



## Snapshot: What travel to Cuba looks like today

By Zach Everson

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President Obama's announcement in December of a new U.S. policy toward Cuba has opened the door a bit wider for Americans who want to travel to their island neighbor.

Most American leisure travelers to Cuba currently go there on authorized people-to-people programs, which allow them to book their trips through a U.S. travel agent. But now, though you still can't just hop aboard a plane, many Americans are eyeing the communist island nation with the pent-up intrigue you'd expect after a 54-year prohibition.

But where will they stay? Where will they eat? And what will detente mean for cruise lines?

Collin Laverty, founder and president of Cuba Educational Travel, which specializes in legal and licensed trips to Cuba, says his company's bookings have increased more than 300 percent since Obama's announcement, and that uptick has already taxed Cuba's hospitality industry.

Just imagine what will happen if the U.S. lifts its travel restrictions altogether. "With this increase in demand and visits, there are more challenges on the Cuban side," Laverty said.

### Accommodations

Cuba's 60,000 hotel rooms are already occupied near capacity, says travel writer and photographer Christopher P. Baker, who's authored six books about Cuba and whose latest edition of the "Moon Cuba Handbook" was published in February.

But not all of those rooms will appeal to middle-class Americans. "When you look at Havana, there are really four or five five-star hotels," Laverty said. "Then you get down to the four-star hotels and three-star hotels, and they get shaky." He predicts Cuba will make adding high-end hotel rooms a priority.

Laverty said the resort town of Varadero, a 90-minute drive east of Havana, is a popular vacation destination for Canadians and Europeans and already has ample hotel capacity.

But current U.S. requirements for Americans traveling to Cuba typically preclude spending more than a day or two in a resort area, and most Americans are not interested in Cuba's resorts anyway, according to Baker. "They can get that anywhere," he said. "They want to experience Cuban culture."

Along those lines, hotels in more remote parts of the island have seen an increase in American travelers since the change in U.S. policy. "I just got back from leading a month of motorcycle tours all around Cuba," Baker said, "and in the eastern part of the country, where one never ever previously saw American groups, the hotels are full of American groups on the people-to-people program."

He said the Cuban government two years ago set a goal of having 85,000 hotel rooms by 2020, but he has seen few signs of new hotel projects on recent visits, other than in Havana and at the beach resorts. "They are certainly going to face room shortages," he said.

For visitors who can't find hotel rooms, private-room rentals are an alternative. Airbnb launched in Cuba earlier this month, and while a U.S.-based company expanding into Cuba is noteworthy, there's nothing new about Cubans renting out rooms in their homes.

"There are thousands of private room rentals in Havana and elsewhere in the country," Baker said. But private rooms, too, are filled

near capacity now, he added.

Hostels and family-run bed and breakfasts are other options for Cuba Educational Travel's clients, especially in the tobacco-growing region of Pinar del Rio and the cities of Trinidad and Cienfuegos. "And you have the added experience of having the family cook for you and getting to know them," Lavery said.

### Cruises

Cruise ships owned by non-American companies mostly go to Cuba's three main cruise ports: Havana, Cienfuegos and Santiago de Cuba. At the start of the current season (November through April), Cuba's state-run travel agency estimated that more than 200 ships would visit these ports. And they're getting larger.

"You see one once every two weeks or three weeks and you can feel it," Lavery said. "You're in Old Havana and all of a sudden instead of, whatever it is, 2,000 tourists out walking that day, all of a sudden there are three or four [thousand]."

Smack dab between the Bahamas and Jamaica, Cuba is an obvious port of call for U.S.-owned cruise lines. But it will take more than a go-ahead from American politicians for Cuba to open up fully to the major ones, said John Boyd Jr., a principal with The Boyd Company, which counsels cruise lines and other companies on site selection.

"The Cuban ports, including Havana, are all too shallow to accommodate the large modern ships of major cruise lines," Boyd said, citing Royal Caribbean, Carnival and Norwegian. "Also, some Cuban ports are inland, necessitating negotiating unmapped, narrow channels...."

"What is needed before the mainline cruise industry enters Cuba is massive private investment to dredge and develop other port infrastructure." He said floating jetties and tendering (ferrying passengers between ship and port) are also being considered.

But ocean liners aren't the only way to reach Cuba by boat. The island lies only 90 miles from Florida, putting it well within the reach of private boats. And Cuba can accommodate them.

"Probably the most fascinating development in tourism in Cuba, but not many people are aware of, is that Cuba has already completed building one of the Caribbean's largest marinas for private vessels. It's at Varadero," Baker said. "Directly below Florida, it's got about 1,300 berths already built — including for mega-yachts."

### Restaurants

Cuba has 11,000 restaurants, according to the Cuban government, and last September it announced that 9,000 of them would be privatized, joining the 1,261 that already were independent. In 1993 these family-run restaurants — known as *paladars* — became among the first private businesses allowed on the island. Located in private homes, they were limited to just 12 seats and prohibited from selling hard liquor or luxury foods like lobster and steak, according to Anita Snow, a long-time Cuban correspondent, in an article for the Associated Press last September.

Even before the mass privatization, Snow reported that "hundreds of private restaurants operate in Havana and can serve whatever food or drink they want, as long as they can prove it was purchased legally."

Cuba's 22 years of experience running private restaurants has paid off handsomely, Baker said. "Now you have world-class restaurants in Havana, and you're beginning to see a few world-class restaurants outside Havana. And that's going to accelerate."

### Air travel

For years Americans have gotten around restrictions for visiting Cuba by flying from the U.S. to another country (typically Canada, Mexico or a Caribbean island) and, from there, taking a second flight to Cuba. The cheapest option for this approach has been via Cancun, which costs just more than \$700 round trip, according to the iOS app Hopper.

American carriers have offered charter flights for U.S. citizens in limited travel categories — round-trip prices are usually more than \$500 — and on Wednesday CheapAir became the first online booking agency to let authorized U.S. travelers book direct charter

flights to Cuba from Miami, Tampa and New York.

But now U.S. airlines are setting their sights on Cuba. American Airlines, JetBlue, United, Delta and Southwest Airlines have all expressed interest in starting commercial service to Cuba. Before that happens, though, the U.S. Department of Transportation will have to negotiate a civil aviation agreement with Cuba that clarifies the rules for air travel between the countries, such as how many flights will be permitted.

Once the travel ban is lifted, Hopper estimates the cost of flying between the U.S. and Cuba will drop to about \$375 round trip.

But Baker thinks the Cuban government won't allow its airports to handle their full capacity of incoming flights. "In the next few years, they're going to have to restrict the airport landing rights to control the influx of Americans, just because there's nowhere to put the groups," he said.

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