U.S. TRAVEL TO CUBA: Setting the Record Straight

**Background:**

The Trump administration’s rollback in U.S. policy towards Cuba, begun in June 2017, has caused uncertainty and a degree of fear among Americans interested in traveling to Cuba. It is also causing confusion among members of Congress, the media, academics, and tour operators.

In addition to the State Department’s ordered departure of non-essential staff from the U.S. Embassy in Havana and its expulsion of 15 Cuban diplomats from the Cuban Embassy in Washington, the Trump administration has announced several recent key changes related to travel to Cuba. They include:

- A ban on individual, self-directed, non-sponsored “people-to-people” travel to Cuba. In addition, individual, undergraduate, student-research travel has also been effectively eliminated, and the category of “support for the Cuban people” has been extensively re-written and does not provide a simple substitute for the eliminated individual, people-to-people travel category.
- A State Department Travel Warning against U.S. citizens visiting Cuba.
- A list of 180 Cuban enterprises, ranging from hotels to soft drinks to flower shops, that American companies and travelers are prohibited from engaging with.

Based on anecdotal evidence, the Trump administration’s policy changes are sowing fear and uncertainty among Americans and leading to unfortunate and unwarranted cutbacks in U.S. travel, trade, and investment in Cuba. Financially, this is hurting U.S. companies and institutions involved in educational and people-to-people visits to Cuba.

**What You Can Do:**

It is vital that those involved in travel to Cuba help to spread the word about legal travel to Cuba and correct the misinformation. Most people don’t know it’s still legal.

We’re encouraging everyone who has visited the island—tour operators, educational institutions, and individuals—to use the talking points below to contact policy makers, the media, and civic and community groups. Audiences could include, but are not limited to, members and staff of the U.S. Congress, newspaper and magazine reporters, bloggers, talk show hosts, businesspeople, faith-based groups, and fellow travelers and/or tour operators.

Whomever the audience, these talking points are designed to clarify the new rules and assert the belief that Americans should be free to travel wherever they want. The broad message we suggest you help to convey is that Cuba is safe and open for business and that the U.S. Government should return to the normalization process begun in 2014. In talking about why your travel to Cuba was important and special, you might consider incorporating some of the following talking points.

**Talking Points**

- Travel to Cuba is safe. While investigations into the health incidents impacting U.S. and some Canadian diplomats remain ongoing, there are no confirmed cases of other visitors (private citizens) having been similarly harmed.
• The United States is the only country in the world that restricts its citizens from traveling to Cuba. U.S. citizens should have the right to travel wherever they want to, despite the relationship between our two governments. Placing restrictions on U.S. citizen travel to Cuba is out of line with American values.

• Individual travel to Cuba is allowed in almost all the 12 general license categories of travel recognized by the Office of Foreign Assets Control of the U.S. Department of the Treasury (“OFAC”). These categories include visiting close relatives, educational activities, journalistic activities, U.S. religious organizations, private foundations, and research or educational institutes, among others. However, one category – individual “people to people exchanges” – has been eliminated effective June 16th, 2017. This was one of the most important categories of general license travel allowing individuals to make their own arrangements on self-directed programs in Cuba.

• Groups of all sizes can still travel to Cuba under the “people-to-people” category. Groups of any size (two people upwards) can visit Cuba if they are sponsored by a U.S. organization, have a full-time schedule of educational activities that result in meaningful interaction, and a U.S. employee, paid consultant, agent, or other representative of the sponsoring organization accompany each group.

• Under certain conditions, all school trips—high school, university, and graduate—remain legal under the “educational” or “people-to-people” category. It is also legal to organize events and conferences under the “professional meetings” category, meaning companies can hold corporate retreats and U.S. associations can organize conferences. Religious, humanitarian and family travel remain legal as well.

• Many U.S. citizens traveling to Cuba stay in private homes, eat at private restaurants, and contribute to the growth of the Cuban private sector—a stated goal of both the Obama and Trump administrations.

• U.S. travelers in Cuba provide an important source of revenue and other resources for Cuban entrepreneurs and household-based businesses as well as hotel, restaurant, and other service-sector Cuban workers.

• Lifting travel restrictions to Cuba would be good for the U.S. economy. It would expand demand for U.S. products, help the travel and airline industries, and create American jobs.

• Restricting our ability to freely travel to Cuba has not helped us nor has it helped the Cuban people over the past 50 years.

• When diplomatic and official government-to-government ties are strained, people-to-people interactions and educational travel are more important than ever.

• A majority of U.S. citizens support normalization of relations with Cuba. In December of 2016, a PEW Research poll showed that 75 percent of Americans approved of re-establishing U.S. relations with the island nation, and that 73 percent favor ending the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba.

• There is bipartisan support for legislation to lift restrictions on American travel to Cuba in both the House and Senate. These bills are good for American businesses and good for the American and Cuban people.
Follow Up: Please be in touch with us:

If you do make use of these talking points while reaching out for advocacy purposes and/or sharing information with the media, please:

- Let us know whom you’ve contacted; and
- Send copies of and/or links to any letters, articles, blog posts, etc., that may be published as a result.
- Please send to: Rich Shea, Communications Director, Center for Responsible Travel (CREST), Email: rshea@responsibletravel.org

Signed

Martha Honey, Executive Director, Center for Responsible Travel (CREST)
Steve Schwadron, Ocean Passages
Bob Guild, Vice President, Marazul Charters, Inc., and Co-Coordinator, RESPECT
Kate Simpson, President, Academic Travel Abroad (pending)
Robert Muse, Law Office of Robert L. Muse
Andrea Holbrook, President, Holbrook Travel