



Center for Responsible Travel

Transforming the Way the World Travels

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Panel 5: Mutual understanding, peace, and security

Presentation Overview – Collin Lavery, president, Cuba Educational Travel (CET)

I'm an American citizen, but I've been focused on U.S.-Cuba academic exchange and Cuba policy for many years. A decade ago, I took part in a semester-long study abroad program between the College of Charleston and Havana's Institute of Philosophy. That led me to serve as director of the [Center for Democracy in the Americas](#)' Cuba program for several years, when I took dozens of members of Congress and their staff on fact-finding trips to Cuba. Then, in 2012, I founded [Cuba Educational Travel](#), which organizes people-to-people travel, educational exchange programs and research trips between the United States and Cuba.

During this time, I've seen Cuba, and relations between the two countries, weather many storms—the most recent being Hurricane Irma, which made landfall in Cuba earlier this month. It was a monstrous storm that practically ran the length of the island, leaving a path of destruction along the northern coast. It was also the first time the eye of a category 5 storm reached the island since 1932, and the immediate consequences were dire.

The malecón, Havana's famed seawall, was hit with 20-foot swells. Low-lying neighborhoods were flooded, laying to waste the belongings of tens of thousands of Habaneros and flooding the U.S. Embassy. Ten Cubans died in the storm, countless homes were lost, and resort towns, airports and farms suffered millions of dollars in damage.

What remained intact, as it always does in cases like this, is the resilience, resolve and spirit of the Cuban people. Plus, the storm did not leave Cuba uninhabitable, and didn't destroy the beauty the country has to offer. Havana was largely spared from destruction. Old Havana's plazas, parks, churches, cobblestone streets, and cafés are up and running, as are the city's impressive art museums and private studios and galleries—and popular tourist attractions, like Ernest Hemingway's home.

Hotels long popular with Americans, like the historic Hotel Nacional, and Parque Central and Saratoga in the city's historic core are running at 100 percent capacity. The famed paladars, or private restaurants, and the internationally acclaimed Atelier are still serving meals. The airports, bus stations and, of course, the 1950s Chevys and Fords, are up and running. And electricity was restored to the city days before South Florida residents got back on the grid.

The same is true for the cities of Cienfuegos, Santiago, Trinidad and the beautiful tobacco region of Pinar del Rio, all of which fell outside of Irma's path. If you've thought about visiting Cuba, now is the time. As the video I shared demonstrates, Cubans are very much back to business—and their doors are open to visitors.

But one big challenge we face as travel providers in Cuba are the misconceptions magnified by the media and other parties. Most of the Hurricane Irma media coverage has focused on horrific scenes of destroyed coastal towns and severe flooding. Combine that with a State Department travel advisory urging visitors to “carefully consider the risks of travel to Cuba,” and you have people starting to panic and cancel their trips.

This is a tough time for Cubans. There was already confusion about measures taken, back in June, by the administration of President Donald Trump to limit U.S. travel to Cuba. It’s led to the false belief that Americans can’t visit the island, resulting in a decline in visitors. This has hit Cuban entrepreneurs and folks working in the tourism sector particularly hard, and many small businesses won’t survive a Trump-Irma combo that results in a tourism slump.

As was the case with New York City following 9/11, it’s important to remember that recovering and rebuilding means visiting. Visiting with your hearts, minds and wallets is what helps cities rebuild and aids the local economy. At Cuba Educational Travel, we rely on a steady stream of visiting families, university groups and social organizations to help make a difference. And we’re redesigning some of our programs, whenever possible, to help with recovery efforts and prioritize businesses and individuals who are rebuilding. Many travelers, in fact, are making donations that we’ve channeled to the areas hardest hit by Irma.

It’s really an incredibly exciting and interesting time to visit Cuba. Reforms there, combined with improved relations with the U.S. government in recent years, has led to a dynamic and robust private sector. Cuban art, dance and music are thriving. The culinary and nightlife scenes are incredible. And the Cuban people aren’t just resilient—they’re warm, open, and friendly.

So I urge everyone, if you haven’t already, to come for a visit. Not only will it be culturally enriching, intellectually stimulating and incredibly enjoyable, but you’ll also be standing strong with your Cuban neighbors and helping them move forward.