

AN AMERICAN TRIATHLETE IN

CUBA

A TRIP TO TRIATHLON'S NEWEST FRONTIER FOR ONE OF
THE MOST HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT RACES EVER.

BY CHRIS FOSTER

"Sabes manejar?" the driver asked. (Do you know how to drive?)

Fellow ITU triathlete Dan McIntosh and I had been standing outside, waiting for our ride for almost an hour. Before that, we had spent three hours shuffling through an amorphous crowd in immigration. We had passed the time joking about watching a baby being born in line and being there so long that we had seen the conception as well. Needless to say, we were very late meeting our ride, but that didn't make his question any less strange. I gave him a blank, American-trying-to-parse-Spanish look, and he repeated, "Sabes manejar?"

"Sí," I told him—for no other reason than to get things moving. He seemed satisfied and walked our two big bike boxes and other as-

sorted baggage over to his car. He laid the rear seats down flat, put our belongings in the back and hopped into the trunk, on top of the bags.

"I need you to drive," he said in Spanish. "I was just at a party and I've had a bit to drink."

So there it was: My first experience outside of the Havana airport was driving a stranger's car for over an hour through the poorly lit streets of a communist country with a tenuous diplomatic relationship with my country. Meanwhile, an energetic, slightly drunk man shouted directions to me in Spanish from the back seat of his tiny car. Bienvenidos a Cuba.

The next day we decided to go shopping. The parking lot of the supermarket looked normal enough: people selling sandwiches and ice cream, cars honking while finding parking spots. The moment I entered the grocery store—after





The Habana CAMTRI event took place in the historic Miramar district of Havana.

being asked to leave my bags, cell phone and camera outside—something felt different.

I stepped into the first long aisle and saw sesame seed crackers stacked to my left. A few feet away, the same crackers—same brand, same flavor—were placed in a slightly different formation. A few feet more and the crackers were now stacked vertically. The entire cracker aisle was essentially one brand and one flavor, at the same price I had seen in every other grocery store. The next aisle was for bottled water, but only had a few dozen plastic jugs. The remaining 50 feet of shelf space was completely empty.

No, this wasn't a bizarre dream with my subconscious trying to tell me that middle age is approaching and my options are dwindling (let's not go there). This was a real grocery store in the really posh Miramar neighborhood of a very real Havana, Cuba.

In the United States, empty aisles and lack of selection would cause panicked riots and looting. In Cuba, this is the way of life. As I checked out with the cashier, I noticed one last oddity: Cigarettes cost between \$0.50 (U.S.)

YES, I COULD HAVE GIVEN THE CASHIER A DOLLAR AND SHE WOULD HAVE HANDED ME A PACK OF CIGARETTES WITH CHANGE.

and \$2.50 for a pack. Yes, I could have given the cashier a dollar and she would have handed me a pack of cigarettes with change. But I wasn't in Cuba to smoke. I was in Cuba to race.

I had traveled to Cuba to compete in the Habana CAMTRI Sprint ITU Triathlon. Held at the end of January, elite triathletes from Ireland, Spain, Italy and all over North and South America came to this small communist island in the Caribbean to test their early season form and accumulate valuable ITU points. Though Havana has hosted an ITU event before (a Pan American Cup in 2006) this weekend was historic for one big reason: It was the first time U.S. citizens have officially raced a pro ITU triathlon on Cuban soil.

In addition to the elite contingent, age-group athletes from the United States also competed in a sprint, Olympic-distance race and long-distance



Finished in 1953, the Iglesia de Jesús de Miramar is the second largest church in Cuba.

event. In total, 27 American triathletes came to Cuba to compete. In fact, USA Triathlon president Barry Siff, who tagged along as unofficial diplomatic “fixer,” said that once the announcement was made, there was a mad dash of U.S. athletes rushing to become the first.

The day of the elite race finally arrived with gusty winds and ominous clouds. The women went off first, and I arrived to the race site just in time to watch two of the first Americans ever to compete in Cuba, Renee Tomlin and Kirsten Kasper, come across the finish line in first and second place, respectively. The door to Cuba had only just been opened and these two young women had staked their claim as the first of the first. Third place went to Tamara Gomez Garrido of Spain, and Rebecca Wassner was the final U.S. finisher, in 10th.

While the women's race was an orderly affair—one large pack coming together on the bike, while the finishing order was sorted out on the run—the men's race showed less of the stereotypical American order and required more of the famed Cuban resiliency.

The men's race split up quickly into two main bike packs as I trailed behind in my own “packlet.” Halfway into the 20K looping course it began to rain, and the crashes started immediately on the oil-slicked roads. My rear

wheel slid out twice around a smooth corner, and one of my pack-mates lost rear traction at least once. While we were able to stay upright, a few other athletes weren't so lucky: Near the transition area, with over a lap to go, U.S. athlete Josh Izewski crashed in a roundabout. A few minutes later another athlete slid across the road just before the far turnaround. While the latter cyclist was able to rejoin the group, Izewski's day was done.

Once onto the run, the skies opened up and the rain went from scattered to constant and then to a waterfall in a matter of minutes. The tiny spit of land that acted as our run course and simultaneously separated the raging ocean from the placid waters of the Hemingway Marina suddenly seemed in danger of being overwhelmed by the sea. Though we stayed on land, the high winds still claimed the finish line and many of the event's tents.

The eventual race winner was a very soggy Rodrigo Gonzalez of Mexico, followed by Italian Daniel Hofer and Irishman Bryan Keane. The first American finisher was Nick Karwoski, who ran his way up from the second pack for a well-deserved sixth place. I was a distant 16th place. It was not my finest finish, but I was happy to have ridden up to the second pack.

After the race, I was fortunate enough to speak with Diosele Fernández, the

head coach of the Cuban national triathlon team. Diosele was younger than I had expected, but his almost-shoulder-length hair was flecked with distinguishing specks of grey. He's excitable without being overbearing, and though he looks nothing like the old images of young Castro, there's no doubt in my mind that he could have been an animated revolutionary in another time. All he would have needed was a beard.

Diosele and I hunched together in a muggy tent with a low ceiling—crammed together and hiding from the pouring rain with a gaggle of Spanish-speaking triathletes. The race had ended an hour ago, so everyone's exhaustion had passed—replaced with the excited anticipation of the post-race party and conversations about who worked hard in the bike pack, who just sat around and who rode como un descaro-do (like an idiot) and caused crashes.

Though my Spanish is decent, the constant background babble and the sound of the rain made understanding Diosele's words difficult. Still, his passion for triathlon and his athletes

was clear. He had just come in from the torrential rain where one of his younger athletes was competing in the age-group sprint race. Diosele spent every moment before the gun went off making sure she was completely ready. When the rain began, he was there by her side, preparing her.

AVERAGE CUBANS MAKE \$20 PER MONTH AND THE HAVANA EVENT HAD AN ENTRY FEE OF OVER \$100.

"We are trying to get younger kids to start participating in this sport," he said, and explained that economic issues are still the biggest obstacles to triathlon's growth in Cuba. Average Cubans make \$20 per month and the Havana event had an entry fee of over \$100. He still maintained that it was a sport that anyone could try. "Yes, you can participate with what you have. Many Cubans have bicycles. If you want to, you can."

The event itself had the usual ITU rules and regulations mixed with the unexpected

insanity that accompanies many of the smaller ITU events. To be fair, on the scale from laughable (starting the race before all athletes have been called down in Peru in 2009) to dangerous (starting the race two miles upstream in the hopes of avoiding poisonous snakes in Argentina in 2010), the Havana

event fit more at the harmless end with some accidental problems: The age-group sprint race was delayed endlessly, and in a moment of terrible luck, the entire bike rack collapsed right before their start.

However, in this madness, the true heart of the Cuban people became clear: Delayed start? Who cares—where do you have to be? Broken bike rack? Lay the bikes on the ground. Torrential rain? Smile through it. Make do. In Diosele's words, "If you want to, you can."

On December 17, 2014, in a historic press conference, President Barack Obama used the Spanish phrase "No es fácil" ("it's not easy")—a phrase often uttered by Cubans when faced with the sort of constant hardship that U.S. citizens rarely see. Obama went on to announce a new era in diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba, taking immediate steps to ease both economic and travel restrictions. While no U.S. president in office has visited the island since Calvin Coolidge in 1928, Obama's choice of words still accurately captured both the challenges of living in Cuba and the challenges facing the reversal of over 50 years of icy foreign relations with the United States. "No es fácil" is a phrase that not only identifies the hardship Cuban people face, but also the everyday resilience they exude.

Michel Gonzalez is the top male triathlete in Cuba, boasting a seventh-place finish at the Pan American Games in 2007 and fourth place at this year's event in Havana. He competed in his first ITU event in 2005 and won the inaugural Havana

ITU race less than one year later. As a child, his only dream was to leave Cuba.

"Growing up, you only eat, get dressed and go to school," Gonzalez says. "You don't have any other interests." Years later, after having traveled all over South America, Canada and Europe, Gonzalez now says that Cuba is the only place he'd ever live. He says it's safer and more comfortable than any of the other big cities he's visited. Even training in busy Havana is ideal, he says: "The training facilities are free to all Cuban people, the weather is amazing and motorists are incredibly tolerant of cyclists." This is in sharp contrast to Mexico City where cyclists must sometimes ride with an armed escort 40 minutes outside of the city center simply to reach a still-crowded training area.

"I would prefer to live in Cuba with 1 dollar, 2 dollars or 5 dollars, than live in another country with 100 dollars," Gonzalez went on to say. "We don't have much money, but there's not much we need. Everything is provided for us."

Unfortunately, not everyone shares Gonzalez's views. In 2012, after finishing the Cancún

ITU World Cup, Gonzalez prepared to fly back to Havana with his Cuban teammate and longtime friend, Yunior Rosete. When the time came for the group to board the plane, Rosete was nowhere to be found. "None of us knew he was going to leave," Gonzalez explains—a hint of betrayal still in his voice. "It was very, very bad for the group."

Though he had known Gonzalez for 14 years, Rosete told no one of his plans. "My teammates were like my brothers and sisters," Rosete says. "You can only imagine how they felt." Not even Rosete's family back home in Cuba knew. After deliberately missing his flight back to Havana, Rosete remained in Mexico for five days before eventually emigrating to the United States via Miami—a process that Rosete says was not very difficult at all, despite knowing almost no one in America.

U.S. Olympian Manny Huerta is another triathlete who fled Cuba. Huerta came to the United States when he was 13 with his mother and sister. Seventeen years earlier, in 1980, Huerta's



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grandmother was a part of the famous Mariel boatlift, when almost 125,000 Cubans emigrated to the United States via Florida. Though Huerta competed for the United States in the 2012 Olympics and now lives in Puerto Rico, Cuba is still a part of him.

“I miss my family that is still there. I miss running through the streets where I once ran barefoot playing soccer or baseball. I miss fishing at night or walking through Havana’s Malecón,” Huerta says. “I miss the Cubans’ smiles, jokes and lies.” Though his memories are tinged with a tiny bit of cynicism, he maintains a slightly jaded optimism for the future of Cuba’s relationship with the United States.

"ONCE THE EMBARGO IS OFF THEY WILL NO LONGER HAVE AN EXCUSE."

“The embargo only affects the normal people; any high-ranking official lives like a king over in Cuba,” Huerta explains. “Meanwhile, the Cuban government always uses the embargo as an excuse for every problem. In the meantime they do business with any other nation in the world. Once the embargo is off they will no longer have an excuse.”

Huerta has not returned to Cuba since he left. “Yes, Cubans are afraid,” Huerta warns. “If you criticize the government or protest, that means prison for sure, and in extreme cases you will disappear.” While the threat of punishment looms large, Huerta’s fear of returning is also emotional. “There are many barrios (neighborhoods) over there that are in pretty bad shape: houses falling, trash and poverty everywhere. Living over there you get used to seeing this and don’t know any better and don’t mind. But now that I have traveled the world, it would make me very sad to see this in the land where I was born.”

As darkness approached on Sunday night in Havana, I went to the store, picked up a bottle of Cuban rum and had a few drinks on the rooftop of my casa particular (a kind of budget bed and breakfast). I set off towards the waterfront, and much like a moth to a flame I stumbled upon the final age-group participants in the run leg of the long-distance triathlon.

The course for the Sunday race contrasted starkly with the could-be-anywhere-marina that hosted Saturday’s sprint. The run meandered along the same Malecón (Spanish for “breakwater”) Huerta had remembered with such affection As dusk gave way to darkness, locals gathered to have a few beers, catch up on the day and serendipitously cheer on the racers. What began as a short walk to see the canal, ended up taking me five miles along the Havana Bay.

I finally reached the quiet finish line, took in the uneventful award ceremony and grabbed a beer for the walk back. Just to mix things up, I made my return trip through Central Havana—a weaving route that gave me a more realistic view of many Cubans’ daily lives. I finally got to see the side of Cuba that had made Huerta so sad at the thought of returning: I saw blocks of buildings with beautiful facades from the early 20th century with no windows, and with what looked like a refugee camp inside. I saw wires spliced into the back of streetlights running into buildings and powering the whole unit. I saw houses that looked as if they had been hit with a mortar shell, seconds from falling down, while children ran in and out of the plywood door.


But as I walked down unlit, dangerous-looking streets, nobody paid me any mind. I foolishly wandered como un descarado and never once felt unsafe. Earlier, I had seen a homeless-looking blind man get into a near physical fight with a tamale vendor. The vendor wouldn’t take his money, and the blind man refused to take a free tamale. Even though there was grinding poverty all around—even in the heart of Cuba’s most touristy city—I never saw anyone looking threatening or defeated.

The Cuban people may not have much, but they have a strong conviction to keep moving, no matter what. Though their lives are difficult, as I walked through the streets of Old Havana and listened to the music floating out of every café, I understood that the Cuban people would always be joyfully resilient. Though it may take a while for the sport of triathlon to gain a true foothold in Cuba, the challenge and competitive spirit it represents has been there for a very long time. **A**

Chris Foster is a pro triathlete specializing in draft-legal racing. He has a degree in journalism from Penn State and lives in Redondo Beach, Calif.


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