

ATTRACTING TOURISTS AMID PANDEMIC IS CHALLENGING FOR CUBA



After being closed for almost eight months, Havana reopened its doors to international tourists, but travelers still need to be convinced to return. Cuba is confident that it will be successful in attracting tourists and revive this vital industry for the island.

“It is an important challenge,” says Francisco Camps, deputy general director in Cuba of Spanish hotel chain Meliá, which manages 34 establishments on the island, of which only 10 are currently operating.

Five international airports in the country reopened to charter flights in mid-October, but the island’s crown jewel was missing: Havana, whose old-fashioned charm and historic center, declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, attract hundreds of thousands of visitors each year; and the Havana square is one that many tourists, especially Europeans, do not want to miss.

“Havana is important because it is the airport with regular flights that already allows connections with Europe,” says Camps. Closed to commercial flights since March 24, Havana reopened its airport last Sunday, just in time for the peak season (November-April).

For Camps, “this also allows a flow of visitors who come not only to visit the city but to do tours and, let’s say, a type of tourism different from sun-and-beach tourism, [with] more spending.”

In terms of revenues, there is urgency: deprived of the economic engine that is tourism (which recorded revenues of US\$2,645 million in 2019), Cuba had to drastically reduce imports, which usually cover 80% of its food needs. Meanwhile, given the shortage of coffee, milk and other basic products, lines for groceries in the country’s supermarkets get longer and longer.

“The shortage that we experience throughout the country, which is quite significant, I think it is the most serious since the 1990s,” highlights the economist Ricardo Torres from the University of Havana, referring to the famous economic crisis, known as the Special Period, that hit the island after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Torres recalls that at that time tourism was “the industry that really managed to get Cuba out of the depths of the economic crisis.”

But now reopening tourism poses risks. In flights with British and Russian travelers heading to the country’s beaches, cases of coronavirus were detected that forced dozens of travelers into quarantine.

“It is without a doubt a significant risk for the country and for further efforts of attracting tourists,” acknowledges Francisco Durán, head of Epidemiology of the Cuban Ministry of Health. “It is necessary for our population to know this so that they protect themselves and those who arrive,” he says.

To reassure travelers, the country launched the slogan: “Cuba, your safe destination”. The island’s number of cases (only 7,725 in a population of 11.2 million) is among the lowest on the continent.

However, the protocol requires tourists to undergo a C-reactive protein test (at a cost of \$30) upon arrival and to limit traveling within the island until results are available 24 hours later. In addition, each hotel has medical staff thanks to a health network of 82 doctors per every 10,000 inhabitants (for comparison, there are 32 in France and 26 in the United States per every 10,000).

“This very successful strategy in controlling the epidemic is an asset for Cuba when it comes to reopening,” because “in the next month tourists are going to look for safe destinations,” warns Torres. “Yes, we must protect people’s lives, but we must also revive our economy which is on its knees,” he adds.

At the beginning of November, Cuba hosted a seminar for 150 German tourism agents. The Prime Minister himself, Manuel Marrero, welcomed them to the island. **However, some European countries remain closed due to the pandemic, and even Canada, the main source market to the island, imposes mandatory self-isolation for its nationals upon return.**

In general, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) does not foresee a rebound in the industry before the end of 2021, hence the need to be creative.

Some hotels offer long stays (two or three months) to Canadian tourists who want to escape the winter, but even more surprising is the teleworking offer on Cuba.

Other Caribbean destinations, such as Barbados and Bermuda, also started to promote this initiative. The Hyatt hotel chain now offers it in Costa Rica and the Bahamas.

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