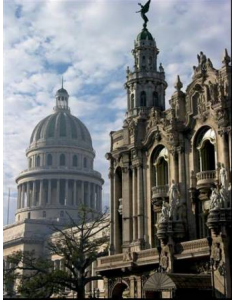


CUBAN TOURISM FIGHTS INCREASED AMOUNTS OF TOURISTS



The Cuban tourism industry has experienced a rebound in recent months thanks to the increase in the amount of U.S. visitors on the island. However, the growing tourism numbers put the Raul Castro's government to the test since there are serious doubts that the demand can be met.

Cuba received a record 3.5 million visitors in 2015, up 17.4% over the previous year. U.S. tourist visits increased by 77% to 161,000. **Some sources within Cuban tourism are wondering how can the country absorb such an increase in the number of visitors.**

"From airport arrivals to the availability of restaurants, the infrastructure has reached its maximum," said Collin Laverty, president of Cuba Educational Travel, who organizes trips to Cuba for Americans.

Meanwhile, foreigners often complain about the great difficulty they have booking hotels and renting cars to tour the island. "Cuba is full of tourists. I've seen so many Americans that it is not even funny," said Ana Fernández from the state of Tennessee.

A small group of hotels operated by foreign companies, such as the Spanish hotel chain Meliá get sold out quickly, making other tourists to stay in obsolete state motels or in private homes which harms the image of Cuban tourism.

In addition, business travelers have raised taxi fares and the prices of meals and souvenirs. An example is the trend that Cuban women posing to be photographed in colorful dresses and headscarves while chewing tobacco begun charging five dollars, four more than before.

"It's like a slap in the face, since Canadian and European tourists have been the ones who have helped keep the Cuban economy afloat for the last 25 years," said Keri Montgomery, a travel promoter who runs an agency in Vancouver, Canada.

Cuba only has 63,000 hotel rooms nationwide and these are still being run by the state. However, now the government is looking for more foreign investment and plans to reach the figure of 85,000 hotel rooms in 2020, although the pace is slow and so far beach tourism has been given precedence over cultural tourism.

"Cuban tourism industry was not prepared for a scenario that was different from the one that had prevailed in the island for more than 50 years," said José Luis Perello, Professor of Tourism at the University of Havana.

Moreover, the Havana International Airport has neither the necessary infrastructure to cope with the influx of visitors, nor enough cars to transport luggage.

"This is total madness. The employees are doing everything possible to please visitors, but the equipment is very old and needs to be replaced," said an airport worker in the capital.

U.S. tourism is still prohibited under the Washington trade embargo, but for several years Americans and residents of the country were allowed to visit the island if they claim that their trip was for religious, educational, cultural, or sports exchange, among others.

In December 2014 the United States and Cuba agreed to end the five decades of enmity and have since restored diplomatic ties. Only recently, president Obama announced that the restrictions on Cuba would be relaxed. These new measures will have a positive effect on activities related to authorized air travel to permit placeholder agreements with Cuban airlines.

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