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## Reopening of Delta Air Lines Flight Operations - Georgia, USA and Havana, Cuba

Maryam Gracias

*Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, [graciasm@my.erau.edu](mailto:graciasm@my.erau.edu)*

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# **Reopening of Delta Air Lines Flight Operations Between Georgia, USA and Havana, Cuba**

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Maryam Heroena Gracias

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## 1. Abstract

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The research paper is about the relationship between Delta Air Lines and Jose Marti International Airport located in Havana, Cuba. The report will focus on how the flight operations resumed back after the suspension for nearly 55 years. Since I interned with Delta Air Lines, I got a wonderful opportunity to talk to Delta representatives involved in the process. I also got to interview Delta officials stationed in Cuba. Some of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, while the rest was via phone calls. There were some limitations since I cannot really put any confidential data in the report, but I did gain an internal knowledge of how the airlines work when being stationed in a different country.

## 2. History of Delta Air Lines

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Delta Air Lines is one of the largest and most successful air carriers in the US. The company was originally founded as a crop dusting service in 1924. Collet Everman Woolman, an agricultural scientist and pilot, led it for 40 years. In 1929, Delta Air Lines became a passenger transport. It was called Delta Air Corporation by 1941 (Malik, 2016). Further on, Delta merged with Southern and Chicago Airlines in 1953 and prospered as a major regional carrier. In 1967, Delta combined with Delaware Airlines and was then officially called Delta Air Lines. In 1972, Delta Air Lines obtained Northeast Airlines. Delta bought Storer Leasing in 1976. This added several jets to the fleet that existed of about 200. Delta then obtained Western Air Lines in 1986. By 1994, the Leadership 7.5 program was launched in order to restructure and streamline the operations. In 2000, the number of passengers carried during the year reached 120 million. Ed Bastian (Image 1) is the current CEO of Delta Air Lines (Timeline of airline, 2016).



**Image 1: Ed Bastian- CEO of Delta Air Lines**

## 3. Research Topic

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### 3.1 Research Introduction

Delta's service from Cuba to USA reopened commercial flights, with Atlanta representing the largest connection point of passengers to Havana. Reopening these flights have proved to be a boost to tourism and also will strengthen the relationship between the two countries. My research topic is about the procedures Delta Airlines had to go through to reopen operations at Havana Airport in Cuba after suspending flights for nearly 55 years.

### 3.2 Research Analysis

Services between USA and Cuba sever diplomatic ties, thus, suspending flights due unstable political struggles and profitable encounters. Many incidents led to the destruction of relations between the two countries. One of them was that Fidel Castro blamed the US for harming a ship that blew up in Havana's port. The only U.S. presence at the time that remained in Cuba was Guantanamo Bay, the naval base. U.S. then declared that all travel to Cuba would be ended. This also ended all air carrier travel (Rothman, 2014).

U.S. and Cuba relations began to improve, thus reopening air travel between the two countries, which allowed Delta Air Lines to resume services through Marazul Charters in 2002-2004. Commercial flights reopen in 2016. Agreements were signed by both federal governments to allow commercial round trips between the two countries. The U.S. Department of Transportation approved Delta Airlines as one of the commercial service providers. I had the opportunity to interview Ingrid Hogan (2017), who works for Delta Air Lines in the Special Council Department. She was involved in the Cuban side of the reopening of flights. In the interview, we talked about how the Instituto de Aeronáutica Civil de Cuba (IACC) controls

aviation in Cuba. However, the government controls all aviation. US and Havana Airport have 20 frequencies (flights) per day. During the process of reopening flights to Cuba, all the airlines had to put their cases to the Department of Transportation as to why they are the best airlines to Havana. Delta Air Lines requested for five but got three out of the five - John F. Kennedy International Airport, Hartsfield- Jackson International Airport, Miami International Airport (did not get Orlando International Airport and a second one to Miami International Airport), which is a great result. There still needs to be a lot of improvement in the Cuban aviation industry. For instance, there is always a sweep inside after deplaning and before boarding passengers. Cuba doesn't have enough personnel to perform the tasks, and the government doesn't want any liability. Delta eventually will look into alliances with Cuba de Aviciano; mostly operations; but there is nothing concrete yet. They also don't have enough equipment and Delta is not allowed to bring their own either. The Cuban government doesn't want to have any liability that is not their equipment; ex: wheel chairs- storage, maintenance. According to Ms. Hogan, "The key to operating Cuba is relationships. They are more than willing to help, but you need to understand the limitations and the resources they have" (Hogan). The Havana airport knows they don't have enough personnel and wants the U.S. to understand their limitations.

Ingrid Hogan was involved in the Cuba side of the flight operations, but Gary Bunce, the Assistant General Counsel of Delta Air Lines, was involved in the U.S. side of flight operations. In an interview with Gary Bunce (2017), he talked about the flight operations from the U.S. perspective in Cuba during the process of reopening flights to Cuba. According to Bunce, there were three basic restrictions, "The trade embargo and travel ban were not lifted so travel from US is restricted to follow 12 categories, which means they had to get passengers to understand the travel limitations imposed by Cuba. Due to the trade embargo, we can't send equipment to

Cuba- computer, scanner, and kiosks. They would need permission from the Cuban government, and they would need to go through a process if it is approved to be shipped to Cuba. The Cuban government has its own import restrictions. The government has historically had restriction on communication equipment in general. They are also dealing with a centralized government- normally we would talk to people at the airport and discuss the required equipment and get approvals. But in Cuba, those types of decisions have to be alleviated to someone in the government, and it could be anyone up the chain so we don't know who that person could be" (Bunce).

Delta became the first U.S. airlines to open a city ticket office in Havana. Reopening flights to Cuba is a very important market and will help boost the country's economy through tourism. In an interview with Jose Zapata (2017), he talked about the process of opening the City Ticket office in Havana. It was opened on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016. Jose "Pepe" Zapata is the General Manager of Central America and Caribbean for Delta Air Lines. In this role, he is responsible for leading the commercial activities across Central America & Caribbean with a team of sales professionals focused on maximizing profitability and continue improving Delta's brand positioning and preference. Pepe's role in the Cuba Project was to establish Delta's commercial presence in Cuba. He also established relationships with key government and business leaders, such as U.S. Embassy, Ministry of Foreign Relations of Cuba, and Habanatur, the largest agency in Cuba, among others. According to Jose, "Everything was slow. There were a lot of challenges, but the Cuban people were willing to work with us, in spite of their limitations" (Zapata).

Susan Bailey Schmidt (2017), a pilot for Delta, talked about her trip during the inaugural flight to Cuba. She has been with Delta as a pilot almost 17 years. According to Schmidt when

asked about the inaugural flight, she stated “I was the Jump seater representing Flight Standards. I was more excited to be part of the captain’s historic moment in time as he touched down after leaving the country when he was about 9 months old” (Schmidt).

When asked about the difference in flight operations at the country, she replied “It’s my understanding the airport must comply with our Flight Operations Manual in order for us (Delta) to operate. If not, we would have exception notes on our company pages and flight plan. There really were not any exceptions that stand out from normal island operations. One exception was that at the time of our start up, there were no FAA certified mechanics in HAV. We carried mechanics on every flight until that was authorized” (Schmidt).

In terms of aviation safety, another interview was conducted with Theresa Debosky, who observed that safety was not really a thing in Cuba. She is currently the Program Manager for ACS Emergency Response and Business Continuity Planning at Delta. According to Debosky, “Safety is not a thing in Cuba. They do not use basic items like gloves, or use any basic necessities to get the job done” (Debosky). She also made other observations during her trip to Cuba. When she landed, she noticed that there was only one chock for airplane. This doesn’t follow the FOM of Delta Air Lines, which states that there needs to be chock at least for main gear, but in Cuba, they just put one chock wherever they want. There was also Foreign Object Debris (FOD) present near the aircraft, which is dangerous since it can go in the engine and ruin the aircraft.

## 4. Methodology

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### 4.1 Narrative Inquiry

I had conducted six interviews for the purpose of this research. I talked to Mayda Molina, Director of IACC, in Cuba briefly about the flight operations.

### 4.2 Observations

I did some observations of how the operations of flights take place in Cuba, including the safety culture, customer service, etc. I think Cuba has improved in terms of their aviation safety culture since Ms. Debosky's trip to Cuba.

## 5. Analysis of Data

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The process of reopening Delta Air Lines as well as other air carrier flights was very slow due to the past history the two countries had with each other. Some of the interviews I conducted were face-to-face, while the rest were through phone calls. One of my interviews did happen in Cuba. In an interview with Demetra Bethvas (2017) held in Cuba, we talked about the flight operations process but from a Cuban perspective. The process was similar to the information from the other interviews. I also got to meet Mayda Molina, Director of IACC and talked briefly about the flight process between U.S. and Cuba.

There are many similarities in all the interviews conducted. For instance, Delta for three out of the five commercial flights from the main hubs- ATL, JFK and MIA. Delta is still working with Cuba on opening more flights out of airports in different states. As far as aviation safety is concerned at the Havana Airport, the process still seems slow. The Cubans are willing to work with American air carriers, but they also want the air carriers to understand their limitations. There are still many obstacles that American air carriers face. For example, Americans cannot take their equipment to Cuba since there is a whole process they would need to go through with the government to get approval. This mostly takes a while since the government does not want any liability.

## 6. Conclusion

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There are still restrictions while travelling to Cuba, since passengers would need to fall under one of the 12 acceptable classifications to visit Cuba. The only American carrier in operation that previously flew to Cuba until 1961 before recently reopening their flights to Cuba is Delta Air Lines (Yamanouchi, 2016).

Delta's service from Cuba to the United States reopened commercial flights, with Atlanta representing the largest connection point of passengers to Havana. Reopening these flights have proved to be a boost to tourism and also will strengthen the relationship between the two countries.

There weren't a lot of limitations I had while conducting my research. I had conducted interviews prior to the trip and a couple during the trip to Cuba. Language wasn't a barrier either in any of the interviews that were conducted. Some of the information that I did get during the interviews cannot be put in this report due to confidentiality purposes.

The aviation process is slow in Cuba and will take a while to adjust to the American air carrier standards. The Cubans want other air carriers to understand their limitations, but they are more than willing to work to meet the aviation standards.

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