

Tourism and Political Change



Edited by Richard Butler and Wantanee Suntikul

Tourism as an Instrument of Foreign Policy: the US Trade Embargo on Cuba

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

Part III

Normalisation/ Opening

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Tom Hinch

Introduction

Tourism occurs in complex and dynamic environments, and it is impacted by and, in turn, impacts upon these environments. One goal of tourism research is to develop an understanding of this relationship and ultimately to articulate ways of influencing it. This chapter considers the US foreign policy environment in relation to tourism in Cuba.

At its core, the relationship between the US and Cuba has been characterized by fear, distrust and animosity since the Cuban revolution led by Fidel Castro in 1959. At the forefront of the US government's overt responses to these events was the 1962 economic embargo that restricted US citizens' right to trade with, invest in, or travel to Cuba. The embargo is still in place, 47 years after its original imposition and despite several rigorous critiques of its merits.

At the time of writing this chapter, expectations are high that the embargo is ripe for significant moderation, if not an outright removal, based on two developments. First, recently-elected US President Obama publicly stated that he was prepared to modify the US's strategy of isolating Cuba by relaxing the economic embargo. He has since tempered his statements but still seems committed to moving in this direction. The second major factor is that Fidel Castro has suffered health problems over the past few years and recently relinquished his post as President of Cuba to his brother Raul. Given the apparent personal nature of the animosity that exists between the two countries, the US is likely to be more willing to work with new leaders in Cuba. The direct impact of removing the US imposed travel restrictions, even in the absence of the removal of other aspects of the embargo, would be significant for tourism in Cuba and throughout the Caribbean. In the absence of the US travel restrictions, Padilla and McElroy (2007) estimate that in five years, annual visits by Americans would grow to 2.3 million, with up to two-thirds of these being diverted from other destinations and one in four being Cuban Americans. Similarly, in a working paper published by the International Monetary Fund, Romeu (2008) estimated that 3 to 3.5 million Americans would soon be visiting Cuba each year. The overwhelming consensus of these and other estimates is that Americans will flood to Cuba upon removal of the US travel restrictions with significant implications in terms of economic, social and physical impacts on Cuba and throughout the Caribbean.

Chapter extract

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