



Off-grid solar havana

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Maybe you travel for the beaches and the views. Maybe it's for the food. But did you know that with a little planning and local assistance, you could use your travels to teach your friends about clean energy? Perhaps your travels could inspire them to live differently and even influence energy policy.

Most of our Cuban journey took place in Viñales, a small town on the western part of the island known for its rugged beauty and traditional farming. Here, we collected a wealth of clean energy information from some unexpected sources—a fearless mountain climber, two taxistas, and a welcoming resident of the beautiful valley. The following are stories of our encounters with these edifying individuals.

When we arrived in Viñales, we knew there were clean energy stories but didn't know where to find them. Satellite images of Cuba are grainy, so an eye in the sky wasn't an option. Google searching "solar field" or "wind turbine" was equally imprecise.

One of our crew, Chad, had contacted a local guide, Yaro, to organize some cliff-side team building. On our first night, Yaro met us in the courtyard of the town's central church and took us to a nearby restaurant to enjoy ropa vieja and drinks. We talked about climbing for a few minutes but quickly switched to our main agenda—the fact that we were desperate to find some elusive solar panels.

Yaro laughed a lot and knew everyone in town. He was the unofficial mayor of Viñales. His English was strong, probably thanks to the host of international climbing enthusiasts he had guided over the years. He was open-minded and knowledgeable. Most importantly, he was willing to help us. Our work interested him, and he could see that we were an earnest, but a disoriented group of adventurers.

If you're like us and seeking information, someone like Yaro is perfect. During a single conversation with him, we picked up more information than we did from months of internet research and email correspondence.

He taught us that in 2008, the island faced one of its worst energy crises when Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, as well as Tropical Storm Fay, tore apart the central grid. Vowing to address this problem, they kicked off a national movement to build distributed regional power hubs that could provide local electricity when the main grid goes down. Today, Cuba boasts one of the most distributed energy systems in the world.

The giant solar farm was our most exhilarating visit. We knew we could get in big trouble for what we were about to do. Filming large energy projects in Cuba requires government permits and escorts - something we had pursued for years through the Cuban Embassy in Washington, DC, but to no avail. We would rely instead on improvisation and discretion.

On the outskirts of Viñales, we piled into a vintage Chevrolet. We didn't tell the driver anything about our

visit. We just pointed to the map, and he nodded understandingly. It was a clean transaction with no questions.

As we planned the mission in the car, we spoke softly and in code to avoid raising alarms with the driver. The drone was referred to as the "bird" or "Sheila". The solar panels were the "target".

When we arrived, we broke into groups. Two of us made up the drone team — one pilot and one standing guard. The other three filmed around the fenced-in solar panels and positioned the getaway car. Each of us was captivated. This was one of the biggest installations on the island, with enough juice to power almost 3,000 Cuban customers! Here's the math: 2,000kW (the 2MW solar field) * 5.5 hours per day of productive solar exposure (SolarGIS) = 11,000kWh / 3.855kWh of electricity consumed daily per capita (WorldData) = 2,853.

Suddenly, the mission came to a stop when a man in military fatigues spotted the drone. As he started following the "bird," we knew it was time to bolt. We quickly realized, however, there was no way to recover Sheila incognito, so we all dove into the car and hurried off with the drone still airborne. A mile down the road, we landed and collected that drone faster than a pit stop at the Daytona 500.

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