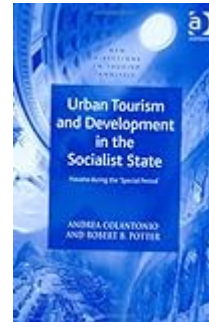


Andrea Colantonio, Robert B. Potter. *Urban Tourism and Development in the Socialist State: Havana during the "Special Period"*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006. xii + 256 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-4739-3.



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Tourism and Transition

Since the tourism industry replaced sugar as the most significant contributor to the island's national economy, Cubanists have paid increasing attention to tourism and its effect on the Cuban state, economy, and society. *Urban Tourism and Development in the Socialist State: Havana during the 'Special Period'*, written by Andrea Colantonio and Robert B. Potter, adds to this growing body of work. *Urban Tourism* is more comprehensive than most of the material currently being published. Much of the research being done on Cuban tourism deals with narrowly defined—but nonetheless significant—topics, such as foreign investment, prostitution, health tourism, etc. Colantonio and Potter utilize a wide variety of sources as they examine “the role, impacts, and planning implications of urban tourism in Havana within the new national and local developmental strategy in Cuba” (p. 12). In doing so, they illustrate a number of the political, social, economic, and environment impacts of this highly significant industry. Their work will be useful for individuals interested in contemporary Cuban history, tourism and development, and postcommunist transition.

The book has two main arguments. “The first one

maintains that decentralization and the economic reforms of the 1990s are simply recasting vertical models of governance into new forms” (p. 5). The second argument contends that within the diverging forces of Cuba's inward-looking socialist ideology and market economy tourism, the Cuban government is not implementing its plans in a way that will preserve the achievements of the revolution. Instead, state officials are basing their decisions on the dire economic need that followed the fall of the Soviet Union and Cuba's highly preferential trading sphere. Furthermore, the authors rightfully stress that it is important to recognize “the 'path dependent' nature of post-socialist change” (p. 7). Cuba is adjusting to this change differently than countries such as Poland, Croatia, and Russia. The high level of centralization that has been maintained in the post-Soviet era and the continued U.S. embargo are two of the most significant factors influencing Cuba's particular path. Along these lines, the authors highlight the work of Allan Williams and Vladimir Balaz (2000) illustrating the different paths to tourism development in both Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

The introduction and subsequent four chapters com-

prise part 1. Each helps to provide a strong theoretical and historiographical underpinning for the ensuing study. Chapter 2 examines some of the ethical dilemmas that can arise for Western researchers working in the underdeveloped world. One of the authors' main concerns in this context is the transfer of knowledge, or in this case, the lack thereof. They argue that the underdeveloped world needs to incorporate more of the research results of Western scholarship into their respective nations' planning strategies. The authors also outline their methodology in this chapter, highlighting their varied source pool that includes archival research, interviews, and questionnaires.

Chapter 3, "Tourism Development: The Cuban Context," examines the contradictions between tourism development in the underdeveloped world, which tends to be decentralized and foreign-dominated, and the system of socialist governance in Cuba, one based on centralized planning and national sovereignty. The authors examine what the government has done to remedy these contradictions, arguing that its goal has become the "implementation of an Import-Substitution policy centered on tourism, aiming to reduce the country's leakages and economic dependency from external markets" (p. 25). Finding balance has been difficult for several reasons, however. During the Special Period Cuba's economic needs have been extreme; Cuba did not begin to develop the necessary infrastructure to independently maintain the tourism industry until the mid-1990s; and foreign partners have tended to prefer retaining control of their investments. Thus, while during the Special Period tourism has helped Cuba immensely, by creating over 200,000 jobs and generating 7 percent of the country's GDP by 1999, the authors also remind readers that scholars should not cease to see tourism as what keeps the developing world's dependence on the West intact.

Chapter 4's goals are twofold. The first is to provide an overview of tourism re-development in Havana during the 1990s. The national government identified sixty-seven tourist poles throughout the country. Five of these are in Havana, and the government has centered urban tourism development on them. Still, the steady growth in urban tourism that took place in Havana between 1988 and 2002 has not been distributed evenly among the five poles. The authors argue that East Havana has benefited the most from this growth. The chapter's second goal is to provide readers with a theoretical framework for the study of urban tourism. This is done for two reasons—to illustrate that varying types of urban tourism develop-

ment (i.e., cultural, heritage, business, etc.) impact cities in different ways, and to link tourism planning with urban planning in general. In their view, tourism and other urban functions are interdependent.

The general links between tourism planning and urban planning are dealt with in chapter 5, yet it does not highlight the particularities of this intersection within the context of Havana. Instead, the authors outline the variables utilized in their research. This chapter, much like those that precede it, is largely theoretical. Like the others, it helps to provide readers with the background they need to understand urban tourism in Havana during the Special Period as well as the major arguments surrounding its development.

Chapters 6 through 9 comprise the book's second part. In "Tourism and Urban Development in Havana: From the 'Pseudo-republic' to the Special Period," the authors "describe how tourism has historically been a powerful force in shaping Havana's urban expansion, with the exception of the revolutionary period from 1959 to 1990" (p. 87). They also begin their intense focus on the idea that tourism has led to the uneven spatial development of Havana. Throughout the rest of the book, they effectively highlight this notion in the context of themes such as infrastructural development, economic opportunity, and environmental impact.

Despite this uneven development the authors argue, in chapter 7, that the effects of tourism on Havana have been generally positive. They do have three criticisms though. Doctors, teachers, and other professionals are abandoning their jobs for work in tourism. The state's failure to employ large numbers of people has led to increased crime and prostitution. Finally, the economic benefits have been limited to the city's tourism poles. To justify their criticisms, the authors cite a number of examples based on statistical information and several interviews with residents. They also note that in light of this tourism-based social change, new actors and interest groups have arisen in Havana, in some cases, in direct opposition to Cuba's system of highly centralized planning. Thus, the authors illustrate that tourism may provide the fertile ground necessary for institutional change to take root in Cuba.

Chapter 8 deals with the environmental consequences of tourism on Havana during the Special Period. The consequences have been tempered by two conflicting trends. The Cuban government promotes "sustainable development," yet its hunger for foreign currency "has increased the pressure to marginalize environmental

protection" (p. 138). The authors outline the institutions and legislation designed during the Special Period to regulate the environmental impact of tourism on Havana. They focus on topics such as the city's water, sewerage, and drainage systems, road networks, and pollution levels, arguing that in terms of infrastructure, tourism has had both positive and negative impacts on the city.

Chapter 9 is perhaps the book's most interesting. It examines how residents perceive tourism's influence on Havana. The authors base their conclusions on 160 questionnaires that they divided equally between the neighborhoods of Old Havana, Vedado, Montebarrreto, and East Havana. The questionnaires gave the authors an opportunity to test the validity of their claims regarding tourism in the capital. In almost every instance, residents' perceptions reinforced the authors' aforementioned assertions. The authors argued that one of tourism's main benefits is the economic opportunity it provides. In fact, 70 percent of respondents to the questionnaire saw tourism's main benefits as economic in nature. Unsurprisingly, the responses also reinforced the authors' focus on Havana's growing spatial divide. Similarly, when the authors were unable to assess whether infrastructural or environmental improvements in the capital have been a result of tourism or non-tourism-related initiatives, residents were equally unable to do so. The authors also incorporated several personal interviews into the chapter. The interviews reinforce the conclusions drawn from the questionnaires, complementing them quite well and improving the chapter's readability.

Chapters 10 and 11 comprise part 3. This section examines tourism's impact on policy-making in Havana and offers some concluding thoughts about Cuba's future. Government efforts to decentralize tourism planning have frequently met with mixed results. As the authors demonstrate, this has been the case with many of Cuba's state-sponsored tourism initiatives. They argue that the creation of seven new ministries could possibly serve as a step towards the extension of decision-making power to Cuban communities. Even though foreign investors seeking to operate in Cuba must obtain a license from one of these new ministries—the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (CITMA)—the economic strife brought on by the Special Period and concomitant shift from medium- and long-term to short-term planning, has led to the use of weak licensing standards in some instances. Thus, it remains to be seen whether or not these supposedly independent governing bodies will be permitted, or even willing, to act in ways that could potentially subvert the national economy. If

they are not, it is unlikely that decision-making power will be extended to individual Cubans. As the authors note, the formation of civic groups in Cuba is still forbidden. Once again, the authors locate their discussion within the ongoing debate regarding these institutional changes, highlighting the varied conclusions drawn by scholars including John Brohman (1996, 1997), Marifelli Perez-Stable (1997), and Mauricio Font (1997).

It is clear that the authors are well versed in the most pertinent issues relating to the impacts and development of urban tourism in Cuba, and particularly in Havana, during the Special Period. Still, certain ideas could have been developed further. They suggest that Western analyses of the underdeveloped world—particularly in the context of tourism development—could provide useful to information planners in developing nations. Nevertheless, they do not offer suggestions as to precisely how their work might be incorporated into Cuban planning. In the authors' defense, though, the insular Cuban government may not be interested in the recommendations of foreign academics anyway.

Furthermore, on a more minor note, the authors err in their assertion that taxis specifically designated for Cubans avoid picking up tourists because they face high fines. I have spent roughly five months in Cuba, and I have had no trouble getting a *machina* (the Cuban word for these taxis that the authors do not acknowledge) to pick me up. My own research on Cuban tourism has also led me into countless conversations with foreign tourists. Most tourists do not understand that *machinas* run fixed routes around the city. Thus, if you ask a driver to go somewhere not on his or her route, they will rarely offer you a ride. The fixed *machina* rate for Cubans is normally ten *pesos nacional* (\$U.S. 0.45), but some drivers attempt to charge foreign tourists a higher rate—anywhere from twenty to forty *pesos nacional*. While this fee is still often better than one would pay in a state-owned tourist taxi, the seemingly arbitrary price structuring causes some tourists to avoid using *machinas*. Other tourists are merely intimidated by the fact that many *machina* drivers do not speak a language other than Spanish. While this example is neither a glaring error nor a reflection of carelessness on the authors' part, it does illustrate a dilemma for scholars of tourism. The industry is all-encompassing, and one would likely need professional training in multiple fields to fully understand all of its complexities. Thus, for broad studies of the tourism industry, inclusion will always come at the risk of oversimplification.

While the authors proclaim their book to be one of

the most comprehensive works dealing with tourism in Cuba (and in fact it is), they also acknowledge its limits. Two of these are evident within the book's title. Colantonio and Potter's focus on urban tourism neglects to address the growing levels of rural tourism on the island, particularly in Vinales and the Sierra Maestra. It also excludes the resort-based tourism that is so prevalent in areas such as Varadero and Cayo Coco. Along similar lines, their concentration on urban tourism in Havana ignores the other important cities within Cuba's tourist world, for example, Santiago de Cuba, Santa Clara, Trinidad, and Cienfuegos.

Despite these and several other minor criticisms, this

is an extremely useful book. It should be compulsory reading for students of Cuban tourism, although individuals who are already quite familiar with the topic may find themselves yearning for more. This is partly a result of the responsible limits self-imposed by the authors. Nevertheless, their analysis of the changes that have taken place in Havana during the Special Period as a result of tourism is fascinating. As the book concludes, they also illustrate the major role that tourism and the institutional changes that have accompanied it will likely play as Cuban society braces itself for change in the looming post-Castro era. Thus, the book becomes a tool for not only those interested in Cuba's past, but the island's future as well.

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