
Travel to Cuba Is Booming

03/12/2014



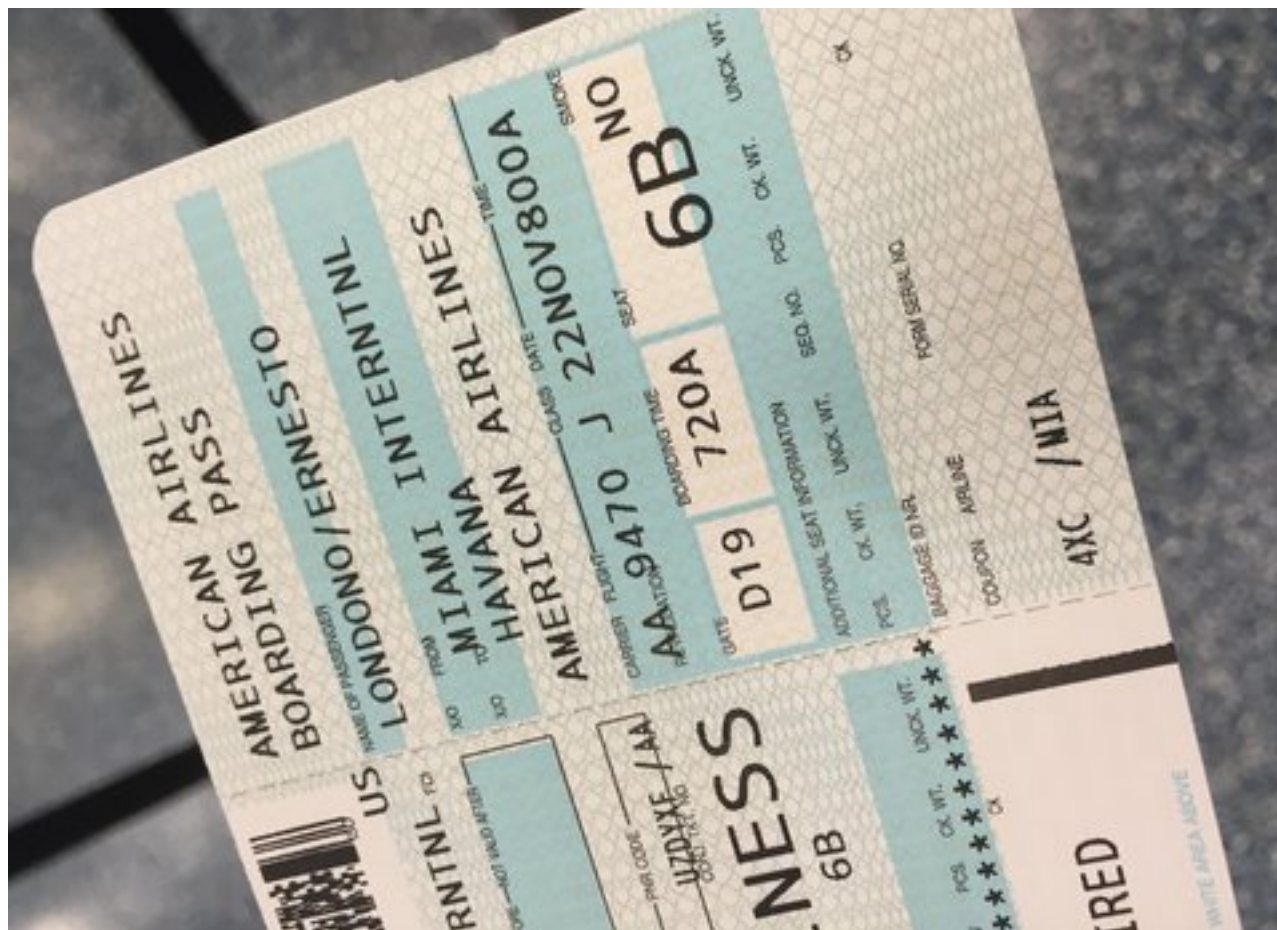
But technically, in order to comply with the sanctions the United States imposes on Cuba, Miami-based ABC Charters operated my flight. It's one of several embargo-compliant companies that is benefiting from a boom in travel to Cuba.

While traveling to Cuba for tourism remains technically unlawful for Americans, rules loosened by the Obama administration now permit a greater variety of so-called "people-to-people" cultural exchanges. Those include tours for art collectors, tobacco aficionados and Americans who want to explore Cuba's dynamic gay scene, to name just a few.

In 2012 and 2013, more than 90,000 Americans legally visited Cuba under those programs. That's more than twice the number that traveled here legally in 2008, when the rules were tighter, according to Cuban government data. In addition to that, American officials estimate that Cuban Americans visited the island as many as 500,000 times in the last year. A growing number of them shuttle back and forth.

The sanctions have kept traveling to Cuba extraordinarily expensive, and have created opportunities for the Cuban government to profit. A recent lawsuit filed in Florida by a charter company revealed that Cuban landing fees that are well above the industry average for American passengers, [the Tampa Tribune reported](#). That mark-up is due in part to the fact that American carriers cannot employ people in Cuba and must rely on local personnel that work for the government.

Photo



The ticketCredit Ernesto Londoño

Under the terms of people-to-people tours, travelers must follow detailed itineraries and are not supposed to venture out on their own. All-inclusive tours give authorities in Cuba the ability to steer business to government-owned hotels and restaurants, whereas independent travelers can more easily explore the burgeoning scene of privately-owned restaurants.

Collin Laverty, a Havana-based American businessman who runs [Cuba Education Travel](#), one of the licensed travel companies, said the average cost of a trip to Cuba under the current rules is \$4,000 a week. A Mexican citizen, by comparison, could easily do a similar trip for a quarter of the price, and have the option to stay at a Cuban home.

The price tag has meant that the bulk of American travelers tend to be older and white, said Laverty, whose company has sought to diversify the clientele, by bringing in university students.

“Sometimes you’re in the Hotel Nacional and you see these groups coming in, and they’re all over 80 and they all have white hair,” Mr. Laverty said. “It looks like the Golden Girls coming to Havana.”