



STORY BY PETER SWANSON

# AN EVEN GREATER LOOP

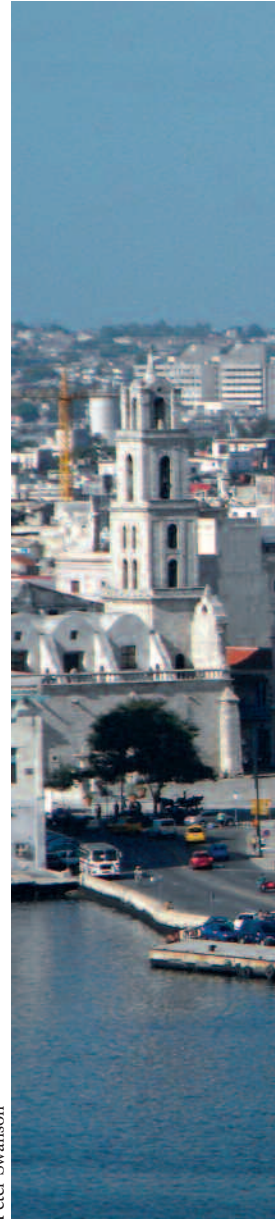
OPENING CUBA TO U.S. VESSELS WOULD MEAN  
BAHAMAS CRUISERS COULD RETURN HOME VIA HAVANA

*"I'm ready for some fresh, new cruising spots, and the idea of seeing Cuba on my horizon once again makes my heart sing."—Milt Baker, Nordhavn 47 Bluewater*

The popularity of America's Great Loop, despite some long, dreary stretches, reveals an essential truth about the psychology of cruising. Blame Magellan and all the circumnavigators that followed in his wake: most of us would rather not go home the way we came, whether we are navigating a trawler or driving a Toyota.

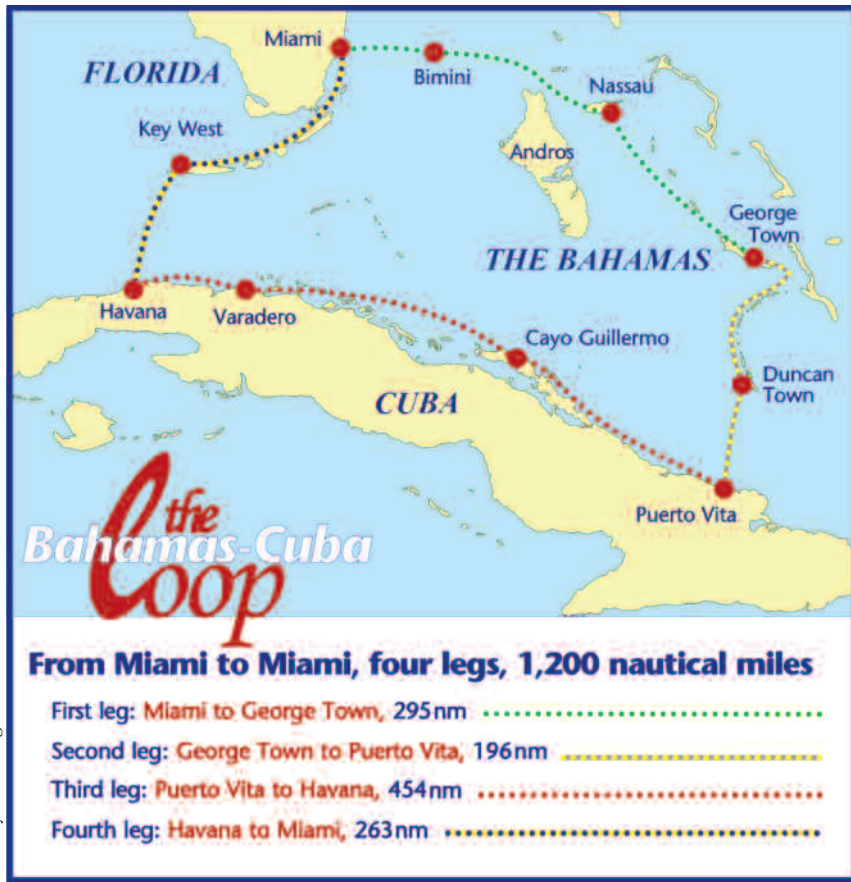
If proposed U.S. legislation to lift the ban on travel to Cuba becomes law, tens of thousands of American boats of all types will cross the Straits of Florida to visit this enormous, friendly, and largely undeveloped next-door neighbor. The Bahamian hospitality industry and its counterparts throughout the Caribbean are terrified that normal relations between Washington and Havana will result in devastating revenue losses.

Personally, I can hardly wait until Cuba's 3,000-mile shoreline is open to U.S. citizens and their boats. That said, I don't believe Bahamians dependent on cruiser dollars will suffer as much as feared. The reason is simple. Though many skippers may choose Cuba over the Bahamas, opening Cuba will create an enticing new cruising route that incorporates both. I call it "the Bahamas-Cuba Loop."



Peter Swanson





Courtesy of [cruisingcuba.net](http://cruisingcuba.net)

cross the Gulf Stream, and set a course for the Exumas. The cays of this 113-mile archipelago are stepping stones leading the fleet south to the enormous anchorage at George Town on Great Exuma.

This popular route would be the first leg of the Bahamas-Cuba Loop, which, for the sake of discussion, begins and ends in Miami. From Miami to George Town is about 295 nautical miles. The second leg, from George Town to Puerto Vita, on the north coast of Cuba, is 196 nautical miles. The third leg, from Vita to Havana, is 454 nautical miles, and the fourth and final leg returns to Miami from Havana for another 263 nautical miles.

Those distances add up to 1,200 nautical miles, not a voyage to be undertaken lightly or quickly. If today's cruising patterns are any indication, most participants in the Bahamas-Cuba Loop would probably set off from Miami in January and return four to five months later—at the very latest before July, with its sweltering heat and prospects for hurricanes.

As mentioned, American and Canadian

cruisers are well acquainted with the George Town leg. Boats begin arriving in December, and by February more than 400 are anchored in the roadstead off the settlement. By April, foreign boats are leaving, a few continuing to the Caribbean, but most just going home the way they came.

The arrival of so many foreign retirees transforms George Town into a floating North American suburb even more organized than the places many cruisers say they are trying to escape. Mornings begin with "the net," a daily VHF broadcast with schedules for volleyball, tennis, bridge, golf, and bocce tournaments; softball; lessons in yoga and watercolors; excursions; sailing regattas; a variety show; and beach church—to name a few. Did I mention happy hour and the potluck supper?

### THE JUMENTOS SEE MORE FOREIGN BOATS

This kind of happy hoopla is not for everybody, as you can well imagine. Over the past decade, a growing number of George Town boats have quietly raised the hook and gone off to explore the Bahamas' last frontier, the Jumentos and the Ragged Island archipelago. Like rungs on a ladder, the Jumento Cays and Ragged Islands lead southward toward Puerto Vita, which ends the second leg of the Bahamas-Cuba Loop.

One of the trawlers that will cruise the Loop is *Bluewater*, Milt Baker's Nordhavn 47. Baker and his wife have been cruising full time since 2000, when they sold their marine bookstore in Ft. Lauderdale.

"When I owned a Grand Banks 42, I took it to Cuba twice," Baker says. "My last trip there was in the 1990s and was authorized by the U.S. government because I went down to purchase Cuban hydrographic charts to sell at Bluewater Books & Charts, which I owned at the time. I brought back the first Cuban government charts. There's been a shroud of mystery around the island for most of my life, and I'd love to go back and see more of Cuba. You can be sure that my boat will be cruising in Cuba not long after the embargo is lifted.

"The Bahamas-Cuba Loop appeals to me in a big way. I've spent nearly 35 years cruising the Eastern Seaboard from Halifax to the Florida Keys, the Bahamas, the eastern Caribbean, Venezuela, Bermuda, and the Mediterranean. I'm ready for some fresh, new cruising spots, and the idea of seeing Cuba on my horizon once again makes my heart sing."

### LEG ONE IS THE GEORGE TOWN MIGRATION

Each winter, hundreds of cruising vessels—about 10–15 percent of them trawlers—leave ports in South Florida,



The Explorer Chartbooks are indispensable resources for Bahamas cruising. Whether by clever design or for reasons of space, the publisher includes the Jumentos in the same region as the Exumas, which means that every vessel bound for George Town has charts for the Jumentos, as well. I doubt visits to the Jumentos would be increasing had Explorer included this region in its *Far Bahamas* book instead.

Credit another cruising guide author, Stephen J. Pavlidis, with having stirred our interest in the Jumentos. His guide *On and Off the Beaten Path: The Central and Southern Bahamas Guide* is simply among the best ever written, with superb harbor charts and navigational directions. Credit also single-sideband weather guru Chris Parker, who provides daily forecasts for each region of the Bahamas, often including Jumentos-specific weather information.

Duncan Town in the Jumentos is just 67 nautical miles due north of the Cuban port of entry at Vita, which already boasts a serviceable and friendly marina. Between Vita and Havana—our third leg—lie dozens of anchorages and four marinas, although three of the four are grouped within 80 miles of the capital. The timing could not be better, because the north coast of Cuba enjoys its most settled weather during March and April, and as Pavlidis was quick to note when we discussed the Loop idea, the westward run is downwind and down-wave.

“The Loop from George Town to Cuba and Key West will certainly become a popular route, making Cuba’s north coast anchorages available to those who would enjoy a downhill run,” Pavlidis says. “Those that head to Havana from Key West will be hard pressed to enjoy those same anchorages without the burden of going against wind and sea.”

The fourth leg finds us back in home waters after the 90-mile crossing from Havana to Key West and a cruise up the Florida Keys to Miami. Alternately, some northbound cruisers may choose to set a course for Fort Myers and take the Okeechobee Waterway, rejoining the Intracoastal Waterway at Stuart and thus bypassing South Florida altogether.

Much has been written about the Exumas and the Florida Keys, so this article will focus on the lesser-known waters of the Jumentos and the north coast of Cuba, the second and third legs of our Loop. Though I have cruised the Bahamas extensively, including some of the remote Out Islands, I have never been to the Jumentos. Instead, I have corresponded with Pavlidis and others who have.

Here’s how Pavlidis describes the “croissant-shaped chain of islands” in his book: “Here you can relax, enjoy



Peter Swanson



Sara and Monte Lewis

Top: A Great Harbour 47 moves through the anchorage at George Town in the Exumas. Above: Duncan Town residents hosted cruisers for a picnic last Valentine’s Day. Fifteen foreign boats were anchored off Ragged Island.

life at your own pace, and rarely see another human being except for the local fishermen who frequent these islands in great numbers. This is my favorite island chain in the Bahamas. Giving away the navigational information to allow cruisers to have a safe, enjoyable, memorable cruise through these cays is like giving away my daughter.” He describes the fishing, diving, and beachcombing as superb.

### DUNCAN TOWN POISED TO BE A WAY STATION

David Allester is a Canadian writer with vast cruising experience. His wife is singer-songwriter Eileen Quinn, well known in boating circles for having recorded five

CDs of songs about the cruising lifestyle. Until they sold their 36-foot sailboat a couple years back, they were full-time cruisers and veterans of the Bahamas-Cuba Loop, although there was no name for it at the time. Here is Allester's description of Duncan Town on Ragged Island:

"By the time one reaches Ragged Island, the only inhabited island in the entire chain, the cruising crowd is pretty sparse, even now. And Ragged Island is definitely the end of the line. With nothing but the deep blue water of the Old Bahama Channel stretching to the south, it seems like the world ends there. And for all of the attention that they get from the government in Nassau, the 80 residents of this small outpost sometimes feel they've actually fallen off the edge."



Left: El Morro Castle guards the entrance to Havana Harbor, which is restricted to ship traffic and commercial vessels. Right: The pub at the Puerto Vita marina sits on a bluff overlooking the bay.

One of those residents is Wilson Percy, an ambitious man known for Percy's Eagle Nest, a Duncan Town tavern with a DC-3 airplane on the roof, and also for his plan to establish a nudist colony on Jamaica Cay. Percy envisions the Loop raising the standard of living for his hardscrabble island community.

"This area has a great future," Allester quotes Percy as saying. "We have two of the best legal businesses possible, fishing and tourism. A fisherman can make \$100,000 a year here. We're at the gateway to Cuba—it's only 60 miles away. When Cuba opens up, there will be all kinds of boat traffic through here. All we have to do is build the facilities, and people will stop. I tell the other islanders that's what they should be doing with their money."

Percy's exhortations appear to be gaining traction;

there were 15 foreign boats at Duncan Town when Explorer publishers Monte and Sara Lewis visited last February in their Mainship 34.

"We visited Duncan Town this past winter and had a much more favorable impression than we did 15 years ago, when it seemed to be largely controlled by the drug trade," Sara Lewis says. "Now it is friendly and welcoming and has a few more services to offer boaters. There are some enterprising folks on Ragged Island who just might be encouraged to provide even more services if the traffic were to increase."

Allester, Pavlidis, and the Lewises all stress the same point when they discuss cruising the Jumentos. This is a region where the skipper and crew need to be at the top



Photos by Peter Swanson

of their game. Self-reliance is essential. There is no TowBoatU.S. service; there are no stores to sell you spare parts. If you go to the Jumentos believing that other cruisers will bail you out of trouble, you are a menace to others. The same can be said of cruising Cuba.

### THE UNDEVELOPED NORTH COAST OF CUBA

I have visited Cuba three times as a journalist, first in 2002 while working full time as an editor at *PMM*. We took a Great Harbour N37 to photograph in front of Havana's El Morro Castle for the cover of the magazine. Despite my professional exemption from the U.S. travel ban, the Bush administration refused to grant permission for me to take a boat on my second visit to Cuba, and I had no time to do so on the third.

On those latter occasions, I traveled by air to Havana



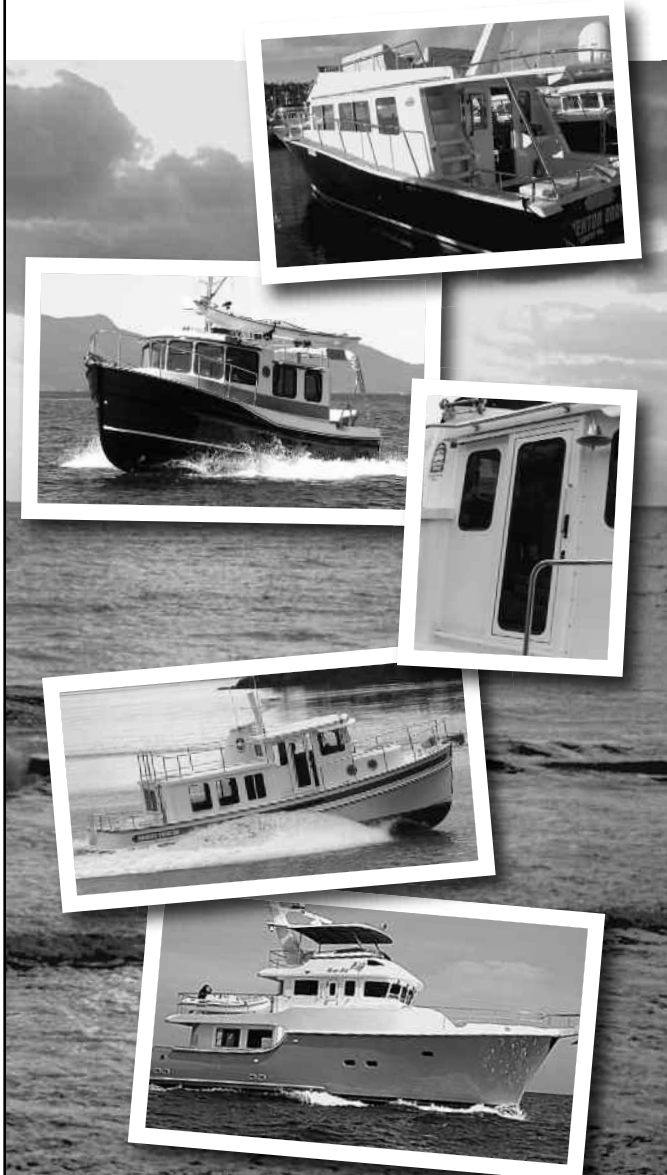
Photos by Peter Swanson

Top: Marina Darsena at Varadero is one of two facilities that accommodate transient vessels at the Cuban beach resort. Above: Port clearance procedures are an issue for anyone cruising Cuba, but the officials themselves are polite and professional. The man at left is a doctor.

and visited ports and harbors on the north coast by rental car to supplement interviews with dozens of sailors who have cruised this region. Most of those I spoke with were Canadian or European and therefore were unaffected by the U.S. travel ban. My most recent visit to Cuba was in July.

One man whose observations I trust is my good friend Bruce Van Sant, author of the well-known *Gentleman's Guide to Passages South: The Thornless Path to Windward*. Van Sant cruised along the north coast of Cuba on his Schucker 440 trawler, researching anchorages and weather conditions, and shared his findings with me.

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Van Sant anchored *Tidak Apa* in six places on the route from Puerto Vita to Varadero, a beach resort 60 nautical miles east of Havana. After Vita, Van Sant made an overnight run, anchoring at Cayo Confitas. This is a lovely and well-protected little spot that has a lighthouse and Cuban coast guard post. Shoving off at 5 a.m., he reached his next anchorage, Cayo Paredon, at 11:30 a.m. Cayo Paredon has an unspoiled beach, coral for snorkeling, and a distinctive black-and-yellow checkerboard lighthouse. Leaving at 2 a.m., *Tidak Apa* was anchored seven hours later at Cayo Frances, a mangrove island with several sheltered places to drop the hook.

From Cayo Frances, Van Sant made another overnight run (are you starting to see a pattern here?) to Canal de los Barcos (“The Ship Channel”), which serves as the entrance to a long inside passage through Santa Clara Bay. From there, he made a rare midmorning start to reach Pasa de La Manuy, the channel that connects Santa Clara Bay to Cardenas Bay, continuing the inside run free from ocean swell.

“There’s a great lobster station at Manuy,” Van Sant says. “We traded some worn shorts for 15 lobsters, cleaned and gutted. Cuba has many such pens, which look like small Chesapeake lighthouses, but they provide platforms from which they suspend pens to hold the lobster catches.”

Passing into Cardenas Bay, Van Sant found shelter in the anchorage at Cayo Siguapa. From south of the Hicacos peninsula (otherwise known as Varadero), where there are marinas for transient vessels at either extreme, he made the 100-mile crossing directly to Florida, having visited Havana on an earlier voyage.

Aside from Puerto Vita, Van Sant avoided any port that required being checked in and checked out by Cuban officials. Security-conscious Cuba continues to adhere to a rigorous port clearance system that is as much a vestige of Spanish colonialism as it is a control mechanism of the current regime.

### VAN SANT’S PASSAGE PHILOSOPHY

Van Sant is an expert on weather windows and using “land effects” to enjoy safer and more comfortable passages. In the islands, particularly mountainous ones such as Hispaniola, nightly offshore breezes tend to counteract the prevailing trade winds, creating calm water near shore until midmorning. The trade-off is that it requires the kind of “zero-dark-hundred” passages Van Sant described earlier. On Cuba’s north coast, another crucial consideration is the state of the tide at your destination. “Timing is everything,” Van Sant says. “Timing, timing, timing.”

“Navigation, even westbound, uses smaller land effects than Hispaniola but has the added wrinkle of goodly tidal current in narrow, twisty channels drawing from great reservoirs of water in the large bays behind them. Sort of like coasting New Jersey, I should think,” he says. Tidal flow in some of these entrances can build to more than 4 knots. Ideally, arrivals should be timed to coincide with slack water or the beginning of an outgoing tide to ensure steerage.

Besides a strong independent streak, Van Sant’s aversion to Cuban officials is based on the importance of timing departures to ensure optimal arrival times. “It’s not because the bureaucrats are not polite and really nice, it’s just a nightmare clearing in and out,” he says. “I prefer to play the tide against me for steering control in the narrow, fast-tide, crooked entrances. That means, of course, *timing*—and the various bureaus don’t do that. Could take them three or four hours.”

There is only one transient marina about midway between Puerto Vita and facilities at Varadero. Van Sant chose not to stop there, but I received a report about Marina Cayo Guillermo from correspondent Wally Moran, a Canadian who did the Loop last winter on his 34-foot sailboat. Cayo Guillermo, with seven transient slips, can handle only shallow-draft vessels because of shoaling at its 4-1/2-foot-deep entrance channel, but Moran managed to bump his way in and out. (Deep-draft vessels can anchor close by and dinghy ashore.) Marina Cayo Guillermo has only a tiny grocery, but, according to Moran, all-inclusive resorts in the area offer unlimited meals and mojitos to cruisers who purchase a day pass.

One of Cuba’s top marina officials told me of plans to eventually create a new facility nearby, since dredging has proved a temporary a solution to the shoaling.

### A HUGE MARINA DEVELOPMENT AT VARADERO

At Varadero, cruisers will soon be tying up at the biggest marina in the Caribbean. Gaviota, a state-run enterprise, is expanding its Varadero marina in anticipation of the end of the U.S. travel ban. By the end of 2010, Gaviota is expected to have 400 slips available for foreign vessels. By stage three of the project, the complex will have more than 1,200 slips at state-of-the-art floating concrete docks, including berths for six 200-foot megayachts. This will make Marina Gaviota Varadero bigger than Puerto del Rey in Fajardo, Puerto Rico, now the largest marina in the Caribbean.

Varadero’s other transient marina, Darsena Varadero, boasts 104 slips in a man-made basin built for a 1950s villa development. Unlike most of the country’s scattered transient marinas, Darsena has well-maintained floating docks, rather than concrete piers, and boasts a pleasant restaurant and a jazz club on-site.



Left: Most of the foreign vessels visiting the Exumas are still sailboats, but you wouldn't know it from this scene at Big Majors Cay. Right: Marina Hemingway, east of central Havana, features 2 miles of side-tie berths.

Marina Tarara accepts transients at its tiny facility, about halfway between Varadero and Havana. The day before I visited the marina, a U.S.-registered trawler had arrived there, its skipper one of a handful defying the travel ban. In Havana, Marina Hemingway is a respectable facility with roughly 400 side-tie berths, just a 25-minute cab ride from downtown Havana. Mariners should be thankful for Marina Hemingway, because Havana has no place for recreational boats to anchor; Havana Harbor itself is restricted to commercial vessels.

Like Van Sant, Milt Baker says he is put off by Cuba's clearance procedures. "Last time I went there by boat, checking into and out of Cuba was a real hassle. It was time consuming, thorough, and occasionally included officials asking for 'gifts,'" Baker says. "There was also the requirement to check out from each port, then check in at the next port. I've heard from others cruising Cuba that poor communications in the countryside resulted in them being confined to their boats for up to three days while awaiting an OK from Havana. If I go, I want some assurance that's not going to happen."


The Cuban official with whom I spoke is Jose Escrich, longtime commodore of the Hemingway International Yacht Club in Havana. Last summer, Escrich was appointed director of the Marlin Group, a government enterprise that operates eight of Cuba's 15 transient marinas. As commodore, he has a well-earned reputation as an advocate for foreign boaters.

I asked Escrich whether it was possible that Cuba would adopt a more streamlined cruising permit system for foreign boats, something like the cruising permit

system in the Bahamas. He said he doubted that change would come immediately but reckons that reform will be inevitable if the U.S. travel ban is lifted and Cuban officials are overwhelmed by tens of thousands of U.S. vessels.

"I know this system of ours bothers yacht people. And I do not entirely agree with the system either," Escrich says. "The minister of tourism is aware of the problem, too, so our 'working group' looking at nautical issues will try to come up with something else that preserves Cuban security without bothering people."

From Havana, of course, the way home is straight-forward: 100 nautical miles across the Florida Straits to quirky Key West, also known as the "Conch Republic." For many U.S. boaters, crossing to Havana and returning directly back to the Keys will constitute a "Cuba cruise" in its entirety.

Honestly, if you had to choose between the Bahamas and Havana—with its classic cars, rum and cigars, spectacular art and architecture, vibrant music and dance—you would surely tend toward the latter. But that's a false choice. Experienced cruisers will be able to get their George Town fix *and* see much more of Cuba by following the Bahamas-Cuba Loop. 

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*Delivery skipper and PMM Electronics Editor Peter Swanson has been researching Cuba's cruising potential since 1992. He is the editor of [www.cubacruising.net](http://www.cubacruising.net).*

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