Insect Collecting in Cuba: recent experiences and outlook for the future

Robert Anderson, CMN
Some Statistics

Area 109,884 sq. km (104th)
Population 11,238,317 (106th)
GDP (per capita) $6,985 (86th)
HDI (health) 0.815 (44th)

highest doctor/patient ratio in world

Currency Peso
          CUC (convertible peso)

Provinces 16

Highest Point Pico Turquino (1,974m)
First Settlement Baracoa, 1511
Tourism

Canada (945,000/2010), UK, Italy, Spain

Cubans now second highest number of tourists
Descubriendo el Turquina
Discovering Turquina

“Descubre que se interesas por la geografía de un país se proporcione especialmente en lo que se maneja mejor estimulación”, dice el historietista, un país que en el pasado ha sido conocido a escala, aunque más pequeño y que hoy es país, suele surgir nuevas ideas. 

El naturalista sueco Erik Leonard Elen manzara por la razón de su viaje, la historia, pero como uno, a menos de un paso de llegar a Cuba, el encuentro del Turquina.

La milicia le quedó en abril de 1947 y le había prometido una independencia del tráfico de las minas y sus rutas por el mundo. Dicho estaba 12 días en el nuevo objetivo y el 17 de abril, a las 4.00 horas, logró una victoria, con más de un día de viaje a Cuba, el encuentro del Turquina.

“Sé solo de los privilegios que se reservan las comoquedades de grandes abominaciones, de poder dar nombres como los dioses, a las montañas. Los montes, los cerros, las montañas, los ríos, las montañazas, les llaman Pico Quinquín y Pico Reina en honor a los príncipes (Regina Natividad y Joaquín Rodríguez) que se revirtieron comúnmente en este todo difícil terrenos.

Hace tiempo que se supo que aquel hombre sería uno de los más grandes momentos del Siglo XX, descubriendo y desenterrando de la flora de las Antillas. 

The Swedish naturalist Erik Leonard Elenman marked by the cause of his life, history, and as a challenge, less than a year from his arrival to Cuba, the street to Turquina peak.

He set out on April 4th, 1915 and the struggle to cross the forest of La Madera and its path was arduous. It took him 13 days to reach their site and at 9 a.m. on April 17th, he conquered Cuba’s highest summit.

“Encubierta ya con el privilegio reservado para el conquistador de la montaña, al subir las montañas, le preguntan Pico Quinquín y Pico Reina en honor a los reyes (Regina Natividad and Joaquín Rodríguez) que se revirtieron comúnmente en este todo difícil terrenos.

Hace tiempo que se supo que aquel hombre sería uno de los más grandes momentos del Siglo XX, descubriendo y desenterrando de la flora de las Antillas. 

Historia revolucionaria
Revolution History

No se puede olvidar que en las faldas de la Sierra Maestra germinaron dos repúblicas. En el siglo XIX estas montañas constituían refugio para las mambises y en el siglo XX fueron testigos de distintas escaramuzas llevadas a cabo por el Ejército Rebelde, liderados por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz. Allí se estableció la Comandancia de la Plata, sitio que se utiliza para dirigir escaramuzas muy importantes y donde luego se firmó la Primera Ley de Reforma Agraria. Esta construcción presenció una famosa huelga de dichos acontecimientos y constituye un ejemplo de arquitectura vinculada a los espacios naturales. Por el valor histórico que presente y por la belleza del lugar es visitado con frecuencia tanto por turistas nacionales e internacionales.

It can not be avoided that two revolutions germinated from the sides of these mountains. In the 19th century these mountains constituted a shelter to the rebels (The Mambises) and in the 20th century these very same mountains were witness of dissimilar actions executed by the Rebel Army led by the Commander in Chief Fidel Castro Ruz. The Command of La Plata was established there, place from where very important actions were led and where afterward the First Law of Agrarian Reform was signed. This construction still remains as a faithful witness of those events and it constitutes an example of art linked to natural spaces. Due to its historical value and the beauty of the place, both national and international tourists very frequently visit this place.
ESCASOS, COMO LOS MONTES,
SON LOS HOMBRES QUE SABEN
MIRAR DESDE ELLOS Y SIENTEN
CON ENTRAÑAS DE NACIÓN DE
HUMANIDAD.

MARTI
Collaborator(s). You will need to contact and work closely with a good and reliable contact person, ideally a fellow scientist sharing your taxonomic interest. They will secure all required signatures for your permits and be your chaperone.

Work visa. It is possible to travel to Cuba as a tourist but this type of visa restricts where you can go in the country, where you can stay overnight, and your ability to freely use the peso (moneda nacional).
Places to stay. Hotels are few and far between and frequently full. Casas particulares or private houses are common in big cities (but often very hard to find).

Campismos are campgrounds with small cabins that you can rent; some of these are for locals only and they are frequently full on weekends. These are nice as they are usually in a rural setting with local access to decent habitats. Surprisingly there are also many biological stations or houses operated by Flora y Fauna, the national wildlife agency, that you can arrange to use but only via your contact.
**Guides.** You will need a guide or chaperone everywhere you go in the field. This can be your colleague or a local person hired or provided for you at each locality. Always go with a guide, they know the habitats really well and you’ll be more productive in the end.
Car rentals. Like hotels, car rentals can be hard to get as there are few cars and increasing demand. They are expensive ($150 per day) and types of cars are limited and quality may not be the best. Most Cuban roads are good and passable in a car but once off the main roads things get bad and good clearance is necessary. You may have to do a lot of walking.
Driving. Cuban law states that in an accident you are guilty until you are proven innocent and you will be required to remain nearby if you are in an accident. Drive carefully and as the roads are filled with bikes and horse wagons, keep your eyes open ALL the time. Night driving is a nightmare as none of these vehicles, or the many people who walk the roads, have lights!
Money. You’ll have to get it all there. The CUC is basically on par with the US$ and moneda nacional is about 1/10 that value. In some rural areas their economy is all moneda nacional so you will need to have some with you at all times. You’ll be paying for everything, for everybody. Stock up in big cities.
Food. Depending on where you are, finding food can be a major issue. Even in larger cities it takes the better part of a day to get meat, veggies, canned items, rice, beans, etc. as these are often in different stores or markets. Imported items are few and expensive and local products are limited and some not up to the standards you may be used to. Restaurants are very few in small towns or rural areas. If you stay at a private house you can negotiate meals and these are often pretty good.
Paperwork and permits: I saved the worst for last. There is a lot but most or often all of it will be done by your collaborator.

Before your trip you need to submit a list of localities you plan to visit with dates. Your collaborator will do the necessary legwork which will likely include a trip to Havana to get the collecting and export permits.

The day before you get to a specific collecting site (or the day of) you need to go with your collaborator to the appropriate large city and get in person permission from the local military, local immigration authorities and the Flora y Fauna people. These are in different offices scattered throughout the city and a full day is usually necessary for this at each locality you visit.

Authorities do check you (and hand luggage) upon departure so make sure what you collected matches the permit exactly.
Miscellanea

We have found that people are very honest and you will feel very safe. All crimes are few. People are often intimidated by you but once they get to know you and what you’re doing they are wonderfully friendly. The kids are the friendliest and least reserved.

Cubans are paid about $20 per month salary so you will be expected to pay for ALL of their costs during the trip. Budget for this. Be prepared for the occasional unexpected visitor at dinner or for the drive to the next site and even if the car seats 4, be prepared to take 6. We tip guides and our collaborators, usually around $20 for local guides, $100 per collaborator.
Baseball is huge in Cuba so I take used gloves as gifts for kids. Other great gifts are deodorant, toothpaste, shampoo, etc. Forceps, headlamps, rechargeable batteries, etc.

Electricity, gasoline and bottled water are widely available, medical services terrific.
CONFIDEL REVOLUCION
EN GUANTÁNAMO
SÍ SE PUEDE
Future Outlook

Expected higher tourism, especially from United States; cultural and ecotourism will increase taking people away from beaches.

Better logistics (hotels, restaurants, stores, car rentals, roads, etc.) will need to be developed.

Permitting and reporting processes will need to be simplified.
1. What is the common name of the national tree of Cuba?

PRIZE: Can of Cristal
2. Who is the person whose bust sits atop Pico Turquino?

PRIZE: Can of Buccaneer