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explorer

THE BEST OF EXPERIENTIAL TRAVEL



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with gentle giants*

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excitement in Wales*

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*Bora Bora's
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*Cultural Tourism
in Jerusalem*

CUBA'S WILD SIDE

Beyond cigars and classic cars in
adventure travel's newest frontier

SUMMER 2016

"What is your must-have adventure travel gadget or tool?"

"Bringing the right gear along to document an adventure is always a challenge. My Manfrotto camera bag offers the perfect balance of versatile storage and protective compartments for cameras and lenses. It also allows me to travel with a tremendous amount of electronic and photo gear while staying discreet, since it just looks like a normal backpack."

DAVID DIGREGORIO IS A NEW YORK CITY-BASED TRAVEL PROFESSIONAL WHO HAS EXPLORED 75-PLUS COUNTRIES WITH A FOCUS ON AUSTRALIA, CHINA, SOUTH AFRICA, IRELAND AND NORWAY. HE IS AN AUTHOR, EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE PROMOTION OF TOURISM TO AFRICA, CHAMPION OF PENGUIN CONSERVATION, CONTRIBUTOR TO *HUFFINGTON POST* AND FOUNDER OF *STYLEHICLUB.COM*.

"I'm not an avid hiker by any means, but whenever I do find myself backpacking at places such as Kings Canyon and Zion National Park, I make sure to bring my Timberland Mt. Maddsen hiking boots with me. They are as comfortable as my normal sneakers, and they're also waterproof and feel very light. I'll usually end up wearing them throughout the entire trip, regardless of whether I'm trekking along a rocky trail."

SEAN STROH IS AN EDITORIAL INTERN WITH *TRAVELAGE WEST*. ONE OF HIS FAVORITE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES REMAINS THE TIME HE STAYED IN THE MOUNTAIN TOWN OF OURAY, COLO., BETTER KNOWN AS THE "SWITZERLAND OF AMERICA." HE HAS PUBLISHED STORIES IN *THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER*, *ORANGE COUNTY CULTURE MAGAZINE* AND OTHERS.

"My favorite adventure travel gadget is decidedly low-tech and requires no batteries: a drybag. It saved my electronics gear and kept me in dry clothes — plus, it can also double as a wine stash."

ERIC HISS IS AN AWARD-WINNING TRAVEL WRITER WITH AN UNREPENTANT ADDICTION TO ISLANDS. HIS WORK HAS APPEARED IN OUTLETS SUCH AS *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, *CONDE NAST TRAVELER*, *DELTA SKY* AND MORE.



BEYOND CIGARS
AND CLASSIC
CARS IN
ADVENTURE
TRAVEL'S
NEWEST
FRONTIER

Exploring

Cuba's Wild Side

BY ERIC HISS

WE HEARD THEM BEFORE WE COULD SEE THEM — A GOOSE-LIKE HONKING DRIFTED ACROSS THE STILL WATER FROM A DISTANT BANK OF GUANAROCA LAGOON, AN ISOLATED EXPANSE OF BRACKISH WATER NEAR CUBA'S SOUTHERN COAST. OUR LOCAL GUIDE DIRECTED OUR SMALL GROUP OF EIGHT KAYAKS TO PADDLE ANOTHER HUNDRED YARDS BEFORE THEY CAME INTO VIEW — A FLOCK OF ABOUT 200 FLAMINGOS FORMING A DISTINCT ROSY-PINK LINE ON THE SHORE. WE FELL SILENT AS KAYAKS WERE STEADIED, PADDLES STILLED AND CAMERAS FOCUSED. MAYBE IT WAS A SLIGHT SPLASH OR A SUDDEN MOVEMENT THAT SET THEM OFF, BUT AFTER 10 MINUTES OF BLISSFUL SILENCE THE ENTIRE FLOCK TOOK OFF IN SEVERAL HORIZONTAL COLUMNS, WINGING GRACEFULLY OVER THE WATER. SQUAWKS AND HONKS GREW LOUDER AS THE FLAMINGOS PASSED JUST YARDS IN FRONT OF US — AND THEN THEY WERE GONE. DISSOLVED IN THE MIST. THE NEXT SOUND WAS THE DELIGHTED LAUGHTER AND CHATTER OF MY AMAZED COMPANIONS.



CHAD CASE PHOTOGRAPHY; SNORKELER; ISTOCK



Top row, left to right: Cuba offers the opportunity for great kayaking, soft-adventure tours, urban strolls and interaction with locals. Middle row: Venders offer local food; Cuba has a unique perspective on history; there's a great deal of unexplored nature in Cuba; kayaking trips provide a great way to experience adventure there. Bottom row: Cuba has unique wildlife viewing; the island is a great spot for watersports; Cuba's infrastructure is still developing; like the rest of the Caribbean, Cuba is ideal for snorkeling.

“Welcome to wild Cuba,” said our guide, Lerdo, with a schoolboy’s grin.

Just a year earlier, this experience would not have been possible due to a mix of restrictive Cuban government policies and the difficulties put in place by the U.S. government. These strict regulations hindered travelers and U.S.-based operators seeking to provide this type of off-the-beaten path experience to visitors.

Our kayaking trip marked my first visit back to the country in 14 years. The tour, by ROW Adventures, was one of the first itineraries led by an American company permitted in Cuban waters, and with every paddle stroke — as we went deeper into an estuary, bay or coastline — I reveled in this remarkable shift.

My, how times have changed.

ADVENTURE TRAVEL GETS A TOE-HOLD IN CUBA

Adventure travel as a category is defined by blazing trails in the next great frontier, whether that’s a new destination or a newly minted activity that reimagines the experience in a known destination. For American travelers, Cuba represents both, which is probably why it is becoming one of the world’s most buzzed-about destinations.

Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) president, Shannon Stowell, has yet to visit Cuba, but says many in his organization certainly have.

“Our private social media site is pages deep with Cuba pictures and posts, so I would say our membership is definitely onboard,” Stowell said. “The only thing preventing me from going right now is my travel schedule, but it’s absolutely on my top-five list.”

Idaho-based tour operator ROW Adventures (an ATTA member) isn’t just organizing trips to Cuba, it is building an industry-leading platform aimed at getting Americans to Cuba to experience adventure first-hand. This past season, the operator ran 18 sea kayaking trips, selling out every one of the 16-person-maximum excursions. With its bet on Cuba paying off, ROW decided to double-down on the country and recently launched a new travel brand, Cuba Unbound, dedicated to U.S.-legal adventures as well as experiential and educational itineraries. Under the new banner, ROW is offering 100 departures for the coming season, including itineraries such as a kayaking tour called “In the Wake of Christopher Columbus,” a National Parks walking tour, bike tours, a photography tour and a cigar and classic

car experience, in addition to custom itineraries and special-interest groups.

“We were so excited by what we found in Cuba and saw that no one was addressing the legal active travel market in Cuba for Americans,” said Peter Grubb, company founder and president. “It took a lot of work to figure out the labyrinth of systems there, but we felt Cuba deserved its own effort. So that’s how we came up with this new brand in our family of adventure companies.”

But as other American operators seeking to do business in Cuba have discovered, it didn’t happen overnight. In fact, the company’s first pass at doing business there didn’t make it off the ground.

“You have to remember that Americans are still not free to go as tourists; you can’t just run a bike or kayak tour — it has to have a ‘people-to-people’ element to pass U.S. government standards,” Grubb said. “When we started seriously looking into Cuba about four years ago, the climate then didn’t make it feasible to offer these types of trips under the general license required by the U.S. government, and when we applied for a special license, we were turned down.”

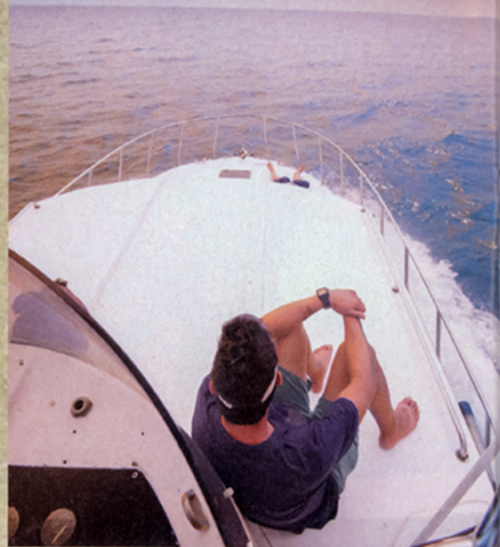
The Obama administration’s policy shift that took effect in January 2015 opened the door for companies such as ROW who were seeking a more straightforward general license, and thanks to his previous experience navigating the tricky governmental waters, Grubb was granted a license.

The company hasn’t looked back since.

“We feel like we’ve hit the mark on our Cuba trips now thanks to all the time we’ve spent on the ground there working with Cuban guides, whether we’re walking or kayaking, or in more formal situations such as visiting a well-known photographer,” he said. “Our goal is always to go well beyond and provide more meaningful people-to-people experiences.”

During my recent trip, one of the more memorable encounters took place on the breezy, ocean-view rooftop patio of a *casa particular* — sort of a Cuban-style Airbnb where Cubans rent rooms to foreign guests — and where our group was staying near Playa Larga. After a day spent kayaking the largest wetlands in the Caribbean in the Cienega de Zapata National Park, we sat down to enjoy cold

The 2015 U.S. policy shift has made it easier for soft-adventure operators in Cuba.



Tourism to Cuba is growing at a rapid rate.



Adventure operators still have a lot of regulations to deal with.

Havana offers great cultural experiences.



Tourists still must meet people-to-people requirements.



CHAD CASE PHOTOGRAPHY

Cristal beers and an afternoon visit with Frank Medina, a jocular Cuban official who is a technical director with the National Park Ministry. In near-perfect English, Medina explained everything from the area's colorful history to the mating habits of endemic Cuban crocodiles.

Our group listened attentively but also engaged Medina with many questions. In the process, we learned about local colonial-era tax evaders who traded in dried pig meat called *bucan* (the source of the word "buccaneer"), and the efforts of the ministry to manage Cienega de Zapata's vast, 5,200-square-kilometer ecosystem to protect species such as the Cuban crocodile and manatees. We also learned that conservation work is taking place here along with U.S. organizations such as the Nature Conservancy and the National Audubon Society. This cooperation with American groups was especially poignant given that our casa particular overlooked a bay named Bahía de Cochinos, or Bay of Pigs, the site of the U.S.-sponsored invasion in 1961.

THE AMERICANS ARE COMING

These days, the only invading Americans are tourists. Dan Austin, founder of Austin Adventures, was one of the pioneering American tour operators to go into Cuba. He secured one of the first licenses almost four years ago and sold six programs right away.

"Our clients loved it — Cuba radiates experiential travel and you would be hard-pressed to beat it," said Austin. "We would get feedback like 'the elevator didn't work,' but it didn't overshadow the experience. It's a fabulous destination."

What did discourage Austin Adventures from continuing to work in Cuba, however, were restrictive regulations that hindered the development of a truly unique itinerary.

"We weren't able to do trips like you can do now," he said. "We're an active company, and it was hard to bike ride, snorkel and do those types of

activities. After our initial departures, we made the decision to pull back. But we knew changes were coming."

For Austin, the only concern now is the infrastructure keeping up with the increased demand, especially from Americans. The company is closely monitoring the situation to see if a level of consistency can be developed as a wave of Cuba product offerings hit the market.

"We know what we want to do, we're just waiting for the rush to be over," Austin said. "What's most important for us, regardless of the location, is reliability and quality of the product."

Isramworld is also bullish on Cuba, and it runs trips to the island in multiple categories. Latour, the company's Latin America division, currently offers three programs, including Hello Cuba (a Cuba overview), Shalom Cuba (Jewish history and culture in Cuba) and LGBT Cuba. Latour also regularly customizes itineraries with active adventures to accommodate travelers looking to explore Cuba's natural wonders.

"Our team of experts started with the addition of soft-adventure and ecotourism elements to our customized group requests," said Richard Krieger, president of Isramworld. "We've crafted programs that include hiking in a national park, bird watching, kayaking and fishing, to name a few. Beyond that, we've created yoga experiences and photography walking tours. Many of these individual features will be added to existing programs, and stand-alone programs are in development as well."

What all this means for travel agents is that for clients with a sense of adventure, Cuba offers a deep dive into an almost mythic destination where natural beauty, a rich culture and sometimes challenging situations combine for a singular experience unavailable anywhere else in the Caribbean.

This was made crystal clear to me the morning of my flamingo encounter. As I bobbed in my

kayak after the flock had passed, I realized my waterproof camera case had fogged, obscuring my lens. So what I thought would be a popular photo on social media turned out to be a pink blob.

Considering what I had just experienced, however, it just didn't matter. I got the big picture. X

THE DETAILS:

Adventure Travel
Trade Association
www.adventuretravel.biz

Austin Adventures
www.austinadventures.com

Cuba Unbound
www.cubaunbound.com

Isramworld
www.isramworld.com