
10 The Politics of Tourism in Cuba

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Introduction

On March 14, 2016 the US government announced that it would allow its citizens to travel to Cuba for ‘people to people’ visits (e.g. educational) and that it would relax its restrictions on commerce between the two countries. This announcement was made as part of a policy to normalize the relations between the US and Cuba (Davis, 2016). Notwithstanding the volatility of US politics and the possibility of a reversal of this initiative, if normalization eventually includes pleasure travel, a virtual tsunami of American tourists could soon be making its way to Cuba. This possibility raises fundamental questions about Cuba’s strategy for development and its readiness for this tourist invasion.

In the first edition of *Tourism and Political Change*, the chapter on Cuba (Hinch, 2010: 97-107) focused on tourism as an instrument of foreign policy from the American perspective. Recently, there has been a thawing of the US position, although basic travel restrictions are still in place. Rather than providing a new analysis of the politics and policies on the American side of this relationship, this chapter will focus on the politics of tourism in Cuba. The underlying objective of the chapter is to consider the sustainability of tourism as an agent for development in Cuba, given the political paradoxes that are emerging as the government uses a capitalistic industry to support socialism.

The chapter parallels the structure of its 2010 predecessor by opening with a review of the historic phases of Cuban tourism, followed by a synopsis of the previous discussion on US foreign policy on Cuba. It then diverges significantly from the earlier version by examining the politics of tourism in Cuba.

Phases of Cuban tourism

International tourism in Cuba can be characterized as five phased (Figure 10.1) with the fifth phase representing potential scenarios for future development. A synopsis of these phases is now presented.

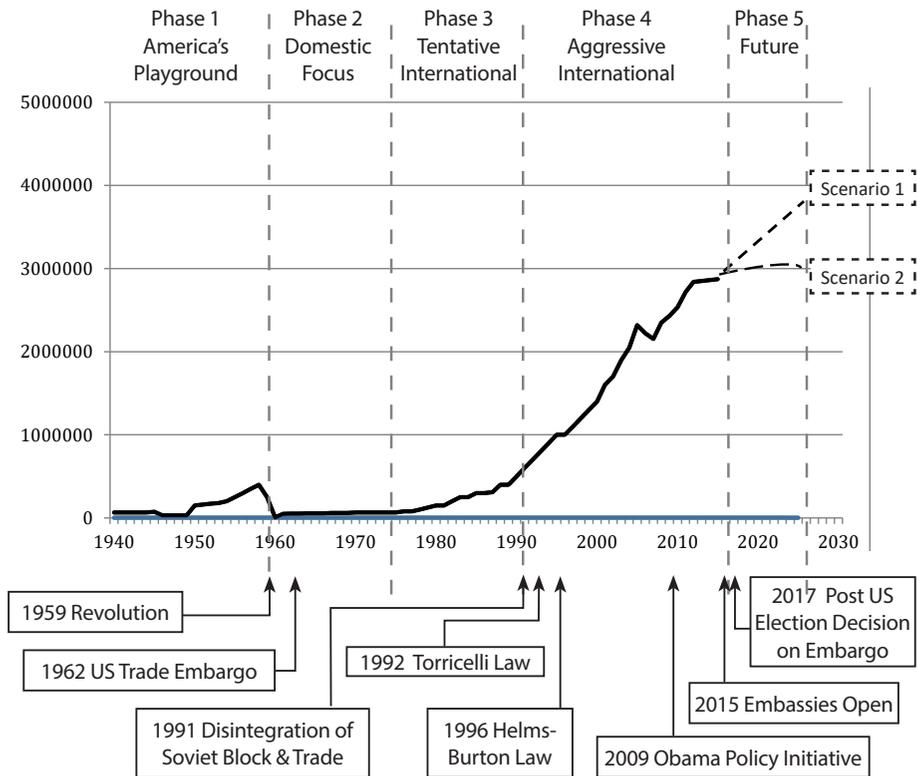


Figure 10.1: International visitors, phases of Cuban tourism and highlights of US foreign policy. Adapted from Elliott and Neirotti (2009); Maliska (2009); Sharpley and Knight (2009); and Hinch (2010).

Pre-revolution (1900 to 1959) – America’s playground

Cuba became a leading tourism destination in the Caribbean after its independence in 1898 from Spain. By 1920, tourism was Cuba’s second largest industry after the sugar industry. Tourist visits declined after the 1929 stock market crash but rebounded in 1933 when Batista seized power (Schwartz, 1997; Jaywardena, 2003; Elliott and Neirotti, 2008). Visitation to Cuba continued to grow with the exception of a brief slow down during WWII. This phase of Cuban tourism came to an abrupt end with the 1959 Communist revolution. Throughout these years most of the international travelers were Americans, who accounted for 87% of the 272,000 foreign visitors in 1957 (Hinch, 1990). During this period, Cuba was basically used as a playground by American visitors with a focus on sun, sand, sea and sex. Casinos featured prominently in the Havana-centred industry (Hinch, 2010).

Post-revolution (1960 to 1975) – Domestic focus

Although Castro’s post revolution regime nationalized the industry and ended, or at least suppressed, tourist related gambling and prostitution, it did not prohibit international tourism. In fact, Fidel Castro initially promoted international tourism by hosting a conference of the American Society of Travel Agents in Havana

in 1959 and with a promotional campaign in 1960 that targeted black Americans (Jayawardena, 2003). However, the country's geo-political volatility and the US imposition of trade embargo in 1962 including a ban on Americans traveling to Cuba resulted in a drastic downturn of international travelers. After the embargo, international visitations dropped to 3,000 to 6,000 travellers per year (Hinch, 1990). This low international visitor rate continued for the next 15 years but domestic tourism grew. Ward (1978) estimated that over 3 million Cubans used official accommodation on an annual basis by the mid-1970s.

Post-revolution (1976 to 1991) – Tentative international

The shortage of 'hard currency' and the country's vulnerability to fluctuations in sugarcane markets of mid-1970s compelled Cuba to return to the international tourism market. By this time, international tourists appeared to feel that the Cuba had stabilized since the volatile period of revolution and the missile crisis (1962). Organized tour groups began arriving from Canada followed by European and South American countries. Cuba soon gained a reputation as a low-cost sea, sun and sand destination in these markets (Hinch, 2010). By 1987, Cuba was reported to have 310,000 international tourists (Hinch, 1990) and had begun to enter joint partnerships with foreign investors to upgrade and expand the tourism infrastructure (Avella and Mills, 1996).

Post-Soviet (1992 to 2015) – Aggressive international

This period, sometimes described as a tourism revolution in Cuba, was an economic necessity caused by the disbanding of the Soviet Union and the subsequent disappearance of its international trade and financial subsidies to Cuba. Fidel Castro's five year 'special period in time of peace' plan was designed to resolve the crisis, and featured economic reforms such as legalizing hard currency holding and sanctioning a limited number of private micro-enterprises (Hinch, 2010). A significant growth in tourism resulted, as reflected in an increased market share in Caribbean international arrivals from 3% during second half of 1980s to 10% during the first half of 2000s (Padilla and McElroy, 2007). By 2009 Cuba was positioned as a sun, surf and sand destination for cost-conscious international travelers, and was hosting 2.42 million international tourists per year (Caribbean Tourism Organization [CTO], 2010).

Future (2016 to 2025) –Return of the American market or slowed growth

The CTO reported that international arrivals to Cuba in 2010 were 2.53 million which, by the end of 2014 had surged to 3 million (CTO, 2012, 2015a). International tourist arrivals grew at a rate of about 4% per year from 2010 to 2014 (UNWTO, 2015). The most recent data of CTO (2015b) that reports the international arrivals during January to May of 2015, shows a 15% increase compared to the same period in 2014. By and large, with recent developments in the US-Cuba relationship and