

St. Pete yacht club working to resume annual race to Havana



Paul Guzzo, Times Staff Writer

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Some 100 pennants from yacht clubs around the world hang from the walls of the bar at the Hemingway International Yacht Club of Cuba.

By this time next year, a pennant from the St. Petersburg Yacht Club will likely hang there, too.

For nearly three decades, the St. Petersburg club sponsored a boat race to Havana that brought international exposure to both cities.

But the contest was cancelled following the rise of Cold War-era communism in Cuba.

Now, with relations between the United States and the island nation improving, the St. Petersburg club is working toward relaunching the race to Havana in spring 2017.

"Now that things have opened up, I decided to take a look at doing it," said Richard Winning, commodore of the club. His father, also named Richard Winning, was commodore in 1959, the last year of the regatta to Havana.

Winning is still in early talks with his counterparts at the Hemingway International Yacht Club, **named for legendary author Ernest Hemingway** — the American most closely associated with Cuban boating thanks to his novel "The Old Man and the Sea." Hemingway also lived in Cuba from 1939 to 1960.

Winning hopes that in March 2017, boats will be racing from the St. Petersburg Pier to the Morro Castle, an 18th century fortress guarding the mouth of Havana bay.

That would be the same starting and finish line as the original competition.

"I don't see any problem with them getting it started," said George Bellenger, the organizer of the Havana Challenge, a boat race from Key West to Cuba's capital city. The Havana Challenge started in May 2015, the first such event between the two nations in this new era of normalization.

If the St. Petersburg Yacht Club is serious about the venture, it will happen, Bellenger said. "Cuba recognizes that these races bring the nations together."



The St. Petersburg club sponsored **its first sprint to Havana** on March 30, 1930. Eleven boats piloted by a mix of locals and people from outside Florida made the two-day journey.

The regatta quickly grew into a popular annual event that drew more than 30 boats a year and large crowds at both ends of the course.

Then, when the U.S. and Cuba turned from friends to Cold War foes, the race was called off.

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 it was cancelled when sanctions on Cuba grew so strict the U.S. government refused to license the contest.

Commodore Winning hopes his yacht club's return race to Havana will attract 40 to 70 boats.

That's a reasonable expectation, said Phil Thompson of Ruskin, who has been visiting Havana for more than two decades and teaches catch-and-release classes to Cuban fisherman.

Maritime excursions of all kinds are growing popular again for Americans interested in Cuba.

A few years ago, Havana's annual **Hemingway International Tournament fell to the brink of extinction** because of low turnout, said Thompson, a participant and past winner who is a friend of José Miguel Díaz Escrich, commodore of the Hemingway International Yacht Club.

Last year, the first since 2003 that the U.S. government allowed U.S. citizens to pilot sea vessels to Cuba, 24 boats took part in the Hemingway tournament, 14 of them from America. This year, the June 13 tournament will welcome 100 boats, 87 from the United States, Thompson said.

"There are few places like Cuban waters," he said. "It is a beautiful place to be. As the American fisherman and boaters realize this, these events will become even more popular. A St. Pete to Havana race will be big. I can promise that."

Under U.S. rules, Americans can visit Cuba as long as the trip fits into one of 12 categories, such as education, research or sporting events. Fishing tournaments and boat races are considered sporting events.

The race would help advance the Cuba initiative of St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman, commodore Winning said.

Kriseman has been to the island nation twice over the past year to lobby for a Cuban consulate in St. Petersburg and to foster art and cultural exchange.

"The race was started to bring St. Petersburg and Cuba closer together," Winning said. "It's come full circle."

Contact Paul Guzzo at pguzzo@tampabay.com or (813) 226-3394. Follow @PGuzzoTimes.

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