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Cuba: Ready, Set, Go!

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I've just returned from my first visit to Cuba, where I spent several days talking with government officials, business and cultural leaders, and ordinary citizens. Like many in the U.S. today, I was intrigued with Cuba and eager to experience it firsthand. I was not disappointed.

We stand at a historic moment in the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba. On Monday, the two countries reestablished embassies in Havana and Washington, D.C., closing the door on 54 years of diplomatic isolation.

One might think that this history would give rise to enmity between the Cuban people and the U.S. Nothing could be further from what I found in the Cuban capital.

Instead, what I found in the colorful, energetic milieu that is Havana was a people eager to engage with America. Everyone I met said unequivocally that they loved the American people and its culture.

While proud of their past, Cubans are excited for the future. I asked whether there was any anxiety in Cuba, including in its government, about reengaging with the U.S. Although one official admitted that Cuba felt a bit like the blade of grass on the savannah observing an elephant, and knowing that whether the elephant made love or war the impact on the blade of grass would be just the same, there is a broad consensus that they would like to reengage with the U.S. – its businesses and its people – as soon as possible.

At Marriott International, we are ready to get started right now. While U.S. law still does not allow Marriott to do business in Cuba, we learned that the steps taken by President Obama to reengage with Cuba have launched a bit of a global race involving businesses from other countries to leave as little as possible for American business when the restrictions are lifted altogether.

Nowhere is this clearer than in travel. Hotel companies from Latin America and Europe have been doing business in Cuba for decades. With travel to Cuba now surging, existing Cuban hotels are full and hotel companies from

other countries are racing to tie up as many of the new hotels as they can before the likes of Marriott and our U.S. competitors show up.

Shouldn't U.S. companies be permitted to at least compete for all this new travel business in Cuba? While undeniably biased, I think the answer to this question must be "yes." By engaging in business in Cuba, we will contribute to stronger and increasingly constructive relationships between Cuba and the U.S. as a result of two very basic things: first, our hotels will employ hundreds, if not thousands, of Cubans and, in doing so, bring career and cultural opportunities to them and their families in a manner that will reflect well on the U.S.; second, we will be able to welcome tens of thousands of American visitors to Cuba who will eventually return home with memories, friendships and opportunities that draw us together.

Of course, we need to recognize the strong and historic voices in this country that have resolutely opposed reengaging with Cuba until such time as its form of government changes. I met the son of Cuban-American immigrants in Havana last week. It was his first visit to Cuba and he acknowledged that some members of his family were upset that he had taken the initiative to go. But he had a strong belief that change in Cuba will come faster through engagement than through a continuation of the old rules. I feel the same way.

American visits to Cuba are set to double this year, even before there is a lifting of the general travel ban. If Congress acts to lift the travel ban, the number of U.S. visitors is likely to grow to 5 million within just a few years. Make the trip if you get a chance. American citizens should be free to travel to Cuba, as they are to every other country in the world, and draw their own conclusions about this fascinating culture. Why prohibit people from getting to know each other? We are much more likely to get along if there is a vibrant relationship between our people.

As the fog lifts on five decades of diplomatic isolation, American business can also play a crucial role in helping the United States and Cuba build a new relationship based on mutual respect and trust. The demand for travel is growing, partners are on offer and deals are ready to be signed. Shouldn't we get going?

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