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Keep on keeping on

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y the time you read this, the spring race season will be well and truly underway and those of you who have trained for a specific event will hopefully have seen the fruits of your labours in PBs and long-held goals achieved.

Once you've completed a big event it's understandable to want to take a few days off before running again. But sometimes those days can become weeks, the weeks months, and before you know it you're no longer on talking terms with your trainers.

To stop that from happening, we take a look at the opportunities open to runners who find themselves with all the fitness but not the focus. One obvious path is to take your running abroad. As any seasoned traveller will tell you, the best way to explore a location is by foot and that certainly proved to be the case for our writer, Simon, who decided to combine his passion for running with a life-long ambition to visit Cuba (page 34).

If you fancy something closer to home you can utilise the very powerful bit of tech on your wrist to create some new training goals (page 48), or follow our expert advice on how to make the move from tarmac to trail (page 23). Or, if you're already *au fait* with off-road, why not take a leaf out of Kilian Jornet's book and run up Mount Everest (page 54)?

For more inspiration on what to do with your current peak condition head over to mensrunning.co.uk and follow us on Twitter and Facebook.



SIMON MESSENGER

Run-adventurer Simon leads us on a fleet-footed tour of Cuba, as part of his mission to travel 'around the world in 80 runs' (p34).



MARK BAILEY

Mark is a journalist who specialises in sport, health and fitness. He spoke to Kilian Jornet for this issue's profile feature (p54).



MICHAEL DONLEVY

Freelance writer Mike spoke to a host of experts for this issue's piece on first big race mistakes and how best to avoid them (p60).

MEN'S Running

READ THIS, RUN BETTER

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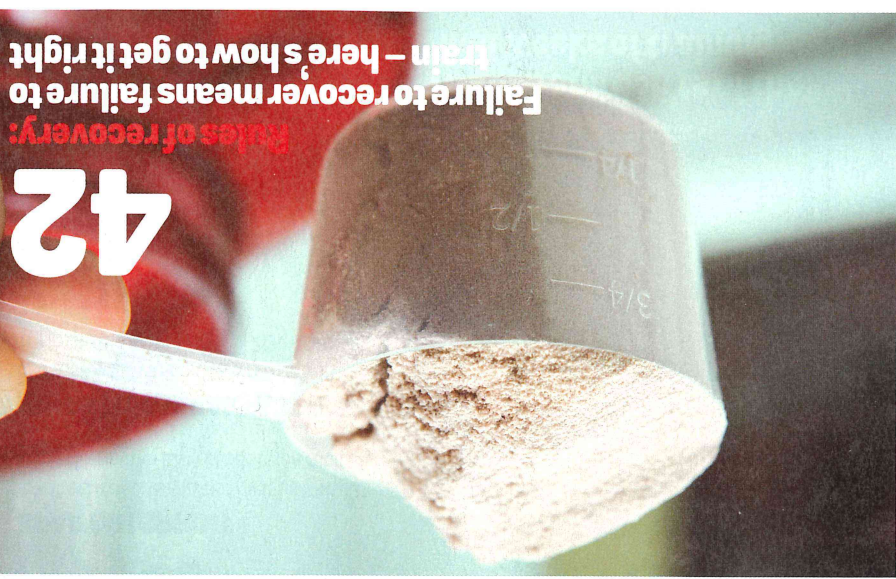
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RUNNING REVOLUTION

CUBA IS ON THE CUSP OF
SOME BIG CHANGES, SO NOW
IS A GOOD TIME TO CATCH
THE ISLAND'S PAST AS IT
LOOKS TO THE FUTURE



El Capitolio, the seat of government in Cuba until after the Cuban Revolution in 1959, provides the grand backdrop for a morning run

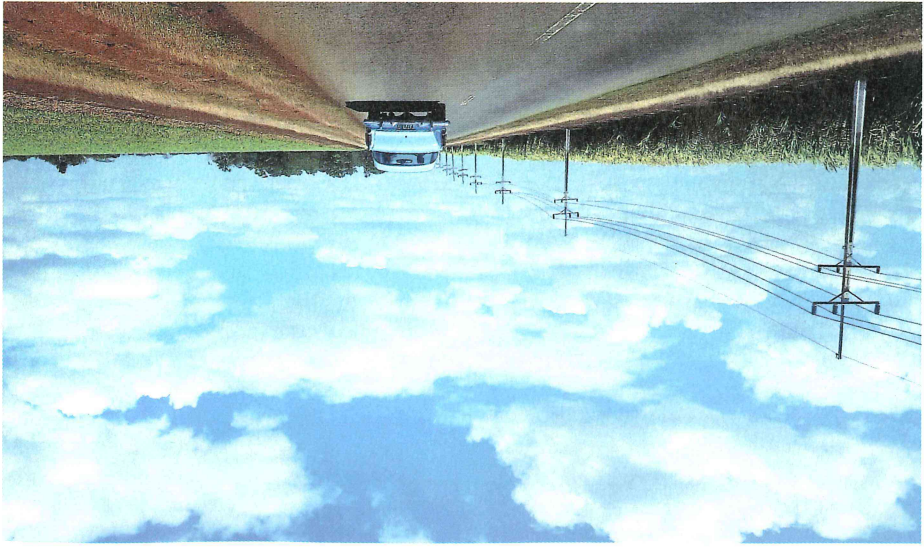


Cuba is officially open for business. Historically the Caribbean island's relationship with the US made it an awkward destination for travellers looking to enjoy its unique charms. But since the thawing of relations commercial flights have sharply risen and tourism is expected to balloon accordingly. I wanted to see the island before the four million tourists expected in 2017 turn up, and my best friend's wedding gave me the opportunity to do so. It also gave me the chance to explore by foot the trails and roads of an island that still feels somewhat forbidden and undiscovered. For the time being at least.

TRINIDAD

My first trip is to the south of the island and after an exhausting day of navigating the confusing rural roads of inner Cuba, I arrive in Trinidad, a beautifully restored 16th century town, and head straight to bed. I'm

up before dawn the next day to avoid the heat and my body, quite frankly, is utterly disorientated by being up at 6am running. The streets are silent and I jog past the famous Plaza Mayor towards the town's historical church. The well-trodden cobbles would be terrible for anything too energetic, but for my morning slog are just fine and I pace myself accordingly. As I discover over the coming weeks, running in Cuba is, overall, very safe. Aside from the odd foot towards my brightly coloured shoes, I'm generally left in peace – so long as I give way to five-decade old taxis. Considering they are built like tanks and I don't particularly fancy being liquidised, jaywalking is the least of my plans anyway. However, the gel-addicted, tape-wearing, Strava-using runner should beware: apart from what you bring with you, running in Cuba is back to basics. It's hard enough finding a shop to buy water; running gizmos are, unsurprisingly, fairly low down on the ration books' priority lists! »



Trinidad, though small, is charming: its marvellous architecture has largely remained unspoiled (or has been renovated) with street after street of narrow, pastel-coloured, colonial mansions adorned with arches and balconies. Huge, rusty lorries from yesterday lumber by belching out monstrous clouds of black smoke while vultures circle overhead, possibly planning to make a snack out of the brightly coloured running object below them. Rather keen to deny them of their breakfast, I look for new routes and soon enough I reach the bottom of a valley and discover a narrow river path.

The gurgling of the river is a welcome break from the roads and, without a soul in sight, I feel a lot closer to nature. The trees, covered in termite nests, flicker in the breeze and provide some welcome shade. Eagles lurk in the distance while a tocororo, Cuba's national bird, breaks cover as I pass. Unfortunately my

communing with the island's bird life is loudly interrupted by my Garmin telling me another kilometre has gone by. Well at least I wasn't listening to music.

PLAYA LARGA

After a few days, I head westwards towards the Peninsula de Zapata. Vast tracts of open swampland and contrastingly dense forests harbour one of the most famous beaches in US 20th century history: the Bahía de Cochinos, or Bay of Pigs, famous for the failed US-backed invasion of Cuba following the island's scheming with the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War. No sooner have I arrived I switch my flip-flops for trainers and head out for



Around me nature is gradually waking up, with early birds swooping to catch unsuspecting insects. In the undergrowth is a range of animals, including giant rats, crocodiles and boa constrictors. The travel guides all warn you to be careful although none of them mentioned the worst of all evils hiding in the salty swamps: the local guerrilla mosquitoes. Stop to catch your breath at your own peril, as like the well-

HOW WE GOT THERE



We flew from London Gatwick to Havana with Virgin Atlantic (flights only from £637) who fly to the island twice weekly. We found our accommodation via Casa Particular, a directory for private rentals on the island, and paid £25 a night for B&B accommodation (casaparticular.com). Public transport in Cuba, while reliable, is generally slow and rather complicated. We recommend hiring a car to get around - from £100 per day (carrentalcuba.com).

Clockwise from top left: the island's classic 1950s US cars are a result of Fidel Castro's ban on foreign imports; one of many colourful, cobbled streets; city soon turns to verdant National Park; all over there are reminders of Cuba's violent past

coordinated revolutionary army hiding in the swamps 50 years ago, death by execution is not enough to scare them off. When the ideal moment arises, they swarm and strike. The only solution is to run, and fast. Having recovered my breath, I slow down as the sun makes its appearance, its heat causing a haze to rise from the road and swamps. Soon the whole area is covered by thick mist and the cool and sheltered mangrove forests now feel humid and constrained. It has been an hour and I haven't seen a single other human.

Eventually, I exit the park for another 10 kilometres along the beaches. On fallen remind me of the island's violent past. Tanks, flags, monuments and propaganda-ridden murals: the message is clear and sobering.

VINALES

It's easy to see why tourism beat its way to the small and formerly little visited village of Vinales. The surrounding flat-topped limestone mountains shaped by millennia of erosion give the landscape a unique, prehistoric look and feel, and the land is unspoilt with rolling valley after valley of primary forest. For trail runners it really is a version of heaven. By now, my body is getting adjusted to this gam running malarkey. I warm up under the cacophony of cockerels' sing-song before heading out into the

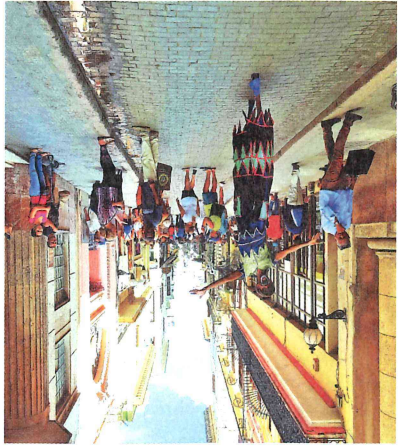
wilderness. Soon, the colourful brick houses and cars become wood huts and carts. Although I have a map on my phone, I decide to head out rather aimlessly along the dusty paths between the pineapple and tobacco fields, enjoying the act of running like I haven't in a long time. A childlike joy overcomes me at the rawness of nature as piglets come out for a stroke, breaking my stride. After an hour, the first slither of sunshine creeps over the Cuban skyline. Soon, the clouds are orange then pink while the soft rays bring new warmth to an otherwise cool morning. A local farmer on horseback rides past me and raises his straw hat as a greeting. Time stops and I pause to witness the scene.

I continue along the sinuous paths, utterly and blissfully unaware of where they will take me. Within minutes, a little mongrel comes running towards me and, resisting my attempts to usher it away, begins leading me along the paths. I decide to follow it - he leaps rather impressively over a stile and I take a sharp incline much to my quads' distress and, before I know it, I'm faced with a cave taking me deep into the cliff's darkness. My legs are heavy but I turn my phone's torch on and gingerly follow him, wondering whether this is a well-trained dog taking part in a tourist-mugging scheme. To my relief, daylight appears a few minutes later and »

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we emerge to a glorious vista of green valleys and testing terrain. We make our way down a long set of rooted steps before the mongrel runs off, leaving me to head back to the village, exhilarated.

A few days later, I'm back in Havana, which has the potential to be one of the most striking cities in the world.



a chance for me to finally do some tempo running and put my new companion through his paces. While free of cars, the Malecon does have one quite major obstacle: the ocean and its raging waves. Without fail, every unsuspecting tourist will get a soaking and I regularly find myself jumping into the road to avoid getting wet. The dog – by now named Spot for a distinctive mark on his coat – is far braver than me and excitedly sprints along the seawall. I approach the end of the Malecon and with it the US Embassy. A brutal building in a prime waterfront spot, it only resumed its function in 2015 and is a reminder of thawing relationships since Obama's presidency. That said, should the ambassador look along the seafont, he would be faced with a massive monument decked with ¡Patria o Muerte, Venceremos! (Fatherland or Death, we shall win!) as a gentle reminder that once bitten, twice shy.

A few locals run by and all, without exception, are running in the road. Do they know something I don't? Moments later, a wave no less than three meters high comes crashing over the wall.

Spot and I emerge, somewhat drenched, and catch our breath. In the distance, workmen are bent double laughing. Chastened, I apprehensively run back towards town, the side streets now awake and buzzing with the sound of neighbours chatting through iron window grills. As my legs tire I head

still an hour away I tackle the silent, uneven streets of Old Havana, lit by 1950s-style glass globes streetlamps. Despite the straightforward grid system, there remains a sense of disorder and much of the city's past rawness remains. One second, I'm running alongside a majestic restored colonial hotel; the next, a row of crumbling apartments more akin to war zones.

After a few kilometres, I reach Havana Harbour from where the Malecon – the city's famous waterfront – begins. A few early-morning anglers look back at me; a pelican nose-bombs to my right, possibly stealing the angler's catch. Behind me, the stray dog continues to pay close interest to my trainers.

The Malecon is an obvious place for all visiting runners to seek out: broad and flat, it is a continuous five-mile boulevard and seawall protecting the city from the Atlantic's thunderous mood. The uninterrupted pavement is



Left to right: a street performer entertains tourists; a classic Chevrolet; Spot and Simon tempt fate; waves come crashing in



Nacional, while long-forgotten classic US cars – Chevrolets, Pontiacs, Buicks and dozens of other colourful vehicles I've never before seen – motor on by. Life in Havana slowly begins to unfold in plain view: domino players are sat at tables, children in mustard-coloured uniforms play outside school, and people are starting to queue – a compulsory pastime here if ever there were one. The streets, devoid of any tawdry advertising or international shops, make me feel like I'm running in a different world.

By the time I reach the Capitolio Nacional I've been running for over 90 minutes and my stomach is rumbling. Sightseeing done, I start to head back towards the B&B. I'm staying at, although Spot has other ideas. Instead of tailing me for once, he creeps up behind a parked horse and cart, whose driver has stopped to buy a drink, and with one very carefully placed bark, all hell breaks loose. The horse, clearly panicked, gallops off down the wide boulevard, narrowly swerving past pedestrians and parked cars. His driver sprints behind him before jumping into a passing taxi and in a flash, the horse and taxi have vanished from view. I decide to do the same myself, my mischievous four-legged running partner in tow.

Havana is an enchanting and intriguing city pulsating with energy and full of diverse districts ideal for running around. Life is changing, however: on my final morning stroll, a giant cruise ship honks as it enters the bay, bringing both tourists and foreign money to this once isolated nation. Nearer by, a queue forms outside a *bodega* shop, ration books tightly clenched. This paradoxical clash of past and future is an ever-present occurrence in Cuba – which one will prevail is anyone's guess.

Follow Simon's Around the World in 80 Runs adventure at 80runs.co.uk