

WILL AMERICANS BE FREE TO TRAVEL TO THE ISLAND OF FREEDOM?



Cuba may witness a surge of U.S. travelers coming to its shores. With the new U.S. president, the policy towards the “Island of Freedom” changes and it is possible that the travel ban restricting U.S. citizens traveling to Cuba will be lifted altogether.

Cuba certainly is a luring tourism destination. There are **UNESCO world heritage sites as well as beautiful beaches**. The years-long U.S. embargo policy considerably affects the Cuban economy in general and tourism industry is not an exception.

The U.S. in essence prevents its citizens to travel to the “Island of freedom”. Unlicensed U.S. visitors of Cuba could be fined up to \$10,000 by the U.S. The Bush administration even tightened the restrictions on travel and cash remittances by Cuban Americans in July 2004.

With the new administration, the policy somehow changes. President Barack Obama lifted the restrictions in relation to Cuban Americans and there is also a bill in the congress that could lift the travel restrictions for all U.S. citizens.

According to Miguel Figueras, an advisor at the Cuba Ministry of Tourism, **Cuba is able to handle the influx of U.S. tourists** that would appear in case the travel ban was lifted. The advisor, however, does not expect the tourists to flood Cuba in the first year, as it will take some time to reestablish air routes.

Currently **Cuba has some 48,000 hotel rooms** and there are plans for expansion. According to the authorities they will continue developing their tourism infrastructure regardless of whether or not the travel ban is lifted.

The most important source markets for Cuban tourism industry are Canada, Germany, Britain, Italy, Spain, France and Mexico. Canadians are the most numerous group of visitors. Despite the restrictions, U.S. tourists visit Cuba traveling through a third country.

According to the latest statistics, Cuban tourism is not that severely hit by the global economic crisis as other parts of the world; nevertheless, it records its impacts. According to the Cuba’s National Statistics Office the number of tourists has increased by 1.9 per cent over the last months but the travelers spend less money. As a result, the total revenue for the first quarter of 2009 dropped 14 per cent compared to the year before.

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