

Cuba!

An old car journey by the Plymouth Owners Club 1959 Tech Advisor

by Dan Morton
1959 Tech Advisor
Upper Darby, Pennsylvania

Following the overthrow of the Batista regime in Cuba by Fidel Castro, the United States imposed a trade embargo on the island nation in the fall of 1960. Consequently, no American automobiles—nor the parts to maintain them—could be shipped to Cuba. Cubans who wanted to keep their classics running have for over fifty years resorted to ingenuity, improvisation and good old-fashioned luck. As a result, an estimated 60,000 American antiques are still on the road in varying states of repair. Since driving a cab is one of the most lucrative occupations on the island, most of these cars have been pressed into the service of passengers for most of the day, every day. And since diesel fuel is much cheaper than gasoline, many of the motors have been replaced with diesel engines to improved profit margins.

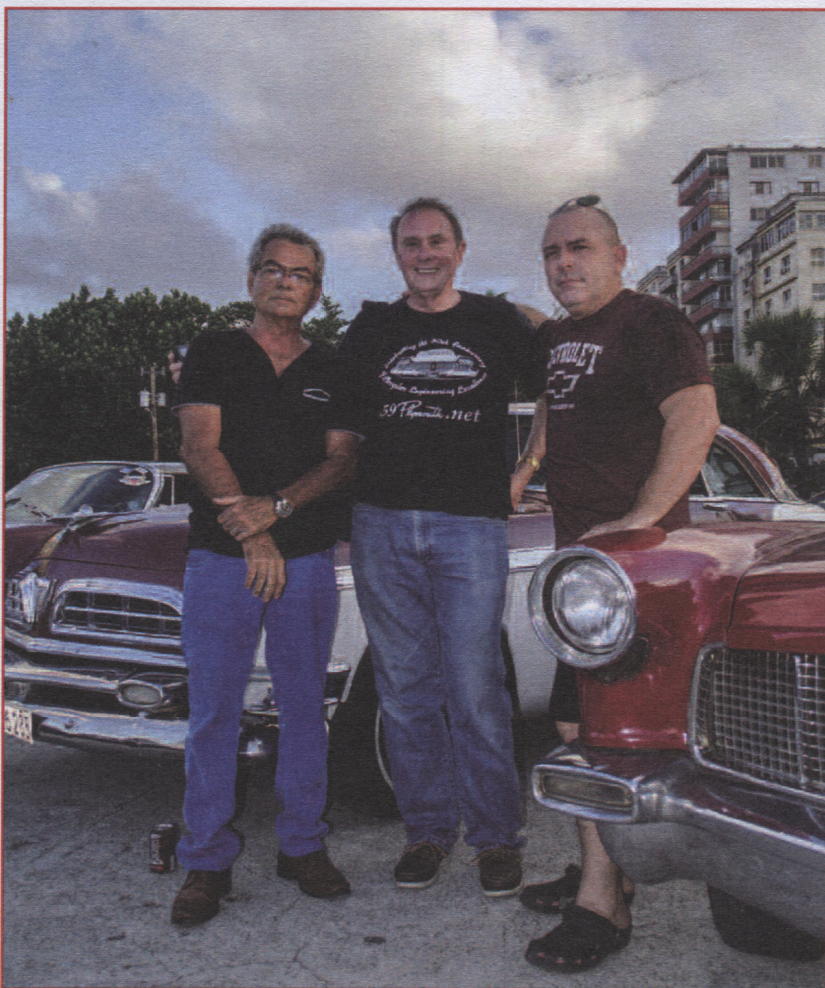
On Friday, January 16, 2015, the Obama Administration announced relaxed restrictions on travel of United States citizens to Cuba. Formerly, a special license from the US government was required. Under the new regulations, American travelers can provide one of twelve different reasons for their proposed visits, and apply for a visa to Cuba.

I watched these developments with great interest, knowing that Cuba is a veritable storehouse of classic American automobiles, although in most cases the cars are heavily modified. Knowing many changes are coming, and wanting a chance to see the “before” Cuba, I had to act soon. But, what would be my official reason? As webmaster for www.59plymouth.net, I would of course be a “journalist!”

I was granted my visa, and on October 9th, touched down in Havana airport.

But, there's more to this story...

I knew my best chance of seeing a collection of largely unmodified American iron would be to attend a scheduled car event. I discovered the “Amigos de Fangio” Cuban car club. Juan Manuel Fangio, winner of the first Grand Prix of Cuba in 1957,



Alberto Gutierrez and Fernando Barral from Cuban Chrome with Dan Morton

was famously kidnapped by Castro just before the second Grand Prix but was treated humanely and released.

I also discovered the California Auto Museum was planning a “People to People” event (another of the twelve reasons) in Cuba the week of October 9th, and they planned to meet with Amigos de Fangio on Saturday the 10th to talk cars. Now I had a date! I couldn’t afford the price of their club trip, and wasn’t planning to stay as long as they were, but I figured, if I showed up at the event they planned, who could stop me? I contacted Onelio García Pérez, cultural promoter for Amigos de Fangio, and told him of my plans.

The week before I left, Onelio contacted me to confirm the date. Yes, I told him, October 10th, the same day the California Auto Museum would be coming. When I arrived on the 9th, I called Onelio and told him I would meet him the next day. That evening, I walked to the Hotel National where the California Auto Museum brochure said the club would be staying, thinking I could perhaps meet some of the members. The concierge, however, claimed to know nothing about their arrival. How odd.

Saturday afternoon at La Piragua, in the shadow of Hotel National, the cars came streaming in. These were not diesels. These were well-preserved vehicles with original engines and only modest compromises, due to the unavailability of parts. Fans of *Cuban Chrome* on the Discovery Channel will recognize several of the folks who arrived <<http://bit.ly/amigosfan>



Amigos de Fangio: Lorenzo Verdecia, president, Onelio Garcia, cultural promoter, and Lupe Fuentes, public relations, with Dan Morton

gio>. And soon Onelio himself arrived. Introductions were made all around, and I was hailed as the representative of 59plymouth.net.

But, where were members from the California Auto Museum club? I asked Onelio in passing, but he shrugged. On at least one other occasion, I again put the question to him, but if he answered, we were soon distracted by yet another Amigos de Fangio member's arrival.

The evening wore on. Many pictures were taken—and heavenly cigars were smoked! Soon it was time for folks to depart. Onelio, his best friend and wife, and I headed across the street for drinks and a bite to eat. Again, I asked Onelio:

Where is the California Auto Museum club? He replied, saying if I provided him with contact information, he would be happy to accommodate them. *Huh?!?*

"But Onelio," I protested, "if they weren't going to be here, why did all of the Amigos de Fangio members come tonight?"

"They came because of you," he said. "They came because of you."

I was floored. "Onelio," I said, "I think I'm going to cry!"

It turns out, the California Auto Museum didn't collect enough members interested in making the trip, so the trip was postponed until the spring of 2016.

Now, car people don't really need a reason to get together; but it turns out in this instance, I was the excuse for Amigos de Fangio. What an extraordinary surprise for me, and an opportunity to prove the maxim: That love for a hobby such as ours transcends all politics and borders. Our 59Plymouth.net and Amigos de Fan-

gio are now officially sister organizations.

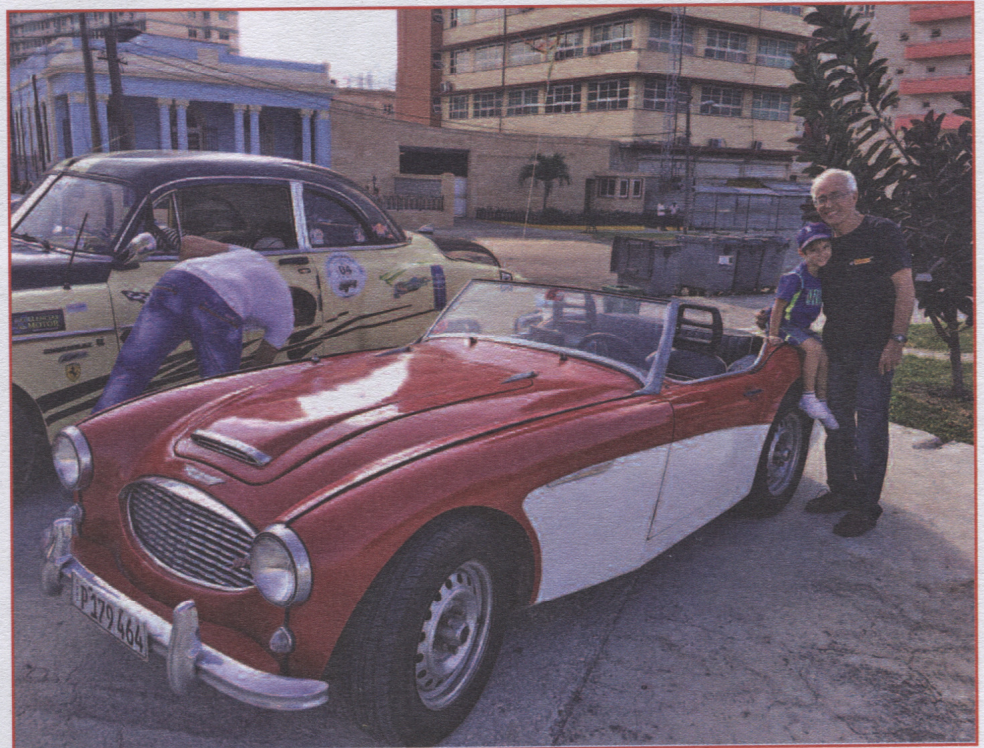
The Cuban people are an exceedingly friendly lot and bear no animosity towards Americans. I encourage you to visit for the time of your life.

For more vignettes of Cuba—and especially the cars—visit <<http://bit.ly/cubancars>> and look for "Cuba Field Trip!" in the post title.

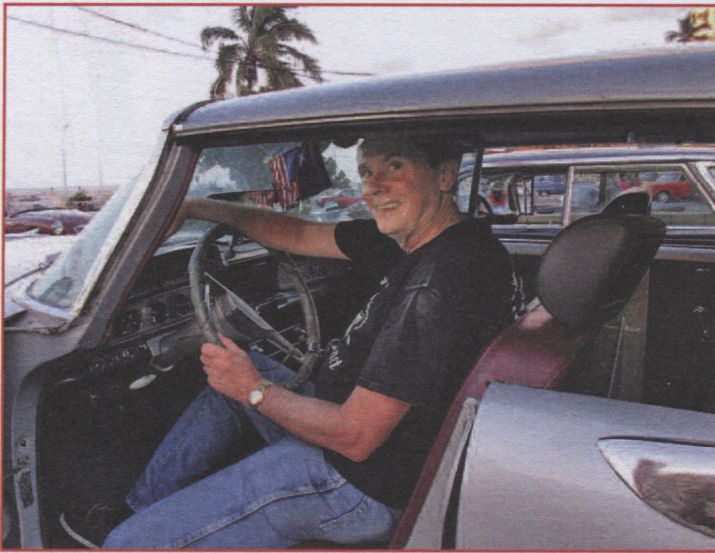
Dan Morton

<dan@59plymouth.net>

<www.59plymouth.net>



Ricardo Medel and grandson, from Cuban Chrome



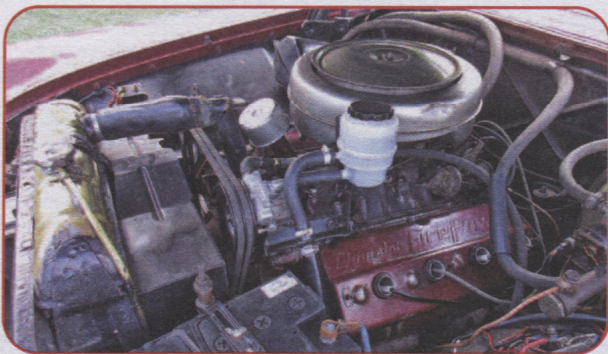
With no '59 Plymouth available, Dan had to make do with a '58 Dodge sport sedan festooned with rally decals.



A '55 Chrysler New Yorker sport coupe



Another '58 Dodge, a Plymouth-bodied Mayfair "Plodge."



A '57 Chrysler convertible: still Hemi-powered



A '55 Plymouth in purple—not quite Plum Crazy?