

PONTON

and DECK BOAT®

A Pontoon To Cuba?

*Recapping another
wild adventure*



10
Great Gifts
for the boater in your life



Lady Luck Shines At Poker Run

4 kings earns her a new Lowe!

The question came up more than two dozen times this past week.

My response was always: "Because we can." Now, it's all behind us. It's 11:30 a.m. and I'm sitting on a flight back to Detroit, Mich., recalling the five-day, 600-mile boating odyssey my three best friends and I just completed. I laugh when I hear a flight attendant tell a passenger he can't put his bag in an overhead compartment because they stow the life raft there. Made me think about our life raft, floating out the rear of our boat, Charlie swimming after it.

Charlie (Chiara—Media Coordinator) has been the media producer for Avalon/Tahoe for 10 years. Travis (Conners — Engineer) the owner of Indian River Sports Center in Indian River, Mich., sells our Tahoe line. And Doug (Haskell — First Mate), my traveling companion today, is the owner of North Shore Marine, an Avalon/Tahoe dealer in Manitou Beach, Mich.

A LOOK BACK

Doug and I have been doing long-distance extreme pontoon excursions since November 2004, when we took our first trip from Baltimore, Md., to Key West, Fla. Since then, we've completed five other extreme pontoon adventures. During our last trip, we pondered: "Where to next?"

"CUBA," someone blurted out, half-joking. But then we thought, "Why couldn't we? It's only 100 miles from Key West."

"But that's 100 miles of open ocean," Doug reminded me. "And no support. No chase boat."

"No problem," I replied. "This is how we do it in the Wolf family. We love boating."

HOPE FOR THE BEST, PLAN FOR THE WORST

Once we decided to go in 2017, the plan came together quickly. I worked with the team in the factory to build a 27-foot Ambassador and outfit it with state-of-the-art twin 400 Mercury Verado outboards, Garmin GPS, JL Audio Stereo and Yeti Coolers. Travis arranged the necessary

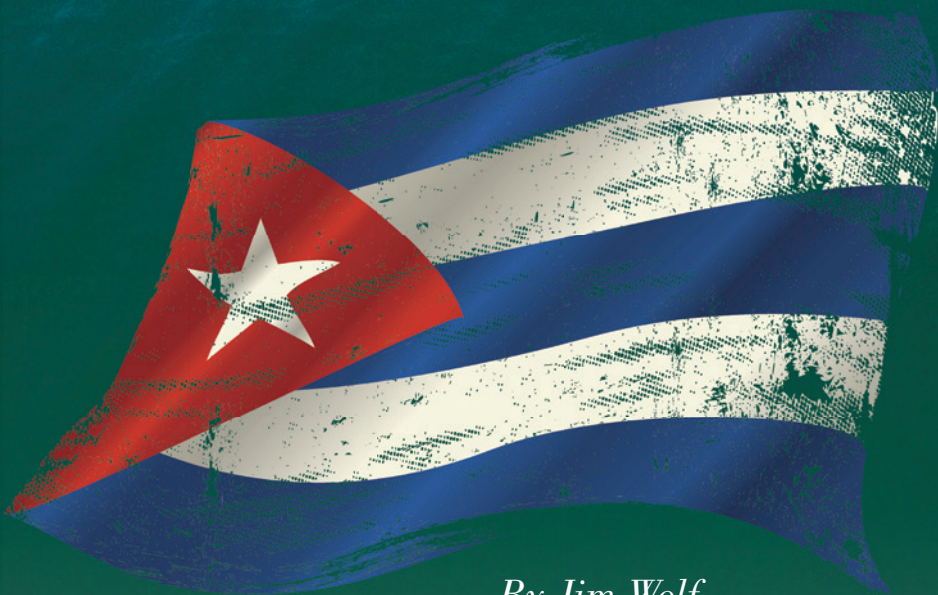
safety equipment including EPIRBs, tracking beacons, strobe lights, flares, marine radios, lifejackets and a satellite phone. Doug watched the weather and found a suitable rental six-man life raft, provisions, and charts, while Charlie researched various cameras and the requirements to visit Cuba.

Search results for boating to Cuba

returned conflicting information, so I started finding boaters who knew the do's and don'ts. Contacts such as Wally and Ron Shelton pointed me in the right direction. Ron suggested we hire his friend George, a Cuban national and tour guide with very good English. He informed me that the marine fuel in Cuba had not been reliable lately and

AVALON'S LATEST

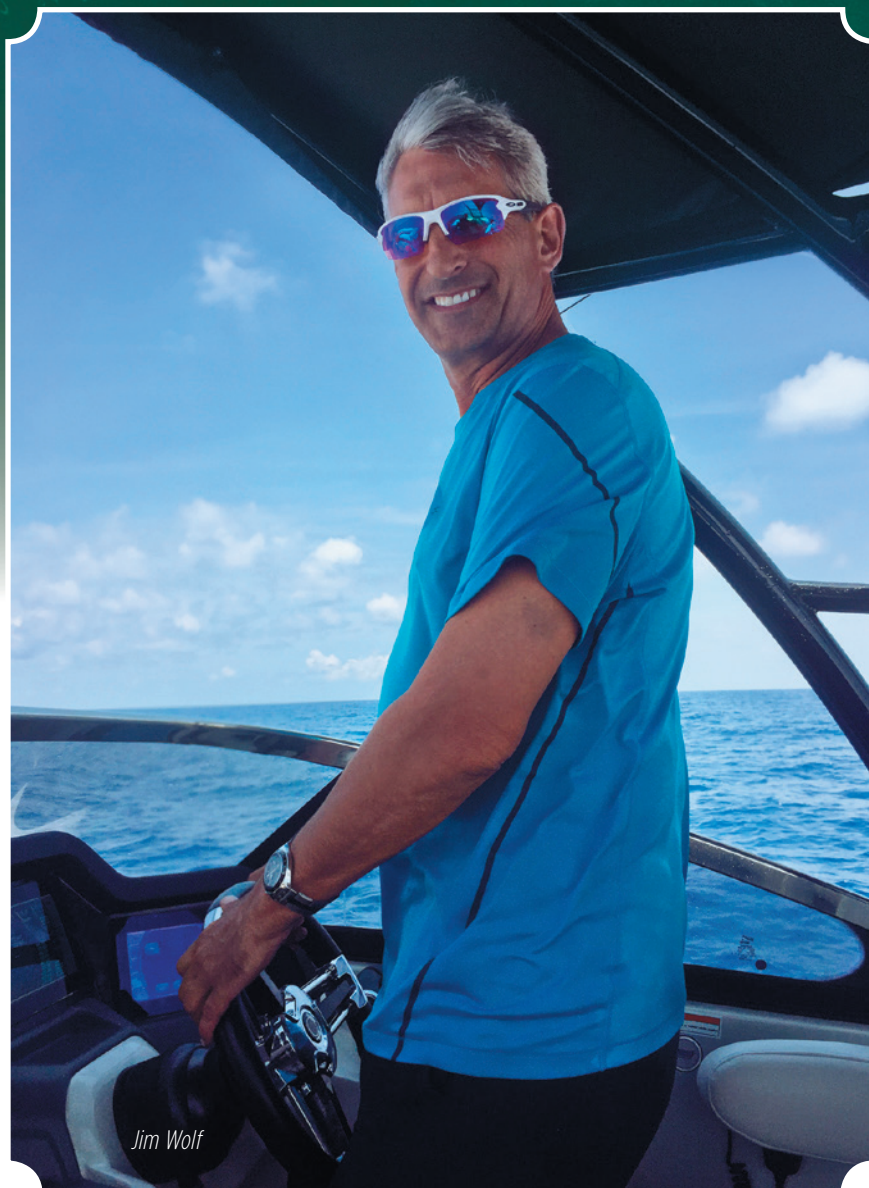
WHY WOULD YOU TAKE A PONTOON



*By Jim Wolf,
Avalon/Tahoe Pontoons CEO*



ADVENTURE BOAT TO CUBA?



recommended we carry enough to make the return trip. The Ambassador comes standard with a 100-gallon fuel tank built into the center pontoon. I challenged my engineers to add a second – the only modification we made to our stock production boat. To err on the side of caution and the one-third rule, we also took eight five-gallon tanks, giving us 240 gallons total.

The last big unknown was the weather.

The week before we were scheduled to leave, a low pressure system parked itself over the Straits of Florida, but as the trip drew near, we were delighted to see a favorable marine forecast. The main issue would be avoiding scattered thunderstorms, which tend to pop up.

DAY ONE 286 MILES: CLEARWATER TO KEY WEST

We got up early, interviewed with the *Tampa Bay Times*, and departed at 9:30 a.m. We had 185 miles until our first refueling stop, Marco Island, and I was feeling confident.

Two hours into the first leg, we were flying along with the music cranking. We hit Marco Island four hours later where we were met by Travis's friend, Jason Peach, who had been tracking our progress on the SAT TRACKER. This device/app was on the boat and allowed 10,000 people to track us through the link we posted on our Facebook page. By 3 p.m. we departed, our first open water leg ahead of us.

OPEN-WATER CROSSING

We watched the island recede, and all that was in front of us was 90 miles of open ocean, two storm systems, and even more unknowns. By mile 20, we rode four- to six-foot waves toward Key West. It was a wet four hours, but we arrived in the harbor safe and sound. Our first crossing was now behind us.



We pulled into a slip at the Harborside Motel and Marina, where Gregory A. Knight from Avalon joined us for dinner. Later we washed down *Avalon* to get the salt off. We named the boat *Avalon* and started referring to “her” as part of our family, part of this experience.

DAY TWO 100 MILES: KEY WEST TO CUBA

The weather report said it would be a nice day. We were pumped. We took on 69.5 gallons and filled up the reserve cans. A bearing of 215 degrees would take us on a straight line to Cuba.

The 100-mile crossing was smooth as silk with blue skies. We passed a lonely freighter, and at the halfway point, we stopped to contemplate our achievement. Epic. We flew the drone. We put in the fuel from the cans. And then, we went. Only 50 more miles to reach our goal of being the first to take a pontoon to Cuba!

The clouds were high and storms were looming as we approached Havana. There were locals waving from the break wall and soviet-style one-story buildings lining the entrance. We took the first canal to the left and saw a blue wall and a small building: the customs office.

The first officer didn't speak English but a second appeared and we started making progress. They asked about the SAT phones and drones, which they put special security tape on and instructed us not to use while visiting Cuba. Afterwards we needed to get over to Hemingway Marina; Channel One was waiting for us.

We were greeted by the Doctor and the Dock Master, who quickly dubbed the *Avalon* the *SEA CAR*. The Doctor came onboard and asked us funny questions. Locals milled around, checking out the boat, and Travis handed out hats, t-shirts, cozies, etc.

Thanks to Ron and George, we had a great rental house with a pool and a staff that had prepared amazing sandwiches. That was the first thing we did. Have a Cubano and a swim. In Cuba. Excellent.

Driving into Old Havana that evening was surreal. The sodium lights gave everything a yellow hue and the buildings, though architecturally lovely, were well-worn and foreboding in the faded light. The old American cars you hear about were everywhere; Cuban cigars and rum completed the mood at dinner. We had made it. Believe it or NOT.

DAY THREE: CUBAN TOURIST DAY

We spent the day visiting the old train station, which had been converted into shops. George took us up to a SkyBar where we had some excellent local beer. Then we went to find lunch, cigars, and a weather report. Our plan was to spend three nights, but because of an approaching system in the gulf, it looked like we'd have to leave before the weather turned.

DAY FOUR 100 MILES: CUBA TO KEY WEST

As we departed, I couldn't help but take a few minutes to cruise up the coast. I took one last look, said adios, and took a heading of 340 degrees back toward Key West.





Within 90 minutes the seas had calmed. At the halfway mark, we took some drone shots and I had a quick, refreshing swim in the 78-degree water. Then off we went, even passing a large sea turtle.

Arriving at Key West mid-afternoon, we filled up with 168 gallons of fuel. We had a nice reserve left over. I was proud of my engineers and all of our hard-working folks back in Alma, Mich.

DAY FIVE 100 MILES: KEY WEST TO MARCO ISLAND

We left the harbor on Father's Day morning. The waves were only three to five feet, but about 10 miles out, they grew to seven feet. When we looked back, it was obvious we'd be better off going 90 miles ahead than 10 miles back. The waves were hitting us from our stern, starboard side—lifting and pushing us toward our destiny. As REO Speedwagon blasted on the stereo, I knew there was nowhere in this world I would rather be. We smiled, laughed and sang as the miles and the waves rolled past us.

At the halfway mark, the waves were in the 7- to 9-foot range, with an occasional 12-footer. Eighteen miles out and we spotted Marco Island. We were climbing up and down waves, going left and right to dodge the big ones. The 7,500-pound boat felt like a nimble tank on the water. As I was driving, I thought to myself, "This is why we do this stuff; we're testing the limits of our boats in a way that no other consumer would."

We were ready to celebrate when I saw them coming: two large waves, back to back and very tightly stacked, just 30 or 40 yards ahead. There was no safe place to turn. All I could do was yell, "HOLD ON BOYS!"

As we punched through the first wave, the front door BLEW open and 1,500 gallons of water swamped us. The boat slowed, rolled to the right, and started backing up into the oncoming surf. As the water shifted to my side of the boat, it filled up to the bottom of my captain's chair. I heard Travis yell, "FULL THROTTLE. TURN RIGHT!" As the 800 horses proudly responded, the water shifted to the left and poured out of the rear door nearly as quickly as it had come.



Within 30 seconds we were back underway. Doug said, "I smell burning." Sure enough, smoke was coming up from under the seats and the USB port where I had my phone plugged in. Smoke, but no fire. We alerted the Coast Guard, just in case.

As we passed the island's southern tip, the waves started to die down. We had a sheriff's boat in front of us and the Fire & Rescue trailing us. We were directed to Rose Marine, where a large fork lift waited.


When the boat came out of the water, I was glad to see that our engineering efforts had paid off. The underside of the boat looked like it had just rolled off the production floor. I think the crew got more beat up than the boat.

Tired, wet, and hungry, we walked to the Dolphin Tiki Bar & Restaurant for some food, drink and conversation about the next step. The weather continued to deteriorate and the following day was supposed to be worse. Given that our electrical system was compromised, and wanting to err on the side of safety, we agreed that the trip should end here.

DAY SIX: BACK TO CLEARWATER

The next morning, we loaded her up and headed back to Clearwater. We received lots of honks and thumbs-ups from passersby on the highway. If we told them we just got back from Cuba, they wouldn't have believed it!

Back on the plane, we are over Toledo and I can see Put-In-Bay sitting 20 miles out in Lake Erie. That's where this all started. Just a couple of guys sitting in a bar on a random mid-July day, hashing out a plan for a long-distance pontoon adventure! Looking back, I have to say this was the best one. So far.

There are only four guys in the world who have taken a pontoon boat from America to Cuba, and only one company that had the determination to make it happen. If Doug were sitting next to me, I would look at him and say, "Let's get 'er done." That's been our motto for 14 years. And now, we've added another great boating adventure to our legacy. When we get off the plane, I plan to ask him: "Where to next, Doug?" 



For more photos and to read the full version of this feature click here.

(L to R) Doug Haskell, Charlie Chiara, Travis Conners and Jim Wolf are the first to pilot a pontoon from the U.S. to Cuba and back.



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