

Jim, Nico, Andy, and Cuqui Leshaw in Key West, look forward to heading for Cuba and sighting the channel marker (facing page) outside Marina Hemingway.



90 Miles
TO
CUBA



CUBA'S NEW CRUISING FRONTIER



Advice for those looking for a Cuban cruising adventure.

Story & Photography By Jim, Cuqui, Nico, [and](#) Andy Leshaw



Crusing Cuba is an amazing experience but to do it properly requires significant amounts of preparation and planning. You must prepare to be completely self-sufficient in terms of boat maintenance, provisions, fuel, water, communications, and emergencies. You will go days without seeing a single cruising boat or even a boat with a propulsion system other than two oars and a fisherman.

There is no commercial towing service. There is nobody to respond to your EPIRB in an emergency. You must have the ability to travel at least 150 miles safely between fuel stops. You must be comfortable leaving your boat at anchor or your dinghy at an unguarded dock.

On the other hand, if you are willing to go it alone, the rewards are abundant, such as the opportunity to see a country that is largely forbidden to Americans and to see parts of it that even Cubans and other foreigners have not seen. It is also an opportunity to interact with some of the nicest, most helpful, and resourceful people you will ever meet. Here are a few hints to make your trip safer and more enjoyable.

U.S. PERMITS AND LICENSES

Cuba does not require any permits before arriving, but traveling to Cuba on a U.S.-flagged vessel requires a license from the United States Coast Guard. This may be obtained by filing the Form 3300. Turnaround time is generally between 14 and 30 days.

United States citizens will also need a license from the Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC). To be licensed, mariners will need to fall into one of 12 general license categories, such as family visits, journalistic activity, educational or religious activity, or support for the Cuban people and humanitarian projects. Under new regulations enacted by President Obama, travelers may self-certify that they fall within one of the categories. More information is available at: www.goo.gl/o7JegL

If you will be in Cuban waters more than 14 days, you will also need an export permit from the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS). The purpose of the BIS license is to ensure that the government is comfortable that your boat will not be used to import or export illegal cargo of any kind. The license generally takes about 30 days. The first step is to apply for a SNAP-R account at www.bis.doc.gov.

The OFAC and BIS licenses must be issued, not just applied for, before you are permitted to file for the Coast Guard license, so begin the process early.

CUBAN ENTRY PROCEDURES

Entering Cuban waters, on the other hand, does not require a license. The recommended process involves informing the Cuban Coast Guard on Channel 16 of your imminent arrival as you enter Cuban waters. Do not expect a reply. Upon entry, your first stop must be one of the eight official maritime entry points. For most boaters, that will be Marina Hemingway on the outskirts of Havana, Marina Gaviota, or Marina Darsena in Varadero.

Upon arrival, you will be welcomed to Cuba, subjected to a plethora of paperwork, and given a medical checkup by a doctor. You will be questioned about the contents of your boat and the purpose of your visit. An inspector from the Department of Agriculture will also ensure that you have no forbidden stores, such as raw eggs or poultry. (Cuba has no salmonella.) Firearms will be confiscated. We found that all of the government officials and inspectors at Marina Hemingway were friendly and professional.

INSURANCE

In all likelihood, your boat insurance excludes coverage in Cuba. There are, however, a number of European insurance carriers that are willing to cover your boat while in Cuba. We found several insurance brokers who were knowledgeable about available insurance products and willing to help place a policy for the trip. These include Bob Peck at Triton Insurance in Newport,



VHF radios are useless, because there is no one to hear or respond to calls. Your cell phone will not work in most parts of the country and is prohibitively expensive when it does work. Access to the Internet and email are infrequent. You are unlikely to find a mechanic along the coast other than in the major cities, and even if you do, you will likely not be able to find parts. There is no commercially available weather information. The fact that you, someone you know, or the author of your cruising guide was permitted to go ashore in a particular port has little bearing on whether you will be permitted to disembark, regardless of the reason or your perception of the importance of your reason.



Opposite: Cuban and U.S. flags fly above the Leshaw's PDO powercat, Thing 1 Thing 2. **This Photo:** The Leshaw boys join two Cuban fisherman. The fishing catamaran is made of not much more than truck tire inner tubes and sticks.

Rhode Island, and Kerry Gonzalez at Maritime Insurance International in Charleston, South Carolina. We were not able to find an insurance rider to supplement our existing policy but had to purchase a new boat policy for the trip.

MONEY

Cuba has two currencies—the Cuban Peso (CUP) and the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC). Foreigners are required to use the CUC, which trades evenly with the dollar (one CUC is worth \$1). There is a 13% fee for exchanging dollars into CUC. This fee can be avoided by bringing and converting Canadian dollars or Euros rather than U.S. dollars. We learned that Cubans have little use for foreign currency and prefer to receive CUCs.

Few places other than tourist locations, such as the foreign marinas, accept credit cards. U.S.-issued credit cards do not work in Cuba, so you will need to bring plenty of cash. We did not see any ATMs.

COMMUNICATIONS

Communications in Cuba are light-years behind those in the U.S., Bahamas, and other established cruising grounds. Most U.S. cellphones now work in Cuba, though they are very expensive to use. We have heard stories of people receiving bills in the range of \$1,000 per day due to the automatic downloads and other data-consuming functions of many smart phones.

Internet is available at the major hotels and marinas, but do not expect to have Wi-Fi at your slip. As a general rule, you will need to go to a hot spot where you can purchase an internet access card with a scratch-off code. Internet cards cost CUC \$3 per hour. There is little Internet access outside the major cities, including at some of the foreign marinas. When available, Internet speeds tend to be relatively slow.

We had two satellite phones on board *Thing 1 Thing 2*—an Iridium Go and a Globalstar. Both were very reliable and easy to use until we entered Cuban waters. In Cuba, the Iridium worked well, but Globalstar did not, because the system had been programmed to comply with the U.S. embargo. Globalstar has advised us that they are currently looking into the new regulations and that their phones may work in Cuba in the future. We had been warned that the Guardia Fronterra might require that we seal our satellite phones on arrival, but we declared them when entering the country and did not suffer any restrictions on their use.

There are very few VHF radios in Cuba, and we did not use our VHF a single time other than upon entering Cuban waters and as we entered two marinas. We are confident that had we tried to use our radio in any of the more remote parts of the country, there would have been nobody to hear or respond to our transmission.

We also carried a SPOT Gen 3 tracking device. The SPOT transmitted our location 24/7 from the flybridge, permitting friends and family to track our route and see our location on Google Earth at all times. It also gave us the ability to send periodic previously programmed messages to a smaller group of friends and family, letting them know all was well, something that provided a level of comfort to nervous family members. In our experience, SPOT worked flawlessly in Cuban waters.

POTABLE WATER

Cuba's domestic water supply is generally clean, but the drinking water contains numerous bacteria that likely will not mix well with the Gringo stomach. You will need to make

your own water on board, purify water, or use bottled water. Bottled water was widely available at foreign marinas. We chose to purify water by putting Clorox into our holding tank (1 teaspoon per 5 gallons of water).

PROVISIONING

Plan to provision before you leave the United States. In the major cities, you will be able to purchase staples, though many things you take for granted, including milk, meat, fish, toilet paper, and other toiletries are not readily available in stores. You will be able to catch fish. You will find beer, rum, rice, beans, and bread in even the most remote locations.

This Photo: Cheap local transportation in Cuba. Right: Officers of the Guardia Fronterra welcome the Leshaws and courteously check them into Cuba at Marina Hemingway.



CHARTS AND CRUISING GUIDES

We looked at a number of the charts available at Blue Water Books and chose the NV Atlas chart books. Although we found them to be detailed and accurate, we came across several large swaths of the internal passage that were either uncharted or contained inaccuracies. We were advised that these charts remain the best for Cuban waters, and you will need four chart books to cover the entire Island.

Of the two electronic charts on board, we found that the Navionics charts for the Caribbean and South America on our

iPad to be far and away the most detailed and accurate.

There are several cruising guides available. We traveled with Cheryl Barr's *Cruising Guide to Cuba* and Nigel Calder's cruising guide. Cheryl Barr's guide contained more interesting information on potential stops, though the current edition covers only the stretch from Varadero to Trinidad. Nigel Calder's guide covers the entire island. There is also a free downloadable cruising guide available at www.goo.gl/E63jsl.

We also downloaded the Maps.me app onto an iPhone. It permits you to download a region before leaving home and have a fully functional GPS road map (including step-by-step walking and driving directions) available off-line, thus avoiding the need for



cellular service and hefty surcharges. We found the road maps to be accurate both in Havana and in the most remote parts of the country. While cruising, we used the app to determine the size of small towns were by counting the number of streets within the town. You might also consider purchasing a road map of Cuba from Amazon, because road maps are not generally available in Cuba.

MARINAS

There are only eight marinas in Cuba to which foreign boats are permitted to enter, and you do not need a reservation. Although the cruising guides provide phone numbers, the phones are rarely

answered. The two marinas we entered (Marina Hemingway and Los Morros) have little more than concrete seawalls so you will need plenty of fenders. Los Morros is open to the elements on three sides. Electric service at both marinas was good, though we needed an electrician to connect our 30-amp power cords at Marina Hemingway. At Los Morros, the dock master found electricity for us at the third outlet post he tried.

DESPACHOS

You will need to obtain a despacho, or official government permission, each time you move the boat. These require a fair amount of paperwork and are issued by a member of the Guarda Fronterra at each stop. In some locations, the Guarda Fronterra will arrive at your boat even in the most remote anchorages. In other locales, it is your responsibility to find a member of the Guarda Fronterra before setting foot on terra firma. Consult your guide book for more guidance.

Although the cruising guides talk about a number of small villages apparently visited by the authors, our experience was that in the most populated areas other than large cities or tourist destinations, such as Cayo Levisa and Maria la Gorda, we were not permitted to tie up a dinghy or touch land. In some instances, we were not even permitted to anchor in harbors close to civilization. As a general rule, we were allowed to anchor off uninhabited islands, including a few islands with beautiful beaches. We met a number of Cuban fisherman camping on these islands, making them some of our favorite destinations.

FUEL

Fuel is available for purchase only at the eight marinas to which foreigners are permitted entry. Diesel fuel costs CUC \$1 per liter (about US \$3.80 per gallon). We filtered the fuel on the way into the boat and found it to be surprisingly clean and completely free of water.

SPARE PARTS

You will need to be self-sufficient. Carry all the spare parts, including oil and fluids, you will possibly need. Assume that no spare parts will be available in Cuba and that you, rather than a mechanic, will be required to make all repairs. You will find mechanics but not spare parts at Marina Hemingway and at some but not all of the foreign marinas. Outside the large cities, there will be no way to contact a mechanic, and there are few boats that would be able to tow a typical U.S.-style cruising boat. It is unlikely that even if you could find or contact one that it would be willing or able to help as we were told by fishermen that it is a serious infraction for a Cuban to either permit a foreigner onto their boat or for a Cuban to board a foreign boat.

Scuttlebutt has it that most people who need mechanics fly one in, typically from the Cayman Islands. Spare parts that are not carried on board or cannot be located from other cruisers (of which we saw only one in three weeks of cruising) will generally require a trip back to the United States as parts cannot be shipped from the U.S. into Cuba.

SECURITY

We found Cuba to be as safe as any place we have traveled. We never felt we or the boat were in danger. We did not see a single gun the entire time we were in Cuba, including on any of the military officers who routinely visited our boat. Our experience is consistent with the experience of other cruisers with whom we have spoken. ■