



Center for Responsible Travel

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PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 14, 2018

Zero U.S. Travelers to Cuba Reported Health Problems Similar to Those Suffered by U.S. Embassy Employees

That statistic is one of many revealed in a survey of tour operators conducted by the Center for Responsible Travel amid concerns that U.S. policies toward Cuba are causing unnecessary fear and misinformation.

WASHINGTON, DC, FEB. 14, 2018 – Cuba remains one of the world’s safest travel destinations, according to a new survey of U.S. travel companies. This despite the U.S. State Department’s warning that U.S. citizens should [“Reconsider Travel” to Cuba](#) because of health ailments afflicting 24 U.S. Embassy employees in Havana, the cause of which has yet to be determined. In the survey, conducted by the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST), 42 tour operators, who took more than 17,000 people to Cuba in 2017, report that not one of those people reported health symptoms similar to those suffered by the Embassy employees.

The survey was conducted just a month after Cuba was granted a travel-industry honor. At the 38th annual International Tourism Trade Fair in Madrid, Spain, attended by well over 100,000 companies and travelers from more than 100 countries, the island nation was awarded the Excellence Prize as the safest country for tourism.

This is in line with comments made by many of the survey’s respondents. “Our company presently offers travel programs to 45 different international destinations, and Cuba is the destination that receives the highest rating for traveler satisfaction among returning travelers,” said Peggy Goldman, President of Friendly Planet Travel, Inc. Andrea Holbrook, President and CEO of Holbrook Travel, which runs tours in 30 countries, added, “We’ve been operating in Cuba since the year 2000. Cuba remains one of the safest destinations in which we operate.”

But public perception is just about the opposite. Eighty-five percent of the tour operators—which includes cruise lines, small-ship cruises, and booking agents—saw a decline in bookings and/or increase in cancellations in the second half of 2017, compared to the first half. And the same percentage project even fewer bookings in 2018. The number-one perceived reason for the decrease in travelers to Cuba is State Department travel advisories.

On Jan. 10, the State Department announced [a new, scale of 1-to-4 advisory system](#), under which Cuba is rated 3, for “reconsider travel.” During a meeting with State Department officials two days later, a coalition of tour providers and travel experts, including CREST, was told that both the 3 and the 4 rating (“do not travel”), which are the equivalent of the old Travel Warning, are mandatory when there is a “drawdown” of U.S. Embassy staff. In September 2017, the Trump administration withdrew 60 percent of the U.S. Embassy staff in Havana, citing Embassy employees’ health issues.

The coalition insisted that the 3 rating is unjust because it misrepresents Cuba as a whole. On its travel advisory website, the State Department gives as [its sole reason for the 3 rating for Cuba](#) an “H,” for “health risks,” making it the only country branded in such a manner. In addition, the “health risks” are based on still-unsolved incidents that affected Embassy employees in Havana only, and in very specific locations, reportedly from late 2016 through August 2017.

In contrast, the results of the CREST survey reflect a wider reality: In 2017, 4.7 million travelers, including 620,000 Americans, visited Cuba, and there are no confirmed reports that they experienced the same kinds of health issues the Embassy employees did.

It should be noted that one of the State Department officials did share with the coalition that 19 U.S. civilians have reported they’d had health issues while traveling in Cuba—a detail that was later reported in the press. The official told the coalition, however, that those claims could not be substantiated medically, and that, after asking the civilians’ permission, their complaints were passed along to law-enforcement authorities. No further details are available.

What’s perplexing about the Cuba rating is that, aside from the still-unresolved health issues, Cuba is free from any other concerns—including civil unrest, crime, and violence. Several countries in which those issues are of concern to the State Department are given only a 2 rating, or “exercise increased caution.” Those countries include Mexico, Egypt, Israel, and Kenya, and their travel advisory pages are awash with travel alerts about certain states, regions, or provinces.

On [Mexico’s](#) page, for example, the states of Colima, Guerrero, and Michoacán are rated 4 for crime. And [Egypt](#), although rated 2 overall, is branded with “U” (civil unrest) and “T” (terrorism) labels and warns travelers, specifically, not to visit the Sinai Peninsula and the Western Desert “due to terrorism.” The [Kenya](#) page provides similar warnings, and [Israel’s](#) warns of “terrorism,” “civil unrest,” and “armed conflict” in various parts of the country.

The point in making these comparisons is, if the State Department is providing this level of detail about other travel destinations, why not apply the same rule to Cuba, where the perceived health threat is contained to small sections of Havana? The coalition has, therefore, proposed to the State Department that all of Cuba be given a 2 rating, with only Havana set aside for a separate alert.

Those who participated in the CREST survey are organizing Cuba trips for people traveling under 12 legal categories, which includes a wide range of educational, medical, cultural, professional, and other activities. Among the survey respondents, the highest demand is for “people-to-people group exchanges,” or trips during which members of a tour group interact with Cuban residents.

One of the hardest-hit categories is educational travel. The CREST survey found that more than half the clients handled by tour operators are educational programs, many at the college level, and that 66 percent of those operators have had their academic partners cancel trips to Cuba.

Marcel Hatch, education director for Cuba Explorer, reported that 11 of its academic partners, ranging from secondary to post-graduate levels, pulled out of trips to Cuba in 2017, with reasons ranging from safety concerns to confusion about the new regulations and insurance issues because of the travel advisories.

“For months now, we’ve been hearing anecdotally from travelers and tour providers that recent U.S. policies are causing fear and misinformation, and now we have proof,” says Martha Honey, CREST’s Executive Director. “With this survey, we’re sharing on-the-ground information with the public in an attempt to be as transparent as possible about the realities of traveling to Cuba—which is, it’s both safe and legal.”

A summary of [key findings](#) of the survey is available on CREST’s website. Among them are the numbers of U.S. travelers to Cuba in 2016 and 2017 as well as projections for 2018, with the overall trend showing that, while U.S. travel to Cuba

increased steadily through June of 2017, it's been decreasing since then. Below are several highlights from the survey, reflecting the number of respondents to each question:

- 27% of those asked – 42 out of 156 – responded to the survey.
- 0% received confirmed reports of their travelers to Cuba contracting symptoms similar to those which affected U.S. Embassy staff.
- 85% saw a greater decline in bookings/increase in cancellations in the second half of 2017, compared to the first half.
- 66% have had cancellations from travel partners (universities, museums, professional associations, etc.) in 2017/2018.
- 85% project fewer bookings for 2018 than they had in 2017.
- The top 5 perceived reasons cited for decrease in travelers during 2017 are:
 - State Department travel advisories (84%)
 - Belief that the new U.S. policies make travel to Cuba illegal for U.S. citizens (75%)
 - Health concerns/fears about Cuba (56%)
 - Safety concerns about Cuba (50%)
 - Fear of being subjected to unnecessary scrutiny by U.S. authorities upon return or regarding the documentation or other requirements (37%)

“Cuba remains as safe and amazing as ever and has unparalleled potential,” says survey respondent John Haffner, President of Cuba Trade and Travel. “During this transformational period in its history, it is in both U.S. and Cuban interests for U.S. government, business, and citizens to engage constructively and respectfully. There has never been a better time to visit and experience Cuba's rich cultural, historical, and natural beauty.”

A summary of key findings of CREST's Cuba tour-operator survey is available [here](#). For questions about the survey, or to request interviews from Martha Honey or members of the coalition, contact Rich Shea at rshea@responsibletravel.org or 202-347-9203 ext. 417.