



Complexities Of Tourism Planning And Development In Cuba

By: Lauren Duffy and **Carol Kline**

Abstract

Within the last ten years, Cuba has undergone many social, economic, and political changes. Since President Raul Castro took the reins from his brother, Fidel Castro, he has restructured several core economic principles within the island nation to allow for more legalized private enterprises, reduce the number of State-employed workers, and foster additional outside investments in order to tackle economic stagnation. These reforms have created a surge of entrepreneurial activity in tourism among Cuban residents who are entering into the private sector, offering new products or expanding traditional ones such as opening paladars (private restaurants) or operating their homes as casa particulares (bed and breakfast enterprises). Paralleling the changes in Cuban domestic economic policies, there has also been increased interest in the potential for significant transformation in the relationship between Cuba and the US that led to speculation and attention among researchers, politicians, and investors alike. Though the current diplomatic climate suggests uncertainty foreseeable future, the ripple effects of the possibility of a thawed relationship went beyond the two countries with an unexpected surge in international travels looking to experience Cuba before it was opened up to US travelers.

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Complexities of Tourism Planning and Development in Cuba

Within the last ten years, Cuba has undergone many social, economic, and political changes. Since President Raul Castro took the reins from his brother, Fidel Castro, he has restructured several core economic principles within the island nation to allow for more legalized private enterprises, reduce the number of State-employed workers, and foster additional outside investments in order to tackle economic stagnation. These reforms have created a surge of entrepreneurial activity in tourism among Cuban residents who are entering into the private sector, offering new products or expanding traditional ones such as opening *paladars* (private restaurants) or operating their homes as *casa particulares* (bed and breakfast enterprises). Paralleling the changes in Cuban domestic economic policies, there has also been increased interest in the potential for significant transformation in the relationship between Cuba and the US that led to speculation and attention among researchers, politicians, and investors alike. Though the current diplomatic climate suggests uncertainty foreseeable future, the ripple effects of the possibility of a thawed relationship went beyond the two countries with an unexpected surge in international travels looking to experience Cuba before it was opened up to US travelers (Morris, 2017).

This issue calls attention to the travel and tourism industry in the island nation of Cuba. Over the last decade, tourism scholarship that has focused on Cuba has included: tourism planning, management, and policy, broadly (Gonzales-Morales, Duffus-Miranda, & Pons-García, 2017; Laitamaki et al., 2016; Salinas, 2013; Sharpley & Knight, 2009; Spencer, 2016), particularly in light of developing tourism in a socialist economy (Sanchez & Adams, 2008; Taylor & McGlynn, 2009; Wilkinson, 2008); tourism competitiveness and identifying a distinctive position within the market (Elliott & Neirotti, 2008; Miller, Henthorne, George, 2008); the development of niche tourism and emergence of agricultural, cultural, heritage, medical/health, sport, scientific, and/or voluntourism markets (Babb, 2011; Duffy, Kline, Swanson, Best, & McKinnon, 2017; Kline, Bulla, Rubright, Green, & Harris, 2016; Medina-Labrada, Cabellero-Hernández, Perez-Ricardo, & Fernández-Cueria, 2017; Ramírez de Arellano, 2011; Salinas-Chavez, Delgado Mesa, Henthorne, & Miller, 2017; Spencer, 2008); host-guest encounters, including in the context sex tourism and in light of the erotization of Cuba (Cabezas, 2009; Morris, 2016; Plasencia, 2009; Simoni, 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2016; Spencer, 2016); authenticity, representation, and cultural exchange as a means for learning the story of Cuba (Ogden, 2017; Spencer, 2010); entrepreneurship (Hingtgen, Kline, Fernandes, & McGehee, 2015); service culture (Henthorne, George, & Williams, 2010); second residences and other tourist rentals (Abreu-Rodríguez & Delgado-Castro, 2017); coastal zone management and environmental impact in popular tourism development zones (Anfuso et al., 2017; Anfuso, Williams, Hernández, & Pranzini, 2014; Botero et al., 2017); the effects of social media on travel to Cuba (Boley, Jordan, Kline, & Knollenberg, 2018); and most recently, with regard to Cuba-US relations and speculation of future implications of tourism opening up between the two countries (Balslev & Velázquez, 2018; Fullerton, Kendrick, & Broyles, 2017; Jordan, Boley, Knollenberg, & Kline, 2017; Wilson & Látková, 2016).

Tourism to Cuba has continued to grow with a 16% increase between 2014 and 2015, and another 13% increase in 2016 (Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información Republica de

Cuba, 2016). This has led to new opportunities, as well as given way to new impacts, some of which are discussed in this issue. Specifically, this issue builds on the literature related to tourism by focusing on factors that influence, and in some cases, complicate, tourism planning and development in Cuba. First, Salinas, Mundet, and Salinas provide a comprehensive historic overview of Cuban tourism, considering the development of the sector since its beginnings in 1919 with the establishment of the first official government tourism organization. Informed by literature and official Cuban tourism data, this paper considers various social, political, and economic factors that have influenced the ebb and flow of tourism on the island. They provide a descriptive account of the turbulent relationship that Cubans have had with tourism development as a result of the early socio-cultural impacts that occurred with foreign-owned mass tourism development that promoted hedonism, gambling, and prostitution. As they note, the four factors that have led to the recent growth in tourism include the lift in the restriction of domestic Cuban travel in 2008 (permitting Cubans to use tourism facilities), the authorization of *casa particularles* and *paladars* as part of socio-economic policy changes increasing self-employment, the thawing of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US which led to a global shift in perceptions toward travel to Cuba, and new policy that has allowed for infusion of foreign investment in the tourism sector.

Kubickova and Lee consider the competitiveness of Cuba through an application of the Tourism Competitiveness Index, comparing Cuba to 29 other countries in the Caribbean and Latin America Region. In their analysis that considered change that occurred over two decades, finding that compared to other countries in the heavily tourism-dependent Caribbean, they are the least competitive while they are relatively “middle of the pack” compared to other Central and South American countries. The authors give important considerations with respect to future positioning of Cuba amount competing Caribbean destinations.

Two papers included in this special issue focus on how creating opportunities for interactions between tourists and local residents can help international development organizations achieve their goals. Bertella and Romanelli apply a community benefit tourism initiatives model that emphasizes the roles of actors, suggesting a reconsideration of the role of foreign organizations within that platform. Their case study focuses on an Italian development organization who partners with an Italian tour operator, that has aligned priorities, and together they offer a tour package that acts as a cultural bridge between locals and tourists. In doing so, they reflect on the ways in which international organizations can engage in responsible tourism, brining benefits to the local community.

Similarly, Spencer investigates Oxfam and Global Exchange study tours to Cuba. She introduces the notion of development tourism, a type of tourism that allows tourists to learn about how international non-governmental organizations are achieving their development projects by experiencing them in person. The author finds that development tourism not only brings about greater awareness of the work being done, but also finds that the interactions with Cubans produce feelings of solidarity and empathy among tourists.

Simoni’s investigation of *casa particularles* is timely. The recent growth in the private tourism enterprises in Cuba is one that is reshaping the physical and socio-economic landscape. As Simoni notes, with new construction happening everywhere while Cubans seize the opportunity for capturing the much stronger tourism currency. Likewise, this empirical investigation can be paired with the contemporary reports that are demonstrating the “flipped pyramid” of the Cuban economy that is showing the best paid, most lucrative work can be found in the travel and tourism industry leading to Cubans leaving professional jobs for work in the sector.

In Checa-Gismero’s paper, the Bienal de La Habana, a bi-annual exhibit of contemporary art celebrated in cities across the globe, explores the ways in which it influences the construction

of the image of the everyday, quotidian Cuban. Given the historically questionable air of how Cuba has been portrayed—between the narrative painted by the US since the Cold War to the scripted message that the Cuban government provides to state employees in the tourism industry—the complex ways in which Cuban culture is represented and consumed needed critical examination. In this analysis, Checa-Gismero considers local, site-specific art and how it creates an opportunity for international tourists to experience authenticity through unmediated messages of the real Cuba through art.

Morgan and Pritchard expand on the work related to the cultural production of Cuba in online tourism advertising that draws heavily on its colonial past that, in turn, eroticizes and exoticizes Cuba. Conducting a critical discourse analysis on a particular set of advertisements of Iberia Airlines, the authors raise concerns over the ethical imperatives of advertising agencies who reinforce constructions of Cuban culture after finding that the airline had promoted messages that had racist and sexist undertones.

Finally, Látková, Jordan, Vogt, Evertte, and Aquino examined the perceptions of State-employed tourist guides to understand the way in which they represent Cuba to international tourists. They found that the messages were being filtered through government-approved scripts even though many guides noted that US tourists were particularly interested in learning about Cuban lifestyles.

Given the historic, political, and economic conditions that have shaped modern Cuba, the country has a very unique set of resources that set it apart from any other country worldwide. The timing of this special issue was meant to capture some of the historic changes facing Cuba's tourism industry. Though this special issue focuses attention on a single country, to reiterate what many scholars have already noted—there is generally a dearth of tourism and hospitality research that focuses on Latin American contexts (Lu & Nepal, 2009), and nations within a transition economy (Jordan et al., 2017). We hope that more this will spur more focused attention to this region with the scholarship, and moving forward, there is more intentional effort to give voice to scholars from the region.

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