

Revolutionary Etude

The coastline of the Republic of Cuba is 3,570 miles, more than four times longer than that of California and more than ten times that of Puerto Rico. Let's imagine there's at least one decent break for every five miles of Cuban coastline – that's 714 breaks, give or take. Sets one to dreaming, doesn't it?

On January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro and the 26th of July Movement declared victory upon the flight of dictator Fulgencio Batista from the island, and Latin America's first communist regime inaugurated what has become almost 60 years of uncontested rule. That same year, the first West Coast Surfing Championships were held at Huntington Beach Pier, and *Gidget* flickered on drive-in screens across the USA. A very different revolution was in full swing.

Cuba was closed to Americans until 2016, when Barack Obama became the first American president since Calvin Coolidge to visit the island. Another visit, one accorded far less fanfare and much longer, about ten weeks, was made by Makewild, a Southern California collective of artists, filmmakers, photographers and writers. Adventurers and explorers each and all, the Makewild team has spent about five months traveling and surfing in Cuba since 2016.

The result of Makewild's extended surfing safaris is *The Cuba Unknown*, a combination coffee table photography monograph, Surf Report, travel journal and Baedeker. It's *Endless Summer* on a single island, and you'll find everything from a detailed hand-drawn map and guide to Makewild's favorite bars, cafes, restaurants and tattoo parlor in Havana to page after page of luminous aquamarine waves that set one to dreaming. Marco Bava, Seth Brown, Tyler Dunham and Corey McLean share credit for the exquisite photographs, California artist Allison Kunath provides delightful single-line illustrations, and McLean wrote the text and drew the maps. *The Cuba Unknown* is the first segment of an even larger Makewild project, *Havana Libre*, a feature documentary and part of the group's efforts to help make surfing legal and legitimate in the Republic of Cuba.

The Cuban government doesn't officially recognize surfing, which makes it just this side of illegal, and the country's surfers have to battle just to get a board or even wax. "When surfing began in Cuba," McLean writes, "surfers made boards from all sorts of material, but the most popular method was to find broken refrigerators and strip out the foam...the boards were shaped with cheese graters. Today, of the hundred or so surfers in Cuba, less than half actually own a modern board."

A few pages later McLean explains the impetus for the voyage: "...the sport was considered illegal and those who chose to pursue it did so with great risk. We set out on a journey to learn why the sport was off limits and how, in spite of this restriction, surfers chased the swell anyway. Fortunately, on an island of 11.5 million people, fewer than 100 of them surf and all of them know one another by name." The book is a work of "amor verdadero," equal parts affection, awe and reverence: "At another spot we learned it was common to crush beer cans into makeshift

sandals to walk across the reef to an entry point where you'd kick the can back to your friend." Dios mio.

We are introduced to a number of effervescent and impossibly hospitable Cuban surfers who make the Makewild sojourners family over the course of the team's first ten weeks on the island, including shaper and surfer Frank Gonzalez and the island's lone female surfer, Yaya Guerrero. As you progress through *The Cuba Unknown* it's obvious they are the first deities of a pantheon: Frank is its Zeus, forging tri-fin thunderbolts in his apartment cum workshop; Yaya is its Athena, giving the island's youngsters the gift of her wisdom, courage and enthusiasm.

"For Cubans, the sea is the window into the outside world," McLean writes. "It is the only clear path that promises freedom, clarity and space. In Cuba the sea acts as a border wall and the very end of communist control." This is very much how Cuban novelist Reinaldo Arenas describes it in his autobiography, *Before Night Falls*: "The sea was like a feast and forced us to be happy, even when we did not particularly want to be. Perhaps subconsciously we loved the sea as a way to escape from the land where we were repressed; perhaps in floating on the waves we escaped our cursed insularity."

In perhaps the most memorable photograph in a compilation of same, Yenia Exposito-Linares, Frank's wife, eight months pregnant and wearing bikini, floats face-up six feet or so below the surface of the sea, a constellation of bubbles as round as her belly rising from her mouth and nose. It is the book's purest, most visceral image of hope.

The revolution is long-finished: surfing is a core branding concept for global corporations like Citibank, Samsung and Subaru, a marketing tool to reach multiple demographics, and you can buy Billabong and Quiksilver clothing at Target. We are outlaws no more. What we see, in *The Cuba Unknown*, is one of the world's last surf frontiers, a nascent culture of outliers, rebels and zealots. They have been forced to feel their way forward in darkness, and they have done so with delight, vigor and unimaginable ingenuity and resilience. They have built a community. It is a surfing revolution on the cusp, and *The Cuba Unknown* is one of its core documents.

Long-dominated by the USA and Australia, surfing, as both art form and professional sport, is a chorus soon to include the voices of some of the world's tropical and largely impoverished nations. It's only a matter of time, isn't it? Here at home we have brand new boards, rash guards, enough cakes of wax to open a bakery, dependable rides to the water...traveling through *The Cuba Unknown* will fill you with admiration for our brave, hearty and joyous Cuban brethren while making you stratospherically grateful for what we have.

Cuba's surfers want official recognition of their sport so they can surf for Cuba at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and, obviously, in other international competitions. May their love and devotion continue to inspire us. Hasta la victoria siempre.

For more information, please visit www.makewild.co.