

CAN YOU GO HOME AGAIN? TO SURF...

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In November 6, 1960, on my mother's birthday, my father, mother, brother and I left Cuba "for a few days while things calm down". A half a century later, they have yet to calm down. In the interim, one of my fellow Cuban immigrants, Cesar Garcia (now a world travelling surfer) introduced me to surfing. Since then surf trips have been part of my family. So, when we decided to bend the boundaries of our traditional surf adventures, Cuba, my homeland, seemed like a great idea.

Having been there several times during the last decade, the initial "shock" of returning to one's home after 40 years had worn off. However, we were not prepared for a surf adventure of a lifetime.

We asked fellow Wrightsville Beach Longboard Association (WBLA) members to help. And, boy did they ever. Shawn O'Donnell, President of WBLA chipped in a beautiful longboard and Scott Taylor, local shaper donated a red rocket, Tracy Skrabel and Dr. Will Russell also donated boards. Many gave us t-shirts, baggies, stickers, and decals. Probably the best thing we took were all the baggies that were owned by Mike Malone, a stalwart longboarder from the North End of Wrightsville Beach and an early WBLA member, who passed away last year of cancer.

But the initial excitement wore off, we were faced with hassles and roadblocks (literal and figurative). The charter plane staff did not know what surfboards were, the customs people in

Cuba wondered what we were going to use them for and the car rental people said it was “illegal” to carry boards or anything for that matter on top of cars (which were actually not available for a few days). We ended up with a Chinese car whose gas gauge was only accurate when the tank was half full. And when we finally did get US money exchanged (dollars are not useable currency) to rent a “car” and purchase gas (astronomically high) as well as food and water (difficult to find and expensive to purchase), off we went to in search of waves.

Surfer had done an article on the Lopez brothers (Cuban ancestry) about a dozen years ago, Taylor Knox had filmed a short segment of surfing down there and Surflife purportedly had surf reports. In addition, we found a Cuban surf association online with some e-mail addresses. The former information proved incomplete and incorrect whereas the Cuban surf association was nowhere to be found online nor on land. We actually never saw any surfers, any surfboards or any surfing. We were, as the saying goes, totally on our own.

When we did find waves, we were told by an official guard that “you cannot do in the water whatever you were planning on doing with those things made out of plastic”. We were in violation of owning a “water craft”; apparently it is next to impossible to own a water craft (presumably because it could be used to leave the island). So, on our first attempt at surfing we got busted.

When we did find waves that were surfable and away from authorities, it was the rural, northern coast east of Habana (where I was born). The beaches were stunning, miles and miles of soft pink and white sand with crystal blue waters and no swimmers. The waves were not all that great

much like our summer waves in Wrightsville Beach; they tended to be wind swells though there are plenty of beach, point and reef breaks. In many ways, Cuba's coast line is much like that of Puerto Rico, fairly jagged, lots of hidden beaches which are hard to access but, in this case, clearly unsurfed. When we did surf, people, especially local farmers would stop and ask "what are you doing?" We never actually talked to anybody on the beach that had seen or heard of surfing. Although one of our cousin's boyfriend did confide in us that during high school, he would skip school when the "El nortes" came in bringing in big swells. Then, and apparently now, it was difficult to find boards and people to surf with.

When we left Cuba, all the supplies were left with our cousins. Some are marine biologists and divers with the Universidad de la Habana, others are trainers with the national sailing team. And since all workers (except police and military) make \$15 per month (enough with great ingenuity to get you by for two weeks with food subsidies), they have decided to start the "Habana Aquatic Club"...for tourists to dive, sail or surf.

The Aloha spirit seen in our surf community (and WBLA) is now planted on the beautiful beaches of Cuba.