



Can a pontoon boat survive the trip from Clearwater to Cuba? (w/video)



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CLEARWATER BEACH — Some adventurers go looking for new worlds or new records.

First to Mars. Fastest around the Earth.

Important stuff, at least to them.

But sometimes there's just a guy, and that guy has a dream of getting to Cuba on a pontoon boat.

Meet Jim Wolf, 52, who spends part of the year in Clearwater and part in Alma, Mich., where he is president and CEO of Avalon & Tahoe Manufacturing Inc., a private, family-run pontoon boat builder.

More than a decade back, a buddy of his pitched the idea of doing an extreme adventure on a pontoon. Something newsworthy.

They were enjoying drinks, of course, like pontoon boat captains often do, and it sounded to Wolf like a good idea.

So in 2004, they left Baltimore on pontoons and — after 1,168 miles, 122.5 hours and 600 gallons of fuel — arrived at Key West. An epic journey via a vessel oft-considered to be a floating front porch.

LIVE TRACKER: *Follow the pontoon boat's journey.*

The achievement triggered yet another challenge, then another. Before long, Wolf and his mates had 'tooned from Chicago to Michigan's Mackinac Island, Key West to the Dry

Tortugas, Fort Lauderdale to Bimini, and from the California coast to Catalina Island.

"Then, I said, 'Cuba would be interesting.' There's a little intrigue. It should be fun," he said.

LIVE VIDEO: *Watch the captain and his crew aboard the boat.*

It's important here to calibrate your mind to the limitations of the pontoon boat. If we're being politically correct, the pontoon is speed-challenged, a manatee in a pod of dolphins, a tricycle at the Tour de France. The pontoon opts for frivolity and scoffs at speed. It is relaxed, competent, satisfied, plodding — a nautical Garrison Keillor.

Its origin story, in fact, tracks to a small-town Minnesota farmer named Ambrose Weeres, who basically had the humble ambition of floating his family around on a lake. In 1952, Weeres fashioned two pontoons from steel oil drums welded end-to-end, with an upswept nose cone, according to *Pontoon & Deck Boat* magazine. He then fixed atop the barrels a plywood deck rimmed by a 2-by-4 wood railing. The boat offered desirable stability and a high deck less prone to take on water. So many people noticed that Weeres began making more, calling them *The Empress*, until their popularity exploded.

Enter Jim Wolf, 52 years later in 2004, with a background in manufacturing and supply-chain consulting, who took over Avalon & Tahoe Manufacturing and began growing the company. Now routinely No. 4 or 5 in sales in the pontoon boat world, his 280-employee outfit makes quality luxury crafts and wants to show they're capable of more than folks might have reckoned.

The lazy pontoon now has some versatility.

"It's not your grandfather's pontoon anymore," Wolf said.

After one risky adventure on Lake Michigan during which a pontoon split at a weld, Wolf's company began manufacturing a boat with a beefier structure called the rough-water package. The vessel for this journey to Cuba is a 27-foot "tri-toon" Avalon pushed by twin Mercury Verado 400s, which means, basically, it's fast. Like, 60 mph on the water.

Wolf and a crew of three friends are bringing 240 gallons of gas and all the safety gear — emergency position-indicating radio beacons, satellite phones, tracking beacons, spare propellers and fuel filters.

The handful of captains surveyed by the *Tampa Bay Times* had never heard of anyone taking a pontoon to Cuba . . . on purpose.

"With all the right safety equipment and a game plan and some smart preparation, they could pull it off," said Capt. Dave Mistretta, who runs Jawstoo Fishing Charters out of Indian Rocks Beach.

Wolf isn't worried. He said they've alerted the Coast Guard. They'll even have a lifeboat. And, per pontoon boat requirements, he said, they'll be carrying a gallon of vodka, a case or two of beer.

"I don't suspect any issues," he said. "We're going to enjoy ourselves."

Their plan is to leave early today for Marco Island, then Key West, about 250 miles from Clearwater Beach. They will cover the final 95 miles to Cuba on Thursday, spend a few days in Havana, then head back for a total of 700 miles.

The volatile weather is Wolf's only concern, but even that doesn't bother him much.

"We will try to dodge any thunderstorms," he said Tuesday. "We can outrun them."

In a pontoon boat?

"No turning back now," he said.

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