

CUBA

From the Saddle

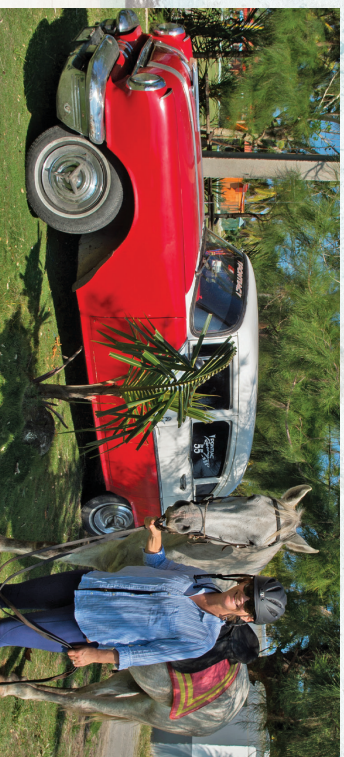
An unexpected view of the charming countryside and rural culture of Cuba.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHAWN HAMILTON

My memories of living in Cuba in the mid-1990s were not of the '50s American cars cruising down the Malecon in Havana or the Tropicana dancers in their colorful leathers strutting to the salsa rhythm under the stars. No, the lingering pictures in my mind were of the countryside and the people in it. Oxen-powered carts and transportation by horse were part of the survival on the island.

Opportunity to Return

It had been just over 10 years since my last visit when the words "Finally, a horseback ride in Cuba" caught my attention on the Unicorn Trails website. The mention of Valle Vinales on the Tabaquero ride whipped up visions of the morning sun slowly illuminating the karst topography of the valley, which is filled with limestone forms of what is left after generations of slow erosion.



All with one of the Cuban horses in front of a typical Havana car at Playa Este Beach.

BACKGROUND PHOTO: ALAN COPSON/GETTY IMAGES



At one of the many pristine river crossings in Mit Curubres, Geerhart leads with All close behind.

DESTINATION

Tourists from all parts of the world come to enjoy Cuba's beaches and get a feel for the unique history, but what is dear to my heart is the rural life and the people surviving in it; happy with the simple bare necessities. My desire to see that part of the country sent me to Havana for a riding vacation in the Pinar del Rio province, the western-most area of the island.

Arrival in Cuba

Shipping mojitos in the lobby bar of the Hotel Presidente outside the city center of Havana, my traveling companion Ali and I meet the other riders. We are an eclectic mix from Belgium, France, Spain and Mexico, speaking four languages among us. Ali and I are quickly dubbed "the Canadian girls."

Rafael, our Spanish guide, briefs us on the itinerary and goes over a few rules. Afterward, the couple from Belgium, Tania and Geert, join Ali and I at Porto Havana, a restaurant in an apartment a few blocks from the hotel. My *ropa vieja*, a traditional pork dish that translates to "old clothes," is delicious.

The morning sun shines on the colorful American 1950s-era cars lining the front of the hotel. \$10 gets you a tour of Havana. Wedged between the cars are the small coco taxis shaped like large yellow helmets.

After breakfast by the pool, our driver Tony manages to fit our luggage into a van just big enough for the 11 of us. Minutes from the ranch, we pile out of the van to finish the last leg on foot, as the rains have made the road impassable for our van.



Saddles freshly cleaned and ready for the ride around Charcoal Azul in Artemesia.

Horses & Rustic Living

Rafael is quick to point out that our very good-looking and well-fitted mounts will be the nicest horses we will see all week, managing our expectations. A three-hour ride through the countryside brings us to the beach, where a swim is followed by an amazing seafood lunch.

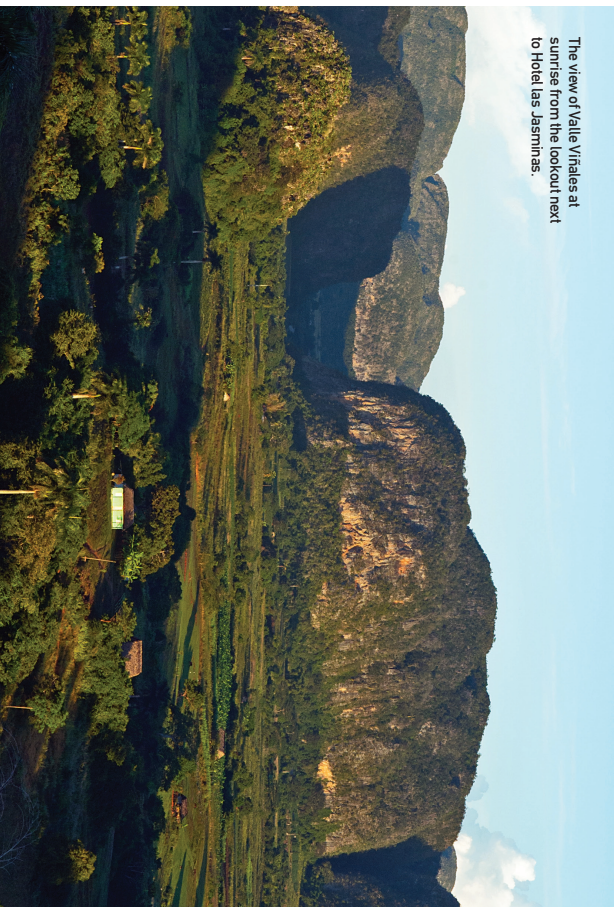
Tony whisks us out of the city and into the countryside, where we enjoy a mojito at the pool bar before dinner at Finca Charcoal Azul in Artemesia, a state-run farm and facility where Canadian Belgians are crossed with the local Criollo horses to create stronger cart horses.

The morning sun rises as the stables activities begin, including the daily visit from the vet, who arrives via horse-drawn cart. We ride around the large farm, then return for a drink and a swim at the pool.

Our next stop is Mill Cumbres, a 32,000-acre reservation of flora and fauna. The boarding-house accommodations means six of us sleep in a room where the single beds barely fit. We are truly experiencing the simple life in Cuba's countryside.

Eating as the local Cubans do, we stay in bare-bones accommodations with zero internet, limited electricity

The view of Valle Viriales at sunrise from the lookout next to Hotel las Jasmínas.



A few local kids greet us along the trail at Charcoal Azul.



Shawn and her mount pose at the entrance of la Finca Guabina by an old sign of the revolution. Photo by Ali Demure.

DESTINATION

and nightly entertainment provided by local musicians. The rum flows, the music plays, the dancing starts, and suddenly the lack of amenities is forgotten.

Our ride through the lush reservation with pristine river crossings is beautiful. Refreshments are served on the porch of a small farmhouse. People of the village we ride through smile, wave and gesture *bon dia*, good day. Our horses rest as we lunch at an outdoor restaurant in El Buren, then continue our ride back to the farm and on to our next destination, my favorite part of Cuba, Viñales.

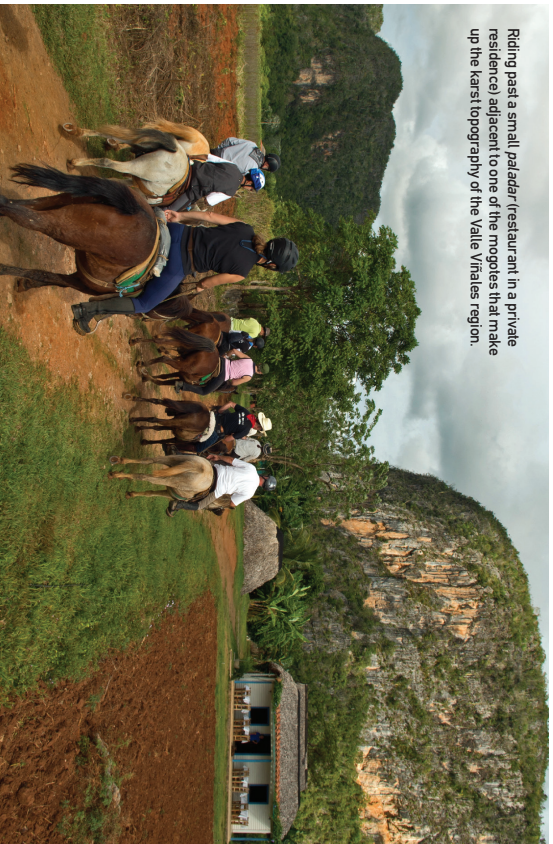
A Favorite Spot

Our accommodations in a Cuban family's house, a *casa particular* in the village of Viñales did not provide the stunning views of the valley that I remembered from the windows of the Hotel Las Jasmíns. Ali and I decide to wake up early in the morning and take a short cab ride to watch the warm morning sun slowly reveal the haystack-shaped limestone mounds known as mogotes. The vibrant green tobacco fields are accented by old tobacco drying houses.

We return to the house in time for breakfast, and then hop in the van to meet our horses. The ride in the valley is bordered by uniquely carved limestone walls and active tobacco plantations. We arrive at a small farm where honey is processed, then served in the purest of lemonade.

Before lunch, we get a lesson on how to make *ganajo* (a common drink made from squeezing cane stalks) and how coffee is processed. Lunch includes fresh pineapple carved in front of us while chickens fight for the scraps.

The afternoon ride takes us to a tobacco farm for a lesson on how tobacco is grown and cigars are made. We arrive back to the van and dismount just seconds before the heavens open.



Riding past a small *paladar* (restaurant in a private residence) adjacent to one of the mogotes that make up the karst topography of the Valle Viñales region.



Active tobacco plantations using primitive farming methods make up much of the Valle Viñales region.



Guides Rafael and Angel sample the cigars at the Viñales tobacco farm where we learn how tobacco is grown and processed.

All goes for a good gallop at Finca la Guahina.



Belgian couple Tania and Geert in front of the Cuban flag and sign of the revolution with Fidel Castro at the Finca la Guahina.

Inset: Shawn and one of her many mounts on the trip. Photo by Ali Denure.

Working Farm

Our final destination, Finca La Guahina, is a state-run farm less than 10 miles from the city of Pinar del Rio. Our small cabin overlooks the lake on this farm, which is known for its breeding of Appaloosas and Cuban pintos. We are lucky enough to have the stallions presented to us on our first day's ride.

The steep terrain we climb provides stunning views of the 2,500-acre active cattle farm supported by 150 staff whose small village we visit.

A late lunch is provided in the restaurant, and in the afternoon, we take advantage of the local horse and buggy. Ali convinces the driver to let her take the reins. She has already driven a horse and cart on the busy Malecon in Havana with buses flying by, so a trip around the ranch is a walk in the park for her.

Local musicians make the trek from the city to provide the entertainment for the night after dinner. The sun starts to creep below the horizon, painting the sky shades of orange and pink.

Last Ride

Our last day's ride brings us to the lakeside for a gallop among the palm trees. Then it's time to say goodbye to our mounts and head back into Havana.

Reflecting on the week, I was happy to know that with the exception of a few

new tractors, the countryside of Cuba had not changed. It remains as simple as can be, but more importantly, the enduring people are just as I remembered.

For more information on the ride, visit www.unicorntails.com/latinamerica/cuba/dabaquerstrail.

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