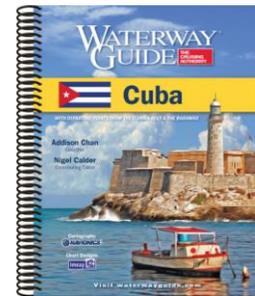


COMMUNICATIONS IN CUBA – For Cruisers and General Visitors

By Joan Conover, sv Growltiger

Waterway Guide: Cuba by Addison Chan and Nigel Calder provides an excellent and detailed discussion of most communication issues. The guide is well written and should be read BEFORE you arrive in Cuba. This is available from Amazon or direct from Waterway Guide. Mr. Chan's wisdom and perspective as a sailor have been shaped, along with his wife's, by over six years' experience in Cuba aboard their boat, *Three Penny Opera*. You may find Mr. Chan at Marina Hemingway during the season as they continue to enjoy and write about this lovely country. He welcomes questions from cruisers.



Spanish for Cruisers by Kathy Parsons, is another must have communications resource. You will encounter a few English-speaking citizens since English has replaced Russian as the principal second language taught in Cuban schools. It's helpful to learn and practice a few phrases to make your wishes known. You may encounter older Cubans who explain, "*we don't speak English*", implying perhaps *you* should be polite and learn *their* language! Attempts to speak their language using smiles, a few phrases, and lots of hand gestures opens doors. It's also polite.

Internet

Internet access in Cuba is available, but it is not what we are accustomed to in the U.S. where reliable, high-speed, and often free WIFI service is available practically everywhere. Internet access is restricted and controlled by the Cuban government. It is not free. In fact, it is expensive and available only through ETECSA, a government controlled company. To gain access, you must purchase an ETECSA card that provides you with a username and password. The cards typically provide one hour of access for 1.5 CUC\$. Cards were available for purchase at Hotel Acuario at this price and at the Marina Hemingway Yacht Club for 2 CUC\$. A grey market exists for WIFI cards. Locals often buy them up in the morning and furtively offer them for resale to tourists for as much as 4 CUC\$ later in the day. A website we discovered that provides helpful information about the Internet in Cuba is:



<https://www.twoscotsabroad.com/internet-and-wifi-in-cuba/> .

Firefox, Opera, and Chrome browsers seemed to work well for access. Mac users had some luck using Safari. At Marina Hemingway you will connect to WIFI-ACUARIO2 (3G and 5 G is not available in Cuba). Open the login page in your browser and enter the

username and password from your ETECSA card. Keep your fingers crossed. If you are lucky, if the signal is strong, and if the connection is working, you will connect. If you take a taxi to telecom stores, you can ask your driver to help purchase cards. Taxi drivers (with the antique American cars) are go-to people for many services, including communications and WIFI access.

WIFI boosters may or may not work. Drivers seem to become damaged and require troubleshooting, disabling, and/or reinstallation. Also many Internet sites are blocked, and some email services are not usable if hosted by a U.S. service. Gmail seems to work,



and private services such as our www.sv-growltiger.com worked for emails. For Internet access, it's easiest to go to a hotspot. You can find hotspots near ETECSA offices, near some public parks, at some hotels, and at a growing number of *casa particulares*. We used the Hotel Acuario lobby where we found good signals and a well-stocked bar. Having a drink became a habit due to login challenges and slow, slow Internet speeds. General browsing was tedious if

not frustrating at times. Advance preparation of emails will save you money and connection time.

Marina Hemingway has only ONE connection to the Internet all users must share. Streaming YouTube or other video or downloading files of any size is severely constrained due to the limited bandwidth. Dropbox is recommended for uploading large files (www.dropbox.com). Emails with large attachments simply failed to send.

Internet access cost is based on the time you use, not data, so we recommend using computer based email programs such as Opera Mail or Airmail that do batch email downloads. Use your app to reply to all emails and when finished, reconnect, and send your content/mail. The idea is to connect, download, disconnect, do work as required, post for sending, and then reconnect. I do 5-15 minute sessions if I am not uploading large files or content. Work offline as much as possible.

At most times of the day Internet data flow is very slow – almost snail paced. You can tie up a lot of minutes just uploading or downloading some email. So do work off-line, and accept the Bandwidth is very small, and you will eat up data cards just doing small things. That is just the way it is in Cuba right now.

We suggest using FTP capability with your email to access weather data from NOAA, a Cuban-blocked U.S. government site. While.gov sites in the U.S. are blocked, FTP requests are not, and this is a highly effective way to get weather files in seconds. Send an email to NWS.FTPMail.OPS@noaa.gov. Put the word HELP in the subject line and you will receive a response containing instructions for using this service.

Security & Connection Warning



We do not recommend using online banking in Cuba, as the Internet connection is not secure. The open connection is an invite for hackers. Server certificates cause virus applications to complain bitterly. Transmit personal and confidential information at your own risk.

Cell Phones and iPads

You can use your iPad or cell phone browser to access the Internet. Again, you will be charged for time, not for data. A single session can chew up an hour of time easily.

IMPORTANT - Be sure to log off to end and terminate your session to insure the remaining time on your card is not wasted. Use the logout button (*Cerrar*) or type in 1.1.1.1 to check your connection status. You may have to do this repeatedly before you get a "logged out" message. Again, LOG OUT before turning off your device, or all your remaining time disappears – even if you are not actively using the card!

Satellite Phones, Hand Held Radios Prohibited



Iridium or other satellite phones and hand held radios must NOT be used while you are in Cuba. Customs officials will ask you to produce any such devices you have aboard, and they will seal them in a bag or container you provide. The container will be taped shut, and the tape must not be cut, removed, or damaged until you are 12 miles outside of Cuban waters following departure. Some systems such as Iridium GO are exempt from this requirement, as they are data only and not voice devices. GPS devices are allowed on your vessel, but you may not take them off the boat. Care must be taken with smartphones that have GPS capability. At this time such phones may be used ashore, but the first time a visitor abuses the privilege, this policy may change for everyone.

Phone Booths

Cuba still has public pay phones. However, phone access is limited. Pay phones require a phone card from ETECSA. Non-Cuban public phones are blue and use CUC's. Grey phones are for Cubans, and payment is in CUP's for the phone card.

CELL Access/SIM Cards

SIM cards for unlocked cell phones can be obtained at any ETECSA business office for approximately 30 CUC\$ with airtime purchased separately. To Cubans, this is called a "line" or phone line. We found SIM cards are regularly loaned among friends with only

top-up of minutes required. We purchased an unlocked phone and a SIM for *Growthtiger* from ONESIM that offers services in all the Caribbean islands: such as Cuba, Sint Maarten, Dominica, etc. While you may pay roaming rates, you do not have to find SIM cards or services on arrival. Both AT&T and Verizon recently established service in Cuba, but you will pay roaming charges of approximately \$3.00 per minute for using it. World Traveler or international plans do **not** presently reduce this rate in Cuba.

Radios: VHF and SSB/HF Radio

Radio VHF is one major marine communication device at the marinas. The main channel, CH 16, is reserved for HAVANA's port captain or for hailing Guarda Frontera when reaching the 12-mile Cuban limit. After first contact, use VHF 77 to hail the local Port Captains of, for example, Marina Hemingway. Marina Hemingway staff use 77 for sharing instructions and intra marina communications. Be polite and hail on 77, then take your traffic to a non-working channel such as 68 or 71. Channel 69 is used by local networks and fishing boats.



SSB and HF voice should be **receive-only**. Voice transmissions are said to be a problem for the Cuban military. **Do not transmit** HF or SSB voice while in Cuban waters. Using SSB, HF radio and pactor modems is allowed on the vessel. Sailmail should be the service of choice as this use is allowed with commercial weather services. Winlink is only available for contact-to-contact emails without use of paid-for data from services such as WRI, Commanders Weather, or Chris Parker. Since weather information via SSB

is a lifeblood for cruisers, make sure you use the appropriate Sailmail, or be prepared to face warnings and having your messages submitted to the U.S. Federal Communications office and loss of account privileges. Since email weather is essential to cruising, this is critical. There is only one Cuban SSB system on the east coast of Cuba. Cuban SSB is not available on the island except at that one marina.

HF handhelds are forbidden, and should be declared at Customs for sealing. Never use a handheld radio in Cuba; penalties are harsh. This includes headsets used aboard or the little walkie-talkie radios we carry to keep in touch. Keep them aboard and do not use.

Mail

Direct mail service does not exist between Cuba and the United States. Mail will be routed through another country and typically takes weeks to months to arrive, if at all.

