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Paths

MARIA LA GORDA: MY KIND OF PLACE

By Conner Gorry

Cubanow.- I recently heard the story about an American guy returning from Cuba who was faced with intrusive questioning about his travels by US immigration officials.



"What countries have you visited on your trip, sir?" the buttoned-up officer asked.

"Only Maria La Gorda," responded the blockade-breaker.

"Maria La Gorda? Where's that?"

"It's a tiny island in the middle of the Caribbean," the traveler invented.

"Welcome to the United States," the officer said, stamping his passport vigorously.

You have to love a beach so remote it can be passed off as its own country. Indeed, idyllic Maria La Gorda is Cuba's most remote mainland beach, reached by heading west and then west some more from the provincial capital of Pinar del Rio.

If you're rushed for time, stick to the Autopista. This two hour drive starts off spectacularly, with a colonnade of royal palms ushering you out of Pinar del Rio and on to San Juan y Martinez, where the world's best tobacco is grown; this stretch of the ride is especially picturesque in January and February when the tall plants blanket the countryside in a verdant sea of big leaves ripe for the picking.

Beyond the tobacco-growing region however, the landscape flattens out tediously, delivering long, hot stretches of farmland with few

settlements or visual diversions.



If you have meandering time, the alternative north-western route from Pinar del Rio via Sumidero and onto Guane, is probably the province's most scenic, taking you through several valleys and across old steel trestle bridges spanning drowsy rivers. Mini-mogotes, smaller versions of the pincushion hills that have made nearby Viñales famous, provide a lush backdrop for the thatched-roof homes and grazing horses peppering the vista.

Of course, taking one route on the way there and the other on the way back promises the best of both worlds.

Whichever way you choose, the last 30 miles or so of the trip shoot straight as an arrow through the scrubby Peninsula de Guanahacabibes, both a national park and UNESCO biosphere reserve. Little by little, the delights which distinguish Maria La Gorda start to show themselves: old growth trees hem in the road, the interlocking branches creating an enchanting canopy above, wild cows munch contentedly on the shoulder and a dazzling variety of birds flutter about.

If you arrive in March or April, a peculiar smell will start accosting your nostrils about the same time you begin to notice the birds and cows. The reek will grow stronger until even those with compromised olfactory senses will rush to roll up the windows. You'll smell them long before you see them: thousands of crabs turning the road into a moving sea of red as they complete their annual migration from the forest to the ocean and back.

The red sea parts at your approach, with scads of crabs scurrying laterally, one big claw raised defiantly in the air as if to say 'Crab Power!,' even as they pop and crack under your wheels. You, like others who came before you, will leave a trail of crab carnage -it's unavoidable- to bake in the sun, punctuating the crisp air with a stench unparalleled. Punctured tires are not uncommon at this time of year, so drive carefully.

Also, mind the many turkey buzzards feasting on the carrion as they've been known to crack a windshield or two as they lazily take to

wing, reluctant to abandon their gluttonous feast.

The last stop before the beach of dreams is La Bajada, where you can climb the internal spiral staircase of the meteorological observatory for terrific views of the entire peninsula to land's end. When there are no visiting scientists, the friendly folks here also rent out four very affordable and serviceable rooms.

A variety of nature hikes can be arranged across the road at the Estacion Ecologica Guanahacabibes, which will be of particular interest to birdwatchers as the highly skilled guides here can pick out many of the 172 endemic and migratory birds that frequent these protected forests (from March to May is when this fly-through sees the most action).



At this point you're just about nine miles from Hotel Maria La Gorda. The crabs thin out on this ribbon of road flanked by the turquoise-sapphire sea on one side and uninviting scrub and shaggy forest on the other. Little scoops of beach invite passersby to test the waters or watch the sunset; the closer you get to the hotel, the more inviting the pit stop opportunities become. Finally you arrive.

According to hotel staff, this is the most profitable hotel in Cuba, earning a higher percentage on each dollar spent. Regardless of yearly earnings, this is certainly one of the best values in Cuba for your tourist money, with charming accommodation, surprisingly good daily buffets, water activities galore and a super friendly team making it all work.

There are two types of rooms available, both quite distinct, but priced equally. Units on the beach are in older, two-story cinderblock buildings, each with a little porch; some of these rooms, which are technically on the beach, face the parking lot, so be aware when booking. The other type of accommodation is in cute individual, wooden cabins tucked into the forest and connected by raised boardwalks snaking through the trees. Each cabin has its own porch, bathroom, refrigerator, TV and AC. Unless you simply have to be on the beach, these are superior to the other units and make a superb setting for cocktail hour after a day diving or sunning on the beach.

The greatest attraction at Maria La Gorda of course, is the spectacular scuba diving and snorkeling available right off shore and within short boat rides. There are some 30 identified dive sites here where you will see gigantic tube sponges, sea fans and brain coral, plus black coral and a stupefying array of fish. After just two immersions, my neck was stiff from winging it to and fro, trying to catch all the different marine life in my sights. The dive club at the hotel offers dive packages from one tank to 20, running two boats twice a day, plus there's deep sea fishing and private excursions where it's just you, the boat captain and the secret beaches and dive spots to explore all day long. You can also get certified for scuba diving here and dive masters can converse in English, French and Italian.

Maria La Gorda -thankfully- is not for everyone. Its mere isolation (it takes around five hours driving from Havana, with gas fill ups, pit stops and photo ops, to reach the hotel) puts off those people who want to reach pretty beach quickly. There is nothing cultural on offer, save the swinging quartet that serenades you during dinner and cranks out current favorites and old stand-bys at the beachside bar until midnight. Rather than upscale, the hotel is comfortable and laidback, focusing on practical details (eg, in-room refrigerators mean cold beers and juice after a day diving and selective thinning of the forest where the cabins are situated host throngs of *jutias*, a type of large rodent that are cute in a big rat kind of way) and the clientele are folks who make their own fun, instead of having it scheduled for them.

In terms of value, setting, service and philosophy, Maria La Gorda is my kind of place and should serve as the yardstick for mid-range lodging in Cuba.
