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## Spain offers 200,000 a get out of Cuba card

*Enacted in December, the Law of Historic Memory has thousands of Cubans in Havana lining up for Spanish citizenship -- and a potential way off the island.*

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HAVANA — Marisabel, a warehouse clerk in her 40s, wants to leave Cuba and move to Spain. A tattered piece of paper -- her grandmother's Spanish birth certificate -- may allow her to do that.

Marisabel is one of thousands of Cubans who have applied for Spanish passports since Spain enacted a new citizenship law in December. Officially known as the Law of Historic Memory, it grants citizenship to the children and grandchildren of Spaniards who fled the country during the Spanish Civil War or were exiled during the regime of Gen. Francisco Franco.

The Spanish government estimates that more than a million people worldwide will become citizens, including as many as 210,000 Cubans, or 1.9 percent of the population of the island. The Spanish Consulate in Miami is also expecting several thousand applications, mostly from South Floridians of Cuban and Venezuelan descent.

For Cubans still living on the island, the new law offers a legal, safe and not terribly difficult alternative to the way so many have escaped -- spending \$10,000 to ride a fast boat across the Florida Straits, or marrying a foreigner.

Since the law was passed, the Spanish newspaper *El País* has called the consulate in Havana the "factory of Spaniards" because so many people are eligible and trying to take advantage of it.

"There was a large migration to the island of Cuba from the beginnings

of the last century until the 1930s and 1940s and later," explained Pablo Barrios, the Spanish consul general in Havana.

The law, often referred to as the law of grandchildren, was passed as an effort to make amends to the families of people forced to flee Spain during some of the darker moments of that country's recent history. The law makes it possible for people to apply for Spanish passports for the next two years, with a provision for the deadline to be extended for another year.

When it was passed, the Spanish government was expecting 75,000 and 100,000 applications in Havana every year.

"Now it looks like it will be closer to 100,000," Barrios said.

His office already has set up appointments to interview 40,000 Cubans and is talking with about 220 a day, he said. He hopes to interview 350 a day once a variety of technical problems with the process are worked out. The problems include misinformation spreading through Havana's rumor mill and an inability to get more phone lines installed in the consulate to handle the volume of inquiries.

The consular staff in Havana was nearly doubled to handle all the work, and Barrios expects to issue between 50,000 and 70,000 new Spanish passports each year the law is in effect.

### HIGH INTEREST

The consulate in Miami has been inundated with requests for information, receiving as many as 4,000 calls a day, according to Santiago Cabañas, consul

general. His office did 572 interviews in January and is booked for interviews through October. He has hired more staff members and has rented a second office to handle the volume.

"We would like to attend to everyone well," he said. "Sadly, we have not been able to do it faster."

He expects to issue several thousand new passports in South Florida. People here are applying for nostalgic reasons, and some want to be able to work in Europe, which Spanish citizenship would allow.

"The employees at the consulate are working very hard," Cabañas said. "We don't want to leave anyone unable to exercise their rights."

The consulate in Cuba has been able to issue its first new Spanish passport, but the process in Miami is moving more slowly because of a requirement that the birth of the new citizen be registered in the consulate of the country where that person was born. Most of Miami's applications have to be sent to Havana or Caracas to accomplish that.

Even after they receive their passports, Cubans living on the island will have to get permission from the Cuban government to travel, a process that can take years. And while some Cubans have been denied the right to travel, Cuba's historic ties to Spain may make it hesitant to do that to Spanish citizens.

### THE MONEY GAME

The possibility of not being allowed to leave the island, even after obtaining the Spanish passport, certainly hasn't deterred the tens of thousands

who have applied to the consulate. One reason is that becoming an instant citizen eliminates the need on a visa application to prove wealth that few Cubans have.

Even Cubans who have managed to save money by working in the black market have a hard time proving it. Many countries require visa applicants to show that they have money in a bank account, but Cubans who have made money illegally face unique risks if they try to put that money into a Cuban bank.

“How do you explain the money you put in the bank to the Cuban government, which owns the bank?” Amaury, a musician, said.

For many Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits, documenting their ancestry has been difficult.

Some families in Florida that have been exiled twice in three generations are having trouble locating paperwork to prove that they started their journey in Spain. While they are able to travel to Spain to get copies of birth records issued there, they may not be able to get copies of Cuban documents that close the circle by showing that the grandmother born in Spain gave birth to a son in Cuba.

In Cuba, the problem is often obtaining the necessary Spanish documents.

Yineth, a hairdresser, cut Marisabel’s hair while she listened to her story of joyfully discovering her Spanish grandmother’s birth certificate while rooting through old documents and photos. Marisabel was lucky, Yineth said.

Yineth would like to apply for Spanish citizenship so she can get a passport allowing her to travel through Europe. She wants to see Paris and Greece.

Her own birth certificate shows the name of her father, and his Cuban birth certificate shows her grandparents’ names. But to get copies of her grandparents’ birth certificates, to show they were born in Spain, she would have to travel to their hometown, Pontevedra, on Spain’s northwest coast.

“I need a visa to get a visa,” she said sadly.

*(This story appeared with an editor’s note that the reporter could not be named because she was reporting inside Cuba without a visa from the Castro regime.)*