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**DESTINATION
TOUR CUBA!**



CUBA

TEXT AND PHOTOS:
CHRISTOPHER P. BAKER

Almost two decades have passed since my journey in 1996, when I traveled legally as a professional journalist under a U.S. Treasury Department license (resulting in several magazine articles plus two books: the *Moon Cuba Handbook* and a literary travelog, *Mi Moto Fidel: Motorcycling Through Castro's Cuba*). In all that time, Uncle Sam has barred its citizens from visiting Cuba. Until now!

I'm holding a copy of License CT-19070 authorizing "...individuals under the auspices of *MotoDiscovery* to engage in travel-related transactions involving Cuba." *MotoDiscovery* is a Texas-based company specializing in worldwide adventure motorcycle tours and training. It's just been authorized by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) to offer "educational exchange" group trips to Cuba under a new license category—known as 'People-to-People'—created by President Obama that inches the door open for travel by permitting *any* Joe Blow to sign up for such programs. That's you!

So now I have 14 Joe Blows and four Jane Blows in front of me, riding through Havana on F800GS, F650GS and a handful of Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Four hours ago we were still in Miami awaiting our direct 45-minute flight to Havana and the start of the first-ever all-Cuba group motorcycle tour for U.S. citizens since Fidel Castro took power. I'm riding sweep as tour leader on a F800GS with less than 1,400

miles on the clock. Up front on a Harley Street Glide is Luis Enrique González, President of Cuba's Motos Clásicos Club, and our guide for our 15-day counter-clockwise cruise around the Western Hemisphere's only Communist nation. (Cuba's Havanatur travel agency also supplied a support van plus driver and English-speaking guide.)

We head east for downtown Havana on a short introductory run to get used to our Beemers and Harleys. Setting sunlight gleams on the chrome of pre-revolutionary American cars and silvers the Malecón esplanade fronting sinuously along the Atlantic shoreline where a streak of indigo marks the edge of the Gulf Stream that Hemingway called his "Great Deep Blue River."

Damn! This feels good. Like old times.

Ahead, I laugh to see the riders doing double-takes. On your right, ladies and gentlemen, note the Hotel Riviera, a treasure of Modernist design built in 1958 by U.S. mobster Meyer Lansky. High-finned, voluptuous dowagers from the heyday of Detroit are parked in its driveway. In fact, every third car we pass is a 1950s *yanqui* classic, evoking nostalgia like Elvis Presley songs of the same era. Our 2013 model F800s and F650s seem totally out of place in this twilight zone city and isle. Time itself seems to have stopped on Havana's highways.

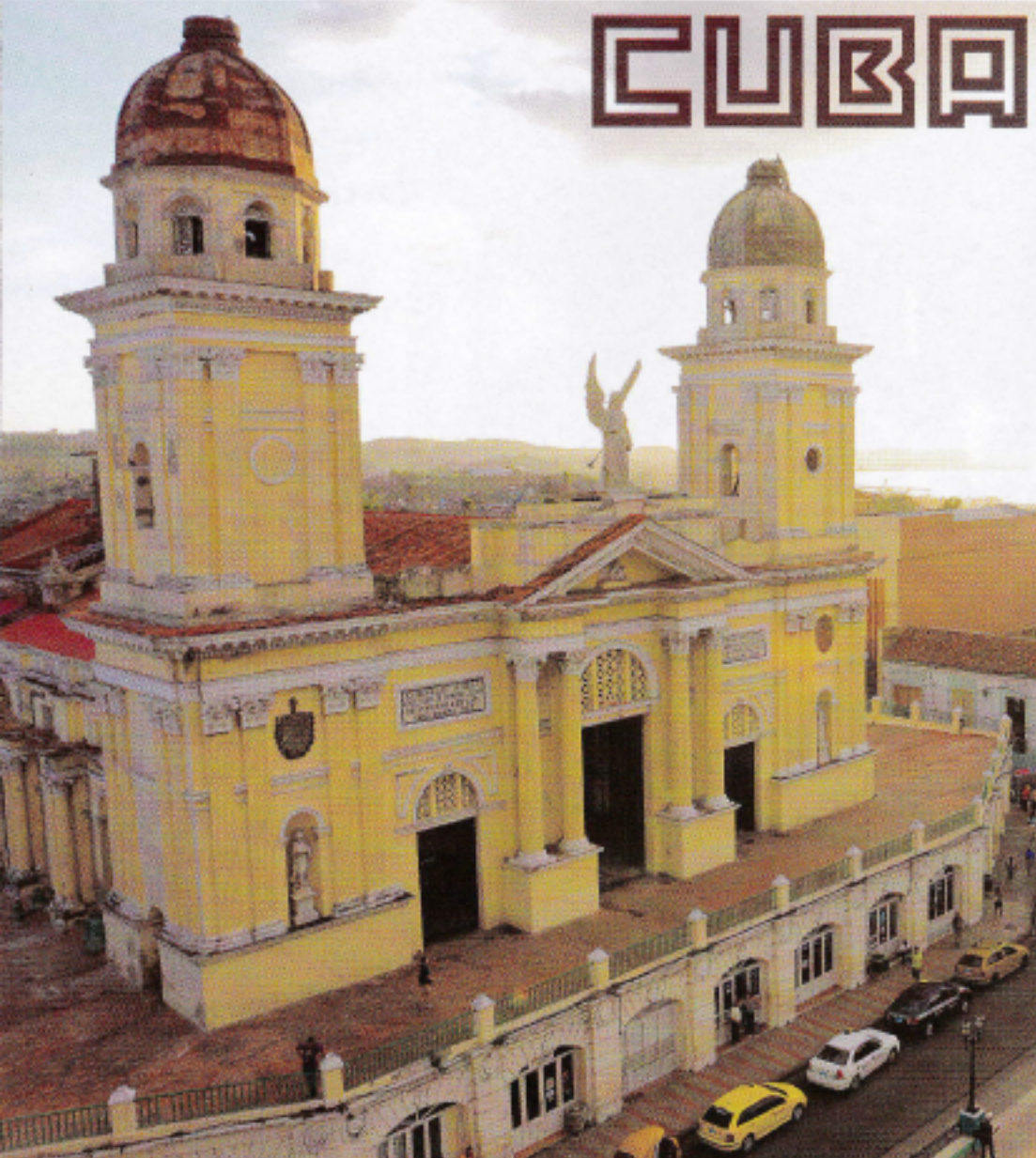
Shipping U.S.-plated motorcycles to Cuba is its own minefield, requiring an impossible-to-get export permit from U.S. Commerce. So *MotoDiscovery* hooked up with Danish motorcycle tour operator Michael Christiansen and Xpedit,



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into the Western
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nation.

F800GS in
Valle de los
Ingenios, Cuba.

CUBA



Scandinavia's biggest distributor of BMW motorcycles, to import a fleet of new Euro-spec F-GS BMWs from Copenhagen. In Cuba, they were registered for the maximum permissible 90-day stay.

Our OFAC license precludes tourism. Not allowed. U.S. law stipulates that it's purely to encourage "people to people contact... which promote two-way exchanges" with Cubans. Uncle Sam requires that this be formal meetings rather than, er, let's say a casual encounter at gas stops. That means a packed itinerary. Ride. Stop. Engage.

First stop: Museo Hemingway. I'm a close friend with the director, Ada Rosa Alfonso, who gives us a personal tour of Finca Vigía, the novelist's former home on Havana's outskirts. The house is kept just as he left it on the day he departed Cuba for good in 1960. No entry is allowed, so we peer in through the open windows and doors while we share in a "people to people" encounter, or "P2P," with Ada about Hemingway's relationship to Cuba.

"Ride at your own pace, but no diversions!" I instruct the group as we prepare to ride east from Havana on the Autopista Nacional—a concrete eight-laner and Cuba's sole freeway. "There's little traffic, but it's ill-maintained. Watch for collapsed

sections, plus stray cattle, ox-drawn carts crossing your path, and bicyclists coming head-on in the fast lane." At Jagüey Grande we turn south for the Bay of Pigs and our first group photo beneath the wings of a British Sea Fury that saw action defending *la revolución* against a CIA-trained Cuban-American exile army, which landed here on April 17, 1961, to topple the Castro regime. We learn more at a museum dedicated to the Cuban version of this fiasco. Nearby, Cuban and Canadian tourists laze on white sands and splash about in teal waters stained five decades ago with blood and gore.

Beyond Cienfuegos we stop for an impromptu lesson—"Sugar 101"—from smoke-smudged machete wielding men slashing at the sugar cane. This is the *zafra*—sugarcane harvest season. Black smoke rises in twirling tornadoes over the wind-rippled fields, eddying up from cane processing factories that taint the idyll with a cloying scent of molasses.

These flatlands are also a center for rice production. Heading inland the road narrows to one lane—the other lane is occupied by husks of rice laid out to dry, unfurling to the hazy horizon like the world's longest beige carpet. Workers turning the husks with crude wooden rakes tell us they're employed by a private farmer who's just been given free usufruct (right to use) of State land. *Welcome to the new Cuba!*

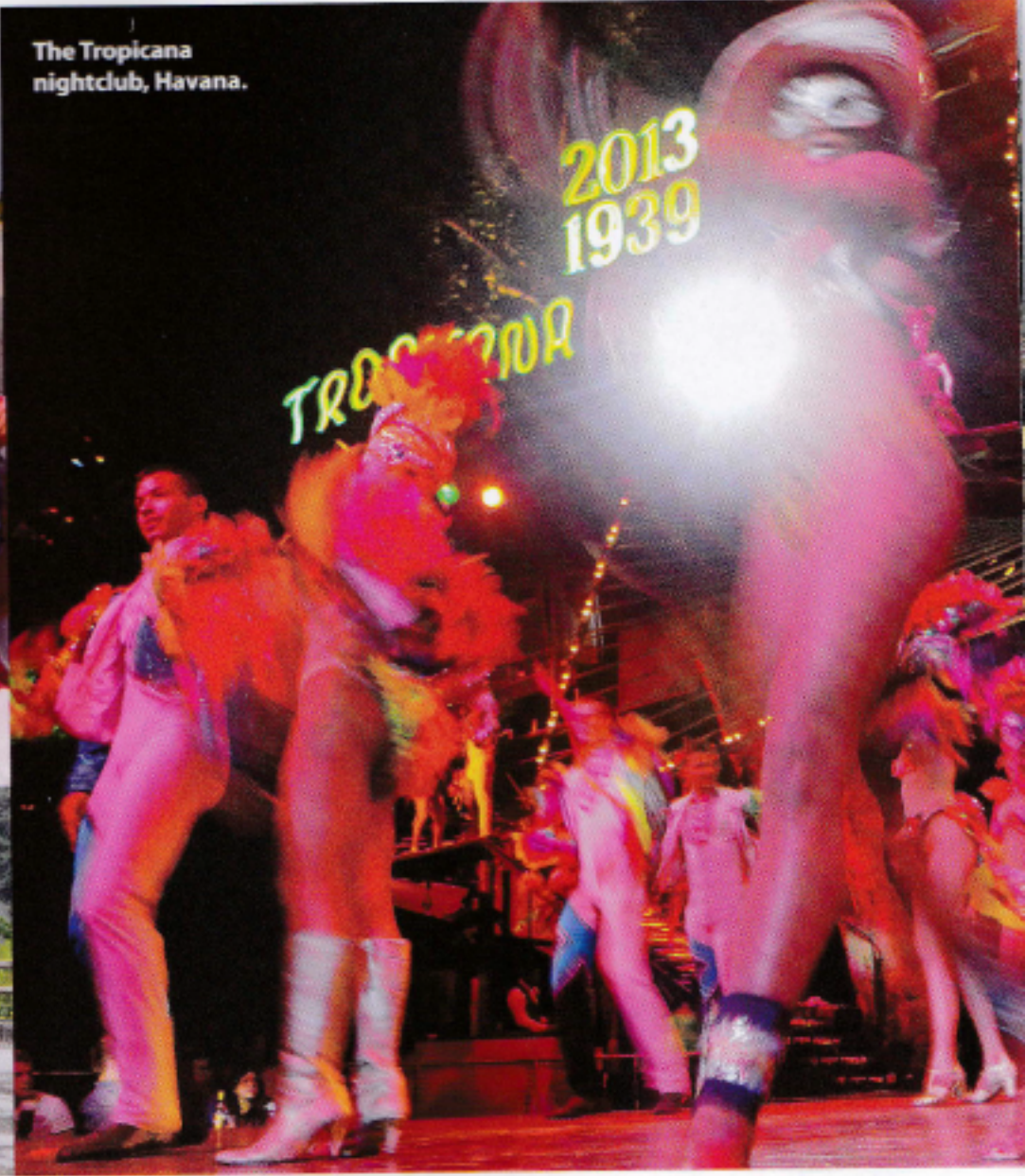
There are no roadside 7-Elevens. No Walmarts. No McDonalds. Not even a single advertisement billboard imploring Cubans to buy, buy, buy. (Not that most Cubans have much to spend!)

Still, we're visiting the island nation at a fascinating historical moment.

Above left: Main square in Santiago de Cuba. Above: F800GS at Plaza de la Revolución, Havana.



The Tropicana nightclub, Havana.



Above from top: Classic Oldsmobile meets modern BMW F650GS. | Schoolgirl at Vado de Yeso. | Luis Enrique leads the way over La Farola.

After the revolution in 1959, Fidel nationalized every private business in Cuba. Farmland was seized and organized in a system of centralized, albeit inefficient State farms. Skilled managers were replaced with loyal Communist cadres with diddly economic experience. And the State, which also took over all distribution, set artificially low prices and got diminishing supplies in return. Factor in the U.S. embargo, initiated in 1961, and the predictable result was economic catastrophe. In 2006, gravely ill, Fidel relinquished the reins to his younger brother Raúl. After skillfully shoving aside Fidel's partisans, Raúl initiated radical reforms in 2011 to promote private enterprise and kick the moribund Communist economy into gear. Possibility hangs in the air like intoxicating aromas of añejo rum.

With all the hoopla about politics, it's easy to overlook the sheer beauty of the place. The chartreuse canefields. The bottle-green mountains and emerald valleys full of dramatic formations. The talcum beaches and bathtub-warm waters of Maxfield Parrish hues. And, perhaps above all, the ancient cities evocative of the once-mighty power of Spain.

Arriving in Trinidad causes more double-takes. One of Cuba's original seven cities, founded in 1514, this perfectly preserved jewel of colonial architecture resembles a Hollywood stage set, with sloping cobbled streets laid out like a maze to thwart pirates. Everything looks so nostalgic. Cities throughout the 800-mile-long island feel like they've sidestepped the currents of time.

Here, too, we get a sense for the "new" quasi-capitalist Cuba that is emerging. In 1996, I slept hungry. "¡No hay!" was the standard refrain in the State restaurants: "There is none!" How things have changed! Since 2011, the number of private restaurants—*paladares*—has exploded. At one such, Vista Gourmet, we lunch on a buffet of international quality, abundant with variety and flavors ne'er to be found in State restaurants. »



MotoDiscovery (www.motodiscovery.com) operated five 9- and 15-day Cuba tours last winter and has scheduled 10 more 9-day and 15-day tours for winter 2013-14.



More about budding private enterprise we learn from my close friend Julio Muñoz, who now operates his antique-stuffed 18th-century gem of a home as a bed-and-breakfast. He regales us about what the lifting of restrictions on private enterprises means, including Cuba's latest *bête-noire*: taxes.

Such P2Ps offer kaleidoscopic vignettes of Cuban society as we follow the Carretera Central, Cuba's Central Highway. One lane in each direction, it runs along the island's spine for more than 700 miles, linking dusty provincial capitals end to end. Vigilance is a constant watchword. Obstacles litter the highway: Broken-down jalopies. Horse-drawn coaches. Ox-drawn carts hauling sugarcane. Nonchalant bicyclists. Stray dogs. And vultures. Always the *auras tñosas* (turkey vultures), sinister as undertakers, picking at roadkill and waiting unnervingly until the last second to lift off and fly away.

Luis Enrique sets the pace on the Street Glide, our arrival in towns announced by ear-shattering music—Charlie Daniel's "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" is a favorite—from his Harley's twin speakers. Luis also owns 12 pre-revolutionary Knucklehead and Panhead Harleys. In Camagüey

he arranges a P2P with local *harlistas*, who arrive on equally antique machines and are questioned about what they do for spares, how they keep their Hogs running all these years and so on. "El cubano inventa," (The Cuban invents) one replies with a wink. Forget motorcycle dealers, auto parts stores, Internet sales sites, or classified ads. They don't exist. That, and five decades of U.S. embargo, has made Cuba's motorcyclists and car owners self-reliant. Imagination, ingenuity and mechanical alchemy keep the vehicles on the road. Luis reckons there are no more than 200 Harleys island-wide. They putter along beside Soviet-bloc MZs, Jawas and ubiquitous Urals with sidecars: After the Cuban Revolution, the Ural—a version of the 1938 R75 BMW—invaded Cuba along with the Soviets.

The coast highway that wraps around far eastern Cuba delivers adventure in spades: A perfect tropical cocktail of adrenalin-charged curves, rugged terrain and superlative vistas. The trip, which has been mostly level so far, begins in earnest east of Guantánamo, where we prearranged a visit to the Cuban military zone (complete with military escort) to view the U.S. Naval Base from a viewpoint at Caimanera.

At Cajobabo we turn north and climb into the Sierra Cristal via a switchback—La Farola—that kicks up the adrenalin a notch. My F800GS and I arc gracefully through the curves of serried ranges and forbidding valleys. Ideal guerrilla territory. Every other turn offers a heart-stopping drop-off. Beyond the summit we swoop down to plains and on the long straight, we can now open the throttle wide to cook down the highway, arriving in Baracoa—founded in 1511 as Cuba's first city—in time for sunset cocktails.

West of Baracoa the coast highway takes a turn for the worse, at least



MotoDiscovery bikes at Hacienda Iznaga, Cuba.

for the heavy Harleys. The BMW riders, however, are suddenly delivered into GS heaven as the paving gives out. Muddy sections are interspersed between long patches of rock and scree as the 25-mile-long (40-km) enduro course wrinkles up into sharp curves.

Even here, in the Cuban boondocks, we can't escape the fact we're in a Communist nation pitted against an imperialistic USA. Ubiquitous revolutionary signs rub the fact in our face: "We have and will always have socialism!" and "The enemy shall not pass our frontier!" while others show Uncle Sam being struck in the jaw by a clenched Cuban fist. Fidel Castro's visage is everywhere, too, betraying a personality cult second only to that of revolutionary icon Ernesto 'Che' Guevara—an Argentinian whose own motorcycle journey through South America on a Norton would have been the adventure of a lifetime had he not hooked up with Fidel.

"Why does your government not like us? They are too hard on us Cubans!" one peasant lady scolds as we gas up in Las Tunas, heading west. As we depart, she kisses my cheek and thrusts two ripe mangoes into my hand. It is the same all over the island. Cubans we have met only moments before

Top: MotoDiscovery group at Bay of Pigs Museum, Cuba. Above left: Author Christopher P. Baker and Che Guevara monument. Above middle: Christopher and Che Guevara sign, Las Tunas. Above: Arriving in Guantánamo.

embrace us, call us "amigo," and invite us into their homes. Friends and neighbors arrive. We are hugged warmly by Cubans we do not know. Cuba's material impoverishment and five decades of antagonistic government relations haven't stifled the passions or generosity of this genteel and disarming people.

It is hard to believe that the U.S. government's 1917 Trading with the Enemy Act is directed at these warm-hearted people. We laugh, as it were, with the enemy. As I pull up to our hotel—the Habana Libre (formerly the Havana Hilton)—and haul my motorcycle onto the side stand one last time, I grin broadly and sigh with satisfaction, knowing that we could never have got so close to such a fascinating people and culture inside a bus or car. ▀

Christopher P. Baker is the author of *Mi Moto Fidel: Motorcycling Through Castro's Cuba* (National Geographic Adventure Press), which won both the Lowell Thomas Award "Travel Book of the Year" and the North American Travel Journalist Association's Grand Prize. His four other books on Cuba include *Cuba Classics: A Celebration of Vintage American Automobiles* (Interlink Publishing). He has written and photographed for more than 200 publications worldwide, from *Motorcyclist* to CNN Travel, *National Geographic Traveler*, and *Robb Report*. His work and contact information is at www.christopherpbaker.com.