



# HARLEY DAVIDSON'S



*Left to Right, Latin American Motorcycle Association (LAMA) president, Adolfo Prieto and Dominic Soave.*

*Classic Rider Andrew Gyenes with Dominic Soave.*

**T**o speak of the legend of Cuban bikers, one needs to talk about the owners of Harley-Davidsons.

The first automobile entered Cuba in 1898, and a year later, according to the magazine *El Figaro*, on September 3, 1899, a three-wheeler built by Prinetti & Stucchi in Milan, Italy entered the port of Havana. The motorcycle had only a 138 cc engine and used benzene as fuel.

Then in the United States in 1903, Arthur Davidson and Walter and William S. Harley started the opportune process of building the first Harley-Davidson bike in a room in their home. Four years later the Harley-Davidson Motor Company made its appearance.

The precursors of the motorcycle market in Havana were Cristián Bru and José Presas, two traders who

dedicated their lives to motors on the island. But by 1917, the Harris Brothers Company began to flood the Cuban market with Harley-Davidson bikes in competitions.

However, despite their skill and fascination, they could not maintain market dominance there faced with the competition from British motorbikes. In the 1920's the company was sold to José Luis Bretos, a motorcycle merchant in eastern Santiago de Cuba.

With fresh capital and Bretos at the helm, the Harley business in Havana had a new dawn. Why not say it? As happened in the US, Bretos' money, intelligence and experience, together with his good relations with the police, guaranteed the supremacy of the brand in Cuba both in the civilian and military markets.

In those years, the Indian and Harley-Davidson motorcycles became the absolute masters of the Cuban

# CLASSIC RIDERS IN CUBA

*Text and Photos by Onelio García Pérez and Cubaplus*



*Sergio Morales (right) with club members in the 1970's.*



*Caravanning to Havana's Colon Cemetery on Father's Day.*

market. There was nothing better than a motorbike to get around in a city growing by leaps and bounds. Among other uses, you could drive around, go on fishing trips, move heavy loads, and make home deliveries.

The most popular were the Baby Harley Super 10 for its ease of maintenance, the famous Hydra Glide used to distribute film rolls to movie theatres, and Bretos gained a greater market share in Cuba with the comfortable, quiet GE Servi-Car model, with its three point support and V shaped two cylinder engine that made it easy for novices to ride to sell ice cream!

The FL Hydra Glide appeared in 1949 with a Panhead engine, which had several improvements over the earlier "Knuckleheads" including aluminium cylinder heads to reduce weight and improve cooling, and self-adjusting hydraulic lifters. In addition, the new front suspension

had hydraulically-damped telescopic forks that absorbed vibration on both sides, something not achieved by its predecessors. The improved seat also had a spring system making the "Buddy Seat" more comfortable for both driver and a companion.

The manufacture of the 74 FL models in 1951 led to top sales in both versions (1000 cc and 1200 cc), with a production of more than 6,000 units, the largest for Harley-Davidson that year, as prices became accessible for bike lovers all over the world.

During the 1950's Cuba also felt the new dealer-oriented Harley-Davidson management policy: improved image among consumers, facilitated delivery, increased advertising and commitment to the brand.

In the 1960's with the breaking of US-Cuba diplomatic relations, the motorcycle business fell off due to a lack



*Yamil and Yazmin (left), Adrian and Ariadna (right): not only humans have twins, Harley Davidson also provides.*

of accessibility of parts causing great concern among bike owners who watched their motors slowly dying in garages and backyards.

It was not until the 1970's, due to the needs of transportation and repair of British and American bikes, that different groups of owners of classic and old engines woke up and began to create new, non-profit bikers' associations. The "Group of Owners of Harley Davidson in Havana" was created in 1977.

In June 1991, the brilliant mechanic of Spanish origin, José Lorenzo (aka Pepe Milésima), died. He was so greatly esteemed among bikers that they began the custom of caravanning to Havana's Colon Cemetery each Father's

Day in homage to deceased bikers; it is known as Absent Motorbiker Day.

On September 26, 1995 the Classic Motorbikes in Cuba Club (MOCLAC) was founded in Cañitas, Regla, with Raúl Corrales as president. Its goal was to help its members exchange information and spare parts and organize rides on the beautiful and uneven roads of the island. Among its various activities, MOCLAC organizes some important social initiatives, such as special amusement days for youngsters in hospitals.

It was not until the visit to Havana of Mario Nieves, international president of The Latin American Motorcycle



*Marc Whittingham, President CCC and the Harlistas of Cuba.*

Association (LAMA) based in Chicago, USA, and his contacts with local bikers that a chapter of that association was created in Havana. It was the start of a new stage among members of both MOCLAC and LAMA.

Then on February 10, 2002, English motorbike owners founded the Classic English Motor Team of Havana (EMICCH in Spanish) as a club for faithful enthusiasts of antique engines.

All motorbike lovers gather on Saturday evenings at the "Amigos de Fangio" Peña (Friends of Fangio Club) located at the corner of 19th Street and the Malecón (seawall) in Havana.

Today, an incredible traveling motorcycle museum has become a major tourist attraction. In fact, some members even organize tours of the island for bikers from all parts of the world, who either bring their own bikes or use those of the Club for a unique experience.



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