

# THE SOUTH COAST OF CUBA, VIA HAITI'S ÎLE-À-VACHE

**Carla Gregory and Alex Helbig**

*(Carla and Alex left Portsmouth in July 2014 in their 1986-built Trintella 45 Ari B, cruising Spain, Portugal, Madeira and the Canary Islands before crossing the Atlantic to Antigua in 2015. They have spent the past two years exploring the Caribbean, and future plans include Colombia, Panama and then 'west'. Visit their blog at [www.sy-arib.com](http://www.sy-arib.com).)*

Our adventure started in Bonaire in early December 2017, when a plan was hatched to sail in company with fellow OCC members Tim and Gayle Evans – and their Patterdale terriers Gem and Pip – in *Wild Bird*, their Trintella 44, and explore the south coast of Cuba. We set off in a blustery 20 knot easterly for the 470 mile sail to Île-à-Vache on the southwest coast of Haiti. It had already been blowing 20+ knots for several days, so we expected a lumpy sea and were pleasantly surprised by the relatively small waves on day one, enabling us to cover 185 miles in 24 hours. The following day our earlier expectations were realised, with 30 knot gusts and moderate waves off of the starboard quarter making things a bit more lumpy. We still made really good progress, however, and on the third day had to reef down further to ensure we arrived in daylight, having read reports of unlit fishing boats and countless plastic bottles marking fish traps.

As we approached land the winds eased and we motor-sailed the last 12 miles. Yes, there were a few plastic bottles, but they were easily spotted with a lookout on the bow and nowhere near as many as we'd expected. The two boats had kept within a few miles of each other for the whole passage, and *Wild Bird* led the way into Port Morgan anchorage where there was one solitary boat. As *Ari B* approached it looked as if *Wild*

*Dressed  
in her  
Sunday  
best  
for the  
market*







### *A mud fest at the market in Madame Bernard*

*Bird* had several fenders out each side, but it soon became apparent that they were in fact local boys in dugout canoes hanging onto the sides as *Wild Bird* manoeuvred around and anchored. The entry to the anchorage is straightforward and it was very calm with good holding in mud. Arriving on a Sunday was perhaps not the wisest decision we have ever made though, as the kids were out in force!



The boys were extremely polite, eager to work or sell produce to make money to pay their school fees. We also had requests for gifts such as fishing gear, rope, old sails and mobile phones, and scoured the boat to find a few items for them. There were so many boys, however, that the constant company did get a little tiring after a few days. Ashore in the village of Caille Coq it was like stepping back in time. There was a generator and solar-powered street lights, but most people had no electricity or running water. Gayle and Carla took a guide, Pepe, to the market in Madame Bernard, four miles each way, past pigs, goats and sheep tethered along the path and through small villages, mules laden with produce passing us along the way. It had rained heavily the night before so the market itself was a mud fest

*Pepe, our market guide,  
in his dugout canoe*





*OCC meet in Haiti: left to right, Nicol, Alex, Ronald, Tim and Gayle*

(as was the path), but that didn't stop the local people from getting on with buying and selling everything from livestock to flip flops. Friends and fellow OCC members Nicol and Ronald in *Fairy Queen* arrived the next day *en route* to Jamaica, so we had an OCC get-together on *Ari B*.

Haiti was quite an experience, and enjoyable. Overall though, we felt that having given so many gifts, it would have been nice to be on the receiving end of a little thank you of some kind, even if it was just one of the many coconuts on the beach.

After four days we set off in the early morning for the 180 mile passage to Santiago de Cuba, at the southeast end of the island, arriving at 1400 the following day. While motoring in the wind shadow off the southwest coast of Haiti we encountered numerous plastic bottles marking fish traps, but managed to avoid them and entered the deepwater windward passage before dark, picking up a steady 15–20 knots of wind on the beam until 10 miles from Santiago.

Clearance was straightforward with medical check, customs formalities, a boat search and a US \$235 fee (surprisingly, the exchange rate was better for dollars than



*Fishing, Cuban style*

*Grand  
buildings...*

*...and not  
so grand  
buildings*



euros). There are two docks, which can take about eight to ten boats in total, and an anchorage towards the plateau to the north that is well protected with good holding. The reported broken marina pontoons were in good repair, the facilities refurbished (although without toilet seats or paper). The ferry wash not really an issue, and

as there were only eight boats in total including us, spread between the dock and anchorage, there was lots of space. The often-reported discharge from a cement factory also did not materialise during our stay.

Next morning we ventured to Santiago de Cuba on the local bus, for the grand sum of 1 peso (about 4 US cents) for all four of us, engine cooling water top-up stop at a local restaurant included. Santiago is a bustling town full of 1950s American cars and Russian equivalents (Ladas and the like), and the associated fumes. Many local town buses are converted trucks, which in the UK would have livestock poking their heads out of the long narrow slit windows instead of people. Grand buildings and rundown, ramshackle ruins stand comfortably alongside each other, music pours out of bars and squares, people dance in the street, and men are engrossed in chess games under the shade of the trees.



### *Local transport options*

We exchanged money at the *cadeca*, where you can purchase CUC (convertible pesos, primarily for foreigners) and then CUP (national pesos, used by locals).



Then we stocked up on fresh fruit and vegetables at the local market where everything is priced in CUPs per pound and the vendors extremely helpful and friendly. 'Supermarkets' in Santiago are very limited, one selling only stock cubes, so we were glad we had arrived fully provisioned. Rum, however, is plentiful, very good and cheap!

On entry to Cuba we were issued with 30-day visas, so after five days it was time to move on towards Cienfuegos where we could renew them. We opted for a 75 mile daysail to Marea del Portillo, as although Chivirico is a shorter 35 miles we thought the 2.4m charted depth in the anchorage might be a bit tight for our 2.2m draught. We had little wind in the lee of Cuba, and had to motor-sail out to five miles offshore to avoid the counter-current, and arrived in Portillo at 2215. The anchorage has easy access and is buoyed, although the buoys are not lit at night. We anchored in 5m with great holding in very sticky mud, and *Wild Bird* and *Ari B* were the only two boats in this glorious, well-protected bay. Between us we carried three different varieties of electronic charts, plus GeoCuba paper charts, and found the Navionics charts to be very accurate on entry and for the rest of our passage.



*Santiago's agro-pecuario  
(fruit and vegetable market)*

*Gayle, Pip, Carla, Gem and Tim  
at El Morro fort, built to guard the  
harbour entrance*



The Cuban officials were waiting for us the next day, and after completing the formalities we were free to explore. We were immediately approached by a lady asking if we wanted any fresh fruit or vegetables, and she invited us into her home. She also had fresh pork and lobsters and told us they were slaughtering a young goat on Christmas Day and we were welcome to some meat. She didn't want any money for the goods but wanted to trade for, amongst other things, clothes, fishing hooks/line, rope and old sails. On further exploration of the village – with pigs, goats and chickens roaming freely – we discovered a bakery, a school, a tiny shop and found wifi could be picked up with our ETECSA\* cards. Apart from the occasional bus and car, horse and carts are the main mode of transport here, and the houses and gardens are immaculately kept. Every evening we watched the fishing boats row out to sea, using a third oar as a rudder, returning the next morning. When there was wind they would hoist a homemade sail for additional propulsion.

\* ETECSA stands for Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba SA, owned by the Cuban government and the country's only provider of telephone and internet services.

*One BHP transport lorry*







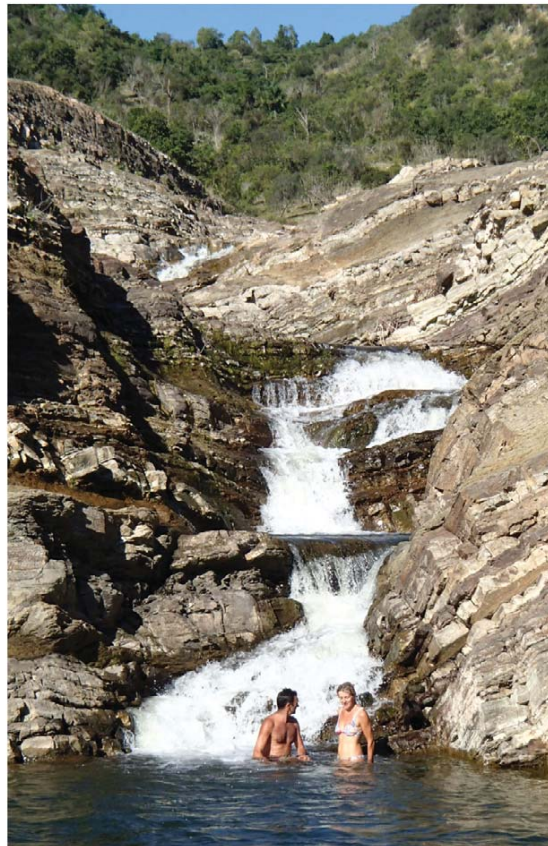
### *Portillo harbour*

On Christmas Day we went swimming at a waterfall an easy 3km walk from the village. Some local people had a fire going, cooking up pork scratchings, pumpkin and plantains whilst the kids jumped off the rocks into the pools. We joined in the fun and were made very welcome.

On the way back we stopped at a smallholding and traded some goods and CUPs for lots of fresh fruit and coconut

water. We were continually astounded by the generosity and friendliness of the Cuban people, who would happily invite you into their homes and share what little they have. It was very much trade not aid, and a sharp contrast to the attitude in Haiti's Île-à-Vache. We felt very ashamed of our limited Spanish and so wished we could converse more with these wonderful people.

*Tim and Gayle  
enjoying a dip at  
the waterfall*





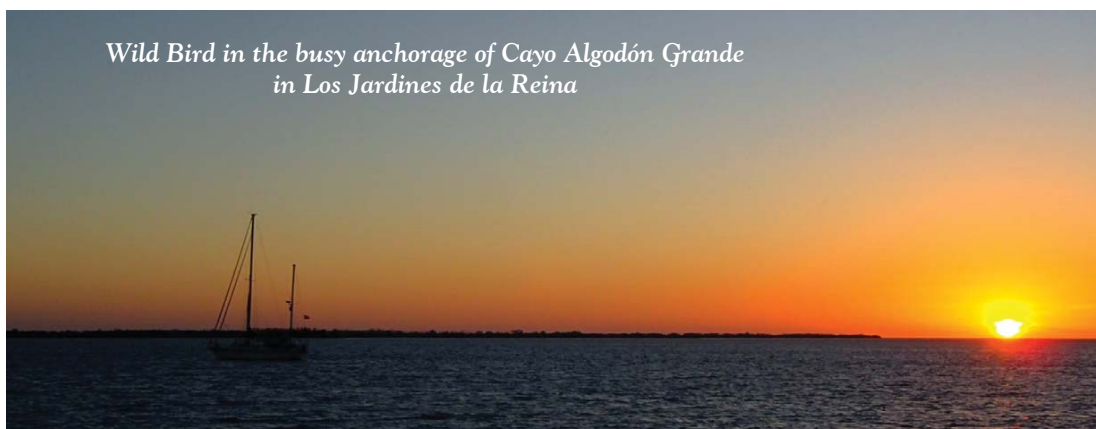


*Tim, Carla and Alex sporting their Christmas presents, hats made by Gayle*

After the normal over-indulgence on Christmas Day it was time to move on again. The Cuban official was waiting for us at 0700 to clear us to our next port, after which – laden with lovely fresh produce including a couple of legs of goat (it was the last opportunity until we reached Cienfuegos) – we set sail for Cabo Cruz.

A pleasant light-wind sail with spinnaker flying quickly carried us over the 35 miles, and we arrived in Cabo Cruz in early afternoon. We had read that the coast between Santiago de Cuba and Cabo Cruz was a fantastic fishing area and we normally do quite well. On this occasion, however, all we managed to land was one small *mahi mahi* and Carla caught a cold! We had no plans to go ashore, but even so the Cuban officials came out to both boats to check our paperwork, this time bringing a sniffer dog. Pip, one of the Patterdale terriers aboard *Wild Bird*, promptly went and sat on the dog handler's lap, causing everyone to chuckle and lightening the atmosphere. As the sun was starting to set a local fishing boat passed by and shouted over asking if we wanted any lobsters. He then headed off in the opposite direction and a couple of hundred metres away one of them jumped into the water and swam back to the boats. Presumably they didn't want the officials to

*Wild Bird in the busy anchorage of Cayo Algodón Grande  
in Los Jardines de la Reina*



see them, as approaching and selling to boats is illegal. It was certainly the most unusual takeaway delivery service we've ever encountered.

The next morning we left Cabo Cruz at 0400 for the 65 mile passage to Cayo Grenada. With a 20–25 knot northeasterly we rocketed past Golfo de Guacanayabo heading for the Los Jardines de la Reina, named by Christopher Columbus and meaning The Queen's Gardens. Lying some 50 miles south of the Cuban mainland, they are a 150 mile-long chain of more than 600 mangrove-and-coral cays. We would be all alone there, with no settlements or supplies until we reached Cienfuegos some 200 miles away. We passed through the Cabeza del Este channel into shallower water and reached the large, deserted, well-protected anchorage of Cayo Grenada (also known as Cayo Grande) just after noon with the sun high for good visibility. This area is renowned for being rich in seafood, and the next day we snorkelled for lobsters on the isolated coral blocks around the bay and sped across the calm, flat water to explore around the island. There is not much in the way of a beach, but the dogs were grateful for the partially-submerged sandbar all the same. In the afternoons, with not a waft of breeze, there was a total silence that is difficult to comprehend in a world where noise is normally a constant companion.



*Another deserted  
beach in Cayo  
Cuervo*

After a couple of relaxing days we excitedly set sail for our next destination, Cayo Algodón Grande. Our route would take us through the heart of Los Jardines de la Reina via well marked channels. We experienced amazing flat water sailing with northeast force 4 winds through Canal Rancha Vieja, Canal del Pingue and finally Canal Algodones to our anchorage 42 miles later. Comfortingly, the Navionics charts were spot on the whole way and all the buoys were exactly where they should be.

Cayo Algodón Grande is a large and lovely anchorage, again completely devoid of any other boats or signs of civilisation and with several sandy beaches. We anchored in 6m, with our anchors stuck solidly in the muddy bottom and protection from east through northwest. We immediately noticed that the temperature was a bit cooler, especially when we ventured into the water – a chilly 26°C! Lobsters seemingly like



*Beware of the sandflies in  
Cinco Balas!*



the cooler water, and we celebrated New Year on *Wild Bird* with 'surf and turf' – lobster scampi and mini beef burgers in fresh, homemade rolls – all washed down with the compulsory bottle of champagne. This year was no exception to the norm and again we couldn't make it to midnight – tucked up in bed by 10pm!

With slightly sore heads we set off on the short hop to Cayo Cuervo, 18 miles away. This anchorage has great all-round protection, probably the best for our 2.2m draught. There was a lovely sandy spit for the dogs and for Alex to kite-surf from, and plenty of reefs to snorkel on. It was time to start honing our lobster-hunting skills and we set off with two Hawaiian slings, a 'tickler' stick, a stick with a hook whipped to the end, a net and a bucket! One hour later, including some manic chasing of lobsters across the reef, we had six lobsters in the bucket, one damaged Hawaiian sling, freezing cold bodies and large smiles on our faces. With a cold front approaching the sea temperature had dropped to an alarming 23°C!

After a few days we wanted to move on again, but with a forecast of stronger winds approaching we needed another well-protected anchorage. As the forecast was for northeasterlies the anchorage of Cayo Alcatracito in Cayos Cinco Balas fitted the bill nicely, and was only 25 miles away. With just over 20 knots of wind from the north-northeast we soon had our anchors down in 2.8m and even managed to catch a few tuna along the way. There was a lot less water than the guides and charts had led us to believe, however, and we were unable to make it into the eastern anchorage, but we still had reasonable protection. The forecast was now for 30–35 knots from the northeast

***Our catch***



overnight and through Sunday, so with 40m of chain and a 40kg Rocna on the end of it, we put up our cockpit enclosures and hunkered down. The cold front was very cold, and it rained virtually the whole day on Saturday and into the night. Out came the jogging bottoms, fleeces and socks! *Wild Bird* even put their heating on after taking the woofs ashore. On many occasions we've wished we had a dog, but that was not one of them. By Sunday afternoon the wind was still blowing a hooley and the sea temperature had dropped to 20°C. No snorkelling or kite-surfing here!

Thankfully the weather settled down and brightened up after a day or so and it was time to do some exploring. During a walk along one of the many long beaches we spotted large tracks from the sea up to the undergrowth ... crocodiles? Dogs definitely on leads from now on! The local insects made the most of a rare human visit and feasted on every inch of exposed skin. Despite Gayle having spotted a shark in the shallows we braved the water, and snorkelling visibility on the reef was superb with a wealth of fish and corals, including several large lobsters. By now Tim had become an expert shot with the Hawaiian sling, and Carla used her tickler stick to lure them out and then grab them by hand.

With time on our visas running low and another cold front approaching, it was time to head towards Cienfuegos, civilisation and wifi. We had a great sail to Cayo Machos de Fuera (Iguana Island) with 15 knots of wind from the northeast, where we saw the first boats and signs of civilisation. It was another early start the next day for the 50 miles to Cienfuegos, sailed mostly under spinnaker, to be told via VHF on arrival that the anchorage was closed and the marina couldn't accommodate us. Apparently the concrete docks had been damaged by hurricane *Irma*, but why the anchorage itself was closed remained a mystery. We could almost hear the salsa and taste the *mojitos* as we sadly turned around with only two eggs, one tomato and one hairy potato left. The marina at Trinidad was too shallow for our 2.2m draught, so we set off on an overnight sail to Cayo Largo, some 70 miles to the southwest. Cayo





Largo is purely a tourist destination and not a bustling Cuban city, and although it has beautiful white sandy beaches and clear turquoise water provisioning is very limited and expensive (four bendy carrots for 2 CUC, lots of olive oil and olives, but no UHT milk or eggs). Rum, however, was very cheap and beer only 1 CUC in the marina bar, so all was not lost.

Our craving for music and salsa had to be satisfied though, so we decided to leave *Ari B* in the very safe marina and fly to Havana to continue our exploration on land. The flights are on a standby basis and only confirmed the day before, so not great if you have a connection to make, but the price is reasonable at 159 CUC return, including transfers to and from Havana.

Cruising the south coast of Cuba may not be everyone's cup of tea. In fifteen days we only saw one fishing boat, and that from a distance, but if you want to be on a less-travelled path and enjoy remote anchorages visited by only a handful of boats every year, Cuba may be right up your street. Essential items to bring with you are insect repellent, a Hawaiian sling or spear if you want a lobster or two, and plenty of provisions.

