

Luxury Travel

Believe It or Not, Now Is the Best Time to Visit Cuba

The new regulations for Americans are confusing. But don't let them dissuade you.

By [Nikki Ekstein](#)

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A little more than a year ago, things were looking rosy for Cuban entrepreneurs in the burgeoning tourism hubs of Havana, Cienfuegos, and Trinidad.

Those with culinary training were opening ambitious **paladars** and employing large numbers of locals to chop, sauté, wash, and bus tables. Classic car owners were polishing their 1954 Chevys and leveraging them to start tour companies. And artists—fashion designers, jewelers, painters, sculptors—were taking commissions from art enthusiasts eager to explore an untapped market.

The year 2017 was record-setting for foreign visitation to Cuba. According to government figures, the tiny Caribbean island welcomed 4.7 million travelers over those 12 months, pulling in \$3 billion in tourism revenue and showing an 18 percent increase in visitors from a year earlier. With 619,000 of them coming from the U.S., the spending power of Americans was becoming as clear as when the Andrews Sisters recorded their iconic calypso tune about “workin’ for the Yankee dollar” in 1945.



Colorful, historic facades in Havana.
Source: Cuba Candela

But in June of last year, President Trump announced new travel regulations for Americans, and the rum-and-coke-slinging crowds in Havana slowed to a trickle. Then came Irma, and on its heels a series of mysterious sonic attacks. By the time the U.S. administration released its updated travel policies in November, American tourism to Cuba had plummeted.

“The market froze for a few months,” says Chad Olin, founder and chief executive officer of Cuba Candela, a luxury-focused Cuba travel outfit. “It’s amazing how much confusion these headlines caused.”

The silver lining is that travelers don’t need to reshuffle their itineraries altogether—not when they can get a little extra hand-holding from an agency like Olin’s. In fact, amid reports of fewer crowds, improved infrastructure, and a wider variety of tapped-in experiences on the ground, now may be the best time yet to visit Cuba, no matter where you’re coming from.

Why All Travelers Stand to Benefit



A guided studio visit with Abercrombie & Kent.
Source: Abercrombie & Kent

Travelers of all nationalities stand to reap certain rewards by going to Cuba this year. “If you go back to December 2016 [when tourism was peaking], there were just too many people in Havana,” says Olin. “The infrastructure was stretched to its capacity.”

It took time to better pave the roads, tighten service at restaurants, renovate old hotels, set up functioning Wi-Fi connections—the list goes on. Now Cubans are able to meet higher levels of demand, but the crowds aren’t there. As a result, Olin says, “getting reservations at restaurants is easier. The best five-star hotels can be booked with less advance notice. We aren’t seeing overbookings like we used to—when you would arrive at a restaurant or hotel and your table or room isn’t there anymore.”

For outfitters such as Abercrombie & Kent, this translates to more intimate and authentic experiences. “If you go now, you’re not going to have tour bus after

tour bus lined up for the same experience,” says Stefanie Schudde, vice president for product development and operations. “You’re able to spend more time engaging with the locals when there’s less churn and burn.”



Catamarans on Varadero Beach, roughly an hour-and-a-half drive east of Havana.
Photographer: Jane Sweeney/AWL Images RM

The experiences themselves are also better and more varied, as Cubans are learning to anticipate travelers’ expectations and interests. For instance, Schudde sends her guests on catamaran rides with fishermen in Cienfuegos, while Olin is setting up private dinners in chefs’ homes and visits with a local vinyl collector who can walk guests through the history of Cuban music.

Meanwhile, Cuba’s creative scene has picked up significantly, with new labels including Rox950, a minimalist semiprecious jeweler, and Clandestina, a screen-printing T-shirt company that recently opened the country’s first independent design shop. Both are rolling out behind-the-scenes experiences for curious travelers.

Navigating America's Tough Travel Rules



On a group tour through Cuba with Abercrombie & Kent. Source: Abercrombie & Kent

As of November, the most common way Americans had been visiting Cuba is off the table: “People-to-people” trips are now a no-go. Twelve categories of licenses remain, from educational and humanitarian trips to family visits.

Cruises are an easy workaround, but group tour operators offer a streamlined approach for those wanting to plan a land trip. Abercrombie & Kent, for instance, is resuming 24-person trips to Cuba in October after a 10-month-long pause that the company used to parse the new regulations. “We wanted to make sure we understood what was changing and what was still possible,” explains Schmutde. Turns out all her favorite excursions were still bookable, so her team combined them into a single, epic itinerary.

Despite popular belief, independent travel in the country is still possible, and it’s the specialty of Olin’s Cuba Candela. Generally, he exploits a loophole that allows companies (not individuals) to apply for people-to-people licenses or uses so-called Support for the Cuban People licenses. Both, he says, require legal know-how—particularly because Support for the Cuban People licenses carry vaguely worded requirements. “We work with the best lawyers in the country on Cuba travel rules, and our documentation is always vetted and approved by our legal counsel,” Olin says.



If you're American, the rooftop pool of the Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski in Havana is on the restricted entity list. Source: Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski

One wrinkle travelers might not expect? Tight limitations on where you can stay. Almost 100 hotels have been added to a restricted entity list, including Havana's standard-setting Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski. Beach resorts are categorically off-limits, as traditional tourism is not allowed. Don't try to pay under the table, either—your luggage can be searched for cash on both ends of your flight, and agents caution you'd be putting yourself at risk by bringing in large amounts of U.S. dollars.

Instead, Olin uses "boutique hotels that are more private, or luxury villas that provide a more authentic experience." Schmutde books unrestricted Meliá hotels across the country. At these spots, availability is up and prices are down—a result of the sudden dearth of American big spenders. "Prices for hotels have dropped considerably for the next few months leading up to high season," says Charel van Dam, chief marketing officer for Cuba Travel Network. "In Havana, rooms at the luxury and centrally located five-star property Hotel Parque Central are 35 percent off until the end of October," he adds. "In the iconic Hotel Nacional some rooms are even up to 40 percent off."

High Stakes on the Ground



Now it's possible to see such landmarks as the Gran Teatro de La Habana without intense crowds. Source: Cuba Candela

“Tourism allows an entrepreneurial mindset for the Cuban people that hasn’t been possible before,” says Schmulde. Who else would be buying Clandestina’s tees, emblazoned with slogans like “Oh la Habana,” if not foreign visitors?

“Many Cubans are hurting for tourism,” Olin adds. “The individuals behind the private restaurants, the business owners, the ones renting their homes—they’re the ones that have been hurt by the new U.S. travel policy.”

Schmulde tells of a guide she works with (a “program director,” in Abercrombie & Kent parlance) who used tourism gratuities to buy his mother a house in Havana. “That’s the kind of life-changing effect travelers have had on Cubans,” she says. Her company has nearly sold out its two 2018 departures (slots are left on one of the trips), and it’s added eight more for 2019.