

RACING TO HAVANA: THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

By Neil Davies

PENSACOLA A LA HABANA - 2017

If you are thinking of participating in the 2017 Pensacola a la Habana Race, start planning now. The purpose of this article is to provide some assistance with the planning process, particularly if you have not previously participated in this race or a similar race, and to give some insight into some of the timeframes involved.



We want to provide prospective participants in the 2017 event with some idea of what to expect, and some food for thought when preparing for the trip. The starting premise is that you have a sea-worthy boat capable of safely making offshore passages, and a crew with the experience and training needed to make the trip. This article should not be used as a safety or readiness “check-list”. All skippers should develop their own list specific to their boat and situation, and in consideration of the Notice of Race, Sailing Instructions, and regulatory requirements.

MAKING THE COMMITMENT

When making the commitment to participate in an offshore race, there is obviously a considerable commitment of both time and resources involved. The time commitment includes both upfront preparation (administrative and boat preparation) and the time to participate in the race and return the boat to homeport. In addition to time, the resource commitment may include work for the owner and crew to prepare the boat, and of course the financial cost of any needed additional equipment, race fees and other trip expenses.

TIME

Here are a few thoughts on the time commitment:

- **Boat Preparation** – This will be completely dependent upon the individual boat, but I would suggest starting with a review of the race requirements and rules to develop a list of needed equipment and upgrades well in advance of the race (3-4 months minimum). Pay particular attention to safety equipment, including required storm sails, life-raft, and more. Some items may need to be purchased or leased and may have long lead or delivery times.
- **Administrative** – This involves the time needed to review and complete the application processes, as follows:
 - **PHRF Certificate** – Be sure you have a valid and up to date GYA PHRF Certificate for your boat. If it is out of date, contact GYA and start the update/renewal process. Allow one month.
 - **Boat Documentation** – Make sure your boat documentation and registration are up to date.

<https://www.uscg.mil/d7/docs/Cuban%20permitCG3300.pdf> . The permit application is straightforward, but does require a crew list. USCG is currently asking for 21 days to approve the permit application, but typically responds within 10 days. I would suggest applying at least a month ahead of the race. If the crew list is not final, include all potential crew members. A change in crew list requires a new permit, but my experience is that it is easier to delete a member than to add one. I also found out that the USCG requires hard arrival and departure dates (do not use approximately May 3, etc.) One would think that the USCG would understand that sailing is "weather dependent", but please use hard dates and be prepared to email the USCG with any changes. Your application should also be sent with a cover letter indicating which category or categories of the General Permit your trip complies with and a statement that you understand that you are only allowed to stay 14 day or less. At the time of writing, the fastest way to get an approval is to email or fax you completed application and cover letter to:

MST1 Joseph Wilson (email: Joseph.D.Wilson@uscg.mil)
District 7 Response Division
909 SE 1st Ave.
Miami, FL 33131
305-415-6820
305-415-6791 fax

- **Cuban Permits** – No advance Cuban Permits are required. You will pay for and obtain a visa for each crew member, and a cruising permit for the boat upon arrival. In June 2016, the cost was \$75 per person for the Visa and \$35 per boat for a cruising permit. Note that prices have increased several times in the past 12 months, so check on current information. These prices are in US dollars and only cash is accepted.
- **Race Duration and Return Trip** – Depending upon weather and your boat, the trip to Cuba is likely to take between 3 ½ to 4 ½ days. The race is currently planned to leave Pensacola on Sunday April 30, 2017, so most boats will arrive in Havana on the following Wednesday and Thursday. The Castillo del Morro race will be held on Saturday, May 6 as will the Trophy Presentation. This will allow race participants time to explore Havana and participate in other planned excursions. We also hope to have an informal raft-up/cruise to another Cuban destination for any cruisers wishing to participate on the return trip home. Obviously some crews will be more pressed for time, but I would recommend making a trip out of the return home if at all possible. In either event, you should likely plan on a minimum of 10 days for the race and return, allowing for weather and at least some sightseeing.
- **Time in Cuba** – As stated earlier, the working assumption is that most participants will limit



their stay in Cuba to less than 14 days. That said, we are planning to organize several excursions for those wishing to participate. Marina Hemingway is a 15-minute cab ride from Havana. So realistically, to see and experience Havana you will need at least one full day in Havana. We are also considering organizing other non-race activities, which will include parties, a night out in Havana, and may include a land excursion to Cuba's south coast. If there is sufficient interest, we may also include an informal "raft-up" for the return trip home in either Veradero or Cayo Levisa.

RESOURCES

Here are a few thoughts on resources. In the context of this article, resources really mean man-power and money. It is unrealistic for one person to do everything, so the key is developing a plan and dividing up certain responsibilities between the owner and crew. Here are some thoughts on the major items and activities:

- **Costs** – The owner should develop a detailed budget for the race and return trip home, and decide which costs will be covered by the owner and which will be shared. Shared costs should be communicated to the crew well in advance so that there are "no surprises". Typical shared costs might include:
 - Entry Fees
 - Purchase or rental of safety equipment not typically kept on the boat
 - Provisions
 - Visas and cruising permit
 - Docking/marina fees in Cuba and on the return
 - Fuel and consumables
- **Money in Cuba** – There are two forms of currency in Cuba: (i) the CUC and (ii) the Cuban peso. In general, you will only need the CUC. Note that US credit cards and ATM cards cannot be used in Cuba (although this may be changing), so you will need sufficient cash for the trip. The US dollar has a 15% surcharge on exchange to CUCs, so it may be better to take Canadian dollars, Euros, or British pounds. At the time of writing, 1 CUC = \$1.15.
- **Long-Lead Items** – Make certain that one or more crew members have the responsibility for getting any long-lead items in time for the departure date. These may be items that need to be purchased, rented, or borrowed that may not be typically carried by the boat. Some of these items may need to be purchased and installed or reserved and rented in advance, and may include items such as:
 - Storm sails
 - Communications equipment (sat phone, tracker, etc.)
 - Life raft
- **Work Days** – It may be beneficial to have one or more "work days" for the crew to get the boat ready. This also provides a good opportunity to familiarize the crew with the boat, its systems, safety equipment etc.
- **Practice Sails** – If the crew is not a regular crew to the boat, it is definitely advisable to have one or more practice sails. In addition to general familiarization with the boat, make sure the crew

knows how to deploy safety equipment, operate reefing systems, knows locations of critical items including through-hulls, fire extinguishers etc. Make a chart of your boat indicating the location of all thru-hull fittings, shutoff valves, and safety equipment to post in several locations in your boat.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Neil Davies is a Professional Engineer and has now visited Cuba on two occasions: (i) as a participant in the inaugural Pensacola a Habana Race in 2015; and (ii) as part of a recent cruise to Mexico (Isla Mujeres) and Cuba in 2016. Neil is a keen sailor and owns a 1997 Hunter 42 Passage. Neil describes himself as a "cruiser" rather than a racer and has now completed several off-shore cruises including Mexico, Cuba and the Bahamas, as well as numerous bareboat charters.



HAVE FUN!

Come join us for the Pensacola to Havana 2017 Race! If you have any questions, feel free to contact one of our organizing committee members.

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