

# LIFE ON THE ISLE OF YOUTH

*Claire Boobyer gets off the beaten track on Cuba's little-visited Isle of Youth in search of its rare species and teeming reef life*

ALL PHOTOS BY CLAIRE BOOBYER

Most travellers skip Cuba's Isle of Youth, a fat, comma-shaped island dangling below the Caribbean coast of the mainland. Those that are curious about this island, 60 miles south, discover it's almost impossible to get a seat on the irregular flights from Havana. And to book the daily ferry requires heaps of patience as tickets need to be booked a month in advance.

Those that do make the hop mostly come for the diving. They stay at the Hotel Colony on the west coast and set out each morning to dive the coral reefs beneath the turquoise waters of Punta Francés Marine National Park. Most take in a visit to the Presidio Modelo, too. This panopticon prison-turned-museum, its circular concrete and iron skeletons desiccating in situ, rests east of Nueva Gerona, the island capital. For 19 months from 1953, Fidel and Raúl Castro were incarcerated here after they launched an attack on army barracks in Santiago de Cuba.

But I'd come to get even further off the beaten track, to explore the endangered wildlife and stay far from the all-inclusive beach resorts dotted around Cuba's coastline. I headed to the bottom of the island, the deep south, and a little-known spot, Cocodrilo village. It's far from the quiet streets of Nueva Gerona, and even further from the hubbub of Havana's lively bars, music venues and trafficked avenues.

It's a schlep to get there, but oh so worth it. The ferry leaves Batabanó on the mainland and arrives around 4.30pm daily at the small port at Nueva Gerona; a bus leaves town, a few blocks away, at 4pm sharpish to Cocodrilo, so you need to overnight in one of Gerona's B&Bs or take a taxi straight to Cocodrilo. The bus, a converted truck, leaves

Nueva Gerona three times a week and jangles three hours to Cocodrilo, some 53 miles south.

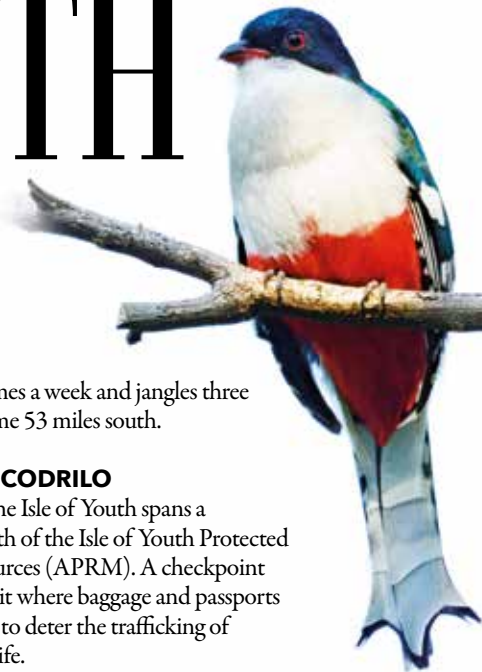
## DESTINATION: COCODRILLO

The southern third of the Isle of Youth spans a protected region – South of the Isle of Youth Protected Area of Managed Resources (APRM). A checkpoint marks the northern limit where baggage and passports are looked over in a bid to deter the trafficking of people, drugs and wildlife.

Beyond, thick forest sprouts from a porous limestone karst landscape. Enveloped in the dense tree cover is the internationally recognised Lanier Swamp, home to critically endangered Cuban crocodile, American crocodile, and the spectacled caiman. Out east are the Punta del Este caves, known for their rock art painted by pre-Columbian people. On the southern curve, remote beaches are ideal nesting sites for hundreds of endangered green turtles. At the western tip, Punta Francés National Marine Park is the shape of a lizard's tail. The warm, blue sea here is a sanctuary for vulnerable manatee, critically endangered staghorn and vulnerable elkhorn coral, marine turtles and sharks.

Some 346 souls live in small homes in Cocodrilo, which was founded in the early 20th century by tradesmen and fishermen from the English-speaking Cayman Islands. It was named Jacksonville after one of the founders.

The low-slung houses face the Caribbean Sea with waters that slip between inky black to teal blue as the sun arcs across the sky. At the end of the bumpy road to Cocodrilo, and facing the ocean, is a Parque José Martí of collapsed concrete columns. West is a marble sculpture perched on the rough limestone coast, a small, scrappy central park with a couple of seats, a Lutheran church, primary school, and medical centre with an ambulance. The skeletal remains of a former Japanese-supported turtle research station colour the horizon. ►►



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1: Entrance to Pirate Le Clerc's cave, Punta Francés  
2: Sea off Playa de Pucho at Cocodrilo  
3: Staghorn coral ready to be planted  
4: Recently hatched green turtle at Playa Guanál  
5: Artificial tree for attaching staghorn coral fragments  
6: Collecting rubbish on Playa Americana, near Cocodrilo

LEFT: Cuban crocodile  
ABOVE: A Cuban trogon, in the colours of the national flag







Hermit crabs, larger than a human fist, scuttle across the road seeking shelter under large almond trees. And noisy, jet-black Cuban crows, which garble like an underwater cry, herald dog day afternoons and fabulous amber sunsets.

Fish, fruit and veg are sold to locals at kiosks but with national scarcities not a drop of alcohol or bottled water is for sale. Many folk work for the local fishing co-operative based out of Playa Caleta, just over a mile away from the village. When time is their own, locals slip into warm water in the tiniest cove of dazzling sapphire sea, Playita de Pucho. But since Hurricane Ian barreled in at the end of September 2022, Pucho has ceded its sliver of golden sand to the waves.

**REEF AND FOREST**

I stay with Reinaldo and Yemmy at B&B Villa Arrecife. Reinaldo, known as Nene, has a Master's degree in coastal management, and runs a marine conservation project, Consytur, with the help of eco-friendly visitors. He collects rubbish from local beaches and the seabed, spears lionfish, an invasive species that competes with native fish for food, for lunch. And he grows critically endangered staghorn coral under the sea on a tree-like structure. After a year the coral is replanted on the seabed. Healthy colonies of staghorn coral are a protective nursery for juvenile fish.

Cocodrilo's Villa Arrecife is my home for almost a week as I take part in Nene's reef protection

*Hermit crabs scattered, cracking up the bone-dry leaves of the forest floor as they fled the sound of our wheels*

programme. We collect some 10kg of rubbish from a nearby beach, capture several lionfish, and plant around 20 or so orange finger-like fragments of staghorn coral.

Nene and I bike a few miles to Playa Americana, so called as an American couple summered here in isolation before the 1959 Revolution. We pedal through a forest darkened by the branches of cedar, mahogany and yellow mastic tree and perfumed by the sweet scent of the white mariposa flower. The wood of the mastic was used to make homes in the village, of which just three traditional houses remain. Hermit crabs scatter, cracking up the bone-dry leaves of the forest floor as they flee the sound of our wheels. The stone house of the Americans is now in ruins, the beach choked with rubbish, and Sargasso seaweed, which can damage the reef, licks at the shore.

"We started collecting rubbish here in 2015 as an initiative to get the young people involved in the community," Nene tells me. "After we've collected the plastic, I take the youngsters out snorkelling."

We pedal to Playa Caleta another day. After dismounting and walking the last stretch through strands of red mangrove and black mangrove, we pick a path through sea grape trees to Caleta Beach, a ribbon of blinding white icing sugar-soft sand that shelves into a sparkling sea. We snorkel through gin-clear water over noodle-like seagrass before exploring the reef – teeming with colourful seafans, brain coral and fish. ▶▶

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- 1: Cocodrilo horse and home
- 2: Playa Caleta near Cocodrilo
- 3: Parque José Martí, Cocodrilo
- 4: Nene with spearfish, Cocodrilo
- 5: Villa Arrecife B&B, Cocodrilo
- 6: Jetty, Playa Punta Francés

**ABOVE:** The coral reef festooned with purple seafans, off Cocodrilo





## BIRDS AND BEACHES

The following morning, we bump along the single road to Punta Francés National Marine Park in a tuk tuk. Our first stop is the site known as Cave Le Clerc, a huge chamber churned out by the sea, said to have been refuge to the French pirate François Le Clerc, hence the name of the national marine park.

From there we walk the two miles to the main beach and guard protection post. Almost immediately Nene spots a tocororo, the national bird of Cuba in his soldier-smart red, white and blue coat. Our next spot is unusual: a van stuck in the sand. A couple of guys have had to overnight on the beach waiting for rescue. They'd burnt a cigarette box to light a fire to make coffee and caught a tin full of fish for breakfast.

Nene, who was director of the park between 2001 and 2009, says the guards are vigilant in protecting the area including the sea.

"No fishing is allowed in the park," Nene tells me. "The only fishing activity allowed is that of the Caribbean spiny lobster in the north of the marine park, and it's controlled in a limited area."

We head away from the dunes on a path through mangrove and puddles that are more like ponds. In the bushes, a glittering hummingbird buzzes by. Turning a corner, we spy a Cuban black hawk, *Gavilán batista*, perched on a branch overhanging the path. It is a beast of a bird and doesn't budge as we edge closer. It feels like we are on the Galápagos Islands where the wildlife doesn't flinch in the presence of humans. We spot glossy ibis, white ibis, warblers, a black-crowned heron, the colourful cartacuba, grey kingbird, white-crowned pigeon, and a magnificent frigate bird soaring through the sky, too.

The main beach of Punta Francés is gloriously empty when we arrive but there are a few more signs of human life here than I remember when I last visited almost 10 years ago.

Nene explains: "In the time of Trump, cruise ships visited regularly – weekly, sometimes twice a week, so they built drink stands, palapas and compost toilets."

That is until Donald Trump shut down the industry in summer 2019.

Apart from a couple of park guards, Nene and myself, the long curve of virgin beach backed by palms is blissfully empty. The sun is broiling, the sea glitters, and I wade straight into the warm waters.

Cocodrilo and Punta Francés are special places, I think, as I play back the memories on my return to Gerona. I think of the reef, the birds, the empty beaches and the elusive crocs. Long may they remain so. 🌊



**ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM:** An original wooden home in Cocodrilo; the virgin Playa Punta Francés; sunset in Cocodrilo **LEFT:** Cuban black hawk