



**STOLEN MOMENTS**  
A teen standing in a sunlit plaza in Old Havana. "Fashion is entirely planned," says photographer Andrew Jacobs, who visited Cuba last year. "When you do street photography it's the opposite. That's what I wanted to embrace." Opposite: A bus on a road in Pinar del Río, a province west of Havana.



## CUBA CARRIES ON

---

The island nation's stark isolation has been helpful for containing the coronavirus, hard on its troubled economy. One photographer's wanderings captured Cuba's beauty—and the resilience of a people who have long wrestled with the ebb and flow of history.

BY TONY PERROTTET  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW JACOBS

**A**S WORLD TRAVEL began to close down in March due to the coronavirus pandemic, Collin Laverty had to make a snap decision: Miami or Havana? For an American who divides his time between the two cities as he runs Cuba Educational Travel, an agency that in less restricted times counted U.S. senators and tech-world luminaries among its clientele, the choice was obvious. “I felt the Cubans were going to do a better job,” he explained by phone from Havana. “It would be safer here.”

Laverty has been proved right. As the situation has deteriorated this summer in Florida—a population of 21.5 million with nearly 10,000 deaths, or 46 per 100,000 people—the Cuban island of 11.3 million people had by mid-August clocked 88 deaths, or less than one death per 100,000. Despite the occasional small outbreak in the provinces, the island was reporting many days with either zero new cases or few enough to count on one hand.

Cuba’s success was the result of a textbook response: Health authorities (who had been in constant dialogue with the World Health Organization since January) locked down the country, froze international flights, conducted widespread testing, isolation and tracing and enforced the wearing of masks, a process undoubtedly made easier in an authoritarian system.

“It’s a different culture,” says Laverty. “If health officials tell you it’s better to wear a mask, you wear a mask. And unlike the U.S., there is no alternative media telling people not to wear a mask.”

Although Cuba’s health-care system is plagued by chronic shortages, the capacity of its medical workforce has served it well during the pandemic. Cuba has the highest percentage of doctors per capita of any country in the world, and they are trained for rapid community response to hurricanes and other natural disasters. “You had doctors and nurses in lab coats knocking on your door once or twice a day, checking in,” says Laverty.

The flip side is that the crisis has punished an economy that was already in serious trouble from internal mismanagement and its disconnection from the rest of the world. While Cuba has been removed for six decades from its natural trading partner, the United States, via a trade embargo known on the island as *el bloqueo*, “the blockade,” Covid-19 has taken the country’s isolation to new extremes. The overnight closure of the tourism industry, Cuba’s major source of hard currency, has brought unemployment and food shortages to levels unseen since the “special period” 30 years ago, when the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of its economic subsidies left the island stranded and impoverished.

Cuba has made a few tentative steps toward reopening to tourism. Five sandy northern cays have been earmarked to receive charter flights, where foreign visitors will be tested for the virus on arrival and housed in beach resorts far from the rest of the population. So far, there have been few takers. Sun-starved Canadians, the logical target market, have been discouraged by their government from traveling abroad, and Europeans are likewise skittish about venturing far from home. Locals are also

wary: “Cubans have sacrificed a lot,” says Laverty. “They know as soon as they open up there is a risk of a second wave.”

A possible silver lining is that the crisis has pushed President Miguel Díaz-Canel to restart reforms to the state-run economy, a process that had begun under Fidel Castro in 2011 but stalled three years ago as government hard-liners put up resistance. The announcement was made mid-July; details remain sketchy, but the idea is to encourage private enterprise and agriculture and reduce government regulation. “It’s very positive news, but there’s also a lot of skepticism,” says Laverty. “Everyone is waiting to see what happens.”

**T**HE PANDEMIC is just the latest chapter in Cuba’s roller-coaster ride since the 1959 revolution—periods of grand hope followed by heartbreak. As a result, dealing with the uncertain ebb and flow of history has become something of a Cuban specialty, a resilience that allows its people to survive challenges that might have been crushing elsewhere.

This spirit was captured by another observer of Cuba, the New York-based photographer Andrew Jacobs, who explored the island in the summer of 2019, unaware that the pandemic would soon give his work added resonance. Like many Americans (he immigrated to the U.S. from South Africa at 13), Jacobs first visited Cuba in the wake of the so-called Obama thaw, a delirious spasm of optimism that seems like ancient history today. The reopening of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the U.S. in 2014 led to one improbable scene after another: President Obama touring Havana and attending a baseball game with Raúl Castro; the Rolling Stones playing to a massive outdoor crowd; U.S. travel restrictions that had been in place since the Eisenhower era loosening; and within Cuba, new grass-roots businesses turning the island into a shabby-chic fiesta.

For veteran Cuba watchers, the new possibilities were symbolized by Bar Roma, a partnership between a local DJ and expat yanqui that was secreted on the rooftop of a decrepit art deco apartment block in Old Havana. Found by word of mouth, it qualified as Cuba’s Studio 54: From the crumbling lobby, a hand-operated cage elevator creaked upward on uncoiled wheels, then opened onto a Felliniesque crowd of young Havana fashionistas and in-the-know foreigners dancing above the moonlit colonial rooftops. The Cuban co-manager, Alain Medina, pointed out the spot on the tiled floor where he was born. To visit a bathroom, guests would slip some currency to one of the top-floor residents, then edge past their sofa as the family sat and watched TV.

It was this euphoric atmosphere that captivated the Johannesburg-born Jacobs, when a spur-of-the-moment fashion assignment in early 2017 transported him from New York to Havana via one of the new direct flights on JetBlue. The commercial shoot for Onia swimwear lasted less than a week and took him no farther from the capital than local beaches, but he was astonished by what he found. “I was enthralled at how vibrant Cuba was,” he recalls.

“It was very visceral. I stopped wanting to take photographs of the fashion models I was with. I wanted to take photos of people in the street.”

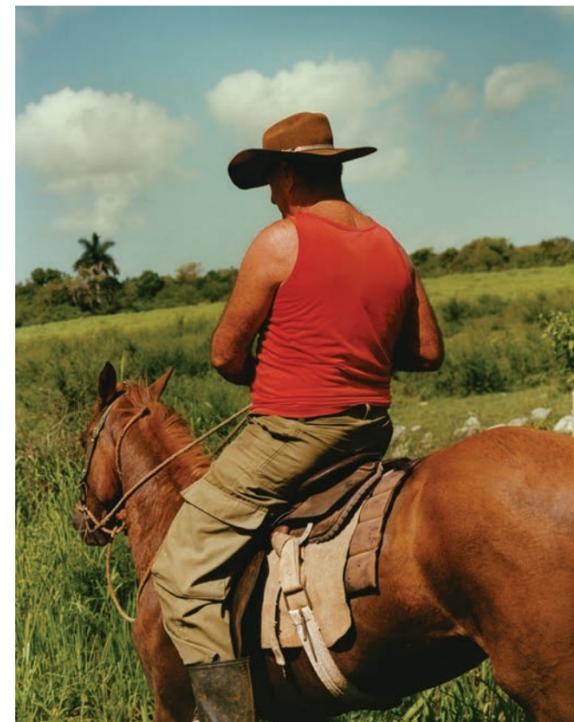
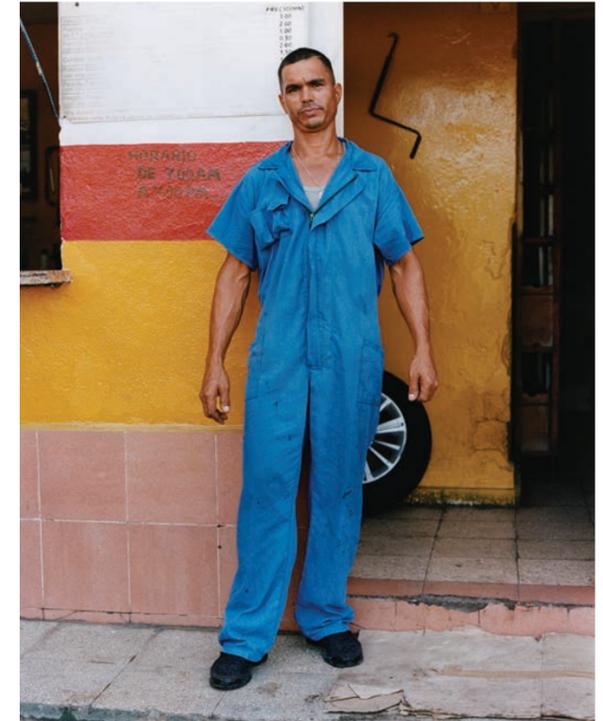
Jacobs swore to return independently to document the new Cuba. When he finally did, in June 2019, the course of history had changed tack again. The U.S. reversed the Obama thaw, tightening economic sanctions and turning the clock back to the Cold War. President Trump’s bellicose rhetoric had scared off most American travelers, and reforms to Cuba’s state-run socialist system had stalled. When Jacobs contacted Talía Bustamante, a producer in Havana he’d met on his previous visit, she had been struggling to find steady work for over a year, as had her husband, Alejandro Callejas, a camera operator. As if to symbolize the new chill, Bar Roma would soon close its doors, after a feud between the Cuban and American co-managers. “It was really hard for Cubans,” says Laverty, whose own company had brought many American entrepreneurs to the country to investigate opportunities. “They were the talk of the world, this cool, sexy place; then they got hit with a series of body blows.”

Jacobs found that, despite this twist that dashed many hopes, the vibrancy that had first attracted him to the island was still intact. Generations of tumult and setbacks have taught Cubans to appreciate the adage “The best things in life are free.” They are blessed to live on a tropical island with 3,500 miles of coastline, lush forests, sandy beaches and a benign climate. This welcoming environment has helped foster communal life, which, after the hiatus of the Covid-19 restrictions, has started to bounce back. Cubans still spill onto street corners, playing music with improvised instruments, joking among themselves about their politicians and enjoying the sensuality of sugar-scented evenings. They rely on resources of conversational wit and humor to an extent that other cultures, deluged by technology, have abandoned. Colonial Old Havana may be crumbling, with a tangible air of privation just around the corner from areas that have been beautified for tourists, but many residents know each other by name. Teenagers will sometimes cluster along the Malecón, the city’s waterfront promenade, to share a bottle of rum and dance under showers of sea spray.

To capture this spirit, Jacobs set out to explore the capital on foot, with chance and whim his only agenda, walking, talking and meeting people as Bustamante served as a guide and translator. During his 2019 trip, it was exhilarating to relinquish anything resembling a shooting schedule. “Fashion is entirely planned,” he says. “When you do street photography it’s the opposite. That’s what I wanted to embrace.”

One day, they came across a little-league baseball practice where the players were all wearing over-size shoes and hand-me-down uniforms. As a New Yorker, Jacobs was greeted like a celebrity. “The kids were so excited they couldn’t stand still or look at me for too long,” he says.

To explore the provinces, Jacobs took a road trip to Pinar del Río, west of Havana. Logistics were improvised in classic Cuban style: Bustamante’s husband signed on as the driver, and during the three-day jaunt Jacobs and his assistant were sandwiched into the tiny vehicle’s back seat beneath



#### IN LIVING COLOR

Clockwise from top left: Items hanging out to dry in the laundry room of a Havana apartment building; an auto mechanic outside his workspace; fruit for sale in a Havana market; a *guajiro*, or Cuban campesino, in Pinar del Río.



**LONESOME ROADS**  
Residents of Santa Fé in Playa, a municipality in Havana. Cuba's economy has struggled since the 1990s, after the Soviet Union dissolved and support dried up. Areas outside the city center that see fewer tourists have been hit especially hard.



**BLUE HEAVEN**  
From top: Birdcages hang on a wall in Playa; a coastal road near Havana harbor. Given the U.S.'s decades-long trade blockade, Cubans have become adept at recycling parts to maintain vintage American cars.





#### COUNTRY LIVING

Pinar del Río province, about 100 miles west of Havana, is the agricultural center of Cuba's tobacco industry. Above: A bohío, or thatched hut. Opposite: A mountain lake.

mountains of camera gear. The reward was exploring the Viñales Valley, where a patchwork of impossibly lush tobacco plantations and farms are framed by spectacular limestone outcroppings called *mogotes* ("Like *Jurassic Park*," Jacobs says). The hermetic rural society has an otherworldly air: sun-battered campesinos in straw hats riding horseback past bohíos, thatched huts, creating tropical scenes that recall the canvases of Gauguin.

Jacobs's images rarely include telltale signs of specific locations—no tourist-friendly statues, cathedrals or postcard views—and instead concentrate on intimate details. He was particularly drawn to what lay behind closed doors. The Spanish-Caribbean architecture, with its wrought-iron balconies, covered porticoes and shuttered windows, protects residents from the sun but also deflects prying eyes. "In the streets, you can approach anyone, chat and laugh and take pictures," Jacobs says. But gaining access to private homes was a delicate matter; many worried their circumstances might be judged by an outsider.

In reality, Jacobs was the opposite of judgmental

as he became drawn into the casual poetry of Cubans' domestic lives. "People don't have much, but it's beautiful," he says. "The light, how they arrange things, their use of color—Cubans make the best of what they have."

Cubans are legendary for the creativity they apply to material goods. Cut off from new mechanical parts, they're experts at recycling, with 1950s Chevrolets, Dodges and Buicks reconfigured to last decades beyond their natural lifespans, sometimes with Toyota engines under the hood, wire holding up the cracked windows or wooden planks used as floorboards. But access to even the most retro luxuries frays out in the provinces. Many of the villages Jacobs visited exuded a ghostly air.

Typical was the outpost of Hershey (today known as Camilo Cienfuegos), roughly 35 miles from Havana, a town founded in 1916 to provide sugar for the Pennsylvania-based chocolate company. The streets were once lined with tidy bungalows that echoed the model towns of the American suburbs—a vanished world captured in Rachel Kushner's 2008 novel, *Telex From Cuba*. When the refinery was

nationalized after the revolution, the town continued to function as long as the U.S.S.R. purchased Cuba's sugar crop at an inflated price. "It was like a gold boom town in the Old West," Jacobs says. Today, the closed refinery looms like a ruined cathedral over streets inhabited only by the elderly.

To this older generation, Cuba's fractured dreams over the past decade have a familiar air, echoing longer historic cycles of hope and disappointment. At first, the arrival of Fidel Castro and his romantic *barbudos* ("the bearded ones," as his guerrillas became known in the Sierra Maestra) were greeted with rapture. The entire island was caught up in the fairy-tale "youth revolution" against the vicious dictator Fulgencio Batista, as Cuba embarked on an experiment that seemed to promise a political, economic and racial utopia. Over the years, disillusion set in, and the dream collapsed in the 1990s.

Even so, within Cuba today, hope carries on. "If everything lines up, Cuba will be in an OK place," Laverty says. "But getting there, they'll have to deal with a lot of hardship." As always, Cubans will have plenty of experience to draw on. ●

## EXTRAS



### **GOING SPIRAL**

A stairwell in Old Havana. Years of neglect have added a patina to the city's vernacular architecture.



### **CATCH OF THE DAY**

Teenage fishermen at a marina near Havana. Cuba's 3,500 miles of coastline washed by warm tropical waters have offered some respite during the decades of isolation.