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Cuban Tourism Set to Break Record

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MORE than two million tourists have visited Cuba already this year, Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero said on Wednesday, meaning that the country is on track for a record number of visitors.

He revealed that visitor numbers are running 12 per cent ahead of those last year, when the current record was set.

The surge is credited to a wave of international interest in Cuba prompted by the announcement of US-Cuba detente in December 2014.

Visitor numbers are expected to receive a major boost after commercial flights from the United States begin this month.

The rise in tourism has strained the country's infrastructure, filling hotels to capacity and creating long waits at Havana's Jose Marti International Airport.

The government announced on Wednesday that Aeroports de Paris, the French state-owned company that runs Charles de Gaulle, Orly and other Paris airports, would receive a concession to operate Jose Marti, which will be renovated by the French firm Bouygues.

The announcement contained no details, but updating the airport to receive hundreds of thousands more tourists a year will almost certainly become one of the most important infrastructure projects in Cuba.

It would also represent the largest French-Cuban deal since President Francois Hollande visited the island in May 2015.

Mr Marrero said that Cuba expects to receive 3.8 million tourists this year.

Foreign Ministry official Josefina Vidal, who is Cuba's specialist on relations with the US, noted that 138,000 US citizens had visited in the first half of 2016, an 80 per cent increase that made the US the second-largest source of visitors after Canada.

Cuba has become increasingly dependent on tourism as other aspects of the economy have failed to keep pace.

President Raul Castro warned last month that the country faced sharply slower growth this year and the economy has expanded by a mere 1 per cent in the first half of 2016.

Cuba has begun cutting back on energy use, primarily in government offices, where workers are being told to leave early and cut back on air conditioning.

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