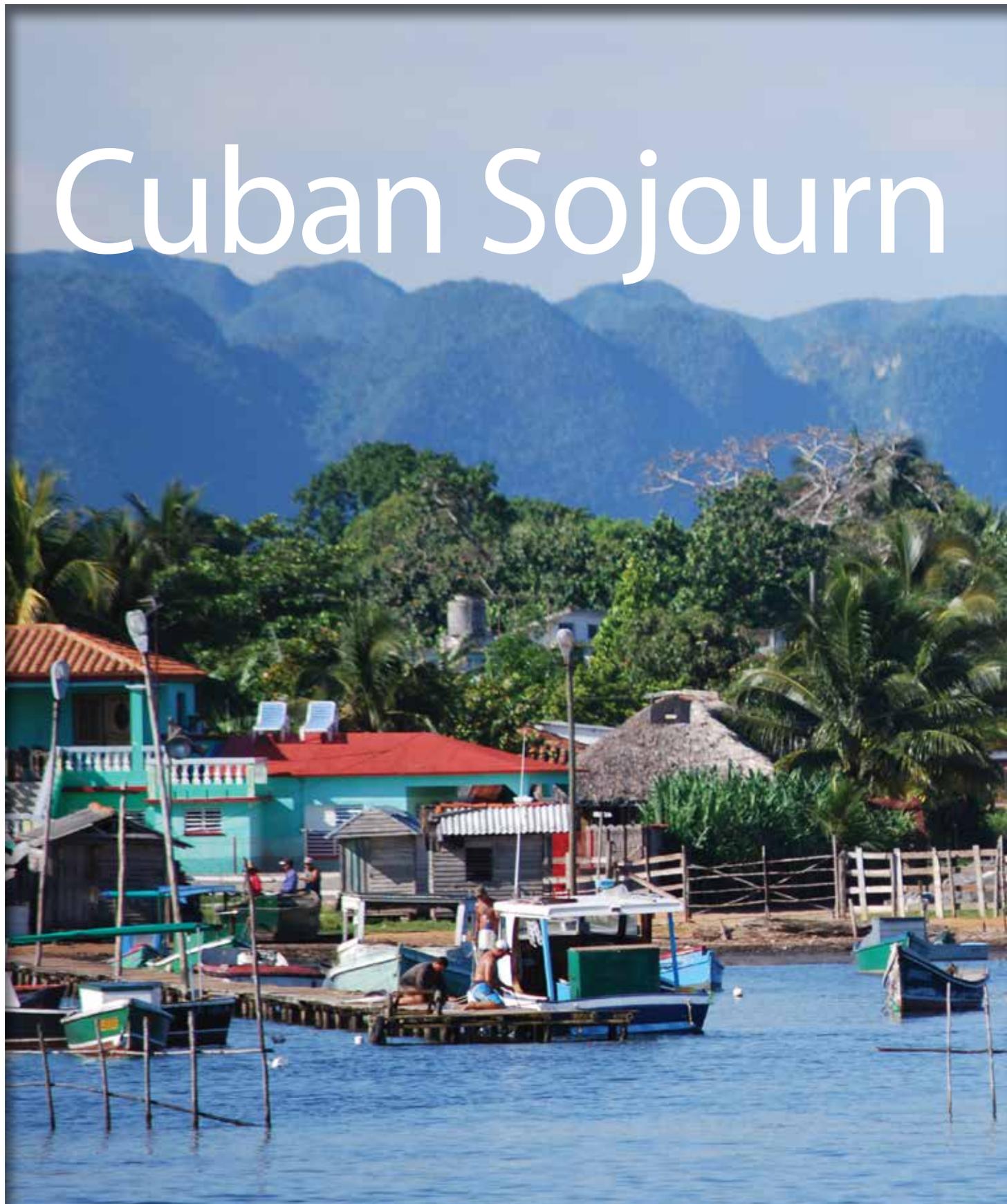
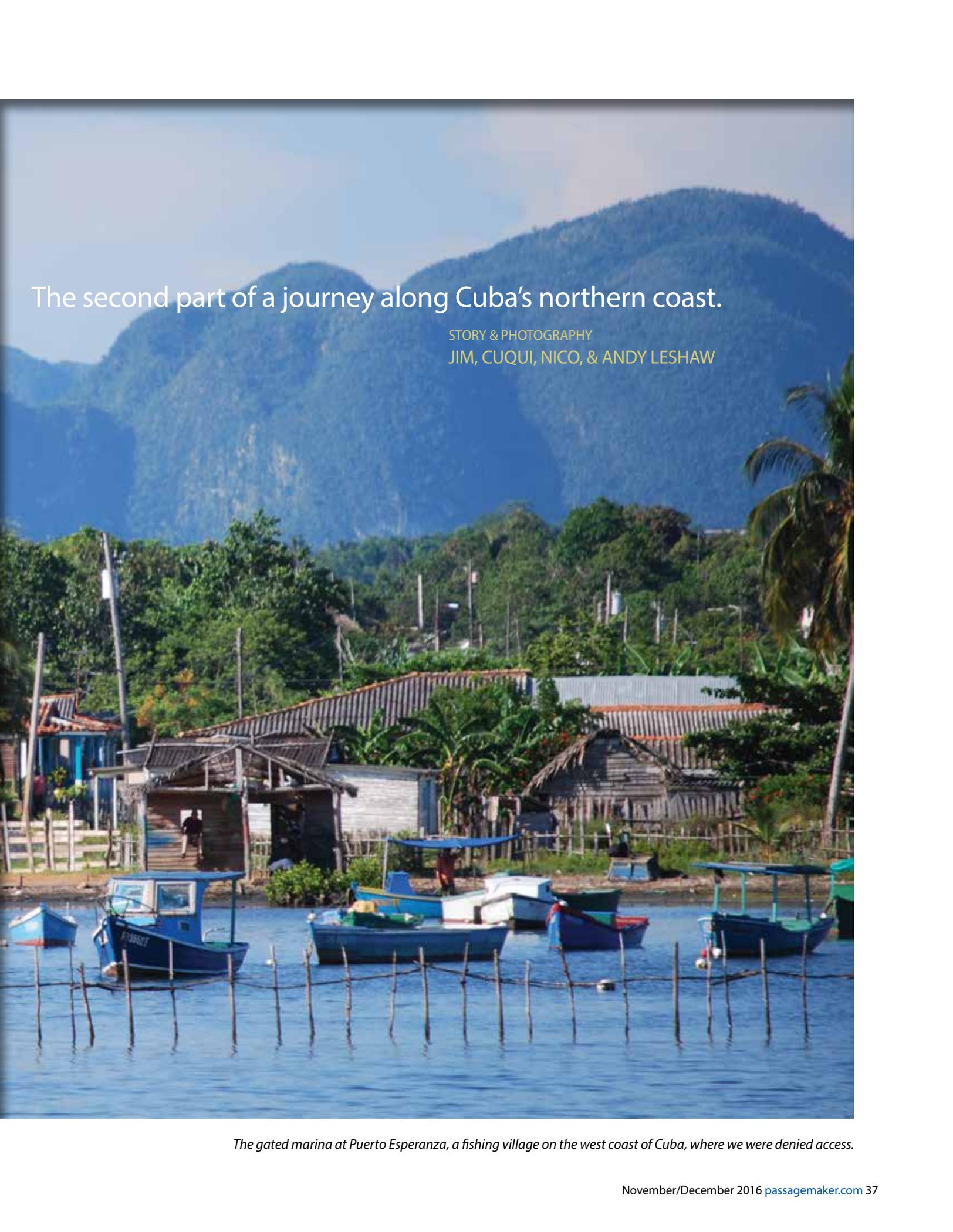


Cuban Sojourn



A scenic view of a fishing village in Cuba. In the foreground, several blue fishing boats are docked in a marina, with a simple wooden fence made of vertical posts across the water. The middle ground shows several buildings with corrugated metal roofs and some with thatched sections, surrounded by lush greenery and palm trees. In the background, large, forested mountains rise under a clear blue sky.

The second part of a journey along Cuba's northern coast.

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY

JIM, CUQUI, NICO, & ANDY LESHAW

The gated marina at Puerto Esperanza, a fishing village on the west coast of Cuba, where we were denied access.

After spending three days at Marina Hemingway on the outskirts of Havana, we began our cruise west along the northern coast of Cuba, aboard our 34-foot PDQ powercat, Thing 1 Thing 2. We planned to cruise through the Archipelago de los Colorados along the northern coast, stop at Los Moros Marina at Cabo San Antonio at the northwest tip, and dive in the waters off of María la Gorda, which lies underneath the westernmost tip of the island. Total one-way distance: approximately 200 nautical miles. We would then have to retrace a portion of our route before making the crossing back to Florida via the Dry Tortugas.

LEAVING MARINA HEMINGWAY

There are a number of deep-water pocket bays along the coastline west of Havana, with many protected anchorages and a variety of towns and small fishing villages. The reef Archipelago de los Colorados extends nearly the entire length of this portion of the coast, usually no more than three miles offshore. Numerous, typically unmarked, channels dot the reef, permitting passage across it. These passes, illustrated on the better charts of the area, are clearly visible in moderate seas and aided by clear skies. Islands inside the reef provide protected anchorages during inclement sea and wind conditions.

You will have two options to traverse this portion of the Cuban coast. One is the shallow-water route between the mainland and Las Islas de los Colorados. The second is the deepwater route that lies just outside the barrier islands and the reef. We chose the inside route due to our 3-foot draft, and our enthusiasm to take it slowly and stop to see the small towns along the way. Our plan

Right: Our family at Cayo Levisa, a small resort island built for foreigners. **Top (left to right):** A bicycle owned by one of the fishermen at Cayo Jutias. He rode the bike two hours to fish and camped for the night; An acopio—fishing shack—at Cayo Rapado Grande. The acopio is surrounded by underwater lobster cages where lobsters are stored before being transported to the mainland.

was to anchor out each night, as we had already been advised there are only six marinas in all of Cuba into which foreign boats are permitted entry.

HEADING WEST

We left Marina Hemingway and headed west about 38 miles past Mariel to Bahia Honda, a large and well-protected pocket bay. Following the advice of the dockmaster at Marina Hemingway, we cruised about three miles offshore, passing a number of working fishing boats. Most of the way, the water was too deep to register on our depth sounder. We cut inside the reef through a marked channel and into the wide, well-marked entrance to Bahia Honda, which is home to a large ship-scraping facility. There were a number of scuttled metal ships at the bay's entrance.



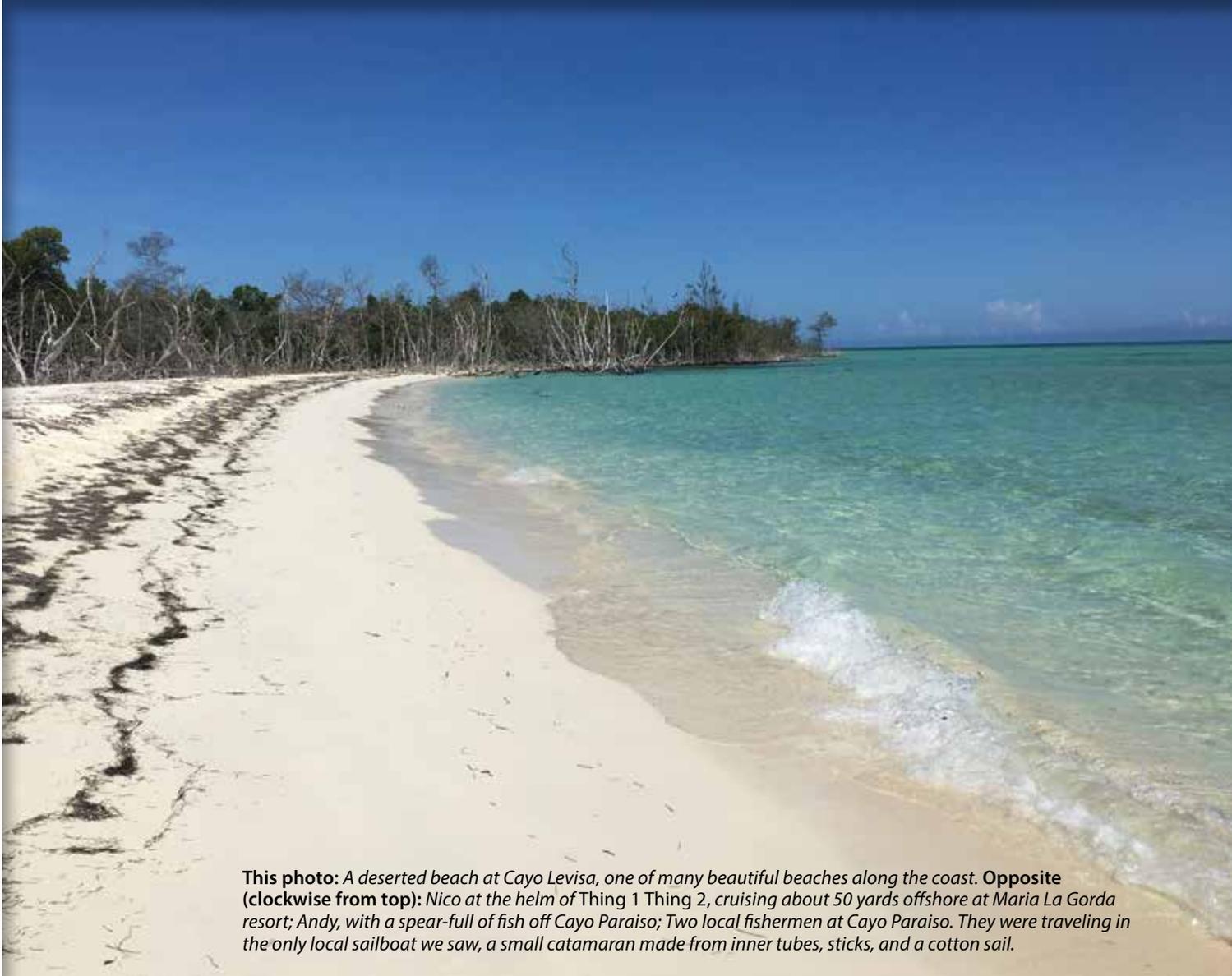


The Guarda Frontera (military) station is immediately across the channel from the scrap facility. We had been warned that before we could enter land or even anchor in an inhabited area, we would first need to check in with the Guarda Frontera to obtain a despacho authorizing us to anchor. We hailed them on Channel 16, but failed to get a response or see a single person. Since a storm was moving in from the south, we proceeded into Bahia Honda and headed into a large cove called Ensenada Santa Teresa. The inlet was surrounded by mangroves, completely protected, beautiful and desolate—not a single boat, person, or sign of life other than a houseboat on anchor that looked like it was used as a fishing camp.

We lowered the dinghy into the water for the first time since entering Cuba, and explored the beach in an effort to find the Guarda Frontera dock and outpost. The dock appeared to be abandoned: Only a group of old wooden pilings remained. The Guarda Frontera station itself was decorated with a large picture of Che and a number of political slogans. The building was padlocked and two police boats—small wooden rowboats with no engines—were chained to the remnants of the dock. The only other building was a concrete bunker with cutouts for shooting and a thick metal door to protect the bunker. No guards were present, so we took pictures to prove we had made the effort, if we ever had to prove it later.

PUNTA PIEDRA

From there we pointed our dinghy in the direction of a small village that was identified on the charts. As we arrived, we saw numerous people in houses along the waterfront of what we would learn is Punta Piedra, a small fishing village. They directed us to a dock where the local fishing fleet was housed—about 25 small, rickety rowboats without an engine among them. Each of these boats was a different design but all had lots of freeboard, indicating that the chop sometimes picks up in Bahia Honda. We were greeted by an older man who made a point of waving his machete as he questioned us about our intentions. We stated that we were coming ashore to purchase eggs. He gave us permission to tie up, offered to guard our dinghy and directed us to the bodega, the sole commercial enterprise in town. As we walked down the only street, people stared at us but did not say hello. In hindsight, we think our presence made them nervous, thinking they might get into trouble as a result of having seaborne foreigners in town. We found the store easily. Its inventory consisted of half-pound bags of white rice, small containers of



This photo: A deserted beach at Cayo Levisa, one of many beautiful beaches along the coast. **Opposite (clockwise from top):** Nico at the helm of Thing 1 Thing 2, cruising about 50 yards offshore at Maria La Gorda resort; Andy, with a spear-full of fish off Cayo Paraiso; Two local fishermen at Cayo Paraiso. They were traveling in the only local sailboat we saw, a small catamaran made from inner tubes, sticks, and a cotton sail.

cooking oil and not much else. We returned to the dinghy a few minutes later without eggs. We thanked the watchman (who was still wielding a machete) for watching the dinghy, and Jim asked if we could take a picture of the dock (he said no) and headed back to Thing 1 Thing 2.

After a restful night on the hook in Bahia Honda, we headed to Cayo Paraiso with the plan of snorkeling above a four-masted 1850s-era shipwreck we read about in our guide book. After snorkeling the wreck in about 15 feet of water, we met two fishermen in a small sailing “catamaran” constructed of inner tubes, with a mast and boom of sticks and a sail made from a piece of cotton cloth. We did not know it at the time, but this would be the only local sailboat we would see on our trip. We are not sure why, but fishing from sailboats is prohibited in Cuba. We bought six lobsters from the fishermen for \$6.00 and discussed everything from family to fishing and politics.

Our boys, Nico and Andy, spent about two hours working the coral heads with a spear gun and Hawaiian sling. The boys were under instructions to get fish for two meals. Any additional fish would be given to our new friends. The boys speared nine fish, including two parrot fish, which are a local favorite. We gave the fishermen the surplus fish as well as about 50 much sought-after fishing hooks, said our good-byes, and made the six-mile trip to Cayo Levisa, a small island resort built for foreigners.

CAYO LEVISA

We anchored on the southeastern shore and dinghied into the dock where we were greeted by a number of the local mariners, including the crew of the supply and dive boat. Everyone we met was pleasant and wanted to know what spare parts we might have to trade, with 5200 sealant being the most popular item.

We walked to the beach bar on the other side of the island where we met some of the other guests, primarily European couples and families. The next day we spent a bit more time exploring the island and the beautiful beaches where the kids gathered enough hermit crabs for a stew. We also went about two miles out to a reef off the southern coast of Cayo Levisa where we enjoyed some good snorkeling in about 30 feet of water.

That evening, we arranged to have the Guarda Frontera give us a despacho to depart Cayo Levisa the following morning. After checking out the resort’s \$10-per-person buffet, we decided instead to grill fresh fish on board. That evening a small U.S.-flagged sailboat arrived. It was the only non-Cuban boat we saw from the time we left Marina Hemingway until our arrival in the Dry Tortugas two weeks later.

ISOLATION

We took the inside-the-reef route at about seven knots to Puerto Esperanza, a small fishing village we read about in our cruising guide. The sea bottom was littered with starfish.



After anchoring, we headed toward the commercial dock, which was filled with fishing boats that ranged from 18 to 22 feet, powered by inboard diesels mounted amidships, and fully exposed to the elements. The entire marina was enclosed by a “gate” made of sticks. Our arrival dock was surrounded by about 15 kids who were swimming and cheering as we tied up. Before we could exit the dinghy, we were confronted by a non-uniformed man who informed us he was from the Guarda Frontera and we could not enter the town or remain anchored in the harbor. After attempting unsuccessfully to reason with him, we returned to the boat and made the 90-minute trip to Cayo Jutias, an uninhabited island connected to the mainland by a bridge that was supposed to bring tourists to a resort. Due to a hurricane, the resort was never built.

At Cayo Jutias, we explored a desolate white-sand beach, snorkeled, and returned for lunch and a nap. We were woken from our nap by a member of the Guarda Frontera who had commandeered two fishermen and their boat to greet us. Amazing how word gets out when a foreigner arrives. We later learned that the Guarda Frontera spend the day watching the coast with a telescope. He checked us in and gave us permission to anchor in a more protected spot on the other side of Cayo Jutias.

On a beach at our new anchorage, we met three local men who had ridden their bicycles two hours to the beach to fish and

planned to camp that night. We agreed to return for a campfire and barbecue on the beach. We were swarmed by mosquitoes (la plaga) until the fishermen got a smoky fire going, and we ate hot dogs and talked about Cuba, the U.S., and specifically Miami.

After a night at Cayo Jutias we made our way toward the fishing village of Los Arroyos, another town we had read about in our cruising guide. Before we could even begin to lower the anchor, a member of the Guarda Frontera arrived by boat, asked to see our papers, and told us we could neither anchor nor come into town.

Based on that episode and becoming increasingly pessimistic about our ability to enter any other towns along the coast, we headed for the marina at Cabo San Antonio on the northwestern tip of Cuba. This marina—a 45-mile run from Los Arroyos—is one of the six into which foreign boats may make port in Cuba. The marina consists of nothing more than a single concrete pier with an outbuilding. No town, no road, nothing. There was not even a Guarda Frontera boat, a dinghy or a skiff tied up at the pier. We had not seen a single boat, village, or sign of life from Los Arroyos to Cabo San Antonio.

Abel, the dockmaster, greeted us when we arrived. He informed us that he would call a man with the key to the fuel shed, and that he might be able to arrive that night. We also had very little water, but the only water here was bottled.

The Guarda Frontera showed up while we were pumping



fuel. He said he had nowhere to be and would wait while we finished fueling. After completing our paperwork, he told us the next place we could go ashore is Maria la Gorda around the farthest tip of Cuba.

Despite the ghost-town feel, the marina had a very nice modern restaurant and bar, which was only open to passing cruisers. We went in for a drink and met the doctor and nurse assigned to run the facility. The doctor explained that since we were only 100 miles from Cancún, medical professionals needed to be on site to examine arriving cruisers before they can be admitted into Cuba.

AROUND THE TIP

The next morning we walked along the road and saw wild horses, pigs, snakes and bugs of every variety, and later fired up Thing 1 Thing 2 for the 40-mile run to Maria la Gorda—around the northwestern tip of Cuba. The western shore of Cuba is completely desolate. Again, we failed to see a single boat or structure other than a small military facility and a large yacht or small cargo ship that appeared to have been on the rocks for many years. We were once more the only recreational boat. The anchorage is unprotected from all but the east, which is fortunately the direction of the prevailing winds.

Maria la Gorda (Fat Mary) is one of the premier dive resorts in Cuba. It is also a heavily protected marine sanctuary where diving is permitted only with a Cuban guide. Fishing of all kinds is prohibited in the waters around Maria la Gorda. Most of the guests we met were Europeans who had traveled to Cuba specifically for the diving, so while we were there, we hired a dive boat and guide to do some exploration of our own. This was





Far left: Two local fishermen in Bahia Honda. Few of the boats had motors and most were manned with two fishermen.

Left: The Guarda Fronterra station at Bahia Honda. The building was decorated with a large picture of Che. The dock consisted of a group of old wooden pilings to which two police boats, small wooden rowboats with no engines, were chained. **Far Bottom Left:** Nico and Andy in front of a scuttled ship outside the metal scrapping facility in Bahia Honda. The fish surrounding the remains of the ship were abundant. **Below:** The dock at Cayo Levisa, a secluded resort built for tourists. The local fleet consisted of two dive boats, a ferry, and a barge used to bring in potable water for guests, and diesel fuel to power the resort's generator.

easily the best diving we experienced in Cuba and apparently this was just a preview of the reefs on the south side of the island, which are reputed to be even more vivid and full of fish than the reefs on the north side.

We spent several days in Maria la Gorda, swimming, kayaking, and enjoying the resort. Regrettably, we were forced by an incoming storm to break anchor and begin our return trip to Florida, which would include a stop at the marina at Cabo San Antonio where we would again be the only guest. Along the south side of Cuba we ran into 6-8-foot following rolling seas. Once we lowered our speed, the waves became quite manageable. After arriving, we

had dinner at the marina restaurant where we connected with our new friends and learned that we were the only boat to have arrived at the marina in more than three weeks. We had the best shoreside dinner of the trip, including some of the largest lobster tails I have ever eaten.

The next stop was a three-hour run to Cayo Rapado Grande, our last stop in Cuba before heading for the Dry Tortugas. Cayo Rapado Grande is part of a group of uninhabited mangrove islands sporting nothing more than a single acopio, which is a small fishing shack with a dock on stilts. Lobsters are stored here in large underwater cages. We entered through the narrow channel between the acopio and the inner shoal, anchored, and spent the day kayaking through the vast array of mangrove trails. We also visited the acopio where we learned a bit about Cuba's lobster industry. At sun-up we began the 150-nautical-mile run to Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas.

Our voyage to Cuba was a unique opportunity to see a largely undeveloped cruising ground so close to our own home on the Florida coast. We met interesting people, and all the civilians we met welcomed us with open arms. Some day we hope to return to see the south side of the island, which is rumored to be even more pristine than the north, with its many islands, well-preserved reefs, and colonial towns. ■

