

First direct China-Cuba air service takes off

28/12/2015



BEIJING, China, Monday December 28, 2015 – The first direct flight between China and Cuba took off yesterday from Beijing International Airport, with state-owned carrier Air China said to be aiming to promote Chinese tourism in the Caribbean and Latin America.

Fox News reports that the route is the first direct one linking China, the world's second-largest economy, and the Caribbean, as well as the first route between the Asian nation and Latin America operated by an Asian airline.

Flights from China to Mexico and Brazil are currently operated by foreign carriers.

The Boeing 777 departed at 1:45 p.m. Beijing time (0545 GMT) and was scheduled to arrive at 8:15 Havana time (0115 GMT) today.

The trip takes 19.5 hours, with a stopover for refuelling in Montreal, Canada.

The new service is expected to boost tourism between China and Cuba, as well as travel from the Asian nation to all of Latin America, a region that is rarely visited by the growing number of Chinese tourists.

Although China became the world's top source of tourists in 2014, Chinese tourists tend mainly to visit Europe and Southeast Asia.

The Chinese are nevertheless familiar with Cuba and the two countries have had friendly political and cultural relations for decades.

Cuba and China have a "long-running friendship" and the flight will draw more "tourists and Chinese businessmen" to the island, Cuban Ambassador to China Alberto Jesus Fernando Silva said during a ceremony organized by Cuban diplomats and Air China at Beijing airport before the plane's departure.

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Published on Cuba Si (<http://www.cubasi.cu>)

The ambassador pointed out that tourist arrivals from China had risen 27 percent in Cuba in the past year.

Air China executive Fan Cheng said that the direct flight will help “promote links with Cuba and the Caribbean.”

Cuba was the first country in Latin America to establish diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China, Fan noted.

He Zhigang, marketing director of Air China International, said: “People traveling to Cuba used to transfer in Paris or Mexico, which would take them over 20 hours in flight time. So the direct flight from Beijing to Havana is the most convenient.

“The opening of the direct flight will also help more people learn about the beautiful scenery of Cuba and the Caribbean Sea, and attract more Chinese tourists.”

The number of Chinese tourists in Cuba has already exceeded 25,000 this year.

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