

MARINE SERVICES IN CUBA - Fixing Boats In Exotic Places

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Cruising is often described as completing boat repairs in exotic locations. Our task was to explore how this is accomplished in Cuba. Fortunately there are existing resources that provide helpful information on this topic:

- *Waterway Guide Cuba* by Addison Chan and Nigel Calder
- *A Cruising Guide to Cuba* by Amaia Agirre and Frank Virgintino
- *Cruising Guide to Cuba* by Capt. Cheryl Barr
- *Cuba, Land and Sea*, Addison Chan Facebook Group,
<https://www.facebook.com/cubalandandsea/>

These guides provide a more comprehensive look at marine services and should be reviewed as part of planning any trip to the country.

Our research was aided by conversations with Addison Chan, Cubans engaged in the marine service trades, and cruisers repairing or improving their vessels while in Cuba.

There are currently two major marinas in Cuba: Marina Gaviota in Varadero and Marina Hemingway approximately 10 nautical miles west of Havana. Marina Gaviota has a 100-ton travel lift, and Marina Hemingway has a boatyard that can bring in a 50-ton crane when needed for haul out.

The approach to Marina Gaviota allows access under most weather conditions; however, access to Marina Hemingway can be limited when swells and adverse weather prevent safe passage through the channel and reef near its entrance.



Skilled labor is available for completing most boat repairs in Cuba, but parts and tools are often lacking. Supplies such as fiberglass, epoxy, wood, and generic parts for automobiles, such as lift pumps, are available. Parts unique to particular marine systems, such as engine specific impellers, fuel filters, and electronics are difficult to source since well stocked chandleries familiar to most cruisers are non-existent in Cuba.



There also is no marine services directory or website to help cruisers find skilled labor. Tradespersons do not seem to advertise so ask the dock master, boatyard, and other cruisers if there is a dependable and skilled person they can recommend for work you require. You may find it advantageous to deal directly with each contractor or tradesperson since working through facilitators and middlemen will likely add cost and delays.

Be prepared to supply some or all the material, parts, and tools needed to complete your repairs. One Rally participant hired an individual to strip and sand brightwork, and he supplied the heat gun, scrapers, and sandpaper. If you do not have spares, materials, or parts on your boat, creativity may be needed to bring parts in. Trading or

buying parts from other cruisers is always an option, and having visitors or incoming crew carry smaller items in luggage might work. Currently, U.S. airlines are not able to carry freight to Cuba. FedEx is establishing service to Cuba and you might have parts flown in from Europe. Both will likely incur attendant processing and fees at Customs.

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You should not be afraid to have boat work performed in Cuba. You just need to come prepared with the parts and tools or, if that is not possible, be prepared to be resourceful in obtaining the parts. We strongly encourage you to come to Cuba to experience the wonderful cruising opportunities and the people and the culture of this exciting island, but do not come for the sole purpose of having work done on your boat!

Marina Gaviota - Veradaro

Marina Gaviota is a new and very large marina located at the eastern end of the Varadero peninsula approximately 80 nautical miles east of Marina Hemmingway. All 1,000+ slips are arranged on a med-moor basis. Surprisingly, all docks have an east-west orientation, which puts the wind on the beam in prevailing easterlies.

Although the marina accommodates over 1,000 boats, we noticed only three cruising boats at the docks in addition to several charter powerboats and catamarans. The dock master suggested they may have a “pricing “ issue. Effective May 2017 a new pricing schedule will be introduced purportedly reducing current rates (see *Waterway Guide Cuba*). Based on our observations the *Waterway Guide* appears to completely and accurately describe the various marine and other services available.

Marina Hemingway

The boatyard at Marina Hemingway has a machine and carpentry shop and can provide mechanics, plumbers, welders, painters, and fiberglass workers. The yard’s current price list is included. Work also can be performed on the wall in the marina. Generally, labor costs are less for work done in the marina.

Some Marina Hemingway Boatyard Tales

We met Andrew, a Canadian-flagged single hander, while visiting the Marina Hemingway boatyard. Andrew’s boat had gone on the rocks a few weeks before and was in the yard for repairs. The boatyard was well-equipped to handle the requisite fiberglass and welding work. Andrew needed no outside boat



parts. He also lost his sails and contracted directly with a local sail maker for a new set, avoiding a boatyard markup. He reports that loft prices are about the same as in Miami.

Andrew described work also being done for a large Florida motor yacht at the dock. The owner travels to Florida every few weeks on a friend's boat to find parts and materials which he imports duty free because they are for his boat, not for resale. Labor seems to be readily available, but Andrew reported that the owner had to wait six months to get a carpenter! The boatyard and marina operate separately and are separate sources for labor. Labor at the marina is cheaper. The harbormaster is a source for labor at the marina.

Andrew replaced his engine at Marina Hemingway several years ago. He purchased a Beta, which was made in England and shipped to Florida. He brought it to Marina Hemingway in his bilge and hired a local diesel mechanic through the marina to help with installation, a young guy who insisted on a fresh coat of white paint in the bilge before beginning work. Andrew knew the installation procedure better than his help, but his help was stronger and more limber. Andrew received quotes for the engine purchase and installation in Canada and the United States; both ran around \$25,000. Andrew purchased the engine for \$8,000 and paid his help \$10 per hour for 60 hours work!

Salvage Tales

Andrew's boat was pulled off the rocks by a commercial salvor who quoted Andrew \$5,000 for the work. After showing shock at the price, the salvor agreed to 3,500 CUC. They had to wait out weather conditions to safely float in a crane.

A friend of Andrew's vessel went aground some time before and was not so fortunate. He was quoted \$5,000 CUC which he was prepared to pay. The salvor returned the next day and the cost had risen to \$10,000 CUC. Andrew's friend couldn't afford the increase, and he lost his boat. Lesson learned: despair at the initial offer and negotiate.