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TRAVELLERS' TALES

Cuban roads were often potholed, but epic subsidence like this was rare. The real challenge for UK tourers was the heat and the humidity, Margaret says.

Cuban wheels

Margaret Westhead spent three weeks exploring in the Caribbean sun

We really should have looked at the world map and noticed how close Cuba is to the equator before setting off on a three-week cycle tour of Cuba in August. Temperatures of 35 degrees and above, coupled with 80% humidity, soon made us realise that cycling our usual 700-800 miles was not going to happen. However, cycle touring is a great way to explore this fascinating and beautiful country.

We stayed in *casas particulares* (private homes with rooms to rent) with Cuban families, and were always given a very warm welcome. Our hosts all seemed keen to tell us about their lives in Cuba. Some spoke very good English, others a bit, and some not at all. We were very glad that we had spent time learning some Spanish before we went there. Our conversations with locals were one of the highlights of the trip.

We spent three days sight-seeing in Havana, and then cycled to Vinales in the west of the island. Vinales is in a beautiful national park with fascinating rock formations. Here we visited the San Tomas cave system, where we were provided with hard hats with lamps and had a great time scrambling around. We also swam in natural pools in rivers, and in the warm sea.

Traffic on roads was light and ranged from horse drawn carts to 1950s cars to luxury Chinese tour buses. All gave us a wide berth, though we did have to look out for potholes. We were even able to cycle on the motorway, and pushed our bikes across the central divide when a much-needed service station appeared on the opposite side.

We covered about 400 miles and, on our last day, stopped off to swim in a cave pool just ten minutes ride from the airport at Varadero. It was certainly a different cycle trip.

The Airnimal packs into the case, along with the trailer wheels. Francis packs everything else (tent, sleeping bag, cooking gear, clothes, etc.) into a holdall with rucksack straps.

Airnimal case study

FRANCIS CHALMERS FOUND HIS ANSWER FOR CAR-FREE FRENCH CYCLE CAMPING

I LOVE cycling in France, especially the Auvergne, but don't enjoy the long drive there and don't have time to cycle the whole way. Last year, I bought an Airnimal Joey Explore Elite, and this year added Airnimal's new travel case, together with its trailer conversion kit.

Although the case with the bike inside is heavy, it can be towed along by hand as it has luggage wheels. There was plenty of room in the Eurostar luggage racks for my case and bag. Arriving at Gare du Nord, I took the underground to Gare de Lyon to catch a train to Clermont Ferrand.

From Clermont, I rode to a campsite at Cournon, 10 miles east. Next morning, I rode off into the mountains to the south west, and spent two days climbing through some wonderful countryside before stopping for a few days at Allanche, a really nice little town at 950m altitude with a quiet and clean municipal campsite. The trailer performed well. It attaches to the rear hub via the quick release, and the handling of the bike is unaffected.

Allanche is a perfect base for exploring the mountains. There are numerous cols and scenic routes, including the Pas de Peyrol, the highest in the Auvergne at almost 1,600m. So I had some glorious rides without luggage, before cycling back to Clermont in a day along the valleys of the Alagnon from Massiac, and then the Allier, before catching the train back from Clermont. It was a brilliant break. Travelling by train was much more relaxing than driving.

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Two entry-level tourers tested

PANNIERS GROUPTEST
A closer look at luggage

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Crossing the Shetland Isles by folding bikes and inflatables

QUICKER COMMUTING
How slow and steady can beat fast and sweaty