

Rhombus' Cuban Adventure

Part I: Trip Planning and a Voyage to Cuba

by Fred Braman

Cuba! "Pearl of the Antilles," and the largest Caribbean island; beautiful beaches, sugar cane, great cigars, classic rum, warm and friendly people, and a history entwined with our own. Remember the Maine, Teddy and the Rough Riders, the Missile Crisis, Meyer Lansky and the mob era, and the millions of Cuban Americans within our borders, to name a few of the more famous connections. I write cruising stories, not about politics. But, US policy has hidden this island nation, only 90 miles from our shores, from US citizens for six decades. I've often said, "If our Cuban policy gets unscrambled while I'm still young enough to sail there, I will!" As I celebrate my 70th year, Mr. Obama may have just made it in time! Although unrestricted tourist travel to Cuba is not yet authorized by our government, with a little planning, we can cruise to Cuba legally. I did and loved every minute of it. You can go too!

A little about the approval program. Twelve categories of visitation have been jointly established by the Departments of Treasury and Commerce. People who fall within one of twelve self-certifying categories need not seek specific permission to enter Cuba. Write up your program and keep records. I went as a journalist, Southwinds helped with that. Education, athletic competition, religious activities, support for the Cuban people, humanitarian projects, and people to people interaction, are all qualifying categories. The cruise ships that are going to Cuba now are doing all the paperwork, but, you can do your own program.

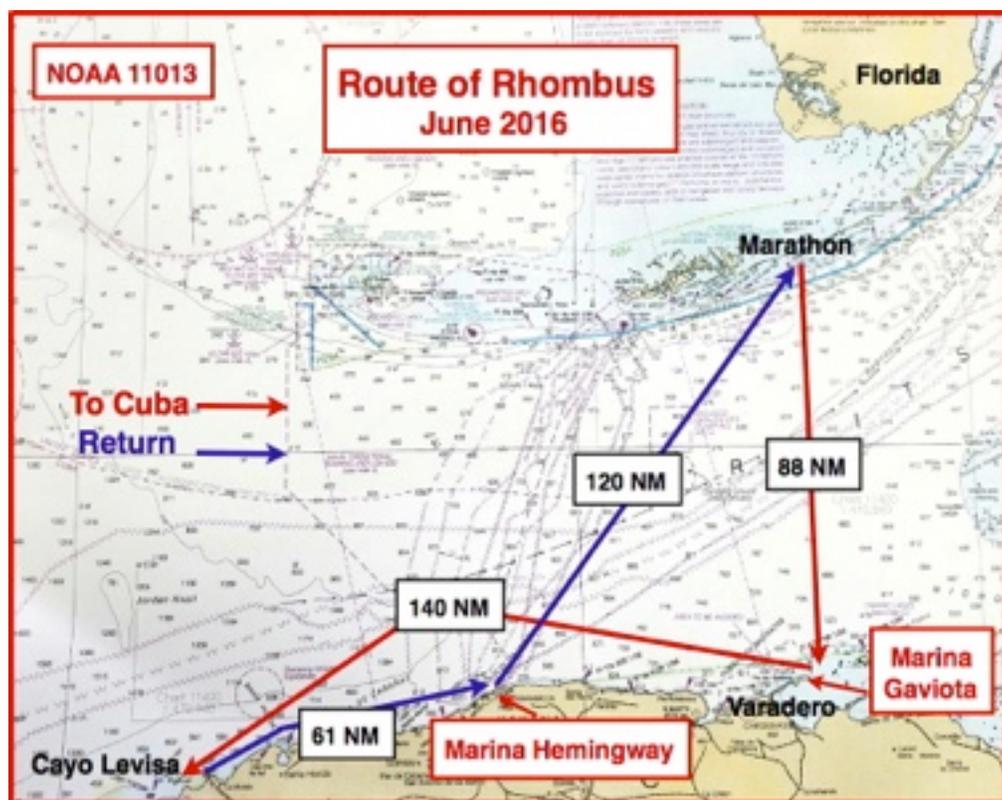
I met Bart Blankenship, along with his crew, friends Caitlin and Sam and mother Lucille, aboard Bart's 26 foot sloop, *Revival*. Although Bart is also a journalist, he designed and executed a program that would have satisfied more than one of the general license requirements. Bart is interested in encouraging more girls to play baseball. He stocked his small boat with donated baseballs, gloves and bats and, along with his crew and recruited fellow cruisers he met, walked the small towns and gave them out, preferably to girls but any kid could get a set. Massive good will resulted! In short, anyone with an ounce of imagination can fit themselves into one of the categories and design a program to match. Just keep records. The only real form to file for going in a private boat is with the US Coast Guard: CG 3300 - Permission to enter Cuban Waters. They are quick to approve applications. US citizens traveling under this program are restricted to fourteen consecutive days in Cuba. To me, that meant a short trip along Cuba's north shore. After some study, I picked a route and I did a great job! We loved how our trip turned out: some great sailing, small towns, country, off-shore islands, Havana lights, Hemingway's villa, and a '57 Chevy convertible! In this and the next two Southwinds issues, I'll tell you about it!

My Catalina 30, *Rhombus*, and I left our Ortega Landing Marina homeport near Jacksonville, Florida, in late April. My target was to get to Marathon in the Florida Keys and sail to Varadero, Cuba, a couple of days thereafter. I was accompanied by another boat, friend Frank Peri on his Pearson 35, *Yours Trulli*. Frank planned to leave his boat in Marathon and join me on *Rhombus* for the Cuba

trip, as would another friend, Trevor Rhody, driving down by car. Our trip to Marathon was very nice in itself and almost identical to one taken a year or so prior (Southwinds - September 2016). With bigger fish to fry this time, we hurried south.

I selected Varadero, east of Havana, as my initial destination, as it is a port-of-entry and offered a better angle on the current in the Florida Straits, than did the other possibility, Marina Hemingway, west of Havana. It was a good choice. Delayed a couple of days due to high seas, we finally had a great crossing night. Crossing the Florida Current (Gulf Stream) north to south is different than a west to east crossing en route to the Bahamas. Both crossings have prevailing southeast winds. For a Bahamas crossing, a SE wind is friendly with a north flowing Gulf Stream. Not so with an east flowing Florida Current, which opposes the prevailing wind direction and the two don't get along! So, the Cuba weather window needs a light wind day, or, a day with a non-typical wind direction.

Trevor and I departed Marathon Marina about 8 am, and picked up Frank off *Yours Trulli*, moored in Boot Key Harbor, a short time later. Heading almost due south after leaving the harbor, the 88 as-the-crow-flies miles to Varadero took about 25 hours. The widely spaced seas had quieted down to less than 3 feet during the night and it was a pleasant ride, a surprising change, since it was 6 or 7 feet only a day before. We got the sails up quickly, but, could have used a little more wind. Nevertheless, it was a pleasant sailing night. Set to arrive at our preprogrammed waypoint just before first light, I slowed the boat to allow for a daytime entry. By 5 am we could see a glow over Cuba and a short time later, all of Cuba seemed to light up. As it turned out, the channel into the marina was a little longer than expected and we probably didn't need to slow as much, but, our 9 am arrival was still good. Of my many Gulf Stream crossings, this was a good one. It was also one with little shipping, always nice for the small boat crowd. I had expected at least a patrol boat or two, but, nothing from either country all the way across.

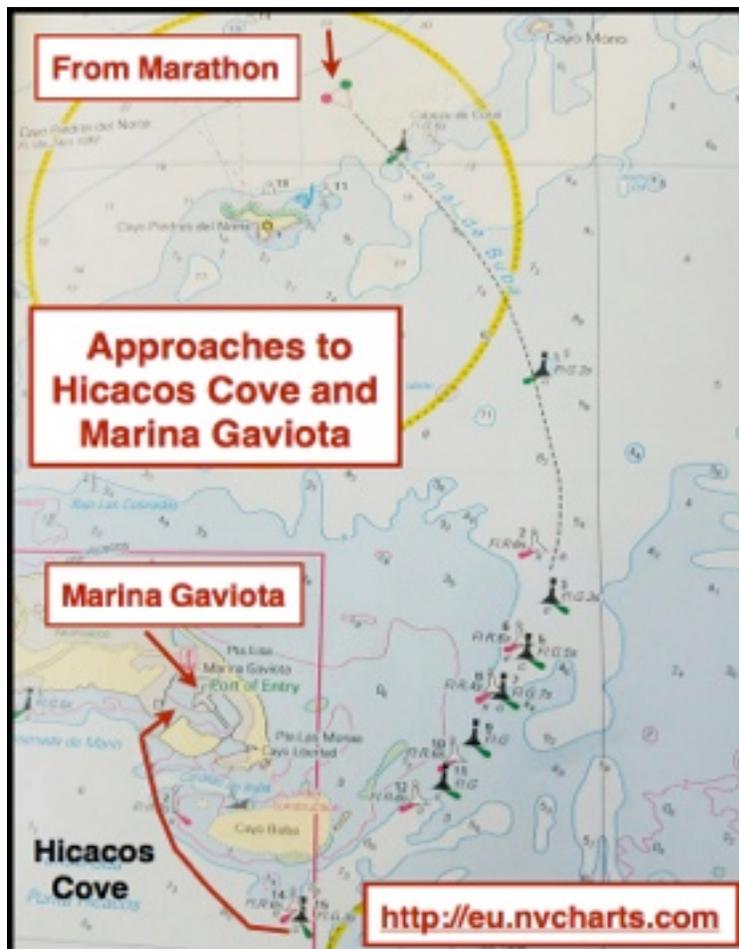


Rhombus' route consisted of four overnight sails. Three of the four were required by the distances. We elected to overnight from Cayo Levisa to Marina Hemingway as, at 61 NM, it was on the outer edge of a comfortable daytime transit and would guarantee a late evening arrival at an unfamiliar destination, something to be avoided. Overnights were also time savers. In view of our 14 day limit in country, we wanted as much time as possible for our chosen destinations.



The difficulty of the Gulf Stream crossing can be judged by the “intensity” of the crew!

Our initial target was Marina Gaviota, a massive new marina on the tip of Peninsula de Hicacos, a long arm into the ocean about midway along the northern coast of Cuba. The marina



NV Charts are the best source of navigation detail for Cuba. My Garmin Chart plotter was also found to be accurate, although displaying less detail than what we are used to. The entrance into Hicacos Cove and thus Marina Gaviota is well marked and easy to follow, although the channel markers are widely spaced and a bit of an eye test. Call ahead on the VHF and get permission to enter the marina well ahead of time and you will be directed to your dockage and met with dockhand help.

has about 600 spots for boats now, but, will eventually expand to over a thousand. "Spots" as opposed to slips, as they Med-moor here, with the bow tied to a buoy and stern tied to the dock, even when the place is nearly empty and they have miles of unused dock space. The cruising guides suggest calling on VHF radio an hour or so before arrival. I did and was granted permission to enter the marina, and directed to a "Med-moor" docking. I hadn't done that since I lived in the Mediterranean in the late '90s, and was pleased that I managed it on the first try! When docked, we were visited by a small army of officials: customs officer, doctor, dock master, agriculture representative, and an assistant, not sure of her function. They looked around the boat, asked a few questions, gave us forms to fill out, and, after having a cold coke on us, left. It was all very pleasant and professional.



Marina Gaviota is a massive new and mostly empty marina on the tip of the Hicacos Peninsula. Cubans are hopeful for the jobs it will bring if the new rapprochement with the United States helps to fill it up with boats.



Upon visiting Cuba, one is struck by the complexity of the political situation. There is no doubt where the man on the street stands - "Cuba and USA, Si! Blockade No!" The country is filled with individual entrepreneurs with something to sell. They just want somebody to sell it to. That "somebody," they hope, lies just 90 miles to the north.

The marina is surrounded by up-scale apartments with trendy shops and restaurants on-site. Across the street is a row of beach hotels, vacation central for well off Cubans and foreign visitors. Marina guests are allowed to use the hotels' public facilities. The marina also has a boat yard that looks full service. Definitely not quaint Cuba!! A bit tired after the nightlong trip, we spent the day at the marina's very pleasant roof top pool and snack bar, well stocked with plenty of very cold Cristal beers. We'd start and end every day there during our stay.



Rhombus is comfortable at her relatively isolated Med-moor location in the center of a giant marina.

Rhombus had a close call while we were away being tourists. The line attached to the mooring came loose to the point where the boat was at a 45 degree angle to the dock rather than perpendicular. A Canadian couple, berthed nearby, came to the rescue and notified the marina while protecting Rhombus. No damage and it was all over before we found out about it!



We spent a lot of time at Marina Gaviota's roof top pool and snack bar. An exercise room and showers are located just below. Drinks were plentiful and the food was good, including breakfast. We began and ended our days there; it's a very pleasant spot!

The following day we were rested and ready to explore some of Cuba. We rented a car and drove through the surrounding countryside, stopping along the way at tourist shops to buy required “presents” for our crew back home. Don’t go to Cuba for the shopping! We did find a little market with the usual tee shirts, hats, beach towels, and wood products, and found most of our obligatory gift requirements. Touring further, we came across “The House of AL,” now a beachside restaurant, but, formally Al Capone’s booze warehouse used during Prohibition to store yet to be smuggled hootch into the USA. Al’s place came with a great beach, beach bar, and ambiance and we vowed to return to spend the next day.



Trevor Rhody at “La Casa de AL” Restaurant



Frank Peri and an old Capone car!

Varadero was a great place to start our Cuban adventure and great experiences lay ahead. Making new friends as we went, we enjoyed Marina Gaviota and our three days exploring the Cuban countryside by car. While the Varadero area is as upscale as Cuba gets, our next stop, Cayo Levisa, 140 NM to the west, would be an anchorage at a small off-shore island and a completely different experience, one that we loved. After upscale and before the big city, we looked forward to exploring the North Cuban coast. Snorkeling around an anchored Rhombus would replace a roof top pool, but, there was a tiny bar, through the mangroves, on the tip of a sandy point, that mixed a great mojito and made our day. Cuba was wonderful and Cayo Levisa proved to be our favorite place. Stay tuned next month for Part II, when *Rhombus’ Cuban Adventure continues*.

Captain Fred Braman, USN (ret), and his wife Louise live in Fleming Island, Florida. He writes about the places he visits in his Catalina 30, Rhombus, for Southwinds Magazine. He is available to talk about the Cuba trip to yacht and sailing clubs in the general Southeastern United States area. Contact Captain Braman at: fredbraman@hotmail.com/904-866-6862. Many thanks to crew Trevor Rhody and Frank Peri for their help with the voyage and this article.