

THE ★ REAL

Cuba

Southern Cuba's Granma province, the birthplace of the Revolution, is an oasis of serenity and a scuba-diving paradise

BY DOUG WALLACE

I'm sitting in what has to be the world's softest white sand in two feet of 30-degree water, drinking a

Cristal beer and waiting for my lunch. The smell of roast pig wafts out from a nearby spit and life couldn't be more grand.

We're midway through a scuba diving trip to Cuba's south-eastern Granma province, relaxing on the tiny islet Cayo Blanco after a fun morning spent combing the coral reefs, and about to fill up on the best pork I'll ever eat in my life. It's all part of the week's package at Hotel Marea del Portillo and its sister property Hotel Farallon, both Club Amigo resorts located in a secluded cove nestled at the foot of the western end of the Sierra Maestra Mountains. They're part of Cuba's Sierra Maestra National Park on the country's Caribbean Sea side. Hundreds of kilometres away from the tourist-laden Varadero and Havana, Granma is old-school Cuba: laid-back and rustic, frayed and almost frozen



in time, but rich in heritage, authenticity and pride. The region surrounding Marea del Portillo is all parkland and farmland, rural and friendly, the trees thick with mangoes and limes, with horses and cattle grazing by the roadside. I spot goats wandering by the resort entrance, seemingly abandoned, until a boy on a bicycle rides by and the herd picks up and follows him down the road.

The province is named after the yacht that Che Guevara, and Fidel and Raúl Castro used to bring their 82 guerillas to Cuba from Mexico in 1956, landing at Playa de los Colorados on Cuba's southwestern tip. The story goes that they bought the boat from an American acquaintance who had named it, interestingly enough, after his grandmother. The region has a number of reminders of the Cuban Revolution; plaques and signposts along the road denoting important people, meeting places and hardships from this era of Cuba's history, reaching back to the

time when the rebels first made their way through the Sierra Maestra before eventually overthrowing the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship.

"Granma is the poorest province in Cuba, but you'll find the most genuine Cubans here, less influenced by the dollar," says our scuba guide Norbert Pietkiewicz. "People here have maintained more of the original Cuba—the old way of life, the horses, the goats, the beautiful mountains."



Norbert is co-owner of Richmond Hill's AquaSub Scuba Diving Centre and brings groups of divers down to Marea del Portillo several times a year to take advantage of the 17 scuba diving sites in the area, in partnership with the very capable Albacore Dive Center.

"It's like a hidden jewel and there are superb dive sites," Norbert says. "The mountains here deliver a sheltered microclimate. It's not touristy so there are fewer people, which means there's very little impact on the reef from the traffic, so the reef is healthier. On a calm day, the visibility is great and you can see so much."

The diving indeed yields many "hills and valleys," various sponges and coral formations—black, soft, fire and brain—and marine terraces for multi-level, underwater adventure. Diving from 10 to 25 metres, we see angelfish, squirrel fish, hogfish, barracudas, lots of snappers, blue jacks and green moray eels, all to the soundtrack of a young girl in our group who sings into her mouthpiece on our dives. She's like a little mermaid, weaving in and out of the reef's nooks and crannies with her camera, humming away.

With the morning's dives over, our afternoons spent at the beach are the epitome of carefree. There's just enough of a breeze here to stave off the heat. Watching the butterflies and hawks shift with the wind, it is easy to lose track of time. Who knew I would be so good at

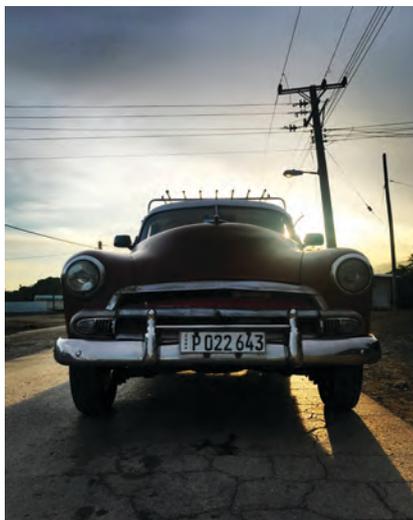


doing absolutely nothing? I am also good at burning the bottoms of my feet on the dry sand, which I still feel the next day. Needless to say, that's the last time I forget my flip-flops.

A trip to the nearby town of Pilón is a step back in time: Transit carts are pulled by a team of horses, uniformed schoolkids race each other down the street, mothers push their infants in decades-old prams, a man gets his haircut on the sidewalk. Later, we see



Things to DO



families and hikers head in from the hills after an afternoon of exploring the Sierra Maestra mountains by Jeep, on horseback or on foot, taking in the peaks and valleys, rivers and forests. You can rent a horse for about \$10 an hour.

One night, on the way to Dany's Restaurant in the town of Marea, in an old Lada that reeks of gasoline, we bump along the rough roads, skirting horses and carts with no reflectors and people on bicycles with no lights. No one has cars because no one can afford them. We pass villagers all sitting on their verandas with the lights off to keep away the mosquitos. A few homes reveal the blue glow of TVs. Locals appreciate your business and a trip to town makes for a fun night out, getting you out of the resort bubble for a few hours.

Most evenings, we watch the performers at the resort. Word gets around fast that I have money to drop on the CDs the singers sell after their show, but I feel it is money well spent. Ditto with the trios of singers that serenade their way around the lunchroom each day. There are far worse things to do with your cash.

The music, the rustic charm, the beauty of the terrain, the resilience of the people and the positive energy, despite some very harsh realities, all add

up to a week of intriguing discoveries, amid total relaxation.

At least half of the people in our dive group have been here before. In fact, we meet many other travellers who have latched onto this particular part of the world and return time and again, including a young woman from Ontario and her Cuban fiancé, set to marry at the resort in a matter of months.

"There are many repeat visitors, because coming here for two months is almost cheaper than living at home," says Norbert. "And because this is a budget holiday, you can do it two or three times a year," he adds. "I made 15 trips last year and I'm still not tired of the view. It's spectacular."

I unreservedly second the sentiment.

Take an all-day boat ride

through the nearby quays or go fishing for snapper, grouper and marlin. Don't pooh-poo the sunset cruises, which are beyond beautiful and well worth the money.

The Rebel Army once had its hidden headquarters in nearby **Turquino National Park**. La Plata Rebel Army Command Post was where Castro coordinated rebel activity. Jeep tours leave from Santo Domingo Villa.

Desembarco del Granma National Park is a biosphere reserve and UNESCO World Heritage Site. Boca de Rio Toro is a noteworthy beach here.

Sendero Arqueológico Natural el Guafe, on the south coast's westernmost end, is an ecological and archeological trail. Highlights include an underground river, many large caves and Old Witness, a 500-year-old cactus.

Pop into the nearby town of **Pilón** to see how the locals live. There's a traditional street party on Saturday nights here and in most towns in Granma.

La Demajagua Park, near Manzanillo, is the birthplace of Cuban hero Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, who declared Cuban independence from Spain in 1868.

Getting there:

Sunwing flies direct from both Montreal and Toronto to Manzanillo every Wednesday from November to April, and from Toronto from May to October.