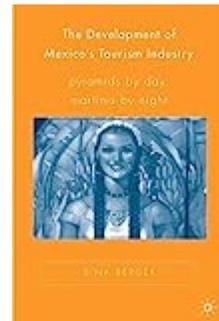




**Dina Berger.** *The Development of Mexico's Tourism Industry: Pyramids by Day, Martinis by Night.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. xvii + 164 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-6635-3.



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## Selling Mexico and Modernity through Tourism

In *The Development of Mexico's Tourism Industry: Pyramids by Day, Martinis by Night*, Dina Berger explores a complex and contradictory history. She recounts how the government of post-revolution, 1920s Mexico chose tourism as a primary strategy for achieving modernization and economic development. According to Berger, "tourist development helped shape a new society of modernity from mass urbanization and consumption to professionalized service and transportation industries," and succeeded to such an extent that by the 1950s Mexican intellectuals such as Octavio Paz were lamenting the loss of Mexican culture (p. 20). Yet success required attracting visitors from the United States—a nation resented for its economic dominance and nineteenth-century invasion and annexation of Mexican territory. It also required convincing Anglo-American tourists—many of whom held derogatory views of Mexico and Mexicans—that Mexico could be an appealing tourist destination. The goal was to cater to the needs of tourists while enhancing Mexican pride, providing "Service, not Servitude" (p. 54). Tourism, it was hoped, would transform rhetoric into reality, making Mexico as modern as its tourist "boosters" already claimed it to be. Ironically,

ensuring the comfort and entertainment of affluent Anglos became part of a larger set of seemingly contradictory revolutionary goals. Mexico's experiment also became a model for other developing nations. This process—and its problematic consequences—serve as the focus of Berger's study.

Mexico serves as one of the most popular tourist attractions for U.S. citizens in the early twenty-first century, but this was not the case in the early twentieth century. Anglo tourists feared germ-laden water, poor accommodations, bad roads, a less than welcoming reception from many Mexicans, and even a lack of things to see and do. Further, many Anglos associated travel in Mexico with the vice tourism that flourished in the 1920s in border communities such as Tijuana, where alcohol, gambling, and prostitution were abundant. In Mexico, citizens even coined the term "tijuanaization" to describe the spread of vice along the border (p. 61).

Mexican tourism boosters and government officials tried to combat these dim perceptions in multiple ways. One was to fund the production of tourist booster literature, which was distributed widely in the United States.

This literature presented Mexico as a nation of contrasts—a place of indigenous cultures, ancient traditions, and monumental Pre-Columbian architecture, yet also a thoroughly modern nation with comfortable hotels, fashionable stores, fine cuisine, and lively nightlife. Mexican tourism officials also attempted to build relationships with tourism boosters and tourism industry figures in the United States, and to secure investment for new hotels and other tourist infrastructure. Finally, the Mexican government oversaw building projects to try to remedy problems that could not be “boosted” away. One of the largest was a new national highway, connecting Mexico City with the United States via Laredo, Texas.

Berger’s book makes an important contribution to tourism studies by maintaining a comparative view. She demonstrates that Mexican officials saw the meteoric growth of Los Angeles and Southern California, which had used tourism as a central means of development, as an important model. She also connects Mexico to tourism development in the Caribbean, for Mexican boosters saw Cuba—a potent draw for U.S. tourists—as both a success and a cautionary tale. On that island, large-scale tourist development brought wealth to only a few, and also brought the vices that had already blighted Mexican border communities. Berger also uncovers the extensive relationships between government officials, tourist businesses, and tourist boosters in both Mexico and the United States. Prior to Berger’s work, these links had not been well-documented, and their very existence is somewhat surprising, considering the often acrimonious relationship between both nations in the 1920s and 1930s.

While promotional efforts met with some success, they also met unexpected adversities. The nationalization of foreign oil company holdings in Mexico, by president Lázaro Cárdenas in 1937, created a backlash in the United States, and American oil companies spread rumors of dire petroleum shortages that would leave motor tourists helplessly stranded. In 1938, a hurricane struck San Luis Potosí, and the American media printed accounts of a thousand or more U.S. tourists trapped without help, potable water, or food supplies. On this occasion, tourism promoters on both sides of the border swung into action, writing accounts of what measures the Mexican government had taken to aid tourists in the region. Tourism boosters also took advantage of more favorable news, highlighting Mexico’s role as an ally of the United States during World War II and promoting travel to Mexico as not merely escapism, but rather “vacationing with a purpose,” which aided the economies and war efforts of both nations (p. 90).

Indeed, the zeal and creativity which tourism promoters exhibited were remarkable, and Berger carefully details their efforts, particularly attempts to “sell” Mexico City—to draw U.S. tourists from the northern border to the heart of Mexican culture and society. Her analysis of promotional materials, including romanticized or nationalist illustrations of alluring landscapes—and sensualized Indian and mestiza women—is particularly effective, as she teases out the complex meanings of images intended to attract tourists and also bolster Mexican pride. In addition to tourism ephemera, Berger relies upon newspaper articles and letters, correspondence between various boosters, and a variety of Mexican government records and archival sources. These include periodicals published by the Mexican Tourist Association, the National Tourist Commission, and MAPA (the Mexican Automobile Association). By delving deeply into Mexican archives, Berger has uncovered a wealth of materials, many of which will be of use to subsequent researchers.

For all of the energetic efforts of its boosters, the Mexican tourism industry faced deep problems, particularly the lack of outside investment, and the limited funds of the Mexican state. Thus *The Development of Mexico’s Tourism Industry* is a prelude to later events, and the mass development of tourism in Mexico in the post-World War II era. According to Mexican Department of Tourism figures, tourist visitation was a paltry 13,892 in 1929, and did not surpass one hundred thousand until 1937. By 1950—beyond the scope of Berger’s study—it had leapt to 384,297 (p. 121). Consequently, this book is a study of the period in which the Mexican tourism industry was founded, not the period in which it flourished.

As such, Berger’s book hints at, but does not really delve into, the fundamental problems of Mexico’s tourist development. In Mexico, as in many places, government officials saw little distinction between economic development which enriched them, and economic development which was intended to enrich the nation. As in Cuba, Mexican tourism had limited economic benefit for most citizens. Further, for all of the boosters’ efforts to sell Mexico, particularly Mexico City, in the long term Anglos proved to be drawn to the least Mexican parts of Mexico—new resort communities such as Cancun, built from scratch to cater to Anglo tastes and expectations. Finally, there were the irresolvable contradictions inherent in using tourism to achieve revolutionary goals of modernization. Mexico did indeed develop a modern mass tourism industry—but that industry did not beneficially modernize the lives of most Mexicans. Instead, as the author notes, while it “undoubtedly modernized Mex-

ico, tourism perpetuated ties of dependency as a service-oriented, demand-sided industry” (p. 3).

The book—rather than the author’s text—suffers from a few deficiencies. The inclusion of a map locating major cities, attractions, and travel routes would have been helpful for readers unfamiliar with Mexico’s geography. Likewise, while the book includes several illustrations of promotional materials, Berger’s adroit analysis of promotional imagery, as well as architecture, would have benefited from a larger number of illustrations to complement her text. Other components of the book, however, such as the bibliography and index, appear comprehensive.

Those criticisms aside, Berger’s book makes an important contribution to the historiographies of tourism, Mexico, and U.S.-Mexico relations. *The Development of Mexico’s Tourism Industry* furthers our understanding of the utilization of tourism as a strategy to achieve economic development. In her analysis of the contradictory attempt to achieve Mexican national modernization and pro-revolutionary development through tourism, Berger highlights a national story that can serve as a key model for how tourism has been utilized in many developing regions and nations. In those places, as in Mexico, its success has often produced ambivalent consequences.

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