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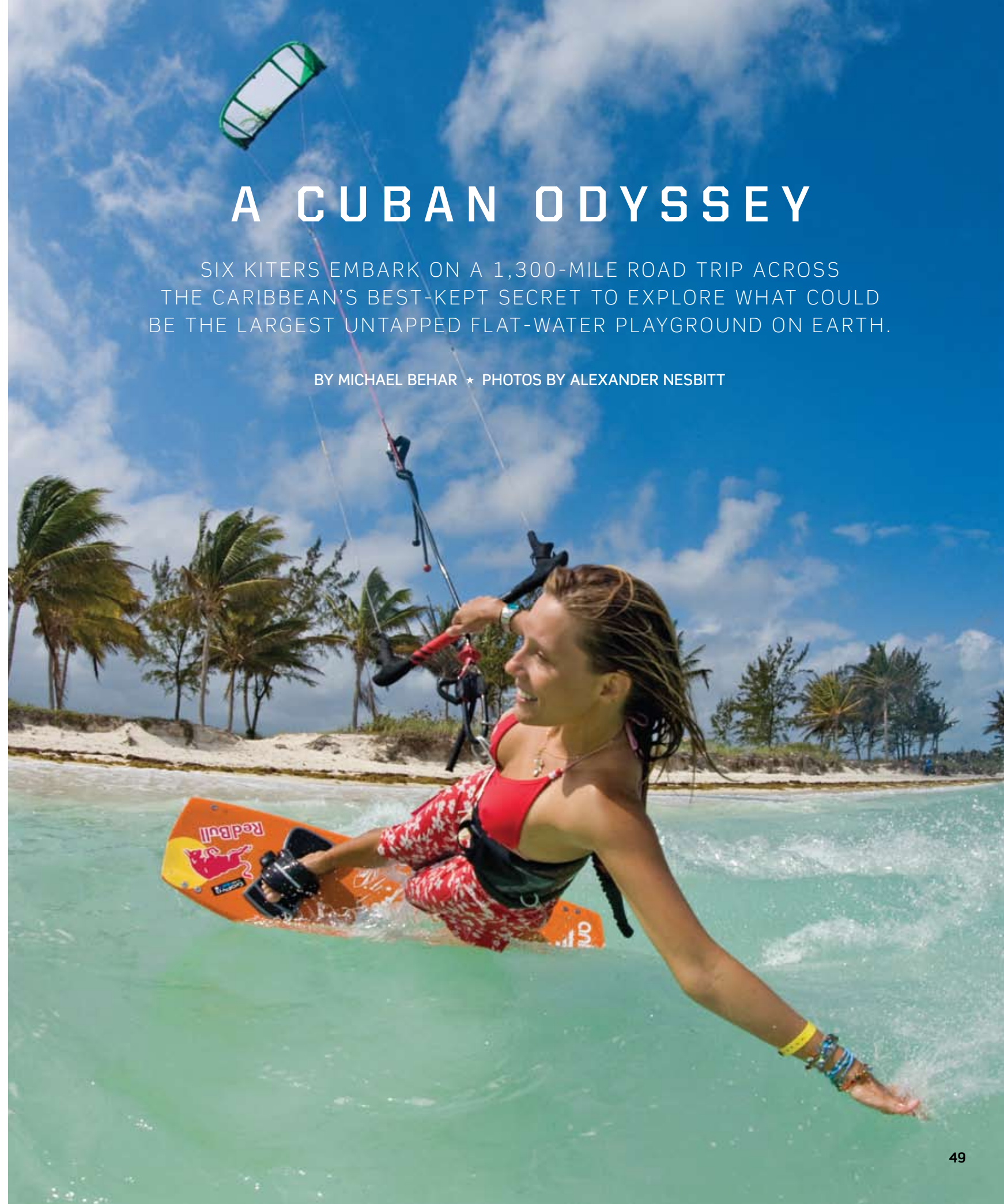


Editor: Caroline Hempel
Executive Editor:
OTTEBON@KITEBOARDING.COM
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A CUBAN ODYSSEY

SIX KITERS EMBARK ON A 1,300-MILE ROAD TRIP ACROSS THE CARIBBEAN'S BEST-KEPT SECRET TO EXPLORE WHAT COULD BE THE LARGEST UNTAPPED FLAT-WATER PLAYGROUND ON EARTH.

BY MICHAEL BEHAR ★ PHOTOS BY ALEXANDER NESBITT

Last summer, I began studying the north coast of Cuba with Google Earth, and what I saw was electrifying. An aquatic labyrinth of mangrove cays and sapphire lagoons emerged 80 miles from Havana in the Archipiélago de Sabana and ended in the east near Baracoa, where, on Oct. 27, 1492, Christopher Columbus first spotted the island from the deck of his carrack. Satellite imagery revealed a wide coral shelf paralleling the shore. Between the reef and the mainland is an enormous inland sound sprinkled with hundreds of tiny cays. From almost every cay extends snow-white sandbars that enclose aquamarine pools. All told, Cuba's northern coastal waters harbor a 6,500-square-mile slick — large enough to encompass the flats at South Padre Island some 25 times over.

For a wind check, I called Scott Stripling, a fellow kiter based in Puerto Rico who is a meteorologist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Stripling has contacts at Cuba's Instituto de Meteorología (Institute of Meteorology), renowned for its forecasting prowess. (Fidel Castro pumps gobs of cash into the national sciences.) Stripling managed to obtain climate records from his colleagues in Havana. The data was intoxicating: In an e-mail, Stripling said the north coast gets slammed with consistent 20-knot winds from November through April.

I traveled to Cuba in March with Cabrinha pro riders Susi Mai and Clarissa Hempel. Mai, 25, is the three-time winner of Red Bull's Queen of the Air and is ranked fourth in the world overall. In 2008, 26-year-old Hempel nabbed first place in the U.S. Course Racing National Championship, Triple-S Invitational, Gorge Games, U.S. Wind & Water Open and the Ozone Snowkite Masters. Adventure photographer Alexander Nesbitt also signed on, as did Nick and Megan Wilder, two kites from Boulder, Colorado — my hometown.

A bipartisan bill making its way through Congress aims to lift the 47-year-old travel ban that prohibits Americans from visiting Cuba. Should it pass, President Obama has indicated he will sign it into law. In the meantime, only a handful of Canadian and European kites — and the occasional rogue American — venture to this forbidden paradise. But they tend to stick to all-inclusive resorts clustered in specially designated tourist zones. This leaves 99 percent of the island entirely unexplored by kites.

We depart Havana, the bustling capitol, in a rented Hyundai minivan jammed with gear and two cases of Red Bull, which Mai procured from a Cuban distributor. While I drive, Nick navigates using a map I'd marked with GPS waypoints that flag key

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Fortunes told here, as long as you don't mind secondhand smoke; satellite snapshots plus GPS route-finding equals kiting bliss; early-morning rumba, Cuban-style; the neighborhood plomero (plumber).



★ CUBA'S NORTH COAST GETS SLAMMED WITH CONSISTENT 20-KNOT WINDS FROM NOVEMBER THROUGH APRIL. ★

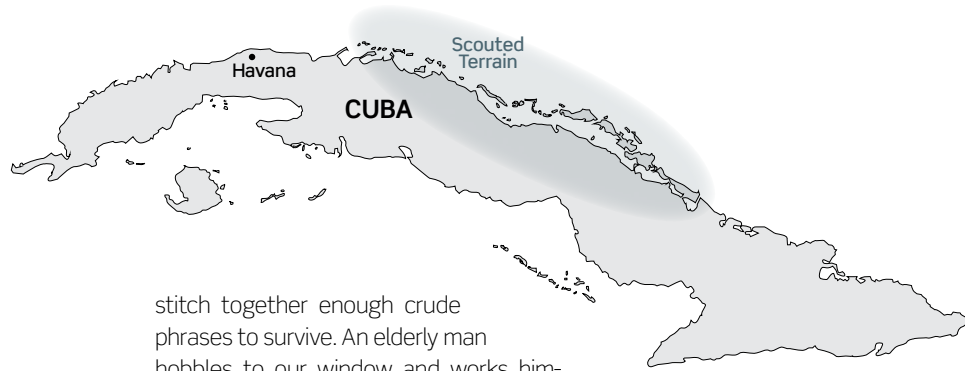


highway intersections and plausible riding spots. GPS devices are contraband in Cuba. We smuggle one in anyway, duping customs officials with a Suunto X10, a GPS housed in an ordinary wristwatch. Presently, it isn't much help. We left Havana 20 minutes ago and we're already lost, searching for an entrance to the Carretera Central, 777 miles of blacktop that bisects the island from east to west. Unfortunately, I forgot to mark its coordinates on our map. Only a tiny minority of Cubans own cars, not enough to warrant erecting road signs anywhere except where tourists gather. So for much of our expedition, we're driving blind.

At a bus stop that looks like a fall-out shelter, we pull over to ask for directions. Mai and Hempel are both fluent in Spanish; the rest of us can

The author takes a solitary session on yet another newfound virgin beach.





stitch together enough crude phrases to survive. An elderly man hobbles to our window and works himself into a frenzy of *derechas* and *izquierdas* (rights and lefts). According to him, we're miles off course. A dapper chap with a paunch says he'll show us the way if we give him a lift to the next town. Meanwhile, a matronly woman shakes her head disdainfully. There's an oxcart carrying a farmer who gestures toward Havana. And an enthusiastic middle-aged couple, with arms flailing, debates the route between themselves. In reality, nobody knows the way because nobody has a car or has actually been where we're going. I don't mind. In fact, having to ask directions at every turn for the next 12 days is kind of fun. It creates a social umbilical cord that binds our experience in Cuba with the country and its people, who we must interact with or perish.

We bid our bus stop comrades farewell only to discover the highway entrance is 100 yards from where we're parked. The six-lane freeway, completed with help from the Soviets, features hoards of hitchhikers waving fistfuls of cash (gas money), but

In the name of discovery, the rental car's "no off-roading" clause is prudently ignored. (Opposite) Two days of driving leads to Cayo Santa Maria, where Clarissa Hempel wastes no time going huge.

rarely other vehicles. From time to time we pass a rickety horse-drawn contraption or an American-made car dating to the 1950s. Cubans call them *las machinas* (the machines): vintage Chevys and Pontiacs in mint condition and still running after five decades. It takes six hours to reach Santa Clara, where, in 1958, during the Cuban Revolution, Che Guevara derailed a train



carrying Batista troops and seized the town. It was a pivotal battle: Gen. Fulgencio Batista, the longtime dictator, fled the country 24 hours later. We park on a side street and Hempel wanders into the central square. She soon returns, straddling the seat of a rusty bicycle pedaled by a brawny man who works at a cigar factory nearby. He leads us through a maze of cobblestone alleys to a *casa particular*, a private home akin to a bed-and-breakfast where we'll spend the night.

To reach the coast, we have to pass through a military checkpoint, where a guard asks for our passports and wants to search the van. Hempel offers him chocolate cookies. He declines, but the gesture makes him happy and he waves us through without much fuss. We cross a vast estuary on a two-lane causeway made of crushed rock that sits a scant 3 feet above sea level and leads to the ocean. For much of the 30-mile drive, the view is nothing but water in all directions. Seabirds use the causeway to corral fish. At one point we witness a roadside feeding frenzy when thousands of pelicans, gulls and terns trap a wayward school and a dive-bomb feast ensues.

Halfway across the causeway the wind starts to howl and Cayo Santa Maria appears on the horizon. At the cay, the road becomes gravel and cuts through a mangrove swamp. Suddenly, glints of blue begin flashing between gaps in the thick scrub. I stop the van and we scramble across a ditch and over a dune. Jaws drop. A powdery beach frames an eight-mile-wide bay, where the water is impossibly clear and cosmic blue. Upwind and perpendicular to the shoreline is a sandbar that flattens the chop. "It's so beautiful," cries Hempel. "Let's go kite." This is our maiden beach — fingered in a grainy satellite photo and divined with luck — and it rivals anything in the Caribbean. Even better, we have the place exclusively to ourselves. The wind is rock-steady at 18 knots. It's quite possible nobody has kited here until now. A session is going to feel wonderful after two long days on dusty roads. Our rigging is frenzied — like silent film actors moving in double-time — and we ride until dark.

With 10 more days ahead and countless beaches left to explore, I'm ecstatic. Satellites don't lie: My Google Earth printouts show enough kitable turf in Cuba to ride a different location for each day of winter. Then I glance at the map and notice we're closer to Miami than Havana. A direct flight would take 30 minutes, an unsettling thought. For the first time in my journalistic career, I seriously consider telling my editor to stuff it. The trip is





★ “EVERY MOMENT OF THE TRIP I’M SURPRISED BY WHAT



a bust. There’s no story and nothing to see. Even Mai, who lives in Cabarete, Dominican Republic, and has kited the finest flat water in the world, is impressed. “Are you sure you want to write about this?” she asks, while unfurling a crispy new Nomad prototype she’s testing for Cabrinha.

It’s tempting to keep Cuba under wraps. Throughout our journey, the wind never rests. Each successive day we stumble upon another deserted beach, ride another cerulean lagoon, discover innumerable slicks and even score wave sessions at reef breaks. The seafloor is impeccably clean: no busted coral, spiny urchins or sharp shells — just silken sand. Rarely is the water deeper than our waists, and often it’s so clear it’s like kiting on translucent velvet. “I really wasn’t expecting to ride so much beautiful, flat water that you can get to without a boat,” Hempel admits. “Every moment of the trip I’m surprised by what we find.” Hempel, born in Brazil, came to the United States when she was 17 to attend college in Boston, but got sidetracked after vacationing in Maui. “I discovered kiting and never left,” she says. This is her first trip to Cuba. “I used to live in Miami and the Cubans there talked a lot about their country,” recalls Hempel. “I was curious to see what it was all about. I’d heard the kiting was very unexplored and that it was very windy.”

Heading inland, we drive through fragrant orange groves — Cuba has some of the world’s largest orchards — and sugar cane

WE FIND,” SAYS HEMPEL. ★

plantations. Lining the roadside are Cuba’s famed royal palms, which soar 100 feet high. Also growing are pineapple, papayas, tomatoes, bananas and cabbage. The land is heavily cultivated and cattle graze the green pastures. Even so, the state-run agriculture industry is inept and Cuba must import 80 percent of its food.

We approach the coast and another military roadblock, where I flash my passport, which allows us onto a shoddy causeway that fords the 12-mile-wide Bahía de Perros (Bay of Dogs). With few exceptions, Cuban citizens who aren’t employed at resorts are not permitted to visit the coastal cays. The unofficial explanation: With beachfront situated so close to the United States, Cubans could flee in droves lashed to anything that floats. Indeed, in a stiff wind I could kite to Key West in an afternoon. Military and police checkpoints are erected almost anywhere the highway meets the sea. I ask one of the soldiers the purpose of his job. “Yankee invasion,” he says in English, pointing north, then laughs hysterically because he knows how ridiculous that sounds.

The causeway links mainland Cuba with Cayo Coco and Cayo Guillermo, where for five days we trash the minivan on rutted roads in a valiant effort to survey every inch of shoreline. Several all-inclusive resorts are clustered around Cayo Coco, populated with pasty Europeans and Canadians who rarely stray more than 50 yards from the bar and are often drunk before lunch. The kiting here is world-class. An offshore reef hems a shallow tidal lagoon that’s about 10 times the size of Manhattan and



butter-flat, even though it’s blowing 20 knots. Hempel and Mai provide the daytime entertainment, hucking provocative aerials in front of hooting men with roly-poly wives. “I’m in love,” a tubby, sunburned guy from Montreal announces when Hempel nails a huge unhooked kite loop. Later, he pulls me aside and asks if I think she’d marry him.

Concealed within this cluster of cays, amidst 60 miles of beachfront perfection are dozens of untapped riding spots. We decamp to an outlying cay that’s still undeveloped and wild. I’m not going to tell you which one. To get there is an axle-crushing, trial-and-error dance through unmarked dirt roads, forks that lead nowhere, impassible marshes, quicksand and a dilapidated bridge so precarious that when I drive across it, everyone leaps out of the van because they’re certain the entire structure will collapse into the ocean. And, of course, there’s yet another military checkpoint. This one is staffed by shirtless guards in threadbare trousers playing baseball with a burnished tree limb and a wadded-up dirty sock. They cheerily accept a few cans of Red Bull and then unlock a heavy chain blocking the road so we can pass.

Eventually, a sandy trail deposits us onto an uninterrupted five-mile beach. It is spectacular. On the horizon there is a white

Hempel shreds crystalline shallows near Cayo Coco. (Opposite, clockwise from top left) Freshly christened Obama Beach sees what are likely its first kites; Hempel smacks a curveball during a pickup game; taxi service in Havana’s historic Malecón waterfront district.



Clockwise from left: Hempel, in the village of Santa Lucía, seeks directions to the beach; Susie Mai soars above Cayo Guillermo; viva la revolución!

ribbon — ocean swell breaking over a reef about two miles out. I could kite the surf. But at the moment I'm mesmerized by the undulating rink of teal lapping at my toes. Its depth tops out at 4 feet, the water is crystalline and the seabed is so spotless it looks like it's been scrubbed by sand-cleaning parrotfish with obsessive-compulsive disorder. At low tide, oblong sandbars emerge to form kitable kiddie pools as big as football fields. "So, you found this spot, what do you want to name it?" Mai asks, pointing a camcorder at herself before turning it on me. During the PKRA World Tour, Mai emcees for Extreme Elements TV. She's an on-screen natural who could land a gig as a cheeky ESPN sportscaster should her pro kiting career falter. I tell Mai it's impossible to know if we're the first kites here. But since the road in isn't shown on our maps, chances are pretty good this is virgin territory. I deliberate for

a minute, congratulating myself under the temporary delusion that the place has no indigenous name, and decide to christen it Obama Beach. After my session, I climb a bluff and



★ AMIDST 60 MILES OF BEACHFRONT

survey the beachfront property I've vowed to purchase the day Castro finally lets foreigners buy land.

We kite Obama Beach for three consecutive days, milking the wind until sunset. On our last evening, the guards

at the military roadblock motion for me to pull over as we're leaving the cay. They've caught some fresh snapper and want us to stay for dinner. Their ghastly barracks are windowless and dank, a concrete cocoon in astonishing disrepair. But they're in good spirits, having played baseball

all afternoon, and now the Yankees are here for a fish fry. The next day we attempt to reach Cayo Cruz, which is the shape of a string bean and boasts a continuous 13-mile swath of white sand. But there's a guard station blocking access to the causeway that leads there. The four soldiers manning the gate have spiffy uniforms and polished combat boots. One carries a sidearm. Compared to our buddies at Obama Beach, these guys are downright hostile. Red Bull bribery fails. "No tourists on Cayo Cruz," barks the guy with the gun. Hempel tries to negotiate, but he's not interested in the arsenal of wholesome treats she packed along, including edible seaweed, goji berries, macadamia nuts, sprouted grains and hemp seeds. (Hempel wants to open a health center and spa that features a menu of raw-food snacks.) Then, one of the soldiers decides to inform us there is a tourist office 10 miles back where we can get a permit to visit the cay with a guide. "Ooh, the beach is so *bonita* [pretty]," gushes a woman named Zuremy who is in charge of issuing permits to Cayo Cruz. "You must go see it." Only a hurricane wrecked the causeway, she adds. There is a boat, only it could take a day or two to arrange. Alas, Cayo Cruz is added to the growing list of potentially epic kite spots we have to abort because of logistical snafus.

Cayo Sabinal, the southernmost island in a string of cays that form the Jardines del Rey (Gardens of the King), is next on our

itinerary. The entire cay is a wildlife preserve, home to more than 150 bird species, wild pig and deer. A dirt road passes through two military checkpoints and a park entry station before traversing a tidal lagoon where we watch thousands of pink flamingos pluck shellfish from the marsh. Ernest Hemingway, who angled for marlin and barracuda nearby, often described the rich ecosystem in his writings. In November 1942, the novelist organized an expedition to hunt for Nazi U-boats in the byzantine cays and reefs along the north coast, including Cayo Sabinal. Armed with machine guns, grenades and a bazooka, Hemingway and a crew



PERFECTION ARE DOZENS OF UNTAPPED RIDING SPOTS. ★

of five spent a total of seven months at sea aboard his 40-foot fishing boat, *Pilar*. They hoped to lure U-boats to the surface for long enough that the U.S. Navy, which had patrols in the region, could blast them with depth charges. While Hemingway never found any enemy subs, the Germans were always close and on several occasions sunk American freighters as they passed within a few miles of Cuba's coast.

I kite Cayo Sabinal for two hours, riding upwind and downwind from our launch to survey the coast. The shoreline is utterly desolate, at least 30 miles of palm-fringed emptiness. Now I know

why Nazis sought to hide in these cays. You could stash an armada here. Our tour sampled less than a third of the island. We're already planning another trip to survey the coast farther east, where satellites show sublime black-sand beaches and countless kitable surf breaks. In the meantime, I'm not worried about spoiling what could be the most popular kiting destination in the world — there's simply too much real estate to explore. It would take a half-million riders before Cuba would feel overcrowded, and even then you could spend a week kiting at one of the many off-the-grid spots and the only footprints on the beach would be yours.