

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

## Interest in visiting Cuba jumps, with affluent US travelers craving exclusivity

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*The Hotel Inglaterra in Havana, Cuba*

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With the United States government's travel ban to Cuba lifted, the island nation has quickly climbed into the top 15 of desired destinations among affluent American travelers, according to a luxury survey conducted by Travel Leaders Group.

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The Caribbean country is a destination unseen by many U.S. travelers due to the past travel restrictions imposed by the government, but many affluent travelers have Cuba high on their bucket lists now due to the exclusivity. However, Europe, and more precisely Italy, is still being hailed as the premiere destination amongst affluent U.S. travelers.

"What is most surprising is that, in a relatively short amount of time, Cuba has jumped into the top 15 for luxury travel destinations," said Ninan Chacko, CEO of [Travel Leaders Group](#). "Since luxury often translates to enjoying experiences that are not readily available to the mass market, it is clear that there is pent up demand, particularly among affluent American travelers, to see and experience Cuba as soon as possible.

"Chief among our takeaways is how enormously appealing Europe remains among affluent American travelers and leading the way is Italy," he said. "Also, since luxury travelers want to immerse themselves in their destinations, their expectations include details that simplify and personalize aspects of their trip, allowing them to fully relax and enjoy the overall experience.

"That includes having access to personalized or private check-in, private concierge-level access, fine dining and a spa for their resort vacations. But also trending high was having the services of a personal butler at their disposal."

### Individualized experiences

The more exclusive and personalized an experience is for affluent consumers the better. This is especially true for travel, with many consumers spending top dollar to ensure the best service that caters to their individual needs.

Cuba's popularity with affluent U.S. travelers makes sense, as those who travel there will be included in a small group of individuals.

French atelier Chanel, for example, presented its cruise 2017 collection in Havana, Cuba on May 3. Chanel's

selection of Cuba as the setting for its annual cruise presentation aligns with the brand's practice of traveling to a different destination each year, with previous cities including Seoul, South Korea and Dubai, United Arab Emirates, all of which are emerging markets for luxury ([see story](#)).



*Musicians driving a convertible in Cuba, image by Stefano Torrione/Hemis/Corbis*

Travel brands are seeing great success by providing exclusive options that cater to individuals, such as personalized butler service, with 84 percent seeing an increase or equal number in bookings since this time last year.

"The luxury travel industry is robust as demonstrated by 84 percent of our luxury travel agents indicating that their bookings are higher than or equal to this time last year," said Gail Grimmitt, president of Protravel International and Tzell Travel Group. "There continues to be a strong desire for high-end VIP experiences, which our agents tailor for their clients above beyond the five-star hotel or a suite on a luxury cruise ship.

"And, it is professionals with first-hand expertise and the proper training in high-end service who are going to be able to deliver the unique and customized experiences these discerning travelers desire," she said.

#### Popular destinations

While Europe is still the most popular travel destination, it seems as though affluent consumers prefer to see the continent via a cruise with the second most desired trip being a European river cruise.

As Italy continues to be the leader in popular travel, Paris was looking to increase its tourism numbers with a promotional film that toured the multifaceted city through the eyes of locals and visitors.

The film was screened in Galeries Lafayette stores in Paris, Berlin and Beijing, as well as on Air France flights and screened in international cities. Following fatal terror attacks in November, Paris' influx of tourists has dwindled, but the city's government and key business players invested 2 million euro, or about \$2.250 million, into a recovery plan ([see more](#)).

Another study noted that U.S. travelers are also looking favorably at London, with the British city being a popular international destination for the rest of the year.

A survey of travel agents conducted by Travel Leaders Group found that London moved up from number three last year, topping the list of global locales being booked for the first time. The survey also found that terrorism had less of an impact on European travel, while Zika inspired domestic tropical bookings ([see more](#)).



*Porto Rafael, Italy*

Also, it is not just Cuba climbing the ranks in popularity, but also New Zealand, Iceland and Australia listed within the top 15 destinations desired by U.S. affluents.

"We are also very excited to see New Zealand, Iceland and Australia among the top destinations on our list," Travel Leaders Group's Mr. Chacko said. "These are incredible countries that, each in their own right, offer a diverse mix of

experiences appealing to a wide variety of affluent travelers."

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