

Tourists to Cuba jump 15 pct in Q1

24/04/2015



Tourists to Cuba jumped by 15 percent in the first quarter of 2015, and the trend is expected to hold for the rest of the year, the country's Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero said.

Speaking at the opening of the 7th International Gourmet Festival of Varadero, the island's leading seaside resort, Marrero did not offer specific figures, but indicated visitor arrivals in the first four months of the year "have been magnificent," communist youth daily Juventud Rebelde reported on Thursday.

Cuba and the [United States](#) announced an agreement in December to resume diplomatic ties and normalize relations, sparking a surge of interest in travel to the Caribbean country, which has been largely off limits to non-Cuban U.S. travelers for five decades.

A day after the Dec. 17 announcement, [TripAdvisor](#), a travel planning and booking website, reported that interest in travel to Cuba spiked by nearly 300 percent in one day.

Marrero called on the country's tourism industry to strive for excellence, saying there was a lot of global competition for tourism dollars.

In 2014, Cuba drew some 3 million visitors, but tourism officials are preparing for an expected wave of U.S. tourists once travel restrictions imposed by Washington are lifted as ties with Cuba improve.

Tourism is Cuba's second-largest source of foreign revenue, after the export of technical and

medical services.

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