

The Catch to the US Allowing Air Travel to Cuba

The United States and Cuba have agreed to restore scheduled commercial airline service between the two countries, the two countries said on Thursday, the first anniversary of the Cold War foes' announcement they would normalize relations.

The deal, the latest step this year to restore ties after more than half a century of hostility, is expected to increase tourism and business on the communist-ruled island.

It will allow U.S. airlines to sell tickets on their websites for flights to Cuba. However, the move does not lift the U.S. ban on general tourism to the Caribbean island. U.S. travelers still must meet at least one of 12 criteria to visit, such as being Cuban-American or partaking in educational tours or journalistic activity.

Charter flights operated by U.S. carriers already connect the countries.

"While U.S. law continues to prohibit travel to Cuba for tourist activities, a stronger civil aviation relationship will facilitate growth in authorized travel between our two countries— a critical component of the President's policy toward Cuba," the U.S. State Department said in a statement announcing the deal.

President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro announced on Dec. 17, 2014 that they planned to normalize relations, following 18 months of secret negotiations.

The United States broke diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1961, two years after Fidel Castro ousted dictator Fulgencio Batista in a revolution that steered the island on a leftist course and made it a close ally of the Soviet Union. For

decades, Washington's policy was to isolate the island.

Since last year's detente, the countries have restored diplomatic ties and reopened their embassies. Obama has also taken several steps to encourage closer business ties with the island.

However, the longstanding U.S. trade embargo on the island remains in place and the Republican-controlled Congress has resisted Obama's calls to lift it. Cuba's human rights record still draws criticism from Washington, and Castro's government has made clear the diplomatic opening does not mean Havana plans to change its one-party political system.

Cuba's embassy in Washington said in a statement on the airline deal that the countries reiterated their commitment to flight security and to protecting civil aviation "from acts of unlawful interference."

Airlines from both countries will be able to make commercial agreements such as sharing flight codes and leasing planes to each other, it said.

FLIGHTS NOT AVAILABLE IMMEDIATELY

There will be some delay until travelers can book commercial flights to Cuba.

Airlines will have to apply for permission from U.S. regulators to fly specific routes between the countries, and the timeline for this was not immediately clear. It was also not yet clear how many U.S. flights will be allowed into Cuba.

New York-based JetBlue Airways Corp, which already operates charter flights to the island, said in a statement it plans to apply to schedule service once it has fully reviewed the terms of the aviation deal.

"Interest in Cuba has reached levels not seen for a

generation," its Senior Vice President for Airline Planning Scott Laurence said in the statement.

Other U.S. airlines – American Airlines Group Inc, Delta Air Lines Inc and United Continental Holdings Inc – have all expressed interest in scheduling flights to Cuba.

President Barack Obama relaxed travel restrictions to Cuba earlier this year. That has led to a boom in U.S. citizens' visits to Cuba, which are up 71 percent this year, with 138,120 Americans arriving over the first 11 months. {eo}

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