



TRAVEL

The Passport blog

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Cuba lifts travel restrictions

By Husna Haq



Cubans queue outside a migration office to request new passport on 14 January 2013 in Havana. (Adalberto Roque/AFP/Getty Images)

In what is perhaps the greatest development in travel in Cuba's history, President Raul Castro **announced the end of tough travel restrictions** starting 14 January 2013, making it easier for millions of Cubans to leave the communist country.

The landmark move marks the first time in five decades that Cubans will be able to travel outside their country without a tourist visa or an invitation from a resident in their destination country. Under the new policy, Cubans will need only a passport, national identity card, and, if required by the country they are visiting, a visa from their destination. The new travel measures also extend the period of time Cubans can spend overseas, from the current 11 months to 24. The new policy is part of an immigration initiative by President Raul Castro's government to make it easier for Cubans to go abroad, study and earn money, some of which it is hoping will be sent back to their homeland.

The changes mark the first major reform to Cuba's travel and immigration policies in half a century. Fidel Castro **enacted the travel restrictions** after the Cuban Revolution in 1961 to prevent Cuba's intellectuals from fleeing the country en masse. Cubans and outsiders, including human rights activists, have long protested the policy, seen as overly restrictive and punitive.

"Like earlier decisions legalising the personal sales of homes and cars, this is another step in the direction of loosening restrictions and opening up Cuban society," Sarah Stephens, executive director of the **Center for Democracy in the Americas**, a Washington group opposed to the US embargo on Cuba, **told Reuters**.

But not everyone will be free to travel under the new policy. Restrictions will remain on many doctors, members of the military and athletes, which Cuba attributes to reasons of national defence and security.

Nonetheless, the reform means many more Cubans will be travelling. Monday, the first day of the government's new travel rules, saw scores of Cuban citizens lining up at travel agencies and migration offices.

Which cities and countries can expect to see an influx of Cuban visitors? Miami, home to the largest Cuban community outside of the communist island, will be a popular destination, as will Orlando, a favourite vacation spot for many Cubans, thanks to it being the home of Walt Disney World. Ecuador may be another hotspot, as the country has no visa requirements, making it easier for Cubans to visit.

However, experts don't expect a mass exodus from the island, as most countries, including the US and many nations in Europe and South America, still require Cubans to obtain visas, which may not be easy due to fears that those granted tourist visas will not want to return.

The move also has US-Cuba analysts questioning what effect the eased travel rules will have on US-Cuba relations. The US broke diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1961 after Fidel Castro's communist takeover, and relations between the two countries have been poor ever since. For now, the US hasn't announced any changes to its Cuba policy.

The US accepts about 20,000 Cubans annually via legal immigration, in addition to family members seeking reunification and those who manage to make it to US shores. Under the controversial "wet foot, dry foot policy", US authorities turn back Cubans picked up at sea but allows those who make it to US soil to stay, even fast-tracking their citizenship. Over the past century, thousands of Cubans have died attempting to cross the Florida Straits in makeshift boats and rafts.

"We obviously welcome any reforms that will allow Cubans to depart from and return to their country freely," spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said in a US State Department briefing on the matter. "We are analysing, obviously, all of the details and any implications it may have for our processing [of Cubans seeking to travel to the United States]."

Travel to Cuba is still restricted for US citizens. Due to a long-standing trade embargo against Cuba, Americans must obtain a license from the US government to visit Cuba – similar, in fact, to Cuba's prior exit permit requirement.

As such, noted John McAuliffe of the Fund for Reconciliation and Development, which advocates for better US-Cuba relations, the new policy means that "Cuba now gives its citizens more freedom to travel to the US than the US gives its citizens to travel to Cuba."

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