

# 2015 CUBA Trip

By: Galin Hernandez & Millie Santiago

Visiting Cuba had been on our "bucket list" for the longest time but was something we thought would never happen. Then on January 15, 2015 President Obama relaxed the travel restrictions to Cuba bringing with it the possibility of a trip there. When President Obama met with Cuban President Raul Castro on April 11, 2015 we knew actually visiting Cuba had become a reality. Soon after that fellow pilot Anthony Perea and I began researching and planning a flight to Havana, Cuba.

The first and most important thing to know is that visiting Cuba by U.S. Citizens for tourism **is still illegal**. However, there are 12 specific categories of travel that are exempt from the Cuban travel restriction. The travel restriction rules are set by the U.S. Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC), augmented by the Department of Commerce Bureau of Industry Standards (BIS) as well as the Department of Homeland Security's Customs & Border Protection (CBP). Since we wanted to fly our private airplane there, we would have to follow additional restrictions in place by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). At this point it seemed the bureaucratic hoops made the trip impractical. But even with these roadblocks we kept working on a trip there.

For a U.S. Citizen to legally travel to Cuba he must fall under one of the 12 exemptions which are:

- 1 - Family visits
- 2 - Official business of the U.S. government, foreign governments, and certain intergovernmental organizations
- 3 - Journalistic activity
- 4 - Professional research and professional meetings
- 5 - Educational activities
- 6 - Religious activities
- 7 - Public performances, clinics, workshops, athletic and other competitions, and exhibitions
- 8 - Support for the Cuban people
- 9 - Humanitarian projects
- 10 - Activities of private foundations or research or educational institutes
- 11 - Exportation, importation, or transmission of information or information materials
- 12 - Certain authorized export transactions

Each one of these exemptions is highly controlled and have specific requirements that must be met for the exemption to apply. On May 15, 2015 OFAC published guidance on the requirements for travel between the U.S. and Cuba based on the 12 exemptions.

[http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/cuba\\_faq\\_ferry\\_05042015.pdf](http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/cuba_faq_ferry_05042015.pdf)

With this guidance and after much discussion we realized that, in our particular situation, a trip to Cuba was possible under the religious activities exemption. So in late May we started preparing for a trip to Cuba during the 2015 Labor Day weekend.

Besides the OFAC requirement there are other issues unique to flying a General Aviation (GA) aircraft to Cuba that needed to be addressed. These included:

- 1 - Obtaining aircraft Insurance for Cuba
- 2 - Obtaining Cuban Landing Permit
- 3 - Finding out CBP exit/entry requirements
- 4 - Finding lodging and transportation within Cuba
- 5 - Confirming aviation fees and methods of payment in Cuba
- 6 - Obtaining aviation charts, maps, plates for Cuba
- 7 - Checking to see if we can use U.S. credit cards
- 8 - Establishing an itinerary for our time in Cuba
- 9 - Obtaining U.S. Commerce (BIS) permission to export and re-import our aircraft from Cuba
- 10 - Insuring compliance with OFAC travel exemption certification requirement
- 11 - Finding out monetary restrictions/availability in Cuba

Since there was a lot to do before September 4th, so Anthony and I divided up the tasks.

Not wanting to complicate things further, and since my airplane was undergoing major maintenance, we decided to use Anthony's Cirrus SR20 on this flight. Anthony would obtain aircraft insurance coverage, landing permits, lodging / transportation in Cuba and the U.S. BIS export/re-import permit. I would do the CBP exit/entry requirements, Cuba landing permits as well as the Cuban approach plates & charts.

In July, 2015 during a telephone conversation Anthony had with a BIS officer, the officer told him that they had just implemented an exemption to the export/re-import requirement for GA aircraft that were staying temporarily in Cuba. This meant that issue #9 on our list was no longer required. The trip became even more possible.

To insure we complied with the religious activities exemption, each person on the flight would have to do a signed affidavit certifying they were traveling to Cuba on a religious excursion and would not engage in tourism while there. I planned a detailed itinerary of the religious activities we would engage in and would document compliance to the itinerary with photographs, videos and obtaining religious newsletters during our visit. With the incredibly historic number of old churches in Havana (some built in the mid to late 1500's) this was actually very interesting research and something people should do. Add to this was the fact that the Pope was going to visit Cuba later in September so there were many Catholic religious activities happening in Havana. We were advised to keep records of our trip and all paperwork since the trip could be audited at any time during a 5 year period. Kind of like the IRS record keeping requirement so no big deal.

CBP in Key West told me that their only requirement was to provide 1hr advance notice of arrival as well as enter an outbound and inbound Electronic Advanced Passenger Information

System (E-Apis) notification. This meant I wanted to have a method of calling Key West Customs from Havana since I don't trust just entering Advise Customs in the flight plan.

To issue the landing permit, Cuban Aviation Authorities requested the following information:

- 1 - Name, nationality and address of the aircraft operator.
- 2 - Aircraft type and registration markings
- 3 - Name of pilot in command (PIC)
- 4 - Place of origin and destination
- 5 - Air corridor or route to be used in the flight plan
- 6 - Date of the flight
- 7 - Purpose of the flight
- 8 - Number of passengers and type and amount of cargo
- 9 - Statement of third party insurance liability coverage
- 10- Radio frequencies available

Additionally you have to submit an advance notice of arrival to the Cuban Customs Authorities via their web page ([www.aduana.cu/api/inicio.php](http://www.aduana.cu/api/inicio.php)) 15 minutes prior to aircraft departure. Except for the time frame, it is similar to the U.S. E-Apis requirement.

While in Cuba the aircraft must have the following documents on board:

- 1 - Airworthiness certificate
- 2 - Registration Certificate
- 3 - Licenses for all crewmembers
- 4 - Aircraft maintenance logbook(s)
- 5 - Radio Station License
- 6 - Passengers names with points of embarkation and destination
- 7 - Cargo manifest if applicable

After e-mailing back and forth a few times with required paperwork, we eventually received our Cuba landing permit with a landing permit number and an overall cost estimate. Some of the fees were very reasonable while others seemed quite high. All fees, to include fuel, are paid just prior departure. At least we had an idea of how much it would cost. But, more on this topic later.

Our trip started on Friday, September 4th at 8:00am with an uneventful VFR flight from North Perry (KHWO) to Key West (KEYW) in beautiful South Florida weather. Since the flight from KEYW to Havana (MUHA) is only 90 miles and it was forecast to be your typical beautiful Caribbean weather we carried minimum fuel for the flight plus IFR reserve. Even with minimum fuel, with 4 persons in the airplane and limiting the baggage to 25lbs per person we were still at the airplane's max gross weight.

In order to fly within Cuban sovereign airspace you must be on an Instrument (IFR) flight plan at all times. Visual (VFR) flights in Cuban sovereign airspace are not authorized and since Anthony is not IFR rated I would be the Pilot in Command (PIC) for Air Traffic Control (ATC)

purposes. All Cuba aeronautical information is available on the Cuba Aeronautical Information Services (AIS) page or by getting them from Jeppesen which we did.

With this information we filed KEYW - MAXIM - FARAC - FARAC1 arrival with an Instrument Landing System (ILS) approach to runway 06 for landing. In the remarks section we entered our Cuban landing permit number to make sure we weren't turned back by Cuban ATC due to an administrative error. When I called Key West ground and picked up our IFR clearance I was happy to hear; "N555GQ is cleared, **as filed**, to Havana Cuba". Nervous jitters aside, just before 10:00am we took off towards Havana.

Shortly after departing KEYW we approached check point MAXIM and were handed off to Havana Center. Approaching check point FARAC I heard a "Cubana de Aviacion" airplane being cleared for the ILS RWY06 into Havana. Even though the weather was severe VFR, I still wanted to do the ILS to make sure we avoided the Cuban Air Force base restricted area which is just south of the RWY6 approach path. When I tuned in the ILS frequency we did not receive anything on either radio. Once at FARAC we were sent to check point AVSAK and cleared for the ILS RWY06 but we were not receiving or hearing an ILS signal. I was about to tell approach we were not receiving the ILS signal when the controller asked if we were receiving the ILS to which I responded "No". He then asked me to "verify with your onboard systems if you are receiving the glideslope" to which again I said "No". However with the GPS still navigating we could clearly see the Havana airport to my left and about 8 miles away. It is hard to miss a 13,000ft runway in such clear weather conditions so I told him we had the airport in sight. He cleared us for the visual approach and to contact Havana tower. As soon as we checked in we were cleared to land on RWY06. So at about 11:00am Cirrus N555GQ landed at the Jose Marti International Airport in Havana, Cuba with Anthony Perea (Pilot), Galin Hernandez (Co-Pilot), Milagros Santiago (Pax) and Giovanni Ferrer (Pax) on board. Other than the ILS being out, the flight was uneventful.

We were originally scheduled to park at terminal #5, parking spot #1 but Havana ground told us to park at terminal #2. Terminal #2 is used for flights between the US and Havana so off we went. After taxiing for what seemed like forever we saw the marshaller indicating where to park the airplane, about 300ft away from the terminal. When we shut down we were met by very pleasant Cuban aviation authority officers who asked us for three copies of our General Declaration form. I filled it out, handed the copies to him. We loaded our limited luggage on a bus that was there and took the short trip to the terminal. Once in the Immigration area we paid the tourist VISA (\$20.00/person) and one by one they had us do their Immigration process using the VIP/Diplomatic line. Crossing Immigrations took less than ½ hour for all four. I was the last one to go through the different processes in case somebody had a problem. When I was cleared, the Immigrations officer asked if I wanted my passport stamped to which I said "Yes". My passport now has evidence I traveled to Cuba.

After Immigration we went to Customs. As many other nations do they run luggage through an X-Ray machine. Once again we were in the VIP/Diplomatic line. As I waited, the X-Ray machine operator seemed to be concerned about my back pack. When it came out he opened it, removed my aviation kneeboard and studied it very closely. After about 5 minutes of inspecting it he asked me what it was. I explained that I strap it to my knee, use it as a portable

table to write things down as I fly. It still had the paper with all my notes, frequencies, altimeter setting, altitudes and other information I had jotted down during the flight. I then showed him the battery compartment that powers the small lights so I can read and write things even at night. When I explained it to him he shrugged, told me he had never seen anything like this, gave me my kneeboard and welcomed me to Cuba. I guess until I explained what it was and how it worked he thought it was some kind of high tech imperialistic Yankee spy equipment.

Once inside we were told the director of Cuban Civil Aviation Authority Permits and Plans division (Mr. Roberto Brown Drake) wanted to talk to us about U.S. GA aircraft flying in Cuba. So after dropping our luggage off at the room we had rented we went and met with him. Anthony and I talked for about 45 minutes on topics from VFR flight (Big No-No for now), domestic flights within Cuba (Very interested) and what kind of services U.S. GA aircraft would need in order to facilitate this kind of activity. He recognized that GA is different from scheduled commercial service. He also recognized that they are not set up for GA and was concerned about getting a flood of U.S. GA aircraft overwhelming their capacity. He was very enthusiastic about GA flying within Cuba and asked lots of questions. We provided as much information as we could during the meeting and he requested we keep in touch to help make this go as smooth as possible. It was an excellent exchange of ideas and concerns.

By now it was almost 3pm and we were hungry so we decided to go get something to eat. The Cuban government has given permission to some Cubans to open restaurants called "paladares" which are showing up all around Havana. Most of the "paladares" are in a person's homes but some are a bit more refined. We stopped at the "Santa Barbara" paladar for lunch since it was fairly close by. The atmosphere was very relaxed and the food was delicious. One thing for sure, the service is more laid back so you can't be in any rush. While eating we looked over our planned itinerary of places we wanted to visit during our stay. We didn't want to waste any time since we were in Cuba only for such a short period of time.

Paying for lunch, and everything else in Cuba, is different. Cuba has a unique monetary system. There are two different currencies in Cuba and foreign currency is not officially accepted anywhere. Cuban citizens use the Cuban Peso (CUP) while foreigners are required to use Cuban Currency (CUC). The exchange rate for the CUP is 25 to 1 while the exchange rate for CUC is 1 to 1. So if you are a foreigner by using the CUC you pay 25 times the amount a Cuban citizen pays for the same services. However, some places do not accept CUPs so in those cases there is no difference.

There are many places (CADECA) to exchange foreign currency for CUC's but we were told that there is a 10% fee for exchanging US Dollars (USD) for CUC. So before we left the U.S. we converted our dollars to Euros. Then in Cuba, we converted the Euros to CUC avoiding the 10% USD exchange fee. U.S. credit and bank debit cards are currently blocked and can't be used in Cuba at all so you have to make sure you carry enough cash for your entire stay. All aviation services in Cuba must be paid for in CUC.

The first things we did after lunch was to get some kind of communication. Anthony purchased a 10.00CUC sim card for his cell-phone and put minutes on it. Now we had a way to contact U.S. Customs for our advance notice of arrival on Monday. It also served as a communication

device in case of an emergency. INTERNET service for the general population arrived in Cuba just a month before so it was the new craze. There are WIFI hotspots around Havana that anybody can use if you buy a 1hr INTERNET card (costs 2-3CUC) which gives you 1hr of WIFI access. You can tell where there is a WIFI hotspot because there are hundreds of people sitting around tapping away on their devices. Although spotty, with these services we felt that we were not cut off from the rest of the world.

For the next three days we walked, AND I MEAN WE WALKED, around Havana trying as best we could to follow the religious activity itinerary we had. Being a totalitarian state, it is how entire families go everywhere. We felt completely relaxed, comfortable and safe walking around Havana. Towards the end of each day we were so tired and sweaty (the temperatures were in the high 90s) we used taxi services instead of walking. It was wonderful to see that people of all ages walked everywhere.

Later that evening we returned to the room, took a shower and went to dinner at a 24 hour place next to the "Habana Libre" hotel called "La Rampa". When we walked in, Anthony mentioned it looked just like a Denny's so that is what we called it during our stay. Now, even though there were lots of people using the WIFI during the day, at night there were many more. Although there were people of all ages, the majority were much younger. After what seemed like a very long day, it was time to go back to our rooms and get a good night sleep.

The next morning we woke up to a delicious hot breakfast waiting for us. We were told not to drink local water, always ask if the ice was made from bottled or boiled water because if not you can get sick. We sure didn't want to spend our time there in the hospital. Another thing is that public restrooms do not have toilet paper so you have to carry some with you during the day. Once done with breakfast, it was time to start our route. We quickly found that Cubans are very humble and friendly. It was amazing to see how they automatically knew we weren't locals. Even some small dogs followed us around because local say foreigners use different soap and perfume so we smell different.

As we walked to the different churches we saw many beautiful buildings with incredible architectural detail. Until the Spanish American war, Havana was the center of the Spanish colonial empire in the Americas and was the largest most prosperous city in the new world. Most of Spain's riches flowed through Havana and you can see it in the old buildings, some of them dating back to the 1500's. Walking from place to place and seeing these historic buildings really gave you an insight into the influence religion had on colonial Spanish society during these times. While walking from church to church we would stop in different places to drink something and get air-conditioning relief from the heat. The last thing we wanted was to succumb to heat exhaustion while walking around.

It took us a while to get to the first place on our list which was the "San Francisco de Asis" convent. At the convent we could look inside the altar area but it were unable to actually go inside. Many historical religious places in Havana were undergoing major maintenance work since the Pope would be visiting Havana on September 20<sup>th</sup>. Because of this some of the places we wanted to visit were temporarily closed to the public. At least we could take our cameras and click away. After that we walked to the "San Francisco de Asis" church which

was open. When we entered we came upon an incredibly beautiful altar area. It really did provide a peaceful sanctuary for meditation and reflection. We stayed there quite some time while trying to absorb every detail. Soon we realized we had been walking for several hours and were hungry, so we stopped at the "El Jardin del Oriente". We sat at a table next to their water fountain which gave the restaurant a very cozy and relaxing feeling. They had a shrimp stuffed avocado appetizer in a white sauce and a papaya milk shake which was divine!

After we paid the bill we went walking to the next church, taking pictures and appreciating the beauty all around us. To keep hydrated and avoid heat exhaustion we would stop about every hour, go into an air conditioned area to drink something. One of the places we stopped was "La Floridita". This is where Ernest Hemmingway frequented while he lived in Havana. They even have a statue of him at the bar where he apparently stood when alive. When it got dark, we went to our rooms and prepared to have dinner at "Paladar Los Primos" which was across the street from where we were staying. We had seen the "Paladar Los Primos" on an episode of the U.S. television series "Cuban Chrome". It was exactly as depicted on Television. After a very good dinner it was time to get some rest for the Sunday activities.

After Sunday breakfast we took an antique car taxi to mass at "La Catedral de San Cristobal de la Habana". When we arrived we were disappointed to see the church was undergoing renovations so the main entry was closed. However we asked one of the guards about Sunday mass and he told us there was a side entrance being used. We went in and saw it was a small area just for religious services which was filling up rapidly. It was wonderful to spend Sunday mass in such a different and beautiful setting. After the mass we talked to the priest for a few minutes before heading back to the room to change out of Sunday clothing. For the ride back we decided to take a "Coco-Taxi" to the room.

A "Coco-Taxi" is a tricycle scooter that has the back seats within a round fiberglass shell resembling a large coconut. The shell has no doors, is open to the front but the seats are in the shade. There are no seat belts so as the scooter drives around you hold on to a handle as the breeze cools you off. The ride back to our room was so much fun we would go to Cuba just to ride in one of those again.

After changing into more comfortable clothes we went back to our itinerary. We visited "El Cristo del Buen Viaje" church, but it was also closed for renovations. From there we continued walking and visited the Santo Angel Custodio and the San Agustin churches. With all the walking we were doing and with the temperature in the high 90's the heat was something we had to worry about. When the heat got to us, we stopped somewhere to get some liquids and air-conditioning before continuing on. We walked so much we hadn't realized it was late afternoon by the time we were ready for lunch. So we stopped into the "San Felipe" hotel restaurant to cool off, get some drinks and have a light lunch. The restaurant and hotel looked like an expensive 5 star place yet we had the small restaurant all to ourselves. The services was superb, food quality was excellent and were pleasantly surprised that it cost about the same as the "Paladares".

By this time we were so tired so we decided to take a taxi to the "Sagrado Corazon de Cristo" church, known to local Cubans as the "Reina" church which was quite a walk away. We could

have taken another of the old taxis as before but decided instead to take a restored antique taxi. We had been told the "Sagrado Corazon" church was also undergoing renovation and a convertible taxi was the best way to appreciate it. So we got into a purple 1953 Pontiac convertible taxi and off we went to visit the church. On the way there the taxi driver stopped at a small park that has a bench with a life size bronze statue of John Lennon sitting on it. The statue didn't have his glasses since they kept being broken off and stolen during the night. So to remedy this, they have a person who is responsible for the glasses. His job is to put the glasses on the statue's face when somebody sits on the bench then takes them off when the person leaves. We found this so interesting we had to get pictures sitting on the bench with John Lennon's statue. After this we arrived at the "Sagrado Corazon de Cristo" church. Using a convertible taxi worked out very well since we got an uninhibited view of the church while sitting inside the taxi. As we were told, it was undergoing renovations so that was the best we could have accomplished.

Last but not least, we were contacted by a friend who had been recently assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Cuba and wanted to meet us for dinner. We arranged to meet him and his family at "El Hotel Nacional" which is the most prestigious and beautiful hotel in Havana and close to where they were staying. We sat at the Cinema Cafeteria in the hotel, had some milk shakes and got caught up with each other's lives. After 5 years it was great to see them and meeting their youngest daughter who was born after we last saw them. From there we had dinner at the hotel and spending the rest of the night enjoying each other's company. After dinner it was time to pay the bill, say our goodbyes completing our last night in Cuba.

Knowing that dealing with a GA airplane was new to Cuban authorities, we got up real early on Monday for the trip back. We arrived at airport terminal #2 about 8:30am and started figuring out the departure process. It took about 30 minutes to get in touch with the Cuban Aviation Authority officer that would handle our departure. Once she arrived we were told to go to the Immigration VIP/Diplomat line for processing. This time I would be the "guinea pig" and be the 1st to go through. The first snag came when I was asked for my boarding pass. Obviously we don't have boarding passes but the immigration agent would not let me pass until I produced one. After a few minutes of explaining the situation, giving them a copy of the GenDec and that there are no boarding passes on a GA flight she called a supervisor over. After talking between themselves for a while the supervisor told me they needed to enter a boarding pass number into their computer system or it would not let them process us. They talked for a while, looked over the GenDec, talked some more, then decided to use the GENDEC as the boarding pass for the computer system. Soon afterwards we had all passed through Immigration.

Except for the fact that we had to take our shoes off, the Customs portion was quick and efficient. We then waited for the Cuban Aviation Authority Officer so we could get fuel, file our flight plan and pay the fees. This took another ½ hour before she showed up again. It turns out she handles all aircraft at that terminal to include the 6 jets heading for the U.S. that were waiting for their passengers. She was one busy lady.

Millie and the other passenger waited at the terminal while Anthony and I took the bus to the airplane to be fueled. The fuel truck arrived at the airplane just as we got there and we immediately told them not to proceed since it carried JetFuel not AVGAS. They thought all U.S.



airplanes used JetFuel so that is what they brought. I told them we used AVGAS and it seemed they didn't know what that was. The fuel truck operator asked if we wanted B100 fuel which was a new term to me. After a few minutes of talking I realized what they call B100 is what we call AVGAS. So off they went to get the other fuel truck.

As we waited for the fuel a "Cubana de Aviacion" Antonov-148 landed and parked next to us. The Captain came down the stairs and immediately walked over to us. He had never seen a small U.S. registered GA airplane parked on the ramp at Havana and wanted to see it up close. We talked about flying, how the airplane was equipped and where we had flown before. He said it would be a dream for him to have a small airplane and be able to fly from place to place within Cuba. He also said he hoped more GA airplanes would fly into Cuba so someday Cubans can also own private airplanes.

About ½ hour later the fuelers showed up with a truck that had B100/AVGAS labels on it. They told me they have to be very careful with this truck since people steal the fuel to use in their cars. Kind of like what happens in the U.S.

After taking 12 gallons of fuel, we needed to file the flight plan and pay the charges. The flight planning office is in terminal #3 so the Officer flagged down a passing truck on the ramp and we rode to the flight planning office. When we got to the office the persons working there just stared at us. To them flight crews are always in uniform so they were shocked to see us in shorts, T-Shirts and tennis shoes. We explained that Anthony owned the airplane and we could dress as we wanted. To them this was so out of the ordinary and completely unheard of. Even so, they treated us extremely well and once I filed the flight plan they provided a folder with weather information (printed program charts, winds aloft charts, pressure variant charts and other charts I have not used in years) as well as verification of ATC flight plan acceptance. All in all it is a very efficient operation. There were a little bit of weather on our route so we filed MUHA - MAXIM - KEYW, no SID to make it easier on us. After all it was only a 45minute flight.

From there we went to pay the charges. We were shocked when we got the bill. The total charges for the three days were equivalent to \$557.80 while we were expecting only about \$350.00 maximum. The charges in USD equivalent were:

Government handling fee: 151.00 (no personal handler but an officer as a contact)  
Flight dispatch fee: \$14.00 (reasonable charge)  
Landing fee: \$6.36 (reasonable charge)  
Parking fee: \$3.82 (reasonable charge)  
Aeronautical Services fee: \$73.11 (quite high)  
Customs fee: \$48.00 (quite high)  
Immigration fee: \$23.00 (a bit high)  
Fuel-AVGAS: \$48.51 (very reasonable \$4.04per gallon)  
Airport tax: \$50.00 (Huh?)  
Requested services-1: \$90.00 (Huh?)  
Requested services-2: \$50.00 (Huh?)

We asked about the airport tax and they told us it was the departure tax which is \$25.00 per person but the crew is exempt. When we asked about the requested services 1 & 2 charge they told us it was the bus we used to transfer the crew and the passengers from the airplane to the terminal and back. They told us the charge was per trip for the entire bus, regardless of how many persons are on the bus and that we could have declined it. So we had made a rookie mistake and took the bus thinking it was complimentary. Now we know for next time.

After this we took the bus, hey we already paid for it, back to the airplane with the other two persons already there. By now it was 11:00am so as they strapped in I called and made the 1hr advance notice of arrival to U.S. Customs in Key West. I got in the airplane and was already strapped in when two Cuban Officers ran out to us. One stood in front of the airplane while the other told us we could not depart. The head immigration supervisor had noticed we had not provided boarding passes and wanted us to go back to present them before we could depart. Once again we explained what was going on and the officer made some radio calls. We sat there all strapped in until the head supervisor showed up. He looked at the airplane with us strapped in, realized why we didn't have boarding passes and after a few minutes decided it was OK for us to depart.

By the time we got the engine started and I called in for our IFR clearance it was almost 11:20am. We got MUHA - PRIM - TADPO - KEYW as our route which would take us further East than we wanted to go. Oh well; file what you want, fly what you get. As we taxied to the departure area of RWY06 we were cleared to the tower frequency and the tower cleared us for take-off. I told them we needed to do a run up before departure. It took them a few seconds before they told us to continue to RWY06 and to do our run up in an area next to intersection ALPHA. Note to self; do the run up before taxiing out to the runway. While we did our run up, the Antonov-148 taxied by for take-off. The Captain we had chatted with earlier came on the frequency, wished us a good flight and hoped to see us there soon. Politics aside, pilots of all nations are brothers in flight.

After the run up we were told to maintain runway heading and were cleared for take-off. After a few miles we were handed off to Havana Approach. We were then "cleared to PRIM, climb/maintain 5,000ft, expect direct MAXIM after PRIM". Cool, this is basically the route we wanted in the first place. After PRIM he gave us a 010 heading to avoid a restricted area and once past the restricted area he cleared us direct MAXIM. When we got close to the U.S. / Cuba ADIZ, we were handed off to Miami Center and cleared direct to KEYW. Except for a few build ups along the way it was another uneventful flight.

Once on the ground at KEYW we parked in front of U.S. Customs. Even though we arrived almost 45 minutes later than filed, the inspectors were walking our way to inspect the airplane before we even had the doors completely open. They told us to take our baggage inside and fill out the forms. Once inside they asked the normal U.S. Customs questions like where are you coming from and what was the purpose of your trip. They did not even flinch when I told them we came from Havana and were on a religious excursion. They mentioned they are getting more and more charter flights from Havana so it is no longer a big deal. The entire U.S. Customs process took about 15minutes for all four of us. They were extremely efficient and very courteous.

After that, the flight from Key West (KEYW) to North Perry (KHWO) was anticlimactic. Our flying adventure was over.

Our flight to Cuba was an incredible experience. The bureaucratic paperwork is more than one would normally do but nothing overly outrageous. I feel eventually the paperwork requirements will be greatly reduced as time progress. For now; "When in Rome, do as the Romans". The fees in Havana are high but I also feel once they work out a system to handle GA aircraft it will get better. In our case we made a rookie mistake that cost us, a mistake we won't do when we return.

Overall we are thrilled to have done this trip and, as far as we know, Cirrus N555GQ with Anthony Perea (Pilot), Galin Hernandez (Co-Pilot), Milagros Santiago (Pax) and Giovanni Ferrer (Pax) on board became the 1st Cirrus in history to fly from Key West to Havana.

You can see photos of our trip at:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1024498654248587.1073741835.100000653864290&type=1&l=0c01b609bf>