

Cuba attracts Chinese vacationers with visa-free entry



Cuba wants to boost trade and tourism with China through visa facilitation (Source: [Directoriocubano](#))

From this month, Chinese tourists will be able to enter Cuba visa-free for the first time. At the same time, direct flight connections between Havana and Beijing will be resumed. The island hopes that the measure will boost tourism, which has so far been slow to recover from the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic - but growing trade between the two countries should also benefit.

Cuba's Tourism Minister Juan Carlos García [announced](#) the surprising move this weekend at the International Tourism Fair (FITCuba), which took place at a resort on the island of Cayo Coco. As García explained, the People's Republic will be the guest of honor at the fair next year. China is now one of the few countries of origin whose citizens are not required to obtain a tourist card for stays of up to 90 days. For countries with a visa requirement (which includes most European countries including Germany), the paper tourist card ("Tarjeta del Turista") will be replaced by an electronic visa by the end of June.

At the same time as the abolition of the visa, "Air China" will resume a direct flight connection between Havana and Beijing twice a week from May 17. As a spokesperson for the airline explained to "Cubadebate", the return flight will be priced at 1,350 US dollars.

So far, Chinese tourism has hardly played a role in Cuba. In 2019, the last year before the pandemic, there were only 44,873 Chinese tourists among the 4.26 million foreign visitors to Cuba - a share of just over one percent. In the following years, the proportion of Chinese tourists was similarly low.

However, this could start to change. In March 2023, the Cuban Havanatur S.A. and representatives of the Chinese tour operator Tumei International Travel signed a memorandum of understanding to promote the arrival of Chinese tourists to Cuba. In view of the decline of traditional issuing countries in Europe, Cuba wants to boost tourism via friendly countries, which was previously successful in the case of Russia.

As the Chinese "Global Times" reports, the move has already met with a positive response: following the announcement on Saturday, search queries for corresponding tourism products on Chinese travel platforms rose by 40 percent. In particular, users from Beijing and Shanghai as well as residents of the provinces of Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Fujian showed increased interest in information about Cuba. The announcement at the end of the "Golden Week" (the five-day holiday after Labor Day) came at the best possible time. This is when many Chinese people start to think about their travel plans again. This May, bookings for international flights were 20 percent higher than in 2019. The tourism analysts at ForwardKeys noted in a study that visa facilitation plays a role in the choice of vacation destinations. In addition, factors such as safety and good flight connections also play a role. The latter remain a hurdle due to the distance, despite better connections.

In addition to tourism, however, the better connection also benefits trade. "Cuba is confronted with greater vulnerabilities due to its size and its status as an island developing country. Improving connectivity and greater integration into global value chains are particularly important for its development," Song Wei from the School of International Relations and Diplomacy at Beijing University of Foreign Studies told the Global Times. The resumption of the flight route will help "improve trade relations and contribute to consolidating the country's development base". It will also help "mitigate the impact of the decades-long US embargo and improve the country's economic relations with the rest of the world".

With a bilateral trade volume of 862 million US dollars (2023), China is Cuba's largest trading partner. In recent months, companies from the People's Republic have opened several new online stores together with Cuban import and trading companies, making them an important supplier for the island's growing private sector. Diplomats from both countries, as well as holders of service and official passports, have been exempt from visa requirements since January 2021 as part of a bilateral agreement. ([Cubaheute](#))