Sustainability and Its Constraints in the Global Tourist Industry: Exploring the Dark Side in the Growth of International Tourism

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This paper provides a brief overview of three problematic aspects of the trend towards globalization in the tourist industry: sex tourism, exploitation of minors, and environmental degradation in both the physical and social environments. This paper draws on the experience of fast-expanding tourist centres in Central America, in addition to worldwide compilations of published data. It suggests that underlying the specific problems of each of these three major aspects of globalized tourism, there exists a deeper malaise: its potential contribution to a deeper rift between “haves” and “have-nots”. Income inequality has clearly always existed; however, the awareness of such inequality may spread through the globalizing nature of international tourism. Such consciousness may lead to increasing resentment, despite the injection of tourist income into the local economy. One-way exploitation is thus distinguished from mutual exploitation, and in that context, “gringoitis” and social degradation are discussed. The possibility is explored that growth in global tourism is ultimately beneficial. However, the dark side of that growth needs further exposure. That is the aim of this paper.

Keywords: historical perspective, sex tourism, child exploitation, mutual exploitation, environmental degradation, “gringoitis”, consumer homogenization

Introduction: Historical Roots of Global Tourism

“A traveler is the person worthiest of receiving protection”, declared the Caliph Umar in A.D. 638, according to the article The Wells of Memory, by Salopek (2014) in National Geographic, in July 2014.

Even today, over 2 million people travel to Mecca every year, from all “corners” of the globe, to fulfil the religious duty of visiting this site sacred to Moslems. However, the majority of tourists today do not travel to fulfil a sacred religious mission. Therefore, it should be expected that most will not receive the protection which according to the Caliph was their due. How far the world has removed itself from the Caliph’s idealistic perspective of travel and the duty of hospitality incumbent on hosts is an implicit part of the somewhat dark trajectory of this paper.

Clearly, global travel has long historical roots. Some of the main reasons for such travel, outside national borders, can be traced as follows:

1. Economic opportunity and opportunism;
2. Political/military expansionism;
3. Exigencies of human survival;
and as alluded to above:
(4) Religiously/spiritually motivated travel;

Only relatively recently has much travel been converted into what will be the major concern of this paper, namely:

(5) The consumption of tourism, as part of the service sector.

But first, it may be salutary to present a historical perspective on the first four categories, which comprise travel’s historical roots. The four categories are not mutually exclusive—there has been evidence of the potential for considerable overlap among them.

**Historical Perspective**

Land travel via ancient caravan routes straddling the Middle East, Africa, and Asia was able to connect to water travel, via merchant ships with an even more global span, via seas, lakes, and rivers. Thus, land and water routes were established, for what we would now describe as global trade. Bandits and pirates would pillage the caravans and vessels—international piracy having the extra advantage of being beyond the boundaries of national law.

One of the overlaps was therefore the political sanctioning and military protection afforded the buccaneer ships of each maritime power, such as England, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and France, in the relatively recent time of major colonial expansions by European states. A rudimentary form of insurance was effected: protection in return for a share of the spoils. Thus, colonial powers were complicit in the extra-legal activities of major maritime traders. The British Royal Navy was able, for example, to increase its military scope by formalizing agreements with its captains (including Nelson himself, see, e.g., Pottinger, 2012), with regard to “spoils of war”, aka subduing and pillaging ships of other maritime nations. All major nations were involved, but the most sophisticated, i.e., the maritime nations such as Spain, France, and Portugal, as well as England, managed to integrate many of the dimensions of travel classified above.

Although the ramifications of “oceanic highway robbery” constituted an early example of a “zero-sum game” in economic development, it was not unsustainable, so long as trade was not substantially deterred. On the contrary, it continued to expand, despite the significant incidence of piracy. Natural resources were not then considered in finite terms at a global level. Most were still to be discovered. Their movement to an increasingly global market was considered as the major constraint, i.e., transport, traffic, and travel.

**The Time-Honored History of Global Exploitation of “Human Resources”: Servitude Then and Now**

A substantial ingredient of the international trade, which is apposite to our theme of exploitation in the global context, is the time-honored tradition of the slave trade. It still exists, though less honored or socially accepted today than in the heyday of colonial empire-building; or well before that, in the era of history belonging to the dominion of Rome, where slaves were traded regularly for other resources, such as livestock and precious metals.

Exploitation of one less powerful group by another more powerful group has been a hallmark of history since antiquity. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the phenomenon has been internationalized and is part of the globalization of human trafficking, some part of which satisfies the demands of the highly profitable sex tourist industry. The conservative estimate of the head of the United Nations (UN) Office concerned with “human trafficking” currently puts the figure of slaves at well over the official 2.5 million presented by the visible
statistics—the highest figure for slavery in the history of the globe (Statistics presented later in the paper put the figure much higher). Since slavery and trafficking were “outlawed” in most of the world over a century ago, the social institution is, like piracy, more evident as an underground phenomenon than as a visible good or service, to be totted up and included in a nation’s official GDP as a “respectable” high income-earning tourist export, along with hotel and tour revenues. Thus, the 2.5 million represents a very conservative estimate, possibly the “tip of the iceberg”. Central America, Africa, and Asia are regions in the globe especially prone to such economic servitude, because the huge gap between the rich and the poor makes the latter far more vulnerable to exploitation. In each of these regions, tourism is a major income generator and is relatively uncontrolled by local authorities. Thus the felicitous connection between servitude and availability of “sexual services”, forced and unforced.

The very young and very old are the most vulnerable among poor populations. The latter are naturally discounted as valuable slave material. Youngsters make the most prized slaves, for ease of exploitation and potential longevity—the highest return for investment. Not surprising therefore that the UN Head of Drugs and Crime estimated in a recent CNN interview, which marked a CNN-sponsored “Day of Freedom” (July 29, 2014), that over 25% of the global slave trafficking consisted of children. Sadly, children are not always abducted and sold. Commonly, parents or foster parents offer children, often as ostensible “domestic servants”, but either knowingly or unknowingly allowing the children to sink into slave status, which is more or less visible, depending on the host society. In many cases, the indenture will include not just unpaid and forced labor, but also sexual exploitation of both genders to suit all host tastes. The greater the mobility of a wealthy cadre of global tourists, the greater the chances that children as well as adults will be offered to outsiders on a short-term basis, in an increasingly impersonal and therefore potentially uncaring context. Exploitation, thus, becomes exceptionally unfettered. The spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) may become rife, as occurred with the spread of the HIV virus. The pimp-prostitute relationship, traditionally providing some umbrella of protection, in exchange for a (large) share of the business profits, will become attenuated to a point close to zero, as the economic value of human life in a slave context approaches the same zero point. Exploitation here is palpably uni-directional.

What drives the above less-than-publicly discussed scenario? In short, the drivers are economic, but skewed by economic imbalance and thus open to intense exploitation: the rapacity of human greed, masked as economic entrepreneurialism on the one side (“honest brokers”), coupled with the exigencies of human survival for an increasingly large group of economically if not politically disenfranchised people (constituting the “raw material” of the supply); “balanced” in classical economic terminology by an insatiable demand, which is still relatively unfettered, and becoming more economically “effective”, as incomes of the “haves” rise disproportionately to those of the “have-nots”.

How has the above repugnant scenario changed from that of Victorian England? One social historian (Edward (1997), in his classic history, London) estimated that of the 3/4 million “surplus” women in England, a huge proportion were prostitutes, since by and large the female component of the urbanized “working class” had no other work, if they could not find domestic service (or an economically secure husband—this was worsened by the “lost generation” of eligible males, following the First World War). The plight of children was not much better: Charles Dickens built his literary reputation depicting the exploitation of minors through such economic activities as pickpocketing, chimney-sweeping, and other less-than-health-promoting pursuits (e.g., Oliver Twist (Dickens, 1838)). “Plus ca change, plus ca reste la meme chose” (The more things change, the more they remain the same)? No.
The exploitation in the imperial days of the 19th century England was quite visible and national in scope. It was also the subject of a great number of soul-searching and social reforms, as the Victorian era progressed. The current exploitation of the 21st century has been hugely expanded, on the other hand, to offer the globe as a marketplace for both supply and demand. It has also until now been adept in maintaining, if not invisibility, at least mostly “underground” activity. As with drug trafficking, human trafficking has benefited very nicely from the globalization of both travel and tourism.

**The Role of World Sport Meets: Brazil FIFA 2014**

Major global events, such as the recent World Cup Soccer Games in Brazil, act as magnets for sexual exploitation of minors. Shastra Darlington covered this phenomenon in depth for CNN on April 2, 2014. He reported as follows (Darlington, 2014):

… A state prosecutor says the desperation is so great, some parents even put their own children on the street. But there is also a serious problem with organized crime. “It involves a whole tourism network, from agencies to hotels to taxis. With these mega events, sexual exploitation is also going to be organized much more via the internet…”. Despite promises to eradicate child prostitution, the number of estimated child sex workers in Brazil stood at about half a million in 2012, according to the non-profit National Forum for the Prevention of Child Labor. Fortaleza is considered a hotspot for child sex tourism, due in part to the widespread poverty as well as a now long-standing reputation that means potential clients continue to seek out the beach resort… often chartering planes direct from Europe, according to prosecutors…

**Global Studies on Sexual Violence: The Social Invisibility of Sex Victims and the Marginalization and Exploitation of the Lowest Social Status Groups**

The following presents a brief examination of sexual violence: its exposure, its non-disclosure, and socio-psychological reasons. It is based on four reputable sources:

1. The statistics published by the UN Office for analysis of drugs and crime: the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2014);
2. A report by the Australian Government’s Bureau of Statistics;
3. “Global Sex Trafficking Fact Sheet” published by the reputable non-governmental organization (NGO) “Equality Now”;
4. Report on forced sex trade profits by the UN’s International Labor Organization (ILO).

Because of the relevance of its introduction to our theme of social invisibility, the Australian report will be briefly quoted here first, which states:

It is difficult to measure the true extent of violence against women as most incidences of domestic violence and sexual assault go unreported. In 2005, the ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) Personal Safety Survey estimated that… only 19% of female victims of sexual assault in Australia reported the incident to police.¹

If this is an accurate register of the inaccuracy and gross underestimating of sexual violence in Australia, a society by all measures one of the most, democratic, and egalitarian in the world, it is far more precarious to assess the accuracy of statistics in this area surrounded as it is by social controversy, for countries less fortunate. Unfortunately, it is the latter which represents the countries where the majority of sexual violence appears to have occurred. We defer data on that phenomenon to the fourth report in this section.

¹ Report not paginated; however, the full quote is as follows: “19% (19,100) of women who experienced sexual assault by a male perpetrator reported it to the police in 2005...” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005, p. 8).
The UNODC updates its statistics on a regular basis. The latest update is for July 2014. A major problem for the compilers, and hence the published information, is that the data are only as reliable as their sources: the old management information system (MIS) problem of “GIGO” (garbage in, garbage out). The police reporting on which much of the data collation relies is arguably as much a reflection on the interest of the police in such types of crimes as on its actual incidence. Compounding this problem of collecting accurate information as a base for global statistics is the cultural variation by nation, in the social-psychological dimension of “shame”. How much, if at all, is the reputation or status of a female “stained” in any particular society, by association with sexual activity, even if she is the victim? The more tainted the victim is perceived to have become, the more one can expect an under-reporting of such crimes. This might help explain, for example, why in Honduras and Nicaragua, no such crimes were reported for the year 2009, the most recent year for which the highest number of nations reported some statistics (Their data collection capabilities might also be less than perfect). These zero figures compare to a figure of 142 per 100,000 of the population, reported by Costa Rica. Its neighbor, Panama, reported 24 per 100,000. It is possible that crimes of sexual violence are six times as high in Costa Rica as they are in Panama. However, it is possible, and perhaps more likely, that the data are inaccurate and therefore misleading, with regard to the severity of the problem in Panama. Guatemala reported three sex violations per 100,000. The variations among countries can be considered too wide to take the statistics at face value: As a possible reference point, Canada reported 74 crimes of sexual violence per 100,000 (arguably an ethnocentric value judgment on the author’s part).

In all, possibly, just the tip of the iceberg is becoming visible. But a tip is a quantum leap from professing complete absence of any problem of sexual violence. Given the manifest difficulty to date of collecting reliable data on a global (or regional or national) basis, it is premature to state with any assurance that the incidence has risen, as global tourism has risen. However, it is not too premature to posit that proposition, as a basis for empirical study.

Certainly, Equality Now (2014) asserted that proposition unequivocally, reporting that:

> Trafficking women and children for sexual exploitation is the fastest growing criminal enterprise in the world. This, despite the fact (that) international law and the laws of 134 countries criminalize sex trafficking. At least 20.9 million adults and children are bought and sold worldwide into commercial sexual servitude, forced labor, and bonded labor. About 2 million children are exploited every year in the global commercial sex trade. Countries that neglect to focus on the demand that fuels sex trafficking, or have legalized the commercial sex industry, have witnessed increased prostitution and greater numbers of trafficked women and girls to fulfill an influx of international sex tourists…

Two further quotes from the Fact Sheet are apposite to our study. The first underlines the problem of social invisibility. The second underlines the link between sexual exploitation and profits:

(1) UNICEF (the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund principally concerned with international problems concerning children) wrote a report, quoted by Equality Now, entitled *Children Out of Sight, Out of Mind, Out of Reach*. In it, the report (UNICEF, 2005) stated, “Abused and neglected, millions of children have become virtually invisible”;

(2) Michelle Bachelet, the former president of Chile, and now a champion of equality for women and girls, writes and is quoted as follows: “An estimated 80% of all trafficked persons are used and abused as sexual slaves. This human rights violation is driven by demand for sexual services and the profit that is generated”.

The fourth source of statistics was generated by the ILO and made the subject of a report written for the National Post by Barr (2014). The report was headed as follows: “Forced Sex Trade Profits Highest in Asia, But Traffickers Earn More per Victim in Developed Nations: UN Report”.

For the purposes of this paper, the most relevant ILO statistics have been re-presented in Table 1. The monthly earnings have been rounded to the nearest hundred dollars, in order to highlight the huge earnings differences per region.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Monthly earnings per victim ($)</th>
<th>Annual profits (billion)</th>
<th>Number of victims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asia-Pacific</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>2,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>800,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>3,200</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Union and developed economies</td>
<td>9,500</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>6,500</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Primary source: Barr (2014).

The ILO report goes on to state that (as cited in Barr, 2014):

… In most cases of documented forced sexual exploitation, a whole chain of traffickers and exploiters benefits from it: the recruiter...; the people in charge of travel and transport, who make sure the victim safely reaches the place of exploitation; corrupted law enforcement paid to close their eyes in front of obvious cases of illegal migration or exploitation; owners of flats or houses; companies in charge of advertising; and, of course, the brothel owner or manager of the prostitution networks.

**How Economically Significant is Global Tourism and How Important is the Sex Tourism Sector to the Whole?**

Further informational context on the above reports seems germane to assessing their significance, within a framework of sustainability in the global tourist trade.

For this, we shall use some additional sources: IBISWorld for tourist industry statistics; the UN, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank for GDP by country; and finally, the World Atlas for population statistics.

According to the international market research company IBISWorld (2014), the global tourist industry in 2013 generated revenues of $1 trillion (equals to $1,000 billion). To understate the obvious, that is not a paltry sum. It is also forecast by IBISWorld (2014) to be expected to grow by close to 6% per annum over the next quinquennium. This represents a substantially higher growth rate (more than double) than that forecast for the rest of the world economy (forecast at less than 3% (Conference Board, 2014)). The overall tourist industry employs close to 60 million people.

According to the UN report of world income by country for 2012, the total is some $73 trillion. Of the 200-odd countries making up the world and its total income, only 15 have GDPs exceeding $1 trillion. In other words, if the global tourist industry were a country, it would rank 16th in economic size in the world, surpassing some 180, or the vast majority of the globe’s nations. Interestingly, the IMF (2013) figure for world income ($74tn) and the World Bank (2013) figure ($75tn) would both still have placed global tourism in the 16th place, had it been a country. We can thus have high confidence in the reliability of this particular statistic.
The World Atlas (2014) ranks every country in the world by size of population. Italy at just over 60 million ranks 23rd. Lagging 10 million behind is Myanmar, with some 50 million. Thus, if the tourist industry were a country, its population would rank it in the 23rd or 24th place in the world.

From the above, it is not an understatement to conclude that the tourist industry is a pretty important sector of the world economy, from both income-generating and people-employing perspectives.

Is it sustainable? That might depend on our definition of “sustainability”. Certainly, IBIS shows no doubt in forecasting a very robust and respectable growth in the industry’s annual income, for the medium term. For most, that might be a sufficient dimension by which to define and measure sustainability.

And yet, at some $100bn, according to the ILO, roughly 10% of the tourist industry’s annual income stems from forced sex. Even if that was economically sustainable, is it morally sustainable? What happens to the social fabric, let alone the individual psyches of sex worker victims, if the economy is somewhat, or worse, substantially dependent on the forced sex industry? How possible is it that the ILO estimates are themselves substantially understating the extent of the problem at a global level? We only have to recall the warning of the Australian Bureau of Statistics that according to their estimation, less than 20% of forced sex is reported to the police. Economic growth in the global tourist industry is quite possible, according to the IBIS trajectory. But at what cost to the exploited? Is that cost socially as distinct from morally sustainable in the long term? Or will it lead to a diremption of global social systems, based on increasing recognition by the sexually as well as economically exploited, of the glaring injustices involved. How much force will be required to “sustain” a growth in the sex slave supply in order to satisfy increased global demand? How much “pushback” might we come to expect? Is this already in evidence at the level of crime, violent and otherwise, in the regions most exposed to the global sex trade? It is not easy to answer these questions, either ideologically or empirically; but that in itself might make them more vital to ask.

**Mutual Exploitation: Exploring the Dynamics of “Gringoitis”**

According to the previously cited report from the CNN, “Prostitutes in Brazil take crash courses to learn English, so they can capitalize on the huge influx of affluent tourists ready to dispose of big cash as part of World Cup soccer extravaganza”.

This comment serves as a valuable introduction to the thorny subject of who is exploiting whom, in the context of non-coercive relations between tourist consumer and host service provider—whether that service is sex or house cleaning. It is less clear-cut than the forced sex trade, which was investigated above.

An oft-heard complaint made by global tourists, N. American (“gringo”) and others, is that they often feel like targets; almost as though they have ceased to be human in the eyes of many of the locals with whom they interact: Rather, they are seen more as walking ATMs. The social invisibility alluded to elsewhere becomes reciprocal; the bonds of decency in human interaction get attenuated: Mutual exploitation can become the norm of social and psychological as well as economic behavior, e.g., it is a commonplace that cab drivers in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Belize, and Guatemala will do their best to “fleece” the foreign tourist, setting out to overcharge him by 5-10 times the local rate and quoting the ignorant/innocent tourist in dollars or Euros, depending on their nationality. This is, by its nature, a very short-term interaction, and involves the minimum of social interaction. However, it does set the tone of the degree of trust that may be expected, in future relations between tourist and local. The rationale, apart from “foreigners can afford it”, maybe something like “foreign tourists are here to consume and take advantage of whatever they can”; all services,
whether taxi rides or house cleaning or provision of short-term sex, would probably cost 5-10 times as much in a foreign tourist’s own country. Foreigners can, therefore, be viewed as exploiting the local situation by underpaying, compared to what they are used to. Local “entrepreneurs” are, therefore, only doing their best to “optimize their economic opportunity” on the basis of that knowledge, or at least that set of assumptions, which might be right or wrong. In either case, the damage is done. Economic exploitation, possibly mutual, has been set up as the basis of further social relations. Gringos become a class apart, ripe for host exploitation whenever and wherever possible, a far cry from our Caliph’s injunction of utmost hospitality, quoted at the outset of this paper.

Does the social degradation go deeper via mutual exploitation? Quite possibly. In Central America, it is considered normal to employ short-term house cleaners for vacation properties, at a far lower wage than what would be paid, for example, in N. America. As before, the differential might commonly be between 5 and 10 times ($1 or $2 per hour, compared to $5-$20, depending on location). A commonly reported crime is that of theft of vacation properties. The prime suspect is often the cleaner (or a member of that person’s family, who is provided access). The rationale? Possibly similar to that of the cab driver, i.e., the payer can afford the “rip-off”, due to the systemic difference in economic status between the foreign client and the local service provider. However, a line has been crossed between overcharging and theft, which is a criminal activity. Still, the underlying motive can be seen as an attempt to “get even”, i.e., the tourist’s inherent exploitation, by the very fact of visiting and availing himself of the services of a far poorer country, makes him/her a legitimate target for reciprocal exploitation, whether or not the exploitation stays within the boundaries of the law. The moral boundaries, if not the legal ones, tend to get blurred via the social degradation alluded to above. The “Robin Hood” tradition has deep historical roots.

Nonetheless, in the 21st century, in the context of global tourism, if the law has indeed been broken, the act raises a new set of issues: How well will the legal system protect the rights of foreigners against local criminals, especially if the criminals are engaging in small-scale crime? To the extent that the local police show remarkable lack of interest, this may reflect a further degradation of the social environment.

And what about sexual services? Probably much of the above applies in this case, too, but with the concern that this particular market can be expected to grow faster than other parts of the global tourist industry. Why?

The demographics of the sex service industry depend mostly on male clients (“johns”) and female service providers. As the global population ages, and as the rates of divorce, separation, and “single unit households” rise, so more men can be expected to seek the services of those providing short-term sexual satisfaction. This may be problematic in a man’s own “backyard”, for any of a number of reasons, but two stand out:

1. A perceived high level of discovery/exposure, which could lead to shame/social stigma/or in some jurisdictions criminal proceedings;

2. The high cost of such services in developed countries.

One can therefore expect “johns” to fuel the sex tourism component of the global tourist industry, especially as more males reach retirement age and have the means to live or spend more time, outside their home country. It is compounded by the demographics of the “supply side”: Short-term unforced sex service providers tend to be young, in under-developed countries where there is a far larger proportion of young people. Availability is therefore far more abundant than “back home”, for those seeking these services.
Although “what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander” has been little discussed to date, there is no reason why we should not expect to see an explosion in the demand of older women for the paid sexual services of younger men, also as part of the overall growth in global tourism. We may expect more “joans”, serviced by young otherwise under-employed males, as is already evident in the Cuban tourist scene.

In both cases, it is reasonable to discuss the expected exponential growth in terms of mutual as distinguished from unilateral exploitation, so long as the services are not coerced or “forced”. However, mutual exploitation comes with its costs, even if they are not as vicious and extreme as the one-way exploitation discussed before. Is the culture of Cuba socially degraded by the overt usage of escorts, both female and male, available for the “mature” (equals to increasingly elderly) tourists, of both sexes and genders?

**Human and Natural Resources—Global Tourism and Environmental Degradation: Biological and Social**

Some “mini case studies” will be used to illustrate some of the dimensions of environmental degradation which are the results, direct or indirect, of the globalization of the tourist industry. The environment is here considered both from a biological (or “natural”) and equally important in the view of this paper, a social perspective.

**Tamarindo, Costa Rica**

Twenty years ago, Tamarindo was a sleepy fishing village, with no paved road in or out, and a mostly local Guanacastan population. During the ensuing two decades, it was “discovered” as a surfing destination. Ironically, surfing is ecologically among the purest of recreational sports. It uses no carbon fuels and contributes no pollution. However, as word spread about the virtues of Tamarindo as a surfing destination, its reputation went from local to global, and with the increasing advent of social media, “viral”.

High-end hotels and restaurants sprouted along the beach. Many have encroached on to the public spaces of the sand with impunity. Hundreds of thousands of tourists have virtually picked clean the myriad shells which used to adorn the kilometres-long stretch of beach. Local fishing as part of a sustainable ecology is virtually a thing of the past. Water pollution became so bad that it attracted international attention, which affected the pocket book of the (mostly international) entrepreneurs who have spearheaded the “development” of Tamarindo. Its development is best described now as “in hiatus”, as the local village-turned-international tourist town strives to rebuild its reputation as a safe and desirable destination. The ubiquitous hard-drug peddlers on the beach and the level of tourist-targeted robbery and assaults do not help, neither does the local tradition of the expatriate (long-term tourist?) community of using the beach as their public washroom, not for themselves, but for hundreds of their canine “mascotes”. Not surprisingly, the e-coli count is not publicly displayed.

Despite all the above negative characteristics, a visible sex slave traffic industry does not appear to exist. Prostitution is part of the daily scene, on the beach and in the bars, but this could be considered as “mutual exploitation”, rather than uni-directional.

**Isla de Flores, Guatemala**

This is a small island in the middle of a lake, some 100 km west of the border with Belize. It provides its international tourists with a surprise: Despite its name, there is virtually no flower left on the island. Hotels, restaurants, paved roads, SUVs, and motorbikes abound however, on a piece of land which would take less than
an hour to circumnavigate on foot. There is no beach left anywhere on the island—the whole periphery has been concreted. Swimming is at one’s own risk—the water is highly discolored and opaque. Again, no e-coli count is displayed. But no tourists were seen in the lake during the author’s stay here.

The island is connected to Sta Helena, on the mainland, via a 500-metre causeway, which carries a high density of motorized vehicular traffic at all times of night and day, and not one ecological bicycle during the author’s two-day stay. However, one of the hotels was (cynically? euphemistically?) named “Hotel Verde” (Green Hotel): Most of that hotel’s front was taken up by garage space for its parked vehicle, safely protected behind an iron gate.

All of the tourists staying at the hotel where the author stayed were international.

The hotel which took up the greatest amount of (concreted) shoreline and dwarfed all other buildings on the island was the Ramada Inn. Its billboard advertisements, which blotted the skyline from every direction on every road approaching the region, proudly announced the global quality of its services. This leads to the naturally ensuing question: In what does its “global” quality reside? The question can be couched in a term which we coin here, namely, “Ramadaization”.

“Ramadaization”

“Ramadaization” as a concept involves the process of homogenization of the tourist experience, via the deliberate and extreme standardization of: (1) the physical environment offered, within the inner and outer limits of the hotel property; and (2) the services provided by staff and administration. Some might say that this standardization is merely the setting and maintaining of standards, as in a stringent quality control, which most tourists would welcome. Said tourists are far more assured of a decent minimum standard of hospitality, than in a hotel which is independent, and not subject to the “oversight” or auditing procedures of a higher level of organizational authority (Anthony & Govindarajan, 2006).

That argument is powerful. It was used by Henry Ford a century or so ago, when he standardized auto production via the assembly line (Customers can have any color they like so long as it is black, see for example, Watts, 2006). Ford’s and Anthony’s argument may therefore also lead inexorably to treating hotel clients as a homogenous human herd, to be serviced (or processed) and treated in a polite and plastic manner. The global process of “Ramadaization” will make guests considered increasingly as consumers, rather than as individual travelers, each on his/her own unique voyage. IBIS suggests that so far, the global tourist industry is not as concentrated as others (e.g., the auto industry). Some 2 million enterprises comprise the formal component of the industry (see below for the less formal parts). However, the same 2014 survey reports that four tourist organization chains comprise 10% of the $1 trillion industry, i.e., they share $100 billion between them. That amount of income provides a reasonable base on which to expand globally and to deal with local competition. The recent successful marketing of “boutique hotels” testifies to the reluctance to be treated to a standard experience when travelling, at least by some tourists, often those who can afford to pay the premium of the “high-end” one-off boutiques. And of course, local hostels provide a “low-end” option, often taken by the more adventurous, younger, and less wealthy travelers. Thus, it would be wrong to paint a picture of the industry totally monopolized by Holiday Inns, Hiltons, Best Westerns, Marriotts, and Ramadas. However, to the extent that this trend is evident, it behooves us to discuss it in terms of “Ramadaization”.
La Isla de Ometepe, Lago de Nicaragua

This island, far larger than Flores, is made up of two volcanoes, which are mostly dormant most of the time. The insularity afforded by 10 km of water separating La Isla from the rest of Nicaragua was sufficient to protect La Isla from the worst ravages of the violence during Nicaragua’s recent political past. It also gave the population a tranquil character, which enhanced the magical quality of the island. Until some 20 years ago, Ometepe was nearly but not quite off the map, with regard to the global tourist industry. No longer.

What has transformed Ometepe from an almost secret backwater into a bustling tourist magnet is simply the paving of the main road. What used to be a back-breaking journey, lasting most of the day, to travel from Volcan Concepcion to Madera, is now achievable in an hour or two. With the paving of the road has come “ribbon” tourist infrastructure development, in the shape of many hostels, hospedajes, and hotels, none of them on a grand scale, and none so far belonging to an international chain; yet, the sleepy and intimate communal atmosphere of the past has been replaced by hustle and bustle, by a huge surge in the number of motorized vehicles, 2-wheelers, 3-wheelers, and 4-wheel drives, all virtually supplanting the previously ubiquitous ox and horse carts, supplemented by push-bikes and old school buses. The latter do still exist, but a social stratification has arisen among the local community, based on degree of motorization (and hence mobility, physical, economic, and social (Lehrer, 1997)). The atmosphere on the bus is far less convivial and communal than it used to be. There is less cheerful chatter and banter. Development is in the air, an air strip has been laid, and the pueblo has succumbed to a new form of pollution: the noise level of an urbanizing environment, due to ubiquitous motorbikes and high-volume sound systems from new discos and passing autos. Whilst it is by leaps and bounds becoming wealthier, the social atmosphere seems to this recidivist outsider to be palpably less happy. The exotic quality (“magic”) of the tourist experience has become diluted, if not debased and subject to toxification. Worse is probably due to come, if the proposed mega-project of the Nicaragua Canal, to be funded by China, comes to fruition a few kilometers from Ometepe’s shoreline.

San Juan del Sur Compared to Tamarindo

San Juan del Sur on the South West Nicaraguan Pacific Coast has followed a trajectory that could have been similar to that of Tamarindo, in neighboring Costa Rica, but in fact has diverged. Until a couple of decades ago, it was also a sleepy fishing village (but favored as a retreat spot by a small number of “elite” super-wealthy Nicaraguans, who built mansions there). It was then “discovered” as a potential “gringo” hotspot and developed on that basis. During the heyday of its accelerated development, tourists were lured into purchasing vacation property by several dozens of real estate brokerage firms, whose presence dominated the small downtown core. Since the US property-related recession, most of the real estate companies have vanished, as profits evaporated, and in their stead tourist-related activities have picked up the slack. Different grades of restaurants, tour operations, and accommodations have emerged, to satisfy a diversified demand, based more on European than on US tourists.

A major difference between Tamarindo and San Juan D.S. is the role that local residents have played in the tourist development of each. In Tamarindo, there are virtually no local residents remaining. They have both literally and figuratively “sold out” to gringos of different shapes and sizes, but with a large constituency of South Americans (especially Argentinians) and Europeans (especially Italians), who dominate the tourist-related business scene. Labor, mostly menial, is provided by Nicaraguans, some of whom are working there legally, while many of whom are not. Naturally, exact figures of illegal Nica immigrant workers...
in Costa Rica are imprecise, however, it is generally considered they number in hundreds of thousands (in a country-wide population of some 4.8 million, thus representing possibly some 10% or more, of the total population). Sex workers seem to advertise themselves as from other Latin American countries: Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, etc., as well as Nicaragua. Sex work is legal in Costa Rica, though socially frowned upon. Drug trafficking on the other hand is illegal. However, it is highly visible in both tourist towns (as it is in Puerto Viejo, a comparable tourist “haven” on the Caribbean side of Costa Rica).

**Degradation of Social Environment**

This will manifest itself in many illegal and/or delinquent activities, but the manifestations do not comprise the phenomenon itself, i.e., it will be possible to track a rise in crime rates, from minor to major: petty theft, robbery, fraud, personal assault, sexual assault, and murder/attempted murder. But this may be considered as a symptom of the underlying disease of a degraded social environment, where moral cohesion has been eroded.

It is possible to attribute some of this degradation at least to the influx of outside wealth, brought in by short- and long-term expatriates, and a consciousness of the extreme imbalance between domestic and foreign life styles due to wealth disparities. This may then lead to the desire on the part of locals, perhaps especially younger locals, who have less concern with traditional values based on religion, to find ways, legal or illegal, to “get even” with the foreigners, gringos.

This social degradation, as a partial result of the significant influx of foreigners, especially of North Americans, has given rise to the labeling of most foreigners in Latin America, as “gringos”. It is quite common to hear that little children point at passing tourists and shout out “gringos” as an insult. This whole process of degradation and potential moral disintegration might aptly be termed “gringoitis”, which could be considered as a new form of social disease, being fed by the growth of global tourism. The concept was elaborated more fully in a recent paper (Lehrer, 2014) and will therefore not be expanded upon here. Suffice it to say that one middle-class Costa Rican, on hearing that this author spent time close to Tamarindo, labeled that town “Gringoland”, and said that the majority of self-respecting Ticos now avoided it.

**The Passing of Adventure Tourism: From Active to Passive Roles for the International Tourist**

In both economic and business terms, the focus has become provision of services (and commodities) for the majority of international tourists to consume. The roots of international tourism were strikingly different: When Columbus set sail, he was on an unprecedented adventure, a quest to discover new parts of the globe, what became known as the New World. Centuries before Columbus’s explorations, crusaders set off on adventures to visit the Holy Land, and en route to convert as many non-believers (“infidels”) as possible to the “New Religious Enlightenment”—if conversion was resisted, infidels were subjected to wholesale slaughter. This by any measure was a fairly active role performed by the precursors of modern international tourism.

Pilgrims were somewhat less assertive in imposing their belief systems on the host societies through which they travelled—it could be argued that they paved the way to thinking of the international traveler as less of a person (or a personal threat) and more as a potential major consumer of local wares and services. From then on, the world has witnessed a reasonably significant growth in the relatively passive, consumption-oriented business of the global tourist industry. Instead of the odd inn accommodation and trinket sale, it has evolved into today’s consumption of $1 trillion of counted tourist services (and how many more millions uncounted?).
The loss of individual tourist identity, the increase in anonymity, and the shift from a unique to a deliberately homogenized experience in travelling are alluded to in the following conclusion to an article depicting the experience of a modern throw-back to adventure tourism.

The final paragraph of Salopek’s (2014) article, describing his six-month walk through the Arabian Desert, reads as follows:

I reach a modern tourist resort. No one pays me any mind… I stop at a mini-mart and buy a bottle of filtered water… an artifact from the main channel of history. I peer south… toward the Hejaz… The lips of its ancient wells are grooved by ropes turned to dust… I sip my water. It tastes utterly ordinary.

From the single musings of a lone adventurer, perhaps nostalgically lamenting the lost past, we shift to evidence of mass consumer tourism growing fast in the globe’s fastest growing super-power: the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In the lead business article of The Economist (2014), entitled Riding the Rich, Grey Chinese Wave, we read:

Mainlanders are now the biggest force in global tourism, but in the past had few upmarket offerings to choose from. To serve Chinese families seeking novel holidays, Fosun (a large Chinese business conglomerate) is spending 10 billion yuan to bring Atlantis, a water-themed resort, to the Chinese island of Hainan in partnership with Kerzner International of South Africa. It is also engaged in a battle to take full control of Club Med.

Conclusion

It is still true that the tourist service sector is, according to Porter’s (1988) famous economic analysis, easier to enter than many other sectors of the economy. Less capital and less technology are required to set up a food booth on Isla de Flores, catering to both nationals and extra-nationals than, for example, to manufacture a military aircraft. Most would also argue that tourism inflicts less harm on humanity than the use of military hardware, despite the (too dark?) arguments presented in this paper. We therefore conclude by looking at least at some of the pluses to the growth in global tourism: flip-sides (“Always look on the bright side”—from the globally successful movie, “Life of Brian”, by Monty Python).

A caveat amidst a paper full of gloom and doom: It is facile and dangerous to idealize the past. Nostalgia can blind people in the present generation from the misery and squalor of life before the age of machines, and hence the relative ease of travel in our contemporary world.

Clearly, not all facets of global tourism are bad for the populace, or inherently evil. The hoary economic argument of trickle-down benefits from consistent growth in otherwise less developed countries (LDCs) should not be gainsaid. Therefore, a few examples are provided here, to at least pay homage to counter arguments to the predominant thesis of this paper:

(1) Tourism at an international level has greatly enhanced the interest in and value of archeological and architectural monuments to bygone eras. People pay to visit the past, causing the recent proliferation of “global heritage sites” and the role of United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2014) in preserving architectural artifacts of ancient civilizations, which would otherwise become extinct (1,007 sites currently reported, of which 779 are cultural, and a huge proportion in regions with the highest concentrations of sexual exploitation). Global interest and travel may preserve at least physical remnants of civilizations which would otherwise sink into oblivion.

(2) “Spreading the loot”: As mentioned above, the overall income of the tourist sector, at 1 trillion dollars, would have ranked the sector at the 16th in size, if it were a country. However, in numbers employed, it would
rank 23rd or 24th as a country. This implies that in aggregate, recorded income generated from tourism is spread over more people than recorded income from other sectors. Most social scientists would argue that any activity which promotes a more even or equal distribution of income and/or wealth tends to benefit society in both the short and long term.

(3) A growth in formal economies. This growth is valuable not just in economic terms of extra income per capita, but at least as important, in contributing to the tax base of government and public administrations. Infrastructure development is often if not invariably dependent on government funding, which in turn is dependent principally on its tax base.

An additional advantage of expansion of the formal economy due to global tourism is that a country attracting foreign tourists is also attracting foreign exchange, possibly from a more stable currency (Canadian dollars, UK sterling?), which will be immune to the ravages of an inflation-based local economy (Brazil?).

A third advantage of growth in the formal sector is the potential of relative stability of the employment created: When Burger King decides to invest a sizeable sum in building a new outlet in Sta Helena, overlooking La Isla de Flores, it will seek employees on whom it can rely, since it has its “global image” of consistent quality to maintain and preserve; in exchange, it may offer employees greater security than that afforded in many informal sectors of the economy, including paid work in a local food kiosk opposite. There is no guarantee here, since trust is an important component of employment relations, but at least the possibility of higher stability exists.

(4) Concomitant growth in informal sectors of the economy:

(a) Legal, e.g., street vending, local public markets, bed and breakfast, and small-scale home-based tourist accommodation;

(b) Marginally legal, e.g., unlicensed street vending in many regimes, unlicensed “pirate” taxi services, “personal” services as fronts for more questionable activities, e.g., massage;

(c) Criminal, e.g., distribution of heroin, which may be as globally organized as many formal tourist enterprises.

Criminal activities spurred by the expansion of global tourism are of questionable long-term value to the host society, despite their contribution to the local economy. Colombia, for example, has a hard time combating its international reputation as a hard drug hub. The nexus of sex trade, both forced and unforced, and the drug trade, tends to provide a “honeypot” for other criminal activities—illegal gambling and underage consumption of legal addictive substances (e.g., alcohol and tobacco), encouraging their addiction and abuse. Taken together, these mostly unrecorded tourist income earners tend to generate additional formal tourist income (hotel charges, air travel, etc.), but at a social and moral cost difficult if not impossible to quantify; thus, it is easy for economists and policy-makers to overlook. Health impacts would be reflected as gains, to the extent that they culminate in extra revenue for the health sector—a further anomaly of our current global economic methods for measuring wealth—but the potential subject of another paper.

Maybe criminal and health-degenerating activities would represent the flip-side of the flip-side, thus returning us to our main theme: exploring the darker and potentially more cancerous side of the growth in global tourism.

Quo vadis: towards greater social as well as economic sustainability? Or must we need increasingly to bear witness to the concomitant dark side of global tourist growth, i.e., to see, Through a Glass Darkly (Koen, 1986).
References


