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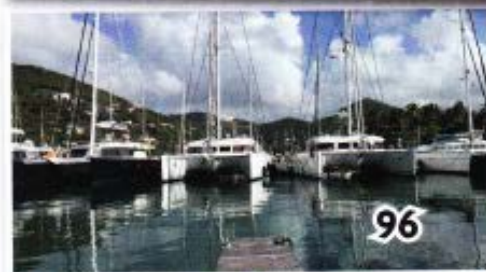


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# JOLLY II ROVER

**Cruising Outpost's Only Official Sailing Outpost**

## First U.S. Sailing Vessel to Sail into Havana Harbor in 50 Years

By Captain Bill Malone

*Additional photos by John Pickens, Chris Green, Margot Koch, Rio O'Bryan, Renee Reddy*

I have always wanted to go to the mysterious island of Cuba! When I first arrived in the Keys I lived in a treehouse on Plantation Key near what was reported to be an ex government building that was used during the Bay of Pigs invasion. And now, working and sailing out of Key West, it is a constant topic of conversation.

Last summer I heard there was a guy (George Bellenger) trying to organize a Hobie Cat race from Key West to Cuba! If this was legitimate, maybe I could offer my schooner as a support vessel for this race and get me and my boat over there! Several of my crew members also worked for George part time. I called him. He confirmed the rumor was true.

We met in his mosquito-infested backyard in Key West. For the next several months I attended Havana Challenge meetings. The number of people at the meetings seemed to increase with each one. We moved from the backyard to a local Irish Pub; then to several

local watering holes in downtown Key West. A portion of each meeting was devoted to making sure that everyone understood this was a work in progress. A date for the race had been set for mid April.

The *Jolly Rover's* participation was still unclear and not at all definite. After all, this was a Hobie Cat race! What was my schooner doing involved at all?!

In early February I heard through the Coconut Telegraph that Commodore Escrich of Marina Hemingway was attending the Miami Boat Show that month. What a great opportunity to meet him! If I could meet him face to face maybe I could have a discussion about the *Rover* going to Cuba outside of the Havana Challenge. I checked with the Havana Challenge race organizers to see if they would mind my contacting the Commodore directly. They were fine with it and told me how to contact him. I sent him an email introducing myself and the *Rover*, asking if I could meet with him while he was in Miami. I never heard back from him.



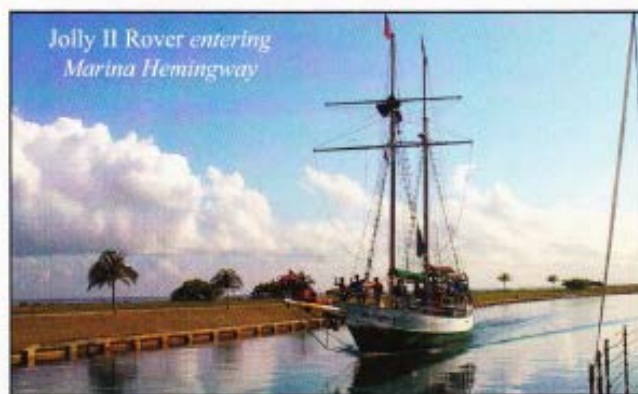




*A happy Chris Green at the wheel*



*One of the capsized Hobies during the race*



*Jolly II Rover entering Marina Hemingway*



*Sailing in Havana Harbor*

Several weeks later I got a late afternoon call from George Bellenger asking if I had room for eight more people on my sunset sail. Turned out that he, Joe Weatherby, the Commodore in Key West, and Commodore Eschrich were having dinner around the corner from the *Rover* and wanted to go for a sunset sail! Fortunately, we had room!

Hopefully I would get an opportunity to speak with Commodore Eschrich about the *Rover* going to Cuba! We set sail into the sunset with the Commodore and his group on the aft deck and the rest of our passengers midship and on the foredeck. I made several attempts to speak with the Commodore. He does not speak English. The Commissioner from Key West spoke Spanish and had him engaged in conversation most of the sail.

The focus changed when an enemy vessel came bearing down on us and we fired one of our black powder cannons! Amidst the smoke, the hooting and hollering, I could see the Commodore standing up with a huge grin on his face applauding and hollering!

I took advantage of the moment, stepped up on the aft deck and introduced myself. Fortunately, his brother-in-law stepped in as my interpreter! I explained to him, that after the Havana Challenge race was over, I would very much like to continue this type of travel to Cuba on the *Rover*. I told him we could provide the education and adventure of sailing a traditional sailing vessel to the youth of Cuba and expose them to this vibrant way of life. To my surprise, the Commodore shared my vision! He was very open to have the *Rover* come to Cuba on a regular basis!

I was so excited I wanted to scream! I could hardly believe what I heard! I was grinning from ear to ear! Joe Weatherby was part of the conversation. He just looked at me with a huge grin of approval on his face!

As the days and weeks rolled on, I, and several of my crew, continued to attend the Havana Challenge meetings. More people were getting involved. Another schooner, *Dream Catcher*, joined the group of support vessels as well as a 100-foot crane boat and several tow boats.

The race organizers pulled off a last minute approval from our government! Captain Rio and I attended the last meeting. The *Rover* and the *Dream Catcher* were scheduled to leave May 15th, the day before the race. Excitement and anticipation were high!

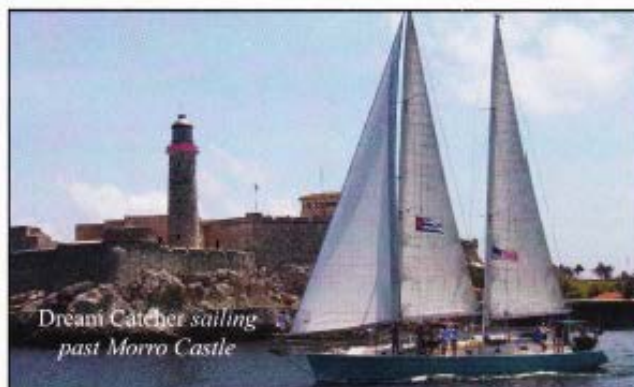
As I was leaving the meeting, George Bellenger pulled me aside to tell me that he had received all the required paperwork for the *Rover* except the Coast Guard piece! I asked him to please not tell anyone and that we were going anyway!

We left our dock in the Historic Seaport at 4:30 p.m. the afternoon of Friday, May 15, 2015 with 13 souls on board





One of the winners entering Havana



Dream Catcher sailing past Morro Castle

headed to Havana! Wind was 15 knots out of the east with predicted 15 to 20 with higher gusts during the night. Captain Chris had set a deep reef in the main. He had the crew set six sails, four lowers (main, fore, staysail and jib) and two uppers (flying jib and topmast staysail). Wind would be against the Gulf Stream so we were expecting rough seas once we entered the Stream. Captain Chris, myself, and Captain Rio had sailed the *Rover* in overnight conditions like this before.

The sailing was wonderful just outside of Key West. We were cruising at 6.5 knots and loving every moment!

Two of the crew had volunteered to be in charge of food and preparation. Not wanting to be out of food in Cuba, I had them purchase enough food to feed all of us for seven days onboard the *Rover*. A few hours out, the seas were building and Shaun went below to prepare an evening meal. I could hear him complaining that the *Rover* did not have a proper galley and that the food prep area should be midship and not forward as it was. Given that, he was doing a great job and we were all very glad he was there. Suddenly, he came up on deck and immediately went to the downwind side and sat on the deck midship

facing the gunwale. Moments later he became our first crew to get sick. Several crew asked if he wanted to stay on deck and they would go below to finish the food prep. He turned and said, "No, I've got this. I just need a few moments." And that he did. We had a great first meal on deck watching the sun set as we entered the Gulf Stream.

After sunset we struck the topmast staysail. We were still doing around six knots and the seas were increasing. We had been in contact with the schooner *Dream Catcher* for most of the evening. By dark we had lost contact with them and we knew we were in for a rough ride. Seas were about six to eight feet and we were getting tossed around like being in a washing machine. Two other crew

members had already had their moments at the rail. Like Shaun, all veterans, they were back at their posts standing watch like nothing had happened. Captain Chris had divided the crew into four watch groups. I had a late night watch.

At daybreak Captain Chris ordered the topmast staysail raised.



Captain Bill Malone (L) with Commador Escrich (R)

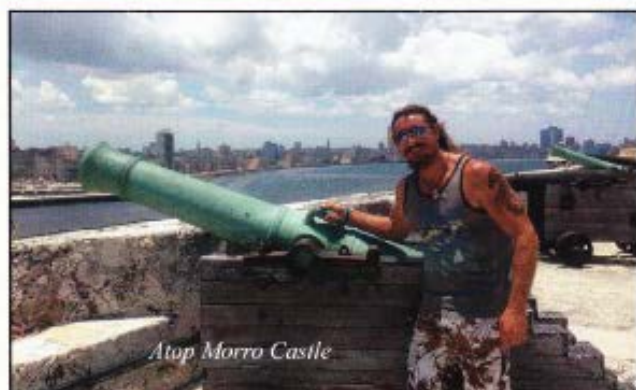


Welcome to Cuba



The Cuban team sailing aboard Rover





Atop Morro Castle

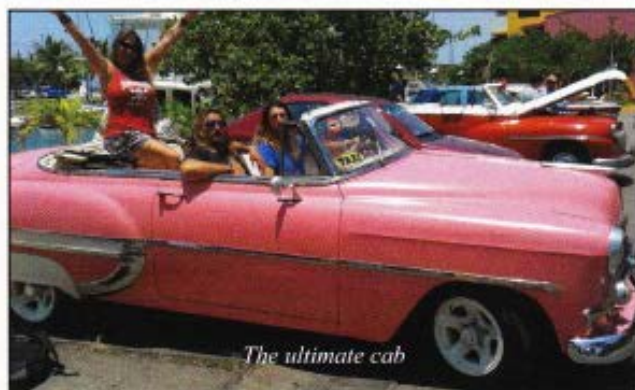
The seas were getting calm as we neared Cuba and we were only doing about 3.5 knots. He had made contact with the *Dream Catcher* several hours earlier. They were a few miles ahead of us sailing along the coast just outside of Havana Harbor. We fired up the diesel and motor-sailed toward the sea buoy outside of Marina Hemingway. The skyline of Havana made it look like we were coming into Miami!

We could see the masts of the *Dream Catcher* already entering Marina Hemingway as we approached the sea buoy. Captain Chris made contact with the marina and we arrived at the sea buoy at 12:30 p.m. on the afternoon of the 16th. Twenty minutes later we were tied up at the Customs dock. A beat up and tired looking bunch we were! The *Rover* had arrived in Cuba!!

Customs went pretty smooth. The agents took our lines as we approached the dock. Some spoke some English. Everyone was friendly. We had our crew member Elio on board to assist us with translation. One agent came onboard with a dog. A few others came on board with paperwork for us to complete and sign. Another wore a white lab coat and told us he was there to inspect the food we had onboard. The last two agents were there as agriculture inspectors. We all had our passports stamped and were given Visas for our time in Cuba. The agents lined up on the dock as we prepared to pull away. They were all smiling as they handed us our lines.

The *Dream Catcher* was already tied up. We passed them and moved on to our designated space along a sea wall in a canal that was facing the ocean. At 1:30 we were tied up and were met by the dock master and several other marina hands.

Once we got situated we were shown a little café/bar right on the dock where both the heads and the showers were located. There were brand new electric boxes and water connections on the dock. The dock masters office and ship's store were nearby as well. We could see some of Cuba's famous old cars coming in and out of the marina! The marina offered 24-hour security. We had security



The ultimate cab

guards stationed in what was the size of an old telephone booth about 50 feet away from the *Rover*.

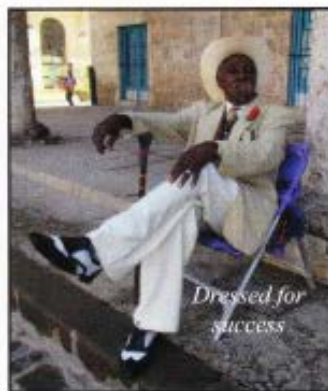
Later that day we could see one of the Hobie Cats that left from Key West that morning coming into view. It turned out to be George Bellenger, the race organizer, who came in first! The second place Hobie Cat was not far behind. We learned later that their Hobie had been capsized by a whale just off the coast of Cuba! Fortunately, no one was injured. The third place Hobie was not far behind, but ultimately was towed in after sunset.

The fourth and fifth Hobies from Key West had broken apart in the rough waters about 40 miles outside of Key West. The *Rover* team of Captains Rio O'Bryan and Andrew O'Conner, had the distinction of being the first Hobie Cat to come apart! Both Hobies were picked up by the crane boat and brought to Marina Hemingway. The safety plans laid out by the race organizers worked very well. Each Hobie Cat had a chase boat for assistance. All boats were followed by the crane boat from TowboatUS in case of an emergency.

Chase boats and others from Key West continued to arrive till sometime after dark. The Commodore had arranged a group of rooms in the hotel at the marina for anyone who wanted to stay there. Lots of the approximately 80 people who came from Key West did just that. I had rented a room there to support the Commodore and to have

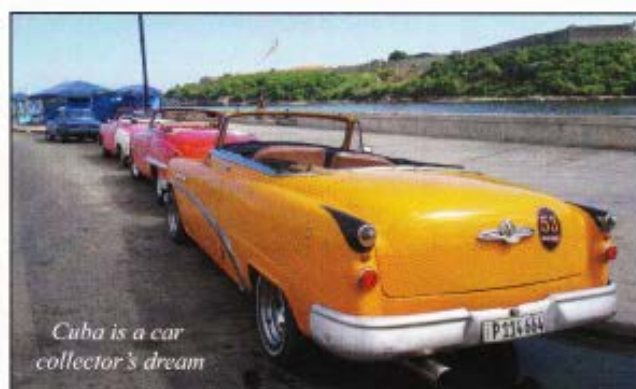
a place where the *Rover* crew could shower and rest. I planned on staying onboard, but Captain Chris convinced me to take advantage of the A/C and rest up that first night.

That evening most crew headed into downtown Havana either by cab or with one of several personal tour guides. Captain Chris,

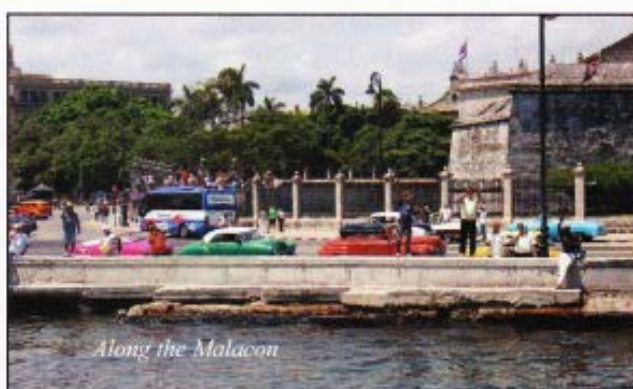


Dressed for success





*Cuba is a car collector's dream*



*Along the Malecon*

Captain Mac and Renee, Chris Greene and Elio spent the night on board. Captains Rio and Andrew took off with Rio's dad for a hotel he had arranged for them in downtown Havana.

The marina hotel was a short bicycle ride away. It was pretty nice, but the room left a lot to be desired. A/C was just about working and smelled of mold. Sliding glass doors to the balcony were locked. Bed's linens and cover had a strange aroma. I slept in my sleeping bag. There was a shower, toilet, sink, well-worn but clean towels and running water. A few pesky mosquitoes attacked during the night! The room came with three free meals and free drinks each day for \$65 American dollars/day!

The next morning I returned to the *Rover* where Renee and Mac had cooked up a wonderful breakfast!! Unfortunately, they told me they had been attacked by mosquitoes all night! No one had slept. Chris Greene was covered in bites and welts. They loved her the most. She was not happy! Several other crew members returned telling of their stories and escapades in downtown Havana the night before.

Later that night the Commodore had a welcoming party for us all at the Club Nautico Yacht Club located in Marina Hemingway. The place was full of sailors, photographers and reporters. I had the good fortune of presenting a commemorative plaque and an engraved belaying pin to the Commodore, as well as a *Rover* T-shirt and hat. I also met several newspaper and magazine reporters from Spain, Japan, Germany, Belgium, South America, the U.S. and Cuba. Most of the *Rover* crew left early for another night in downtown Havana.

The next day I attended a captains' meeting. The Commodore laid out the course for a Hobie Cat race between the Americans and the Cuban Olympic sailing team. The race would take place along the famous Malecon Boulevard in front of the renowned Hotel Internationale. The schooners *Rover* and *Dream Catcher*, as well as the motorboats from Key West, were to join in as spectator boats. Later that

day I met with the Commodore and purchased a lifetime membership at the Club Nautico Yacht Club!

Earlier in the afternoon I hired one of the locals at the marina to wash down the *Rover* and get her looking good for the upcoming events. I paid him \$40 U.S. dollars. He did a great job. I found out later that the average monthly wage is somewhere around \$30! We also unloaded some supplies that we had brought from the US for school children.

That evening we attended a BBQ in honor of the Havana Challenge that was hosted again by the Commodore at the Yacht Club. A pig was roasted over an open fire pit on the yacht club dock. There was a tremendous amount of great food, lots of laughter and conversation. Everyone had a fun time. The Commodore presented us with our membership cards and had a special presentation for the race organizers, George, Carla and Joe.

The morning of the race, off we went. The Commodore had us all back at the yacht club that night for an Awards Ceremony. This time he added music and dancing. Lots of celebrating, congratulating and story telling filled the air. The first, second and third place teams were the Cuban teams!

Plans were also being discussed for the boat parade the next day that would mark the end of the Havana Challenge 2015 event. This was a historic, major event for the Commodore and for Cuba: the first time American vessels were to be allowed into Havana Harbor in what we were told was 50 years! In addition, the schooners would have the Cuban Olympic teams and their trainers on board. This was quite an emotional happening for the Cubans!

The parade was a tremendous success! The Commodore's boat was first, followed by the boat carrying the Mayor of Key West. The *Rover* was next (making her THE first American sailing vessel to enter Havana Harbor in 50 years!) followed by the *Dream Catcher* and the other motorboats from Key West.

The *Rover* and the *Dream Catcher* were to fly both the Cuban and American flags on separate masts. The

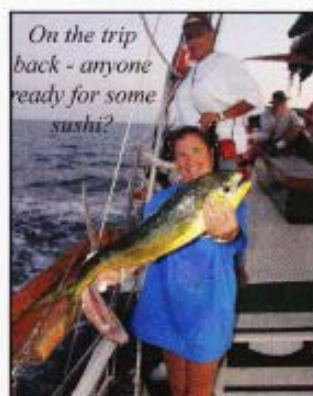


## First Vessel to Sail into Havana Harbor in 50 Years

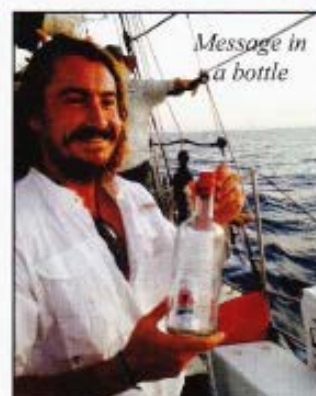


Friday morning. The next day we all checked in at U.S. Customs with no problems.

It was a wonderful adventure!! We returned with lots of stories, cigars, rum, handmade jewelry, and a painting. Rio has a great new tattoo to commemorate the Havana Challenge and Chris Green is sporting a beautiful image of the island of Cuba on her foot! The Hobie Cat crews became instant rock stars in Key West. Rio and Andrew are now infamous for being the first to have their Hobie Cat come apart in the Gulf Stream.

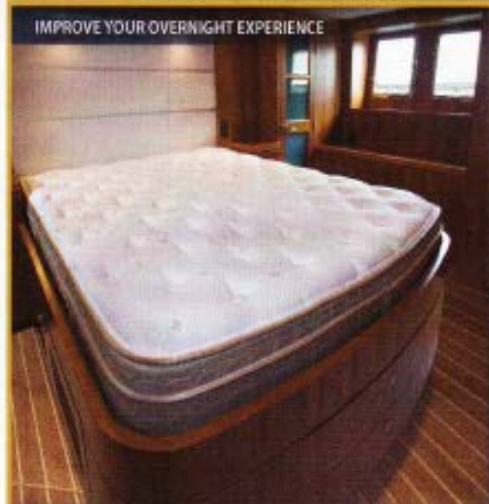


The Rover has the distinction of being the first U.S. sailing vessel to enter Havana harbor in over 50 years! We all have the honor of being part of this historic event!



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