

Rhombus' Cuban Adventure

Part II: The North Coast and Cayo Levisa

by Fred Braman

We spent a terrific last day in Varadero after visiting friends in town. We proceeded to La Casa de Al, a former warehouse for Capone hooch during Probation, spending a relaxed afternoon on the beach and dinner at Al's before our early return to the marina. We much enjoyed Varadero, but, were anxious to set sail for our next destination, Cayo Levisa, 140 NM almost due west. The weather looked great and we looked forward to skirting the Cuban coast. While the majority of the transit would be close to shore in deep, open water, entry into the island's anchorage would be precise, so I spent some time rechecking my waypoints before our planned early morning departure.

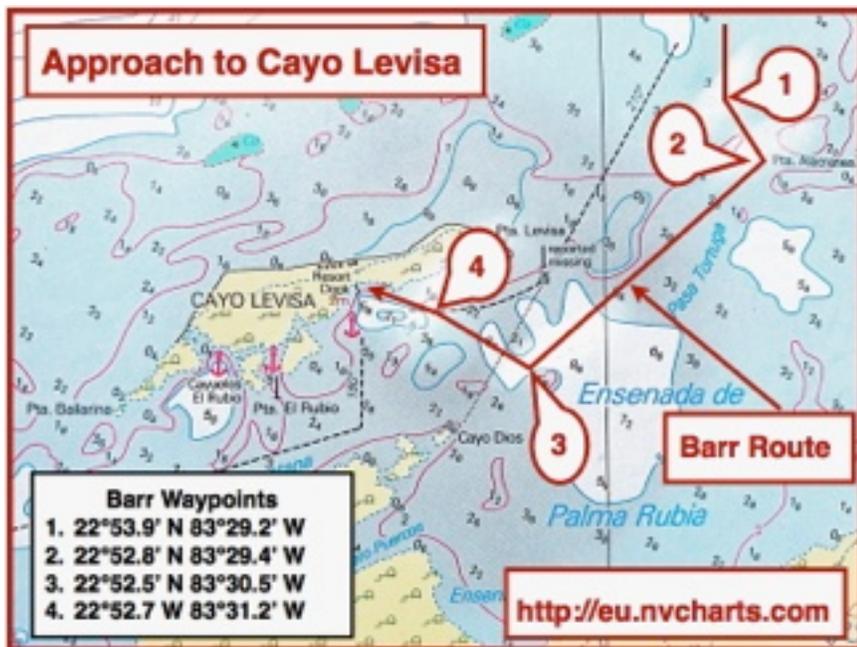


It took three hours to pay our bill, all in cash due credit cards, though accepted, did not work. We quickly said goodbye to new friends, as I was a little concerned that our later than planned departure would turn our trip to Cayo Levisa into two nights instead of a simple overnighter. The Cayo Levisa anchorage would require some precise navigation to read the depths and we needed to arrive when the Sun was high to read the water color. We finally departed Marina Gaviota at 1030, three hours after planned. Seas were gentle, 2-3 foot rollers in our direction. The boat's downwind, rolling motion made it difficult for "Auto", so we hand steered much of the day. Evening brought further moderation of the seas and we motor-sailed comfortably a few miles from shore. We tried different off-shore distances, searching for the advertised counter current sweet spot flowing to the west inside the Gulf Stream. We finally picked up an extra knot or so and made good time throughout the night. We passed Havana, and its famous Morro Castle guarding Havana's port, about 11 PM during Frank's watch. Lights stretched out over miles of Cuba's northern coast. The water was very deep and the depth sounder didn't register anything for almost all of the trip. We passed several bays; Matanzas, Honda, Mariel and kept an eye on a lot of electrical activity north of us, most probably in the Gulf Stream, which paralleled our route.

It was fun watching the GPS displayed time of sunset change as we headed almost due west. It started out at 7: 56 and went to 8:07 before ole Sol finally bid adieu. It brought back memories of

teaching 8th grade science lessons about time zones and what Central Meridians are and why actual noon (the Local Apparent one), sunset and sunrise occur at different clock times, depending on where you are in the time zone. If you don't understand it, not to worry, few people do!

There was an amazing lack of boats on the water, only one freighter and one sailboat the entire trip. A few other unidentifiable lights were undoubtedly boats, but, were too far away to tell. By mid-morning we began our trek into Cayo Levisa. Luckily, the two popular cruising guides (it's good to have both) have good write ups on finding the way into the anchorage. Wally Moran's "Cuba Bound," describes several entrance routes. I used Cheryl Barr's "Cruising Guide to Cuba," which lists entry waypoints for Cayo Levisa. I had entered her waypoints into my GPS-Chart Plotter, so now we just needed to follow them in. Only one short section was nail biting, seeing water depths drop quickly for a few boat lengths, as we passed over the reef. Most depths were 10 feet plus and we anchored a few hundred feet from shore in 15 feet. For a time we had the anchorage to ourselves, but, were joined by a large French catamaran later in the afternoon.



We made a straight in entry from due north of waypoint 1, and followed Cheryl's suggested route the rest of the way in. We anchored close to shore, making sure to give the people ferry and large fishing boats, plenty of room around the island's dock.



Craggy mountains surround Rhombus at Cayo Levisa. We were soon joined in the anchorage by a French flagged boat.

Comfortably anchored by mid-morning, we were anxious to explore the island. In Cuba, when you initially clear in, you get a visa and if by private boat, you also get a raft of other paperwork; health clearance, agricultural clearance, health insurance form, and also a cruising permit. Visiting boats are not allowed ashore everywhere. Where boats are allowed, like Cayo Levisa, check-in and out with the local Guarda Fronteras officer is required. While the crew got Rhombus settled and dove on her anchor to check security, I headed ashore with my paperwork and all the passports.



Cayo Levisa's dock required a good climb from dinghy level. Friendly fishermen quickly recognized our problem and offered their boats to assist. We picked Manuel's boat with a convenient swim platform, docking our dinghy there throughout our visit. We'd reciprocate with some of our Cuba give-a-ways: a tool set, multi-meter, and some spare line. He liked the trade and we had a friendly interchange for the duration of our stay!

I found the official at the island's resort lodge, but, check-in had a wrinkle. He was not happy with my paperwork, indicating that I was missing a "document" of the vessel. After a visit to my boat, and multiple telephone conversations with the Gaviota people who gave me all my forms, he made notations on the forms we did have, and, although missing a key document, let us stay. Later, at Marina Hemingway, I would discover what I was missing!

For most of us, Cayo Levisa is definitely "off the grid!" If I'm ever "on the lamb," I'll come here! Not only is it isolated, it's wonderful! The heart of the island is the Cayo Levisa Hotel, a small attractive rustic resort that welcomes all comers, including day trippers from the mainland who arrive by ferry, and boaters like us, that happen to show up. Everyone is allowed equal use of the facilities, including beach chairs and showers. Though there is no charge to any visitor, everyone makes liberal use of the beach bar, and many stay for the terrific and inexpensive buffet dinner, with music, each evening. We did both, every day of our visit!

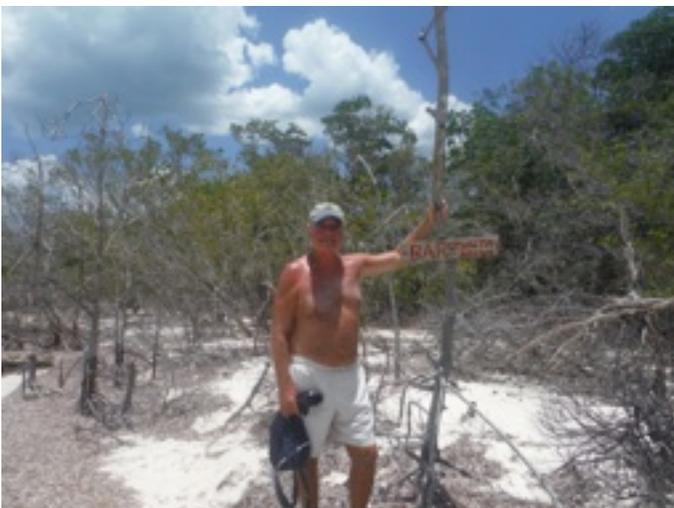
Cruisers routinely arrive in Cuba with gifts for the Cuban people. We gave away boxes of ball point pens, wrench sets, multimeters, children's' sketch books and colored pencil sets, duct tape, flash drives, shampoo-soap-conditioner sets, and the big favorite for families with small children, jars of peanut butter and Nutella. Our give-a-ways were a big hit in Cayo Levisa. It's a remote area and tough to buy things even if you have the money. Manuel, my fisherman friend, who had invited me to tie my dinghy up to his boat as it was easier than the dock, received unexpected gifts. One of his friends sheepishly asked if "it is possible" that I would have a 5 meter piece of maybe 1/4 inch line that I could spare. I was sure I could find something as I always carry a lot of extra line. He was delighted when I showed up the next day with two 25 ft double bradded lines, one new that had never been used. We didn't have a problem getting ice for the boat the rest of our stay. If ever the old adage, "it's better to give than receive" held true, it was here. When we left for the last time, the group had some hot tea for us and gave us a pack to take home. The Cubans are uniformly warm people and this was a most rewarding interchange. Our days at Cayo Levisa were wonderful.



The resort's beach and beach bar. During our four days, we saw plenty of both!



Every day at Cayo Levisa was uniformly the same, another day in Paradise. We would arrive by dinghy in mid-morning, in time to beat the day trippers to the beach chairs. We'd read, nap, snorkel off the beach a little, and visit the beach bar occasionally. In the afternoon, we'd take an amazing excursion down the beach, through a patch of mangroves, to find the Punta de Arenas Bar.



Don't worry, the bar is just up ahead!!

Everything sold and used at the bar is carried in by hand each day by owner, proprietor, and head bartender, Georgie. Georgie built this bar on the edge of nowhere. By his own proclamation, he makes a terrific mojito! He is typical of the legion of Cuban entrepreneurs, willing to take a chance on an idea. A few more customers, especially Americans, would be nice!



Punta de Arenas Bar and bar owner/bartender Georgie, poses with his mojito fixings!



New friends, Eugen and Swetlana from Munich shared this great day with us at Punta de Arenas Bar on the edge of Paradise! From Munich, you had to wonder, “How did they find this place?”

Regretfully, after another great night, we departed Cayo Levisa at 1530, on the minute limit of our permit. I had met with our Guarda Fronteras officer, who had been so understanding with us, and we promised to depart on time. Since we were leaving and this nice gentleman has small children, our last jar of peanut butter and Nutella found a good home.

Cayo Levisa is why cruisers cruise. It's a very special place. One day we'll come back to Cuba, and we'll look for more places like it. But, we would certainly enjoy our last stop, Marina Hemingway. Who can visit Cuba without seeing the great Havana architecture and the classic old cars? I might even run into my wife's first car - a '57 Chevy! So, look for Part III next month, when *Rhombus' Cuban Adventure* concludes.

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.