



U.S. TO RESTORE COMMERCIAL FLIGHTS TO CUBA

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In just a matter of days, U.S. airlines will begin a fierce bidding war to win routes and airport slots to a destination that's been off-limits to them for more than 50 years: Cuba.

Starting Tuesday, U.S. carriers will have 15 days to submit applications to the Department of Transportation for routes they'd like to fly between the U.S and Cuba.

The development brings airlines and travelers yet another step closer to scheduled commercial flights between the two countries.

Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx and staff from the State Department will fly from Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington, D.C., to Cuba to formally sign an agreement to resume flights between the two countries.

"You know it's usually significant when the President made this announcement of re-establishing diplomatic relations more than a year ago," Foxx told CNN. "It really means a great deal to the

people of both countries. Leaving aside the political differences, there's so many cultural connections between the two countries, in some cases family connections, the ability to have educational exchanges and things that happen as a result of resumption of this service, is really, really significant."

The agreement was reached in December.

This agreement will mean the potential for 110 daily round-trip flights in and out of Cuba. That includes 20 daily flights to Havana and 10 daily flights to other airports on the island.

The airline bidding process will likely last until the middle of March.

A U.S. official with direct knowledge of the agreement told CNN that the Department of Transportation could award routes and slots to specific carriers as soon as this summer. Flights between the two countries could resume soon after, but the official says most likely by October.

The Department of Transportation is expecting a large number of airline and cargo carriers to apply for rights to fly to the island that's been off-limits for more than 50 years.

The signing of the final agreement also means U.S. carriers can now begin the process of bidding on slots at Cuban airports, including Havana and bidding for rights over specific routes.

The arrangement does not change charter services, which can still operate.

CNN is told there are no plans in the near future for Cuban-owned planes to land in the U.S. under this agreement.

Although President Barack Obama has relaxed several of the prohibitions on trade and travel that have existed between the two countries, many remain in place and can only be removed by legislation.

The new arrangement will facilitate visits for travelers that fall under one of 12 categories: Visiting family; Humanitarian projects or to provide support to the Cuban people; Official business of the U.S. government, foreign governments and certain intergovernmental organizations; journalistic activities; professional research; educational activities by persons at academic institutions; people-to-people travel; religious activities; public performance, clinics, workshops, athletic or other competitions and exhibitions; authorization to provide travel services, carrier services and remittance-forwarding services; activities of private foundations, research or educational institutes; and exportation of certain Internet-based services.

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