

DECREASE OF AMERICAN TOURISTS TRAVELING TO CUBA



Although Cuba has reported a record of about 4.7 million international travelers, including around 620,000 American tourists in 2017, in the last months travels from the United States to the island have diminished. Cuban-Americans' trips are excluded from these statistics.

After the Obama administration facilitated traveling to Cuba for American tourists, and released decades of a restrained demand, finding a vacant room in a Havana hotel wasn't easy to accomplish.

In the last six months, **Cuba's travel industry has been affected by three major events: warnings and recommendations issued by the United States not to travel to Cuba**, after a series of strange episodes that have affected the health of US diplomats, a Category 5 hurricane that caused damages in tourist facilities, as well as confusing statements and restrictions of the Trump administration regarding trips to the island.

Terry Dale, President and CEO of the United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA) stated: "We are here today to change the trajectory". Though Cuba won recognition as the best emerging and most popular market in 2015 and 2016, Dale stated that Cuba did not appear on any of the 2017 lists and that it was perceived as the destination with the highest risk.

To dispel any fears of American tourists of hurricane damaged hotels, José Bisbé York, President of Viajes Cuba, a tour company of the Ministry of Tourism, stated that the repairs of 40,000 hotel rooms were completed and that those facilities were available on November 1st.

He said: "We not only repaired them, but we completely renovated those hotels," adding that the number of international tourists traveling to Cuba dropped down by 10% in December, and 7 to 8% in January.

"Cuba is one of the safest places in the world," said Bisbé. He stated that of those who visit Cuba, almost 40% return again, 29% of travelers come with their families, and 96% of travelers say they would recommend Cuba as a tourist destination.

When President Trump announced last June in Miami that he was heading towards a new policy with Cuba, he indicated he was reversing all measures taken by former President Barack Obama regarding the island.

Trump did not go through with it, which caused even more confusion amongst American tourists. Nevertheless, the president made some important changes: requiring that all trips in the "town to town" category shall be made in groups and listed 180 Cuban hotels, travel companies and stores controlled by the Cuban military as prohibited territory for American travelers.

No US citizen, business, legal resident or person who is in any way under the United States jurisdiction can carry out any direct financial transaction with any entity on that list.

But Americans may still travel independently and explore other categories allowed in Cuba, such as

support for the Cuban people, and family visits. Many hotels are not on the list, nor are the private facilities that offer bed and breakfast. But travels with the sole purpose of tourism are still prohibited.

American tourists can still stay in restricted hotels, as long as they place a reservation through a Cuban travel agency (Havanatur, San Cristobal, Amistur), that is not on the list, or by a third-country agency, Frank commented. What remains prohibited are direct transactions with the entities on the list.

Americans are required to keep detailed records of their trips when traveling to Cuba, including receipts for up to five years, and the administration has suggested that there could be surprise inspections to verify compliance with regulations when Americans return to their country, but so far that doesn't seem to be happening.

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