

Do you have any information about sailing to Cuba?

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Cuba is all about regulations, and as long as a visiting sailor knows and understands that, the Caribbean island nation can be a rewarding place to visit.

So was the message from Jose Miguel Diaz Escrich, commodore of the yacht club at Marina Hemingway in Cuba. Escrich conducted the "Cruising in Cuba" seminar at the St. Maarten Charter Yacht Exhibition in December. Through an interpreter, he told the standing-room-only group of more than 50 captains, crew and industry attendees that all megayachts are welcome in Cuba, and he offered several suggestions for making a visit pleasurable.

First, the official rules:

Foreign-owned pleasure craft must enter and leave through an international marina, where they can clear customs and immigration and obtain a cruising permit from the harbormaster. It is best, Escrich said, to file a float plan with the expected itinerary, dates and times. Vessels must clear in at each port of call.

The process of clearing in can take three to four hours, he said. Getting a cruising permit can take two to three days, but it is granted, he said.

Visitors must have a valid passport, but it is not necessary to obtain a visa prior to arrival, Escrich said. (Cuban/Americans, however, are the only group who need a visa to enter.) When entering through a marina, immigration authorities will give each visitor a visa card at a cost of \$15 for 30 days. It can be extended for 30 days.

The captain is responsible for notifying the authorities of air travel for a yacht's arriving guests. In answering a question from a captain, he said that private, foreign aircraft are permitted to land in Cuba.

After arrival, the captain has six hours to clear in and should let customs officials know of the yacht's intended departure six hours in advance. While in the marina, luggage control will be carried out by customs authorities upon entry and prior to departure. No drugs, pornography, bombs or fire arms are permitted. Yachts carrying guns should deposit them with the coast guard and when the boat leaves, they will be returned, Escrich said.

Authorities will conduct a health survey, checking on the health of crew members and placing pets in quarantine. Yachts must declare provisions and keep all trash onboard, though a garbage disposal can be requested from the harbormaster.

Escrich also suggested these procedures that are not required but which would make a visit easier:

Captains should make radio contact with port office authorities upon crossing into Cuban waters, 12 miles out. Channels 16 and 72 are the Port Authority; Ch. 19 is the Tourist Authority. HF (SSB) 2760 is the National Coast Network, and 2790 is the Tourist Network.

"If you don't make radio contact, there will be a guard waiting for you at the dock," Escrich said. "Calling in enables the authorities to organize for your clearing in."

The dockmaster or harbormaster is on Ch. 16. If the marina doesn't answer, the coast guard may or may not answer, depending on whether the officer speaks your language.

"Regardless, he knows you are approaching," he said.

After making radio contact, provide information on the yacht, its registration, last port of call, number of people on board, etc.

Once moored, wait for the authorities. Escrich said yacht crew and guests are not permitted off their vessel until cleared in.

Once cleared in, proceed to the dockmaster's office with a float plan to get a cruising permit.

"We are well aware of the fact that the megayacht sector of the world is growing," he said. "In addition to a growing fleet, there are new marinas with slips for megayachts being built very close to Cuba. All these bring, as a consequence, an approach to Cuba, an itinerary.

"There's also a mystique about Cuba because of the political and social system," he said. "For some people, that is a good thing, for others doubts. There are people who think if they approach Cuban waters, police will approach them with guns. That's not true. Cuba knows about international maritime traffic and we stick to international regulations in the protection of human life."

Escrich also promoted Cuba as a "virgin" cruising ground with pristine coral reefs, calm seas, beautiful beaches and temperate climate. In the past four years, 115 megayachts have visited Cuba, he said; 75 percent of them 40m or larger.

Marina Hemingway in Havana is the most popular megayacht marina with seven slips for large vessels.

Marina Darsena Varadero (about 87 miles east of Havana on the north coast) has two slips for yachts up to 70m. Santiago de Cuba in the southeast has one slip, depending on the draft.

Several other marinas have bays for anchorage, but no slips because of draft constraints, including Marina Vita, Marina Cayo Largo del Sur and Cienfuegos, which Escrich said has one of the most beautiful, well-protected bays in all of Cuba.

All told, Cuba has 15 marinas with 789 slips, most of them for smaller vessels, he said. Nine of the 15 marinas offer clearing-in/-out capabilities with government officials on site.

He did suggest cruising the south side of the island during winter when the northerlies from the United States make the north shore rough. And he noted that the west end has the best scuba diving, but there is no marina so yachts have to anchor.

"I am one of those people who thinks and dreams of a better future for Cuba and for better development for recreational boating in Cuba," he said. "We really have the conditions that give us great potential to develop this."

One captain asked whether charter yachts need a charter license.

"In Europe there are different regulations for commercial or private vessels, licenses for charter, etc.," he said. "There is no such thing in Cuba."

Escrich met with representatives of the largest brokerage houses in Europe during the Monaco Yacht Show this fall, he said, and they are working on details for chartering in Cuba. Most likely, there won't be a license, but a flat fee of about \$15 per person per day.

Several captains asked about deviating from the filed float plan.

"If you previously filed a professional float plan, you can deviate from it a little without incident," Escrich said, leaving those captains a little uncomfortable with the vagueness of the regulations.

A note about American vessels and crew: Escrich noted that Cuba welcomes all visitors; it is the U.S. government that prohibits its citizens from spending money in Cuba or helping the Cuban economy in any way.

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