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St. Petersburg Yacht Club revives its once-annual regatta to Cuba

By [Paul Guzzo](#)

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The 1957 race from St. Petersburg to Havana was one of the final races of the once-annual regatta. The contest was canceled following the rise of Cold War-era communism in Cuba. St. Petersburg Yacht Club

The St. Petersburg Yacht Club said Monday it will relaunch its once-annual regatta to Havana, taking off from St. Petersburg on Feb. 28 in an era of calmer waters between the United States and Cuba.

The 284-nautical-mile journey will end four days later at the Morro Castle, an 18th century fortress that guards the mouth of Havana Bay.

Those are the same start and finish lines that marked the course of the original competition held from 1930 to 1959.

Celebratory events will be held in St. Petersburg in the days before the race and in Havana following it.

“Our vision is to create a fellowship between the Tampa Bay area, Cuba and the entire yachting world,” said Richard Winning, commodore of the club. His father, also named Richard Winning, was commodore in the last year of the St. Petersburg regatta to Havana.

The field will be capped at 70 sailboats in four classes. Vessels must be at least 30 feet long.

Boaters can now sign up at spyc.org.

No prize money has been offered, but plans call for a trophy, and one model is already under consideration. Created by Havana artist Jorge Gil, it is made of wood and titanium and depicts a sailboat.

Under U.S. rules, it is illegal for Americans to visit Cuba for tourism reasons. But they can go to the island if the trip fits into one of 12 categories, such as education, research or sporting events. Boat races are

considered sporting events.

Already more than 70 boaters have expressed interest in participating, Winning said.

Among them may be a joint team of marine science students from the United States and Cuba – the former from the University of South Florida's College of Marine Science and its Patel College of Global Sustainability, and the latter from the University of Havana.

Patel College has an exploratory partnership with the Cuban government focusing on marine science research. The first collaboration is under way in another type of maritime race: the Tour de Turtles that began Monday.

The program tracks movements of more than a dozen migrating sea turtles. Whichever makes it the farthest at the end of 90 days is the winner.

Over the weekend, Patel College also co-sponsored the St. Petersburg visit of Alejandro Padrón, Cuba's consul general from its embassy in Washington, D.C., and his second in command, Armando Bencomo.

While the big news of the delegation's visit was interest in St. Petersburg for a consulate, the visitors also met with Patel College to discuss a relationship with the University of Havana and possibly other Cuban educational institutions.

It was during those meetings they talked about entering a student team in the St. Petersburg-Havana Race.

"This is about coming together to address common marine life issues," said David Randle, a professor with the Patel College. "We hope to make an impact."

Both the yacht race and the USF partnership are signs of an evolving relationship with Cuba.

The first race in 1930 featured 11 boats and was meant to be a promotional event to help St. Petersburg recover from the Great Depression.

It grew to include more than 30 boats a year and succeeded in bringing international acclaim to the city.

But the contest was canceled after the rise of Cold War-era communism in Cuba.

From the late 1990s through the early 2000s, another race known as the Havana Cup was run from St. Petersburg to Havana and drew more than 200 vessels each year. But that was canceled when the U.S. government refused to license any contests that included Cuba.

Then in 2015, the United States began licensing American boats to sail into Cuban water again.

Since then, Key West, Sarasota and Miami each have hosted boat races to Havana.

"With relations better and the race beginning, it feels like everything has come full circle," Winning said.

USF was once banned from any collaborations involving Cuba because of Florida statutes forbidding state money from being used to interact with a nation lacking diplomatic relations with the United States or that was designated a sponsor of terrorism by the State Department.