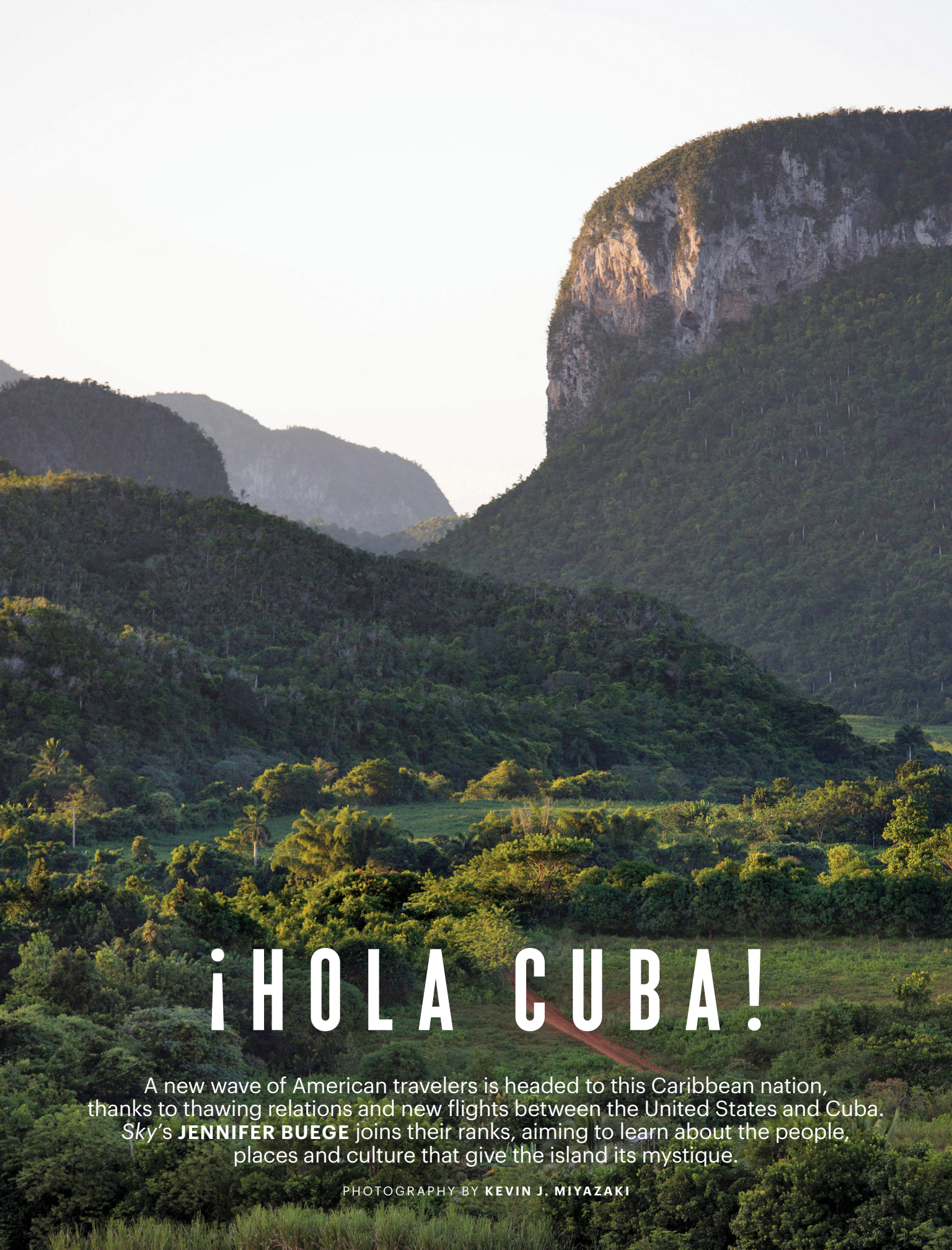


THIS PAGE: A street café in Havana. OPPOSITE: Limestone formations called mogotes rise in Viñales Valley.



¡HOLA CUBA!

A new wave of American travelers is headed to this Caribbean nation, thanks to thawing relations and new flights between the United States and Cuba. Sky's **JENNIFER BUEGE** joins their ranks, aiming to learn about the people, places and culture that give the island its mystique.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEVIN J. MIYAZAKI



FOR YEARS I'VE WANTED TO VISIT CUBA.

The country has been beckoning me for so long, in fact, that I can't remember when it first whispered my name. But I remember distinctly when I decided to answer the call: July 2015, the month a major cruise line announced that it would begin sailing from Miami to the island the following May.

That, I figured, was the beginning of the end—of authenticity, of being able to get a true feel for the country. So my boyfriend and I signed on for a people-to-people tour that promised a good mix of cultural and educational experiences along with time to explore on our own.

It had been a long time since I had been someplace where conveniences such as smartphones and debit and credit cards were pretty much useless. Wi-Fi would be scarce to nonexistent as well, rendering this trip an Instagram black hole. And, not surprisingly, the U.S. dollar wouldn't have its usual pull. To avoid having to pay an extra 10 percent fee when exchanging money, we brought euros instead to change into CUCs—convertible pesos, Cuba's currency for tourists.

As we broke through the clouds to land in Havana, it felt like we were entering another world. I've traveled all over the globe, but this trip seemed different, more foreign. I imagined a country

almost entirely closed off, unfamiliar with the celebrities, politics, music, current events, fashions and pop culture memes that are well-known throughout much of the rest of the world. I kept forgetting that Cuba was forbidden only to Americans. It couldn't be as off-the-grid as I imagined.

I took in everything as we drove into Havana: the blocky Soviet-era buildings; the billboards featuring Fidel Castro and phrases such as "Fatherland or death"; the laundry hanging from apartment windows; the SpongeBob SquarePants doll dangling from our taxi's rearview mirror.

We stashed our bags at our homestay, the best lodging option to really experience a bit of local life. Known as *casas particulares*, these accommodations can range from a room with a shared

bathroom in a family's home (ours always had its own bathroom) to a private apartment; frequently the hosts will offer breakfast: Cuban coffee, eggs, toast, ham and fresh fruit. Ready to explore, we headed to the Malecón, Havana's famed boardwalk that in good weather would be crowded with people walking, playing, wooing. On this chilly, gray day, though, almost no one was around to see the large waves crashing over the sea wall, flooding the road.

As we walked, we passed building after building that had fallen into disrepair—paint faded to a memory, yellowed grass growing in cracks, rusted rebar jutting out from walls. Then vibrant spots of color entered the frame: old-fashioned American cars that looked as if they could have driven right out of history. Green Chryslers, hot pink Fords and

ABOVE: A view of Trinidad from the roof of the Museo Histórico Municipal in the Palacio Cantero—a luxe mansion in its previous life.



"WHILE HAVANA TRANSPORTS YOU TO THE 1950S, TRINIDAD TAKES YOU MUCH FURTHER BACK, TO THE FIRST HALF OF THE 1800S."



red-and-white Chevrolet Bel Airs cruised by, some in prime condition, others pure clunkers. For many Americans, these cars embody Cuba today.

The best-preserved versions sat outside the storied Hotel Nacional. In its heyday, the hotel drew a who's who of cultural and political icons—Frank Sinatra, Marlene Dietrich, mobster Meyer Lansky, Gabriel García Márquez, Winston Churchill. After sampling the famous mojitos, we nabbed a ride back to our homestay in a chartreuse 1930s-era Ford cab.

Our few days in Havana were a whirlwind of must-sees and must-dos: A walking tour of charming Old Havana, including a daiquiri at one of Ernest Hemingway's haunts, El Floridita. A visit to the Museum of the Revolution, which offers a different perspective on history, complete with a stop at the Wall of Cretins featuring caricatures of President Reagan, both President Bushes and former Cuban President Fulgencio Batista, whose regime was toppled during the revolution. Then on to Plaza de Armas, the city's oldest square dating back to the 1500s, and Plaza de la Catedral with its stunning two-towered Havana Cathedral built to honor the city's patron saint, St. Christopher.

Most amazing, however, was Fusterlandia, an entire neighborhood decorated in mosaic tile. First it was just a mural here, a decorative bus stop there. Then suddenly I was surrounded by a whimsical, rainbow-colored vision reminiscent of Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí. It started with the home of the artist himself, José Rodríguez Fuster. An ornate archway soared over the entrance to the yard. Mermaids, giraffes, crocodiles and life-sized figures filled the lawn and balconies of the house. Giant flowers sprouted from the rooftop. The gorgeous visual cacophony spilled out into the yards of his neighbors and down the streets.

VIÑALES

Fuster's colorful magical tile realism primed us for what was waiting two-and-a-half-hours southwest of Havana: the eye-popping Viñales Valley. During our walking tour of the capital, our guide had been reticent to answer some of our questions about life in Cuba. She promised, however, that she'd respond to all of them once we were in the privacy of our tour bus. The ride to Viñales gave us ample time to hold her to that promise.

"Why do you stay in Cuba?" someone asked. "My family," she replied. "And I have a pretty good life." She talked about how fortunate she was to have a job in tourism that, because of tips, allowed her to earn a salary many times that of the average monthly income of \$25. These low wages lead to

low productivity, something reflected in the common Cuban saying: "We pretend to work, they [the government] pretend to pay us."

We wondered where she got her fashionable outfits, since Cuba is far from a shopping paradise. She told us about the black market; Cubans who are able to travel abroad bring back items and sell them out of their homes. (The carts that I had seen at the airport loaded up with goods—bikes, car tires, baby strollers, TVs, duct-taped IKEA shopping bags bursting with clothing—now made total sense.)

"What are Cubans' feelings toward the U.S.?" another person asked. Cubans are inconsistent, our guide said, a word we would hear used frequently to describe all aspects of life in Cuba. While many Cubans love the Americans they meet and their culture—although limited, the internet gives them access to our TV shows, music and celebrity gossip—they don't want Cuba to turn into America. Cubans are proud of their health-care and educational systems and would hate to see them change.

Although she answered all our questions patiently, our guide seemed relieved when we arrived in the lush, agriculturally rich Viñales Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that's best known for growing high-quality tobacco. Viñales itself is a small town, but what it lacks in size it makes up for in color. The houses that line the streets sport an array of pastel hues: pink next to green next to yellow next to blue. They're small and well-kept, with front porches and rocking chairs that welcome you to while away an evening.

Our group had other plans: Driving out of town, we climbed high enough to get a breathtaking view of the valley below. Patches of green popped out of red soil, palm trees clustered in groups along the edges and small houses irregularly dotted the landscape. The most striking feature, however, was the mogotes. These giant greenery-covered limestone mounds pushing up from the land are what remain of a plateau dating back to the Jurassic period. Looking out across the valley, I almost expected to see a pterodactyl soar across the sky.

Fittingly, this view was the backdrop for the most memorable meal of our trip: dinner at the organic farm and restaurant Finca Agroecologica El Paraiso. As the sun started to set, we wandered around the property, admiring the garden beds of lettuce, herbs, vegetables and flowers. Hawks soared over our heads and a group of friendly dogs followed us around, playing as they went.

Dinner on the patio started off with cocktails served Cuban style: We were offered our choice of virgin drinks (piña coladas, daiquiris, mojitos), and a large bottle of rum was plopped down on the table for us to share. I nabbed a couple of the turkey tostones that were being passed around. Then I spooned up a helping of the beets, tomatoes and cucumbers that had been placed on the table. Next came corn on the cob and taro chips, then sweet potatoes, then another piña colada. By the time the main courses were served—barbecue chicken,



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: A resident of Trinidad; Fusterlandia, José Fuster's colorful world of mosaics near Havana; A Havana street musician; A clay cup of canchánchara at Taberna La Canchánchara in Trinidad; Making daiquiris at El Floridita in Havana; The Malecón public boardwalk in Havana; A tattoo of Che Guevara on the arm of a Trinidad resident; A young woman in Trinidad; A vintage car in Havana; A casa particular in Viñales; Dishes at Finca Agroecologica El Paraiso farm and restaurant in the Viñales Valley; Washing an old American car; A game of dominos in Viñales; A portrait of Fidel Castro in Havana.

goat, tuna, all presented family style—along with the ubiquitous rice and beans, my appetite was dwindling. But I couldn't say no to the flan that capped off the meal. We joined guests at the table next to us singing a multilingual version of "Happy Birthday," then headed back to our homestay.

It's hard to think of Cuba without thinking of cigars. Photos of women dressed in colorful outfits and smoking stogies are almost synonymous with the country. And while those women do exist and were in all the tourist areas in Havana, it's a job for them: They pose for photos in exchange for a few pesos. We learned that very few Cubans actually smoke cigars—the government-set prices are just too high.

But tobacco is a huge industry for the country, and Viñales is the epicenter of production. We had arrived at just the right time: The vibrant green plants were in the process of being harvested. During a tour of one farm, we watched as men in their 70s cut the tobacco leaves and hung them over wooden poles, where they would dry for a few days before being moved into a curing barn. There they'd hang upside down to continue drying for several months, then go through a fermentation process to develop the flavor. (The farmer we visited, Geraldo, said that he fermented his using "vitamin R"—rum—along with honey and guava leaves.) Tobacco harvesting is not a popular profession for young people, our farm guide told us. "The work is too hard. No one wants to do it anymore."

As with everything else in Cuba, the cigar industry is highly regulated, and these farmers are governed by production quotas. After the quota is reached, the government gets 90 percent of the yield, which will be turned into one of the big state-owned brands of cigars (Cohiba, Montecristo, Romeo y Julieta, etc.). The remainder is kept by the farmer, who can sell cigars to tourists visiting the area.

We watched Geraldo nimbly show off his rolling skills, layering a large leaf on the outside, smaller filler leaves next and even smaller leaves and tobacco pieces in the middle. In seconds, he had formed them into a compact cylinder, which he then lit and passed around. I'm happy to report that I did not inhale (keeping faithful to proper cigar-smoking technique).

TRINIDAD

We headed east across the island, stopping for a dip in the Bay of Pigs before arriving in the colonial city of Trinidad, another UNESCO World Heritage Site. While Havana transports you to the 1950s, Trinidad takes you much further back, to the first half of the 1800s when the sugar trade was booming and the country was ruled by Spain. Cobblestone streets, horse- and mule-drawn carts, classic cars parked in front of sherbet-colored houses, vegetable sellers on bicycles, shoe shiners setting up shop (two chairs on the side of the street)—there's no lack of photo opportunities.

HOW TO GET TO CUBA

While pure leisure travel to Cuba is still off limits for Americans, you can tour the island under the people-to-people exemption if you follow a full schedule of educational activities. Travel independently—making sure to keep your receipts for five years—or leave the details to the experts and join a tour. InsightCuba and Cuba Travel Network are two experienced companies.

The best—albeit slightly unnerving—way to get the lay of the land is to climb up to the top of the Palacio Cantero, a former luxe mansion-turned-museum in the center of town. The stairway is narrow and gets even more so as you ascend, but once at the top, you get an unrivaled panoramic view across rooftops of the sprawling Escambray Mountains. The city's streets are made for wandering, especially those in the pedestrian-only center, and we took advantage of some much-needed free time to walk aimlessly, stopping in shops selling all sorts of crafts—handwoven baskets and hats, lace tablecloths, knit scarves, ceramics—and tourist tchotchkes similar to those found the world over. Having been told not to miss out on the local specialty cocktail, the addictive canchánchara—honey, lime and rum served over ice—we popped into Taberna La Canchánchara, where live music played and bartenders poured drink after drink. (The word is definitely out on this place.)

It would be a shame to spend time in Trinidad without experiencing its famed nightlife, so that evening we headed to Palenque de los Congos Reales. On stage, a saxophonist, conga drummer, guitarist and guy playing a homemade standup bass were getting the crowd going. After a few songs, they left to make way for about 20 Afro-Cuban drummers and dancers, the women bedecked in colorfully trimmed white dresses with skirts that whirled as the dancers spun and swayed. At one point, the power went out—not an unusual event, apparently, because the dancers kept dancing and the drummers drumming while the audience lit the room with their cellphones.

The following day, we drove back to Havana. As we packed to return home, I thought about my quest to experience the authentic Cuba and wondered what that really meant. I was leaving with more questions than I'd arrived with and felt a bit overwhelmed. Then I remembered something I'd heard while touring an art studio in Havana. At the end of the tour, after answering several questions about the life of an artist in Cuba, the studio assistant gave us a wry smile and imparted this advice: "Enjoy my country, but don't try to understand it." ▼

OPPOSITE: Performers on stilts enter Plaza de Armas in Havana; Taking a break in the plaza of Havana Cathedral; A barbershop on the porch of a house in Viñales; Music and dancing in the courtyard at Quince Catorce, a restaurant and museum housed in an old villa in Trinidad. **THIS PAGE:** A young student in Trinidad; Used books for sale in Plaza de Armas in Havana.



For more photos of Cuba, visit delta.com/skymagazine.