

A Cuban Adventure

By Rick Williams



Seven friends, including three of our active racing team, just returned from Key West where we chartered a 45 ft. Jeanneau Sun Odyssey and sailed to Havana, Cuba.

Spending eight days with this great crew was a wonderful experience. Steve Perry, Chris Hardy, Peter Crawley, Peter Rugg, Kate Jones, and Mike Chester each contributed in a unique way. We had team leaders such as bursar, navigator, security officer, cook, etc. While we had not sailed together before, we formed a crew that got US Coast Guard approval for our mission "to aid the Cuban people."

We did two overnight sails, fed itself for a week, toured an island where we had limited proficiency in the local language, dealt with local government representatives who expect bribes and have absolute control over you, and saw much of Havana and other parts of Cuba. And we got back to Key West with ourselves and the boat intact.

We stocked the boat on Friday Feb. 22 at Ocean Edge Marina on Stock Island, Key West. We then met Paul and Ann Martin for dinner at Louis Back Yard. We were off the dock Saturday morning, got the sails up and headed SW towards Marquesas Keys. The weather forecast suggested that making the passage to Cuba, 90 miles away, would be best that night. At 2:30 PM, we changed to a southerly course and sailed most of the night doing four-hour shifts. The wind dropped early morning, and we motored the last leg arriving at Hemingway Marina at 10 AM Sunday.

Like the description of a relationship, Cuba is "complicated." There is dancing at night and we went to a Buena Vista Social Club style cabaret performance. It was sad to see so much of what a grand city by Latin American standards was decaying from neglect. The capital building was modeled on the US Capital and UNESCO is paying to restore the building for Havana's 500 anniversary.

Through the relative of a crew member, we had a young man as a tour guide for two days. I asked him whether the Cuban people believe what their government has told them about the US. He said they do believe it. But he wants to come to the US at least to visit because he believes things are "best" in the US. I saw lots of very ordinary Cubans with hats, shirts, pants, etc. with the US flag. These are not baseball team hats, but just ordinary clothing. I did not see similar clothing with any other country symbols.

My diplomatic mission was to present the Boston Yacht Club bergy to the Commodore of the Hemingway Yacht Club. When Fidel took over, Cuba had more than 100 yacht clubs. He shut all of them down as expressions of bourgeois culture. Jose Miguel Escrich re-opened the yacht club at the Hemingway Marina about 15 years ago to teach kids about the sea. He changed the name to the Hemingway Yacht Club and advocates for the YC as a channel for international cooperation and friendship.

Getting permission to leave turned into another long process and eventually we were off Wednesday afternoon. After some upwind work in seas too rough to cook dinner, we eventually rose to a heading close to the Marquesas Keys. Before dawn, the wind died, and we turned on the iron genny. After a complex navigation track through coral reefs, we anchored off a narrow beach on the west side of the Key. Friday morning, we pulled anchor and headed to Key West. We motored this last stretch while sharing stories about our lives and what we had experienced.

