

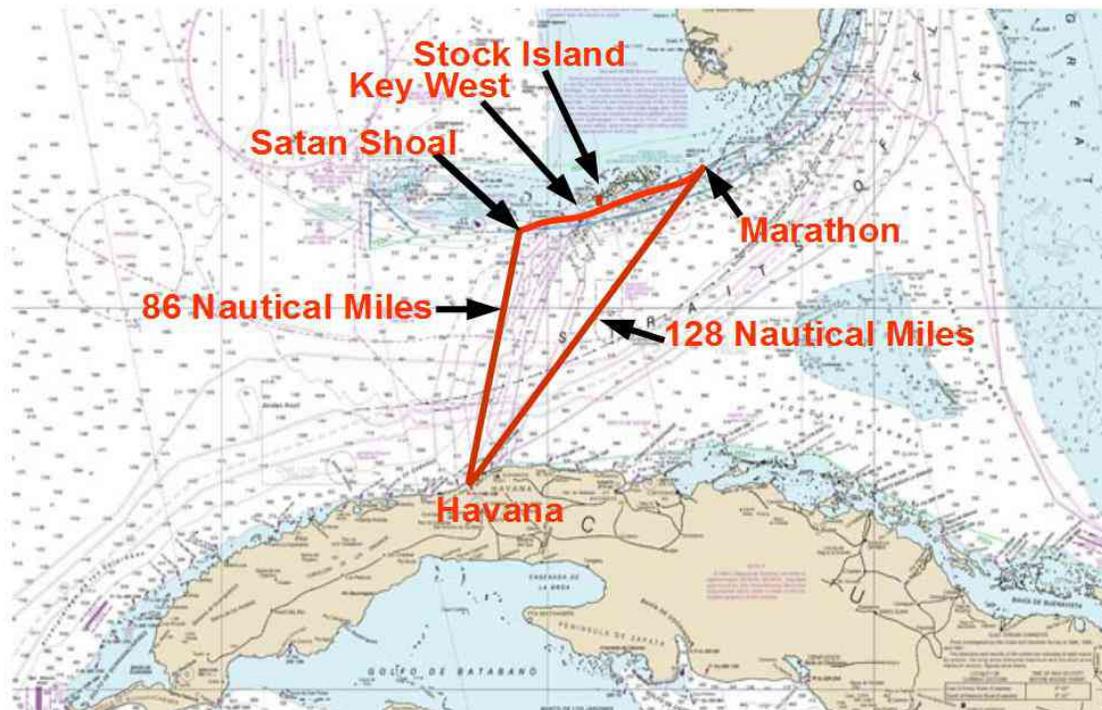
Roaming to Cuba Rich and Cheryll Odendahl – 2017

The planning for this trip has been going on for well over a year. We canceled last year after Cheryll broke her ankle, but it's completely healed now.

The American economic embargo is still theoretically in place, but in October 2016, the regulations were further loosened to allow Americans to visit Cuba on a “people-to people”, educational trip. Tourists, er, students can self-certify that they meet the requirements. They must maintain a record of all financial transactions in Cuba, as well as an itinerary of full-time activities that involve interacting with the Cuban people. These records must be maintained for five years, just in case someone in the government decides to ask. Moreover, the Office of Foreign Asset Controls no longer issues a specific license for vessels if the visit is less than two weeks. The Coast Guard still issues a permit for private vessels. We applied in December, and our permit was issued during February. The loosening of the regulations has resulted in the number of permits increasing from 25 during 2014 to over 500 so far during 2017.

Credit and ATM cards don't yet work there, so we carried a great deal of cash. Four different insurance companies declined to issue a policy for a 25-foot, single-engine boat, so we did without. Cheryll bought provisions and items to give away from the dollar store like candy and shampoo. Rich downloaded nautical charts and spent much time preparing the boat mechanically and checking the safety equipment. Here Cheryll is reacquainting herself with the use of Roam's Lifesling.





When the forecast was good, we left our marina in Marathon, Florida for the six-hour run to Stock Island, near Key West. We stopped just long enough for diesel and pizza before continuing westward across the reef. At sunset we made a left turn to the deep ocean. It was a very dark night, so we don't really know how big the waves were, but the forecast was for 1-3 footers on the nose. The wind increased somewhat during the night, but Roam soldiered on, her bow dividing the waves into spray as high as the cabin top. We took turns resting, but it was difficult to sleep when we seemingly defied gravity; lifting off the mattress as Roam slid off the top of the larger waves. The adverse current gradually increased to over two and a half knots, so Rich pointed the boat a little further east in hopes of finding a counter-current as we approached the Cuban coast. The 101 mile trip from Stock Island to Havana took 19 and ½ hours, for a total of 25 and ½ hours from Marathon.



We tied to the customs dock at Marina Hemingway and prepared to host a parade of visitors. A doctor put on a lab coat to take our temperatures and fill out forms. Customs and Immigration also stopped by for paperwork and pictures. We were later visited by Agriculture Inspectors. We didn't give any cash tips to the officials but they all appreciated a cold drink from our refrigerator. The customs officer had never before seen a beer can insulator (Koozie). He was thrilled when we gave him a couple. The dockmaster and electrician who plugged in our cord clearly did expect cash tips, and we complied. All of the formalities cost \$65 for the boat plus \$86/person for visas.

The harbormaster and the government officials all said that they had never before seen a boat such as ours, so we are laying claim to being the first Ranger Tug to Cuba. We were easily the smallest foreign boat in the harbor. Cruising World magazine had a rally arrive the day before with 50 boats; mostly 40-60 foot sailboats. Several sailors stopped by asking about our crossing. It was acceptable for a 25-footer because we waited for a good weather window.





Marina Hemingway is a relic from capitalism's heydays of the 1950's and has seen little maintenance since then. We had one of the better slips as we only had to walk half a mile to the bathroom/shower facilities. Some slips are more than a mile's walk. There was no toilet paper in the men's room and most of the seats were gone. There are no facilities to pump out a waste holding tank, and you cannot leave the harbor without checking out and in with the officials. We doubt that the harbor has ever been dredged. The water is not considered potable, so we conserved what was in our tank. They have put in modern power pedestals, and we took on diesel (\$4.37/gallon) at a modern fuel facility. There are holes scattered about the landscape to trap the unwary pedestrian. Cubans would be incredulous to learn that you can sue someone in the USA if you trip on a crack in their sidewalk.



Here Cheryl is celebrating a successful crossing with a Mojito. We were crashing the gala Cruising World party at the Hemingway Yacht Club. The club tried very hard to host a nice pig roast, but there were no utensils, napkins or side dishes on the buffet table; just pork and Styrofoam plates. The Jews were out of luck. The club is struggling to keep up as the number of visiting yachties grows exponentially.



The 50 boats in the Cruising World Rally paraded in front of the Morro Castle across the harbor from Havana. They were not on a “people-to-people” visit, but rather participating in an internationally sanctioned “sporting event.”



We hired a guide, driver and car to take us touring in Havana for \$80 for the day.



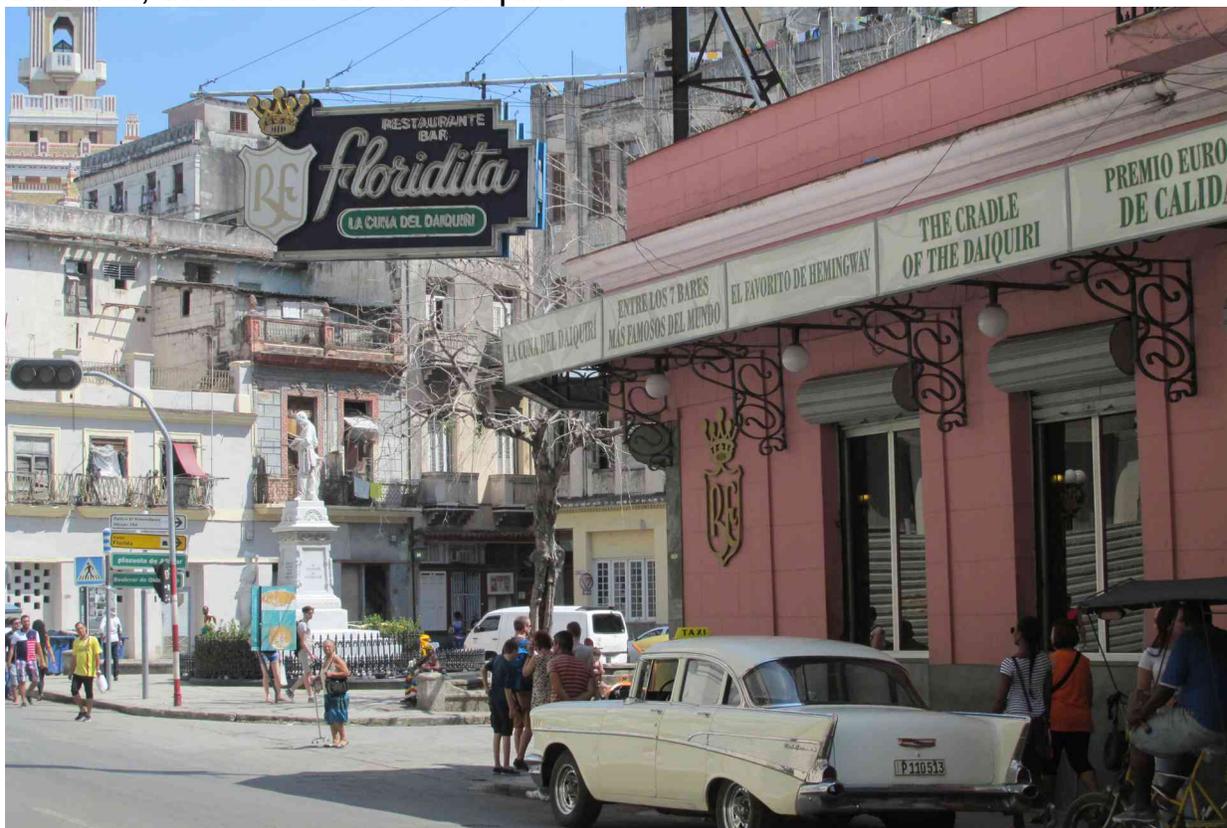
This is overlooking the city from the fort.



One of our goals was to visit Cuba before it was forever changed by tourism. We were too late. There are now dozens of regularly scheduled flights, and each day a cruise ship docks and disgorges over a thousand tourists, er, “people-to-people” educational visitors.



It was elbow-to-elbow, or should we say, “people-to-people” at Hemingway's favorite bar, the cradle of the daiquiri.



This is “Finca Vigia”, Ernest Hemingway's house in the outskirts of Havana.



Hemingway's boat, the Pilar is preserved at the house. There are pictures on display suggesting that he and Fidel Castro were fishing buddies.



The food was bland and basic. This is the house specialty “Pollo Cabana” at the Cabana Restaurant in downtown Havana.



But the cars were neither bland nor basic. Thousands of gorgeous 1940's and 1950's American cars are not only a tourist attraction (er, people-to-people educational apparatus), but a testament to the ingenuity of the mechanics who keep them running with no access to foreign parts. They still serve as basic transportation for people every day.



A trip to Cuba would be incomplete without an attempt to understand how the official communist economy coexists with the largely unofficial capitalist system. In the communist system, professional salaries are \$20-\$30 per month, but most people in Havana seem to earn quite a bit more. There are stories of teachers quitting their classrooms and engineers working as hotel doormen to earn multiples of their government salaries. You don't have to wander far from the tourist areas to find a crumbling, third-world city.



Rich; "Le gusta verde?" (Do you like green?)

Woman; "Si."

Rich "Quisiera una camisa?" (Would you like a shirt?) Cheryll gives her this.

Woman; Speechless. Eventually "Gracias, gracias!" as she ran off to show her friends.



One box of Cohiba Esplendidos costs \$750 in the official, government-run store or considerably less than \$750 when you buy them in a house on a back alley from someone who purportedly works in the factory and is allowed to take home five cigars each day for personal use. This wooden box even comes with stamps if you'd care to pretend that the taxes have been paid.



We took a public taxi to Playa Barracoa and had a few beers at this peaceful beach bar. We can't imagine how someone who earns \$20/month could afford \$1.50 beers. We also can't imagine how a small but significant percentage of 14-year-old girls can afford smart phones. Just what do their parents do to afford them? Some people are well-off, but there is also a lot of poverty and few birds compared to Florida. We also noticed a conspicuous absence of iguanas.



Of course, there are two sides to every story, so we also strove to learn the official government position on the rapidly changing economy. The downtown is bursting with statues, slogans and art that glorify the communist ideals and promise that the capitalists will be vanquished. Surveys still show considerable, if not majority, support for the government. Education and Fidel-Care are completely free. There is no income tax on government salaries.



We visited the Revolutionary Museum and learned how the evil, capitalist landholders held almost all of the wealth prior to the glorious revolution and enslaved the workers at starvation wages. Cartoons mock several former American presidents. This is the room where the new government was born.



Another good weather window arrived on our fifth day, so we decided to return a little earlier than planned. We cooked some chicken and made a sandwich for our security guard. Cheryl put it on a paper plate with some cookies and Rich delivered it to his station. He brought back the paper plate. He had probably never seen one in his life. We can't imagine living in a land without toilet paper, napkins or paper plates. We gave hats to him and his co-worker and then took this picture.



Some of the rally members were also leaving for the overnight crossing at the same time, so we had some company within marine VHF radio range. As we approached the Florida Keys in the morning, this Coast Guard Cutter altered his course in our direction, but then went on without a word. Whatever discomforts we experienced during the crossing were trivial compared to what the illegal immigrants must have felt as this boat approached their overcrowded, rickety boats when they were just a few miles from the American shore.



The 128 NM trip directly back to Marathon took 17 hours with the help of the current. Checking back in with US Customs and Immigration was a simple phone call from the marina after we tied up. Nobody came to inspect us, and we were issued a clearance number without delay.



We're glad that we made this trip, and we can recommend a local contact for anyone considering a trip to Havana by private boat or on the airlines. Cuba is a fascinating place. It's changing rapidly. We'll be closely watching the future of its official communist economy. Raul Castro has announced that he will step down during 2018 and a successor has been named. Will the leaders go the way of the birds and the iguanas? Time will tell. But we don't need to return any time soon.



This report should serve as official evidence of our educational, “people-to-people” visit, but the required record of financial transactions, particularly for the cigars, will be maintained separately.

We don't yet know where Roam will bring us next, so stay tuned at;
<http://odendahls.com/roam/>