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United States-Cuba relations are warming, but not warm enough to end the embargo

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Forget Venice, Paris and Barcelona, the hot spot for travelers this year is none other than La Habana, Cuba.

Yes, it seems our next-door neighbor — with its mystique as a forbidden island — has become the destination of choice for Americans after last December 17, when President Obama and Cuban president Raúl Castro launched a new era of warmer relations between their two countries.

“It has been non-stop,” said Bob Guild, vice president of Marazul Charters, Inc., a long established agency specializing in travel to Cuba. Although it is based in North Bergen, N.J., Marazul has been the main agency serving New York travelers for many years.

“We are going crazy with work,” Guild added. “Just think — (through) June this year we have sent 40% more people to Cuba than last year. Hotels (in Havana) are fully booked for months to come.”

With interest in traveling to the island exploding, it's not surprising that airlines are trying very hard to position themselves to get a piece of the tourist bonanza they predict will come.

A month ago, JetBlue became the first airline to launch direct flights from New York to Havana, and last week American Airlines announced it would begin charter flights to the Cuban capital from Los Angeles in December.

Many advances have been made in these past months, not the least of which is the much longed-for better access to the Internet for Cubans.

“For the first time ever I am able to connect to the Internet using a Wi-Fi connection in Havana. If this is not progress, I don't know what is. Many around me are glued to their mobile devices. What a great moment to be here,” Iraida López, a Cuban-American college professor at Ramapo College, posted on Facebook last month during a visit to the island.

Yet despite the undeniable advances, the anachronistic 54-year-old trade embargo is still in place, and only Congress has the power to toss it into the ash heap of history, where it belongs. The White House, though, is not calmly waiting for the Marco Rubios of this world to come to their senses and drop their stubborn — and, by now, ridiculous — opposition to lifting “el bloqueo” (the blockade), as the embargo is known in Cuba.

The American Airlines announcement comes hot on the heels of reports that Obama is looking for ways to circumvent Congress by considering new measures to allow more flexibility in traveling to Cuba. One such move would permit Americans to go to the island as individuals — instead of as part of a group — for the first time in 50 years.

The White House is also talking to Cuban authorities about reestablishing regular commercial flights to and from the island before the end of the year.

Although so far things have been moving in the right direction, there is still a long and tortuous road ahead until fully normalized relations are achieved.

I, for one, am keeping my fingers crossed.

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