

# International Tourism: Geopolitical Dimensions of a Global Phenomenon

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**Abstract** Tourism is not apolitical. The development of this field has diverse, complex, and contradictory economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental impacts. The revenues derived from international tourism continue to break records: 1.035 billion people traveled for leisure in 2012. Thus, tourism has become a mass practice. The history of international tourism in the last 50 years can be divided into three stages: (1) the period of 1950–1980, which were characterized by a gradual democratization of tourism supported by sustained economic growth; (2) the 1990s, which were marked by an euphoric tourist market that pushed for increasing access across the globe for international tourism; and (3) the years following 2001, which are marked by maturity in the field of tourism. The ecstatic vision of a world without borders was met with harsh reality after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, leading to increased awareness of the complexities for tourism in a world fraught with conflict. Selective diffusion of global tourist flows is the current economic and political logic driving the tourism industry and translates into sophisticated business relations. The climates of insecurity that affect some fragile tourist destinations in the periphery are more sensitive to the expansions and contractions of international tourist markets.

**Keywords** International tourism · History of tourism · Center–periphery · Geopolitics · Security · Power

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## 1 Introduction

Hazards such as natural disasters, military activity, recurring conflicts, and social unrest remind us that international travel is not without risk. The field of international tourism exists in a complex and potentially unstable environment, with dangers such as the explosion of a balloon flying over Luxor (19 dead, February 2013), the kidnaping of five tourists by an armed commando during the Holy Week in Acapulco (2013), the rape of a tourist in a minibus in Rio de Janeiro (April 2013) or that of a Swiss camper on the road to the Taj Mahal (March 2013). Gone are the days when the world was viewed as a vast playground open to tourists.

The flow of international tourism continues to break records: 1.035 billion people traveled for leisure in 2012, representing a growth rate of 4 % [World Tourism Organization (WTO)]. In 2000, 687 million people traveled, up from 278 million only 20 years earlier. Thus, tourism has become a mass practice [1] in the space of half a century: The WTO recorded only 25 million international tourists in 1950. Selective diffusion of global tourist flows corresponds to an economic logic and political tradition in sophisticated reports and evolutionary forces.

Tourism studies take on a new dimension in addressing power structures, often overlooked, and historical forces essential to understanding the internal and external sources of tourism development.

## 2 Tourism is Not Apolitical

Tourism is understood as a development choice with complex and contradictory political, social, cultural, environmental, and economic impacts [2]. Tourism can also be understood as an “engine of growth, prosperity and well-being” (WTO). It generates trade across the world and its export earnings (including tourist transportation) exceeded \$1,200 billion USD in 2011, a rate of \$3.4 billion per day (WTO).

Having acknowledged its overall economic impact, the international tourism industry is not without some fundamental problems. First, revenues are disproportionately captured by more developed countries, which act as both the primary transmitting and receiving locations for tourists.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, these countries possess the bulk of international logistics infrastructure (tour operators, air transport companies, etc.). This concentration, within a context of increasing

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<sup>1</sup> Receipts from international tourism amounted to \$1,050 billion USD in 2011. A total of 64.6 % of expenditures are made in countries with advanced economies (classification based on the International Monetary Fund), divided between the European Union (36.6 % of the total market), North America (14.1 %), and North-East Asia (13.9 %). In terms of emissions of international tourists, the positions are identical: Europe emits more than 50 % of international tourists, followed by Asian economies (China, now the world leader with 83 million in 2012, followed by Japan and South Korea) and North America. Over 75 % of international tourists choose destinations within their region of origin.

international competition, limits the transmission of tourism knowledge and skills to economies of the south. Developing countries are forced to incur significant costs in order to reap the benefits of tourism through importing essential products and services demanded by international tourists, resulting in the famous “leakage” [3] that limits the economic benefits of tourism on economies in the global south. In addition, there is also the issue of diffusion and distribution of income, and as a result the extent of the benefits that reach the poor.

These dilemmas regarding tourism revenues fuel accusations from local populations that the government is prioritizing the accommodation of foreigners at the expense of the needs of the country. The percolation of tourism revenues across different social strata is slow to respond to side effects of the tourism industry, such as the rising cost of living, inflation and dollarization of the local economy, and the privatization of space.

It is in this context that we must analyze the evolution of tourist flows and assess economic and political issues regarding tourism in their international, national, and local dimensions, according to the rivalries of power [4]. And in the margins and peripheries of the world—in developing, emerging, and least developed countries—the tourist is at the heart of political strategies: For some, it is to show their success through the window of the modernity embodied in this place, in contrast, other common opponents, Democrats or extremist ahead will focus their destabilization of that power (the construction of discourse of ordinary hatred of foreigners to possible action terrorist in its international dimension).

### **3 The Advent of Mass Tourism: A Half-Century History of Tourism**

The short history of tourism can be divided into four periods: (1) before 1950; (2) 1950–1990; (3) 1990–2000; and (4) since 2001. The concept of tourism can be traced to the beginnings of industrialization, when the romanticization of nature among the wealthy, coupled with a concern for health and well-being, triggered a self-induced shift among communities away from industrial centers. A rediscovery of shorelines [5] and artificial climates led to a search for exoticism toward the Middle East, Asia, and the Far East. These travelers were decidedly aristocrats and economic elites (bankers, industrialists, etc.) [6]. Over time the famous process of Boyer’s “runoff along the social pyramid” (1999) occurred, and demand for leisure increased to wider social strata. Gradually, the concept of mandatory, paid holidays became democratized in industrialized countries [7], although the World Wars temporarily interrupted this phenomenon.

From 1950, robust economic growth favored changing patterns of consumption in society (such as the need for recognition and self-esteem, see Maslow’s pyramid) leading to the advent of the “leisure society” [8] and the institutionalization of free time. The introduction of transport, both individual (cars were used in 41 %

of all international tourist trips in 2011) and collective (most notably in the form of air travel) accompanied the spread of global tourism. The development of large aircraft (Boeing 747, 1969) and charter flights and the deregulation of air space made international travel more affordable for the masses (51 % of trips in 2011 were taken by air travel). Distant destinations thus became more accessible: Marrakech or Iceland time a weekend, Bali or the Maldives for a week-long holiday.

All these elements contributed to the advent of mass tourism. This is reflected by the massive concentration of visitors at a few cramped reception areas. The development of cruise tourism is particularly significant in this regard: The latest boats put into service have a capacity of more than 6,000 passengers, and it is not unusual to see 12,000 people landed simultaneously at small Caribbean destinations. Democratization and the mass spread of tourism facilitated the development of new venues, and a progressive structuring flows, where offer conditions increasingly demand, like the concept of holiday villages (such as Club Med).

Brief but euphoric, the last decade of the twentieth century was characterized by an extraordinary expansion of the tourist sector. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1989 signaled the end of a bipolar world and triggered curiosity among Western youth to discover Eastern Europe, an area formerly entrenched behind the Iron Curtain. The unification of the world under a capitalist system created a promising geopolitical context for the tourism industry. This period also saw the opening of China (17,877 foreign visitors recorded in 1965, compared with 31.2 million international tourists in 2000 and 57.6 million in 2011), the end of apartheid in South Africa (the second most popular African tourist destination behind Morocco, with 8.4 million in 2011), Vietnam (1.4 million in 2000 and 6,000,000 in 2011), not to mention the positioning of new Caribbean destinations (such as Cuba and the Dominican Republic) as seaside destinations for mass tourism.

The early twenty-first century, and the events of September 11, 2001, began the age of maturity for international tourism. The 2002 Sari Club bombing in Kuta (Bali), in which nearly 200 people were killed on the “blessed Island of the Gods,” highlighted the vulnerability of tourist places and their relation to geopolitical issues.

These tragic events ended the euphoric approach to tourism and remind us that tourism is not apolitical: It cannot escape the social, economic, and political context of international destinations. There have been significant social events that have influenced the trajectory of tourist mobility and demand. These include attacks in Egypt (Cairo, 1996, Luxor, 1997), the Middle East and the Mediterranean (Djerba, Casablanca, Amman, the Turkish resorts of Marmaris and Antalya), on the Sinai coast (Taba, 2004 Sharm el-Sheikh, 2005; Dahab, 2006), and to the Indonesian and Philippine shores, through to piracy near the Horn of Africa. A citizen might imagine tourists to be neutral as a result of the temporary nature of their stay in a location, but tourists are particularly vulnerable targets. Specific policies are implemented to ensure the security of tourists, such as the deployment

of the army in popular tourist destinations (i.e., the pyramids along the Nile), with substantial punishments for potential attackers.

The actual volatility of tourists is not increased by “channel surfer” behavior, but is rather the result of a maturity that develops according to the travel experiences of tourists and the representation of their desired world [9]. The tourist industry emerged in a secure and peaceful world and has developed in a context of economic uncertainty (the 2008 financial crisis), political crisis (the state of emergency declared in the USA on September 14, 2001 is still in force), and environmental hazards (especially in the wake of the Fukushima disaster on March 11, 2011).

## 4 Security is Key

Tourism in more peripheral locations remains fragile: The film *Bronzed* (1978), shot in Club Med Assine, Côte d’Ivoire, is a case in point. Once a promising destination, Côte d’Ivoire and the city Abidjan have since slipped in popularity both for international tourism and for weekend visits.<sup>2</sup> The same fate has befallen the Club Med in Haiti, where the dictatorship of the Duvalier family<sup>3</sup> guarantees economic stability and generous investment, particularly from the United States. The palaces and luxury hotels had globally renown until the spread of AIDS in the 1980s in Haiti.<sup>4</sup>

In the search for a strictly controlled otherness, removed from the stresses of everyday life and global geopolitics, tourists and investors alike favor confined places devoted exclusively to tourism. Investments are concentrated in areas conducive to isolation and tourism specialization such as islands, coastal archipelagos, peninsulas, and barrier beaches around which clubs and tourist complexes are grouped, economies of scale that also facilitate safety. An example of this is the recent tourism boom on Honduras’ Archipelago Bay Islands, situated in the coastal towns of Tela and Puerto Cortes away from gangs, drug trafficking and other illegal activity. Another is the Venezuelan archipelago of Los Roques, which remains spared from the petty crime, social unrest, and political instability that affects the rest of the country. Social and political disruption, however, weaken marginal tourist destinations. A three-month long state of emergency was declared in the capital of Trinidad and Tobago in 2011 in response to gang activity in the neighborhoods of Laventille, Morvant, and Beetham. In Jamaica, it is advisable for

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<sup>2</sup> The latest figures provided by the WTO for Côte d’Ivoire report 301,000 international tourists for 1998.

<sup>3</sup> In a referendum held on June 14, 1964, 99 % of voters approved a constitutional amendment that gave the presidency to François Duvalier for life (because according to the constitution, the president of the republic could not be re-elected).

<sup>4</sup> Several medical studies at the time believed that the virus originated in Africa was spread in the United States via Haiti.

tourists to avoid public transportation and public beaches, as well as main neighborhoods in the cities of Kingston, Montego Bay, and Spanish town (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Additional examples could be provided to understand the logic of tourist resorts, which were imposed in emerging tourist destinations in the late 1990s. Installed at coastal locations, such “transplants” hardly accepted, these resorts concentrated on tourist consumption (and logically income) in peace, with the presence of local populations limited to authorized workers only. Such resorts exist along the northern coast of Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and the Cuban archipelagos of Cayo Coco and Cayo Largo.

The current development of cruise tourism operates on the same logic: The ship is not just a simple means of transport from one stop to another; it becomes the principal destination for cruise passengers.<sup>5</sup> The cruise ship is a floating resort, a secure environment of festivity passing by scenic landscapes [10].

## 5 When the Tourist Becomes a Potential Target

Four levels of insecurity can be defined: (1) tourists as victims of petty crime; (2) tourists as bargaining chips; (3) tourists as symbolic targets; and (4) environmental hazards of inadequate accommodation.

First, the tourist can be exposed to an immediate predation without any significant premeditation. Due to economic discrepancies between tourists and local populations and the financial liquidity that tourists possess, they are easy targets for petty crime. Tourists can be grabbed during popular rallies, when they are not paying attention or at nightlife locales specializing in extortion and prostitution (such as nightclubs in Mauritius). Petty crime occurs in strategic locations such as between downtown hotels and the waterfront (as in Cape Town, South Africa), or the interior, with attacks by bandits (as in Burkina Faso). For all these actions which are petty crime, the tourist is only the most lucrative victim.

Then, there are premeditated acts that target tourists for their economic value and/or for political reasons. They can fall victim to kidnaping for ransom by organized crime (such as in Mexico and Haiti). Tourists also have political value as victims in guerrilla zones or in areas experiencing communal tension (such as in the southern Philippines or in the regions of Mandalay and Pegu in Burma). Such politically motivated actions may attract the attention of the media and subsequently reach international outlets.

The tourist, by nationality, is a representative of their home country, a nation that may engage in war. Thus, tourists can be the victims of improvised explosive

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<sup>5</sup> The average annual growth of the cruise industry is 7.5 % over the period 1980–2011. The number of cruise passengers increased from 3.7 million in 1990 to 7.2 million in 2000 to 14.8 million in 2010 and 16.65 million in 2011, with a total of 105 million overnight passengers. Growth prospects for the industry are favorable, with 25 additional vessels expected between 2013 and 2015, with a total of 360,000 beds; a \$10 billion investment over three years.

devices (IEDs), suicide attacks, or terrorist infiltrators operating in international networks. Areas of instability in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel-Saharan region of Africa are particularly common locations for this security risk.

Finally, tourists' security may be compromised if the level of development and services are not consistent with the requirements for international tourism. Less developed countries face infrastructure limitations, such as at the archipelago of Cape Verde, which lacks a helicopter to assist in the ascent of the volcano Pico Grande, rescue boats capable of intervening in a stormy sea, and a decompression chamber in the event of diving accidents. Other limits may include a lack of hygiene, deficient medical supervision or prolonged exposure to health risks.

## 6 Conclusion

Despite the economic instability and current global crises, international tourism continues to consolidate its growth. While the purchasing power of Western middle classes (which supply the bulk of mass tourism) [11] increases, emerging powers such as China are supporting market growth.

Global tourism is dominated by major poles that structure their regional space. On its margins, emerging tourist destinations fit together, vulnerable, more or less stabilized, then forgotten and dead-angles margins. In these uncertain times, the tourism industry is aware of its own limits [12]. The daily deterioration of fragile zones, lack of hygiene, food hazards, urban unrest, police or paramilitary brutality, and state weakness are all factors that need to be considered within the confines of the global tourism industry. Tourism movements occur in a secure environment that shifts and transforms the borders of tourism in favor of destinations that guarantee security. A few emerging destinations appear capable of meeting the current safety requirements of the global market (such as Cuba, Vietnam, and Cambodia), while many unstable areas (like the majority of African states) have only marginal potential for tourism.

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