and crocodile filet (cliché yes, but it tasted like gamy chicken) it was off to Playa Larga, a beachside hamlet where we settled into a tidy and welcoming casa particular called Hostal Enrique y Dalia. (Think of a Cuban-style Airbnb, where foreigners can stay in family-run lodgings and you get the idea of these accommodations that allow everyday Cubans to earn some tourist dollars.)

As the afternoon waned and the breezes picked up, our group met on the broad, empty beach here to get outfitted with our gear and kayaks. We drew a small crowd of local spectators: Workmen, sea gulls and neighborhood mongrels watched quizzically as we tried on life jackets and adjusted our kayaks' seats and rudders. A group of American kayakers on their beach was definitely a novelty.

Our Cuban guide, Lerdo Acosta, patiently explained the nuances of the narrow sea kayaks and assured us it was unusual to tip over. But just in case, we're given instructions on how to quickly remove the spray skirt and swim to the surface. Mr. Acosta then paused and explained why the vast bay we were about to paddle was world famous, and not just for the eco-adventures afforded here.

Pointing southward, he shared an infamous bit of Cold War history that every American and Cuban school kid learns: On April 17, 1961, a C.I.A.-sponsored invasion



Top, the group kayaking in the Guanaroca Lagoon and across Cienfuegos Bay. Center, rice fields on the road outside Cienfuegos. Above, a cobblestone street in the town of Trinidad.

landed very near where we stood. We were knee deep in the Bahía de Cochinos, the Bay of Pigs. Our mission on this day would be very different — just a small armada of eight kayaks ferrying paddlers intent on exploring the bay's palm-fringed shore.

Some of our group, my girlfriend Fransini included, had never been in a sea kayak, so the wind-chop conditions made the newbies understandably nervous as we navigated the swells in two-person kayaks. Mr. Acosta and our Colorado-based American guide, John Rodriguez, kept our flotilla together as we did an offshore loop that gave all the paddlers a sense of achievement. For the first-timers, it meant a new experience and for the whole group, it provided a chance to turn back the pages of history as we became among the first Americans to kayak the waters of a place whose name evokes the most chilling days of the Cold War.

Early the next morning, we were bumping down a dusty, unpaved road lined with mangroves as we entered Cienega de Zapata National Park, part of the 1.5 million-square-acre Ciénega de Zapata National Biosphere, a Unesco World Heritage site. We entered the area known as Salinas La Brita, or Las Salinas to locals, known for its vast salt pans and marshes. It was here that colonial-era Spaniards extracted salt bound for Europe and where today, birders find treasure of a different sort in the form of more than 150 species including flamingos, herons and raptors. The waters are home to bonefish, sturgeon and an ancient fish called the manguari as well as their nemesis, the Cuban crocodile.

Here the circle of life was unbroken, a primal setting with effusive growth of four types of mangrove as well as ironwoods, palms and other flora, making it easy to imagine why, over the centuries, Ciboney Indians, pirates and traders had all made their home on this wild 78-mile stretch of coastline protected by hundreds of keys or

cayos. First opened to visitors just a decade ago, on this day it would be all ours, as the government currently allows only one kayak expedition per week.

After setting out from an isolated spit that jutted from a tangle of red mangroves, we paddled past an ever-changing panorama of sylvan shoreline and keys, the shades of the vast expanse of water beneath us shifting from jade green to gin clear to translucent turquoise. The calm waters allowed us to ease into a rhythm and scan for sightings, like when Mr. Acosta's keen eyes spotted an osprey in her nest atop some mangroves.

Later, we beached our kayaks on a small cayo for an impromptu picnic of cut papaya, pineapple and sandwiches. Finishing, we slathered on sunscreen, hydrated and resumed paddling the coastline where we regularly funneled into narrow tunnels of mangrove that would then open cinematically to wide vistas of the cerulean Caribbean Sea.

In total, we paddled five hours that day covering seven and a half miles and saw no one else, not even a toothy crocodile, just cranes, hawks, wrens and other birdlife.

Later that evening, defying conventional wisdom and sore muscles, a warm sea breeze and a little Havana Club rum rallied our group when a Cuban trio began playing on our hostel's rooftop after dinner. Fransini, a professional dancer from Colombia, led an impromptu salsa lesson that had most of us paddlers moving to the beat accompanied by third-story views of the moonlit ocean.

Bodies rested and dance moves mastered, our next foray would be kayaking Guanaroca Lagoon, a pristine inlet that is part of Cienfuegos Bay's extensive ecosystem. Several hours drive east from Playa Larga, we drove past guava and mango trees, rice fields under cultivation and small, immaculate towns where children in uniforms on their way to school waved at our van. After parking in a dry forest, a short hike led to a rustic boathouse and dock, where we got underway beneath leaden skies.

As we kayaked toward the southern shore of the 7,500-acre lagoon, Mr. Acosta directed our small flotilla to paddle another hundred yards in a southeasterly direction toward the misty bank. Then they came into view — a flock of perhaps 200 flamingos forming a distinct rosy pink line at the lagoon's edge. Paddles were stilled and cameras focused. It was then that my photo gear failed me. But the same couldn't be said about Cuba's wild side, which minutes later put on that epic show.

The following day, the last of our tour, we traded our kayaks for a 60-foot yacht that motored us out to a remote day-trip destination, Cayo Blanco, an islet that's home to nodding palms, shell-white stretches of sand and a beach shack that served cold Cristal beer and delicious local lobster. After a snorkel session exploring the healthy reefs, most of our group lolled in the shallows for a dip. I opted instead for a secluded spot under a low palm to enjoy a slim Bolivar corona I had purchased the day before.

Looking toward the mainland and the Ancon Peninsula, the words of Frank Medina, a technical director for Cuba's forestry ministry, played through my mind. A few days earlier, we had the opportunity to chat with the jocular Mr. Medina at a rooftop meeting arranged at our Playa Larga hostel to meet the "people to people" requirement for Americans to travel to Cuba.

He told us that recently, a new arrival had shown up on Cuban shores. With changing sea levels, American saltwater crocodiles were now moving inland up estuaries and mating with Cuban crocodiles, producing hybrids of the two species. "Well call them mixtos," he told me, "A whole new species." Then he joked, "I think maybe it's a sign more people like you, adventurous Americans, are coming to Cuba."

Looking up as the curls of smoke dissipated through the palm fronds, I hoped he was right. After all, Cuba's coastlines and wildlife were eye-openers for our group.

And the flamingo photo that got away, well, at that moment it was of no more importance than which way the soft sea breeze was blowing my smoke rings.