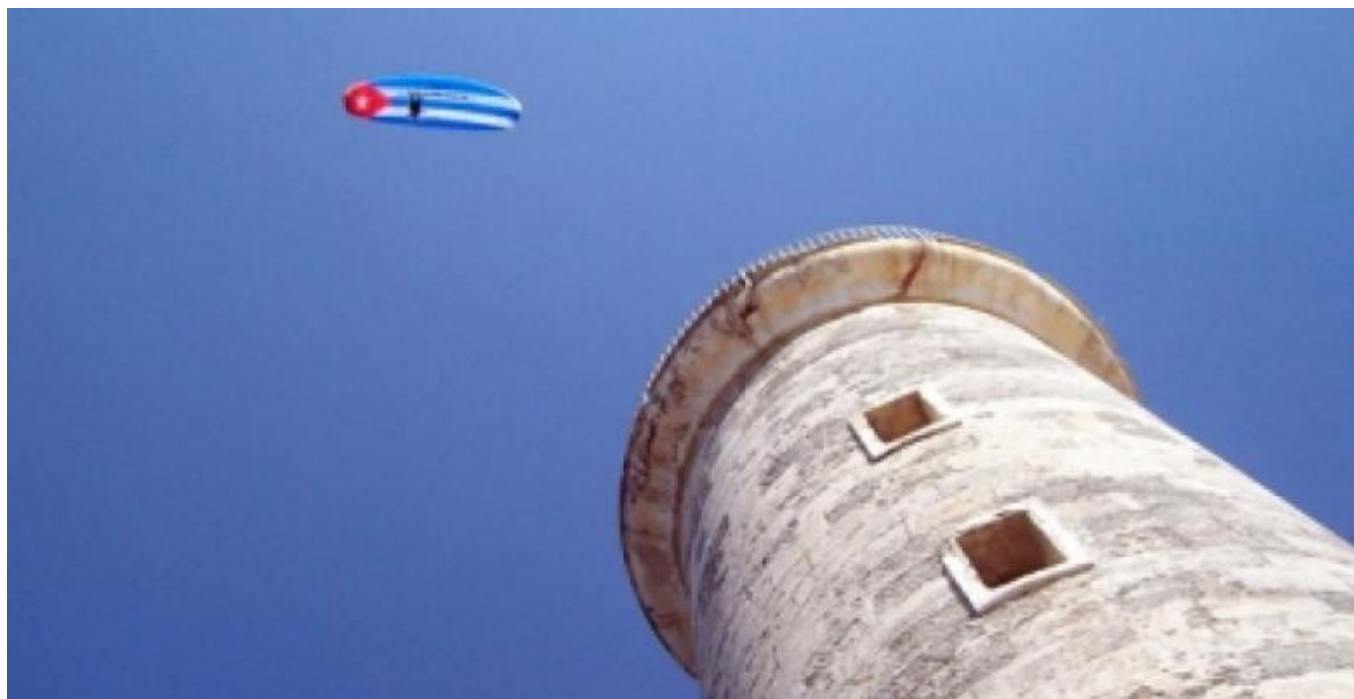

From Key West to Havana: Adventures of an «aviator»

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An engine, a sail and wind force. Luis Alberto García Rodríguez prepares to repeat in a paramotor the flight Domingo Rosillo del Toro made from Key West to Havana in 1913.

PHOTOS: Anabel Díaz Mena

A paramotor flight from Batabanó to the Isle of Youth! The news seemed both incredible and wonderful.

Who was that “courageous man” that just using wind force, small engine and sail, could fly without any protection other than his own body?

His name is Luis Alberto Garcia Rodriguez, and amazingly he graduated in International Relations. Such a big surprise!

That, perhaps, was the main motivation to set up a dialogue, which CubaSi offers you today in advance, because next summer Luisito will make an exhibition at Havana's Morro Castle, as part of the necessary preparation to undertake his journey from Key West to Havana in October, thus repeating the flight made in 1913 by Domingo Rosillo del Toro, the first pilot to cross the Florida Strait.

—How did you reach this world?

—My father was a model airplane enthusiast and the one who introduced me to this world. I was 14 or 15 years old when I made my first little plane. Later, I entered the Camilo Cienfuegos Military Schools (Los Camilitos). I wanted to be a pilot and ended up graduating in International Relations.

—Wasn't it a contradiction?

—Waiting for the pilot career was uncertain and I had to request a second option. At the end, it was granted, but I had already been granted that in International Relations, and decided on the latter to meet the desires, above all, of my parents, who did not conceive that I wanted to be a pilot being able to become a diplomat. When I finished my career I gave them the title and said: "Now I am going to focus on what I like, that is, aviation".

—Being a career diplomat, how did you enter Jose Marti Airport?

—I started to work at International Traffic and right now I direct a group of fourteen people, who are in charge of supervising the services provided to the flights of Air France and KLM airlines. I'm talking about passenger check-in, catering and handling.

—How have your studies served you in your current performance?

—International Relations is a very intense career, it gave me the opportunity to learn two languages, I speak English and French, and that helps me a lot with customers. On the other hand, the culture that one gets, knowledge in history, geography, all that allows you to be a little more professional.

—How did you discover the paragliding world?

—For about fourteen years, I've been practicing paragliding –composed of a sail, seat and safety systems (parachutes, helmet and several flight instruments)—, and it's necessary to take off from a slope or get a push by traction, like when you fly a "chiringa" (small kite) and run for it to fly.

So, some friends from the Isle of Youth wanted to learn aeromodelism, they were paragliders, and then I suggested them an exchange of knowledge. I went there and after completing a fifteen-day course, I made my first tandem (two people) flight, with Ruslan, an instructor.

In those days the weather situation was very bad, and we could not make our first solo flight, the so-called pulling and falling, that is to say, inflating the sail and going straight to the landing, without maneuvering. On that occasion, thus my teammates told me, I set a “record”; because again and again I picked up everything, climbed the hill and returned again. This happened more than three times.

There, we generally take off in front of the Model Prison (Presidio Modelo) and fly over it. On that occasion, I reached a 500-meter height.

Of course, the most beautiful feeling is making it alone! Then later, in a second flight the instructor gave me a walkie-talkie and started to give me instructions. “Go near the hill”, because we support ourselves on the wind to take off and remain flying.

In paragliding flights you have two feelings. First, when you have to climb the hill with 20 kg on your back, and you regret a thousand times and say to yourself: Why am I doing this if I don’t need so?” And second, when you take off, fly and land. At the end, as my friends say, we become parrots, because we want to talk about everything we saw and felt.

—From paragliding to paramotor...

—It’s a modality derived from paragliding, which generally uses two-time engines, with a propellor that propels it and allows you to take off while running. When I knew this variant, I immediately said to myself “we have to do it”. I headed the Free Flight Federation of Cuba’s Aviation Club, and felt that we should “sell ourselves” in the best sense of the word, because we did everything on the hills, in very isolated places, and people did not know paragliding.

I wished to take the flight so children watch it. During an exhibition in Granma Province, we landed on a baseball field, and at once the place was filled with kids. While taking photos and their little eyes were telling us many things, I thought about the need to bring paramotor closer to the city, the only modality that allows to take off from a stadium, or elsewhere, and to maneuver. Thus we would be opening the doors to aerial sports. That was the main incentive to seek a paramotor.

We also began the battle so that authorities allow the so-called fly zones, in which we received a lot of help from the Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (MINFAR) and the Institute of Civil Aeronautics of Cuba (IACC), through Cuba’s Aviation Club. Then there emerged the ones at El Morro Castle and Varadero, very popular places. Since then I thought to make crossings too.

The first happened in the summer of 2012, along the northern coast. We left from Tuxpan Hotel in Varadero to El Morro. I was flying in a paramotor alone and two colleagues flew in tandem. I knew that was a preparation for the crossing I actually wanted to make from Batabanó to the Isle of Youth; a bit retaking my origins in this kind of adventure.

The flight was successful, I made it in November 2013, and lasted 2 hours and 17 minutes. However, in May that same year, we flew over El Morro with a Cuban flag, just the day when teammates from the IACC and Cuba's Aviation Club placed a plaque commemorating the centenary of Domingo Rosillo's flight.

—Your next journey...

—It will be a sort of training for the main journey as I have called it (Key West- Havana), and I will make it in the summer from Isabela de Sagua to El Morro, along the northern coast. They are more than 200 kilometers, which will allow me to test the device with traditional fuel systems, an element that limits us in remote flights.

The Key West-Havana flight is set to take place on October 6-10 and the take-off will be at the airport of that North American city.

Many of those who have wished to be pilots grew up admiring Russian, German and North American heroes, without acknowledging that we have ours, who are as admirable as those from other nations. So, in those first courses taught by big airplane manufacturers there was a Cuban pilot named Domingo Rosillo, who set a record in that first flight.

Therefore, I've always wondered, why not repeating that flight made by a Cuban and that has been recorded in our history forever?

CubaSi Translation Staff
