

Che, Chevys, and Hemingway's Daiquiris: Cuban Tourism in a Time of Globalisation

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In Cuba over the past two decades, diverse and apparently contradictory aspects of tourism have emerged along with state-led development and market-driven initiatives. This ethnographic account examines the complex ways in which Cubans and international visitors experience tourism as an economic and cultural force. Despite the unintended consequences of tourism, which has produced growing social inequality and illicit trade, tourism has met surprising success in appealing to desires for both pre-revolutionary pleasures and enduring revolutionary culture and politics.

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In Havana's Museum of the Revolution, housed in a former presidential palace, a section is devoted to the 'Special Period in Peacetime', a time of economic crisis in Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union. A display case in this space quotes Fidel Castro in the early 1990s as he set forth three areas of development intended to resolve the state's economic problems:

[Our] development efforts during the Special Period are based on three pillars: the food programme, which has to be among the first priorities [...] the tourism programme, which is developing well [...] the biotechnology programme [...]

Following this quotation are several images – cruise ship, hotel and dancing girls – that appear to underscore the primary importance of the tourism component of Cuba's development plan. Indeed, since the tourism programme was introduced in 1991, tourism has become a leading industry in Cuba and the state has become a key competitor in Caribbean tourism (Espino, 2000: 360). Despite a slight decline in 2006 and 2007, the number of foreign visitors to the island rose to 2.35 million in 2008 (*USA Today*, 13 January 2009).

The return of tourism to this Caribbean island where it famously thrived as a tropical destination before the revolution has brought about a series of cataclysmic changes in Cuban society (Schwartz, 1997; Pérez, 1999). It has become *de rigueur* to describe the clash of socialist and market economies and desires on the island fostered by the growth of tourism, and to ask whether tourism will bolster the enduring socialist economy or destabilise it and bring a full-fledged capitalist economy in its wake. Likewise, it is

commonplace to ask if tourism can help build a democratic and open society or whether social conflict resulting from a two-tiered society divided into those with access to tourist dollars and those without will carry the day (Chávez, 2005; Sanchez and Adams, 2008). I want to suggest that we may view tourism as both 'saving the revolution' from collapse and as a catalyst for further social and political change—as well as for engagement with the global market economy, in what has been called Cuba's 'hybrid transition' (Colantonio and Potter, 2006: 4–8).

Like others who have observed tourism's growth during the past two decades, I have noted the ambivalence of many Cubans in response to the surge in the island's tourism, which has brought both economic recovery and social divisions (Martin de Holan and Phillips, 1997; Espino, 2000). At the same time, I have observed the fairly congenial way that diverse tourism niches have developed and offered relief to the suffering political economy. Thus, while my work agrees to some extent with analyses that emphasise the tensions and contradictions in Cuban tourism, I depart from others by arguing that just as Cuba has moved toward a more mixed economy that allows for increased collaboration with capitalist states along with continued centralised state control, the tourism sector has benefited from a similar development strategy. There is a decided economic and cultural advantage to state and society in allowing pre-revolutionary capitalist attractions to coexist with socialist revolutionary ones, even as social and economic disparities become more apparent.

My interest lies in examining how Cuba presents this diverse tourism package and makes ambivalent desires for pre-revolutionary and revolutionary times into a marketable commodity. Drawing on work coming out of anthropology and tourism studies, I call for attention to what I have termed 'the tourism encounter' between travellers seeking 'exotic' new destinations and countries seeking to market their cultural and national heritage effectively to this clientele (see Rojek and Urry, 1997; MacCannell, 1999 [1976]; Hanna and Del Casino, 2003; Bruner, 2005). I should be clear that the desires I refer to are expressed in different ways by Cubans on and off the island and by travellers making their way to Cuba—they manifest as desires for the familiar or unfamiliar landscape, people, music, food, and so on. Nostalgia for the way things were before as well as after the revolution (and even, perhaps, after an awaited 'transition' in the future) has been a stock in trade in Cuba, and this represents the biggest calling card for tourism development. While nostalgia for the distant past would seem to be anathema to the revolutionary project, the government nonetheless participates in re-imagining Cuba's history in such a way that the 'bourgeois' pre-revolutionary period may be viewed as the logical precursor to the triumph of the revolution (on related Russian nostalgia in the post-Communist era, see Boym, 2001). Thus, there is less contradiction than first meets the eye in offering up Hemingway bars, Tropicana nightclub showgirls, and Buena Vista Social Club music along with revolutionary monuments for tourist consumption in present-day Cuba.

During five research trips to Cuba between 1993 and 2009, I focused on the cultural politics of tourism as part of a broader comparative project in the Latin American region. In Nicaragua, I had observed the apparent erasure of the Sandinista revolution and, later, the traces that still made an appearance on the developing tourism market (Babb, 2004). I judged that it would be instructive to examine similar questions in Cuba, where the revolution has held sway for half a century, albeit with some opening up of the market to local entrepreneurs and foreign investors. Staying in Old Havana or nearby Vedado, popular areas for tourists, I also travelled outside the capital to such tourist destinations as Varadero Beach, the model eco-community of Las Terrazas west of Havana, the

Viñales valley in Pinar del Río, and the cities of Santa Clara and Trinidad. I took city tours and day tours outside Havana for a first-hand view of what guides emphasise and what tourists take away with them. When possible, I gave questionnaires to tourists to fill out on the spot with information on their expectations, experiences, and reasons for travel to Cuba, collecting a total of more than 75 from international visitors. In addition, I interviewed tour operators in their off-hours and occasionally recorded them during tours.

After a consideration of diverse forms of tourism and their success in today's Cuba, I show that there are nonetheless social costs that are experienced differentially among the population. I go on to argue that the paradoxes and pleasures of pre-revolutionary capitalist-identified tourism in one of the last bastions of socialism are precisely what make Cuba a desired travel destination. With Havana as my principal site for ethnographic research, I describe the packaged 'City Tour' as a microcosm of how the capital presents itself to visitors, as an amalgam of colonial architecture and traditional life; pre-revolutionary extravagance and nightlife; and socialist modernity and revolutionary culture. In the concluding section, I show how these elements come together to offer up a city and a state that is ready for foreign consumption. As José Quiroga (2005: 103) so aptly describes, 'what needed to be saved from the period before the revolution' is memorialised and then put up for sale on the global capitalist market.

Tourism in a Mixed Economy

In late 1990, the Cuban government's call for a 'Special Period' was a way of introducing a series of austerity measures and other initiatives to overcome the country's deepening economic crisis. In an assessment of this emergency period following the dismantling of the Soviet Union and its trade with Cuba, Susan Eckstein (2003) showed that Fidel Castro looked not only to socialist strategies but also to capitalist and indeed pre-capitalist ones in order to rescue the economy. For example, to maintain the food programme, socialist principles of collectivist development remained in place, but *agromercados* (free markets) were also permitted, and urban subsistence gardens were encouraged as a sort of pre-capitalist alternative for surviving the economic crisis. As necessity became a virtue, it was desirable to save energy and to forage for needed resources. Cuban lives were dramatically affected during gasoline and cooking oil shortages, and while the state pursued a policy of self-sufficient food production. The socialist programme of agricultural diversification and reduced energy consumption was coupled with a 'pre-capitalist' reliance on bicycles and horse-drawn carriages for transport as well as production of homemade soaps, herbal medicines and other goods. And, at the same time, new capitalist relations of globalisation were introduced to 'save the revolution', as Castro courted foreign investment and encouraged the development of internationally competitive manufacturing and marketing (Chávez, 2005: 1).

Just as Eckstein noted the multiple strategies for confronting the Cuban economic crisis, I have found such diverse approaches in the area of tourism development. Visitors remark on the contradictions of tourism on the island, on the one hand offering the pleasures of high-end beach resorts and nightlife, luxury hotels in the capital city and rich architectural history, and on the other hand promising to show travellers a model of long-lasting revolutionary politics and culture. Nostalgia for

both the idealised revolutionary past (before the Special Period) and the hedonistic capitalist pre-revolutionary past in Cuba are evident on the tourist circuit. The peculiar amalgamation of tourist attractions is precisely what accounts for Cuba's global appeal and its economic advantage. Travellers who pay homage to Che Guevara at the Museum of the Revolution, later flock to the famed 'Hemingway bars' in Old Havana, the Floridita and the Bodeguita del Medio, followed by an evening out at the Tropicana nightclub to watch racy and extravagant shows that were downplayed during the early years of the revolution (see Berger, 2006, on related tourism in Mexico).

As tourism has been re-established as a mainstay of the economy and a key component of the strategy to make gains in the global market, it has also become a window on the ironies and contradictions in Cuba today. Thus, we are struck by the inconsistencies with socialist goals, such as the evident sex tourism and the socio-economic inequalities in the form of tourism 'apartheid' whereby most Cubans do not have access to tourist venues and revenues unless they work in the industry (Padilla and McElroy, 2007: 654). With the transition of leadership from Fidel Castro to his brother Raúl there has been an official easing of restrictions on places Cubans can patronise, but the majority of Cubans still do not have the resources to visit tourist hotels and restaurants. Although the government has sought to showcase its enduring nationalist ideology to visitors, sharp distinctions remain within the Cuban population.

Analysts generally agree that Cuba has accomplished much in education, health care, social welfare, sports and the arts, yet they point to the differential consequences of the Special Period for Cubans depending on their gender, race and socio-economic level (Safa, 1995: 166; Holgado Fernández, 2000). The Cuban government has suggested that tourism development *per se* has not entailed a compromise of revolutionary principles, and that any problems that have arisen are as a result of 'antisocial' elements in the society. Hustlers and sex workers (*jineteros*) are said to be seeking personal gains at the expense of the revolution, rather than responding to a difficult economic climate (Berg, 2004). Like some other analysts, I note the various aspects of tourism that seem to both undermine and support this socialist state (Sanchez and Adams, 2008). However, in my view the resulting tensions are part of the powerful attraction of tourism to what one visitor described to me as 'the last Marxist resort'.

Tourism's Return in a Transnational Era

Tourism in Cuba has a long history, from the late nineteenth century and extending through its mid-twentieth century heyday, when the United States supplied the majority of visitors to the country (Schwartz, 1997; Pérez, 1999). However, with the revolution in 1959 and the US embargo on trade and travel to Cuba in 1961, the Cuban government halted tourism development as a vestige of the bourgeois past, when Havana was the playground of US mobsters, media celebrities, and middle-class Americans. Hotels were nationalised, clubs were closed and prostitutes were 're-educated' to become morally correct citizens of the new society. Ordinary Cubans were offered the chance to enjoy the pleasures of the island that were formerly the exclusive province of the elite and foreign visitors (Cabezas, 2009).

Following the revolution, travellers to the country were often activists coming in brigades to cut sugar cane in solidarity with society in transformation. It took the Special Period to bring mainstream tourism back, and its level has now surpassed the earlier heyday. When I made my first trip to Cuba in 1993, the country was

experiencing severe effects of the economic crisis, while tourists were treated to the best of what the island had to offer, including luxury accommodation and lavish culinary displays.

As the economy began its recovery and cultivated foreign investment, new hotels were built and old ones were renovated. Old Havana received a makeover, so that the historic colonial district – designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982 – would attract more international visitors (Scarpaci, 2005). With the US embargo on trade and travel to Cuba, the majority of tourists have come from Canada, Europe and Latin America. The economy's diversification is paralleled by tourism, which targets a number of specialised niches: eco-tourism, sun and sand tourism, academic and educational tourism, heritage tourism, architectural and cultural tourism, health tourism, and so on. Many international travellers are attracted to see one of the 'last bastions of Communism' – if only because its ideological stance has protected the island against over-development – even as they enjoy beaches, nightclubs and the music scene.

Prospective tourists embrace a yearning for the 'other', a nostalgia for a place they have heard about but have yet to discover. An appreciation of things Cuban stems in part from what Ruth Behar has called the 'Buena Vista Socialisation' of Cuba (Behar, 2002), referring to the global impact of Wim Wenders's (1999) documentary tribute to the lives and music of a group of *son* musicians in Havana, *Buena Vista Social Club*. My research revealed that while some older travellers are more apt to be attracted by a desire to see the 'authentic' Cuba or to express solidarity with the revolution, younger generations are often drawn by the perceived romance and adventure of Cuba.

Tourism's Ambivalent Mix

In the Hotel Habana Libre, built a year before the revolutionary victory as the Havana Hilton, desks in the lobby are staffed to sell tour packages. Employees of the state-run tourism companies Havanatur, Cubatur and Gaviota offer tours to the same destinations, with nearly identical itineraries and rates. A day at Varadero Beach will cost approximately USD50 for transportation and use of facilities at an all-inclusive resort, and a three-hour bus tour of Havana will cost a more modest USD15. I found no single tour of revolutionary monuments and history, but these locales are incorporated in the popular city tour – and one state tourism office, Amistur, organises international solidarity group travel to various sites of historical importance to the Cuban revolution.

In conversations with tour operators and those connected to the industry, few mentioned the appeal of the Cuban revolution when I asked what sort of tourism they are promoting. Yet a frequently visited site in Havana is the Museum of the Revolution, and outside it the glass-encased Granma, the vessel made famous when Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, along with other rebels, sailed from Mexico to Cuba in 1956. Other monuments to the revolution, including the vast Revolution Square with a museum honouring Jose Martí and Che's portrait in neon silhouette, are also leading attractions. Tour buses line up so that visitors may pay homage, stopping at least briefly to take pictures.

Mirroring Cuba's hybrid dependence on pre-capitalist, capitalist and socialist economic forms, tourism at once highlights the vibrant natural environment, recognises colonial history and architecture, memorialises pre-revolutionary extravagance, and honours the revolution; tourists also become aware of enduring cultural forms such as Afro-Cuban Santería and contemporary forms such as Cuban hip hop, cinema and

conceptual art. These cultural attractions are often closely intertwined, though they may appear to be in conflict with one another. Any Cuban travel guide will direct visitors to historic Old Havana, with its museum-like quality since restoration began in a serious way a decade ago, and many will direct travellers to the monuments to the revolution that are found in abundance in the capital city and elsewhere.

A starting point for many is the Museum of the Revolution, whose extensive, triumphalist displays trace the early history of Cuba and the War of Independence through the Batista dictatorship, the post-1959 revolution, the building of socialism and, finally, the Special Period; in the museum shop, one finds T-shirts featuring Che's ubiquitous portrait and other revolutionary themes, as well as images of Havana Club rum and classic American cars. Some travellers make their way to the Comandancia Che Guevara, a small museum located at the historic Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña, the Literacy Museum, which features the gains made by literacy brigades during the revolutionary era, or the José Martí monument and museum in Revolution Square. Those venturing into the provinces may see the José Martí monument in Cienfuegos or Che's mausoleum in Santa Clara, where they may also visit the site at which rebels derailed Batista's train in 1958.

Even while seeking out such colonial and revolutionary heritage sites, one continually comes across another current strain of Cuban tourism, that of the alluring pre-revolutionary period featuring old American cars, Hemingway haunts, music associated with the Buena Vista Social Club, Afro-Cuban culture, and the sexually edgy nightclubs and street scene. The American cars are everywhere, many serving as ramshackle taxis for Cubans paying in pesos, while tourists pay more to ride in the newer cars built in the Soviet Bloc. For still higher fares, tourists can ride in one of the rare old American cars that has been kept in mint condition; a state-owned company, Gran Car, offers vintage rentals accompanied by drivers. The most popular souvenir selected by tourists may be the ubiquitous painting of a looming American car parked outside the Bodeguita del Medio, one of the famed Hemingway bars. As the author of a 'car-centered history of life on the island' comments, 'A photo of a 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air in front of an arched colonnade means Havana and Cuba all over the world, much as does Che's image on scores of products from T-shirts to postcards' (Schweid, 2004: 6).

The Bodeguita is one of a number of places now celebrated in Havana for having housed or been frequented by the renowned American writer, who lived in Cuba for almost twenty years. Tourists fill the Bodeguita where he enjoyed *mojitos*, as well as another bar, the Floridita, where he drank daiquiris. The latter boasts a life-size figure of Hemingway seated at the bar, a photo opportunity for patrons, and his commodified image is available in a number of items for sale. The room where he lived and wrote in the Hotel Ambos Mundos has been kept as he left it, with typewriter and manuscript pages, and can be visited for a modest fee. His country home, Finca Vigía, is now a museum site and those who are curious can peer through its windows accompanied by a tour guide for the price of a ticket. Tourists make pilgrimages to the fishing village Cojimar, the setting for *The Old Man and the Sea*, and to the local restaurant he favoured, which now attracts tour buses. Cubans themselves share fond memories of the writer they admired, and as Schwartz (1997: 208) writes, 'Hemingway's and Cuba's years-long mutual affection anchors part of Castro's tourist effort'.

To these iconic (and American) pre-revolutionary tourist attractions, we must add the return of the sexualised culture of the 1950s, a time that is remembered for its great licentiousness and excess. The Tropicana nightclub has been in operation since 1939 and offers patrons an extravagant evening of show-girls (generally dark-skinned

and fine-featured *mulatas*) in lavish costumes on an outdoor stage. For others there are less expensive venues or, if desired, direct purchase of sexual services. Much has been written about sex and romance tourism, and the continuum from prostitution to intimate relationships that go beyond the one-night stand to the duration of a vacation or longer (Davidson, 1996; Fusco, 1998; Fernandez, 1999; Elizalde, 2002; Cabezas, 2009). For the Cubans involved, the hope is to receive gifts and cash remittances into the future, or even marriage and a ticket to leave Cuba.

While the Cuban government has made weak attempts to curtail *jineterismo*, or hustling, it is thriving on the streets of Havana, particularly in areas of Old Havana, Vedado and Miramar, an upscale neighbourhood with large hotels and convention centres. Berg (2004: 49) captures the government's dilemma when she writes that 'jineterismo is seen as a visible symptom of a moral crisis of the nation'. Yet the government appeared complicit in the commodification of Cuban women's bodies when *Playboy* gained entry to photograph women of the forbidden paradise who were making tourism 'the best hope for the island's economic future' (Cohen, 1991: 73). The pictorial article may have encouraged more men to come in search of the beautiful 'flowers of the revolution' who were reportedly eager to meet foreign men (Codrescu, 1998). Cuban singer-songwriter Silvio Rodríguez has written and sung songs of the Special Period, reflecting on the disillusionment that has come with the introduction of capitalist-oriented foreign investment and tourism. His song 'Flowers' is a lament for the 'disposable flowers' that wither when they pass through forbidden doors. And his song 'The Fifties Club' recalls the sad yearning for the time when anything could be bought for a price and 'even desire becomes an object of consumption' (Rodríguez, 2003: 599–603).

Un Mal Necesario

The ambivalent aspects of Cuban tourism described here, revolutionary heritage tourism on the one side and tourism that is nostalgic for pre-revolutionary extravagance on the other, mirror the two faces of Havana as Antillean metropolis (Scarpaci et al., 2002; Sanchez and Adams, 2008). These two faces of tourism are not always separable, however, as many tourists pass unselfconsciously from the world of revolutionary monuments honouring Che or Martí to the world of the Tropicana nightclub in the course of a day discovering Havana. The improbable yearning for both socialist and capitalist (pre-revolutionary) Cuba has been evident for some time. Historically, the same revolutionaries who toppled the US-supported Batista regime also adored their American cars; Schweid (2004: 5) remembers his disconcerted reaction upon seeing the National Capitol in Havana, built in 1929 as a replica of the US Capitol, with long lines of pre-1959 American cars parked outside.

Visitors to Cuba's Varadero Beach may find it surprising that this tropical paradise outside Havana flaunts billboards praising the revolution (Gropas, 2007). Bold signage proclaiming 'Varadero: Revolución es para construir' or Che's image with the well-known slogan 'Hasta la victoria siempre' may appear quaint to those Canadian and European tourists who come directly to all-inclusive resorts and see little more of Cuba. At a baseball game in Havana, I noted the neon sign above the stands exhorting all Cubans to become involved in sport; 'El deporte es para todos', it proclaimed. Thus, Cuba's love affair with American cars, beaches and baseball presents opportunities for prominent displays of socialist propaganda, taken for granted by Cubans but, for at least some visitors, adding to the cachet of tourism in a 'Communist land'. Some visitors

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