

**C**aribbean paradise or totalitarian police state? Neil Hallam joined an Exodus cycling holiday to discover the real Cuba.

Reading Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana* and hearing the enthusiastic reports of friends who visited Cuba, I became intrigued by this former Soviet outpost in the Caribbean. My knowledge

lasted reminder of the Cold War and the US Department of State describing Cuba as a "totalitarian police state", I had some trepidation boarding the direct Virgin flight from Gatwick Airport. Meeting our guide Freddie, any Soviet parallels melted away. Exodus generally uses in-country firms to run their trips. In Cuba this is Cubanacan, which is a government department,

rather than a private company. Again this tempted comparison with Moscow's infamous Intourist department. Freddie proved to be nothing of the sort. He was university educated, spoke excellent English and we were free to join tours or explore independently.

The group was varied; predominantly English, there were also Dutch, Australian and Irish. Cycling experience

was broad, ranging from Lee, with several Etape du Tours to his credit. Through to Ann who took with her the only piece of bicycle she owned, a comfortable saddle to fit on her hire bike.

After a night in Havana's comfortable Miramar Hotel, we had a short transfer outside the city, to where our bikes were waiting for us. All but one of the 18 in the group opted to hire Cubanacan's

## Cycling Behind the Cactus Curtain: A Cuban Christmas by Bike

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of Cuba was limited to its left wing reputation and ability to produce good cigars and Olympic boxers. I saw that the Exodus Cycling Cuba itinerary promised an opportunity to travel beyond the tourist hot-spots and discover rural Cuba. So fuelled by academic interest as well as the chance to cycle without my winter kit, I booked the Christmas departure, Cuba's warm winter providing ideal weather for a cycling holiday.

The Cactus Curtain was a cold war term, coined in the same era as Iron Curtain and Bamboo Curtain. Unlike the Russian and Chinese equivalents, which are purely metaphorical, the Cactus Curtain exists. It is a cactus fence dividing the US territory of Guantanamo Bay from the rest of Cuba. With such a



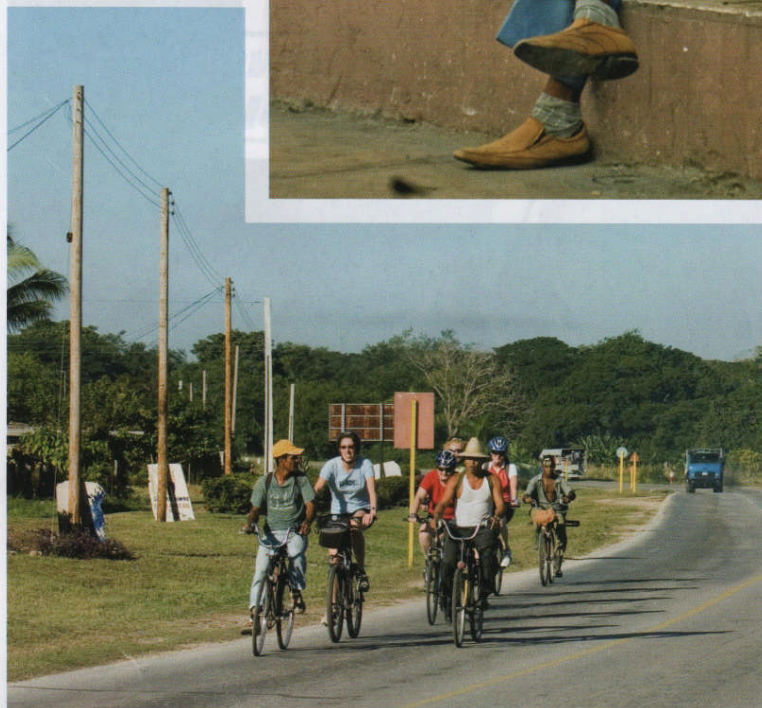
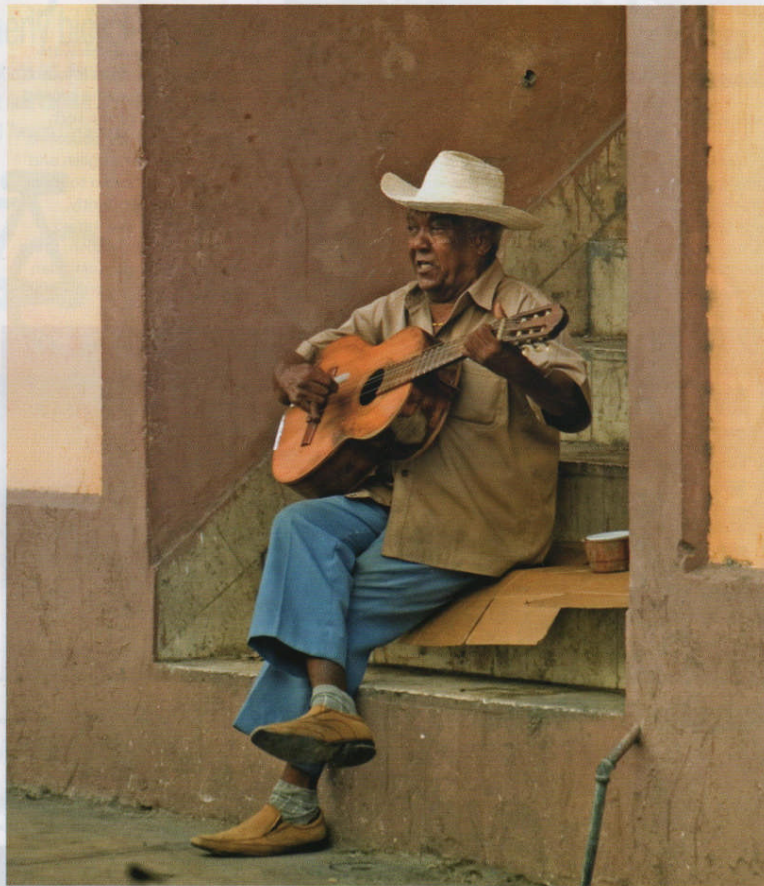


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bikes. These were Trek 4300 mountain bikes, fitted with road tyres. They suited Cuba's roads well. Imagine the worst potholed rural road in the UK and that is the average for Cuba. Some were recently resurfaced, but not to UK standards. Others were simply packed dirt.

We were warned that a cold front was over Cuba, but this was a Caribbean cold front requiring shorts and T-shirt, not the many layers that a British December requires.

We set off on a short 35km ride to test the bikes followed by our air conditioned coach and led by a support van for the bikes. This first ride, like many of the others, was quite flat. We rode across one of Cuba's oil producing areas, passing drilling towers and nodding donkey pumps. Here the contrast between Cuba's haves and have nots was stark. Shiny oil company vehicles sat alongside farmers



ploughing their fields with oxen. We would also see men standing in the rivers fishing with large nets.

Mid-morning we met our support van for locally produced banana, guava, mango and orange. This was to be the pattern for all of the trip's 10 rides. Every 10 to 20 kilometres we would be met by Albert in his van for a water top-up and fruit.

The ride ended with lunch at a lakeside ranch reminiscent of African safaris. Cuban food is not fantastic, but the chicken and sweet potato soup was tasty. Desert was a little odd, a Cuban speciality of guava marmalade sandwiched between two slices of cheese.





The rain arrived for our second cycling day. Although heavy, this was Caribbean rain. Mileage was now up to a more typical 64 km. On one of our stops a local family took pity on the wet cyclists brewing up a tea of wild thyme, which was sweet and most welcome.

In order to see more of the island, each day had a coach transfer as well as some cycling. So after enduring several hours rain we relaxed on our coach for the journey to Playa Giron, site of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. Although some of our hotels were quite luxurious, tonight's holiday camp style hotel was more typical as it had fallen into disrepair following the departure of the Soviets 20

years ago. Hot water was intermittent, a torch was needed to find your chalet and a coat of paint would have helped. The staff were friendly and the food plentiful to fuel up for the next days ride.

Cuba is not a cheap country. Its dual economy sets different prices for locals and tourists. Cubans earn national pesos, with which they can buy most of their staples. Tourists must change their money into Cuban Convertible Currency. Their value is roughly pegged to the Dollar, therefore also similar to Sterling. Beer and soft drinks averaged around one pound per small can. Rum however, was quite literally, cheaper than water.

The local Havana Club rum was generously poured unmeasured into Cuba's famous cocktails.

Our third ride passed through an agricultural area on flat roads. The steady transition from growing sugar cane, to the more profitable citrus fruits could be seen in the huge plantations we cycled through.

Cycles are common in Cuba, though they are mostly aging Chinese examples. Often we would be joined by Cubans cycling with us, cheerfully keeping pace on their single speed bikes.

Our day ended in Cienfuegos, a city founded

by the French, rather than the Spanish or English as in the rest of Cuba. This town was much more affluent than others we had passed through. It had a well renovated and bustling pedestrian centre. Our hotel was one of few meeting western standards. Most meals were included in the trip price, but some were not, providing us with some flexibility. Tonight we had the option of doing our own thing, but most of the group joined guide Freddie at a small family run restaurant. This provided one of the trip's many opportunities to meet real Cubans.





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The ride to Trinidad provided the first hills of the trip. Although gently rolling, the Cuban sun and high humidity made for a testing ride. Trinidad has many buildings dating from colonial times, after an orientation tour we set off to explore this fascinating town for ourselves. That evening some of the more energetic in the group headed off for an optional salsa dancing class. Putting their newly learned skills into practice in one of the town's many clubs.

A strong headwind arrived for our ride to Sancti Spiritus. This, together with drizzle and some of the holiday's less inspiring scenery made for a tough cycling day. So the bus transfer provided opportunity for a much needed sleep. We were rewarded for our efforts by a beautiful colonial hotel in the Unesco city of Camaguey.

The next day involved a morning transfer, which

meant cycling later into the heat of the day. But the ride to Bayamo was mostly flat and the headwind had

left us. Bayamo is famous for its part in beginning the war of independence from the Spanish. As such it is special to the Cubans and is undergoing major renovation.

Christmas Eve presented us with the toughest ride of the trip. We climbed through the Sierra Maestra Mountains on what was one of the hottest days of the trip. This was where Fidel Castro and Che Guevara based themselves during the revolution. As we climbed the dirt road through simple villages, patriotic fervour was evident in the many hand painted signs lining our route. "Viva Fidel", "Viva Revolución" etc.

Latin America celebrates Christmas on 24th December. In our mountain lodge we were treated to a dinner of pork, which we had watched spit roasting throughout the afternoon as we relaxed beside a spectacular waterfall. A trio of musicians kept us entertained with song and salsa into the night.

We were treated to a Christmas Day lie in, leaving by coach at 10am. A shorter 37km ride on flat roads through small towns and villages took us to Cuba's

second city, Santiago. This is a much more touristy town. Our hotel was newly built to western standards. The city square was a vibrant bustle; old men played dominos, young men discussed baseball and a character sat in a doorway playing guitar.

Our 10 rides and two days off completed, we settled down for the long transfer back to Havana. Our final day in the capital was spent seeking out Ernest Hemmingway's haunts ending with dinner on a rooftop terrace watching the sun set over the Caribbean.

It is possible to cycle Cuba independently, indeed we saw two couples with fully loaded tourers doing just that. Cuba is a big country though, only 50 miles wide, but almost the length of Britain. On this trip we saw most of the island, leaving the possibility of returning independently to explore in more depth.

More details of this trip at [www.exodus.co.uk](http://www.exodus.co.uk)  
The 16 day trip costs from £1699, with Christmas departures being more expensive.

