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Crew recounts trip to Cuba aboard pontoon 'sea car'



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The world was full of uncertainty back in June, when Jim Wolf and three of his pals departed Clearwater Beach early one morning bound for Cuba aboard a pontoon boat.

Because there's no such thing as surety on the open water.

Alas, the daring Joe-Sixpack adventurers are back in the United States with some stories to tell about being part of the first-ever (so far as we could find) expedition via 'toon between those two specific points in that specific order.

"It was a great trip," Wolf, 52, reported by phone from Alma, Mich., where he is president and CEO of Avalon & Tahoe Manufacturing Inc., a family-run pontoon boat builder.

PREVIOUS COVERAGE: *Can a pontoon boat survive the trip from Clearwater to Cuba? (June 14, 2017)*

The course from here included stops at Marco Island and Key West before crossing the Florida Straits. And after 80 miles of open water, the Havana skyline was a thing to behold.

"I felt a deep sense of pride, just by rolling in there," Wolf said.

"Pulling into the harbor was surreal," said Travis Conners, 49, owner of Indian River Sports Center in Indian River, Mich. "It was a step back in time, a place untouched by American hands."

They docked the 27-foot Avalon "tri-toon" with dual Mercury Verado 400s at a marina named after Ernest Hemingway, who once wrote that "man is not made for defeat."

The Cubans seemed interested in the vessel they took to calling a "sea car."

"People loved seeing this boat," said Charlie Chiara, 58, a filmmaker with Clear Stream Media Group in California, who handled the media for the trip. "They were really just taken by it."

The Americans were happy to be on dry land.

"I'm not the hugest believer in the seaworthiness of a pontoon boat," Chiara said. "I was a little worried. But looking back on it, I'm so glad that I went."



Jim Wolf, 52, of Alma, Michigan, and a crew of friends drove a 27-foot Avalon pontoon boat from Clearwater Beach to Cuba in June. Asked why, Wolf said: "Because we can." The team faced a several storms but made it back to Florida safely. (Photo courtesy Jim Wolf)

The guys kicked around Cuba a few nights before trying to beat a storm back to Florida. The seas grew rough about 15 miles from Marco Island and got especially hairy when Wolf ran into back-to-back 10-foot waves.

"Hold on boys!" Wolf yelled as the 7,500-pound boat slammed through the first wave, which blew open the front door and swamped the deck with 1,500 gallons of saltwater, per the crew's estimate.

The boat slowed, rolled right. Water rose to the bottom of Wolf's captain chair. As the second wave approached and the crew scrambled to catch floating gear, Wolf punched the throttle and the water rushed out the back door. Thirty seconds later they were all good, short a flip flop and a blue Yeti cup.

Then someone smelled smoke.

"Under the starboard side rear bench, we had installed an inverter at the last minute, and it wasn't marine-grade," Wolf said. "That's what was kind of burning up."

They never actually saw fire, but the smoke was concerning enough to call it a trip.

"You don't want your stuff to burn up and have to abandon ship," Wolf said. "That's the only time it was more of a challenge or concern."

"It was exciting," said Chiara, noting that when they took the boat out of the water at Marco Island, after 600 miles on the water, it looked brand new. "The whole seaworthiness thing . . . I'm much less skeptical now."

Wolf said some 10,000 people were tracking their progress online, and Chiara has strung together a series of films for the Web that captures the adventure.

And they're already thinking about the next pontoon challenge to add to their growing list of accomplishments, which include Chicago to Michigan's Mackinac Island, Fort Lauderdale to Bimini, and from the California Coast to Catalina Island.

Alaska's Inside Passage, maybe. Or something on Lake Superior. Who knows?

"We're going to keep pushing the envelope," Wolf said.

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