
French companies seeking greater role in Cuban tourism

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Several French companies have announced plans to reinforce their presence in Cuba as the island country's tourism industry has started to flourish.

French hotel chains Accor and Warwick International Hotels (WIH) said they are working to incorporate new hotels at Cuban tourist attractions such as the beach resort of Varadero and the Jardines del Rey archipelago.

Accor said it hopes to begin with a luxury hotel of 518 rooms in November. It will be the first Pullman hotel in Cayo Coco, a small island located in Jardines del Rey in central Cuba.

To run the new facilities, Accor will work with state hotel group Gran Caribe through an agreement reached during French President Francois Hollande's recent visit to the Caribbean island.

Jean-Philippe Claret, a senior Accor executive, said his company has been in Cuba for almost 20 years.

Accor currently runs two medium-sized establishments on the island: the Mercure Sevilla La Habana with 178 rooms in Old Havana and the Mercure Playa de Oro with 385 rooms in Varadero.

"The Pullman Cayo Coco will enrich Cuba's range of luxury hotels which has a real potential to develop the country," added Claret.

Accor will also work with local tourist group Gaviota to build luxury hotel Sofitel So La Habana.

The new recreational building will have 218 rooms located in a central corner of Havana's promenade, almost at the mouth of the entrance to the bay.

Another French hotel, WIH, will enter into the island's tourist sector by means of contracts with Gaviota group to run

the Cayo Santo Maria Resort in Jardines del Rey, which will be opened in June. The company will also open the Naviti Resort in Varadero.

Air France said it will schedule another flight from Paris to Havana since October, which will increase the flights from Paris to the Cuban capital to 11 per week.

During the summer period, the French airliner offers a daily Boeing flight from the Charles de Gaulle airport.

The route will be strengthened with four additional flights per week this winter, said the company.

In Havana last May, directors of Cuban airline Cubana and Air France signed a memorandum of understanding for commercial cooperation, hoping to strengthen commercial links.

In 2014, more than 100,000 French citizens visited the island nation. The majority of French visitors stayed in the Varadero beach resort, which is 130 km east of Havana.

This year, Cuba's tourism authorities foresee increasing visitors due to a large variety of tours that combine history, culture, heritage and beaches.

In 2014, Cuba drew some 3 million visitors. The tourism sector generated an annual income of over 2,500 million U.S. dollars.
