

# New Rules Further Loosen Cuba Travel Restrictions

by GREG ALLEN

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Under new rules recently announced by the Obama administration, schools and religious groups can resume sending travelers to Cuba. Restrictions are also being loosened on nonacademic "person-to-person exchanges." They're small changes but mean a lot to people like Charlie Miranda, who is planning to travel to Havana for a rematch of a 1954 baseball game he played in as a 13-year-old.

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MICHELE NORRIS, host:

You're listening to ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News.

For the first time in several years, academic and religious groups will soon be able to travel freely to Cuba. The Obama administration announced it will loosen travel restrictions to Cuba put in place by George W. Bush.

NPR's Greg Allen reports on what kind of travel and what kind of travelers will be allowed.

GREG ALLEN: This is the second round of travel restrictions to Cuba loosened by the Obama administration. In 2009, President Obama signed an executive order lifting most restrictions on Americans who want to visit family in Cuba.

Armando Garcia says that dramatically changed Cuba travel.

Mr. ARMANDO GARCIA (President, Marazul Charters, Inc.): The amount of Cuban-Americans traveling to visit relatives has increased tremendously.

ALLEN: Garcia heads Marazul Charters, a company that operates eight flights a week from Miami to Cuba. Since those rules went into effect, the number of Americans traveling to the island has tripled, to more than 300,000. The new regulations, Garcia believes, will have a similar impact.

Mr. GARCIA: Definitely, it's going to increase tremendously, because there is a lot of interest in travel into Cuba.

ALLEN: Not everyone in Miami or around the country is quite so happy about plans to make it easier for Americans to travel to Cuba. Five Cuban-American members of Congress, four of whom are from Florida, condemned the action, saying it undermines the longstanding U.S. trade embargo.

But there are many others who have been waiting for restrictions to be eased. Included in this group are members of churches and religious groups. Under Bush administration rules, like most Americans, they could only travel to Cuba after receiving special permission.

Ms. PAULA CLAYTON DEMPSEY (Minister for Partnership Relations, Alliance of Baptists): It will be easier for churches to go.

ALLEN: Paula Clayton Dempsey is with the Alliance of Baptists in Atlanta. Dempsey says under the new regulations, American churches will now be able to send money directly to religious groups in Cuba, but even more important, she says, they'll be able to visit Cuba's churches.

Ms. DEMPSEY: They're so isolated. They need - we all need support. They have a need there, and they tell us that you have the option of sending us money or coming to see us. Please come to see us.

ALLEN: Along with religious groups, the new rules also grant colleges and universities broad permission to travel to Cuba as long as it's for course work done for academic credit.

Jose Buscaglia, director of Caribbean studies at the University of Buffalo, says his school is one of the few that was able to keep sending students to Cuba during the Bush years. The new regulations will make those study abroad programs easier to plan and operate. But in recent years, Buscaglia says, Cuban officials stepped up efforts to discourage the kind of free travel and open communication with Cubans many educational programs depend on.

Professor JOSE BUSCAGLIA (Program Director, Caribbean Studies, University of Buffalo): They're interested in having more U.S. tourists, but they're not necessarily interested in having people go to Cuba and start looking around harder beyond the gates of hotels.

ALLEN: One group of educational institutions will still be forbidden from taking students to Cuba, and that's Florida's public universities. A state law forbids it.

On the federal level, the administration says it will be at least a month until it works out details of its new Cuba travel policy, but change is already under way.

Just ask Tampa City Councilman Charlie Miranda. Miranda has long been planning a trip back to Cuba for himself and 20 members of his boyhood baseball team. In 1954, his squad, the Cascadian All-Stars, traveled from Tampa to Havana for a series of games against Cuban youngsters. Miranda says he recently received permission from the Obama administration to take his team of old-timers back to Havana for a rematch.

Councilman CHARLIE MIRANDA (Tampa City, Florida): This will be our last chance. We're all 68 to 70 years old, 65 and so forth. And what we're trying to do is play three games in Havana against individuals, hopefully, our age.

ALLEN: Whether the rematch will happen, Miranda says, now depends on getting the permission of the Cuban government.

Greg Allen, NPR News, Miami.

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