

MARINA GAVIOTA, VARADERO - Cuba's Largest and Most Modern Marina

By Paul and Beth Winchell, SV Black Swan

Note:

- Addison Chan's *Waterway Guide Cuba* has a detailed section on Varadero and Marina Gaviota. Anyone planning a trip to Varadero and Cuba would benefit from purchasing Mr. Chan's Guide (<https://www.amazon.com/Waterway-Guide-Cuba/dp/0996899871>).
- Active Captain is also a good resource for information on Marina Gaviota (https://activecaptain.com/quickLists/marina.php?name=Gaviota_Marina_Cuba&i=515253148).

The entrance to Marina Gaviota via Canal de Buba is straightforward. Keep the green outer marker to your left and the Cayo Piedras del Norte with its lighthouse to your right. The channel was well marked, reasonably wide, and our Navionics cartography was spot on. We had no difficulty navigating the channel, even with a surprise 7:30 a.m. fog bank.

We called the Marina when we passed the outer marker, and they responded immediately and clearly in English. They requested our vessel length, number of people aboard, nationality, last port visited, and the health of those aboard. The Marina is approximately eight nautical miles from the outer marker, and we radioed we would arrive in one and a half hours. Six miles from the outer marker we exited Canal de Buba into a large bay southwest of the Marina entrance. We continued west, then northwest, and finally north to the Marina entrance, making sure we did not get too close to shallow waters directly south of the Marina. Local knowledge applies, as many vessels leaving the Marina are not constrained by canal markings.



From here we proceeded to the jetty with the red and white lighthouse. Do not approach the jetty until you have a clear view of the channel entrance and its red and green markers. Remain vigilant when arriving, particularly in the morning, as vessels leaving the Marina cut the jetty close, some with considerable speed. The channel to the Marina is wide and easily managed. As you pass new mega-yacht docks and buildings to your right, you will enter the Marina basin dominated by the office control tower directly ahead. One of two Marina dock masters approached and greeted us in a small motorboat. Expect to be directed to floating docks to the right of the control tower for initial check in.

Floating docks in the Marina are concrete and set up for med mooring - stern to with a pick-up float for securing bowlines. The first 300 feet of the arrival dock has no mooring floats. This dock differs, as there are no pilings on the arrival side. The rest of the Marina utilizes pilings secured outside the docks with steel, u-shaped bands covered with a 1"x6" board. These pilings are on both sides of the docks with variable spacings of about 50'.

The dock master will direct you to the arrival dock, assist with tying up, and brief you on clearing in. The two dock masters are Francisco and Jose. They have been with the Marina since its startup in 2014. Communication with Francisco and Jose is no problem as both speak fluent English. You will find them engaging and excited you are visiting their Marina.

The Customs and Immigration official will be the first to board your vessel. Unlike uniformed Guardia Frontera officers carrying weapons at Marina Hemmingway, Customs agents and others here will be dressed in a more businesslike fashion. They removed shoes before boarding our boat, even though we told them it was not necessary. The Customs agent will complete several forms and look around your boat. When asked if we had satellite phones, which we did, he simply advised us they were not to be used in Cuba - unlike Hemmingway agents who secured sat phones in plastic bags or containers.



After completing paperwork and our inspection, the Customs agent asked for a tip. This was not unexpected based on our research before arrival, and we were prepared with a small bag of wrapped candy the agent gratefully accepted. We recommend preparing several small bags of candy bars and lollipops before heading to Cuba. We heard from a British boat following us the agent would not leave without a tip. Since they had no candy or Cuban CUC\$'s, they were encouraged to provide a tip in Euro's.

Two well-dressed women from the Health and Agriculture Departments were the final two officials to board. They also had forms to complete and conducted an inspection. Although we had meat and vegetables aboard from other countries, they only required we sign a form stating we would dispose of these products in green containers at the entrance of every dock. Neither agent asked for a tip, but we provided similar bags of candy and lollipops. They seemed grateful and surprised. Unlike those clearing in at Marina Hemmingway, we were not required to have identification photos taken. There also were no para-military officers with drug sniffing dogs. We finished our check in, and Jose returned to direct us to our permanent mooring.

The vast majority of Marina Gaviota's nearly 1,100 slips were unoccupied. Jose told us until the Marina starts to fill up, transient vessels will moor side-to along the docks. We were directed to the dock just to the left of the office tower, the first dock you see when entering the Marina basin. Jose and others helped as we approached and tied off the boat.

In *Waterway Guide Cuba*, Mr. Chan writes about mosquito issues, but we did not experience any at our location. Perhaps this is a problem closer to shore. We did notice citronella candles on the tables at all outside dining areas. Marina security also was present, but not with a military flare. Security guards were well dressed in blue dress pants and white shirts. As we walked around the Marina, we were never stopped and didn't feel surveilled.



Shops and restaurants are located around the Marina. We dined at the famous state-owned KiKe-Kcho restaurant, and it was terrific. Dinner for two was about \$60.00 U.S. and included a bottle of wine, two incredible salads, and two of their popular paella dishes. One salad and paella dish would have been more than enough for two. Wait staff and service was excellent. To work at

upscale restaurants, Cubans are expected to attend waiter/waitress school and speak English. It was refreshing to be served by people who show such pride in their work.

At the other end of the spectrum, we had lunch prepared on sidewalk grills at the Marina. The grilled chicken was \$5.00. Local beer cost another \$1.75. The chicken was topped with an incredible sauce and delivered to our table on paper plates. When we asked for plastic knives and forks, we were told those and paper napkins were not available that day. To be safe, remember to bring your own utensils and napkins!

We arrived in April when the Marina was still charging winter rates. The daily dockage rate for vessels 50-59 feet was \$1.37 per foot. The comparative rate at Marina Hemmingway was \$1.00. Summer rates begin May 1st at Marina Gaviota, and that daily rate drops to \$.60 per foot. We will plan our next trip for May to take advantage of lower summer rates.

Our checkout was uneventful. Our Marina bill was prepared in advance, and we were able to pay using U.S. dollars. Obtaining a Canadian or European card may be helpful, since U.S. credit cards cannot be used in Cuba.

We had a great time and look forward to the opportunity to returning soon. Thanks to Hank George on *FLASH* and the other Salty Dawg folks involved.

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