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Cuban Tourism Sector Gains Continue Amid Controversies from U.S. Rapprochement

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Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2016-06-23

The flow of US travelers into Cuba continues to increase with the arrival of celebrities, models, and show business figures and the recent addition of cruise ship services from the US. It is one of the most visible images of the changes brought about by the process of rapprochement between Washington and Havana (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015, April 16, 2015, and Dec. 10, 2015).

Meanwhile, Cuban journalists and intellectuals raise concerns about the potential political and cultural impact of tourism on the island. In spite of tensions and disagreements, US tourism in Cuba is such a striking phenomenon that it has overshadowed major political events, such as the Congress of the Cuban Communist Party that took place in April (NotiCen, April 14, 2016).

Among the most recent milestones of the “tourist boom” was the May arrival of the Fathom cruise ship Adonia, which operates under the Carnival Cruise Line. With 704 passengers on board, the journey inaugurated this season’s 26 scheduled voyages, 13 of them to the island. Cruise service between the two countries had been suspended since the break in US/Cuba relations in the 1960s.

Scarcely a decade ago, former President Fidel Castro criticized the cruise industry. “Floating hotels come, floating restaurants, floating theaters, floating diversions visit the countries to leave their garbage, their empty cans, and papers for a few miserable cents,” he said. Nevertheless, in order to receive the tourism from the cruise lines, the Cuban government agreed in April to modify regulations that prohibited the arrival of Cuban-Americans to the island by sea. The prohibition had motivated protests in Florida and nearly jeopardized Carnival’s plans.

For now, restrictions from the US embargo remain in place and limit the flow of US travelers. With the support of President Barack Obama, the US government has expanded the number of categories under which people can be authorized to travel to the communist island. These include, among others, family visits, humanitarian organizations, professional exchanges, and journalistic activity.

In 2015, 161,000 US citizens traveled to Cuba while 1,300,000 Canadians made the trip. In the first months of 2016, 94,000 US citizens visited the island, according to reports from Cuba’s Ministerio del Turismo (Ministry of Tourism). Canada and Germany are the top two countries sending tourists to the Cuba, with the US in third place, followed by the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Spain.

Cuba welcomed 3 million tourists in 2014 and more than 3.6 million in 2015. After the December 2014 announcement of the diplomatic thaw with the US, there was also an increased US interest in hotel companies and air and sea transportation, which has led to predictions that one day, Cuba would be visited by about a million Americans annually (NotiCen, June 27, 2013, and Feb. 11, 2016).

In 1980s Havana, one scarcely saw delegations of visitors from Eastern European communist enclaves. Then, during the gradual opening that took place in the 1990s, tourists from the rest of the world began to appear in Cuba’s capital, asking about local political issues with an openness that shocked the Cubans, who either tried to dodge those thorny questions or surreptitiously mumbled an answer.
Expanding infrastructure

The avalanche of tourists is a challenge to the island’s infrastructure, politics, and culture. The authorities recognize that there are not enough rooms available. Some tourists who ventured to cities like Viñales, 150 km west of Havana, or Trinidad, 375 km to the southeast, reported they had to sleep in parks because they could not find lodgings. Some popular restaurants do not have enough tables to serve the number of people waiting to eat (NotiCen, Oct. 30, 2014).

Near the beaches, and in Havana neighborhoods near the sea, many of the houses have logos on the doors that indicate the owners are registered with the authorities and can legally provide lodgings to foreigners. Without official permission, they are exposed to state inspections, or in the most feared cases, a random incident that could bring the authorities to seize the property.

Existing hotels provide 60,000 rooms throughout Cuba, of which the government’s tourism administration operates more than 24,000, according to 2015 reports from the state tourism group Gaviota, of the Grupo de Administración Estatal de las Fuerzas Armadas de Cuba (Group for State Administration of the Cuban Armed Forces). The authorities have announced their intent to double the number of hotels over the next 15 years.

In late February, there were 16,839 rooms for lease in private homes and 1,692 restaurants managed by private owners, with 40.4% of the accommodations concentrated in Havana. There were 6,407 entire homes rented and the number of tenants rose to 30,291, said sources from the Ministerio del Trabajo y la Seguridad Social (Ministry of Labor and Social Security).

According to statements by representatives of Airbnb, Cuba was the 191st country to join the accommodation network and is the fastest growing market globally. In May, they managed reservations for about 5,000 houses, some so luxurious that they look like something out of the grand avenues of European cities. They are really homes located along the coast of Havana or 1950s mansions in Miramar and Siboney, neighborhoods of monumental architecture and with an American-style urban layout.

Glamour and controversy

The affluence of foreign tourism and especially that from the US has been a source of controversy in Cuba, a country that calls itself an ideological and political stronghold against neoliberalism and consumerism, according to Fidel Castro. The arrival of television producers, celebrities, fashion designers, models, and show business figures from the US and Europe has created something of a crisis.

In 2015, Paris Hilton toured Havana and posed with Fidel Castro’s son at a gala dinner promoting Cuban cigars. Those images created a buzz on social networks, with people pointing out the hypocrisy of a government that promotes austerity to the point that it has turned deficiency into a synonym for dignity. Last May, the German designer Karl Lagerfeld burst into Havana with a Chanel fashion show attended by Mariela Castro, daughter of President Raúl Castro, and Antonio Castro, son of the former president.

For the Chanel show, one of Havana’s iconic boulevards, the Paseo del Prado, was cleaned up. Located next to the historical colonial center and stretching from the Capitol to the entrance of Havana harbor, it is one of the city’s principal arteries.
Preparations for the show included the polishing of floors, marble benches, and the Prado’s monumental bronze lions. The authorities did not bother to address the interruption of access for passersby and neighborhood residents, who endured interferences in their daily lives during the weeks of preparation. The national police even set up metal fences to keep them at a distance.

The filming of Fast and Furious 8 in Havana last April raised questions among journalists and social networks as well. The concern was the impact of the initiatives that open doors to foreign producers and entrepreneurs in an economy supposedly managed under the criteria of broad social benefit. There was also discussion regarding the possible distortion of national symbols and culture.

Fast and Furious, a commercial film of dubious quality, aggressively invaded Havana life. It disrupted communications in the central areas, affected students and workers, and added more tension to the Cubans’ already difficult daily life. Something similar happened with the presence of the Chanel show. Graziella Pogolotti, 84, vice president of the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba, wrote in the official daily Juventud Rebelde that the show had “imposed unacceptable restrictions to the residents of some neighborhoods.”

A talented essayist and president of the Alejo Carpentier Foundation, Pogolotti also lambasted the show staged to welcome the cruise ship Adonia in Havana harbor. “The arrival of the first American cruise ship, according to the broadcasts of our news media, was welcomed with choreography more suited to a cabaret than to a public space: The girls wore brief costumes made with the national flag,” she said.

The invasion of a world of luxury, frivolity, and glamour becomes increasingly jarring to the ordinary Cuban amid the fragility of their daily existence. The dizzying social stratification and the prominence of privileged figures linked with political power and the military is adding to the population’s displeasure. That discontent is increasingly seen in the streets, social networks, and in the comments of lecturers and the online media specializing in Cuban current events.

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