OPTIMISM FOR FURTHER EASING OF CUBA LIMITS

News / Business aviation



The recent decision by the U.S. government to re-establish scheduled air service between the U.S. and Cuba is fueling optimism that the remaining travel restrictions will be eased in upcoming months. U.S. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx last week signed an agreement with senior Cuban transportation officials that paves the way for renewal of scheduled air service between the U.S. and Cuba and invited airlines to apply for slot allocations.

The move is the latest in a series of events that have slowly opened the door for U.S. citizens to travel to Cuba. The announcement involving scheduled service does not affect the limitation of travel to 12 categories, advises Adam Hartley, manager of charter management Orange Team for Universal Weather and Aviation. Those restrictions are the same for both scheduled and non-scheduled operations.

But government officials acknowledge that it “represents a major step forward in President

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Obama’s policy of engagement with Cuba” since there had been no scheduled flights between the U.S. and Cuba for half a century.

For business aviation operators, the move signals that the other limitations on travel will ease eventually, including the ban on tourism and the requirement to use gateway airports. With the rapid rate of change, said Bill McNease, v-p of flight operations for Priester Aviation, “I expect the [restrictions] to lift completely by the end of the year.”

Priester was among the first Part 135 operators to receive U.S. government approval to fly to Cuba when restrictions began to lift last year, and McNease said the company has seen numerous changes since. One of the most significant was the ability for crew to conduct transactions in Cuba, enabling longer sojourns there.

Priester has conducted about 15 operations to Cuba this year alone and is receiving more requests with each announced change in the U.S./Cuba ties. “It’s picking up as the news gets out.”

The biggest issues the company has encountered so far have been communications while in Cuba and ensuring their passengers' reported reasons for travel are properly aligned both in the U.S. and Cuba. “We’re learning something every time we travel there,” he said.

While McNease is encouraged by the changes, he believes that Part 135 operations will need to have Cuba included in their operations specification for travel there for the foreseeable future.

The number of charter operators with approval to fly to Cuba has continued to climb over the last eight months, and McNease noted that Priester has received inquiries from other operators about the steps the company took to get the requisite approval.

Priester has worked with Jetex on handling services for its Cuban operations. Most operators use handling services to cut through the bureaucratic processes. Kathlynn Self, director of corporate compliance/audit for Universal, believes the same will hold true for scheduled airlines. “There will be a layer of compliance involved that the airlines will need to build into their processes, more than likely through the use of a travel agency that will agree to take the risk and seek the appropriate certifications at a cost to be built into the ticket price.”

23 FEBRUARY 2016

SOURCE: AIN
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