

CUBA: FROM BEACH AND SUN TO HERITAGE TOURISM

✘ Cuban tourism and heritage tourism especially are on the rise. According to official numbers, in the first quarter of the year, there was a rise of 7.2% in the number of tourists compared to last year. This is a figure slightly higher than planned – 5.1 million visitors by the end of the year.

The industry is gradually changing its orientation. The usual thing that comes to mind when Cuba is mentioned is the sun and beaches, **but the government intends to make tourism an engine of the economy even with the rich culture and heritage tourism.**

“We have seven cities that are over 500 years old,” recalls Sonia Beltran, a representative of the industry. This year Havana blows its 500 candles, but Santiago or Trinidad are older. And heritage is the master card of public authorities. But a living heritage insist the experts working on the renovation of Old Havana.

The population is very sensitive to the question of renovations of the old colonial city. They agree to the need of renovation but while preserving the habitat and satisfying the need for housing.

This balance must be respected between the maintenance of the population in the old districts and the renovations necessary for the industry. There is a lot of tension in this matter, also considering the destruction of infrastructure due to natural disasters like hurricane Irma in September 2017.

“We have 70 hotels in Havana. 30% of these are 5 stars and 20% 4 stars but we must move towards even higher standards, corresponding to international standards. It is true that a lot of hotels are of a respectable age and need a feather to be in tune with the requirements of the current clientele,” Beltran added.

Among these establishments there is the famous Habana Libre where Fidel Castro had his apartments, the mythical hotel New York that will be rebuilt and others. But the authorities are betting on the development of high-end tourism with high purchasing power.

Thus, luxury hotels are multiplying. One of the examples is the Grand Packard hotel on the Paseo del Prado (321 rooms and 5 stars). It was inaugurated last October by Cuban President Miguel Diaz Canel himself.

According to the Ministry of Tourism, seven luxury hotels are under construction and 12 others under renovation for Havana alone. Another way to attract the richer clientele is the development of golf courses but with respect for the environment, as Beltran insists.

But who exactly represents the biggest inflow to the island state? Canada remains the main source market for Cuba, followed by the countries of the EU. And heritage tourism sites are an important attraction for Canadians.

However, not only Canadians arrive from Canada, but also Chinese visitors, since Air China stops in Canada on its way to Cuba (50 thousand annual visitors). **There is the need to overcome the barriers of distance, communication and language to perhaps guarantee a direct flight between China and Cuba.**

Meanwhile, inflow from the United States has regressed after the election of Donald Trump. Regional tensions arising from the Venezuelan crisis also complicated the situation.

In gross figures, tourism from the USA is not weakening, according to Beltran. It is, however, a market less lucrative for traders than those who arrive by plane. In 2018, the port of Havana welcomed 500,000 passengers, with them currently representing 15% of the entire market.

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