

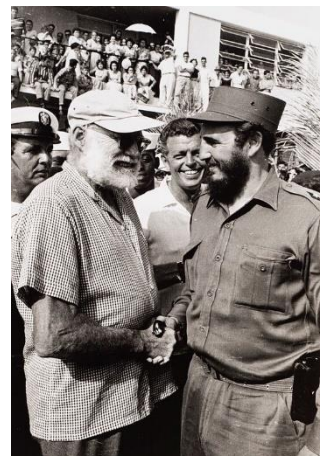


Crossing the Florida Straits from Key West to Havana is a relatively easy 100 nm trip, provided you're on a proper ship. For the hundreds of Cuban refugees, who attempt this passage every year in the opposite direction on all kind of floating gear, it's a nightmare and often a unsurpassable obstacle. The strong Gulf Stream from the West meets the trade winds coming from the East, to create choppy seas.

Crossing the Florida Straits from Key West to Havana also means traveling from the land of plenty into one of the poorest countries in the Caribbean. We stocked up on everything, from fresh fruit and vegetables to dog food, milk, pasta, bread, cheese, corn flakes, muesli, yoghurt, cans of tomato sauce, beer, and off course fuel.

We left our anchorage in Key West just past midnight, in order to arrive in Marina Hemingway near Havana before nightfall, as the entrance to the marina is tight, with some cross currents and often a dangerous surge.

Ernest Hemingway, a notorious traveller in the early 20th century, lived both in Key West and in Havana for quite some



time. He gave his name to the marina near Havana, that for many boaters is the gateway to Havana and Cuba. The marina has a capacity of 350 boats, in a system with 4 canals, boarded by what used to be restaurants, hotels, waterfront villa's,



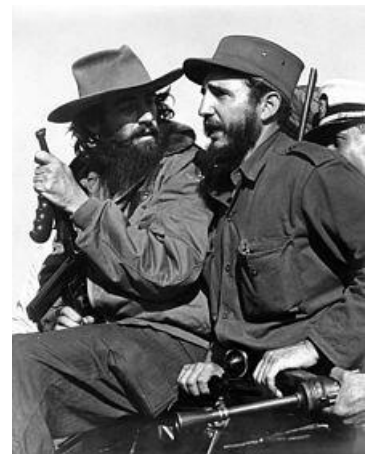
tennis courts, a bowling, swimming pools, boutiques, a full service boat yard and a dive shop. We were there with only 4 other cruisers, most of the remaining boats seemed abandoned, with the exception of a small sport fishing fleet. The accommodation dates from the second half of the 20th century, seems not in use anymore and is in urgent need of renovation and a new purpose.

For us, using the services of driver George in the Oldsmobile he inherited from his grandfather, Marina Hemingway was the ideal starting point to explore Havana, armed with our cell phones as cameras.

Some historic perspective

In the 1950's, when Cuba was ruled by the US-backed military dictator Batista, the capital Havana was corrupt and overrun by brothels, casino's and gangsters, who considered Cuba the playground of the United States. More than half of the population of Cuba suffered from under-nourishment and poverty in the 1950's.

After a failed coup in 1953, Fidel Castro, a young revolutionary, was imprisoned for 15 years, but released in 1955, as Batista did not consider him a threat anymore.



Fidel fled to Mexico, where he met Argentinian Che Guevara, and together they prepared the Revolution in Cuba. In 1956 they landed the yacht Granma with 81 revolutionaries on a mangrove shore in Cuba, and started a guerrilla war from the Sierra Maestra mountains, that would last for three years. Eventually



Batista fled the country, giving Fidel Castro the opportunity to set up a government and eventually establishing a Marxist–Leninist socialist state in 1965, backed by the USSR.

By redividing the wealth, fighting illiteracy and providing every Cuban with proper housing, basic food, education and health care, for 25 years the Cuban revolution was a successful example of a state run economy. Cuba was supported by Russia to export the Revolution to countries across the world. In response president Kennedy proclaimed a trade embargo with Cuba in 1965, which is still in place today.

When the iron curtain fell, support from Russia diminished, and the government of Cuba struggled to provide each Cuban with food and basic services. Cuba had to reinvent itself, and Fidel Castro pulled the tourist flag, building exclusive government owned resorts along Cuba's pristine beaches. Each tourist brought in dollars, a hard currency needed by the government to import basic goods to feed the people.



For the last two years, due to Covid, Cuba was closed for tourism, and no foreign currency entered the country. Only now tourists are slowly trickling in again. On top of that, in early 2021, the government introduced a new peso, which dramatically reduced the buying power of the people. During our stay of one month in Cuba the peso already devaluated 20%. Everybody is trying to get hard currency, as even the official government shops, where one can find beer, rum and some basic groceries, can only be paid in dollars. If tourism doesn't pick up quickly, Cubans will suffer from mal-nourishment again, 65 years after their revolution.



Havana – Marina Hemingway – 07/01 – 15/01/2022

Despite the obvious poverty of the people, strolling through old Havana is a festival of colours, buildings in urgent need of restoration, old cars, tricycles carrying all kind of goods, fruit and vegetable stands, and the occasional open door that gives you a glimpse of the daily life of the Habaneros. School children in nice uniforms, women queuing in front of grocery stores, their humming voices discussing the latest news, bare chested men leaning against their door post observing the busy streets, money changers trying to do some business, and the occasional tourist.

Since our last visit some 11 years ago, private initiative has been allowed by the government, resulting in some trendy bars and restaurants that are happy to see foreigners coming in again. Mojito's and Cuba Libres are mixed to perfection, some bars offer nice tapas and breathe nostalgia through their history, the art on display, the furniture and the live music played. If you would pay using the official exchange rate, a Mojito would typically cost you 6-10 US dollars, of you had the chance to exchange on the black market, you would pay 1.5 to 2.5\$.



In Jaimanitas, the village next to the marina, we visit the house of José Rodríguez Fuster, an artist inspired by Gaudi and Brancusi. Over the last 15 years he has rebuilt and decorated the small fishing town, creating a unique work of public art, decorating over 80 houses with murals, domes and ceramics.



Only a few kilometres from Varadero, Marina Darsena, near the village of Santa Marta, appears to be far from this mass tourism. We are the only visiting yacht. Debbie, a Canadian cruiser who has lived on her boat in the marina for the last 21 years, gladly directs us to the market in Santa Marta, introduces us to the right people in the marina and looks after us like a worried mother-hen. If each marina in Cuba had a person like Debbie, it



would be paradise for cruisers. In the past the marina would regularly have 10 cruisers visiting at the same time, with barbeques and pot lucks on the jetty, with live music and late nights. Due to Covid, we are only the fourth or fifth visitor in the last two years, which explains why Debbie is so happy to see us.

We have diner in La Casa de Al, supposedly the old beach house of Al

Capone, with a beautiful view over the light blue sea.

In Matanzas, the provincial capital, we visit the Museo Farmaceutico, the only French Apothecary to be preserved worldwide. Entering this old store is a journey back in time, with a complete inventory of laboratory equipment, hundreds of bottles filled with chemical substances and century year old recipe books.

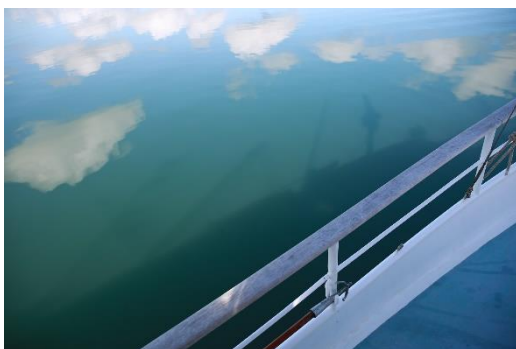


For Sylvie, a visit to the white beaches of Varadero is the best therapy, looking over the light blue sea, soaking up the sun.



When our daughter Jeanne continues to test false positive for Covid in Belgium, even 14 days after recovering, we decide to head further East along the Cuban North coast. We might have to wait until Jamaica, where antigen tests are accepted, to let Jeanne come over. Poor girl, sitting in cold rainy dark Belgium, while we look for shade in 33 degrees Celsius with a cold beer... Hope she has some friends to party with.

Puerto de Vita – 23/01 – 25/01/2022



A weather window opens for us, and we decide to leave the Gardena del Rey to starboard, with all its nice cayo's (=Spanish for keys), shallow light blue waters, bordered by mangroves and white beaches, and we proceed east from Varadero for 2 days and nights, to reach Puerto de Vita, situated in a well-protected bay. Again we are the only

visiting yacht, the beautiful small marina is situated in the middle of the mangroves, with a restaurant on the hill overlooking the Bahia de Vita.



In the small village of Vita we are invited by Joanna and her sister Anna, to eat arroz congri, rice and black beans, in their backyard. Anna's granddaughter studies medicine in Holguin, and would love to become a doctor in Europe. They offer us mango's and plantane, and we bring them some milk and groceries which we bought in the USA.



On an excursion to Holguin, the provincial capital, our 1955 Dodge loses a front wheel while cruising the bumpy roads. The driver expertly directs the car to the curb, calls a friend to pick us up for the city tour and puts on his overalls to start the repairs, in 35 degrees Celsius.

By the time we return from the city, he has isolated the problem, a new part is on the way, and he will be on the road again in half an hour. Before we leave, he proudly shows us the 6 cylinder Mercedes turbo engine he has installed in his car...



Santiago de Cuba – Marina Punta Gorda – 26/01 – 29/01/2022

After two days we leave Puerto de Vita early, passing the eastern tip of Cuba at night. In the morning, south of Guantanamo Bay, we are firmly instructed to maintain a 3nm distance from the shore and we get an escort of American fast patrol boats. Finally, in the afternoon, we enter Santiago de Cuba, the capital of Son music, with a spirit of rebellion and independence, situated more than 850 km from the capital Havana.



Santiago de Cuba is a distant poor cousin to Havana, and when entering the bay, fishermen rowing out on a truck tyre are a first witness of the poverty that reigns in this part of Cuba. In Marina Punta Gorda, we are received by Jorge, the harbour master, who gladly helps us to organise our stay here.

When we visited this city eleven years ago, the streets were filled with music, and there was a vitality to it which we miss today. Lack of tourism due to Covid and financial reforms have damaged the free spirit of its inhabitants. When we visit de Casa de las Tradiciones, home to the Buenavista Social Club, the place is closed, our guide gets us in, but we are the only visitors.

The home of Fidel Castro, the school he attended, the Parque Cespedes, where Fidel gave his first speeches, modern Cuban music, it all originates from here, but we miss the rebellious spirit.

One evening Jorge joins me on the boat. He accepts the can of beer which I offer him, but puts it away for his 63th birthday next week, and will drink water. A child of the revolution, he has lived in socialist Cuba all his life.

He explains that the government still does not allow free enterprise, and will skim any excess profit. Even today Cubans are not allowed to travel freely in their own country, there is an informant for each community of approximately 100 people,



who keeps a book on all your activities. For the moment the government supplies only the very basic food necessities, one bun per person per day, half a pound of rice per person per month, some cooking oil. There is no milk in the country, etc... When I tell him that we ran out of Nutella chocolate spread, he asks me to give him the empty jar, as he and his wife have never tasted Nutella.

From the stories we heard along our trip in Cuba this year, we understand why in July 2021 some people took the streets and protested against the government, triggered by a shortage in food and medicines.

Where the older generation in Cuba have lived a mostly isolated life from the rest of the world, nowadays the government has lost the narrative and the battle of ideas as the young people see what is possible via the internet, they meet tourists when working in the hotels, and realise that although the government feeds, houses, educates and takes care of its people, salaries of 20–30 USD per month are not liveable in modern Cuba.

Jorge, at 63 years old, will not take the streets anymore, he has children and grandchildren. But he fears for their future, he expects some serious clashes with the younger generations in the next years, and hopes that Cuba will keep its identity and its dignity, without becoming the whore house of mass tourism or the holiday resort for the Americans.

