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"Cuba opening up is a fantastic thing for the Caribbean" – Chastanet

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You might think other Caribbean tourism destinations would be ready to flip their sandals as Cuba's tourism numbers continue to climb.

International visitors to Cuba last year rose by 13.9 percent to a record 4 million, second only to the Dominican Republic (5.96 million), while visitors to the Caribbean region as a whole in 2016 increased just 2.4 percent. Cuban tourism officials are expecting another record year in 2017.

But some Caribbean leaders say they view the Cuban tourism juggernaut not so much as competition as a way to raise the Caribbean's tourism profile as a whole.

"Cuba opening up is a fantastic thing for the Caribbean," said St. Lucia Prime Minister Allen M. Chastanet. "It only strengthens the brand of the Caribbean. It's more important for all of us to be strong partners. The more Jamaica grows, the more potential clients there are for St. Lucia. It's the same with Cuba.

"Cuba is huge into Latin America, Europe and Canada and now even the United States of America," said Chastanet. "There are a lot of people who haven't come to the Caribbean and now maybe coming to Cuba will give them the appetite to come to the rest of the Caribbean islands."

A new International Monetary Fund study on the potential impact on the rest of the Caribbean if tourism from the United States to Cuba eventually opens up concludes that one destination's gain isn't necessarily another's loss.

Currently the United States allows U.S. travelers who fall into 12 categories, such as those making family visits to the island, on people-to-people tours or on religious or humanitarian missions, to visit Cuba. But U.S. regulations still don't allow American travelers to make conventional tourism trips where they just lounge on the beach.

If those travel restrictions are lifted, the IMF paper says it could result in 3 million to 5.6 million U.S. arrivals in Cuba — with most of the boost coming from new tourists to the Caribbean. Last year, visits by Cuban Americans and other U.S. travelers to Cuba totaled 614,433, a 34 percent increase.

At this point, there aren't any indications that U.S. travel policy to the island will become less restrictive any time soon.

Former President Barack Obama lifted some travel restrictions with Cuba and allowed the first regularly scheduled commercial flights between the United States and Cuba and the first cruises in more than half a century to go forward under his rapprochement policy, but it's unclear what U.S. policy toward Cuba might be under President Donald Trump.

Trump, who has been critical of Cuba's human rights record and political system, has said Cuba didn't offer any concessions to the U.S. and he wants a better deal for this country in its relationship with the island. The president has ordered a review of all of Obama's executive orders on Cuba, and Florida Republican Sen. Marco Rubio said he expects changes in U.S.-Cuba policy.

If the United States does at some point allow tourist travel to Cuba, "the apprehension of the Caribbean tourism industry" is "likely unwarranted," the IMF concluded. "The history of tourism in the region has shown that it is possible for all destinations to grow despite large changes in market shares."

In some ways the U.S. restriction on tourism to Cuba may have hurt the Miami market, the IMF said. In the interim, Cuba has developed bargain-priced beach resorts that attract large numbers of Canadians.

"One could argue that the U.S. travel restrictions to Cuba have in some ways punished the Miami tourism industry by making Cuba artificially cheap for Canadian tourists [who] would have otherwise vacationed in Miami," said the report. "Hence, a reversal in U.S. policy towards Cuba could potentially be a windfall to Miami." As more Americans visit Cuba, the IMF said, prices there

would be expected to rise.

Over the past 20 years, with the exception of the Bahamas, tourist arrivals throughout the Caribbean have grown, despite rapid expansion in destinations such as Cancun, the Dominican Republic and Cuba, said the IMF report.

"I don't see Cuba as a threat and I don't believe the region as a whole sees Cuba as a threat," said Grenada Prime Minister Keith Mitchell. "It's true Cuba has been growing phenomenally in the last year or so. But what has happened in Grenada is that we also have been growing."

Last year, Grenada — known as the Spice Island because of its exports of nutmeg, cinnamon, ginger and other spices — welcomed 144, 333 tourists, a 2.6 percent increase, and in January, tourists arrivals were up 2.7 percent over January 2016, according to the Caribbean Tourism Organization.

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