



Center for Responsible Travel

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Michelle Bernier-Toth
Managing Director, Overseas Citizens Services
Bureau of Consular Affairs
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Ms. Bernier-Toth:

Thank you very much for hosting our meeting at the State Department earlier this year to discuss the new travel advisory system. We write to you today regarding the State Department's upcoming review of the Cuba travel advisory, which was last evaluated at level 3 on March 2, 2018.

We understand that you will again review Cuba's current travel advisory level by September 1, 2018 as part of a mandatory review every six months. As members of the travel industry with substantial experience in Cuba, we wanted to provide you with our insights and perspective on travel to Cuba to inform your upcoming review. We would also like to request a meeting with you and/or other State Department staff overseeing this review.

Like other Americans, we remain concerned that U.S. and Canadian embassy personnel in Havana have been stricken with unexplained health ailments, including two new cases that occurred as recently as May, and that now U.S. staff in our consulate in Guangzhou, China have also been stricken by apparently the same ailment. We fully support efforts to both determine the nature of this ailment as well as the cause. However, we believe that the current Cuba travel advisory rating of "Level 3: Reconsider Travel" is unwarranted given the realities of travel to Cuba and given the U.S. response to the parallel situation in China.

The current travel advisory rating and other restrictions on travel in Cuba have had far-reaching negative impacts for the Cuban people as well as for U.S. travelers and travel businesses. As travel professionals, we have seen firsthand the benefits of people-to-people travel to Cuba, which puts revenue directly into the hands of Cuban households while providing U.S. travelers with outstanding cultural and educational experiences. The Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) describes the goal of people-to-people travel as "to enhance contact with the Cuban people, support civil society in Cuba, or promote the Cuban people's independence from Cuban authorities."¹ We are concerned about how the decline in U.S. travel to Cuba is hurting Cuban entrepreneurs and curtailing invaluable exchanges between American travelers and the Cuban people.

As you consider Cuba's travel advisory level, we offer the following:

- **There have been no confirmed cases of similar ailments among visitors to Cuba:** Neither the United States nor Canada has had any confirmed cases of these ailments among private citizens visiting Cuba.
- **U.S. travel to Cuba is being seriously hurt by the travel advisory:** For the first half of 2018, U.S. travel to Cuba – not including travel by Cuban Americans – declined by 23.6% compared to the same period in 2017.² 84% of U.S. tour operators surveyed by the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST) in early 2018 cited the State Department's travel advisory as the main reason for the drop in U.S. travel to Cuba.³
- **The travel advisory is undermining U.S. objectives in Cuba:** The level 3 travel advisory has landed particularly forcefully on educational and people-to-people travel, which provide critical support to Cuba's household-based businesses. The White House's stated goal to "encourage American commerce with free Cuban businesses and pressure the Cuban government to allow the Cuba people to expand the private sector"⁴ is being undermined because U.S. travelers are discouraged from visiting Cuba.
- **Small scale, independent entrepreneurs in Cuba are losing critical business:** Cuban entrepreneurs and households have been hit hard by the drop in U.S. people-to-people travel. A recent study conducted by urban economics students at San Gerónimo University College of Havana found that small private restaurants and cafes in Cuba have seen a 10%-25% decline in U.S. customers for the first quarter of 2018, compared to the same period in 2017. Other types of private businesses also reported significant drops in U.S. customers. One handicraft fair in Old Havana reported a 25%-50% decrease in the number of travelers visiting the fair during the first quarter of 2018.
- **U.S.-Cuban educational exchanges have been greatly curtailed and study abroad programs threatened:** Canceled educational and people-to-people travel negatively impacts both Cubans and U.S. citizens by undermining efforts to strengthen academic collaboration. U.S. universities, travel companies, and NGOs involved in travel to Cuba have been hurt financially and programmatically by the current Cuba travel advisory.
- **Canada has not changed its risk level for Cuba:** Canada did not update its travel advice for Cuba after 10 Canadian diplomats in Havana experienced symptoms similar to those experienced by U.S. embassy staff. Though Canada announced that it would withdraw family members of diplomats from Havana, its current risk level for Cuba is still "Take normal security precautions."⁵ According to the Canadian government, this risk level signifies that "there are no significant safety and security concerns."⁶
- **The U.S. is not treating China the same as Cuba:** The health ailments experienced by staff at the U.S. Consulate in Guangzhou, China have not resulted in a change in China's travel advisory. Although the U.S. has evacuated consular staff in Guangzhou, China's travel

advisory remains at “Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution.” The current travel advisory for China makes no mention of the symptoms experienced by U.S. consular staff, while those same symptoms are the focus of the current Cuba travel advisory. Why is China being treated differently than Cuba?

- **Cuban Americans continue to travel to Cuba:** Despite Cuba’s level 3 travel advisory rating, Cuban American travel to the island increased by 21.1% during the first half of 2018, compared to the same period in 2017.⁷ Cuban Americans – the people who know the environment in Cuba best – have not been deterred by the unwarranted travel advisory level and are visiting Cuba at higher rates than last year.
- **Cruise travel to Cuba is increasing as well:** The number of U.S. cruise passengers visiting Cuba increased by 115.68% during the first half of 2018, as cruise operators added more stops in Cuba to their itineraries.⁸ Unfortunately, this type of travel is not as economically beneficial to Cuba as people-to-people stayover travel. Based on a new CREST study of cruise travel in the Caribbean, stayover travelers spend on average 11.5 more into the local economy than do cruise passengers.

In our experience, and based on international health and safety ratings, Cuba remains one of the world’s safest countries for international travelers. In fact, Cuba was recognized as the “safest country in the world” at the Madrid International Tourism Fair this year. We respectfully request that as long as there is no evidence that travelers are being afflicted by the diplomats’ ailment and there is no proof that the Cuban government was responsible, your office assess Cuba at no more than level 2, indicating “Exercise Increased Caution.” Anything higher than that instills unnecessary confusion and fear and hinders U.S. efforts to promote people-to-people travel and private sector growth in Cuba.

We would welcome an opportunity to meet with you and your staff in late August to share our direct and substantial experience in Cuba before the September 1 travel advisory review. Please advise when such a meeting might be possible. You can reach Rebekah Stewart at 202-347-9203 ext. 417.

We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Rebekah Stewart
Communications & Outreach Manager
Center for Responsible Travel (CREST)

Kate Simpson
President
Academic Travel Abroad

Michael Eizenberg
President
Educational Travel Alliance, Inc.

Collin Laverty
Founder and President
Cuba Educational Travel

Robert Muse
Attorney
Washington, DC

¹ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control. (November 8, 2017). “Frequently Asked Questions Related to Cuba.” https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/cuba_faqs_new.pdf.

² José Luis Perelló Cabrera. (2018). “El turismo en Cuba comienza a recuperarse (Resumen del 1er semestre).” Excelencias News Cuba. <https://www.excelenciascuba.com/noticia/el-turismo-en-cuba-comienza-recuperarse-resumen-del-1er-semester>.

³ Center for Responsible Travel. (February 14, 2018). “Survey of U.S. Tour Operators and Other Service Providers to Cuba: Key Findings.” <https://www.responsibletravel.org/docs/Survey%20of%20U.S.%20Tour%20Operators%20and%20Other%20Service%20Providers%20to%20Cuba%20-%20Final.pdf>.

⁴ The White House. (June 16, 2017). “Fact Sheet on Cuba Policy.” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/fact-sheet-cuba-policy/>.

⁵ Government of Canada. (June 5, 2018). “Travel Advice and Advisories: Cuba.” <https://travel.gc.ca/destinations/cuba>.

⁶ Government of Canada. (October 5, 2016). “Risk levels and Travel Advisories.” <https://travel.gc.ca/travelling/advisories/risk-levels-and-travel-advisories>.

⁷ José Luis Perelló Cabrera. (2018).

⁸ José Luis Perelló Cabrera. (2018).