

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

## Sudden US ban on Cuban cruises creates confusion for luxury lines

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*Seabourn is one of the luxury cruise lines impacted by the new restrictions on travel to Cuba. Image credit: Seabourn*

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Luxury cruise lines and travelers are being left in the lurch after the United States banned cruise travel to Cuba with little warning.

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Effective on June 5, the White House is no longer permitting group people-to-people educational travel to Cuba, essentially banning cruise ships and other recreational vessels from the U.S. from visiting the island. Since travel regulations were initially loosened in 2016, Cuba has become a popular tourist destination among affluents.

"Pent-up demand and interest in this mysterious' country meant that, when travel restrictions were eased a few years ago, many luxury and other travelers took the opportunity to finally travel to Cuba," said Rob Clabbers, president at [Q Cruise + Travel](#), a [Virtuoso Agency](#), Chicago. "Due to the country's proximity to cruise ports in South Florida, cruise travel was a very convenient way to do so."

### Curtailing cruising

Cuba is a destination unseen by many U.S. travelers due to the past travel restrictions imposed by the U.S. government, but many affluent travelers have the Caribbean country high on their bucket lists now due to the exclusivity.

When the Obama administration eased the U.S.'s travel ban to Cuba, the island nation quickly climbed into the top 15 of desired destinations among affluent American travelers, according to a luxury survey conducted by Travel Leaders Group ([see story](#)).

[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by Silversea Cruises (@silverseacruises) on Mar 24, 2019 at 12:00pm PDT

### *Luxury cruise lines were still recently adding Cuba to their destinations*

However, President Donald Trump introduced his own changes to Cuban travel regulations during his first year in office.

In June 2017, President Trump implemented restrictions preventing American visitors from providing money to businesses run by the Cuban military, as well as eliminating individual people-to-people visas ([see story](#)).

This latest round of restrictions is more severe.

Announced on June 4, one day prior to going into effect, group people-to-people educational travel will no longer be authorized, according to the [Department of the Treasury](#).

Furthermore, the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security will no longer provide licenses to passenger and recreational vessels as well as private aircraft.

As in the past, the Trump administration is attributing the increased restrictions to Cuba's communist government.

"Cuba continues to play a destabilizing role in the Western Hemisphere, providing a communist foothold in the region and propping up U.S. adversaries in places like Venezuela and Nicaragua by fomenting instability, undermining the rule of law and suppressing democratic processes," said Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin in a statement.

"This administration has made a strategic decision to reverse the loosening of sanctions and other restrictions on the Cuban regime," he said. "These actions will help to keep U.S. dollars out of the hands of Cuban military, intelligence and security services."

There is a "grandfathering" provision for travelers who have purchased flights or accommodations prior to June 5, but it remains unclear what group people-to-people educational travel will be exempt from the new regulations. Humanitarian and faith group trips are still permitted.

As recently as last month, luxury cruise lines were still adding Cuba to upcoming itineraries.

In May, Silversea opened booking for the 2020 and 2021 seasons, including ports in Cuba ([see story](#)).



*Seabourn had planned to visit cities including Cienfuegos, Cuba. Image credit: Seabourn*

Seabourn had planned sail to Cuba from Miami and San Juan, Puerto Rico beginning this November.

The cruise line had become Carnival Corporation's third brand to receive approval for Cuba travel. Seabourn had offered four different itineraries, ranging from 11 to 14 days with stops at three to four Cuban ports ([see story](#)).

"This last-minute change requires cruise lines to make swift changes to scheduled itineraries, and all lines appear to be working on that at this moment," Mr. Clabbers said. "Obviously, this is all very new, and it appears things are in a state of flux."

#### Luxury travel in Cuba

Currently, commercial air travel is not impacted by the new restrictions.

According to [USA Today](#), more than 30,000 leisure travelers came by cruise ship than flights this year alone.

Despite the popularity of Cuba among affluent travelers, frequent U.S. policy changes have created confusion. Previously, this confusion had benefited the cruising sector because group visits are organized and structured, lessening concerns for travelers, compared to people-to-people trips.

Havana hotel occupancy rates have also declined in part due to damage from recent hurricane seasons and U.S. policy updates. Cuba noted huge growth in 2015 to 2016, and was opened to cruising in 2017, but the country saw overall interest soften ([see story](#))

Swiss hospitality brand Kempinski Hotels was one of the first luxury chains to establish a presence in Cuba, opening its first location in Old Havana in spring 2017.

The Gran Hotel Kempinski Manzana La Habana has 246 rooms in the Manzana de Gmez, a historic building in Old Havana. Kempinski has a contract with Cuba's Grupo de Turismo Gaviota, the island nation's tourism board ([see story](#)).