

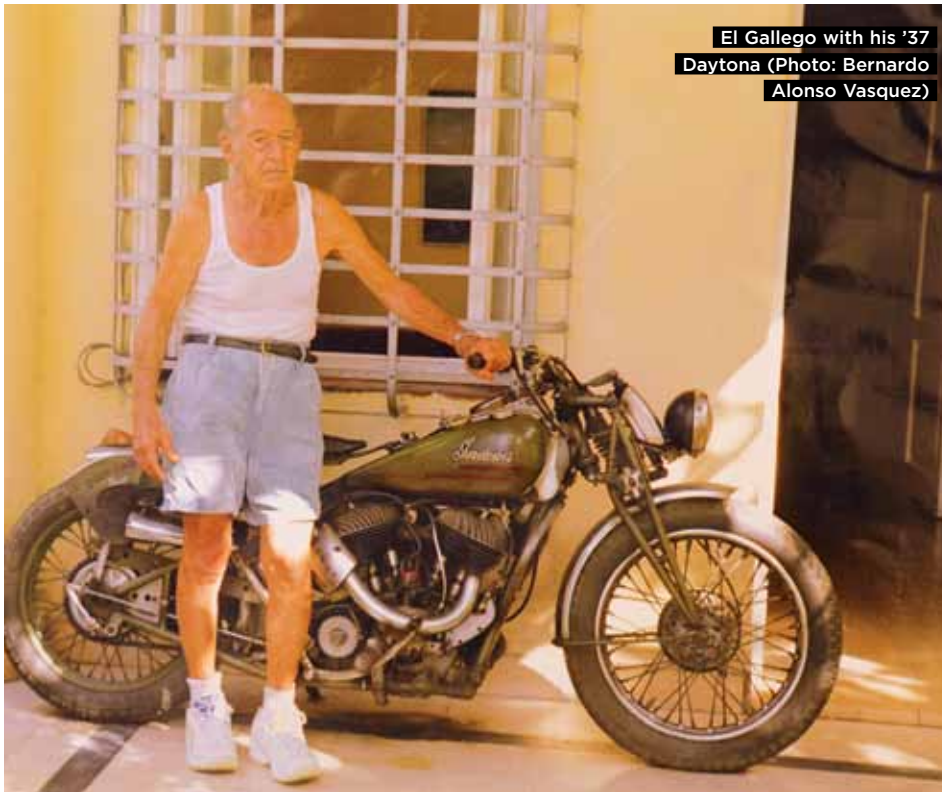


# INDIAN SUMMER

The demise and rebirth of a motorcycle marque in Cuba

WORDS & PHOTOS CHRISTOPHER P BAKER





El Gallego with his '37  
Daytona (Photo: Bernardo  
Alonso Vasquez)



## “WE DIDN’T KNOW THE VALUE OF OUR BIKES AND CUBANS WERE DESPERATE, EVEN FOR FOOD”

**O**K, I go to kill the Corvette!” exclaimed 69-year-old Gonzalo ‘El Gallego’ Alonso. The Cuban donned his aviator-style leather helmet and goggles, dusted off his 1937 Indian Daytona Racer, and headed to a date with infamy in a clandestine race on the Autopista Melena-Batabanó freeway south-east of Havana.

“He looked like a frog with his skinny legs and John Wayne walk,” recalls Luis Enrique González, a fellow vintage bike owner who witnessed the race. Gonzalo raced with a half-smoked stogie in his mouth. “But his Indian Daytona sprinted the quarter-mile like the devil! He passed three times the Corvette,” exclaims Luis. All the more impressive as the blood-red ’59 Vette was converted for drag racing with a 327-cubic-inch engine. “I tell you, I’d pass the Corvette by my balls!” exclaimed Gonzalo. Then he went home and chained the bike to the window grill. “My dad raced the Corvette in 1993. He never rode again,” Bernardo Alonso Vásquez — El Gallego’s son — tells me over *café cubano* in his apartment overlooking the Atlantic shoreline. “Before the revolution he raced anything, especially the Harley-Davidsons of the Luis Bretos dealership. They were the most powerful bikes on the island. But the Indian always won!”

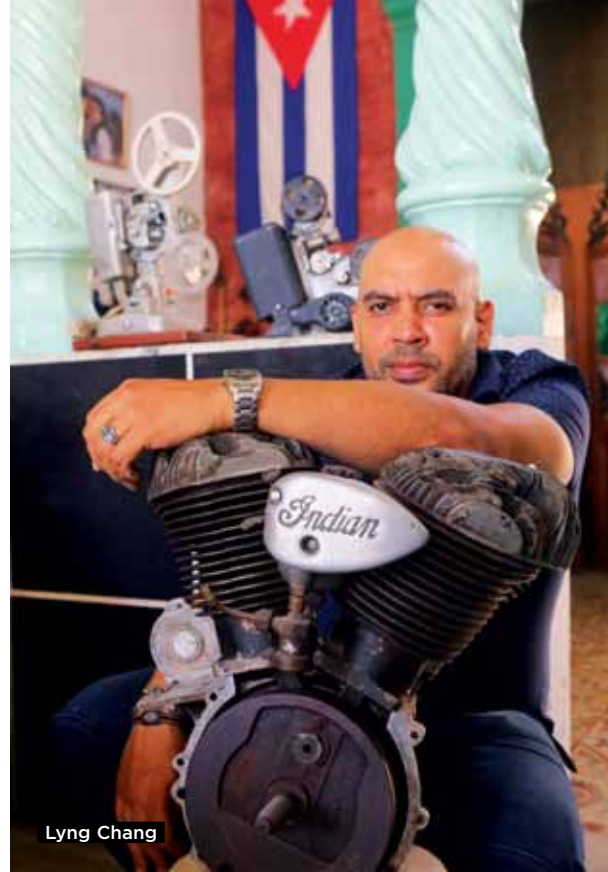
I hail a taxi and ride out to the Miramar district to photograph the legendary Daytona,

propped on bricks in the dusty barebones lounge of a once grand, now forlorn, 1930s mansion. The original olive-green paint is much scratched and faded. But the long low-slung bike looks menacing still. A museum piece begging to be restored. “My dad had another bike,” Bernardo adds nonchalantly. He pulls out a recent photograph. Wow! The cherry-red 1946 Chief Black Hawk with a Bonneville engine looks, er, almost cherry. Bernardo is selling it for a whopping \$23,000 — a phenomenal sum in Cuba, where the average monthly state salary is \$25. “A friend keeps the engine running and tuned. But neither bike has been registered or ridden for 30 years,” he tells me.

Bernardo’s bikes are two of only 10 Indians remaining in Cuba today. “Maybe there are still a few hidden away in the countryside. Since they haven’t been ridden in years, they’re no longer registered,” says Luis. The rest were smuggled out of Cuba. In the mid-1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, several foreigners bought up Indians and other rare bikes from Cubans desperate for hard cash. “An Argentinian shipped out most of the British bikes and some Indians,” Luis told me. “We didn’t know the value of our bikes and Cubans were desperate then,” adds Rafael Díaz Díaz, proud owner of a silver-and-candy-apple-red 1946 Indian Scout. He grimaces at memories of the grim post-Soviet ‘Special Period’, when Cubans

The most famous motorcycle  
in Cuba, El Gallego's  
legendary 1937 Indian Daytona





Lyng Chang



Eduardo Fernández García's Panther-tanked Indian Arrow and early Chev sedan

were so desperate for food that even their cats were eaten.

In 1996, Cuba's vintage bikes were classified as National Treasures and, like their classic car counterparts, can no longer legally be shipped abroad. Still, they occasionally get bought and spirited out of the country as 'recycled steel.' "Many were shipped out by the husband of a German diplomat. He used his wife's diplomatic immunity to send bikes out of the country," says 59-year-old Rafael.

"It's a shame. We're going to end up without motorcycles here," José Ángel 'Pipi' Pérez Moreno complained to journalist Tracey Eaton in 2012. Yet, unknown to his compañeros, Pipi was in on the game. He sneaked out four Harleys and two Indians — one from 1936 and another from 1948 — in pieces. "I shipped them to Spain, reassembled them, then shipped the bikes to Miami in a container," he recalled, having fled to Miami himself.

"*Pipi es un pedaso de mierda que traiciona sus amigos!*" spits Luis. He's a piece of shit! He betrayed his friends!

"There were many Indians before the revolution (sold through Rogers International of Cuba). They were more prized than Harleys," says Rafael, raising a bottle of chilled Cristal beer to his lips. We've just finished a sundowner photo shoot of Rafael riding his Scout along the Malecón boulevard, snaking sinuously along the Havana shoreline.

Rafael, a jovial and chubby mechanic, bought his 750cc twin in 1984. "I don't have a car. I use my bike for everything! To go to the doctor, to the store or a party. Whatever!" he says proudly. "The gearbox is original. The carburettor too." In Cuba, that counts for something.

Rafael's Scout is one of only three Indians still clattering down the island's streets. The second is a 1950 Indian Arrow 149. "I think

this is the only single-cylinder Indian in Cuba," says Eduardo Fernández García as he pushes his 250cc Arrow out of a basement garage and into the blazing tropical light of Havana in May. (The slow and awkward Arrow was introduced in 1948, initially with a 220cc engine, to compete with the lightweight British bikes then gaining popularity in the US and Cuba. It was an arrow in the foot that helped bankrupt the company.)

Eduardo's beaten-about bike is Frankenstein's monster. "The forks, frame and motor are original, but everything inside the motor is modified," says Eduardo. The prior owner — a guajiro (farmer) in Villa Clara — had already buggered it with parts from a Soviet Ural and a 58mm Jawa piston in a modified bore. I note a filthy Japanese carburettor. "Suzuki," Eduardo replies. "The engine doesn't work with a battery. I added a Soviet dynamo." The tank is from a 1958 Panther Model 120 (a rare and beautiful 646cc



Luis Enrique González's basket case 1947 Chief



sloper single made by Phelon & Moore, of Cleckheaton, Yorkshire), although it sports an original Indian decal.

"*El cubano inventa*," laughs Luis Enrique, explaining how proudly fanatical owners of vintage motorcycles go to extreme lengths to keep their bikes running in the face of shortages and other difficulties we can barely imagine. "What we can't fix or cannibalise from other motos or cars, we make ourselves. We tailor pistons and virtually any other part you can think of right here. "*Hecho en Cuba, chico!*"

Luis looks like a textbook harlista in his blood-red bandana, chain-festooned jeans, and black T-shirt emblazoned with a Harley-Davidson logo. He stomps down on the kick-start of his 1936 Knucklehead and it roars into life. Yet keeping it running is a scourge in this land of US embargoes and perpetual shortage. He shows me handlebars and exhausts made from domestic piping. And drive chains that

once powered conveyor-belts in Cuba's Coca-Cola bottling plant. Russian GAZ jeep pistons substitute for originals. And, he explains, in the 'Special Period', lack of tyres forced Luis to replace one of his Harley's spoked wheels with a solid 16-inch wheel from a VW Beetle. His fists clench as if wrestling a bull as he mimics trying to muscle the bike, with its flat tyres, through a corner. "*Coño!* It was like being in a rodeo!"

Luis' collection of vintage bikes includes nine Harley-Davidsons and a 1947 Indian Chief, which he bought in 1989 from a neighbour for 3000 pesos (about \$120). He rode it for less than a year. "The motor was very noisy. When I took it apart, I discovered the pistons were from a Russian Gaz jeep. The cylinders had been bored out, and there was a huge clearance between the pistons and pots," Luis continues. "Russian pistons break apart easily. I worried that if something goes wrong, bits will get into the flywheel

and I will have an explosion!" he exclaims as his hands fly apart. "The crankcase is like a human chest. If you break it, it's a disaster."

He straddles the Chief's carcass, inert beneath Cuban and US flags. The retro icon — the most luxurious bike of its day — seems so sad, disemboweled and immobile for lack of parts.

"In my 1200 H-D Flathead I use the same Russian pistons, and I have the same problem," Luis adds. "Fortunately, we have a lot of crankcases for the Harleys. But Indians are very rare. For Harley I can find spare parts, but not for the Indian." (Prior to the Revolution, Harleys were standard issue for Cuba's police and the military. Then Cuba spun off into Soviet orbit. No more Harleys were imported, thanks to the US embargo. But more than 200 pre-revolutionary Hogs are still on the road.)

"Indian was a highly evolved engine. It was a beautiful design," Luis sighs as he runs his



Rafael Diaz Diaz cruises the Malacon Boulevard in Havana



Meet Ernesto Guevara, son of revolutionary icon Che Guevara. Ernesto runs a Cuban tour business using a fleet of modern Harleys imported from Argentina



Lyng Chang's 1945 Harley Knucklehead



José Angel Pérez Moreno, aka Pipi, with one that got away  
(Photo: Jose Angel Pérez Moreno)



## “WHAT WE CAN’T FIX OR CANNIBALISE FROM OTHER MOTOS OR CARS, WE MAKE OURSELVES”

hand along the Chief’s skirted front fender, curvaceous as Celia Cruz. “But everything was in a different direction. The left-foot pedal was the clutch. The throttle was on the left handlebar — to accelerate I had to twist the hand forward,” Luis recalls, chortling. “I was working as a sailor at Marina Hemingway. One day I forgot it wasn’t a Harley and I almost jumped it into the water!”

Much of Cuba’s beguiling and arcane allure is the fun-loving way the ingenious, resourceful and indefatigably good-humoured Cubans turn adversity on its ear, eliciting simple pleasures out of thin air.

The floor of Lyng Chang’s slightly dilapidated Art Nouveau house literally shakes to a brassy salsa tune hot enough to cook pork and the thunder of antique Harleys arriving for a party that Lyng is hosting. Tragos (shots) of añejo rum are passed around. Couples dance just a little closer than groin-to-groin, whirling sensuously between half a dozen Indians and Harleys that occupy the front room, dripping oil on the colonial tile floor. “It’s his harem!” laughs his wife, Yuxi González, nodding towards the bikes. “*Sus amantes!*”

Lyng — a talented music producer who, in 2007, founded the band ToMezclao — is one of Cuba’s monied elite. He owns four Harleys,

including a 2010 V-Rod, and a US Army-spec WLA sold to Cuba as surplus at the end of WWII. But his real pride and passion are his Indians, including three Chiefs, a black ’37 Scout in running condition, plus a 500cc Pony Scout 741 and a 500cc Indian Tomahawk (a re-badged Royal Enfield).

“When I heard a Harley the first time as a kid, it sounded magical. The most perfect sound in the world! But when I heard an Indian, it transported me to another galaxy,” Lyng says. “That sound enabled me to appreciate music and be the best DJ. I carry the sound of an Indian in my mind, like a perfect tuning fork!” he jokes.

One of the things I love about this iconoclastic island of tropical charms is how reality is often stranger than fiction.

“I’d always heard talk of a container with classic bikes inside,” Lyng tells me, beaming at the memory. “One day I was asking around if anyone knew of any old Harleys for sale. Someone said he knew of some old Indians stored at the dock. I searched until I found the container. Fuck! When we opened the doors we found three Chiefs, a 500cc Scout (Tomahawk) and a Matchless. A foreigner had intended to export them from Cuba, but he never received authorisation. I bought the container with all the bikes,” Lyng laughs.

“Imagine! It had been sealed for 30 years!” His dream is to get the Chiefs running. “I want to make them like new again, little by little,” he adds fondly as he forages among a miscellany of rusty frames and grimy, well-worn parts heaped on his patio. There are plastic bags, too, full of shiny replacements that Lyng buys on eBay or from Jerry Greer’s (an Indian parts specialist in South Dakota) via a Canadian friend who acts as a mula—a Cuban term for someone who carries items to Cuba on someone’s behalf.

“Here, many harlistas tell me it’s not right to have both Indians and Harleys. But I think it’s a luxury to have these American jewels. I’m convinced that Indians are better bikes. They’re incredible!” he adds, wrapping his arms around the bulky block of a Chief for a photo.

“Maybe I’ll buy Gallego’s Daytona, or I’ll trade it for one of my Harleys,” says Lyng. “My ultimate dream is to restore the most famous motorcycle in Cuba and see if it can still beat a Corvette.”

I tell him I know who owns the ’59 ’Vette. “Its engine has been enlarged to 350 cubic inches,” I say. “But no worries. Luis Enrique told me Gallego’s secret when racing. He put a few drops of two-stroke oil in his petrol to lubricate the cylinders and pistons.”