7-11-2013

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Recommended Citation
Rodríguez, George. "Pro-Poor Tourism: Boosting Haiti’s Tourism to Steer Away From Aid-Dependent Economy Risks Commodification of Culture." (2013). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10077
Pro-Poor Tourism: Boosting Haiti’s Tourism to Steer Away From Aid-Dependent Economy Risks Commodification of Culture

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Category/Department: Haiti
Published: 2013-07-11

The traditionally idyllic destination for tourists seeking fun and sun, Haiti is seen now as a destination for people on tourist visas coming to help out in post-quake and other relief work, for low-income or working-class tourists, and for Haitians from among the nation’s diaspora arriving to visit with relatives.


A series of coups ensued junior’s fall—including those against ex-President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004), the Catholic priest better known as "Titide"—into the 21st century.

The recurring, violent political storms were also coupled by violent weather events, such as the January 2010 magnitude 7.0 devastating earthquake (NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010) and last year’s hurricanes Isaac in August and Sandy in October (NotiCen, Jan. 10, 2013), to effectively discourage recreational tourists from enjoying vacations here.

A recent study by Brazilian think tank Instituto Igarapé put at 950,000 the number of visitors coming to Haiti last year, compared with the 4.6 million going to the neighboring Dominican Republic—both countries sharing the island of Hispaniola (NotiCen May 20, 2010).

Igarapé’s figures in the study "Is Tourism Haiti’s Magic Bullet?" indicate that this French-speaking, endemically poor country of 9.1 million people—described as the poorest in the Americas—where daily income for 78% is less than US$2, hosts anywhere from 3,000 to 10,000 nongovermental organizations (NGOs) aiding Haitians after the quake.

Thousands of aid workers and missionaries from these organizations have massively arrived in this nation now nicknamed the "Republic of NGOs," according to the institute whose name derives from the Brazilian word "igarapé," meaning "a current." It combines two words in the indigenous nheengatu language of the Brazilian Amazon Basin—"igara," a small boat carved out of a tree trunk, and "pê," a trail or path, and geographically it also applies to the shallow streams flowing between islands in the basin forest.

Haiti’s diaspora returns as tourists

The institute says that "humanitarian tourism" has more recently been joined by what the institute describes as a "small cadre of tourists," many of them from the Haitian diaspora.

"While the Haitian Ministry of Tourism estimates that only 5% of Haitians in the diaspora visit Haiti, the past few years witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of first-, second-, and third-
generation emigrants returning to visit or even visiting Haiti for the first time," the study pointed out. "Some came to see family and friends, but many also came as typical tourists, staying in hotels and engaging in sightseeing activities and cultural events."

"While there are some tourists who visit specific areas of the country, such as those that enter the north through Royal Caribbean cruises, many do not leave the area they arrive in because of inadequate transportation and a lack of leisure infrastructure around the country," the report said.

By Igarapé’s estimates, 50% of tourists coming to Haiti are working class, with another 10% living in poverty in their countries of residence. Thus, they "struggle to find affordable accommodations in areas like the capital, where hotel-room prices are inflated in response to the per diem rates available to development professionals and international-organization employees," said the report.

Especially after the 2010 quake, Haiti’s precarious economy has come to depend mostly on aid-generated income, a situation the government seeks to change.

Estimates by different sources indicate that, immediately after the event, official bilateral and multilateral donors pledged aid worth US$13 billion, some US$9 billion of which had actually been disbursed by February of this year (NotiCen, May 31, 2012, and Feb. 14, 2013).

Official estimates released in January indicated that the figure was handed in during 2010-2012—although, according to local and foreign observers, the money does not seem to have altogether trickled down to hundreds of thousands of people needing it.

**Aim to increase recreational tourism**

The country’s authorities in the field are betting on recreational tourism to help make the change possible and claim not all visitors are humanitarian tourists, among them Tourism Minister Stephanie Villedrouin. She counters the view held in the institute’s report that charitable travel is better than recreational tourism for Haiti and that the country should focus more on nonwealthy visitors than on big spenders.

Villedrouin says, "It will take time," but the tourism industry "will create jobs, directly and indirectly," since it has the potential to do so.

Some tour operators believe this country cannot compete with other destinations in the area on the 3-S front—sun, sea, and sand—but it can focus on tourists interested in knowing the essential Haiti—the beaches and the mountains, yes, but also the nation’s culture, its history.

Besides tourism projects in several locations that include exclusive hotels charging, in some cases, close to US$250 a night, initiatives for less luxury and a more down-to-earth approach are surfacing, Igarapé revealed.

One such approach is Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT), another is culture commodification. In the first case, tourism is positioned "as a key developmental platform for poverty alleviation and economic stabilization," and it "includes a number of specific strategies aimed at improving the economic status of a country through tourism," said the institute.

"These strategies include increasing economic benefits by expanding local employment, training, and enterprise opportunities; enhancing non-financial livelihood impacts through investment in natural resource management; improving investment in cultural and other public goods," it
explained. Also, by "increasing local access to infrastructure and services developed to incentivize tourism and enhancing citizen empowerment by creating policies and frameworks that include lower income residents in joint decision making and pro-poor partnerships with the private sector."

The study mentioned the example of Saint Lucia, an island nation in the English-speaking Caribbean, where tourism became an economic-development priority in 1998. The community-based Saint Lucia Heritage Tourism Programme, coupled with PPT strategies, had the industry contributing 42.5% of the country’s GDP by 2011 compared with 31.8% in 1998.

About the second case, the report said that, regarding culture and history, "Haiti has much to offer visitors. But tourism efforts to harness the potential presented by Haitian culture need to be mindful of possible commodification of Haiti’s culture."

It is "the process in which rituals, traditions, religious ceremonies, and history become commercialized goods to be marketed in the tourism industry," Igarapé explained.

"Commodification ... could easily happen in Haiti as some of the experiences commonly cited" by foreign visitors, "such as voudou ceremonies, are those most at risk," it warned.

"In cultures where tourism has commercialized sacred rituals and important historical narratives, the very identity of the residents has been deformed as locals altered their practices to meet the expectations of tourists," it said. "This loss of culture isn’t inevitable though. With careful planning and inclusion of all socioeconomic classes in tourism efforts, Haitian culture can be preserved as local residents are empowered to present and celebrate their own definition of local culture."

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