



THE DESPERATE LIVE-TO-RIDE STRUGGLE OF **HARLISTAS** CUBANOS

Denied parts, Cuban motorcyclists keep their antique motorcycles running with resourcefulness and ingenuity

> By **Christopher P. Baker**

A sepia panoramic photograph, circa 1948, adorning the walls of several Havana restaurants shows members of the Club Motociclistas de Cuba by the beach in Surgidero de Batabanó, with their bikes neatly lined in a row. Most are Harley-Davidsons, bought from the Casa Bretos dealership, Cuba's sole pre-revolutionary Harley-Davidson franchise.

In those halcyon days, many Cubans also rode Indians and British Triumphs, but the Harley-Davidson was the

defining icon of the isle's moto culture. Thousands thundered down the highways of Cuba. Harleys were standard issue for Cuba's military and police, and for workers of the (U.S.-owned) electrical and telephone companies.

"Some vendors also sold ice cream from Harley Servi-Car three-wheelers," recalls Raúl Corrales, founder of the Classic Motorcycle Club of Cuba. Even sultry actress and musical diva María de los Angeles Santana rode a Harley

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around the streets of Havana, dressed in a skin-tight Elvis Roustabout leather jacket.

“Perhaps there were more than 5,000 Harleys,” electrical engineer and moto mechanic Luis Enrique González said.

Then Castro’s revolution spun into Soviet orbit, invoking the U.S. trade embargo. Cubans call it *el bloqueo*; the blockade. No more American vehicles were imported. In terms of classic Americana, time stood still in Cuba. The island’s vibrant Harley culture was turned on its head. The Bretos Harley dealership was forced to close.

“We received a shipment of 100 new Harleys in 1960, but after that, not even spare parts,” 79-year-old Antonio “Tony” Miniet said. “We had to find ways to service the bikes. Like all the Cuban harlistas, we learned to be creative,” he added, speaking of Cuba’s proudly fanatical owners of antique Harleys.

Miniet founded the police daredevil acrobatic team that rode Harleys until the difficulty of maintenance, and growing anti-Yankee sentiment, forced their demise.

“The anti-American feeling was especially true of the Harleys,” Corrales said. “They were the motorcycle used by (former president) Batista’s brutal police.”

In 1968, many police Harleys were sold to policemen, as the fleets were replaced with Moto-Guzzis. According to urban myth, Castro ordered the remaining police Harleys buried inside Boniato prison, near Santiago de Cuba.

“No one knows why they were buried,” Miniet said, hinting that the legend is more than myth, his eyes misting at the sad memory.

“Today there are fewer than 200 Harleys left in Cuba,” González said. Still, it’s enough for Cuba’s harlistas to hold an annual “Harley Days” rally in the beach resort town of Varadero.

“The oldest is from 1932,” González



said, straddling a blood-red 1946 Knucklehead in his basement workshop. The fender sports a sticker of Che Guevara.

There are eight other Harley-Davidsons and a disassembled 1947 Indian Chief in his collection of 13 pre-revolutionary bikes.

González looks like a textbook harlista in his blood-red bandana, black T-shirt emblazoned with a Harley-Davidson logo, and chain-festooned jeans. He stomps down on the kick-start and the retro iron explodes into life. His antique Harley would be a museum piece else-

María de los Ángeles Santana and Cuban harlistas with William H. Davidson (top); 1948 Flathead with Che Guevara sticker (center); kick-starter welded with rebar (bottom).

where in the world. In Cuba, where fewer than 10 percent own a car, it’s a daily ride. Keeping them running has been a challenge in a land of U.S. embargo and perpetual shortage. Harlistas must scavenge, swap or monkey-wrench parts.

“El cubano inventa,” González said with a laugh, explaining how Cuba’s harlistas go to absurd lengths to keep their aged hogs running. “What we can’t

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Lyng Chang's 1946 Harley-Davidson in Havana, Cuba (top); Che Guevara banner behind vintage Harley (bottom).

fix or cannibalize from cars we make ourselves. We tailor virtually any part you can think of, right here," he said, showing off his homemade lathe.

"Hecho en Cuba, chico!" González said, pointing out handlebars and exhausts made from domestic piping. A drive chain once powered a conveyor-belt in Cuba's Coca-Cola bottling plant. Russian GAZ jeep pistons and valves from a Russian Kamaz truck substitute for Harley originals.

"The guy I bought the Knucklehead from even made the seat cover from the skin of a pit bull," González said.

In the grim years known as the 'Special Period' (after the collapse of the Soviet Union), lack of tires forced González to replace one of his Harley's spoked

16-inch wheels with a solid 15-inch VW Beetle wheel. Fellow harlista, Sergio Morales, used a tire from a Soviet 37mm anti-tank gun, trimmed and muscled into place, and stuffed with grass.

González grimaces and his fists clench as if wrestling a bull, while he mimics trying to muscle the bike, with its square tires, through a corner: "Coño! It was like being in a rodeo!" González exemplifies Cuban resourcefulness, ingenuity and indefatigable good humor, in the face of shortages and hardships.

It seems ironic that the iconic Americana of a Harley-Davidson has such die-hard fanatics in Communist Cuba. Cuba's harlistas are as passionate as their American counterparts, and their social bond is every bit as strong. The enigmatic and prismatic subculture has the same level of religion.

"I don't have a car; I use my bike for everything!" 39-year-old bearded musician Luis Gustavo Mas, said proudly, of his matte-black '46 1,200cc Flathead. "She's part of the family, like the refrigerator." Family is everything in Cuba.

Fired in the crucible of the Special Period, the tight-knit harlista family is well-recognized, and Harley-Davidson remains the most revered motorcycle brand on the island. This, despite the presence of tens of thousands of small and midsize Czech Jawas, German MZs, Russian Jupiters and Urals. Suzuki 250s are also ubiquitous, imported by the Cuban state since the 1990s, for security and official use.

Over time, many Harleys broke down and couldn't be fixed. Few Cubans wanted them. They preferred easier-to-fix, fuel-friendly, Soviet Bloc motos. Still, the die-hard harlistas stuck by their timeworn treasures. Through genius invention and mechanical wizardry, they saved their machines from extinction. The *lucha* (struggle) forged a battle-hardened bond and infused a sense of *Cubanía* (being uniquely Cuban) that drew the community closer together and breathed fire into the harlista spirit.

"These motorcycles have our sweat all over them, almost like a coat of paint," said Adolfo Reinaldo Prieto, 61-year-old owner of a yellow-and-blue '58 Panhead. "All that's American about our Harleys anymore is the name. They've got a

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Cuban soul.”

In the early 1990s, foreigners began buying up Harleys and other rare bikes for a few hundred pesos (less than \$100, back then).

“An Argentinian shipped out most of the British bikes and some Indians,” González said.

“Many Harleys and Indians were shipped out by the husband of a German diplomat,” 59-year-old Rafael Díaz Díaz said. Díaz is proud owner of a sliver-and-candy apple red 1946 Indian Scout. “He used his wife’s diplomatic immunity to send bikes out of the country. We didn’t know the value of our bikes. We were desperate back then,” he said, grimacing at memories of the bleak Special Period.

In 1996, Cuba’s vintage bikes were classified as national treasures. Like their classic car counterparts, they can no longer legally be shipped abroad. Still, Harleys occasionally are sold and spirited out of the country as ‘recycled steel.’

“It’s a shame. We’re going to end up without motorcycles here,” said harlista José Ángel ‘Pipi’ Pérez Moreno, who, yet unknown to his compañeros, sneaked out four Harleys and two Indians 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.

The harlistas’ world is newly challenged as Cuba increasingly rejoins world commerce. Since President Obama’s easing of relations with Cuba, Harley-Davidson parts can be ordered online and shipped from the U.S., or brought in by visiting friends. The mass arrival of tourism brought more foreign residents to Cuba, and more Cubans with disposable income (much of it sent by families in Miami). Together, the nouveaux riche have been buying up Cuba’s Harleys, which have soared in price and popularity. A six-decade-old bike can command \$20,000—an astronomical sum in a country where the average state salary equates to \$27 a month.

“More harlistas have a capitalist mentality. Money has started getting in the way of brotherhood and friendship,” said Jorge Santos Prats, who in the 1980s



Electrical engineer, mechanic and Cuban harlista Luis Enrique González owns a machine shop and a collection of 13 pre-revolutionary motorcycles, eight of which are Harley-Davidsons.

paid 7,000 pesos (a two-year salary—sufficient to build a house in Cuba) for a 1947 Flathead.

While strolling along a cobbled street in colonial-era Habana Vieja, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara’s son bounded out of a bar and embraced me. Like his dad, Ernesto “Jr.” is a motorcycle enthusiast. When we met six years ago, he was riding a jade-colored 1948 Flathead. He has another five ‘50s-era Flatheads at home.

After we dined at Harley-themed restaurant Chacón 162, where one of Ernesto’s old Flatheads hangs on the wall, he rode off on a 2015 Harley-Davidson Electra Glide Ultra Classic.

Five years have passed since President Obama announced rapprochement with Cuba; eight years since Raúl Castro eased up on cuentapropistas (private entrepreneurs); and 24 years since I rode my BMW R100GS around an impoverished Cuba. Every third building in an overcrowded, once-sclerotic quarter of Habana Vieja is in the throes of a remake.

There are boutique bed-and-breakfasts, hip restaurants, and a gourmet heladería selling homemade gelato ice creams. Still, nothing epitomizes the emerging ‘New Cuba’ so much as Guevara, son of the iconic revolutionary, roaring off on a sleek new Harley. **MCN**

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