

US, CUBA AGREE TO LET AIRLINES BEGIN FLIGHTS

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Cuba and the United States reached an agreement Wednesday night that **will allow US commercial airlines to begin operating flights** to the island for the first time in decades, according to US officials with knowledge of the discussion.

The understanding comes on the eve of the one-year anniversary of the announcement that the two countries would restore diplomatic ties and turn the page on a half-century of animosity. The agreement — which will allow carriers such as United Airlines, American Airlines and JetBlue to fly to Cuba — is a significant breakthrough that should greatly simplify travel between the countries.

The agreement was reached in Washington. A US official with knowledge of the talks said that negotiators from both countries were still working out technical details. But the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because there had not yet been an official announcement, said the basic outlines of the accord were in place.

The deal does not mean that Americans will be able to begin booking travel to Cuba immediately. But it would set in motion the safety inspections and other procedures required by the Federal Aviation Administration when such an agreement is reached. Experts say it will probably be three to six months before US carriers can begin selling tickets to Cuba.

Until then air service between the two countries will continue via the existing system of charter flights. Those flights typically charge \$500 (Dh1,835) round-trip for the 45-minute flight between Miami and Havana. Travellers are required to check in three or four hours in advance, pay exorbitant baggage fees and endure various inconveniences.

Treasury Department

Most of the leading US carriers have said publicly that they are interested in offering service to Cuba as soon as they're allowed to do so. United plans to fly to Havana via Houston and Newark. American Airlines has said it will provide service to Cuba from its Miami hub.

US travellers who want to visit Cuba would have to qualify under one of the US Treasury Department's 12 categories for legal travel to the island. Those permitted to make such trips include US residents with family members on the island, Americans travelling for religious or professional reasons and visitors who participate in licensed "people-to-people" organised tours with an educational bent.

Travel that is considered "tourism" such as visiting Cuban beaches remains prohibited under US law. But the number of Americans travellers who visited the island in the past year increased more than 50 per cent, according to Jeffrey DeLaurentis, the top American diplomat at the US. Embassy in Havana.

In negotiating the agreement, Cuba insisted that its government-owned airline, Cubana, also be granted reciprocal landing rights in the United States. Its aircraft would potentially be subject to seizure as a result of outstanding judgements against the Cuban government in US courts.

But officials with knowledge of the agreement say Cuba is making arrangements to lease aircraft for Cubana or share the route in order to offer US flights from Havana without exposing its planes to seizure.

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