

Discovering Viñales

Category: Tourism

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Written by Ivania Díaz

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The beginning of the journey is the homestead known as El Sitio, on the road used by the settlers to move towards their work zones to the highest parts. This is a small community, where the collective video room is observed, something common nowadays in the fields of Cuba, but which is an achievement of our social system, as explained to the visitors. In front of there is El Boquerón del Infierno, a deep gorge that cuts through the chain of mogotes.

From this ascending point, we continue along a tortuous path that ascends slowly, leaving small limestone blocks on either side, where we can observe some elements of the mogotes vegetation. During most of the route, small areas of traditional and occasional crops appear: beans (*Phaseolus* sp.), malanga (*Xanthosoma sagittifolium*), pumpkin, sweet potato (*Ipomoea batata*), yucca (*Manihot sculenta*) and corn (*Zhea mais*). There are also scattered pastures and fruit trees, including avocados (*Persea americana*), guayabas (*Psidium guajava*), guanabanas (*Annona moricata*), chirimoyas (*Annona chirimolia*), fruit bomba (*Carica papaya*), lemons (*Citrus aurantifolia*), oranges, both sweet (*Citrus sinensis*) and sour (*Citrus aurantis*), as well as mangoes (*Mangífera indica*).

As one ascends the views become more distant and beautiful. To the left of the movement the peaks of the Sierra del Infierno, to the right the road and the Alturas de Pizarras covered with pine forests, while to the back (to the west) other valleys and mogotes appear, both isolated and grouped, from which excellent photos can be taken due to the fact that it goes towards the east and the sun illuminates everything that is in opposite direction to the route.

The trail is a constant ascent, with small interspersed descents, due to the fact that sometimes small watercourses are crossed where some springs that run or not all year round flow depending on the power of their food source. Throughout the route, birds can be heard or seen everywhere, among them the tocororos (*Priotelus temnurus*), the cartacubas (*Todus multicolor*), the hummingbirds (*Mellisuga helenae*), the muleteers (*Saurothera merlini merlini merlini*), the Jews (*Melophyrra nigra*) and the tomeguín del pinar (*Tiaris canora*). The song of the nightingale (*Myadestes elisabeth*) is often heard. The wind blows frequently, which can be seen in the elegant flight of the auras (*Cathartis aura*), a bird that always attracts the visitor's attention powerfully. Although there are butterflies, these are not as abundant as birds, due to the wind that constantly blows in these places.

Occasionally it is possible to find some peasant working with their oxen in these places, which is very pleasant to observe due to the techniques that he uses to work, although there are occasions that

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take advantage of the exchange between visitors, the guide and the peasant, stops the work, if necessary, to talk about the techniques to be introduced in the tillage of the land. It is frequent that in the groups there is someone dedicated to agricultural work so many of these exchanges are true experiences.

The views change constantly in tonalities and angles, because the height increases as the route continues. Several stops are made, although this depends on whether there is something that motivates visitors to stop. There are two of them that take longer than others, especially the two that are next to houses that today are resting points for peasants, next to springs: one in the middle of the tour, while the other is beginning to descend into Viñales Valley.

You advance, crossing near where is the point where the ascent to the summit of the mogote El Americano begins. Sometimes the path passes very close to the walls, in others it moves away a little, so the route is not monotonous at any time.

From this point on, the Viñales Valley begins to be observed slowly. The descent continues very close to the walls and you reach the last stop, in a house where there is a spring and has wonderful views of the entire valley, including the other rest houses of peasants near it. And this is fortunate, because at this time the sun is at the back of the travelers and illuminates everything that is seen in the sense of movement of the group. The view looks like a printed postcard, which remains in the minds of visitors.

The descent is interesting, beautiful and varied. The path taken for the descent is next to the high walls of the Sierra de Viñales, where in the afternoon it is common for the wind to blow constantly, this effect being observed in .

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The path taken for the descent is next to the high walls of the Sierra de Viñales, where in the afternoon it is common for the wind to blow constantly, this effect being observed in the vegetation of the walls, in particular the constant wobble of the trees hanging from the walls. As you move towards the valley, you will see crops of food and minor fruits, from garlic and onions to rice.

In sections, on the side of the path opposite the walls, large isolated limestone blocks are erected, where it is curious to observe the traces of the use that the local population made of them: shade for the maintenance of the domestic animals, sometimes with small enclosures for the offspring and some that another abandoned bat and that was used for the cleaning of the clothes of the family. The remains of an artisanal system for distributing water from streams using gravity are still preserved, which allowed an optimal use of it.

It is interesting to observe what we saw at the beginning of our tour, the cultivation techniques in these landscapes, where small spaces are planted viands, rice and other crops that are commonly planted in the valleys.

Almost all the population that lived here has decided to go down to the Valley and there is only one family left, but the peasants go up to work their lands. With this family we rest for about 20 minutes, and close to the Cuajaní Valley, the route along this path allows us to appreciate the beauty of the Valley in all its splendor, all thanks to the great altitude of the route. The visuals are, without exaggeration, the most beautiful of all Viñales. The landscape resembles a view from an airplane, with all the mosaic of colors given by the varieties of crops and soils, the small ponds for irrigation, the remains of gallery forests, the roofs of the houses and the mogotes of the center of the Valley, in addition to the pine forests of the Alturas de Pizarras del Sur.

When arriving to the bottom of the Valley the footpaths are used that take towards the Workshop Roots, of the sculptor Noel Galá, peasant dedicated to his labors of field and in addition his works carved in

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When arriving at the bottom of the Valley the footpaths are used that take towards the Workshop Roots, of the sculptor Noel Galá, peasant dedicated to his labors of field and in addition his works carved in wood and rock. The paths that take us to his house and workshop allow us to observe all the variety of crops at the bottom of the valley: tobacco, food, small fruits, rice and vegetables. The population in this part of the valley is not numerous. Today it has the benefits of electricity thanks to the panels that have been delivered by projects sponsored by the Viñales National Park.

The visit to this workshop is very interesting, enjoying a genuine peasant sculptor. At the end, in the afternoon, you take the road and climb to the viewpoint of the Loma del Fortín, from where you can see a beautiful view of the entire Valley of Viñales. You can contemplate the landscape for several minutes and descend from it, taking the buses back, ending the tour.