

VISITING CUBA - Skepticism Replaced By Friendship

By David Crafa, *SV Vanishing Point*

I wasn't sure what I was sailing into as I turned *Vanishing Point* toward Cuba's Marina Hemingway after a picture perfect, moonlit Gulf Stream crossing the night before. Waves were less than two feet the entire way. Conditions were much different two days earlier when I crossed the Gulf Stream en route to Key West to pick up my present crew. I broke two ribs during that crossing.



Not many U.S. flagged vessels visit Cuba, aside from the Coast Guard which returns Cuban nationals that survive a failed attempt at rafting across the Gulf Stream to the U.S. I was excited, nervous, and uncertain what to expect as a participant in one of the first legal U.S. sailing rallies to Cuba. I swallowed one of my last remaining painkillers and turned the boat toward Customs and Immigration. It was blowing almost 25 knots, and I had a new crew on board unfamiliar with docking or tying up the boat. I was getting nervous about communicating fender placement and line handling instructions. It was hard to yell because of the sharp pain in my left side. I wasn't sure what help to expect at the customs dock from customs agents or the feared Guardia Frontiera. I spent time in Russia and I imagined customs would be similar to that country - uninterested, unfriendly, and unhelpful.

As I pulled up to the dock, several uniformed officers came to meet me. This made me nervous as I heard all kinds of stories about boat inspections in Cuba, and not all of them had happy endings. To complicate matters, nobody aboard *Vanishing Point* spoke Spanish. To my surprise the officers were friendly, smiling, and waving while welcoming us to Cuba.

From the very start Cubans we met were friendly, helpful, and curious. Marina Hemingway sent a young man to help as liaison for arriving rally boats. He explained the clearance process, provided our slip assignment, and helped with directions for navigating the miles of channels that comprise Marina Hemingway.

At each stage of clearing into Cuba we were greeted with smiles. Even the officer with a drug sniffing dog was pleasant and friendly. I thought it might be an act to put people at ease before violating, fining, and shaking them down for some vague offense, but this was not the case, not even close. I would soon discover how special the Cuban people are. My image of Cuba was changing. Images of a strict communist country accumulated over a lifetime were melting away under the bright Cuban sun.

The Marina liaison (and my new best friend in Cuba) guided *Vanishing Point* to our new home for the next two weeks. He made sure people were at the slip to help. After we were tied up, we discussed all kinds of topics ranging from music (which is my specialty and livelihood) to politics. His knowledge was impressive. His father joined us soon and discussions continued; however, my friend had to translate from English to Spanish for his father. With U.S. restrictions easing, most young people speak some English and seem hungrier than ever to know more about the outside world.

After working so long and hard to get here, I was finally in Marina Hemingway! The feeling of accomplishment was so great, I forgot for a moment the ever-present pain in my side. My guests had left for Viñales. For the first time in a month it was just VP and me. It was time to relax and explore. That's when I first met Adonis, the self-proclaimed excursions coordinator for the Salty Dawg rally.

I wasn't sure what to think of Adonis. He seemed a bit of a hustler, talking fast and telling me in every other sentence that he never lies. With no clear alternatives for getting out of the marina and exploring Havana and the countryside, I was willing to take a chance. Still nursing two broken ribs, I didn't want to overdo it. I decided to follow the path of least resistance, and put my trust and faith in his hands. Although his prices were slightly higher, I felt the convenience was worth the extra cost.

I signed up for a day tour of Old Havana with Adonis and a few other rally participants. Adonis and I hit it off from the start. We understood each other even though we spoke different languages. We joked back and forth and had some good laughs. Adonis was a hard worker and made sure everyone enjoyed themselves. This was a chance to make a mark and build a business for his family, and he wasn't about to squander the opportunity.

Adonis recognized this was the beginning of the American tourist market, and he was getting in on the ground floor. He worked close to 20 hours a day, sleeping in his car when necessary to make sure each rally outing was serviced to the best of his ability. He reminded me of my own experience breaking into the music business and all of the hours and effort it took to make my dream real. Adonis wasn't going to let a small thing like exhaustion get in the way of achieving his dream of becoming an established and successful Cuban guide. I respected that, and we became fast friends.

One night I went out to dinner with Adonis and his girlfriend. About halfway through dinner I started to feel dizzy. The pain in my left side was becoming unbearable. I tried to hide it and thought it would go away, but every time I laughed or spoke too much I was overwhelmed with pain. I started to perspire. I tried unsuccessfully to wipe away the beads of sweat before anyone noticed. Adonis asked if I was feeling ok. I couldn't hide it any longer. I told him about my accident while sailing to Key West, and despite my reluctance, he insisted on taking me immediately to the hospital.

I had no idea what I was getting into. I imagined spending the entire week in a Cuban hospital with doctors who earn as much as a garbage man examining me with medical equipment as old as vintage cars that roam Havana.

Boy was I surprised when I arrived at the hospital. It was a modern facility. The nurses smiled when they took my information, and it took no time at all to sign in. The nurse and Adonis made sure the doctor understood my situation. Adonis stayed with me throughout my visit and examinations, including X-rays. He translated the doctor's diagnosis of two broken ribs and insisted on going to the pharmacy to pick up my prescription. I tried to give him money for all his time, and he refused any amount. I took several more tours with Adonis. We talked some nights for hours about the island and South side of Cuba where he grew up. I realized I had found a true friend in Cuba, somebody I could trust and count on always.



