
Americans Can Now Legally Run Cuba's Havana Marathon

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For many people, running and travel go hand-in-hand. Sure, hometown marathons are fun, but what better excuse to see the world than to sign up for an event in an exotic locale? Now, runners looking for a fall race have a new option that will appeal to serious athletes and travel junkies alike: For the first time since the race's inception in 1987, U.S. citizens will be able to travel legally to Cuba to participate in the 2014 Marabana Havana Marathon or Half Marathon on November 16.

Government-imposed travel restrictions have kept most Americans out of Cuba for most of the past 50 years. Even after regulations were relaxed in 2011, people traveling from the United States must do so with licensed tour companies via chartered flights, and their visits must be educational and cultural in nature—no sunbathing, exploring without a guide, or participating in Cuba's adventure-sport offerings like rafting, cycling, and scuba diving. (Americans traveling through other countries can get around these rules, but risk getting caught in Customs and answering to the U.S. government when they return home.)

Tom Popper, president of [Insight Cuba](#), wanted to change that. His New York-based company has had great success providing tours under its existing "people-to-people" license, but—as a runner himself—Popper knew the Havana Marathon could offer visitors a unique and valuable perspective on the country and its people. "Runners typically share a bond right away, even if they don't speak the same language," Popper says. "We thought this would be a great way to get Americans side by side, literally, with Cubans and have a really meaningful interaction."

It took several years and a pilot attempt to start a marathon under the company's people-to-people license, but Popper finally got his plan up and running with the approval of a brand-new amateur sports license, the first of its kind awarded to an American tour company. Under this license, Insight Cuba can take 156 race participants to Cuba—with options for four-day or eight-day excursions ranging from \$2,495 to \$4,395 per person—and he expects these slots to sell out quickly.

Popper hopes that this new license will also open up travel to Cuba for other fitness-related opportunities.

"Provided the marathon is a success, a logical next step would be in the area of biking—this is something we will certainly explore," he says, although he adds that when dealing with government-sanctioned travel, "nothing is ever guaranteed."

Cuba isn't the only country using amateur sports to strengthen international ties, either. This year was also the first time that North Korea's Pyongyang Marathon, held in April, was open to non-professional athletes from other countries. For visitors who are otherwise required to have structured itineraries and constant supervision, the opportunity to essentially sightsee for 26 miles (albeit, on a specific course and surrounded by other runners) was unprecedented.
