

Towards an alternative tourism for Belize

Ian Boxill

Department of Sociology, The University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston, Jamaica

Keywords

Development, Tourism, Culture, Location, Education, Belize

Abstract

This paper argues that tourism development in Belize should avoid going the traditional mass tourism route of most Caribbean destinations. Instead, it suggests that Belize is at the appropriate stage in its development to forge an alternative model, which draws and builds on its geographical location, history, culture and ecology. In making this case, the paper identifies a number of limiting and facilitating factors to tourism development. These facilitating factors recommend the alternative model. Specifically, the alternative model includes nature, education and community tourism; and a type of cruise tourism that is linked to education and culture. For this effort to succeed, the paper recommends that government and civil society work together to develop the country's human resources and to structure a strategy to achieve the goals.

This paper was originally a keynote address delivered at a national symposium on tourism by the University of Belize (UB) and the Ministry of Tourism in Belize City, 15 November 2002.



International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management
15/3 [2003] 147-150

© MCB UP Limited
[ISSN 0959-6119]
[DOI 10.1108/09596110310470167]

Tourism in the Caribbean and Belize

There is enough evidence to indicate that tourism is the world's largest industry and that it makes a significant contribution to the GDP of Caribbean countries (Jayawardena, 2002). Tourism is growing in its importance to the Caribbean and Central American nation of Belize. For the Caribbean, tourism's contribution ranges between 5 per cent and 80 per cent. Estimates for Belize are about 20 per cent of GDP (*Belize Travel and Tourism Statistics*, 2001).

While stay-over arrivals to Belize are not as high as destinations such as Cancun, the Dominican Republic, Barbados, Puerto Rico, The Bahamas and Jamaica, Belize compares favourably with countries such as Antigua and the Cayman islands. However, Belize has one of the lowest cruise ship arrivals in the entire region (*Belize Travel and Tourism Statistics*, 2001); although this year's (2002) arrivals have increased dramatically. Belize is still a moderate to low density destination, even though revenues earned from the industry are relatively high (see Table I).

Still there has been growth in the industry. Tourism has grown in its importance to the Belize economy over the last ten years. Between 1987 and 1999 stay-over tourist arrivals to Belize grew by more than 200 per cent, from 99,300 to 326,600 (*Caribbean Tourism Statistical Report 1999-2000*).

During the past five years, arrivals by cruise ships have grown significantly. Three years of remarkable growth ended with a 17.2 per cent decrease in 2001 (*Belize Travel and Tourism Statistics*, 2001). However, it should be noted that this year (2002) has seen a significant recovery from previous years – over 300 per cent increase over last year.

Even though the arrival numbers are relatively small compared with the more

established destinations, the dramatic increase in tourist arrivals for a country that has recently started to market itself as a low density/nature-based tourism destination has resulted in some important social impacts. These impacts are visible in larger resort areas, such as San Pedro, and to a lesser extent, in the smaller communities such as Hopkins and Dangriga (Boxill and Castillo, 2002).

There is much that can be learned about how not to develop tourism from the examples of countries throughout the Caribbean. From Cancun to Jamaica to Barbados, there are studies that show the social and environmental impacts of unmonitored mass tourism on the ecology and the lives of the people (Patullo, 1996; Maerk and Boxill, 2000; Periera *et al.*, 2002).

Therefore, Belize should be careful about the way in which it develops its tourism industry. It should eschew the sudden embrace of the traditional sea, sand and mass cruise ship model that most countries of the Caribbean are pursuing. Belize should place greater emphasis on the quality of the visitor rather than the quantity. It should also bring more stakeholders into the process, including the communities and educational institutions. In other words, Belize should adopt an alternative path to that pursued by the majority of the major Caribbean destinations.

Alternatives for Belize

Now, obviously, there are both limiting and facilitating factors to any type of development. These variables are not necessarily inherent, but are contingent on a broad philosophical orientation of development.

The Emerald Research Register for this journal is available at
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregister>



The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0959-6119.htm>

Table 1

Key socio-cultural and socio-economic indicators for Barbados, The Bahamas and Jamaica and Belize (1999)

| Indicator | Barbados | The Bahamas | Jamaica | Belize |
|--|----------|--------------|---------|-----------------|
| Tourist arrivals per thousand of the population | 1,936 | 5,205 | 484 | 1,344 |
| Rooms per thousand population | 21 | 49 (1998) | 9 | 16 |
| Visitor expenditure per capita (US dollars) | 2,490 | 5,224 | 496 | 459 |
| Tourism penetration ratio | 54 | 77 | 14 | 25 ^a |
| Visitor expenditure as a percentage of GDP | 32.20 | 32.87 (1998) | 21.40 | 16.19 |

Note: ^aestimated

Source: *Caribbean Tourism Organization Statistical Report 1999-2000* (2000)

Tourism development is simply one dimension of a set of development policies that may be pursued by a country. Belize would be better off with a development process, or a tourism development policy, which respects people's ways of life, engages them in a way that is psychologically, intellectually and economically beneficial; and sustains ecological systems without which we cannot hope to survive for very long. Of course, this type of tourism should ideally help to bring about economic transformation and must be sustainable. Given its stage of development and its assets, Belize is the one country in the Caribbean region that is best suited to undertake this type of tourism development. What are the reasons for this? In other words, what are the facilitating factors? They are as follows:

- Belize is a low density tourism destination. Both the land to visitor density and the tourism penetration ratios are relatively low.
- Belize is a country with an abundance of natural beauty, and has an ecological system that is the envy of most of the Caribbean.
- Belize is located strategically in Central America but is also washed by the Caribbean Sea and therefore enjoys the best of both worlds. Proximity to the USA may also be seen as an advantage.
- Belize has a diverse culture which incorporates the major cultures of the Americas: indigenous (Maya, Garifuna), African/Creole, European (Spanish and English), Hispanic and Asian.

Nonetheless, one must be mindful of some limiting factors. These include:

- Competition from other destinations in the region in the mass market; especially now from the rise of Cuban tourism, which is the fastest growing in the region.
- Social and cultural conflicts, which are likely to arise from significant growths in arrivals – particularly as it relates to mass tourism.

- The relative softening of traditional destinations of the USA and Europe, due to rising local crime and the threat of global terrorism.
- Potential environmental problems associated with all types of tourism, especially mass and cruise tourism. Many of these impacts have been detailed in the studies of the Anglophone Caribbean and Cancun.
- The present and potential problem of airlift due to the financial difficulties associated with airline industry.

Belize should continue on a path of low to moderate density tourism, with some minor elements of sea and sand/mass variety where possible. The country should adopt a well planned, highly regulated tourism with a strong focus on developing the cultural and ecological gifts of the country. Belize should try to differentiate itself from the pack by focusing on high end tourism and by being more adventurous and courageous. Thinking out of the box is what we need at this moment. But, what are some of the elements of this alternative?

Elements of the alternative

Education and cultural tourism

With the imminence of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), there is a great deal of potential for training in languages and cultures across the region. As a member of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), Belize should develop institutions to train English speakers in Spanish and, Spanish speakers in English. The University of Belize (UB), along with the University of the West Indies (UWI) could spearhead an initiative aimed at the development of institutions to train people in languages, both short-term and long-term. These should be well run, well marketed and well organized bodies which will attract some of the brightest and the best minds in the country.

The Cubans have been developing an education tourism sector, with little competition from other Caribbean destinations (see Jayawardena, 2003, forthcoming). In the case of Belize it should be possible to link the established educational institutions to those aimed at the study of Creole languages in the Caribbean. The target market should be Latin Americans, Caribbean people and US and European colleges and education institutions. There are millions of Caribbean people inside and outside of the Caribbean who look for places to go on vacation, to study and to explore every year. There is a critical mass of Caribbean people with a substantial amount of disposable income.

Relatedly, there is the possibility for the development of a festival type tourism, which draws on the culture of the country. The Belize annual Garifuna festival on 19 November is an example of festival tourism, but there are many others that can draw on the history of all peoples in the country. These festivals should be carefully managed or they can backfire, leading to the commercialization of sensitive aspects of people's cultures. There is the possibility to link these festivals to the educational institutions, thereby consolidating their presence and preserving their authenticity.

The Mundo Maya project of Central America is in this tradition, but it needs to incorporate more aspects of the educational type tourism, thus bringing in a different segment of the tourism market.

Cruise tourism

In relation to cruise tourism, there are questions about its long-term benefits to the Caribbean as currently constituted. Cruise tourism often results in a considerable amount of environmental problems for the income that is earned (Patullo, 1996; Periera *et al.*, 2002). Still it remains an option, that may be pursued, but only if properly managed. However, there is an alternative or complement to the *status quo* of cruise tourism.

This approach to tourism, which is based on collaboration of regional countries rather than competition among them, is well suited for CARICOM, especially in light of the FTAA. This new approach is based on a paper presented by Ian Boxill to the Caribbean Maritime Institute and the University of the West Indies (UWI) in March 2002. The project, entitled the Caribbean World (CW), is an attempt to build on the rich cultural history of the region, using the sea as a mode of transportation, to create a new tourism industry in the region. More

specifically, the CW is an idea that draws on the rich history and human resources of the Caribbean region to integrate and further enhance the development of the region by the promotion of alternative education opportunities, alternative tourism and training. This can be accomplished by using ships to sail around the region and calling at ports according to the objectives of the particular journey. The basic idea is to develop a cruise ship experience that involves people travelling throughout the Caribbean and learning about the history and culture of the Caribbean. These ships should be owned and operated by organizations in the region, in the interest of the region. Four important aspects of our history are critical here:

- 1 Amerindian settlement and history;
- 2 European colonization;
- 3 slavery; and
- 4 East Indian indentureship.

The specific objectives of this type of tourism should include:

- the development of a destination for regional and international tourists similar to the "Mundo Maya" project in Central America;
- to link the islands and landmasses of the Caribbean through travel;
- to generate revenue for the good of the countries;
- to provide an alternative educational experience for regional and international students; and
- to foster closer regional cooperation and integration.

Here is another way of picturing this proposal. Imagine sailing to the Caribbean in a ship with the comforts of a medium-size cruise liner, manned by staff and students of the Caribbean Maritime Institute, beginning in Belize taking in Maya ruins then on to Jamaica, stopping at Port Royal, then to Haiti for two days to see the Citadel and then in St Kitts to tour one of the region's greatest military forts. On board are staff and students of the hospitality programme of the UWI and the UB, managing the cuisine and provision of services that are second to none offered in a five-star hotel. Or imagine being on board a ship, with a group/class comprising students from the UWI and other institutions across the world. Students who filter in and out of the large library on board; students who would not only learn about the Maroons of Jamaica or the Caribs of Dominica, but also get a chance to interact with them, and help in one of the many excavations being run by the UWI's archaeological department. On the way, they

will get a glimpse of the famous Bussa Statue in Barbados and learn about his slave rebellion.

Later they will stop at one of the famous markets in St Vincent and take in a lecture on the history of the steel pan in Trinidad and Tobago, as part of an assignment in cultural studies.

This is an option that could be spearheaded by Belize. Belize could use its knowledge and infrastructure from the Mundo Maya project and lead this process. This type of tourism is consistent with the low density, eco/heritage tourism which the country is well known for.

Community tourism

Then, of course, there is community tourism. Here is where communities can gain greater control and benefit from tourism by having more cooperative ventures. The community organizations need to play an integral role in the development of properties and the creation of regulations which protect the communities from exploitation by foreign investors. There is need for the training of community members in management and entrepreneurial skills. Government officials need to provide incentives for locals to get involved in the industry as owners of properties rather than as suppliers of cheap labour. Above all, there is the need for a healthy respect for the way of life in communities, in view of the changes that will most certainly come with an expansion of tourism. The only way this will happen is if the community leaders take a proactive role in the development of tourism in their communities.

Conclusion

What is needed for this alternative to succeed? To succeed, tourism planners in Belize need vision, will and confidence. Tourism is a serious business which requires careful planning, evaluation and administration. The model which I propose means that governments would have to invest seriously in education at all levels. The UB and other educational institutions

should be at the centre of this type of tourism development.

But, tourism should not be left up to governments or investors; this is a mistake that Caribbean societies are now realizing (Hayle, 2000). Tourism cannot survive in an environment of uncertainty, high crime, poor management and local resentment. On the other hand, people must be made to feel as though they benefit from the industry (Hayle, 2000). Belize is at a stage of its development where it can fashion a new tourism, and not make the mistakes of the more mature Caribbean destinations.

References

- Belize Travel and Tourism Statistics* (2001), The Belize Tourist Board, Belize City.
- Boxill, I. (2000), "Overcoming social problems in the Jamaican tourism industry", in Maerk, J. and Boxill, I. (Eds), *Tourism in the Caribbean*, Plaza y Valdez, Mexico City.
- Boxill, I. (2002), "Caribbean world", paper prepared for the University of the West Indies and The Caribbean Maritime Institute.
- Boxill, I. and Castillo, P. (2002), "Socio-economic impact of tourism in Dangriga and Hopkins, Belize", in Periera, A., Boxill, I. and Maerk, J. (Eds), *Tourism, Development and Natural Resources in the Caribbean*, Plaza y Valdez, Mexico City.
- Caribbean Tourism Organization Statistical Report 1999-2000* (2000), Caribbean Tourism Organization, Barbados.
- Hayle, C. (2000), "Community tourism in Jamaica", in Maerk, J. and Boxill, I. (Eds), *Tourism in the Caribbean*, Plaza y Valdez, Mexico City.
- Jayawardena, C. (2002), "Community development and Caribbean tourism" in Periera, A., Boxill, I. and Maerk, J. (Eds), *Tourism, Development and Natural Resources in the Caribbean*, Plaza y Valdez, Mexico City.
- Jayawardena, C. (2003), "Cuba: crown princess of Caribbean tourism", *IDEAZ*, Vol. 2 No. 1, forthcoming.
- Maerk, J. and Boxill, I. (Eds) (2000), *Tourism in the Caribbean*, Plaza y Valdez, Mexico City.
- Patullo, P. (1996), *Last Resorts*, Cassell, London.
- Periera, A., Boxill, I. and Maerk, J. (Eds) (2002), *Tourism, Development and Natural Resources in the Caribbean*, Plaza y Valdez, Mexico City.