

Cuba to Upgrade Tourism Facilities



Tourism is Cuba's most regular and important source of income, much more important than sugar and tobacco, and therefore, the recent dip in the numbers of visitors, especially from Canada and the US, has hit the economy hard. In reaction to this crisis, the government has joined forces with the Cuban Tourist Organization to plunge \$185 million into the tourism sector. The money is not only going towards updating and improving Cuba's existing attractions - its golden beaches, helicopter rides and boat tours - but it will also be spent on improving golf courses, marinas, yachting clubs and theme parks. The Cubans are trying to offer something new to visitors.

In 2006, 2.2 million tourists visited Cuba, down 100,000 on 2005. The reasons for the dip were thought to be the outbreak of the mosquito-borne dengue fever, Fidel Castro's illness and very high prices. Many tourists were thought to be scared of the negative political implications should Fidel Castro die, and the government tax placed on exchange rates meant that 1 US dollar was transferable into a mere 0.80 Cuban pesos. This simply priced the Cubans out of business.

However, a new influx of cash is set to address all these problems and reverse the decline. A lump sum is expected to be injected into the famous coffee plantations of Pinar, one of 200 resorts seeking financial help. Health tourism is also quite high on the agenda as it is estimated that this particular branch of tourism brings in around \$40 million on an annual basis. Patients travel from as far as Europe and Russia to receive treatment in Cuba. The general belief is that tourists will not mind paying a little bit more than expected if the facilities match the prices.

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