

CUBA – NEVER HAVE A SCHEDULE!

Nicky Barker, Roving Rear Commodore

(Nicky and Reg Barker left their home in Britain's Channel Islands in 2013 aboard their Rustler 42, Blue Velvet of Sark. After four years in the Mediterranean they crossed the Atlantic, and have spent the past two years cruising the Caribbean and the eastern seabards of the USA and Canada. They were appointed Roving Rear Commodores in June 2019.

Plans for this winter include the BVIs, the Cayman Islands, the Honduran Bay Islands and Belize, before heading north to Nova Scotia and Newfoundland in summer 2020. Follow their travels on their blog at www.blue-velvet-exploring-the-world.blogspot.com/.)

Cuba – land of salsa and mojitos*, revolution and romance. When we were planning our time in the Caribbean and North America we agreed that during our second winter season we wanted to visit Cuba before the then US détente brought too much Americana to the country. Little did we foresee the recent clamp-down by the Trump administration. Though, as Brits, the restrictions do not affect us, we're still delighted that we took the opportunity to spend most of February and March 2019 sailing the country's south coast and enjoying the culture and contrasts that Cuba has to offer.

Having spent most of the previous ten days in the Turks and Caicos, we reached Cuba on 31st January. Charlotte, Reg's daughter, was to join us for three weeks, flying into

* A traditional Cuban cocktail, normally of white rum, sugar, lime juice, soda water and mint, though variations exist.

Nicky and Reg, with Blue Velvet of Sark in the background





Santiago de Cuba on 5th February and out from Havana 22 days later. 'Never have a schedule' says the adage, and it's valid. But we hoped that we would have enough time to do the country justice with her. We did, but there's far more that we would like to have done.

*Looking south across Ensenada Gaspar.
Blue Velvet (left) anchored off Marina Gorda (out of sight)*





Ferry into the centre of Santiago de Cuba

We arrived in Santiago de Cuba well before Charlotte to give us ample time to sort out arrival administration, orientate ourselves with the city – including where to buy fresh food – and carry out some maintenance. The arrival admin was very straightforward, albeit somewhat time-consuming. Marina Gorda is state-run and the marina managers speak excellent English. They pride themselves on giving a full run-down on how the arrival process works and then, if it's your first time in the country, will also brief you on how things work in Cuba, including the two currencies*. We were also warned that Cubans are not allowed on or too close to foreign vessels. Indeed, during our time in the anchorage off the marina, the marina managers would dissuade local holidaymakers from bringing hired rowing boats too close to *Blue Velvet* and other visiting yachts by dint of blowing very loudly on an umpire's whistle.

On our first full day in Santiago we took the ferry into the city to explore and to buy fresh food. Our research on Cuba had highlighted that food shopping can be a problem. Consequently, I had spent a good deal of time in St Martin provisioning comprehensively on the understanding that neither Cuba nor our intended destinations before and after (the Turks and Caicos and the Bahamas) are well-known for inexpensive and wide-ranging provisioning options. As it happens, I needn't have worried. Cubans clearly eat and – other than bread – we had no difficulty in finding all the basics, including butter, fresh and frozen meat, fresh vegetables and, of course, rum – Havana Club in particular. The difficulty is in the time that it takes to buy the food. Most 'supermarkets' stock some items but not all, so you have to visit several different shops to buy all the

* The tourist currency is the CUC, which is worth about 1€ The local currency, which you really need if you are going to buy things in local markets, is the CUP. There are 25 CUP to the CUC. Both currencies can be bought and sold at government-run exchange facilities or *cadecas*, but neither can be taken out of Cuba.



Fresh food market in Niquero

things likely to be on your shopping list. We found that, while the shelves were full, one aisle would be filled with just two items (eg. pasta and tinned tomatoes) with only one brand of each item available. Some items, such as butter, are not displayed but are kept under the counter (in this instance at a filling station shop only) where one has to ask for it specifically.

Fresh food, including fresh meat, is available at markets but there

is still a supply continuity problem. On our first day in Santiago we toured the fresh food market and saw pineapples readily available. Two days later there were none for sale but they were available again the day after. Eggs and potatoes we were only ever able to buy from shifty-eyed men who would shuffle furtively over at the market entrance. They'd check around cautiously and then whisper "*Huevos? Patatas?*". If I answered in the affirmative, they'd hustle me off to a back room where their wares were hidden and then start the negotiation. Great fun! But, be warned, you need to take your own egg boxes.

The fresh meat was so fresh it was still warm and wobbling, though the butchery departments could do with a hygiene inspection. In all the markets we visited, meat was chopped unceremoniously by machete, shards of bone and flesh flying, on large tree stump blocks. Your meat was then handed to you just as it was – you needed to provide your own plastic bag (available for sale, usually from an old lady, at the market entrance) or, my preferred option, plastic storage boxes. In many places the locals just bought large hunks of pork fat, which gives a fair clue as to their financial situation.

We made several visits to Santiago, either by ferry from a quay close to the anchorage or by local bus. It's a lively city and very different from both Cienfuegos and Havana, both of which we visited later, apparently because of its position in the mountainous east of the country and the relatively high immigrant Haitian population. We enjoyed Santiago for its busy unpretentiousness. There's plenty of interesting architecture but, whilst there are a number of buildings in the very centre that have been renovated, there is still much work to be done and 'shabby chic' is definitely the name of the game. There's also plenty of communist architecture on display, including the fascinating



*'Yank-tank' taxi
in one of Santiago de
Cuba's more restored streets*



state ice-cream garden. The narrow streets and the volume of old vehicles belching fumes can make for an eye-watering stroll, but it is like nowhere else.

There are plenty of 1950s American cars and trucks in Santiago but, unlike in Havana, they're not highly polished, brightly coloured near-museum pieces. Rather they are matt-painted, dull-hued working vehicles. We also saw a lot of Russian Ladas and Moskvitchs, a good number of modern lorries emblazoned with 'Sinotruck' badges, numerous horse-drawn carts and, most surprisingly of all, a fairly plentiful supply of very modern European cars in taxi livery.

*Grandpappy and his son
pressing and rolling cigars in
a corner of a coffee house*



Salsa dancing to live music – and it's only early evening

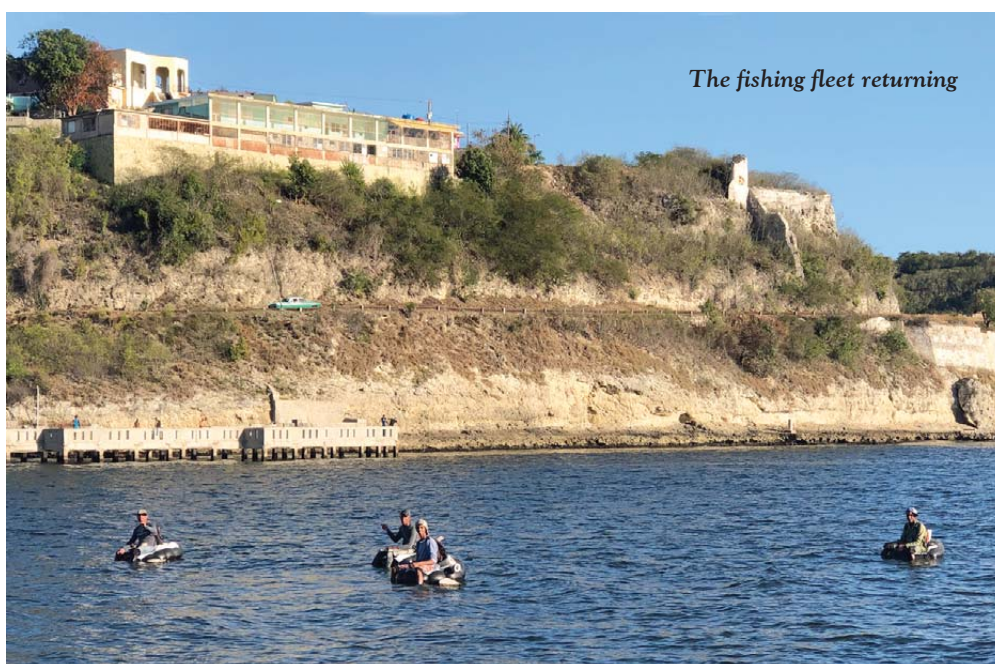
Santiago de Cuba is in the country's revolutionary heartland and on display in the Plaza de Céspedes in front of the cathedral were then and now photos of revolutionary activists, dating from the 60th anniversary celebrations of the revolution in 2016. And, whilst Cuba as a whole has a vibrant musical scene, Santiago is said to have one of the edgiest and the best. In one coffee house we visited, grandpappy and his middle-aged

Son and Cristal in Santiago de Cuba



son pressed and rolled cigars in a corner whilst a total stranger tried to teach me to dance the salsa and, given half a chance, would have dragged us off to enrol in dance classes so that we could better appreciate the music.

Later, Charlotte, Reg and I spent a fabulous evening bar-hopping along El Hollandes listening to live music in each place we stopped. The locals sang along with the bands and danced the salsa beautifully and, in one particularly memorable tiny bar, the band sang and played just across the table from us whilst we tapped our feet, clapped in time and drank yet more *mojitos* and Cristal beer. It was a wonderful evening, a true high point on which to leave Santiago, though there was still far more that we could have explored in and around the city – Never have a schedule!



The fishing fleet returning

The next good anchorage west of Santiago is Marea del Portillo. It's a 60 mile passage which we decided to do overnight, leaving at about 1700. Our check-out was completed swiftly and we were soon the proud owners of a *despacho* authorising us to sail from Santiago de Cuba to Cienfuegos over a period of about three weeks. Using more sign language, we ascertained that we would need to hand the *despacho* in at the *Guarda Frontera* office wherever we stopped, and then collect it again before we left. As we left harbour we met the local fishing fleet – about twenty fishermen floating on individual truck inner tubes, propelled by what looked like table tennis bats. There's no mothership and it all looks terribly precarious, even in good weather. Having passed the fishing fleet we reached the harbour entrance and the impressive, and beautifully renovated, Castillo de San Pedro de la Roca del Morro (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) which steps down the cliff on the eastern side. We'd not had time to take Charlotte to the castle, unfortunately, but Reg and I had spent an enjoyable afternoon exploring it.



*The Castillo de San Pedro de
la Roca del Morro at the
entrance to Santiago
de Cuba harbour*

Our passage along the coast was uneventful and marked by a distinct lack of wind – this would not be the only windless passage we would make. We arrived off Marea del Portillo at dawn with a 2m southeasterly swell, but the entrance is wide and well-marked – albeit the red lateral buoys were bleached white by the sun – and the anchorage off the village well-protected being almost totally enclosed by mangroves. Having dropped anchor, we were wondering how we would find the local *Guarda Frontera* officer when he appeared, the passenger in a small, rowed fishing boat. He came aboard, carefully unwrapped his pink spectacles from a piece of kitchen towel, gravely put them on, pulled out a treasured pen and started to write notes about us and *Blue Velvet* on a scrap of paper. We gave him our papers and passports, which answered some of his questions without our needing to speak or understand Spanish, but for a while we were at a total loss with one of his queries. A mixture of sign language and guesswork answered it – he wanted to know the height of the mast. Why?

Formalities complete, he took our paperwork and made clear that he would deliver it back the following morning before our intended departure at 0800. We went ashore to explore the village and found it a huge contrast to Santiago. Most of the ‘roads’ in Marea del Portillo are unpaved tracks which must be nightmarish when it rains, but through the middle of the village there is one quite large paved road on which we saw just one run-down old vehicle and a horse-drawn cart. The place is obviously very poor, with people scraping a living doing, well, we’re not really sure what. But there are two hotels on the other side of the bay so perhaps some of the villagers work there.

Despite the obvious lack of wealth, the houses were well cared for and the gardens tidy and used for growing fruit and vegetables with, sometimes, a small space in which to relax. There were plenty of pigs and chickens wandering the roads (how do they know to whom they belong?) but there was little litter and no piles of rubbish or junk in gardens or on the roadside as we had seen in so many other Caribbean countries and, indeed, back home. This mirrored what we had observed on our motorbike taxi ride to El

Morro, and we later found it to be the case in most places we visited in Cuba. Sometimes there are rubbish dumps on the outskirts of a village but normally it seems that waste is properly disposed of somewhere. We also suspect that many items are recycled several times over, given that it can be very difficult to obtain consumer goods.

The following day, our *Guarda Frontera* friend returned our paperwork – he was as good as his word, turning up at 0700 though I doubt the fisherman thanked us for it – and we set off at the planned time, more out of politeness than necessity as our destination had changed. We had originally planned on spending Saturday moving 40 miles up the coast to Cabo Cruz but the *Lonely Planet Guide* talked about a village-wide *son** and salsa party held every Saturday night at Pilón, just 10 miles west of Marea del Portillo. Keen to experience more Cuban music we headed there, an uneventful motor in very calm conditions. The bay off the town features several shallow reefs but the channels between them, though rather convoluted, are deep. Some of the marks shown on our chart were in place but several were not – nor was the cay that we had intended to anchor behind! I had been a little concerned about surge in the anchorage as there was a 2m southeasterly swell offshore, but the fringing reefs and shallow water broke that completely so the water off Pilón was completely flat.

With the standard check-in completed we went off to explore the town. Like Marea del Portillo, Pilón is very rural, but it has an air of affluence and the people are busy and have a sense of purpose that we found lacking in Marea del Portillo. Part of the way into the centre of Pilón we stumbled upon a reminder of the town's most notable moment in history. A local woman, Celia Sánchez – aka 'The First Lady of the Revolution' – was instrumental in the success of the 1956 revolution. Her house in the town has been

* *Son cubano* is a genre of music and dance mainly derived from African and Spanish origins, which originated in eastern Cuba in the late 19th century.

Houses in Marea del Portillo





Pilón taxi

turned into a museum, with memorabilia and pictures from her life as well as a section on revolutionary fighters. It's a very local, low-key museum, with hand-typed labels for the displays (all of them in Spanish), but still made for a fascinating visit.

That evening we headed ashore again and, following the *Guarda Frontera* officers' instructions, left the dinghy in the fishing boat compound tied up to a rickety dock. Sadly, the music and dancing was not as we had expected. The *Lonely Planet Guide* talks of live bands and people dancing local variations of salsa and rumba, but in Raul Castro's Cuba, where internet access and smartphones provide Cubans with access to global fashions, musical tastes are changing rapidly. Pilón's Saturday night street party

The main square in Pilón



is now more thumping *reggaetón* nightclub than slinky, salsa dancehall, but it was an experience and all the people we met were incredibly friendly, wanting to know where we were from and what we thought of Cuba, the food and, of course, the rum and cigars.

Around midnight we returned to the dinghy, only to find the fishing boat compound securely locked. Climbing through a hole in the fence didn't seem a particularly sensible idea, but happily one of the *Guarda* officers was still up and about and he roused the night sentry to let us through to our dinghy. As the only yacht in the anchorage it was easy to find *Blue Velvet*, though less easy to work our way out through the ruined pilings off the old quay. But we got back unscathed and, as is required by the state, locked the outboard to *Blue Velvet* and lifted the dinghy out of the water, before collapsing into bed in preparation for another prompt start the next morning.

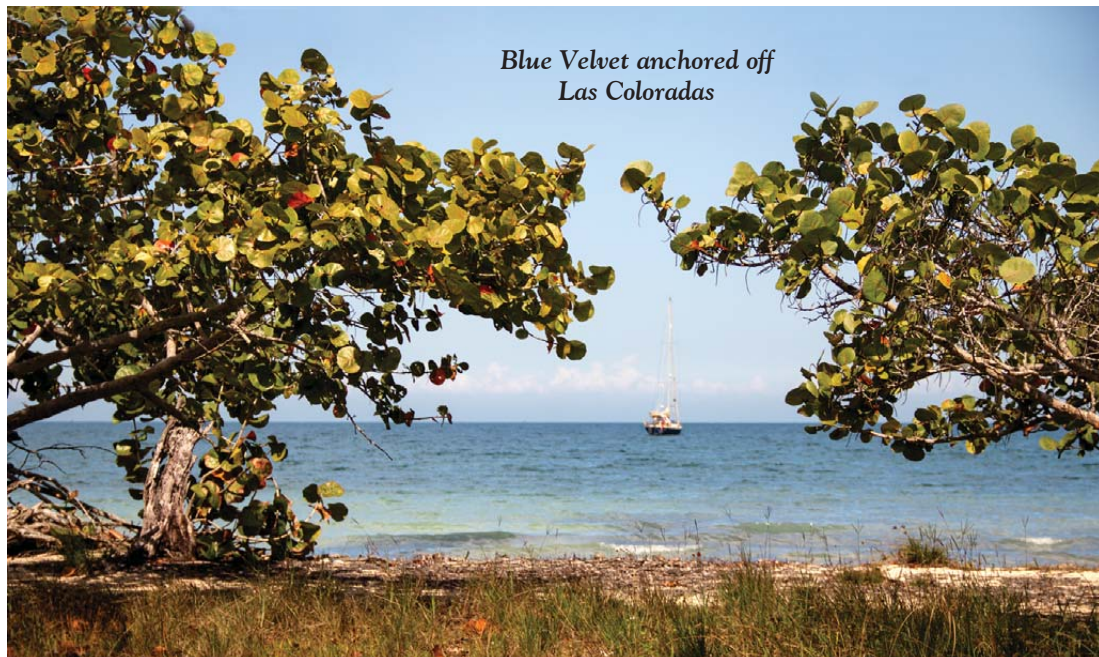
From Pilón we set off for Cabo Cruz, anticipating another motor on an almost windless day. Then, most of the way out through the maze of reefs off Pilón, the engine spluttered and stopped – not good. After sailing slowly for a while in the wrong direction Reg got the engine started again, but we had to run on low revs to keep it from cutting out – it seemed the fuel filters were mostly blocked by fuel bug. A short distance off Cabo Cruz, by which time the wind had built to a heady 7 knots, we completed a full filter change. We also jury-rigged a hose from a jerry can direct to the engine, which we hoped would give us a reliable fuel supply for the passage through the reef and over the shallows to the anchorage off the town. It did, and we breathed a large sigh of relief when we had the anchor well dug-in.

Before we could begin trying to clean through the fuel system, three very young *Guarda Frontera* officers appeared in a rowing boat, having rowed a good three-quarters of a mile out from the town. One of them had a particularly nasty blister from his oar, so I patched up his palm while answering all the usual questions. Perhaps in gratitude, or perhaps just because they didn't fancy rowing back out in the morning, they stamped us in and out of Cabo Cruz and left us with the paperwork.

The following day, in another flat calm, we nursed the engine north to a small beach off Las Coloradas, close to where Fidel Castro and his band of 80 freedom fighters landed in the *Granma* in 1956. Charlotte and I went ashore to walk to the museum commemorating the event, leaving Reg on board to clean out the fuel tanks as much as possible. (Cuba, certainly the south coast, has relatively little in the way of yacht engineering facilities – you need to be pretty self-sufficient if things go wrong.) Reg had a torrid day of it but Charlotte and I had a fascinating time.



The jury-rigged fuel system. The jerry can was subsequently lashed in place to stabilise it against a slight rolling sea



*Blue Velvet anchored off
Las Coloradas*

As we landed we met workers with an ox cart gathering seaweed for field fertiliser. Then we walked through the Cuban equivalent of a Butlins holiday camp to the road which led, a sweaty 2km further on, to the *Granma* landing museum. Here a curator with surprisingly good English gave us a personal tour of the museum, including the life-size reconstruction of the *Granma* and the landing site itself, now reached by a 1km concrete path through dense mangroves. He told us that each year, on the anniversary of the landing, around 3000 people come to watch a re-enactment of the event.



Collecting seaweed by ox cart to use as fertiliser

We scrumped* green coconuts from the roadside trees on our return hike to the dinghy, but didn't get the chance to try them as the three *Guarda Frontera* officers from Cabo Cruz appeared (in a motor boat this time) about two hours before sunset to tell us that we had to move immediately. Reg was still working on the fuel system so I negotiated an hour's delay to get things operating and shipshape(ish). We'd had no plan for such a move, but the chart showed a mangrove cay just west of the town of Niquero which looked as though it would do for a night. It was about an hour's motor north and we squeaked in, very relieved, 30 minutes after sunset. Our coconut cocktails that evening were less sundowners than sun-well-and-truly-setters.

The engine fuel system seemed to be functioning properly but Reg wanted to carry out a check of the generator fuel system. I was concerned that we would run short of fresh fruit and vegetables before we reached Cienfuegos and Charlotte fancied another trip ashore, so on 12th February we moved the four miles to Niquero and Charlotte and I went ashore while Reg continued the clean-up operation. Niquero is almost unique in Cuba in being a provincial town with a working sugar refinery, and as a result the town is quite sizeable, busy and reasonably affluent. We left the dinghy tied to a decrepit quay and ran the normal gauntlet of *Guarda Frontera* questioning. By providing a written summary in Spanish and English of the yacht and crew's details, I managed to bring the check-in process down to a mere 10 minutes – a great improvement!

The back roads of Niquero reminded us of those in Pilón, but in the centre of town we found several bustling streets, a cinema, the statutory state ice-cream house, several small 'supermarkets' and a small fresh produce market. We bought fruit and vegetables

* In British English *scrumpling* implies helping oneself to fruit (often windfall apples) without permission. In American English it more often describes something shrivelled or shrunk by cooking.



and then went on a search for meat, as the market's butchery section had none left. As we left the market we came across a novel way of transporting one's piglet home. All seemed fine whilst the bicycle was stationary, but once the owner started pedalling the piglet set up squealing loud enough to wake the dead. At this point a horse-drawn cart carrying a possible future incarnation of the unfortunate piglet came in the opposite direction, heading for the market. Charlotte and I hightailed it in pursuit and joined the queue for a share of the carcass. I couldn't make myself understood well enough, however, so we ended up selecting something likely from a 'supermarket' freezer. This later turned out to be mince, which I had not expected ... cue immediate menu change.

In the afternoon, I showed Reg the

*And this little pig went squeal,
squeal, squeal all the way home!*



Charlotte enjoying a green coconut cocktail



highlights of Niquero (a rush but we needed to move on – Never have a schedule!) before retrieving the *despacho* and returning to our previous night's anchorage. This made things much easier for our planned early departure next day, for a long passage to Cayo Blanco and the start of our cruise through the mangrove cays of Les Jardines de la Reine. 🌴