

Orlando-to-Cuba charter flights begin

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For more than five decades, Cuba has been a forbidden destination for U.S. travelers as part of a government embargo.

That changed Wednesday as one airline began chartering flights from Orlando International Airport to the communist nation on a weekly basis.

Dozens of people lined up to get on the flights. Some passengers said it was a dream come true to see family they've never met.

"It's very special," said Sima Souji. "I've always wanted to see my family and having this opportunity will make it a little easier for us now. "

The first nonstop flight with Tampa-based Island Travel & Tours took off at 2:15 p.m.

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The company won't be operating every day, though. Flights will take place twice a week, on Wednesdays and Sundays. It will be a 90-minute flight from Orlando to Havana.

"My hope is to open the eyes of Americans to what Cuba actually is and what their people are like," said Bill Hauf, president of Island Travel & Tours. "There (have) been a lot of things written, but many people who read haven't visited there, so they don't really know the people. So, my hopes are this is going to bring the people of both countries closer together."

Hauf said the travel company contemplated starting the flights two years ago, but it was difficult to get licenses for American travels to go to Cuba.

National policies changed earlier this year, and restrictions eased after a push by the Obama administration.

Leisure travel to the island is still technically banned, and so the airline plans on serving mostly the Cuban-American community who want to visit family members.

U.S. travelers who fall under 12 approved categories will be allowed to make the journey. Those categories are as follows:

- Family visits
- Official government business
- Journalism
- Professional research and meetings
- Educational activities
- Religious activities
- Public performances, clinics, workshops, exhibitions and athletic competitions
- "Support for the Cuban people"
- Humanitarian projects
- Activities of private foundations or research for educational institutes
- Exporting or importing information or "information materials"
- Travel related to some authorized export transactions

The U.S. cut off diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1961 after Fidel Castro's revolution. The U.S. spent decades trying to either actively overthrow the Cuban government or isolate the island, including toughening the economic embargo first imposed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Since the late 1970s, the United States and Cuba have operated diplomatic missions called interests sections in each other's capitals. The missions are technically under the protection of Switzerland, and do not enjoy the same status as embassies.

Entrepreneurs hope to cash in on Cuba travel

Investing in ideas is a way of life for Joel Goldstein.

His company, Mr. Checkout Distributors, gets between five and 10 products a week from people who want their products in independent retailers. Goldstein is the aggregator, the connection in the trade.

Now, he has a new idea for a side business based around Cuba.

"I really wanted to capitalize on how many people are going to be searching on how to get to Cuba," Goldstein said. "It's not regulated, and I thought it would be amazing to put this together"

as an Expedia that allows you to learn more about it."

His new company, www.CubaFerryExpress.com, will help travelers make arrangements as they try and hop a ferry to Cuba.

According to Goldstein, there are six American companies that have been authorized to provide ferry services from Miami to Cuba, but they don't have boats.

"So right now, it's off the books," he said.
