

Aruba, July 16, 2015 - Havana is hot. With Presidents Barack Obama and Raul Castro making global headlines for restarting diplomatic relations between their countries after five decades, 2015 is shaping up to be a record year for the Cuban tourism industry.

Some 1.7 million people visited the Communist island in the first five months of the year, a 15 percent increase from the same period last year, which ended with 3 million visitors. Moreover, each of the first five months has seen a double-digit increase in the growth of visitors compared to last year, including a 21 percent jump in May.

While Germans, Venezuelans and Peruvians are all pushing numbers higher, Canada supplied the most visitors with 779,576 so far this year, up 14 percent from 2014. But are they really Canadians?

A tourist arriving on the Caribbean island via Canada isn't necessarily a Canadian. Instead, many of those rushing to book vacations in Cuba are increasingly Americans trying to beat the crowds before relations between the two countries are normalized.

"We saw a real spike in bookings from U.S. clients when President Obama announced the easing of restrictions because people wanted to go and see Cuba before everything changes," said Jury Krytiuk, senior booking agent for A. Nash Travel, an Ontario-based agency that specializes in travel to Cuba. "There are Canadian clients booking beach vacations, but those numbers haven't changed. The real increase is from Americans who want to go to Havana."

The Cuban government doesn't disclose the number of U.S. citizens visiting the island. Americans can get into Cuba either on officially sanctioned trips, such as ones organized by educational groups, or via countries with connecting flights, including Canada, Mexico or Panama. Travel for tourism remains officially off-limits due to the economic embargo.

About 51,000 U.S. citizens visited the island in the first five months of this year, up from 37,000 in the same period a year earlier, according to data published by the Associated Press. The AP cited Jose Luis Perello Cabrera, an economist in the University of Havana's tourism studies department with access to official tallies, as the source for the figures.

While Cuba is already the second-most visited island in the Caribbean behind the Dominican Republic, U.S. tourists are expected to begin arriving in droves as trade restrictions that were first put in 1960s ease. Already, Carnival Corp. has won approval to begin cruising to the island next year. JetBlue Airways on July 3 said it added a weekly direct New York-to-Havana charter flight (which is still prohibited to most travelers).

Source:

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-07-13/tourism-is-surging-in-cuba>