
JRNY

TRAVEL MAGAZINE

ISSUE ONE

JRNY

T R A V E L M A G A Z I N E

THE JRNY BEGINS

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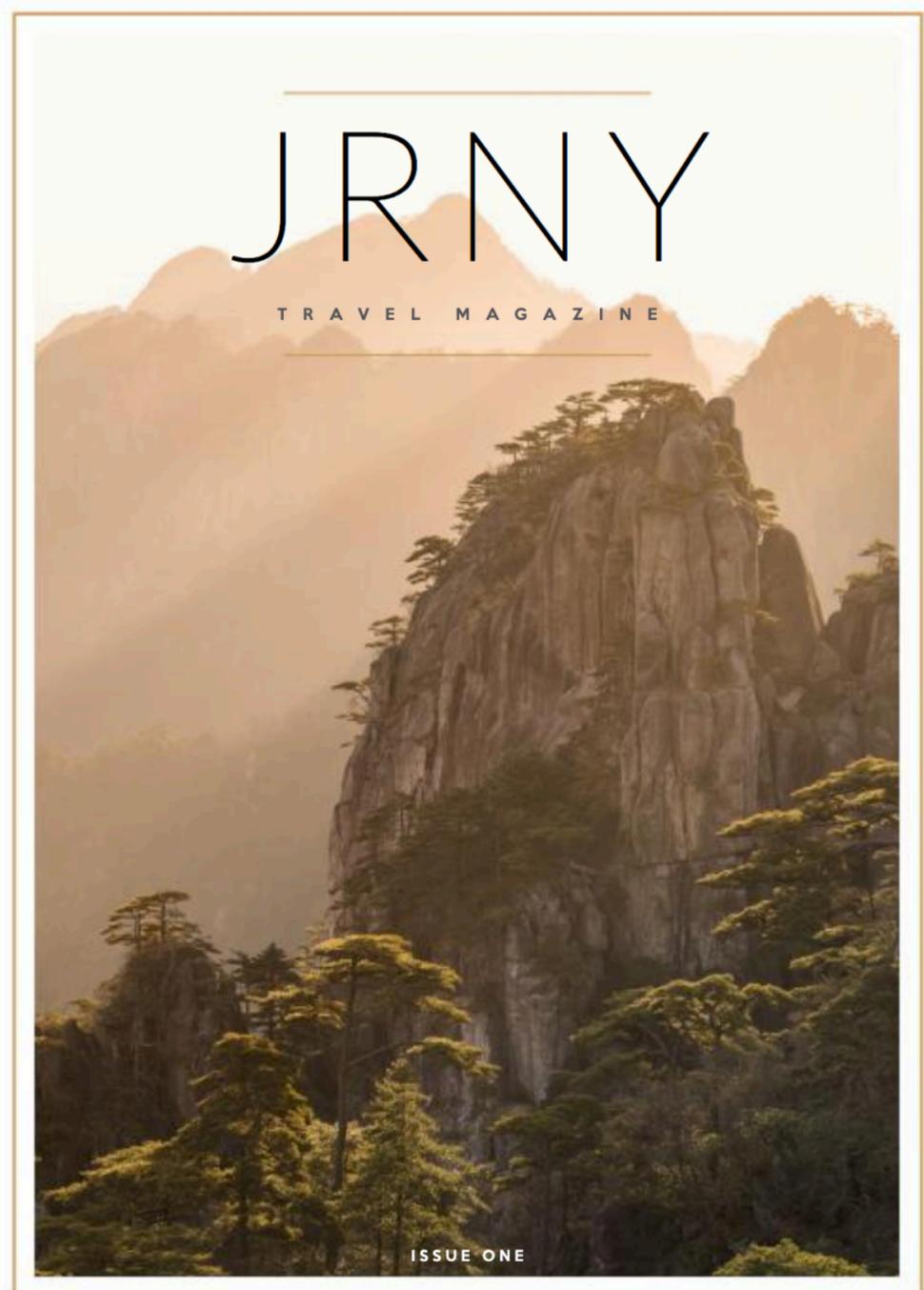
Issue One

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THE WILD EAST

CLAIRE BOOBYER HEADS OUT
FROM HAVANA TO EXPLORE
EASTERN CUBA - FROM NOTORIOUS
GUANTÁNAMO BAY TO THE MAGICAL
WILDERNESS OF ALEXANDER
HUMBOLDT PARK.





The stretched head of the crocodile with "eyes of stone and water" basks in the blue-black Caribbean, 900 miles from its resting tail. In this realm of fantasy, the island of Cuba is imagined as a long green reptile by a cherished national poet. Arranged about the croc's snout is Cuba's far-flung eastern edge and a pooling of her oddities – quirks of land and weather, rare places, and creatures great and small.

"Every nature lover in Cuba dreams of hiking along the magical trails here, hoping to get a glimpse of its famous tiny creatures, especially the zunzuncito, the world's smallest bird," I'm told by my guide, Carlos.

Those eastern wilds of Cuba are a foreign country and my journey to reach them is itself loaded with intrigue and surprise.

I leave the familiar salty streets and ramshackle villas of Havana, with her museums to communist heroics and her raspberry red vintage rides, and catch a bus to Cuba's second city, Santiago, at the other end of the island, in search of these unusual finds. The entrance to these remote lands in fact begins in the centre, when the sole highway on the island abruptly runs out of tarmac at Jatibonico, under billowing sky. From here, slower routes through sugar cane and dozy countryside, waymarked more by billboards of Revolution slogans than by road signs, shuffle me east.

“Every nature lover in Cuba dreams of hiking along the magical trails here.”

Santiago de Cuba, punched into the gut of a huge harbour on the southern coast, is circled by the Sweet Potato and Daiquiri mountains. They trap heat like a pressure cooker. During summer, motor skills slow and senses muddle. I break my journey here and dance madly through the salsa bars, all soul-stirring African melody and Spanish song, arms slick with sweat, cheap mojitos and even cheaper tobacco. When my head clears it's time to get a shifty on, to bus further east.

PREVIOUS PAGE: A man fishing in the River Miel in Baracoa. **THIS PAGE:** Vintage car parked on a street in Santiago de Cuba.



I'd not been looking to holiday at Guantánamo Bay but the 17-mile barbed-wire perimeter and "Cactus Curtain" partly trails the road to Baracoa, my final destination, five hours further east. The US Naval Base straddling this deeply drawn bay on Cuba's Caribbean coast has marked the Revolution's leaders for decades. After the US occupied the island during the 1898 Spanish-American War, one of its conditions for Cuba's independence in 1902 was the lease of Guantánamo for a US naval station. Fidel Castro, Cuba's late president, cashed the annual US\$4,085 rent cheque only once – by mistake – in 1959.

US troops laid the second largest minefield in the world in the seven-mile wide "curtain" in 1961. The Cubans planted their stretch of the no man's land with spiky cacti; then, in 1983, with mines after the US invaded Grenada. When the War-on-Terror military prison opened at the base after the September 11 attacks in 2001, Cuba's rulers were incensed. The occupation of the bay – about half the size of Manhattan – will prevail until the US up sticks.

The Navy Gateway Inns & Suites at the naval base, with harbour views, isn't open to regular bookings. But the two-star Hotel Caimanera, run by Cuba, is. Rooms with a "priceless war border zone view", less than a mile from the "Cactus Curtain" are sold by a travel agency in London. Online booking? Not a chance. I need to swing by a hotel tourism desk in Guantánamo City for a permit inked by the Ministry of the Interior. The city itself, a provincial capital, merits only a paragraph or so in guidebooks; most travellers skip it en route from Santiago to Baracoa. My strongest memory of the place is the stench – four decades in the brewing – when I stuck my head inside the Soyuz 38 spacecraft that catapulted the first Cuban into the ether.

THIS PAGE: *The Iglesia Parroquial de Santa Catalina, situated in the heart of Guantánamo City.*

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP: *Looking out over the Caribbean Sea from Cable Beach in Guantánamo Bay; Mural of Che Guevara; The road to Guantánamo province; Young men playing basketball in the street in Santiago de Cuba.*



“Officials stop me four times at control points to check my papers. At the last halt, Cuban security dig into my photo reel. What was I taking photos of? they ask.”





THIS PAGE: Baracoa at night.

I pick up a modern motor for Cuba's scrappy roads and tune in to *Rrrrrradio Reloj*. Radio Clock has marked time in Cuba since 1947: a metronome ticks through every second of every day. At the top of the minute, Morse code taps *RR*, and headlines on potato harvests and politics are delivered in breathless staccato. Fortunately, communist state news crackles, giving way to a radio signal from Jamaica, and the joyous reggae makes me smile.

In other vacation spots around the world, sunshine billboards announce, "Welcome to Holiday Island". Along my approach to Caimanera, however, a board daubed in blood red blared "High Sensitivity Defence Zone". My car window glinted not with glossy reflections of wind-ruffled palms but with unmoving menace – watchtowers.

Officials stop me four times at control points to check my papers. At the last halt, Cuban security dig into my photo reel. What was I taking photos of? they ask. How do they know I was taking photos? I feel like I've driven into a Cold War film.

I pull into Caimanera town through treacly air. Revolutionary icon Che Guevara's painted face gazes into the distance on the railway terminal, epiphytes

droop from electricity wires, and wonky Christian crosses have given up their fight at the cemetery, sinking at unholy angles into the surrounding salt flats.

I'm the only guest at the under \$30-a-night hotel, which sits on a hillock north of the bayside town. Celia, the receptionist, is thrilled to see me. She hopes I don't mind but the hotel can't afford to turn on the hot or the cold water. I don't mind, I say, but, as the mercury bubbles, does she mind if I plunge into the pool first to cool off before taking her tour of the hotel's museum about Guantánamo Bay?

After a refreshing dip, Celia opens the door to an unsigned room. A scale model, all dirty sand, fence wire and miniature watchtowers, plotted around the raggedy contours of the bay, hogs a terrazzo floor. Forlorn, it seems to say that it's only here, in the shadow of the foreign base, that Cuba claims the entire body of water as its own. Much diminished as it is.

"The bay is an affront, and El Comandante [as Cubans call Fidel Castro] cut off the supply of water to the Americans in '64," Celia says. She seems to relish in telling me the punishment Cuba doled out: "Now they have to get their fresh water from a Jamaican ship that waits offshore."

I ask about the landmines captured in black and white in the pictures hung on the wall. They are gone now, Celia says, referring to the 50,000 devices only fully cleared in 1999 by Gitmo, as the Americans call the naval base.

And the pretty clapboard houses immortalised in pencil drawings here are gone too. The room is a memorial to lost lives and land. Like losing a limb but still feeling its presence.

Beyond the sun-dappled pool, we climb the hotel's lookout. It mirrors the watchtowers I see as I scan the hazy horizon through a telescope. Are those binoculars looking at me looking at them? Sweat prickles around my neck.

I ask Celia about the view and the American occupation. She's hesitant now and lobs back statements of fact, a common Cuban technique to evade sensitive probing. "Those are the Cuban, and those are the American watchtowers. That's a metal barrier across the entrance to the bay ... It's so deep nothing can get through underwater."

From my room, after dark, I watch the Americans' searchlights sweep the sea gate. I don't remember signing up for a blinding light performance from dusk

'til dawn. My bay-facing room flashes with amped-up wattage all night. With no need for a bedside lamp, I pick up the hotel brochure for a 3am read. Nope, there's definitely nothing in the fine print about that.

Celia had told me that Guantánamo means "fertile area surrounded by water". Funny that, as beyond the infamous bay, hillocks of parched land, knobbed by stone and peppered with phallic cacti, sprout across the driest region on the island. It's so dry, the local River Dry refuses to go by any other name.

My route east is cinematic: clumps of spiny green cacti tower against a backdrop of indigo-coloured sea. At the foot of the Nipe-Sagua-Baracoa massif the view changes when the road, straitjacketed in barriers of white cement, coils through rumpled velvety mountains to isolated Baracoa, a small city of antique streets and the centre of a region regularly doused in the island's largest deluges of rain. Sometimes there's an overdose when hurricanes barrel in.

Baracoa is the most isolated place of size in Cuba, and the most beautiful. Cut off from the rest of the island until La Farola highway pushed through in 1965, it shimmers with folk tales, fabulous music and salsa. The air is perfumed with coconut, cocoa

and coffee – and on weekend nights, pongy wreaths of spilt beer.

Cupped within two bays – Baracoa and Honey – it basks under the protective profile of an anvil-shaped mountain. Deep from within the ravines of the massif surrounding the tiny city gush the waters of nearly 30 rivers. Local fishermen still net fish by the waning moon, selling the silvery halfbeak in the shade of columned homes with a sing-song cry – “teti, teti” – to shoppers.

The road south leads to beaches, wild with palms, warm seas and secret coves, and pop-up places grilling shellfish on the sand. North, up the coast from Baracoa, reached by a road rutted with the country’s most evil potholes, is Alexander Humboldt Park, a tad smaller than Singapore in size. UNESCO has taken it under its wing as its wilderness shelters some of the world’s smallest creatures, plus (possibly) a rare bird the US’s National Audubon Society can’t give up on finding: the legendary half-metre-tall Cuban ivory-billed woodpecker, all black and white with a fiery orange crest. “It might still be living somewhere in the deepest corners of the woods,” Carlos, our park guide, says.

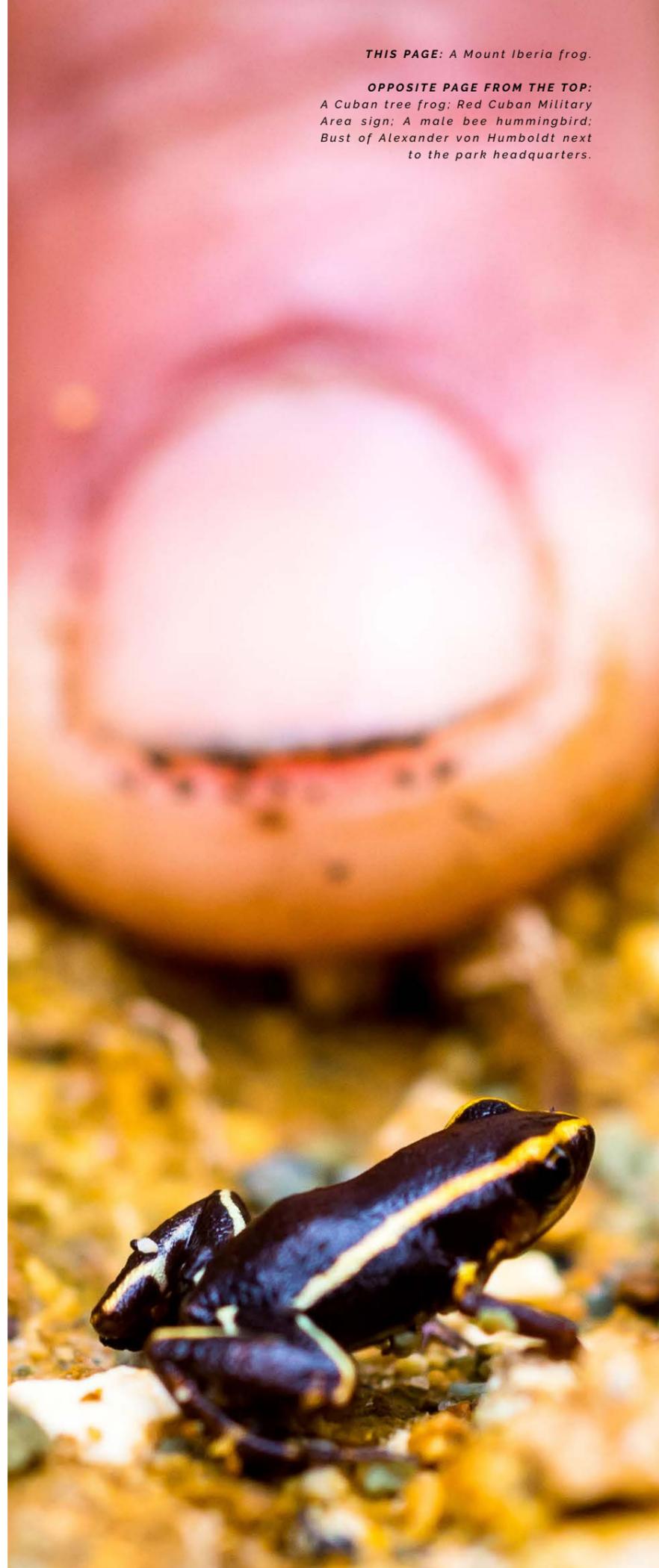
A shack at the side of the road serves as the park headquarters. It’s here I pick up three trail companions and Carlos. In the sharp light of the early morning we walk down to the disc-shaped Taco Bay, stuffed with coconut palms sparkling in the sun. Here, we get in a boat and nuzzle up to the tangled roots of mangrove in search of the slow-moving sea cow, the West Indian manatee.

Like “hammock”, “hurricane” and “tobacco”, “manatee”, is a Taino word. Pre-Columbian Taino lords around here inhaled “cohoba” – powdered seed snuff (whence Cohiba cigars get their name) – and then vomited using spatulas made from manatee bone in ceremonies where hallucinogenic highs enabled communion with their spiritual realm.

Out in the quiet of the bay, with just the slap of cool water on the hull, and the chatter of birds, the seagrass-munching manatee seem too shy to surface, and my mind wanders to the spirits of the Taino and their ties with the natural world.

THIS PAGE: A Mount Iberia frog.

OPPOSITE PAGE FROM THE TOP:
A Cuban tree frog; Red Cuban Military Area sign; A male bee hummingbird; Bust of Alexander von Humboldt next to the park headquarters.



Back on land, we hike through furrowed oxblood earth, rich in iron and nickel. The rain-grooved soil is thronged with ferns and pine trees, needles and cones shed all around. The rising forest smells like Christmas in the sun. Hefty pineapples, slumping banana plants, and then tiny slips of orchid emerge, so delicate, so unclassified, Carlos says. We move from a winter scene haloed in humid air to tropical fruit basket in seconds.

Native *coccothrinax alexandri* offers passing shade with its bicycle-spoke leaves. The fan palm is named after German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt whose boat blew off course sailing to Venezuela in 1801, Carlos says. Humboldt spent time in Cuba with his nose in the island’s botanicals and its Jurassic earth. He boated through the ravishing beauty of the still-isolated southern coral isles, bathed in ultramarine sea. His studies on Cuba earned him the title of second discoverer of the country. Christopher Columbus was the first, but the men of Columbus’s 1492 expedition came in search of new lands and gold, not plants, and fired up a holy war with the Taino people living in this eastern region.

“The road south leads to beaches, wild with palms, warm seas and secret coves.”

We’ll have to slow down if we want to catch sight of the park’s smalls: the tiny zunzuncito; the poisonous Mount Iberia frog, the size of a fingernail; the blue scorpion tapped for its venom for cancer treatments; the light-as-a-butterfly Gervais’s funnel-eared bat, the world’s second smallest flying mammal; and the painted poser, the *polymita picta* snail which garlands trees like festive baubles.

We need patience, too. Carlos once staked out a white petalled carnivorous butterwort for four days. He watched as a fly landed on its fine-hair covered leaf; touchdown triggered a glue that enveloped the insect, dissolving it for the leaf to absorb its mulch. I think of *The Day of the Triffids* and suddenly this forest of steep heat doesn’t seem so kind.

But the Cuban Ray Mears chides us for not seeing the promise of good: “You’ll never go thirsty as these bromeliads here on the branches trap water; the sage here is for a sore throat; that long leaf you can use for toilet paper; and the sharp spines of this palm,” he says, carefully plucking a finger-length spine off the trunk of the endemic pajua palm, “you can use to sew clothes ... you know ... just in case.”

The melodious song of the Cuban solitaire brings us to a halt. And it’s then, while motionless, a creature buzzes by in a blur. Carlos spins. I see something. Briefly. The zunzuncito, the world’s smallest feathered flight. With a hot-pink crown and emerald green livery, the bee hummingbird is as light as a paperclip and, with 80 wing beats a second and the know-how to fly backwards, forwards, whichaway, it’s no wonder I can’t keep track.

It was a dream just to get close, echoed in the hopes of millions of Cubans. Just as with this dazzling avian star, there are still ‘lost’ creatures, dinosaur-era animals and Taino relics in these coastal coves, caves and wilds to be found. I’ll have to come back to find them..

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

Fly into Havana's José Martí International Airport; from Havana, Viazul coaches run to Santiago de Cuba, Guantánamo and Baracoa.

BEST TIME TO GO

November to April.

CURRENCY

Cuban peso

TIME ZONE

GMT-4

FOOD

In the east, search out the best-in-class sweet bizcochuelo mango; drink Pru, a potent botanical brew; buy the palm leaf-bound *cucurucho*, stuffed with grated coconut, chopped almonds and honey; and snap open a bar of Baracoa chocolate, made at the town's Che Guevara Chocolate Factory.

MUST-PACK ITEM

Swarovski Optik NL Pure 8x32 binoculars; they're lightweight; the 8x magnification will be perfect for the zunzuncito; and the 150m field of view will mean no bird escapes attention.

WHY GO

For the spirited Cubans, rousing music, lush nature, warm seas and the chance to travel through the last bastion of communism in the western hemisphere. Everything is a little wilder in the east – the history, weather and the adventure.

Plan your own trip: jrnymag.com/issue-1-info

THIS PAGE Fishing boats anchored at Río Miel river mouth near Baracoa.

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