



**Cecily's Fund**

EDUCATING ZAMBIAN CHILDREN  
ORPHANED BY AIDS  
[www.cecilyfund.org](http://www.cecilyfund.org)

## Cuba Charity Cycle 2007

by Bella Cranmore

### Day 1

Meet at Heathrow and fly to Havana via Paris CDG. Excitement and nerves as meet up with new cycling buddies for next 10 days.

### Day 2



Day in Havana.

Raining, 7 bikes in freight hold.

Whistle stop tour of John Lennon's (a local hero) garden, the Cuban government buildings and a Rum Factory tour, including rum tasting and flaming cappuccinos.



In the afternoon, our guide and leader, Jackie, laid out the plans for the cycling itself. There would be two buses – we were never to overtake the bus at the front or drop behind the bus at the back. Plenty of sunscreen and water...

### Day 3



Trepidation as we prepare to head off from the comfort of our 5 star hotel! Leaving Havana through the city's suburbs with its long straight roads gave us a chance to put our padded shorts to the test and get used to our bikes, which were to be our trusty chariots for the next 5 days.

A midday break introduced us to what was going to be lunch for the foreseeable future – plain cheese and spam rolls, guava, and boiled sweets!



The afternoon brought a change in scenery as we moved into the Vinales Nature Reserve, with tall pine trees and undulating hills. Late in the afternoon, after a demonstration of how to put up our tents, we proceeded to our showers for the evening – a cold but refreshing dip under the reserve's waterfall.

Supper laid out on a table for 26, certainly satisfied our new-found hunger. A

starter of shredded cabbage and tomatoes was followed by a choice of fish, lamb (which turned out to be pork!), and chicken. This was accompanied by traditional Cuban fare of rice and beans, yucca root and chips. We were then presented with sugared mango puree and grated Cuban cheese – a Cuban dessert saved for special occasions (or gullible tourists?). Entertainment was provided by a local salsa band.



An unseasonably cold front meant a chilly night wearing all the clothes we had brought (however not as bad as for the member of our party who had left their sleeping bag in a taxi on the way to Heathrow!).

#### Day 4



The 2<sup>nd</sup> day of cycling got off to a wet and windy start through the winding hills of the park - (making those who had been training in Edinburgh feel right at home).

A mid-morning break at the reserve centre provided treats of real coffee and the excitement of clean toilets.

With the worst of the hills behind us for the rest of the day, the afternoon provided a long straight ride to our campsite for the night.



We were then ushered onto buffalo carts to go to our washing facilities – a stagnant pool.

A plentiful supply of mojitos and local beer more than made up for the lack of flushing toilets and showers. These were probably also responsible for the ensuing cabaret which revealed the hidden talents of many of our fellow cyclists.

### Day 5



After a challenging climb in the morning through the hills, we were rewarded with a guided tour around Che Guevara's cave. Our shy guide was gallantly translated by one of our party, making up for some huge gaps in our (rather expensive!) education, relating to the Cuban missile crisis and poor living standards prior to the Revolution in 1959 (with 60% of children not surviving to their 1<sup>st</sup> birthday). We were also given an opportunity to ask pertinent questions about the future. There seemed to be a fear of the extreme right and left battling for power, while the majority of Cubans wanted a more moderate approach with a controlled opening up of the economy.

Lunch was followed by a promise of an easier afternoon, despite a challenging hill climb (amnesia on the part of our leader? Or a belief that ignorance was bliss?). This was followed by a change of scenery as we moved through the valley floor surrounded by lush tobacco fields. However, concentration was required as the pot holes resembled moonscape.

The evening's campsite provided three showers, some with the luxury even of lukewarm water. After supper we were all invited to give a brief talk about our respective charities. This included moving stories of very personal reasons why people were supporting their charities – including overcoming bone cancer and brain injuries. Sally, the charities' representative, also announced that as a group we had raised well in excess of £58,000.

## Day 6



A dramatic improvement in the weather and temperature arrived just in time for our first excursion to the beaches of the Caribbean at Cayo Juitas. After cycling in the heat, we were rewarded with emerald green sea and sand the consistency of castor sugar. A rather unassuming kiosk failed to fulfil its promise of beer, but rose to the challenge of 22 rum-based cocktails despite running out of cups. Sunswept and tired, we were then transported to our campsite (our planned accommodation had sustained a battering in the previous year's round of hurricanes). The campsite provided the best showers, and even went as far as padded toilet seats. However, our choice of pitching ground proved disappointing as we were on the lumpiest ground and were on a hill – resulting in regular waking up in the night and a need to shift our sleeping bags up the hill again! Beautiful lake, salsa dancing classes, more singing on the guitar.

## Day 7



Final day of cycling.

Stopped off at Vinales for a trip around a Cuban town – saw people using ration cards, and poorly-stocked shops. Souvenirs in the market. Long, hot and challenging afternoon, with unyielding headwind as we cycled out to the coast again. When saddle soreness was reaching unbearable levels, the front van was gratefully viewed on the horizon. We all regrouped to cycle to the finish line together as a group, re-enforcing that it really was a team effort and not a race. On reaching the finish, photos abounded and then we loaded all our luggage onto the boats waiting to take us to the Caribbean paradise of Cayo Levisa. Celebratory supper where our organisers confessed that we were the most laid-back group they had ever gone out with, and on the first day they were worried whether we would ever make it to the campsite! However, this was really a compliment, demonstrating the camaraderie of a group who had really clicked, having bonded as a result of our shared experiences of camping and saddle soreness.

## Day 8



Relaxing day on the beach, laying in hammocks and taking a dip when too hot. Some also indulged in snorkelling, while others went for a more indulgent massage by the sea to soothe aching muscles. Second celebratory supper with a choice of prawns and lobster. With no cycling the next day, Pina Colodas flowed all night....

## Day 9



Return to Havana by bus. Day tour to Cuba Libre Hotel where Castro had had his headquarters for sometime, and the Hotel Nationale for posh cocktails on the sea front. Then to the Cuban Ballet. While we had no idea of the storyline, the contemporary dance enthralled us with its vibrancy and energy. Those who opted out of the ballet went for a cultural and gastronomic experience in a local Cuban family's house. Crammed into a tiny room, they were rewarded with lobster and the added excitement of having to keep their voices down to prevent the rousing of suspicions from prying neighbours....

## Day 10



Final day in Havana to buy souvenirs and cigars. Tearful farewells in Paris and London.

We'd recommend the trip to people of all ages and levels of cycling experience. Made a lot of new friends on an experience which one person described as a 'cocktail party of wheels' (all sponsors please note that it was still a challenge!). Vietnam 2008, here we come!