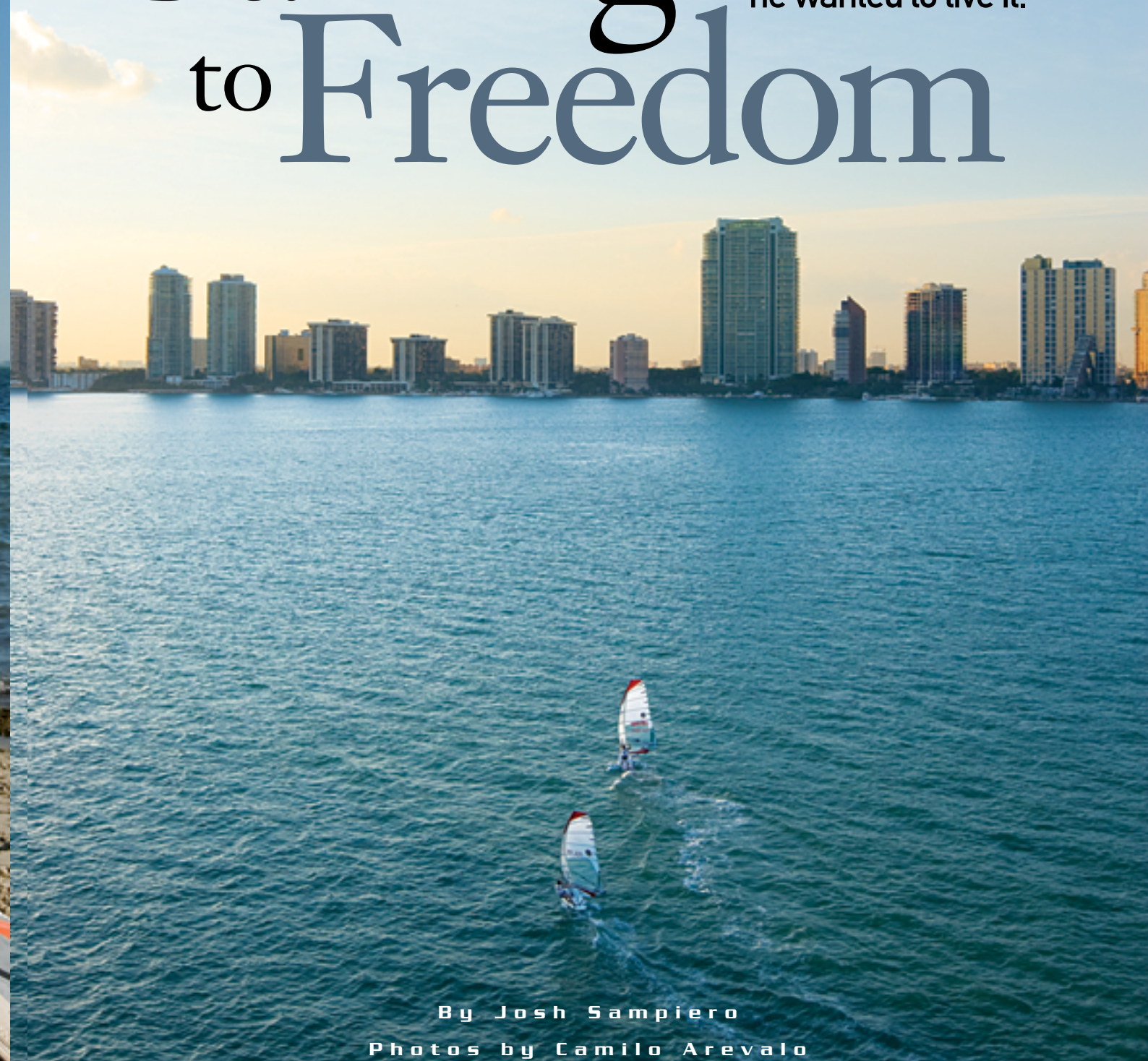


Alex points to the perilous Straits of Florida that make up the 90 miles between Cuba and Florida. RIGHT: Sailing Biscayne Bay in front of Miami.



# Sailing to Freedom

Windsurfing not only changed Alex Morales' life — it let him choose where he wanted to live it.



By Josh Sampiero  
Photos by Camilo Arevalo

**When** 10-year-old Alex Morales first nailed two big pieces of plywood to a large foam block — attaching makeshift daggerboards and his own homemade sail — little did he know that he was taking the first step of a journey that would bring him across the sea from his home in Santa Fe, Cuba, to Miami, Florida, 100 miles and an entire democracy away.

After Alex's first brief encounter with windsurfing on his homemade sailboard, he headed off on a different tack and began racing sailboats — Optimists and then Snipes — before returning to a windsurfing board in 1987 at the age of 15. By '89, he had won his first Cuban national windsurfing championship and was on the Cuban national windsurfing team — allowing him to forgo work and typical school and windsurf every day. "I never finished school — we just windsurfed all the time." Not a bad gig for a teenager living on a tropical island. But life in Fidel Castro's communist Cuba left a lot to be desired — especially for a windsurfer. "We didn't have the greatest equipment," recalls Alex. "The country was just too poor to get the newest stuff. But we had work ethic and dedication." With his teammates, he would be in the water training for five to six hours every day, no matter the conditions — which were rarely less than ideal. "The wind is side-shore all the time — 15 knots nonstop. It's perfect for racing," Alex says.

During the course of a year the team organized windsurfing regattas, bringing as many as 30 competitors together. Many of the races Alex handily won. But he still rarely had the chance to travel outside the country to compete internationally. Why? The Cuban government knew his father had defected to the United States, meaning Alex was blacklisted, with a constant government eye on him at all times. Despite promises that he would be going to Spain, South America and other places to windsurf, Alex never had the chance to travel to international regattas while windsurfing for the Cuban national team.

Nevertheless, an idea had hatched in Alex's head the moment he joined the team: He was going to windsurf his way out of the Cuban communist regime by crossing 100 miles of open seas to the Florida Keys. Over the next four years, Alex and his teammates Carlos Gonzalez and Roberto Ortiz discussed the idea while training every day. In the meantime,

Alex lived in an apartment near his mother's home in his hometown of Santa Fe — where she ran an illegal restaurant out of the back of her house. "In communist Cuba, nothing was legal. Everything you did was illegal."

In the spring of 1993, Alex and his teammates began planning in earnest for their escape. They pushed themselves harder than ever on the water — while making secret preparations on land. They obtained black-market charts of the Caribbean Sea, estimating currents and board speed to calculate the safest and quickest routes to the United States. Alex carefully prepared his gear: a Bic Reggae convertible board and a homemade sail. "I wanted something with a lot of power in the bottom, to help drive the longboard upwind in light air," says Alex, "but I didn't want to be overpowered



**THE GREAT ESCAPE**  
Alex and his two windsurfing companions took four tacks to get upwind to Key West — covering approximately 128 miles.



Alex's stoke is plainly evident anytime he is on a board.

when the wind picked up." So he combined a 7.0 race sail with a 5.4 wave sail, sewing the two together where the outlines met. The sailors would take few supplies with them — a gallon of water each, a flashlight, a compass and a whistle. The final touch? "A brand-new North Sails boom," says Alex. "I was so worried about the boom breaking."

The daring trio waited for spring, when they thought the solid easterly trade winds would afford them the best chance of making the crossing. At about noon on April 26, 1994, they set out from Havana and headed directly northwest for 40 miles. "The Cuban Coast Guard sits 12 miles offshore," says Alex. "They tended to cluster in the area directly north of Havana — the closest distance between communism and freedom. The wind and current push everything west, so anybody who headed northwest wouldn't make it. But they didn't realize that you could do it on sailboards. So when we

sailed northwest — 40 miles out of the way — we slipped out under the radar." Only after they were far from Cuban shores did they turn back northeast — taking a pair of two-hour-long upwind tacks to make up for their downwind run and the effect of the 8-knot current. "Our planning from the charts went perfectly," says Alex.

For the most part, the wind cooperated. After a few hours of planing in a steady breeze, the winds dropped, but the sailors were able to maintain steady forward progress. They sailed throughout the day — staying within view of each other but sometimes up to a mile apart — then sailed much closer together during the night as the wind dropped further and sharks began to circle their boards. Despite their intensive training, the nonstop sailing was grueling. At about 2 a.m., they rafted the boards together to rest before finishing what they thought were about 20 more miles to Key West. They

"We didn't have the greatest equipment. The country was just too poor to get the newest stuff. **But we had work ethic and dedication.**"