

GUILT TRIPS: MIS-PERCEIVING THE LANDSCAPES OF "PARADISE".

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POVZETEK

ČESA SE TURISTI NA KARIBIH SRAMUJEJO – NAPAČNO RAZUMLJENA IN POJMOVANA KULTURNA POKRAJINA PARADIŽA

Na osnovi strokovno priznane in uveljavljene metodologije ugotavljamo, da so otoki Vzhodnega karibskega morja zelo atraktivne turistične destinacije. Predvsem so cenjeni zaradi izrazito bujne tropske vegetacije. Nadalje so opevane kulturne, kreolske posebnosti regije (jedi, glasba, literatura, plesi), ki so mešanica ameriških, afriških, evropskih in azijskih vplivov. Tudi glede na socio-geografske razmere niso na slabem, saj jih razvrščamo v svetovno povprečje: boljše kvalitete življenja težko najdemo na našem planetu, pričakovana starost presega 70 let, pismenost je večja od 90 %, narodni dohodek na prebivalca pa je nekajkrat višji kot v Osrednji ali Južni Ameriki, Afriki, Vzhodni Evropi, na Balkanu, na Kitajskem, v Jugovzhodni Aziji (z izjemo Singapura in Bruneija), v Južni Aziji ali na Pacifiku (z izjemo Hawaiiiev).

Presenetljivo pa je, da se Severno-američani, ki v vedno večjem številu obiskujejo te kraje (predvsem na križarjenjih) vračajo od tod s precej mešanimi občutki. Samo 15 odstotkov potnikov iz ladij se dejansko izkrca na enem ali dveh otokih, ankete opravljene med njimi pa kažejo, da se mnogi vračajo domov z grenkobnim občutkom sramu, ki ga je povzročil stik s tamkajšnjo kulturo. Pričujoča razprava utemeljuje take občutke s temeljnim geografskim nepoznavanjem in globoko zasidranim etnocentrizmom obravnavanih turistov. Obiskovalci niso bili pripravljene na stik z lokalno kulturo, na to, da bi znali pravilno interpretirati videno in občuteno kulturno pokrajino. Namesto, da bi dojeli, da je regija, ki so jo obiskali po fizikalnih in kulturnih zakonitostih povsem drugačna od njihove domače, krivijo sebe in družbo iz katere izhajajo ter napačno zaključujejo, da so videli razmere in navade, ki so izraz revščine. Zaradi pretresljive izkušnje, ki se odraža v osebni potrtosti mnogi trde, da se sem ne bodo več vrnili.

Ethnicity Mis-Understood

The theme of this geography conference, ethnicity, is ultimately about cultural distinctiveness: the ways in which particular culture groups set themselves apart and are set apart from other groups. This paper is about ethnicity misunderstood and

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about places (in this case the Eastern Caribbean) that are as a result misperceived. Under the circumstances discussed here, the traveler, blinded by ethnocentrism¹ and a lack of basic geographic knowledge, mistakenly interprets certain cultural (even racial) characteristics not simply as evidence of difference but as evidence of serious poverty. Then, perhaps because the traveler's North American (or European?) culture encourages a social conscience and egalitarianism, the traveler feels shame and guilt² and shuns further contact with the people of the host society.

Interestingly, my experience has shown that when the traveler to the Eastern Caribbean is supplied with some basic geographic information about the place – demographic data, information on the physical environment and the culture history of the region, and some ideas on how to think less narrowly and judgementally about cultural difference – the sense of shame and guilt rolls back. The traveler not only gains a new respect for the host society and begins to relish contact and discussions with the host people thereby enjoying a better holiday, the traveler also gains a new, more enquiring perspective on global human geography.³

Tourism in the Eastern Caribbean

With the demise of the plantation economy and the rise in popular demand for cash incomes and imported products that accompanied modernization in the post-World War II era, tourism has become a favored strategy for earning foreign exchange throughout the Eastern Caribbean. Today, tourism accounts for a major portion of the GDP of many Eastern Caribbean islands (Table 1.)

¹ Ethnocentrism is defined as the belief in the inherent superiority of one's own group and culture, a belief that can be accompanied by a feeling of contempt for other groups and cultures. Ethnocentrism is found in nearly every individual to some extent; but is most pronounced in those who have only a crudely developed appreciation for cultural diversity that does not acknowledge deeply different value systems.

² Shame and its counterpart, guilt, are here defined as the emotional reaction that occurs when we find ourselves breeching our deepest values. Stronger than embarrassment, guilt is felt when we act in what we perceive to be a socially inappropriate way. I derived this definition of guilt from my reading of Fossum and Mason, 1986 and Kaufman, 1985.

³ In the literature on tourism, there is as yet relatively little discussion of the education of the tourist, either as a sociological phenomenon or as a needed service. Travel by students and "Eco-tourism" are usually billed as educational tourism, but the discourse on content of tourist education and standards is just beginning. Apparently the educational quality of eco-tourism is highly variable (Kermath 1991). One organization stands out as specifically addressing the need for tourist education is The North American Coordinating Center for Responsible Tourism, which provides guidelines for ecological and culturally sensitive travel and publishes a newsletter, *Responsible Traveling*. Some scholars who reflect on the transaction between guest and host and the need for tourist education in order to minimize the negative impact on hosts, particularly in the Third World include: Dennison Nash (1981), N. H.H. Graburn (1983), V. Smith (1989), Cohen (1989), Urry (1990), Turner and Ash (1975).

Table 1: Population and Percent of GDP from Tourism (estimated for selected islands).

Island (s)	Population	% of GDP from Tourism
Anguilla	6 883	30
Antigua/Barbuda	79 000	63
Barbados	262 688	20
Dominica	84 000	12
Grenada	84 135	31
Guadeloupe	342 175	12
Montserrat	12 000	38.5
St. Kitts & Nevis	45 000	32
Trinidad & Tobago	1 300 000	02.0

Source: calculated from data in Dennis J. Gayle and Jonathan N. Goodrich, *Tourism Marketing and Management in the Caribbean*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) pp. 6–8.

For the foreseeable future, the importance that the island governments will place on tourism in their economic planning is not likely to diminish. Commercial export agriculture no longer is able to compete in the global market due to environmental problems and transport and labor costs. Similar problems impede the future of industrialization. Raw materials are scarce or not consistently and sufficiently available and the Caribbean wage structure is too high to compete with Asia and Central America for assembly manufacturing. At the same time Caribbean citizens are getting noticeably more vocal in their demands for a rapidly rising standard of living (now fed by instantaneous connections to North American culture through satellite television). On the other hand, a “green” movement that might down play consumerism and champion local self-sufficiency is only in the earliest of stages of evolution. And so, faced with an urgent need to provide jobs now, the island Governments are, if anything, increasing their emphasis on tourism, despite an emerging conclusion within the intellectual community that this strategy for developing non-Western economies may be unwise.⁴

By all the usual measurements, the islands of the Eastern Caribbean⁵ should pre-

⁴ For a discussion of the arguments against tourism as a development strategy in the Caribbean, see Dennis Conway, “The New Tourism in the Caribbean”, in Dennis J. Gayle and Jonathan N. Goodrich, *Tourism, Marketing and Management in the Caribbean*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) and J.S. Holder, *Caribbean Tourism: Policies and Impacts*. (Christ Church, Barbados: Caribbean Tourism Research Centre, 1979).

⁵ The Eastern Caribbean is here defined as The Virgin Islands (British and American), St. Maarten/St. Martin, Anguilla, St. Bartholomew, Saba, St. Eustatius, St. Kitts/Nevis, Antigua, Montserrat, Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, Carriacou, Trinidad/Tobago.

sent a particularly attractive destination for tourists. First location: they form an ethereal lushly vegetated tropical archipelago that arcs hundreds of miles from Puerto Rico to the South American continent. Most individual islands are accessible by air and sea. Second, the creole culture of the region (architecture, agriculture, cuisine, music, language, literature, dance, religion and folklore) is a rich and exuberant blend from the Americas, Africa, Europe and Asia that provides plenty of appeal for the traveler.⁶ Third, and this is what is so little understood by North American tourists, by all the usual demographic measurements the Eastern Caribbean is a relatively prosperous place. It is firmly in the global middle class:⁷ quality-of-life⁸ indices are in the high 80s, among the best on earth; life expectancies average well above 70 years, infant mortality ranges from just 9 to 15 per 1000 live births, and literacy rates are in the 90th percentile or higher. Even per-capita GNP (about US\$ 3000) puts most islanders in income brackets well above the averages for Central and South America, all of Africa, most of Eastern Europe and the former USSR, the Balkans, China, South Asia, Southeast Asia (except Singapore and Brunei), and the Pacific Islands (except Hawaii). And yet wages are low compared to First World standards, so costs to the tourist are modest. Through a combination of aid from former colonial powers and enlightened social policy, since World War II, Eastern Caribbean physical, financial, and education infrastructures have improved steadily. Furthermore, as might be expected given the present literacy, income and quality-of-life statistics, Caribbean people are for the most part comfortable in their place, competent in their self-governing (though many still rely on former colonial powers to handle some external matters), and well-informed about their own and global affairs. They travel widely, often migrating to work and study abroad for several years; but most return on regular visits or to reside permanently again in the land of their birth, bringing with them skills and financial assets. In short, the Eastern Caribbean exhibits many features that should make it a nearly perfect tourism destination.

⁶ The colonial history of the Eastern Caribbean is not covered in this paper; but the reader should keep in mind that the region long settled by Native Americans, was then seized by Europeans and covered with plantations worked by millions of slaves imported from Africa. Today most citizens of the region are descendent from both the African slaves and the European settlers, some of whom were of the planter class, many of whom were indentured servants or of other lower-class status. During the nineteenth century Asian people were sent to the region as indentured servants and many remained.

⁷ During the last half of the 20th century development effort by Caribbean people and aid from Europe and North America has significantly contributed to the improvement of quality of life in the region. All aspects of the infrastructure have been upgraded; and recently local people, trained at the University of the West Indies and abroad have taken over most government jobs and management positions. Incomes have risen with the drift from the plantation economy to economies based on industry, services, and tourism.

⁸ Quality-of-Life indices are calculated from three sets of data: infant mortality, life expectancy, and literacy, and are reported on a 100 point scale. The Q-of-L index seeks to avoid some of the misrepresentations that result from simply comparing average income or GDP statistics.

But oddly enough, North Americans, who constitute 70 percent of the tourists coming to the region⁹ and who are traveling to the Eastern Caribbean in ever greater numbers (4 million in 1990, primarily on cruises), appear to be suffering a strange reaction to this apparently well-endowed place, as is illustrated by the comment quoted at the beginning of this paper. Only about 15 percent of cruise passengers disembark in any given port; and interviews with all types of travelers reveal that many return home with an ill-defined feeling of shame and guilt about their trip to what had been billed in the tourist literature as "Paradise".¹⁰

Although the phenomenon requires substantiation through further research, I suggest that the shame, guilt and avoidance exhibited by returned Caribbean tourists is due in large part to a basic geographic ignorance.¹¹ These travelers – lacking an appreciation for the complexities of human geography, having little understanding of the global rankings of social and economic well-being, understanding little of the finer points of cultural diversity, more than likely suffering from a deeply grounded ethnocentrism (not necessarily racism¹²), and caught up themselves in rampant consumerism – are left ill-prepared to interpret the human landscapes of the Eastern Caribbean. Rather than seeing that the region is fundamentally different from their own due to its tropical island environment and distinctive cultural/historical milieu, North Americans judge the place by their own cultural and economic standards and guiltily and quite erroneously conclude that they are visiting a place suffering from abject poverty. Their negative assessment of the lifeways and the landscapes they see is exacerbated by the fact that these sojourners come from a culture that instills the ideal, if not the practice, of egalitarianism and racial equity. Seeing what they think are desperately poor, ignorant (and even idle?), powerless Black people living in what appear by North American standards to be shacks surrounded by unkempt spaces and unruly vegetation, induces feelings of pity and then shame and guilt. They feel somehow responsible for this perceived social tragedy, they have a vague sense

⁹ Jean S. Holder, "The Caribbean Tourism Organization's role in Caribbean tourism development towards the year 2000." in Dennis J. Gayle and Jonathan N. Goodrich (eds) *Tourism, Marketing and Management in the Caribbean*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁰ For a discussion of the Caribbean cruise industry's effort to promote the ship rather than the port of call as "the destination" see Robert Dickinson (1993).

¹¹ The general geographic ignorance of the American public has become legendary in recent years. It should be noted that virtually the same ignorance is shared by many of those who promote and manage the Caribbean tourism industry. Most of these people are located in and are from North America, only a few are actually from the Caribbean and they are often not well trained to interpret their own culture to others.

¹² I purposely avoid the term racism here because I feel it is used too simplistically and stereotypically in the U.S. now-a-days as a term to describe the very complex range of feelings that White and Black Americans have about each other.

that they themselves as tourists are part of the problem; and, when interviewed, many say, like this traveler from Knoxville Tennessee, that they will not return.

Statement by a hairdresser in Knoxville, Tennessee, May 11, 1992:

You work in the Caribbean? Oh, I went there on a cruise last year and I got so depressed, that I never want to go back. The people are so poor! They didn't have any schools or hospitals! There were 1500 of us on that ship and when we got off in those little islands, the people just crowded around, shouting to sell us things or to take us on tours. After a while, I just stayed on the ship so I wouldn't feel so guilty.

Cultural Geography as an Answer to Tourist Guilt.

I come to the subject of tourism, and to the search for what might be done to improve the experience of the Caribbean visitor (and host) not from the perspective of a researcher on tourism per se, but from the perspective of a cultural/historical geographer with almost twenty years experience doing field research in the Eastern Caribbean. Though it is not my subject of study, tourism has been on my mind since I first set foot in on the island of Barbados in 1973. Essentially what I am asking is that geographers become directly involved in the education of tourists so that they set out with fewer misconceptions, do less damage to the places they visit and get more out of the travel experience by getting a better sense of their own niche in a global society.

Since 1980, I, myself, have brought to the Caribbean more than 300 students and volunteer Earthwatch and Smithsonian research assistants to work on plantation archaeology and related projects. In an effort to enhance their experience in the Eastern Caribbean and to minimize the negative impact on the community hosting these strangers, I began to give lectures in the evenings about modern Caribbean life, including social, economic and religious patterns. More recently, in connection with my work at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, I have lectured to passengers aboard the sailing yacht, *The Sea Cloud*, and brought them ashore to meet Caribbean people. In both circumstances, I quickly found that while nature and history were of interest to my audience, primarily because they provided a background, what really interested them was the present human condition. I have no data to show what percentage of travelers to the Caribbean have the negative experience of the hairdresser in Knoxville; but the questions I hear usually hint that the questioners share her perceptions. They worry about how Caribbean people are doing and want to understand where the region fits in the global distribution of wealth, how people make a living and whether or not they have a decent life, with food, shelter, health care and education for their children.

The most pressing need of these travelers is to learn not to simply assess everything that is not like their own standard of living and culture as negative and defi-

cient. True, Caribbean standards of living are not as high as those of North America, but that can actually be good. Energy and resources are often managed more conservatively, diets are often more healthy, exercise is still built into everyday life, children and the elderly are cared for at home by numerous kin. Caribbean culture, far from being just a poor version of U.S. culture, is an invention of Caribbean people that serves their needs with integrity and may well be at the forefront of the effort to design more humane and environmentally sound ways of life for all Earth's people. These travelers need to know that there are better methods for measuring well-being than simple income statistics, or the superficial look of a landscape.

A Cultural Geography Experiment in Tourism Education.

During the winter seasons of 1991, 1992, and 1993, I ran what might be described as five ten-day experiments aboard the sailing yacht, *The Sea Cloud*, using entertaining forums in which peculiarly geographic modes of inquiry and analysis were employed to inform the 60 passengers about the Caribbean and to motivate them to engage in a positive interaction with the place and its people.¹³

My first presentation explains how drastically the Caribbean has changed in the last 500 hundred years. Showing landscape paintings of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, I discuss how the introduction of plants, animals, people from all over the globe and, perhaps most importantly, the introduction of alien ideas about resource use has completely transformed Caribbean landscapes. Usually my statement that bananas and coconuts are not native to the New World tropics but were first brought there by Europeans gets everyone's attention. It is then quite easy to teach my fellow travelers how to analyze the human impact on the landscapes they will see the following day.

Our first port of call is often the village of Soufriere in St. Lucia. Soufriere is an old town with a substantial surviving collection of traditional wood houses. It has a town square, a big catholic church, and is flanked to the south by what appears to outsiders as a ramshackle fishing village. I know from experience that visitors need help in thinking about the landscape that Soufriere presents. They tend to conclude

¹³ The *Sea Cloud* is a four-masted bark which is leased out to various tour organizations and universities and sails throughout the world ocean. She usually carries around 60 passengers and a crew of 75. The market category is upscale with average double-occupancy accommodations costing \$6000.00 per person for a ten-day cruise. The passengers are nearly all university educated and well traveled. The average age is estimated at about 69. The age range is usually at least from 30 to 90. The cruises I worked with in 1991, 1992 and 1993, began and ended in Antigua and consisted of two full days of sailing and island visits of at least 6 hours each to St. Lucia, Grenada, Carriacou, Dominica, Anguilla, St. Kitts and occasionally Montserrat and other islands. The activities were usually related to cultural/ecotourism and interacting with islanders. There were daily lectures and discussions on board on cultural and ecological issues in the Caribbean and rim-Caribbean led by a variety of scientists, including myself.

that it is terribly poor and then they feel guilty just walking through the town. I give them some statistics about literacy, infant mortality, and life expectancy in St. Lucia, comparing it not just to the U.S., but the world at large. Soon they see that St. Lucia is in fact quite a safe and healthy place, in many ways, even more so than places in North America. We talk about its problems too and generally work on the idea that Soufriere is a part of a culture system that is very different from the U.S. I ask them now to observe more carefully as they travel through St. Lucia, reading the landscapes as they learned in my first lecture that a geographer might assess a landscape painting, looking for connections to the system that is St. Lucia, and the wider Caribbean. Perhaps, most importantly, I ask them to refrain from using poverty as the explanation for anything they see. I suggest that they politely converse with anyone who is willing and refrain from taking pictures. This latter suggestion is partly to save St. Lucians from the intrusion of the tourist's camera and partly to ensure that the travelers will observe carefully rather than snap meaningless or misleading photos, a tactic also suggested by the new "green" periodical *Responsible Traveling*.¹⁴

The result is usually, that after this first day of traveling with the benefit of "geographic education" most come back having had at least one conversation with a St. Lucian; and they have made all sorts of observations about landscapes and people. They notice plants that they now know were introduced from Asia and Africa, they think about the school uniforms the children are wearing and the cultural meaning behind that. They discover that there is a modern hospital where nearly every baby of the region is born. They notice material culture: house types, tools, the unique dugout canoes, the array of religious institutions, the contents of stores, and things people were doing; and they begin to ask about houses and domestic and family life. My job then is to suggest ways to analyze all the information they have retrieved from a non-ethnocentric point of view.

In succeeding lectures and conversations we talk about the Native American (Carib and Arawak) heritage that has been retained in the dugout canoes, in garden plants and in foodways, and we talk about the pervasive African heritage of the Caribbean and the contributions of other culture groups from Europe, the Mediterranean, and Asia. Invariably, the most popular and stimulating topic is a discussion of family structure, gender relations, and the spatial organization of domestic life in traditional houseyards and in the new concrete houses that are going up everywhere. I think this topic is so popular because it gives people a chance to see how very different cultures can be in the ways they perceive intimate relationships.

¹⁴ Once the passengers are comfortable with interacting with Caribbean people, I suggest that after they have talked with someone for half an hour (and only if the person visited has the time for such an extended visit), it would be appropriate to ask if a picture might be taken. Pictures of inanimate objects are not restricted; but people are still asked to avoid intrusive behavior. For a discussion of the role of photography in the transaction between tourist and host see Urry, 1990: 134–156.

Almost always someone wonders aloud at how this insight is changing their ideas about other cultures everywhere, especially African-American culture, within the United States.

Over the next nine days, as we travel to Grenada, Carriacou, Dominica, and beyond, the observations become more sophisticated and our conversations more lively. The travelers become more curious and less judgmental as they fit together the components that form the system that is the Creole culture of the Caribbean. Soon they are longing to make some acquaintances and so we begin to invite a selection of people to come to dinner, or tea, or for a drink on board: a boat-builder, a fisherman, a folk artist, a clerk in a museum, a tour guide, a businesswoman, an ambassador to the Organization of American States, or a minister of education on one of the islands. We discuss with them why so little local produce makes it into the tourist hotels, we ask what percentage of the money earned in tourism stays in the islands, we may discuss the pros and cons of subsistence gardening techniques with a gardener, or how the University of the West Indies is organized with one of the regional tutors. The travelers ask their hosts about comparative colonial history, the various forms of government on the different islands, erosion rates on different types of agricultural plots, the houseyard pattern of domestic life, mating relationships, gender relationships, child-rearing practices. Always these discussions lead us to reflect on our own part of the world, and how it relates to these islands that have welcomed us.

The primary goals of this education process are to enrich the visitor's enjoyment of the trip by replacing misunderstanding and guilt with intelligent inquiry, and to moderate the impact of the travelers on the host societies. A secondary goal is to replace the misguided and ethnocentric conceptions that visitors often hold regarding Caribbean standards of living, ways of life, and value systems, with understanding, in such a way that appreciation of cultural diversity is significantly enhanced. A yet further goal, and possibly the most important in the long term, is to increase the support of these visitors for the types of international economic and social development policies that underwrite, not undermine, local cultural systems throughout the developing world.

But can this cultural geography approach work, or is this all wishful thinking? How long does the positive effect last? Can tourists be brought to consider such large issues on what was supposed to be a vacation? I can attest that my "experiments", now run six times for ten days each, indicate that the answer is a resounding, "Yes!". Nearly every passenger expresses excitement over the new insights delivered by "geography". Furthermore, letters written to me as long as three years after the experience indicate not only that the effect lasts, but that this technique of thinking about another place is applied on subsequent trips elsewhere. But,

such finely tuned learning sessions require highly trained professional facilitators and appear to be workable only with small groups (60 at most).

Perhaps the most relevant questions relate to the "environmental impact" of the described technique: to what extent can this approach be replicated and extended to the mass of Caribbean tourists, and are host societies really benefitted?

Furthermore, these intimate interactions with island people are so intrusive on local time and patience, that the replications are surely finite. How often, after all, whether paid or not, can an elderly woman cheerfully welcome strangers into her houseyard, or a busy cultivator take an hour out to talk to curious horticulturists? Good public relations are clearly engendered by providing an intellectually and emotionally gratifying experience for visitors and the very few tour companies that provide such an experience appear to enjoy many repeat travelers; but whether or not the return to the Caribbean is worth the investment of time, effort, and patience by the region's people remains, frankly, unclear.

The bottomline may well be that in any case tourism is probably not a very good development strategy for the Caribbean. First of all, relatively little of the money spent remains in the region. There is a leakage of foreign exchange earnings from tourism that may be as high as 75 cents on the dollar. This is due to the high usage of imported goods and services, the repatriation of profits and earnings by foreign owners of tourism accommodations and foreign personnel, and the purchase of tour packages from agents in North America and Europe rather than in the Caribbean (Conway 1993: 169). But most of all the social stress and the infrastructural wear and tear of being a host society may outweigh the benefits generated¹⁵

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¹⁵ For a discussion of ways to stanch the hemorrhage of tourist dollars, see the discussion of 'Caribbeanisation' in Turner and Ash, 1976: 205 ff.

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