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Cuba Gambles on Golf and Moneyed Travelers to Increase Tourism Industry Income

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Banned by Cuba's communist government for more than five decades, golf has returned to the island in style and has become the tourism industry's new, big venture. It is projected that the construction of eleven golf courses at five-star megadevelopments will attract well-heeled tourists who will leave more cash on the island.

The Cuban government is holding talks with a dozen foreign companies, including Canadian, French, Italian, and Spanish firms, regarding the creation of eleven golf-related real estate developments, according to sources within the Ministerio de Turismo and as quoted by the official newspaper Granma. Ironically, the sport was banned in 1959 after Fidel Castro's rise to power; he considered it to be one of the hallmarks of the local oligarchy that had to be banished by the communist project.

Tourism brought in more than US$2.6 billion in 2012 thanks to 2.8 million visitors, 4.5% more than in 2011, although recent data shows a decrease in the amount spent by average middle-class travelers. The new commitment to golf is aimed at attracting tourists who are willing to spend money on more luxurious activities.

Paradoxically, Dr. Antonio "Tony" Castro, 44, an orthopedic surgeon, vice president of the Federación Cubana de Béisbol, son of former President Fidel Castro, and nephew of current President Raúl Castro, won the fifth annual Montecristo Cup golf tournament in April, in which a hundred players from 15 countries participated.

The championship was held at the 18-hole, 3.5 km long Varadero Golf Club. The news was considered an additional boost for the development of golf tourism and provided fodder for regime critics on and off the island who pointed out the perks granted to figures close to the government leadership who enjoy activities prohibited for the rest of the population.

Doubled bet through tourism

This year Cuba expects to entertain 3 million tourists. Tourism is a key economic engine for the nation, along with cash remittances of around US$2.6 billion in 2012 sent by Cubans living outside the country and the sale of medical services to other countries, especially Venezuela, estimated to be US$6 billion.

The island currently has around 60,550 rooms, 65% in the four- and five-star category. In 2012, eight hotels began operations with 1,300 rooms, and this year four new hotels are expected to be completed. However, the first quarter of 2013 saw a slight drop in the number of visitors, 4,500 less than in the same period in 2012. Authorities attribute this to the global economic crisis and the US embargo.

Four hotels in Cayo Santa María, Cayo Coco, Varadero, and Trinidad will open this year, and construction or expansion will begin on at least eight more. The island is promoting new projects
associated with theme parks, marinas, health, and ecotourism, together with its ten locations declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO, which include hundred-year-old cities, colonial fortifications, archaeological sites, and natural sites.

In May, the state group Palmares SA and the British firm Esencia Hotels and Resorts signed an agreement to build an 18-hole golf course, 750 apartments, 200 residences, a boutique hotel, and a luxury shopping mall near Varadero, the most famous and highest valued resort on the island, 140 km northeast of Havana, which hosts up to 44% of tourists visiting the country.

A "strong investor movement" has been launched to help achieve 85,000 rooms by 2020, Cuban Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero said in May. Varadero is building the largest tourist port in Cuba and the Caribbean, with capacity for more than 1,000 mooring stations. The hotel Meliá Marina Varadero, a five-star facility with 423 rooms, will open this summer at the seaside resort.

The Meliá consortium has been active on the island since the early 1990s when the government first allowed foreign investment after the fall of the Soviet bloc. They were the first to open a hotel in Varadero and now have 26 hotels in eight different locations on the island.

For decades the state sector has been the largest employer on the island; now the authorities are dismissing many workers as they try to reduce that sector while they "update" the socialist model. The government is facilitating the licensing of self-employed entrepreneurs who are now concentrating on tourism activities and offer 6,115 rooms in hotels and inns, 950 homes for rent, and 2,242 restaurants.

There are now training facilities for self-employed Cuban workers to help them provide more professional attention to visitors, according to the Ministerio de Turismo. The aim is to raise the quality of the tourism industry so as to encourage a higher rate of return travelers.

Cubans living on the island put up with years of discrimination and were not allowed to enter the international hotels until 2008 when President Raúl Castro authorized access to them. In 2012, 570,000 Cubans living in the country vacationed in these facilities thanks to their freelance income or paid for by family members who have emigrated.

At the same time that the government is betting on the tourism industry, they have taken action against corruption, initiating proceedings against foreign business people on charges of bribery, tax evasion, and damage to the national economy. Their intention is to break the chain of foreign complicity with Cuban officials and buyers who have received bribes.

The island seeks to revamp its tourism image through advertising and promotional campaigns using new communication technologies and social networks. Authorities say Cuba’s image to tourists is one of the country's natural, cultural, and historical legacy, hospitality, and security. The old image of sexual excess in advertisements has been abandoned after scandals involving travelers and local minors.

Canadian James McTurk, 78, the protagonist of the most recent incident, pled guilty in a Toronto court to the sexual abuse of Cuban girls, as well as to the production and distribution of child pornography. It is the first conviction in Canada for sex crimes against Cuban children thanks to a law that criminalizes sexual tourism of Canadians abroad.
A former postal worker, McTurk had already been convicted in his own country in other child pornography cases in 1995 and 1998 but traveled to the island 31 times between 2009 and 2012 without arousing the suspicion of Cuban authorities. The Canadian Press said the man was taking semi-nude pictures of Cuban girls and abused some 3-year-olds.

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