IMPACTS OF TOURISM IN CUBA

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Introduction

This report on the structure of tourism in Cuba is designed to be an informed critique rather than a description of the infrastructure. I have set out to investigate the development of tourism in Cuba up to and including the current state of tourist development.

In attempting to document how tourism has changed Cuba over time, and specifically what negative and positive impacts have developed, I have realised that the political climate of Cuba has had a major impact on the development of tourism for this island nation. The way that the rest of the world has responded to Cuba’s communist regimen has also had an impact on the sorts of tourism have been encouraged, tolerated, or even prohibited by the governments in Cuba and in tourist generating countries, particularly the United States of America.

I will look at tourism in Cuba in three time zones - pre 1960, 1960-1980 and 1980 to current times. Where it has been appropriate I have related the development of Cuban tourism to theorists we have explored in the Impacts of Tourism class and in particular to where Cuba fits in Butlers (1980) destination lifecycle.

Images of Cuba show hot sun and fields of sugar cane, tall palm trees and deep, clear blue sea. Cuba is indeed all these things, but it is also a country with a deep-rooted, complex culture in which old traditions and new intellectual developments co-exist. It is a young and vital island, a place of music and colour, which despite severe economic difficulties in recent years has held on to its unique identity. (Wild, 2002)
Why Cuba? Whilst deciding what country to write this report on I had an encounter with a cigar aficionado who stirred within me a deeper understanding of fetishism (Mowforth & Munt, 1998) as it relates to tourism, I will return to this thought later. This contact inspired me to find out more about Cuba. Cuba is “Caught like a cigar between the fingers of Florida and Yucatán.” (Stanley, 2000) and “At 1100,922 sq km Cuba is almost exactly the same size as the North Island of New Zealand.” (Stanley, 2000)

Yet where the North Island of New Zealand is home to 3 million people “Cuba has more than 11 million inhabitants” (Stanley, 2000). These Cubans are of mixed nationalities including Amerindian, Spanish, African, Asians and Europeans all blended with each other living in a harmonious Creole gumbo. A carefully controlled and classless society has been created among these people that has attempted to keep the individual and combined cultures intact. This “mosaic characterises Cuban culture too: the bringing together of vastly different traditions has produced a unique blend.”(Wild, 2002) This Cuban culture is the result of a long history of racial discord, revolution, social manipulation and the effects of US embargos and the impacts of foreign contact including tourism.
Pre 1960

Tourism in Cuba began with the first ‘Cruise’ ship captained by Christopher Columbus sailing into local waters on 28 October 1492.

First inhabited (by Amerindians) in pre-Columbian times, Cuba was later conquered by the Spanish, who ruled there for four centuries. The island gained independence in 1899, only to come under the virtual control of the US, with the help of dictators Machado and Batista. (Wild, 2002)

In these early days there was racial discord among the many nationalities that called Cuba home, particularly between the plantation owners who were predominantly white and the plantation workers, many of whom were slaves and who were predominantly black.

The main sources of economic income in this time were sugarcane and its related products along with tobacco. From 1910 to 1920 there was an architectural boom in Cuba that saw much development in a range of styles including Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Moorish and Venetian gothic. These buildings, while developed for functional purposes at the time will draw tourism attention in the future.

“In the 1920’s the Cuban developers “encouraged North Americans to visit the island as tourists and to build their homes alongside friendly Cubans.” (Schwartz, 1977: 38) Not only encouraging the North Americans to holiday in Cuba but to consider making property investments there and possibly even to relocate on a permanent basis. In these heady days Cuba was the most important of the Caribbean islands in terms of tourist arrivals.
In the 1950’s Havana had a reputation as being one of the most exciting cities in the world. There was music and dancing all through the night. Exotic cabarets, sometimes under the stars, entertained tourists who drank Cuba’s world famous cocktails or smoked Havana cigars. (Griffiths, 1987)

These tourists were escaping from the everyday working life for some free time and relaxation. They fitted into the model of the Old style tourist (Poon, 1993) that travelled en masse looking for sun, sea, sand and sex…and in Cuba they found all that and more. Cuba had the pristine beaches, the long sunshine hours, the exotic women, the Havana cigars and the local rum. Not unlike Rotorua, Cuba was also touted as an effective sanatorium with hotels being built near springs of therapeutic mineral water in the 19th century.

Wild, 2002, confirms Griffiths observations that

By the 1950’s Cuba was famous for glamour – its music and cocktails, splendid prostitutes, cigars, drinking and gambling, and the sensual tropical life attracted Mafiosi and film stars, tourists and businessmen, in equal measure. However there was a high price to pay: Cuba had not only become a land of casinos and drugs, it had fallen into the Hands of the American underworld, which ran the local gambling houses and luxury hotels, used for money laundering. (Wild, 2002)

“Havana was a dazzling city but there was much that was rotten behind the glitter.” (Griffiths, 1987) The social impact of the tourist influx was having a negative impact on the local population who were seeing the gay abandon of the tourists and were helping to provide services, such as prostitution, in return for money or trinkets. “The demonstration effect of the US dominated industry saw the Cuban elite seeking North American lifestyles. This reinforced the colonial dependency relationship by stimulating the import of goods to meet such aspirations.” (Harrison, 2001)
During this period Cuba went through the exploration, involvement and early development stages of Butlers (1980) lifecycle where after the first intrepid tourists many more came and thus facilities to cater for the growing numbers of tourists needed to be developed.

According to Cohens (1972, 1979a) tourist typologies these people were on a “search for pleasure” and were further categorised as “organised mass tourists”. These tourists wanted safe familiar environments with little or no surprises, they were keen for all the entertainment and thrills that an exotic destination could provide but wanted little or no interaction with the ‘real’ locals. Most of the activities took place in an “enclave” (Britton) or “environmental bubble” (Cohen) in resorts that provided for the tourists needs and expectations while sheltering them from the locals. According to Titchener (2003) these tourists were looking for and having a very inward experience, which is the type of holiday that is safe, secure and familiar with very few surprises of inconveniences for the tourist.

1960 - 1980

“The revolution headed by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, who defeated Batista on 1 January 1959, was a turning point for the country.” (Wild, 2002) Cuba developed economic ties with the Soviet Union and friendly relations with US ground to a halt. The leaders of the revolution rebuilt Cuba. Under the communist regimen illiteracy was abolished and access to health and education for all was encouraged. The leaders of the revolution promoted, encouraged and even forced a classless society aimed at bridging the gap
between the descendants of the plantation owners (white) and the descendants of the plantation workers (black) with standardised wages for all and a zero tolerance towards any forms of discrimination. Industrialization was encouraged and there was much construction of homes, schools, hospitals and other important infrastructure.

Tourism in Cuba came to a standstill and tourist numbers to Cuba dropped to almost nil. There is not much written about tourism in Cuba during this time however Cuba developed as a country with a political stability, high levels of education, tight controls and good infrastructure.

When relations between Cuba and the United States became difficult in 1960, tourist went instead to Jamaica and other Caribbean islands. The Bahamas, for example, only took off as a tourist centre because of the “Cuba crisis”. Few tourists travelled to Cuba Before 1980, when mass tourism to the island began again. (Griffiths, 1987)

Although Cuba had not reached the peak of Butlers (1980) lifecycle, due to political unrest the destination was in a definite and rapid decline.

**POST 1980**

With the collapse of communism in late 1980’s Cuba was deprived of economic partnerships with the soviet and this suspension of soviet aid to
Cuba caused the nation to suffer a severe economic crisis. Tourism was seen by some to be a panacea to this. Cuba re-entered the tourism market part way through the development stage of Butlers (1980) lifecycle with an already known destination, much of the infrastructure for tourism already in place and with resorts of the past being recalled into service. The development during the revolution had seen community facilities improved and this now became beneficial to the tourism industry.

Since 1980 the island has been open to foreign tourists, which has meant that the traditional flow of citizens from eastern European countries has been replaced by the arrival of tourists from capitalist countries – the only people who can bring strong currencies into the country, particularly the US dollar. (Wild, 2002)

“By 1996 the post soviet crisis had subsided, most investors hadn’t been scared away by US intimidation, and tourism was booming.” (Stanley, 2000)

The US and Cuba are natural trading partners, and the anarchistic embargo has deprived us companies of numerous opportunities to do business in Cuba. Washington’s travel restrictions alone cost US tour companies, travel agencies, airlines, and hotel and catering chains billions of dollars a year in lost tourism revenues. (Stanley, 2000)

The trade embargos imposed by the US impacted on the traditional source of tourists to Cuba and meant that Cuba has had to find new markets for tourism. Even tourists from Canada have been restricted in their travel plans to Cuba as the major travel reservation system based in the US refused to allow Canadian agents to book travel directly to Cuba. (Contenta, 1993)
The main Industries in Cuba have been production of sugar cane and its related products, including rum and the production of tobacco products particularly the famous Havana cigars. With the change in the tourism sector Cuba now has tourism as its largest economic sector and on the surface this is a good thing.

Cubas Tourist industry is the fastest growing in the world, and it’s now the countries largest single source of foreign exchange. In 1998 Cuba earned US$1.9 billion from tourism, though the imports required to support the industry meant that only 30 cents out of every US dollar spent by a tourist actually stayed in Cuba. (Stanley, 2000)

With a tourism industry multiplier (TIM) of 0.3 (only 30 cents of every tourist dollar staying in Cuba) Cuba is in the situation of many other island economies that see tourism as the economic answer. The reality of tourism is developing countries and particularly smaller island economies are that in order to support the tourist trade there are many items that must be imported to meet tourist demands. These off shore purchases create the high economic leakages that eventually erode the value of the tourist dollar to the local economy. A TIM nearer to 2 would mean that a country has greater linkages and less leakage in its tourism economy.

In order to reduce the leakage of foreign exchange, Cuba has established a tourism industry that carefully, if uneasily, separates tourism spending from the national economy, and forces tourist to buy goods and service in foreign currency (mainly US dollars). (Mowforth and Munt, 1998)

The Castro government has recognised these leakages and has attempted to manipulate the spending patterns of tourists to maximise the economic benefit to the country. This has not been done by increasing linkages within the local economy but by attempting to control they types of international currency that
tourists can use. “The Cuban Government runs international tourism as a state monopoly, and private competition is either strictly controlled (and heavily Taxed) or banned.” (Stanley, 2000) The influx of tourism saw the Castro government recreate the Cuban ministry of tourism to oversee and control the development of tourism. Many new beach resorts were developed to cater for the growing numbers of tourists.

The hotels belong to the state and there is none of the corruption of the past. Tourists are able to come from all over the world because of the development of cheap air transport...Even new resorts have been developed, like Cayo Largo, one of the small islands off the southern coast of Cuba. Here, new hotels and an airport have been built for tourists who fly in to enjoy the beauty of the beaches and swim amongst shoals of multi coloured fish near the islands coral reefs. (Griffiths, 1987)

Map 2. Cuba Showing provinces, major cities and the resort Island of Cayo Largo. (Lonely Planet).

“But in an attempt to preserve the purity of the revolution, the Castro government isolates these islands of luxury.” (Harvey, 1992)
One of the tools used to assess the social impact of tourism is Doxeys irridex (1975,1976) and there are conflicting reports on how the Cubans actually feel about tourism. Stanley (2000) claims “The Bahamas get 14 tourists a year for every local resident while Cuba gets one tourist a year for every Eight Cubans. That’s partly why Cubans are still so sincerely friendly.” This would support an assumption that the Cubans level of irritation in relation to tourism is in the positive Euphoric stage.

Harvey (1992) contends in his article that Cubans are saying “Its all for tourists and export”, “Tourists have everything and Cubans have nothing”, “Cuban’s say they are often harassed by police for talking to foreigners.” It appears that the deliberate segregation of tourist and local economies and interactions is causing many Cubans to query the value of tourism to them. This annoyance is symptomatic of a people who are being shut out of resorts and shopping venues, harassed for interaction with tourists and being expected to provide for and serve the tourists with no obvious direct benefit. “Cuban’s…. have become increasingly bitter toward this forced separation, the ‘Tourism apartheid’. ” (Harvey, 1982)

Of the 11 million Cubans “Around 140,000 Cubans have jobs directly related to tourism, and these prized positions are used to reward government supporters.” (Stanley, 2000)
The other form of leakage that the Castro government is concerned about is leakage of tourist dollars directly to the Cubans that destabilises the classless society that has been carefully manufactured.

Cuba’s classless society is now threatened by the US dollar, which discriminates against Cubans who earn only Cuban pesos. Cubans receiving US dollars from tourism-related jobs or from abroad are emerging as a privileged new social class. The government hopes to restore equity by taxing dollar income. (Cramer, 2000)

For the Cuban government, control is a big issue. The political structure used to rebuild Cuba during the revolution is seen as the key to maintaining control of a potentially volatile situation. “Independent travel, which might mean lower Yields for the tour companies and revenue leakage to the private sector inside Cuba, is down played.” (Stanley, 2000) Keeping the mighty tourist dollar in the communal coppers has been achieved in part by the careful packaging of tours to Cuba.

The Massive resorts are no-go zones for ordinary Cubans, and the freedom of foreign guests is also effectively curtailed through the use of all-inclusive packages designed to tie the dollar-machine tourists to their hotels. (Stanley, 2000)

Interaction with the locals is also controlled in the same way with the government allowing local participation to sell trinkets to the tourists in what Pretty (1995) would call a Passive level of participation where they are told what can and cant be done or where the locals participate in return for material incentives, particularly cash.

People selling handcrafts at street markets or inside hotels must pay substantial licensing fees. For example, handcraft vendors at the beach resorts pay US$40 a month for their licence, plus 50% of their profits. (Stanley, 2000)
But as the tourists needs change many Cubans are independently offering to meet the needs of tourists, thus earning foreign dollars for their own use.

Tourism, the fastest growing industry in Cuba, is not restricted to beach resorts. Havana is a magnet for international professional conferences, especially in the fields of medicine and education. The service industry is also expanding as Cuban entrepreneurs open up new restaurants... (Cramer, 2000)

This living off the tourists is known in Cuba as *jineterismo*, the *jinetera* (or *jinetero* if male) accosts and initiates a relationship with the tourist that may last hours or days, and organises transport, accommodation, meals and activities, including sex. The aim is not just to earn foreign dollars but also to get invitations to go abroad.

One would be remiss to comment on tourism in Cuba without mentioning the highly popular Carnivals, both in Havana in Late June- early July and in Santiago de Cuba in the last half of July. The roots of carnival are religious and since the 17th century there have been street processions in honour of the patron of the city. Tourism has seen the carnival turn the people and their festival into an exhibit or event that can be sold to tourists. This example of *zooification* (Mowforth & Munt, 1998) is also an example passive participation (Pretty, 1995) in the tourism industry. Carnivals from throughout the Caribbean have been copied and commodified (Mowforth & Munt, 1998) into consumable tourist products in a range of ways that have eroded the authenticity of the original festival.
According to Urry (1990) there is a “privileged way of looking at people and places that reinforces the power of the observer through framing and objectifying the other” and it is with this ‘gaze’ that tourists originally viewed the original carnivals – look but don’t touch or get too close. Over time the tourist became more familiar with the carnival and attempted to get into what MacCannell (1973) referred to as the backspace where the real culture of the carnival was hidden rather than just watching the front space spectacle. Now as this event has passed into the “Social reproduction” (MacCannell) phase of sight sacrilisation the original carnival has become a model after which other events are created and named. These pseudo events (Boorstin, 1961) are largely inauthentic contrived attractions and occur in hotels, on cruise ships and even at Disneyland.

The arrival of wealthy US dollar toting tourists

..has also created major changes in the social relationships, habits and customs of millions of people who after 30 years of semi-isolation have begun to measure themselves alongside western Europeans, Canadians and the occasional embargo defying American.” (Wild, 2002)

These demonstration effects erode away at the traditional cultures of the people living in Cuba and also alter the Cuban culture so that a tourist culture begins to emerge. Where all things western, which are currently restricted by the government, become highly sought after and the locals will resort to crime among themselves and against tourists in order to gain forbidden fruits. “Despite the vigilance the effort to separate Cubans from tourists seems to be breaking down.” (Harvey, 1992)
For all the negative impacts that tourism appears to be having in Cuba there is also a positive side. Tourism in Cuba is now far more diverse than in the 1950s and while there are still those tourists who visit Cuba for the sun, sand, sex and sea...there are also those who now visit for the growing convention market, eco tourism, spa tourism, architectural tours, the cigars, historical sites and the ‘dark tourism’ view of looking at the impact of the revolution.

Since 1980, when large-scale tourism began to be promoted, people from all over the world have travelled to Cuba to see what this country is all about. Some have gone for the fabulous snow-white beaches and the tropical sun. Others have gone to enjoy Cuba’s colonial cities like Havana, Santiago de Cuba and Trinidad. Some have gone to find out what a revolutionary society is like. (Griffiths, 1987)

In a push to preserve the unique and abundant flora and fauna Cuba now has over 12% of its landmass in protected areas or National parks.

The logic of a strong linkage between Deliberate Alternative Tourism (DAT) and Protected areas is based on the existence, at least in theory, of park regulations that ensure outcomes consistent with the core
principles of alternative tourism, including the preservation of the natural environment. … Among countries with more established systems…Cuba has been seriously considering the introduction of ecotourism as an integral component of park master plans. Cuba’s protected areas system consists of some 200 units that occupy 12% of the nation’s territory, and therefore constitutes a significant potential DAT venue. (Weaver, 2001)

Las Terrazas is a project of redevelopment and replanting of native bush on man-made terraces in an area where families were struggling to exist. The community project that involved workers from all over Cuba aimed to integrate man, the environment and history. “The 900 inhabitants make a living from maintaining the woods and from Ecotourism that has increased with the building of the environmentally friendly Moka Hotel.” (Wild, 2002)

Las Terrazas …Named by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as Cuba’s first biosphere reserve in 1985…. Ecotourists can venture into the lush forests for day-hikes or five-day-long treks—always under the scrutiny of a guide who is careful to limit the impact. Everything you can do in this zone must be guided in order to protect the environment. … In the high season, October to February, more than 1900 people visit the area per month, making in necessary to restrict the number of visitors to certain areas of the park. (Simpson, 1999)

Since the Las Terrazas, project Cuba has continued with the development of DAT till more recently “The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared two more Cuban National parks as biosphere reserves, expanding to six the islands total ecosystems with this designation.” (Interpress, 2000) These carefully controlled and developed reserves allow for sustainable ecotourism occurring within specified physical areas, under supervision of a local guide, with minimal impact to the environment and while maximising benefits to the local community. There is
also evidence that other tools of sustainability have been applied for example the restrictions in visitor numbers being applied at certain times of the year.

Beside the spas, mentioned earlier, there are now many state run, international clinics that provide general medical care and specialize in treatments for stress, alcoholism and drug rehabilitation. (Wild, 2002) These clinics with their short waiting lists and competitive pricing are in great demand.

The styles of architecture that were used in the architectural boom from 1910 to 1920 included Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Moorish and Venetian gothic. These buildings have now become tourist attractions in themselves particularly the houses of Trinidad and the monuments in the Parque Céspedes most famously the Cathedral.

A tour operator was asked in 1999 to start tours to Cuba with the emphasis on Havana cigars. “What the Cubans wanted was a tour operation that emphasized the making of the best cigars in the world as the principal focus of the tour, rather than as a mere adjunct”. (Raitz, 2001)

After a famille visit Raitz, 2001 wrote,

“Cuba surpassed all my expectations. The thriving capital city, the heady mixture of rum, music and cigar smoke, the friendly people, the pretty girls, the sparkling sea and the perfect beaches all make for a perfect holiday destination. Add to that the fascination of learning about the highly complex production processes of making the cigars (growing the leaves, drying, sorting, maturing, rolling and packing) and I was left feeling profoundly impressed.”
During the recent conversation that sparked my interest in Cuba, I spoke with a cigar aficionado from New Zealand who is looking at importing and promoting Cuban cigars to a Hawkes Bay winery as part of the “snob” value, adding to his current operation.

He has travelled to Cuba on many occasions and spoke fondly of the local family that he stayed with on his visits. The father of the home worked in the cigar rolling industry, as do many locals. The locals cannot afford to purchase the cigars that they help to make but are allowed to smoke as many cigars as they like while working. On a recent visit to Cuba he stayed with the same family and was summoned to the deathbed of the father…dying of mouth and throat cancer…. as do many Cuban Cigar workers. These workers can’t afford to purchase the cigars but may smoke as many as they like whilst working at making them.

Such is the esteem of this Kiwi bloke in that household, yet he returns to New Zealand to continue to promote the very product that is a symbol of all that is wrong in the core/periphery relationships between developed and developing economies. I was profoundly moved and had to ask myself if this fetishism (Mowforth & Munt, 1998) toward cigars as a Cuban product, where the commodity hides the social conditions of those who have contributed to their production, also extends to the way tourists view the Cuban tourist product.
Conclusion

Cuba is now in the consolidation phase of Butlers (1980) lifecycle and is developing alternative forms of tourism to force rejuvenation rather than sitting back to allow the natural decline brought by overcrowding and/or changing demands of tourists.

The lives of Cubans have been changed by the rise and fall of tourism. The effects of US embargos has been instrumental in changing the source of tourism to Cuba and as this continues Cuba will need to continue to develop and seek out new markets.

The carefully controlled and classless society is being eroded by tourism as has been documented in the form of demonstration effects, privileged jobs in tourism and jineterismo.

The Unique blend of Cuban culture has been commodified in the form of carnival and recreated worldwide as a representation on what Cuba, and the greater Caribbean is all about. This is an unfair representation of these people and their culture that reinforces the core periphery relationship of power that is seen between many island nations exploring tourism growth and the developed countries that provide the tourists and much of the product needed to supply the needs of the tourists.

The existence of this relationship is reinforced in the way the first world countries view products, such as cigars, produced by third world countries. The issues power & control and economic leakages that go hand in hand will need to be addressed before Cubas increasing tourist numbers convert into sustainable benefits for the Cuban people and real dollar benefits for the Cuban economy.
References


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