

CUBA TREK

IN THE SUB-TROPICAL FOREST OF THE ESCAMBRA MOUNTAINS – NOVEMBER 2013



Situated in the Caribbean, surprisingly fewer than 100 miles South of the USA, Cuba is the world's 15th largest island, 780 miles long from East to West, and with a population of about 12 million.

The trek was in the sub-tropical forest of the central southern region of the island, where the highest point we reached was 810m (2,660ft).

But first we had a whistle-stop morning tour of Havana, the capital. A strange mix of dilapidated, collapsing buildings, contrasting with the beautifully restored Old Havana area, and full of "American cars" miraculously still running after access to spare parts ceased following the 1959 revolution. The country relied heavily on support and trade with the USSR, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union and other communist regimes in the 1990s, suffered severe economic troubles, which tourism has been helping to turn round. There is still a US economic embargo, one of the few positive effects of which is the complete absence of McDonalds, Starbucks, etc., in Havana!



After a quick lunch, we were soon off on the 6-hour coach drive to get to near the starting point of the trek, staying the night in a hotel at the northernmost point of the large lake in the map above, at Hanabanilla.

The next day we took an hour's boat trip down the lake, where we met our local trekking guide, and also found the ancient Russian truck which transported our main luggage from place to place, mainly down muddy tracks which any other vehicle would have struggled with.



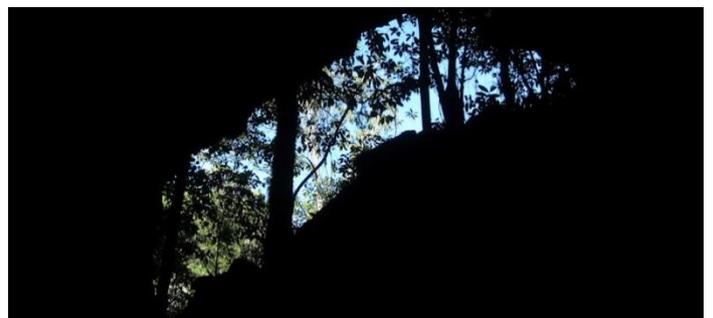
At last, after so many months of preparation, training and fund-raising, we were off trekking in Cuba!



We stayed in various accommodation, including remote haciendas, nestled in the forest, sleeping outside on verandas under the eaves.

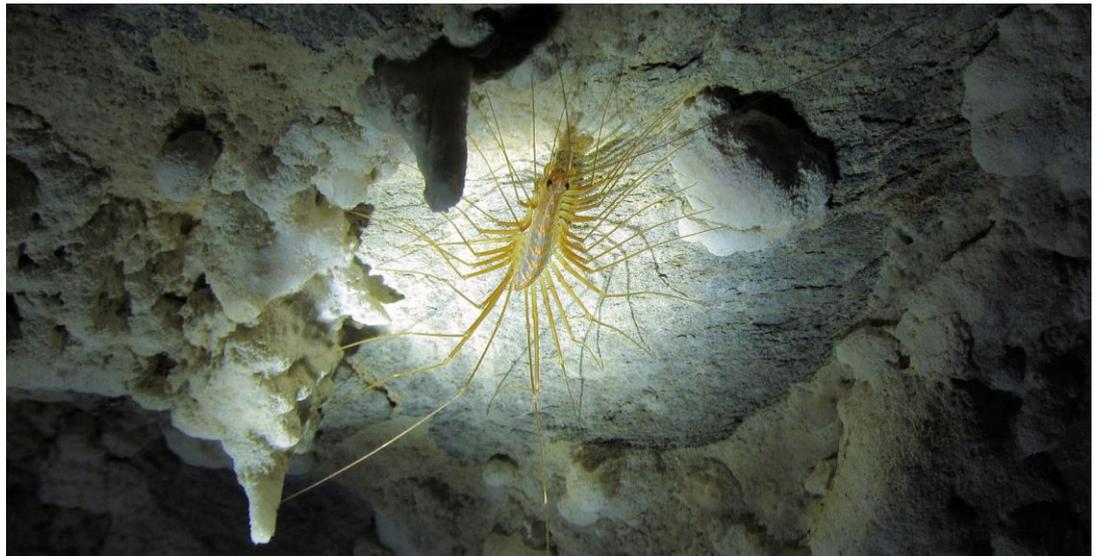


On the second day, our route meant saying goodbye to daylight for a while as we descended into a cave.....





As well as the unusual rock formations, the bats and the owls, we came across this strange creature running across the ceiling just above our heads as we were bent double working our way through the cave.



It was a great relief to get back out into the open and to start to enjoy the orchids and other flora and fauna of the forest.



There was thankfully no sign of the 4-metre long Cuban Boa, but we did come across a couple of snakes on our travels, the one on the right being about 1m long.



We were lucky that we did not have daytime rain, but the ground was very muddy, and the whole trek was hot and humid, which was tough on the undulating days when we ascended 500m only then to drop back again.



A bonus, though, was the fact that most days we came across waterfalls, often with an associated pool we could have a cooling dip in.



Overall, a challenging but amazing experience, although never far from our thoughts were the young people using Teenage Cancer Trust units – on most treks there is at least one person who has had personal experience of cancer in a young member of their family. It was therefore great to read on my return that while we were trekking, a new Teenage Cancer Trust unit had opened in Manchester.

Thank you so much for your support this year, and/or in previous years, both for me personally, but especially for such a worthwhile cause.



Sara Cox opens new unit



BBC Radio 2 DJ Sara Cox officially opened our new unit at Manchester Royal Children's Hospital.

The new five bed unit will provide care for patients aged 13-16 from across the Greater Manchester area.

Sara said: "I'm honoured to be here to open this fantastic new Teenage Cancer Trust unit in Manchester. I've had a great time today looking around the unit and meeting so many inspirational young people. It's really important to remember that when a young person is diagnosed with cancer they're still a teenager, they just happen to have cancer and Teenage Cancer Trust completely get that. There are hundreds of young people diagnosed with cancer right here in the North West, and the charity want to support them all throughout their journey."

Now it's back to the washing, and cleaning my boots!

Nigel

NIGEL TURNER