

## **Travel to Cuba Supports Basic Rights, Cultural Understanding and a Strong Economy**

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This could be the year that Congress votes to open Cuba to travel by Americans. For 50 years, the island has been the forbidden fruit for tourists, while the Cuban government and ours have eyed each other with suspicion over the miles, over the decades, over the disagreements.

Now it is altogether fitting that the romance of travel and the immense values that visiting another society brings are coming together to steer the U.S. relationship to Cuba in an entirely new direction. If that happens, if Congress enacts the so-called "Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act," Americans will reclaim their freedom to travel, and Cubans will enjoy the benefits of broader contact with our fellow citizens.

First, travel is a basic American right. Americans can travel anywhere in the world they want without restrictions *except to Cuba*. Travel to Cuba is regulated, it requires a license, and only a select few are allowed to visit the country. No other nation imposes this travel restriction to Cuba on its citizens, and Americans should have the opportunity to explore the world unfettered by travel and currency restrictions. Extending this right to visit Cuba to all Americans will not only vindicate our constitutional rights, but also set an example to Cuba where the travel rights of its citizens are limited. With The Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act, Americans will be able to travel to Cuba to experience the rich diversity of Cuban culture and heritage.

Second, it is no accident that the coalition of groups advocating an end to the Cuba travel ban includes not only business, agriculture, and tourism interests, but also some of the most passionate advocates of human rights and human freedom that we know. They believe that bringing more Americans into contact with Cubans on the island will help spread our values and our ideas and help average Cubans overcome the restrictions on information that they live with every day. We join them in the belief that American travel to Cuba will have a positive impact on human rights for the Cuban people.

Finally, tour operators, travel agents, cruise lines, airlines, and many other travel service providers will benefit in jobs and revenue from this "new" destination for Americans. Our sister association, the American Society of Travel Agents, believes that the legislation will stimulate more than 850,000 new U.S. travelers to Cuba annually, not counting relatives and cruise passengers.

With 50 years of unfulfilled demand, due to the travel restrictions, there will be significant interest in tours to Cuba as soon as they are available. Many tour operator

members of the National Tour Association are prepared to add Cuba to their inventory of tour products including Philip Sheldon, president of Hanns Ebensten Travel, who said, "As a tour operator based in Key West, I would like nothing better than to be able to freely lead American groups to Cuba and to rebuild the very close ties which once existed between our nations...after 50 years of separation, there is a huge pent-up demand of Americans wanting to visit Cuba."

There is also Dan Mahar, CEO of Tauck World Discovery in Norwalk, Connecticut, who said, "We enthusiastically support the lifting of travel restrictions to Cuba. Lifting the travel ban to Cuba would encourage a groundswell of 'citizen diplomacy.' It could start a new chapter in U.S.-Cuba relations. What's more, at a time when tour operators, travel agents, airlines and others in our industry are feeling the impact of a global recession, having a new and engaging destination to offer travelers would be a truly welcome development."

We know that Cuba will be an exciting new destination that will significantly grow the travel sector of the United States economy.

Lisa Simon, CTP

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