

Teenage best friends sail to Cuba together

Bobby Lewis, WTSP 9:08 PM, EDT March 17, 2017



Clara Poffenberger looked out at the open water with a smile on her face.

"It's all about the journey," the 17-year-old said. "I mean, the destination's just a plus, you know?"

She would know. The St. Petersburg resident set sail in the relaunching of the [St. Petersburg – Habana Regatta](http://www.spyc.org/Default.aspx?p=dynamicmodule&pageid=407831&ssid=335007) (<http://www.spyc.org/Default.aspx?p=dynamicmodule&pageid=407831&ssid=335007>) on Feb.

28, best friend by her side.

"I'm probably not going to be able to do this again," said fellow sailor Hanna Brydon. "I get to go to Cuba and then I get to sail with all of my friends."

The two were among 550 sailors from around the world who signed up to participate in the 284 nautical mile trip from Tampa Bay to Cuba. The race, which started in 1930, was suspended due to political unrest 58 years ago.

The recent warming between the two nations prompted the [St. Petersburg Yacht Club](http://www.spyc.org/) (<http://www.spyc.org/>), now 107-years old, to fire up the sailing tradition again.

"What's wrong with Cuba? Cuba is probably safer than America," said Clara's mother, Gail. "I have no worries about her safety there."

The experience is one that was life-changing for the pair of friends. Poffenberger, who lived on a sailboat for two years with her family before making her home on land in St. Pete, has been sailing all her life.

But this? This is different.

"Any regular teenager won't get the chance to sail to Cuba," she said.

Brydon, a senior at Lakewood High School, was looking forward to every step of the adventure, especially since her friend was on board with her.

"We get confused with being sisters at times," said Brydon. "She's my best friend. we get to do all of this together and it's going to be so much fun."

"She'll remember this her whole life," Gail said of her daughter. "She's treading new ground as one of the youngest sailors to participate in this race to Cuba."

The race took the girls three days to complete. Brydon returned to the United States on a plane last Monday. Poffenberger sailed the vessel home with the ship's captain, Grant Dumas.

"This is kind of their final exam," he said. "They are as good as most adults that I've sailed with."

The regatta may not happen in 2018. During his first few weeks in office, President Donald Trump has expressed interest in closing down many of the pathways for travel between the United States and Cuba.

If it was the last journey to Cuba by sea, at least it was a memorable one for these teens from St. Pete.

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St. Pete teens complete voyage of a lifetime

Bobby Lewis, WTSP 1:24 PM EDT March 20, 2017



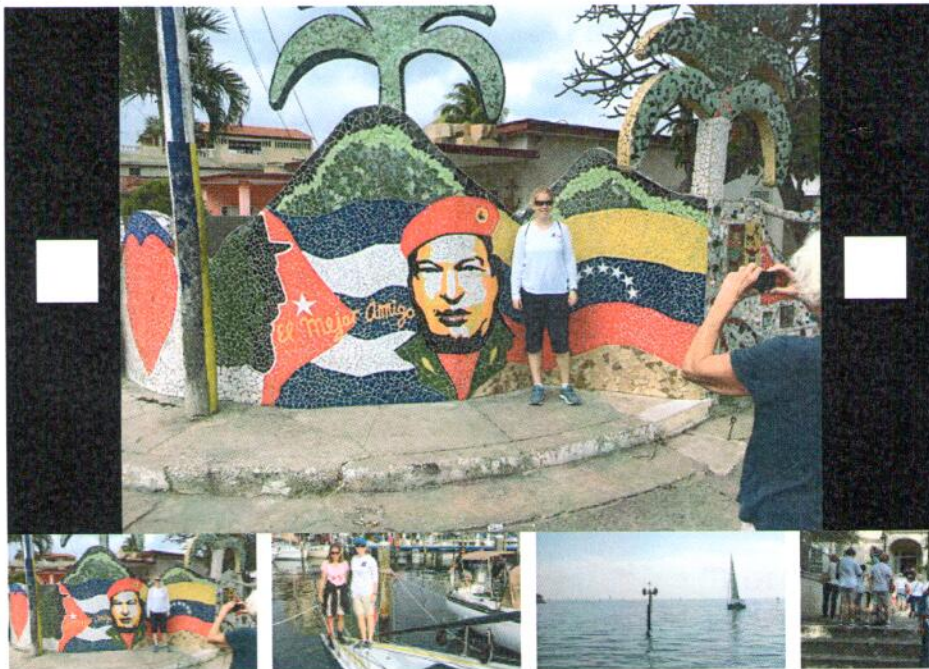
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February 28 with her best friend by her side.

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"We get confused with being sisters at times," said Brydon. "She's my best friend. we get to do all of this together and it's going to be so much fun."

"She'll remember this her whole life," Gail said of her daughter. "She's treading new ground as one of the youngest sailors to participate in this race to Cuba."

The race took the girls nearly three days to complete. They did not win (<https://www.yachtscoring.com/emenu.cfm?eID=2933>) but were one of 22 boats to complete the voyage without having to resort to using a motor. Brydon returned to the United States on a plane. Poffenberger sailed the vessel home with the ship's captain, Grant Dumas, after visiting Cuba for a week.

"This is kind of their final exam," he said. "They are as good as most adults that I've sailed with."

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If it was the last journey to Cuba by sea, at least it was a memorable one for these teens from St. Pete.

"It was definitely a once in a lifetime experience," said Brydon. "I'm going to be telling people about it probably for the rest of my life."

Her friend agrees.

"I feel like I learned a lot of life lessons when we went down there," said Poffenberger.

Poffenberger said one of the highlights of her trip was speaking Spanish with native Cubans. She teaches kids to sail on weekends at the St. Petersburg Yacht Club (<http://www.spyc.org/>).

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