
Industry tour of Cuba set for early 2015

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Cuba is gaining attention as a potential trade partner for the marine industry as some speculate whether the United States will lift its half-century trade embargo with the country.

Marina consultant Richard Graves and Associates is planning a U.S.-sanctioned industry tour of the country for Feb. 18-22, directly after the Miami International Boat Show, to help interested parties save on airfare.

The National Marine Manufacturers Association also has a small delegation of select members touring the island now who are interested in learning more about its industry potential, the NMMA confirmed to Trade Only Today.

"I firmly believe the embargo will soon be lifted. It doesn't make sense and solves nothing. In fact, most people don't even know how it started over 50 years ago," Graves and Associates principal Richard Graves told Trade Only Today. "In recent surveys the majority of Americans believe the embargo should be lifted. It is also interesting to note that most Cubans in the U.S. under 40 also believe the embargo should end."

Graves told Trade Only that he fears the United States will be left out of potential growth and development if it doesn't lift the embargo sooner rather than later.

"Spain is building the marinas, France is building the hotels, the

Chinese are investing, and even Putin is offering help in the construction of their shipping port—and the U.S. is left out," Graves said. "Raul Castro has even made an overture to the U.S. to renew relations."

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean and the 16th-largest island in the world.

Anticipating the end of the travel ban, Cuban state enterprises responsible for marine infrastructure have begun an unprecedented push to prepare the island nation for yacht tourism and U.S. boaters. Although there are only 15 marinas with 789 slips, there are plans to add 23 more marinas with more than 5,000 slips, Graves said.

The expansion of Marina Gaviota at Varadero, 90 miles from the Florida Keys, is intended to help augment facilities for large recreational vessels.

Accompanying the marina will be a five-star villa hotel development. Plans show a marina complex akin to Atlantis at Nassau in the Bahamas or St. Tropez in France, only larger.

After extensive renovations and a massive expansion, Marina Gaviota Varadero will become Cuba's largest and most modern marina. When complete, it will accommodate about 1,200 boats. An official opening is planned for 2015, but vessels are using the marina now.

Last year, Cuban President Raul Castro announced the end of travel restrictions, making it easier for millions of Cubans to leave the communist country.

Parties interested in participating in the tour with Graves must submit paperwork and be approved by Oct. 1.

"NMMA facilitated a [U.S.-sanctioned] research trip to Cuba on behalf of its members with the objective to understand the market and make meaningful contacts and connections that may benefit recreational boating," NMMA spokeswoman Ellen Hopkins told Trade Only.

The NMMA does not have an official position on the current or future status of the U.S. trade embargo with Cuba and continues to abide by the trade restrictions the United States has imposed, she added.

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