

# Urban Tourism and Development in the Socialist State — Havana During the ‘Special Period’

**Andrea Colantonio and Robert B. Potter**

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*Urban Tourism and Development in the Socialist State — Havana During the ‘Special Period’*, written by Andrea Colantonio and Robert B. Potter, is an ambitious, well-organised and written book about urban tourism in Cuba, with Havana providing a fascinating and detailed case study. It focuses upon very recent developments commencing in 1990 when Castro announced the start of a ‘Special Period’ due to the political collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s which had huge implications for the Cuban economy. Having been to Cuba on several occasions with a keen (research) interest in the state’s leisure and sport policies, reading this book was both pleasurable and informative. I have little doubts that this is one of the most comprehensive and detailed studies of the complex developments, realities and implications of urban tourism in contemporary Cuba. The book certainly fills a niche in Tourism studies.

The main aim of this publication, which is based on extended periods of fieldwork in Cuba by Andrea Colantonio, is to analyse ‘the nature and key characteristics of Cuba’s transition and to assess the role played by tourism in the country’s institutional and economic restructuring’ (p. 5). Focusing on Cuba is particularly exciting as the country’s exposure to the complex globalisation process has been limited over the last four decades. Furthermore,

in the wake of Cuba’s growing popularity as a tourist destination, this book is certainly timely.

The book is very well organised and structured. It is divided into three parts, each comprising several chapters. Part 1 (*Urban Tourism, Planning and Development*) hosting Chapters 1–5 contextualises the research, reviews the relevant academic literature and identifies appropriate conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Part 2 (*Tourism and Development in Havana*) comprising Chapters 6–9 focuses on Havana’s urban expansion and lays the foundations for an assessment of the socio-economic and environmental impact of tourism. The final chapter of this part also provides interesting data on the perceptions of local residents. Subsequently, Part 3 (*Tourism and Governance in Havana: Concluding Perspectives*) deals with planning, policy and governance issues (Chapter 10) and draws final conclusions (Chapter 11). Certainly few would argue with the fact that the authors do a worthy job of covering a wide range of relevant issues. The primary strength of the book lies in the presentation of an empirically grounded, theoretically informed case study. The theory sections present well-developed theoretical constructs that draw upon the work of established and prominent scholars. Furthermore, the book duly satisfies the authors’ aim by providing a



detailed and clear understanding of the role of urban tourism in Cuba, in particular of regeneration and sustainability issues, policy processes, the complex set of implications and the perception of Havana's local residents, and at the same time making it obvious (and not just to academics) that the reality of tourism in Cuba clearly reflects the contradictions and weaknesses of the political system and its economic arrangements.

The writing style is fluid and eloquently vigorous. It demonstrates knowledge acquired from dedicated time in the field and fervour for the production of material to assist those who study and work in tourism. Colantonio is to be personally congratulated on using a varied amount of data gathered from archival to personal interviews in Cuba. The primary research that went into the production of this book is proof that hard work reaps rewards. There is little doubt that the book is necessary reading for anyone involved in (urban) tourism policy in developing countries. Each chapter is clearly outlined in terms of its purpose and how it fits into the overall flow of the narrative. Even for those with little prior knowledge in the discipline, the book is highly readable and engaging.

The drawbacks of this book are few. First, there are a small number of typos, spelling errors and inconsistencies, and a few missing words that spoil the high quality of this publication. Secondly, there appears to be a promise to investigate whether 'the impacts of urban tourism (are) the same in cities in the developed and developing world' (p. 61). That promise of a comparative approach, however, is not kept. Thirdly, while the authors offer rare and detailed insights into the role, complex nature and impacts of urban tourism in Cuba, on several occasions this is a rather descriptive account which lacks analysis and a thorough critical evaluation. Consequently, although the authors address many valid points, they do not always follow these up with a full explanation and/or a critical evaluation. Fourthly, the conclusion of the book is a rather descriptive summary of

the main findings. It could have been used to outline a future direction as to how to develop sustainable urban tourism policies in Cuba and how to address some of the clearly visible imbalances and problems. Finally, the reviewer would have preferred a more detailed discussion of the re-emergence of two significant social problems that most Cubans are fully aware of and frequently debate: the recent rise of petty crime and the steadily growing number of prostitutes on Havana's streets. Although fairly difficult to investigate it would have also been worthwhile to look into the impact of multi-lingual Cubans, in particular foreign language teachers or public sector workers, who were trained in foreign countries, for example the German Democratic Republic, deserting their professions. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a considerable number of these have left the state sector in order to work in menial positions in the tourism industry where they can use their language skills and earn more through tips than before.

To conclude, this is a thoroughly researched well-structured book that makes a valuable contribution to the academic study of urban tourism in developing countries. It is also a congenial read and succeeds in providing a comprehensive and fascinating case study of tourism in Cuba covering a wide range of interesting themes. Despite these minor reservations above, there is no doubt that the readers of this excellent book will gain a better understanding and awareness of many significant issues related to urban tourism in Cuba. For advanced undergraduates and postgraduate students and their professors, the detail, depth and theoretical underpinning of the book make it an important addition to the scholarly library. The volume greatly increases the reader's knowledge not only of urban tourism in Cuba but of Cuba itself, its recent socio-economic development, the everyday life of its citizens, Cuba's relationship to the rest of the world, and its heavy reliance on tourism as a vehicle for economic survival and re-structuring. One thing is certain though. If Cuba's popularity



as a tourist destination continues to grow, so will the social divisions within Cuban society — a challenge the paternalistic state will find hard to tackle. Accessibly written and insightful throughout, *Urban Tourism and Development in the Socialist State — Havana during the 'Special Period'* is an important book and highly recommended.

**Udo Merkel**  
**School of Human and Life Sciences,**  
**Whitelands College, Roehampton University,**  
**London, UK.**  
**E-mail: [U.Merkel@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:U.Merkel@roehampton.ac.uk)**