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Historic yacht race returns after 58 years

Posted by [Brian Hartz](#) in [Cuba](#), [Florida](#), [Sailing](#), [St. Petersburg](#), [Uncategorized](#) on February 24, 2017

The St. Petersburg Yacht Club is poised to make history again as the St. Petersburg-Habana Race re-launches Tuesday, Feb. 28 after a 58-year hiatus. The 107-year-old Yacht Club last staged the race in 1959. It was a major annual event from 1930 until that year, when political upheaval in Cuba ended the tradition.

The race has drawn a tremendous response. All 80 available entries were filled within the first week of its announcement on August 1, 2016. Over 550 sailors will descend upon St. Petersburg this weekend to enjoy preliminary events that include a race history dinner on Sunday, safety seminars and a bon voyage party on Monday evening for the race contestants.



1931 Havana Race start

Ray Kendall Williams SPYC Archive

The race launches in Tampa Bay near downtown St. Petersburg off the downtown St. Pete waterfront at 10 a.m. Tuesday, Feb. 28. The waterfront will be quite a sight, as the dozens of sailboats make preparations in the early morning, then gather in the basin for the official start. They will head toward the Skyway Bridge and out into the open seas.

Boats will sail one to two days and arrive in Havana on Thursday. Once there, the sailors will enjoy the country's hospitality at the Hemingway Marina through Sunday, March 5. The activities include a separate, 16 mile regatta with the locals that runs from Hemingway Marina to the Morro Castle.

"All of us at this Yacht Club are looking forward to seeing the historic race re-launch next week, and solidifying the exchange of fellowship between the St. Petersburg Yacht Club, Pinellas County and the City of St. Petersburg, along with the Cuban government and the yachting world," said the St. Petersburg Yacht Club's former Commodore, Richard Winning, whose father was Commodore when the race last sailed in 1959.

Also participating in the Regatta is a contingent of family, friends, dignitaries and sailing enthusiasts who are flying down to Cuba via a package tour in order to join in the festivities.

The St. Petersburg-Habana race was first conceived in the late 1920s by George S. "Gidge" Gandy as a promotional event sorely needed with St. Petersburg mired in a housing bust brought on by the Great Depression. Eleven boats competed in the inaugural regatta, which started on March 30, 1930 at the St. Petersburg Municipal Pier. The winner finished in 41 hours, 42 minutes.

The race, which became one of St. Petersburg's signature events, was suspended in 1942 due to World War II, and resumed in 1946. Military and political unrest in Cuba threatened the event in the latter 1950s, and it was last run in 1959, as gun-wielding revolutionaries patrolled the streets of Havana. Recent breakthroughs in U.S.-Cuba relations prompted club officials to re-institute one of its most historically significant events.

The Mission of St. Petersburg Yacht Club is to encourage and support yachting, and provide a comfortable social environment for our members and guests, while preserving and enhancing the Club's traditions and prestige. The St. Petersburg Yacht Club is located at 11 Central Avenue in downtown St. Petersburg.

To read my feature story about the return of the St. Pete-Habana race, visit [Crain's Tampa Bay](#) business magazine.

Text by Amy Spencer. Photo courtesy of St. Petersburg Yacht Club.