

How travel to Cuba might change

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It's too early to tell. Many Americans clearly have a strong interest in traveling to Cuba. Citing Cuban government data, the Times reported Dec. 2 that more than 90,000 Americans visited Cuba legally in 2012 and 2013 — more than twice the number that traveled to Cuba legally in 2008 — under people-to-people cultural exchanges.

These exchanges, which require travelers to go with a licensed operator, were reinstated by Obama in 2011 to allow travel to Cuba for educational purposes, “not for downtime on the beach,” said Steve Loucks, the chief communications officer at Travel Leaders Group in Plymouth, Minn.

Loucks said he anticipates demand for these exchanges to continue to increase, especially after last week's announcement.

“We are already feeling a great deal of demand from clients wanting to go to Cuba because it has been off limits for over 50 years,” he said. “We now expect the number of bookings to Cuba to grow exponentially.”

Does this mean travel agencies will organize more trips to Cuba?

In some cases, yes. In fact, some were trying to meet increased demand before last week's announcement. Tauck, a tour operator in Norwalk, Conn., recently extended its eight-day people-to-people cultural journey to Cuba to 13 days, with stops in five cities.

“I think it's a destination like no other,” said Katharine Bonner, vice president for river and small ship cruising at Tauck, who has taken five trips to Cuba in the last three years.

Joe Diaz, cofounder of the travel and publishing company Afar Media, said he agreed with Bonner's description.

“It is really something out of the 1950s,” he said. “That's what makes Cuba special.”

Will getting a passport/visa become easier?

Diaz said he thinks so.

“But it seems like leisure and tourist travel are still prohibited,” he said. “We’ll have to wait and see what happens.”

Obama’s order will open up general licenses to travel for the following reasons, which previously required approval on a case-by-case basis:

? Public performances, workshops, and athletic competitions. ? Support for the Cuban people, including human rights work. Humanitarian work. Private foundations and institutes. Information dissemination.

? Travel related to the export of authorized products.

But lifting all restrictions on travel, including for tourism, would require congressional approval.

Will US airlines start flying commercially to Cuba?

Possibly, but don’t head to the airport anytime soon and expect to hop a flight to Havana.

Commercial service from the United States to the Cuban capital is “going to be down the road,” Loucks said.

“Many airlines are already flying between Miami and Havana, but it’s more of a charter service. It’s essentially ferrying family members back and forth, along with those on people-to-people exchanges.”

What is the hotel room/accommodation situation in Cuba now?

“There is a lot, but at the high end, there are only a couple of good properties,” Diaz said. “People don’t go to Cuba for the luxury — they go for the music, culture, and arts scene.”

But if Cuba opens up to US tourists and their penchant for luxury accommodations, “you’re going to see American hoteliers doing their best to find potential properties in Cuba,” Loucks said.

“There are some standout properties there in Havana and some of the beach communities.”

What will be the effect of travelers using US debit and credit cards in Cuba?

A positive one, Bonner said.

“Being able to use credit cards will make it so much easier,” she said. “Right now, you have to think in advance how much cash you need, and it can become quite an ordeal.”

The US trade embargo will remain in place until Congress says otherwise.

But as a result of the administration’s policy shift, “licensed US travelers to Cuba will be authorized to import \$400 worth of goods from Cuba, of which no more than \$100 can consist of tobacco products and alcohol combined,” the White House said.

That’s good news for Cuban cigar and rum aficionados.

What are other changes can US visitors to Cuba expect?

The administration has said it will reestablish a US Embassy in Havana, an idea that could be embraced by American tour operators and visitors to Cuba.

“Having a US Embassy in a destination puts everyone’s mind at ease,” Bonner said.

Getting better connected to the Internet is another change that could be coming for visitors to the island.
