
One of three Tampa-Cuba charter operators suspends service

20/05/2014



Citing a saturated market, one of three charter companies offering service from Tampa to Cuba has suspended the service.

"This Wednesday will be our last flight to Cuba from Tampa," said Bill Hauf, president of Island Travel and Tours, whose company flew the route three times a week. "We will continue to operate our six flights a week to Cuba out of Miami."

Two charter services still fly from Tampa — ABC Charters and Cuba Travel Services, offering five flights between them. Company representatives could not be reached for comment Monday.

Hauf blamed the arrival of CTS in December 2013 for the suspension of his Cuban flights.

Hauf said last year, his flights consistently booked at least 100 passengers — the minimum to break even on costs, including landing fees and taxes paid to Cuba plus renting a plane.

Since CTS began offering flights, the number of passengers dipped to half last year's numbers.

"I am losing \$15,000 to \$20,000 a flight in Tampa," he said. "I cannot continue to operate a business like that."

Island Travel will continue operating a Tampa office and will sell tickets here for charter services flying to Cuba from other U.S. cities. Hauf hopes to resume the suspended flights some day.

According to a Cuban government website documenting passenger arrivals, flights by Island Travel and CTS from Tampa to Cuba never broke 100 passengers for the seven-day period through Monday. ABC's flights during the period topped 100 passengers every time but one.

Overall, passenger totals on flights to Cuba from Tampa International Airport rose last month, from 3,180 in April 2013 to 5,683, said Janet Zink, airport spokeswoman.

From October 2013 to April 2014, 34,358 passengers flew to Cuba from Tampa, up more than 10,000 from the same 23,558 during the same period a year before, Zink said.

Al Fox, president of the Tampa-based Alliance for a Responsible Cuba Policy Foundation, has been predicting one of the Tampa charters would suspend service since CTS entered the Tampa market.

"This travel industry from Tampa to Cuba cannot survive off Cuban Americans living in this area alone," said Fox, whose group lobbies for open relations with Cuba.

Tampa's Cuban American population is estimated to be 80,000, compared to nearly 1 million in Miami. Island Travel has little problem filling planes from Miami to Cuba, Hauf said.

For service from Tampa to Cuba to continue at its current level, more passengers who are not of Cuban descent need to fly, Fox said.

Americans are allowed to travel to Cuba only under people-to-people licenses issued by the U.S., which bring the cost of a flight to \$2,500-\$5,000.

Fox said that's too high for a trip that allows Americans only educational opportunities, not access to resorts.

Educational trips are a great experience, Fox said, but not one most people want to repeat.

"The president of the United States needs to lift the travel ban completely," said Fox. "And he needs to do it soon or if flights from Tampa to Cuba are to continue to have passengers."
