

# CUBA READY FOR THE BIGGEST U.S. TOURIST INVASION



It will be the largest number of American tourists to arrive in Cuba since the 1959 Revolution. The increase is expected to exceed the 50% of visitors who have already made their bookings.

While authorizations for all kinds of travel and transportation companies are multiplying in the U.S., moving beyond the tourist blockade of the island, **Cuba is declaring that the last quarter of 2015 could beat all records in U.S. tourism since the Revolution given that so far and despite visa restrictions American tourist presence has increased by 50%**.

An absolutely clear signal is that hotel chains have started to work out agreements with the almost 20,000 private rooms that provide cheap accommodation in Cuba, by hiring beds to which tourists will be redirected when they have no space.

These agreements are quite unprecedented since private rooms for rent are - at least in theory - illegal and up to this point the big chains had never dealt with the issue except to criticize these accommodations where necessary. 70% of these unofficial rooms are located in Havana.

The U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee has already approved the lifting of the ban on travel to Cuba, which is only the first step in a series of legislative guarantees that Democrats and a section of the Republicans are willing to approve in its totality, which would authorize all types of travel before the year end.

With seven companies already authorized to start ferry trips between Florida and Havana in September (Havana Ferry Partners, Baja Ferries, United Caribbean Lines, Airline Brokers Co., International Port Corp, America Cruise Ferries from Puerto Rico and the Spanish Balearia), everything is pointing towards the first part of the high season in Cuba being successful.

With relations having become more flexible - and even before the opening of the embassies - Americans increased visits to the island by 55% compared with 2014, making 2015 the year of most American visits since the revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro seized power in 1959.

Meanwhile operators are facing an upsurge of queries in Florida and increasing difficulty in booking accommodations. However, plans are underway and while the state hotel agency - Gaviota - has announced an agreement with Bouygues, the French construction company, to build three new hotels in the historic centre of Old Havana, **Marriott International has reached an agreement with the government on business possibilities as soon as conditions are right for investment.**

The United States officially reopened its embassy in Havana and the Secretary of State of the United States, John Kerry made an official visit to Cuba. The seven-story building was built in 1953 and closed in 1961 when the United States broke off ties with Havana. Months later it declared a blockade that has lasted until today, half a century later, and is considered the longest in history.

In his official speech, Kerry said: "Friends, we are gathered here today because our leaders, President Barack Obama and President Castro took a courageous decision: to stop being prisoners of history, focusing instead on opportunities for today and tomorrow."

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