

A Visit to Cuban Waters as Part of the Miami to Havana Race

Capt. Ron Schaper | April 12, 2016



The fleet sets out from Miami for once-forbidden Havana.

“Tack! Tack!” I roared. “Those are the lights of Cuba over there. We don’t need any gunboats threatening us.”

It was 1974. We were returning from a winter in the West Indies aboard Golden Eagle, a classic 72ft wooden ketch. After leaving Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, we rounded the west end of Cuba, taking care to not venture too close. With the wind on the nose, our port tack brought us within sight of the coast, which was closer than I wanted to be. Without the luxury of electronics, I had to rely on the vagaries of dead reckoning and questionable sextant positions, skewed by a fast-flowing Gulf Stream and a not too weatherly full-keeled ketch that made lots of leeway.

Fast forward 42 years to the Inaugural Miami to Havana Race, and we had all manner of electronics, currents data, winds and weather overlays on chartplotters showing us exactly where we were and how we were being set. Plus, until we lost cellular coverage from the Keys, we could locate our competition on the race tracking site.

Oh, and following President Obama’s decision to begin normalizing relations with our neighbor just 90 miles to the south of Key West, we no longer had to worry about any pesky gunboats.



The crew works to maintain boatspeed off South Florida

Our ride, John Evans's lovely Jasmine, a classic 26-year-old 62,000lb Little Harbor 54, was rated the same as the competing lightweight flyer Hobie 33s and a J/105. Our track plan was based upon avoiding the area of the compressed Gulf Stream where it was joined by the Gulf of Mexico loop current. East of that area, the current appeared to spread out and weaken. The wind was predicted to clock to the east, providing a good hot angle to Havana.

At start time at 1300 on February 10, there was only 4 to 6 knots of variable wind, leaving boats scattered and searching for breeze with spinnakers alternately filling and falling. Around sunset, a 12 knot WNW breeze filled in, which built and backed through the night. Just as in the Key West Race a month earlier, the Gulf Stream was offshore, providing us with either a fair countercurrent or slight head current. Half way down the Keys a tactical decision had to be made: sail the rhumb line direct to Havana and risk more adverse Gulf Stream, or continue to hug the Keys reefs, heading west out of the current. The 69ft Trebuchet, with blistering boatspeed, shot straight through on the direct course, reasoning that the powerful Gulf Stream current was only a fraction of their Speed Over Ground. For the rest of us slower boats, the percentage in loss of progress resulted in many varied tracks to Cuba.



Jasmine rests at the dock after the finish

There were a lot of different thoughts on the best track across the Gulf Stream. Aboard Jasmine, while we had it planned out on paper, we were met with as much as 4½ knots of current against us in rough confused seas. Some boats found sweet spots of little current; none of us saw the westbound coastal current that was reported in literature and firsthand accounts.

Unlike 42 years earlier, we actually sought and welcomed the loom of Havana's city lights. In the churning seaway it made an easier target to steer by than the wildly swinging compass or rapidly changing GPS numbers.

As we approached the Cuban coastline, a sudden wind shift forced us to snuff the spinnaker and close reach with the jib. The crew was perched on the weather rail, soaking up the sights and smells of the now nearby coast. The sweet smell of the tobacco harvest and the lights and music of Havana beckoned as we carefully picked out the finish line against the background lights. For us it was a challenging 36 hours. For the pace-setter, Trebuchet, the new course record to beat: 19 hours 36 minutes.

After that it was clear customs and immigration and finally secure alongside in Marina Hemingway at 0330 am. So, what do sailors do when they finish a race? Drink beer! So it was off to find a bar open at 0345 in a strange new port. The Jasmine crew made quick work of it at the still open hotel bar, with beers costing 50 cents and rum drinks for one dollar! This gave a new meaning to Cuba Libre.

The culmination of the race was the Sunday night party, complete with two 150lb roasted pigs and unlimited rum drinks. Jasmine earned a respectable 3rd in class, 12th in fleet. The noisy crowd drew silent as the race was dedicated to our dear recently departed sailor friend Buck Gillette, a long-time leader in the Florida racing scene. I could see his smile in the crescent moon overhead.

For more on the race, which was hosted by Miami's Coral Reef Yacht Club and the Hemingway International Yacht Club of Cuba, visit havanarace.org.

