

Cuba plans cautious reopening to tourists

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Cuba is planning to welcome tourists with COVID-19 tests and limit their contact with locals as part of a raft of measures designed to get its vital tourism industry back up and running.

The government of President Miguel Diaz-Canel said it would gradually open up the economy in the next weeks, with a particular focus on recovering tourism dollars lost to the lockdown.

Foreign tourists, the lifeblood of Cuba's economy, will be restricted to a well established string of coastal resorts to limit contact with the [local population](#) in a country, where Diaz-Canel insisted, the [coronavirus](#) pandemic was "under control."

Havana and the rest of the country will be initially be reserved for local tourism.

The island, with a population of just over 11 million, registered its first cases of COVID-19—three Italian tourists—in March. It reported only eight new infections on Thursday.

So far Cuba has reported 2,219 COVID-19 cases, with 84 deaths.

But the pandemic shutdown has throttled the economy, and the government is eyeing the early revival of tourism, worth \$3.3 billion in 2018.

Masks obligatory

"Unlike other countries, Cuba already had a crisis by the time COVID-19 arrived," said economist Omar Everleny Perez, citing [economic collapse](#) in Venezuela and strengthening US sanctions.

"And tourism, which was a good economic driver, has been at zero for the last three months," he said.

The lockdown forced Havana to slash imports by 75 percent in the first quarter, according to official data

The result is that long lines of Cubans outside stores, hoping to stock up on food and toiletries, have increased amid worsening shortages. The Communist-run island's emerging [private sector](#), invested largely in the tourism and restaurant sector, has been severely affected by the pandemic.

GDP is set to contract 8.3 percent this year, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit.

Cuba "is now entering a state of post-COVID recovery, which is aimed at returning to the best possible normalcy," Diaz-Canel said Wednesday.

But caution prevails.

"There will be no abrupt opening in the first phase," warned Prime Minister Manuel Marrero. He emphasized that Cubans will have to inch their way out of lockdown, and that face masks will have to be worn outdoors.

Although there has been no official word, [international flights](#) are not expected to begin until August 1, forcing Spanish company Evelop to cancel several flights tentatively scheduled for July.

'Take care'

When flights resume, tourists will have to undergo medical checks on arrival and have their temperature taken. Health checks will also be a feature of stays, and hotel occupancy will be limited to allow for social distancing measures.

With the race on to capitalize on the European and North American summer season, Cuba's competitors in the Caribbean have taken the lead in welcoming back tourists.

"Cancun and other beach resorts in the Mexican Caribbean—one of Cuba's main competitors—resumed activities today," Havana economist Pedro Monreal pointed out on Twitter.

Several Caribbean states have already opened up to tourism, while Jamaica and the Dominican Republic plan to do so by July 1.

Cuba is struggling to stay in the game.

On Wednesday, Spanish hotel chain Melia published a promotional video showing employees disinfecting its hotels in Cuba and promising tourists would be "safe" there.

State tourism entity Cubanacan struck the same tone on Twitter, talking up reinforced "sanitary hygiene standards."

Clear plastic panels are being installed in hotel reception areas to avoid people coming into direct contact, and hotels are moving restaurant tables to create more space and adding gel dispensers at elevator entrances.

The [tourism](#) ministry's new advertising campaign is a sign of the country's new normal: "Take care of yourself."

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