



LEFT The Río Yumurí at the base of the Cuchillas de Baracoa mountain range before it empties into the Caribbean

# At the Mouth of the River

BY *Ian Patton*  
PHOTOS BY *Adrian Morris*

The río Yumurí is born in and winds through the Cuchillas de Baracoa mountain range and, like the other streams and rivers every few kilometers along the northern coast of el Oriente, empties directly into the ocean. Unique to the Yumurí are the final five kilometers, where the river enters a steep canyon whose vertical two-hundred-meter walls completely shade the narrow river for most of the day. It is at the ocean where the Yumurí finally exits the walls of the canyon. Due to the river's narrow nature, and the curvature of the cliff walls, the canyon is almost invisible from sea, disguised by the green mountains that line the coast. Where the river quietly exits the passage of the canyon's shade and enters into the intense sunlight and bright hues of the Caribbean, is the village of Río Yumurí clinging to the base of the mountains, seemingly at risk of falling into the sea.

The mysticism of el Oriente - the collective eastern end of Cuba - represents a complex identity that, when juxtaposed with its western half, is an entirely alternate reality. From the heights of the Sierra Maestra to the southern shores that greeted the *Granma* and its 82 rebel fighters, culturally and historically el Oriente reaches toward neighboring Hispaniola, and onward to Africa. Fiercely proud of their regional identity, *Oriental* historically have felt maligned by the government and society centered in Havana, and recent political events are no exception. In the virgin, varied Antillean landscapes and the equally diverse faces of its Mestizo sons and daughters, el Oriente can make the 620 miles (1,000 km) from Havana feel like a lifetime away.

Roughly a total of forty houses, the village of Río Yumurí is little more than the simple two-lane bridge that traverses the river mouth. Most of the village life takes place in the vicinity of or on the bridge itself. Sunburned tourists on a day trip to the Punta de Maisí - Cuba's easternmost point with a 150-year-old lighthouse and, on a clear day, a view of Haiti 43 miles (70 km) away - who otherwise would have hardly noticed the momentary downshifting of their drivers on the bridge in anticipation of the climb into the mountains immediately on the eastern side, are coaxed from the back seats of vehicles to be rowed into the canyon or offered raw cacao for sale. Land between the base of the cliff face and the ocean extends less than a few hundred yards, so space is minimal. There are no *casas particulares*; foreigners are not permitted to stay overnight. The nearest city is Baracoa, site of Columbus' first arrival to Cuba. From its establishment in 1511 until the 1960's Baracoa and the surrounding area were accessible only by sea. Find someone old enough, and they will relate, sometimes with tears in their eyes, how they remember when Almeida triumphantly arrived in Baracoa, bringing the revolution from the mountains.

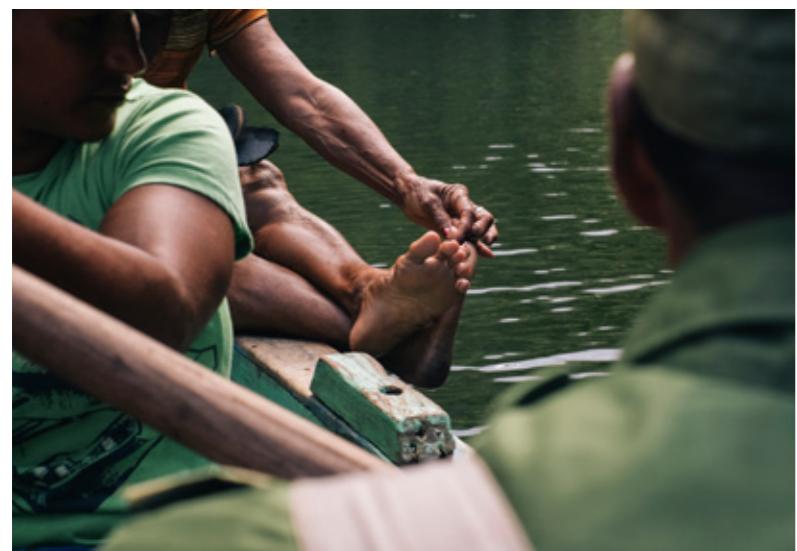
Heading to Río Yumurí, whether inside aged and stuffy Soviet vehicles used for collective transportation, or balanced on the back bumper of a full jeep, it is impossible to disagree with the original assertion of Columbus that the surrounding area was the most beautiful he had ever witnessed. The landscape in many ways remains as it was when populated by the Taíno, the indigenous Arawak people who welcomed Columbus to the New World.

The two-lane road hugs the side of lush cliffs, completely enveloped in their shade. Finally stepping out onto the bridge, I am here to see Roberto Campdesuñer Romero.



Scenes on the way to and in the village of Río Yumurí, on the eastern end of Cuba





Rowing in the canyon where the Río Yumurí ends its journey through the Cuchillas de Baracoa mountain range before it empties into the Caribbean



"They say, about the last Taíno that lived in the canyon, they refused to be enslaved by the Spanish in Baracoa, so when they were left with no alternative, they climbed up..." Roberto leans sideways so our line of sight is parallel and points to the narrow, highest peak in sight of the village. "from there they jumped. Screaming, 'Yu moriiii!' which is what they understood to mean ¡Yo morí! [literally, 'I died!'], and that's why today we still call it that." Pensively, he looks into the canyon from where we stand, in the middle of the bridge. Tall and fit, with handsome features and skin tone reminiscent not solely of African, but also Taíno and European ancestry, he is extremely soft spoken, and equally stoic. "We are small. But we too have history, we have something to offer."

In a country of great ironies, one of the starker in rural, coastal Cuba is the lack of fishermen's boats. As an attempt to stem the flow of migrants northward, the process of obtaining and maintaining a small rowboat is exceedingly costly and impossibly bureaucratic. Roberto refers to himself as a farmer, in reference to the upbringing he had as well as the plot of land outside Río Yumurí where he tends animals and some crops, which is difficult due to the soil and to the lack of space along the mountain's base. Nowadays, his small rowboat is one of his prized possessions, and the ability to fish even just a few hundred yards from shore, as any further would put him at risk with the authorities, gives him a visible sense of contentment. Today he

lives with his wife and two children in a simple, bright house he built.

Born after the revolution, he grew up in his mother's house, adjacent to the lone schoolhouse, *Escuela Primaria Abraham Lincoln*, on the western bank of Río Yumurí. The house is positioned on the sandy curve where the river enters the ocean, molding the bank. Looking seaward from the porch at the varying hues of blue-green, the angled formation of stone below the ocean's surface characteristic of a river mouth is noticeable as a darker shade of blue. This formation of stones carried and pushed by the Yumurí would completely change his life.

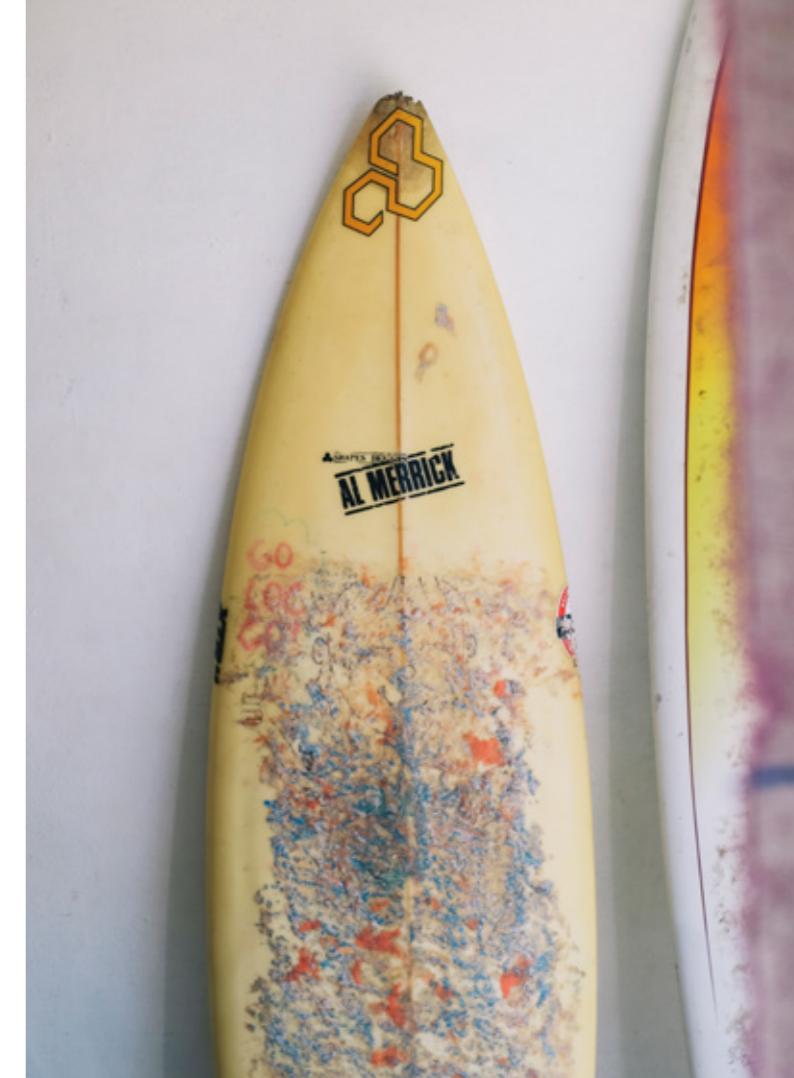
Throughout his childhood, Roberto would notice the way waves crashed into the eastern bank where there is only rocky resistance to the ocean, but would run down the point formed by the river mouth on the western bank, continuing almost perpendicular to the shoreline in front of his mother's house. "Finally, one day I decided I should try and ride those waves, sometimes they would enter so perfectly, but I didn't know they were perfect; I knew nothing about waves at that time." Fashioning a rough, small board to lay on, not unlike early Hawaiian *paipo* boards, he simply had the river carry him outward to the beginning of the point. He was 34.

Roberto knew nothing about surfing. In fact, he had never seen a surfer, and had no idea what a surfboard was. Although surfing in Havana has a complex, unique



history of perseverance and survival, Río Yumurí was for centuries cut off from the rest of the world by geography and politics. Roberto immediately offers a reserved smile when recalling that first time, having the white-water push him into the rocky beach. "People here...they thought I was completely crazy," he says. Riding and paddling on a wooden plank on his stomach with virtually no flotation was challenging, but the village proved the greatest obstacle. Residents would scream from the shore or from the bridge that he was crazy and that he would be eaten by a shark. On land some pleaded with him to stop putting himself at risk, or openly mocked him. Even the police, passing through from Baracoa, warned him. I found this somewhat surprising, having seen everyone in the village regard him with great respect and in some cases a sort of reverence. He shrugs but thinks for a moment. "I was younger, but you have to understand, they had never seen anything like this before."

Several years later, at some point in the '90s, a young Cuban-American, illegally living in Santiago de Cuba to study and play music, saw Roberto riding his crude plank. Approaching him, he explained that he had a *tabla de surf* down in Santiago. Roberto was unaware of what this was. He imagined a *tabla* somewhat similar to his. The glassed surfboard the man returned with was the first Roberto had ever seen. "Not long after that he was deported for living in Santiago, I assume he went back to Miami, he hasn't returned." With minimal instruction, he quickly learned the benefits of the design and construction, and took great care not to damage it, because he literally had no way to repair this gift. The village residents, to a large degree were resigned to his *locura*, his obsession for riding the



In the village of Río Yumurí where Roberto Campdesuñer Romero started surfing its perfect waves, without any prior knowledge of surfing



**ABOVE AND RIGHT** Roberto Campdesuñer Romero with his son Robertico who also surfs now

waves down the point on his stomach. However, with this foreign craft he became a target for harassment from the police. Several times he was explicitly told that it was prohibited and that he would be imprisoned. In recalling this, Roberto shrugs. Almost as an afterthought he smiles and responds with the quintessentially Cuban, "No es fácil."

Some time afterward, an older Australian tourist happened to take note of the waves peeling off the river mouth and returned from Baracoa with his surfboard. For the first time Roberto paddled out to join a wave riding compañero. This marked a turning point. This Australian, one of the greatest yet humbly mysterious benefactors of Cuban surfing, would become one of Roberto's greatest friends and facilitate the connection to the Cuban surfers at the other end of the country, in Havana. "We would spend all day together, he brought a motor for a bicycle, and would come from Baracoa and we would surf together, eat, relax. But he had to return to Baracoa at night," Roberto smiles. "He loves this place, he wanted to buy land, live here, stay here, but as you know you can't do that, especially not out here." Leiry, Roberto's wife, also speaks fondly of this time, lamenting the fact that the tourism that benefits Baracoa is withheld from Río Yumurí. "Here there is not even a baseball field, there's not space; the youths have nothing to do," she motions animatedly around her. "I love it, but the children need a pastime, just like they need a future. Now, after my husband was



called crazy and harassed, my son, Robertico surfs. All the kids in the village surf. When there's waves, everyone can surf."

As Roberto's friendships with foreigners began to develop, this brought suspicion from authorities but also material benefits. Slowly, passing travelers and foreign medical students in Santiago began visiting and leaving surfboards, wax, clothes, pictures. Illegal for private use in order to discourage the creation of rafts, resin and fiberglass cloth are invaluable. Today behind his mother's house is a well tended and repeatedly repaired stack of community boards. This didn't inhibit the ingenuity inherent to Cuba; there are still children who prefer to ride refrigerator foam, glassed and unglassed, just as their countrymen did in Havana during decade long stretches with no material. Roberto sizes me up carefully, then hands me a board left by a visiting pro from Hawaii a couple years back, who signed his name on the bottom. As we walk out onto the cobblestones, Robertico appears and silently hurries ahead, paddling with the outgoing Yumurí. Roberto points to the horizon. One morning following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, on the horizon he could see a severely overloaded boat attempting a crossing to South Florida beginning to sink. "I knew they would drown, even though they were far off, you just knew." He began paddling one board and towed another on his ankle by the leash, something buoyant for them to cling to. He made repeated trips with extra boards to save the passengers of the sinking boat. In telling this he seems perplexed. "That is a desperation...one I cannot imagine. We are very blessed here."

The next day, after entering the canyon by boat and walking along an exposed sandbar in the center of the Yumurí, Roberto looks visibly relaxed, staring up at the canyon walls around him while the sun goes down. The dynamic of the canyon is not infinitely expansive so that it seems unknowable, nor small enough that it holds no secrets. Rather, it is most dramatic in its intimacy. Here, on perhaps the most isolated corner of the one of the world's most isolated countries, a man began riding the waves in front of his house after watching them for over 30 years. The uniqueness of Río Yumurí is in the order of the events. It wasn't a passing WWII naval officer, traveler in the 70's, colonist, missionary, UN peacekeeper or Médecins Sans Frontières employee who brought and left a surfboard that instilled and inspired a surfing culture as is the case in the greater portion of the wave riding world. Here, Roberto, a farmer of color, with no pre-existing knowledge of surfing began a truly indigenous wave riding culture in the heart of the Caribbean. In the midst of its solitude, the modern culture of Río Yumurí was altered completely from the inside outward.