

TOURISM IN CUBA: CASINOS, CASTROS, AND CHALLENGES

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TOURISM IN CUBA: CASINOS, CASTROS, AND CHALLENGES

BY

TONY L. HENTHORNE



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Katie

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Acknowledgments

I am very fortunate to be a member of a profession that allows me the freedom to work in and study topics and subjects about which I am genuinely passionate. Cuba ranks right at the top of that list. I sincerely appreciate the assistance, support, and continual encouragement I have received from those who have made the possibility of this book a reality. Over 20 years ago, Mark Miller exposed me to the complex, daunting, and continually enchanting world that is Cuba. That began a relationship with the island and its people that would see me return over a dozen times through the ensuing years. Early on, friends in Jamaica opened doors and made introductions for me in Havana and Varadero that made my experiences in Cuba so much more rewarding. Thom Riley made certain that funding was available to continue my work on the island during times no one else would. I appreciate Babu George for his help early on with this project. I thank Alvin Williams for consistently serving as a voice of reason to an (at times) unreasonable person. I owe Tom Panko the biggest debt of gratitude for trying his best to keep me on track and focused — certainly not the easiest of tasks. Without his assistance, this work most certainly never would have found completion; thank you so very much. To my friends and colleagues in Cuba, *muchas gracias por compartir ideas y responder a tantas preguntas* (thank you for sharing insights and answering a staggering number of my questions). I look forward to returning.

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About the Author

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She can wiggle her ass but she can't sing a goddamn note.

—Myer Lanksy speaking of his Hotel Riviera
opening night headliner, Ginger Rogers (1957)¹

We do not know anything about this. We, gentlemen, to tell the truth,
do not even know what to charge.

—Fidel Castro on the development of international
tourism in Cuba (1990)²

We will enforce the ban on tourism. We will enforce the embargo.

—Donald Trump on the policy of the United States
towards Cuba (2017)³

¹Lacey, R. (1991). *Little man: Meyer Lansky and the gangster life*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Company, p. 25.

²Castro, F. (1990). Castro gives speed on the development of international tourism. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-castro-quotes-factbox/fact-box-cubas-fidel-castro-in-his-own-words-idUSKBN13L04G?il=0>

³Trump, D. (2017). Remarks by President Trump on the policy of the United States towards Cuba. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-policy-united-states-towards-cuba/>

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Preface

Havana, Cuba. For many Americans, these two words bring to mind a number of rather vague thoughts, loose opinions, and images of colonial architecture frozen in time and classic American automobiles from the 1950s. Cuba occupies a unique point in the American psyche; a position that is quite likely framed in large part by stories heard since childhood from the seemingly constant rhetoric of our government and the media, and from movies like Francis Ford Coppola's classic *The Godfather, Part II* (1974), or more recently *The Fate of the Furious* (2017), the eighth installment in the successful *Fast and Furious* franchise and the first big-budget Hollywood movie filmed in Cuba since the US embargo was imposed more than 50 years ago. However, what do we really know?

Today, Cuba is in the news again. After more than five decades of isolation from the United States and its huge market of leisure travelers, the island seems poised to rejoin the tourism mainstream. Americans want to know more about Cuba and will travel for that experience. However, barely ninety miles from Florida, Cuba is the only country in the world that is legally off limits to most US citizens due to the policies of their own government. While it remains an unknown to most Americans even today, that unknown, that nearly mystic haze that surrounds Cuba has become a large part of its fascination and allure.

American travelers have long been captivated with the island. In 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, infamously known as Prohibition, was passed. Prohibition made the manufacture, transportation, and sale of alcohol illegal for over a decade. America was legally dry and not everyone was happy about it. The US government's war on booze created the first wave of thirsty visitors to the island-nation. Cubans, being ever-resourceful entrepreneurs, announced to the world that they were "Open for Business!" with strong drink, exotic surroundings, and available friendship. A tourist mecca was born.

Since those earliest halcyon days nearly a century ago, Cuba has ridden the crest of the tourism wave and crashed deep into its troughs. Prohibition was repealed and the Great Depression ruled the economy of the two countries and many others around the world. Tourism to Cuba experienced a cataclysmic dive. Down but not out, tourism hobbled on only to be resurrected and taken to unimaginable heights during the 1940s and 1950s, thanks in large part to the American Mafia and the hedonic environment that enveloped Havana. Americans flocked to the city, staying in glamorous mobster-owned hotels, dining and dancing at exotic nightclubs such as the famous Tropicana. They gambled in the swanky casino at the newly completed Hotel Riviera and in a multitude of other casinos around the city. They took full advantage of the plentiful and warm local companionship available at every bar, casino, and street corner. In short, American travelers descended on Cuba for the experience – the

experience of living a high level of self-indulgence they could not easily find at home, if they could find it at all. Some have called this an era of American manipulation and mistreatment of Cuba and the Cuban people. Contradictorily, others have called it the wonderful “Golden Age of Cuban Tourism.”

Ultimately, that exploitation of Cuba and its people gave rise to Fidel Castro’s sweeping Revolution. With the late December 1958 arrival of Castro and his soon to be revealed socialist tendencies, out went the capitalist Americans taking with them their decadent ways and their fat wallets. Casinos were shuttered, prostitution outlawed, and foreign properties nationalized. Tourism to Cuba once again fell dramatically, seemingly hanging on by the thinnest of threads. Castro’s increasingly close ties to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and the Soviet Union helped to drive a further wedge between the US and Cuba.

In 1962, US President John F. Kennedy signed into law the “Trading With the Enemy Act” cutting off (among other things) all recreational travel to Cuba. Thus began a half-century of isolation from the very large, free-spending, and important US travel and tourism market. This long and enduring ideological quarrel did not cause Americans to dislike Cuba or the Cuban people, not even during the bitterest days of the often-frayed US–Cuba relationship. It did, however, cause many Americans to once again romanticize Cuba as that unknown, exotic, and forbidden destination. So close, yet so very far away.

In 2018, American policy towards Cuba is once again in a seemingly endless state of fluctuation. Uncertainty rules the day. Following the 2014 Obama administration’s loosening of travel restrictions to the country, the excitement was undeniable and US tourism to Cuba surged – for a brief period. Americans still were not really free to travel to Cuba; after all, the embargo remained solidly in place (as it has been since 1962). The constantly changing rules and requirements for legal travel to the country left US travelers wary and hesitant. Now, President Donald Trump has closed some of the travel loopholes opened by his predecessor. Trump has yet to make his stance on Cuba completely clear, but his interim directives have made travel to the country somewhat more restrictive again.

It is not often in history that “Hope” has the opportunity to meaningfully shape the future of tourism development, but Cuba may be one such example. There is widespread hope about the future of tourism in Cuba, from within and without the country. While multinational hotel developers from countries such as Spain, Mexico, and Canada have already established a strong presence in Cuba, US-based hospitality companies are only now studying their options. Major cruise lines such as Carnival Cruise Lines, Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines, and Regent Seven Seas Cruises have all announced new Cuba cruises, with more to come. US airlines now fly scheduled flights to destinations around the island. Still, Cuba does not have the tourism-centric infrastructure to support any additional visitors, even during the off-peak season. Professionalism in the industry is yet to be developed and matured. Even when a small cruise ship disembarks a few hundred cruisers, coastal cities are overwhelmed. Notwithstanding, the Cuban authorities are presumptuous about their ability to handle any number of

additional guests. If US travel to Cuba increases — as it inevitably will — it will be no easy task to provide those travelers with the required and expected facilities and services.

There are perplexing signals coming from Cuba. For many years, the country has maintained a close relationship with the socialist country of Venezuela and has enjoyed the ability to purchase oil from that government at very favorable and highly discounted rates. Now, Venezuela has devolved into an internal state of crisis and that agreement is void. As a result, gasoline rationing in Cuba has become commonplace once again. Tangentially, the Cuban economy fell overall in 2016, despite a significant increase in tourism-related revenues. Once again, Cuba is in the unfortunate yet frighteningly familiar position of not being able to import even essential commodities due to its rapidly depleting foreign exchange reserves. The quickest method to replenish that foreign exchange is via tourism. Thus far, however, Cuban authorities are taking a cautious approach. Given the sociocultural and environmental impacts unleashed by mass tourism may potentially have on Cuba and the Cuban people, this is understandable. That said there also exists a heightened realization within Cuba that the country cannot continue to survive on subsidies from foreign governments. Cautious approach or not, markedly increased levels of tourism are coming to the island-nation. Will Cuba be ready?

A Few Notes on the Research

The background and research for this work are based on a number of sources. Principally among these are the author's 30-plus years of working and studying tourism development throughout the greater Caribbean region. My first exposure to Cuba was in 1994, early during the Special Period. Over the next two-plus decades, I returned to the island-nation more than a dozen times and have had the unique opportunity to travel much of the country and speak with numerous Cubans, both within and without the government. I have given talks and presentations to rooms filled with Cuban hotel and tourism executives and have continued these conversations with many of them over the years. I have gleaned insights from interactions with representatives of the Ministries of Tourism, Public Health, and Education. However, speaking with the everyday Cuban — whether that individual is a small business owner, bartender, cocktail server, taxi driver, or hustler — provides an understanding into life and tourism in Cuba not obtainable through any other source.

Extensive reviews of existing literature, data, and statistics were undertaken in an effort to make the book as timely, complete, and relevant as possible. Cuba tourism-related data and statistics are notoriously hard to come by and, although information sources have become more reliable and accessible over the ensuing years, remain somewhat of a challenge. When necessary, data have been extrapolated or averaged in an effort to fill missing information.

The Path of *Tourism in Cuba: Casinos, Castros, and Challenges*

Tourism in Cuba: Casinos, Castros, and Challenges traces the history of tourism in Cuba from the earliest days of Prohibition through the Mob-influenced “Golden Age” to today’s cautious but hopeful outlook for the future. This book is written primarily for those interested in cultivating a deeper appreciation and understanding of Cuba, its tourism industry, and how the progression of tourism has impacted – both positively and negatively – the Cuban people, their culture, society and the country’s overall development. A brief highlight of the chapters follows.

Chapter 1. The First Tourists

The opening chapter begins with a basic review of Cuba’s history, from the time of the indigenous Taíno through the Spanish occupation and Cuba’s various – generally failed – efforts to free itself from outside control. Cuba’s first brush with international tourism and its rise as an “adult playground” were brought about due to the passage of Prohibition in the United States. The results on Cuba were immediate and impressive – anything unobtainable at home was happily waiting for visitors in Cuba. Americans reacted quickly and with zeal to take advantage of such generous offerings.

Chapter 2. An Era of Decadence

Fulgencio Batista was not always the ‘bad guy’ he came to be perceived in the late 1940s and 1950s. However, when he made that crossover, he embraced his new role as dictator of Cuba and erstwhile US puppet with passion. The rapid and in many ways catastrophic growth of American Mafia-controlled gambling, nightclubs, and prostitution brought with it a level of exploitation and depravity never before experienced in Cuba. Widespread corruption and harsh working conditions for the Cuban people became the rule of the day. Was this the “Golden Age of Cuban Tourism” as touted by many or was it in reality the US exploitation of Cuba and its people?

Chapter 3. The Revolution and Tourism

Generally, the outcomes of repression, mistreatment, and lack of individual freedom are rebellion and revolution. Such was the case with Cuba. The corrupt and brutal Batista regime, coupled with the blatant mistreatment of the Cuban people, created a fertile ground for the rise of Fidel Castro and his grassroots revolution. Cuban- and American-owned properties were nationalized and the wildly successful Cuban tourism model of gambling, nightclubs, and open prostitution was brought to a quick and decisive end. Americans and many wealthy Cubans fled the island. The close of the “Golden Age of Cuban Tourism” had come.

Chapter 4. The Special Period, Part 1 (1990–1995)

The emergence of Fidel Castro and his close affiliation with the Soviet Union opened a new era politically, economically, and culturally for Cuba. Individual

freedoms were subjugated to the will of the State. Tourism was encouraged, but it was of a different nature and purpose than previously and targeted a different market segment. Cuba became the destination of choice for Soviet bloc travelers. During this period, tourism assumed an odd utilitarian nature; new hotels were built but with austere features in keeping with the Spartan mantra of the Soviet Union.

Chapter 5. The Special Period, Part 2 (1995–2005)

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 brought incredibly painful changes to Cuba as seemingly overnight the country lost between 50% and 70% of its foreign exchange. Simply put, Cuba was broke. Lines stretched for blocks as the Cuban people queued up and waited for their monthly allocations of rice and other basic commodities. International tourism, reviled as capitalistic earlier by Castro, was now viewed as a potential avenue of economic independence. Havana actively sought and courted international investors to help in the development of their nascent tourist industry.

Chapter 6. Cuban Thaw

An ailing Fidel Castro turns over control of the government to his younger brother Raul who embarks on a cautious journey to bring Cuba into the international marketplace, at least at some level. Over the next decade, international tourism and visitors to Cuba expanded dramatically pouring badly needed hard currency into the island's coffers. Before long, tourism became the primary growth vehicle for the island, slowly pulling the country from the darkest economic depths to which it had fallen. Canada, Spain, Mexico, Germany, and France were all there building and managing hotels, marinas, and other tourism enterprises and sending millions of their fellow countrymen to soak up the sunshine and *mojitos* on Cuba's celebrated beaches. However, the hemisphere's largest and wealthiest visitor base, the United States, was conspicuously absent. In December 2014, US President Barack Obama began abating restrictions on American companies doing business in Cuba and on American citizens' freedom to travel to the island. It truly appeared a sea of change was underway.

Chapter 7. A New Political and Economic Environment

In November 2016, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States and once again the nexus between the two countries was in a state of uncertainty. While Mr Trump rolled back some of his predecessor's actions with regard to Cuba, travel and tourism remains a big business. Then, in April 2018, Cuba experienced the most significant leadership change since Fidel assumed power in 1959. Miguel Diaz-Canel assumed the mantle of President of Cuba. How might the relationship between Cuba and the US be impacted? Will the restrictions on travel and tourism between the two countries remain or change? Combine these questions with the fact that two of Cuba's old allies and supporters – Russia and China – are once again providing Havana with political support and economic aid. It becomes evident that few matters concerning Cuba are simple and straightforward.

Chapter 8. Challenges Old and New

Frequently, being a tourist today in Cuba is not the easiest of vacations. While so much has changed since the country reengaged with the international tourism community so very much remains the same — or worse. Tourism-centric infrastructure has been taxed beyond its limit, with failure common. Prices for everything from a taxi to a hotel room have shot to the stratosphere. Service failures are the norm not the exception. Cuba's continued adherence to a debilitating dual currency system stymies development.

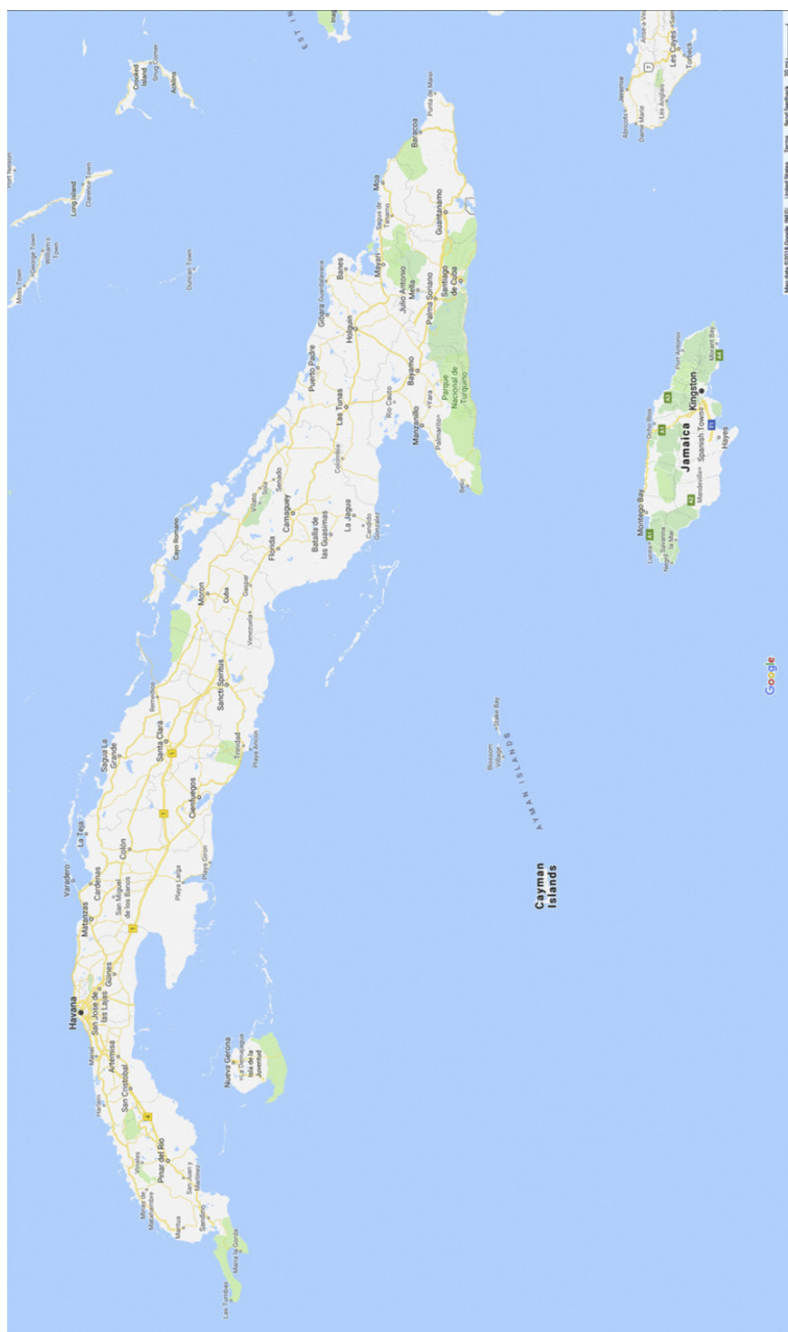
Chapter 9. Where to from Here?

This concluding chapter provides a sector analysis of Cuban tourism growth and development priorities and opportunities. From historic and heritage tourism to chic ecotourism to medical tourism to traditional sun-and-sand tourism and topics in between, this chapter explores the near future of Cuban tourism.

It is my hope that the reader of *Tourism in Cuba: Casinos, Castros, and Challenges* will come away with an enriched understanding of how tourism to the island has evolved to its current status and what the future may hold. However, to attempt to predict the future of tourism in Cuban with absolute certainty is not possible and would be reckless. That future certainly will include the American market and embrace a greatly evolved tourism product. Much work remains to be done. The island's tourism infrastructure is currently experiencing considerable growing pains and all will not go as planned — it seldom does. However, a new “Golden Age of Cuban Tourism” is quickly approaching. Will the land of the Taino be ready to meet that challenge?

PART I

CASINOS



Map 1.1. Cuba.

Chapter 1

The First Tourists

1.1. Cuba: The Early Years

Cuba is a massive island, by far the largest in the Western Hemisphere south of Canada. With a length of 760 miles (1,223 km), it is longer than Florida. Looking back, Cuba was home to a number of Mesoamerican cultures prior to Columbus discovering the island and claiming it for Spain. Cuba's pre-Columbian history dates back to somewhere around 4000 BC. The site of Levisa, a cay in Pina del Rio Province, had developed into an ancient settlement area dating back to approximately 3100 BC. The Cayo Redondo and Guayabo Blanco Neolithic cultures flourished between 2000 BC and 1000 BC in the western regions of the country. In many situations, and as is commonplace worldwide, the indigenous inhabitants would be driven away by a new wave of successful immigrants. The native Guanajatabey had inhabited Cuba for centuries, but were chased away by expansionist-minded Taino and Ciboney migrants. The Tainos, in particular, become very prosperous and successful in agricultural activities by the fifteenth century. They were known to be excellent cultivators of large crops of yucca roots, sweet potatoes, maize, cotton, and tobacco (Rouse, 1993). The Taino population reached nearly one-half million inhabitants by the time the equally expansionist-minded Spanish paid them a visit (Anderson-Cordova, 1991; Cordova, 1968).

The history of Cuba's relations with the rest of the world began with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492. Columbus lost his way on his planned Spanish-sponsored voyage to India and thought that Cuba was a tip of the Indian peninsula. In fact, Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and Dominican Republic) was discovered prior to Cuba and became the site of the first Spanish settlement in the region. During this first voyage, Columbus landed on the northeast coast of Cuba; in many ways, this makes Columbus the first international tourist to visit Cuba. During a second voyage in 1494, his ships passed along the southern coast of the island and visited various inlets. Columbus seemed to have liked the tent-like homes made of palm leaves in which the current inhabitants lived (Johnson, 1920). It was this voyage that legend has Columbus bringing sugarcane cuttings for planting and cultivation by the local Taino population.

Soon after Columbus' first voyage, Pope Alexander VI decreed that the Spanish were morally bound to "convert" these pagans of the New World to Christianity. This edict was a great booster for subsequent European conquests and colonization. The coming atrocities were interpreted and rationalized by the Spanish as much-needed punishments and the only way to successfully eradicate the unacceptable worship of, and belief in, the evil deities and false gods of the pagan Taino people. Mass murders were justified as the final defeat of these pagan deities. The Spanish invasion almost surely eliminated the Taino aboriginals. Many died of communicable diseases; many others were massacred. The conquering Spanish quickly turned those who survived into slaves.

Encomienda was a royal grant that permitted the Spanish settlers to receive labor services from the local indigenous people (Batchelder & Sanchez, 2013). In return for this benevolence, the Tainos were bound to work for the Spanish in whatever way and manner the Spanish deemed appropriate. The practice gave a formalized legal system to the Americas for the first time in history. At the same time, it made the life of the remaining natives a perpetual living nightmare (Laemers, 2011). The results of this order were catastrophic for the Tainos and resulted in a quick and drastic reduction in the indigenous population.

There were different versions of encomienda, implemented differently in other colonies. The abuse of the native population made encomienda a very controversial law at home in Spain. Some priests working in the colonies kept encouraging the Crown to have this practice formally withdrawn and replaced with something more "civilized" (Moses, 1898). Finally, the crown-managed repartimiento system replaced encomienda throughout Spanish America. Some provisions in this new system incentivized natives willing to disavow their tribal identity and heritage and swear allegiance to the Crown. Not surprisingly, one of the results of this accommodation was a proliferation of marriages between the natives and the Spanish.

As late as 1508, no one seemed certain whether Cuba was actually an island or part of the mainland. Sebastian de Ocampo, a Spanish navigator and explorer acting under the authority of the Governor of Hispaniola, became the first person to eventually circumnavigate Cuba. Having the unfortunate bad luck to navigate against the Gulf Stream, his voyage took nearly eight months, which was considerably longer than the 10 weeks it had taken Columbus to sail from Spain. Ocampo's journey erased any lingering doubt that Cuba may have been, in fact, a peninsula and not an island (Johnson, 1920). It took nearly 15 years before the entire Cuban coast was mapped out.

Hispaniola and the Cuban islands grew quickly into Spanish settlements. The remaining native tribes, however, did not always accord the new settlers a red-carpet welcome. Hatuey, a Taino chief from Hispaniola who had escaped the Spanish there to come to Cuba, led his people against the Spanish colonists and became one of the first fighters against European colonialism in the New World (Wright, 1916). He and his men had fled to Baracoa in Cuba as a result of the Spanish exploitation of Hispaniola. His team along with a few native Cubans prepared for an imminent Spanish onslaught of Cuba. Apparently, most of the

Cuban natives did not take his words seriously. When the Spanish finally marched into Cuba with their forces, Hatuey fought back employing guerilla warfare.

Using less than stellar means, the Spanish eventually captured him. He was burned at the stake in 1512. Just before the execution, a priest asked him if he would accept Jesus in order to avert hell. He replied that he would not want to live in heaven, if it meant being there with the Spanish oppressors (Gjelten, 2008). He is widely remembered by many as Cuba's first National Hero.

Hatuey responded:

Here is the God the Spanish worship. For these they fight and kill; for these they persecute us and that is why we must throw them into the sea. They tell us, these tyrants, that they adore a God of peace and equality, and yet they usurp our land and make us their slaves. They speak to us of an immortal soul and of their eternal rewards and punishments, and yet they rob our belongings, seduce our women, violate our daughters. Incapable of matching us in valor, these cowards cover themselves with iron that our weapons cannot break. (Casas & Griffin, 1992)

The spirit of Chief Hatuey lives on with Hatuey Beer, brewed first by the Santiago Brewing Company (owned by the Cuban Bacardi Company) in Cuba between 1920 and 1959 (Photo 1.1), and recently relaunched by Bacardi via Indian Head Brewery in the United States (Hatuey, 2017).

Widespread and unrelenting guerilla warfare continued for several years following the death of Hatuey. The Spanish eventually reigned supreme and, at the conclusion of the fighting, many of the remaining chieftains were captured and burned alive. Even in those cases where the invaders were welcomed, consequences were not much different for the residents. According to the Spanish friar



Photo 1.1. Classic Hatuey Beer Label. *Source:* Photograph by Tony L. Henthorne, from the Author's Collection.

cum historian Bartolome de las Casas, more than three thousand locals were butchered without any provocation in Manzanillo by the colonizers (Casas & Griffin, 1992). Actually, as the story goes, locals were waiting to greet the foreigners with bread loaves, fish, and other food items. Then the massacre began. Even those who escaped to the mountains and smaller islets were later captured and killed or forced into slavery.

Hispaniola was slowly replaced by Cuba as the Spanish epicenter of activities in the Caribbean. Contrary to popular thought, Havana was not always the capital of Cuba or even its first settlement. Coinciding with the struggle with Chief Hatuey, the Spanish conquistador Diego Velazquez de Cuellar led a group of settlers and established Baracoa as their first capital in Cuba in 1511. The municipality of Baracoa in the province of Guantanamo at the eastern end of the island was a location of some importance in later years with the arrival of the United States. Many say Baracoa was where Christopher Columbus was first spotted by the local Tainos (Gott, 2005); others say it occurred at Barlary Bay (Holguin Province) (Quintana, Rueda, Rueda, & Rueda, 1992). Whatever the truth may be, the isolation and charm of Baracoa made it a continual haven for illegal trade in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries.

In 1514, Havana (*San Cristobal de la Habana*) was founded. A very small settlement at that time, it would one day grow into one of the most bustling cities in the Caribbean. The Spanish had come to Cuba looking for gold, as they did elsewhere throughout the Caribbean. What little gold they did find was soon exhausted. Before long, cattle production (and the resulting products of salt-cured beef and leather), sugarcane, and tobacco became the primary sources of income for the Spanish in Cuba. The Spanish quickly picked up and mastered the art of tobacco production from the local population as well as the increasingly popular finished tobacco product – cigars.

By this time, the native population had been almost entirely eradicated by the fateful combination of enslavement, European diseases for which they held no natural immunity, and the general cruelty of their new Spanish masters (Gonzalez, 1971). The surviving natives persisted in their uncooperativeness. This combination of factors led to severe labor shortages for the Spanish and impeded their quest to enhance their presence in Havana and throughout the island of Cuba. The unfortunate demise of the indigenous Tainos created a severe shortage of workers for the local plantations and directly leading to the introduction of the African slave trade to the island in 1527. Slavery lasted for over three hundred years and while estimates vary, between 600,000 and 1,000,000 Africans were transported to Cuba during the history of the Atlantic slave trade (Curtin, 1969; Murray, 1971). With the massive influx of African slaves, the demographic and cultural profile of Cuba was forever changed.

The introduction of this new labor source sparked a striking increase in commercial productivity and served as a significant boon to the Cuban economy. Prosperity came roaring back to Cuba. Sugarcane and tobacco production both grew rapidly; but it was sugarcane that soon emerged as the most profitable and sought-after crop. Cuba solidified its position as a trading post and waypoint for Spanish fleets returning to the homeland after seeking riches in the New World.

Since its earliest days of discovery by Christopher Columbus, Cuba was regarded as the “Pearl” of the Spanish Empire (Goodman, 1873). Nothing contributed to this sobriquet more than its abundant and lucrative production of sugar.

This economic success did not go unnoticed by the competing world powers of the day. Cuba became a frequent target for English and Dutch privateers and French corsairs. The need to protect the Cuban mainland from invasion took on greater urgency than ever. The fortress *Castillo de los Tres Reyes Magos del Morro* (Fort Morro) (Photo 1.2), overlooking Havana harbor, was completed in 1598. However, Cuba’s lack of adequate defenses became patently obvious in 1628 when a Dutch fleet led by the privateer Piet Heyn, commanding an armada of 23 warships, lay in wait for an unsuspecting Spanish silver fleet sailing from Mexico on their way to Havana. The oblivious Spanish sailed unwittingly into the yaw of Heyn’s fleet off the coast of Matanzas, just a short distance from Havana. Upon returning home to the Netherlands, the captured treasures sold for more than 15 million guilders (the equivalent of more than US\$ 204 million in 2017) (Wright, 1921). Heyn’s exploits are still fondly remembered in his homeland.



Photo 1.2. Fort Morro Overlooking Havana Harbor.

Source: Photograph by Tony L. Henthorne.

Cuba’s defense network of citadels grew plentiful over the coming decades but did little to deter the English, Dutch, and French from continuous raids and confrontations. A classic example of this defensive determination occurred during the construction of Castillo de San Pedro de la Roca near Santiago de Cuba. Construction of this citadel began in earnest in 1638. While the fortress was still under construction in 1662, the English naval officer and privateer

Sir Christopher Myngs captured and occupied the town of Santiago de Cuba for two weeks. During that fortnight, his forces destroyed a large portion of the fort and took possession of the fort's artillery (Gott, 2005). The fort was eventually completed in 1700, fully 62 years after construction started.

There was an interim period in Cuba's history, from 1756 to 1763, when Great Britain showed increased interest in the island. This period was fraught with wars between Britain and France around the world, as each nation strove for total world dominion. The British navy overpowered the Spanish and captured Havana in 1762 (Kuethe, 1986). The British also brought in thousands of additional African slaves. Given its location, Cuba was an essential bargaining chip in the strategic calculations of Britain since they were not really interested in the agricultural produce of Cuba. Additionally, they had no special enmity against the Spanish. After a series of negotiations, Cuba was given back to Spain. In return, the British were given Florida (Childs, 2009).

By the later part of the eighteenth century, the fear of attacks and raids from privateers had declined and many of the forts and citadels around Cuba were repurposed or abandoned and began to fall into disrepair and decline. Castillo de San Pedro de la Roca, on the outskirts of Santiago, was one of the casualties. It was not until the 1960s that the fort was restored. It is now recognized as the most complete and best-preserved example of Spanish–American military architecture in existence. It was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997 (UNESCO, 2017).

One unique event that occurred in Cuba during this period was the founding of the *Universidad de La Habana* (University of Havana) (<http://www.uh.cu>) in 1728. Originally established as a religious school with appropriate royal and papal authorizations, it was one of the first higher educational institutions founded in the Americas. Until it changed its mandate to a secular liberal arts institution in 1842, it was known as *Real y Pontificia Universidad de San Geronimo de la Habana* (Royal and Pontifical University of Saint Jerome of Havana). During Batista's rule, the university became a fertile breeding ground for revolutionary idealism (University of Havana, 2017). No wonder Batista forcefully closed its doors in November 1956 (Márquez-Sterling, 2009). These doors did not reopen until 1959 following Fidel Castro's rise to power.

Cuba was forced to bear a significant portion of the financial burden of Spain in the aftermath of her global wars. This burden was not well received by the ruling Cuban elite. These elitists may have been Spanish, but they had spent many long years in building the “new” Cuba and were not willing to have their lifestyle financially disrupted. As a result, many in Cuba began to question Spanish rule. During and after the Haitian Revolution from 1791 to 1804, thousands of French-Haitian refugees fled to Cuba and brought with them greater expertise in sugar refining and coffee growing. The increased wealth of the Creole population led to demands for a more active role in Cuba's governance and political processes. The wars against Spain during 1868–1878 (The Ten Years War), 1879–1880 (The Little War), and 1895–1898 (The Cuban War of Independence) created fertile grounds for the increasing demands of modern Cuban nationalism.

Cuba's fight for independence moved to the forefront in October 1868 when a wealthy landowner and slave owner, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, freed his slaves, proclaimed independence, formed the Republic of Cuba, and declared war on Spain (Henderson, 1978). Other wealthy landowners joined him in freeing their slaves and donating their properties. Their ranks quickly swelled to over 12,000 freedom fighters (or rebels, depending on one's point of view). What followed would come to be known as The Ten Years War. This conflict, which basically ended in a draw, is historically important for two reasons. One, it led to the Pact of Zanjón. This agreement gave Cubans greater freedom of speech and some degree of representation in the Spanish parliament. Two, all slavery was to be abolished in 1886 (Corwin, 2014). The Pact was a hard-won agreement that, in reality, was not overly popular with the Spanish government. As a result, they were less than enthusiastic about its relatively slow implementation. In many ways, the Pact of Zanjón remained little more than a tenuous truce between the two sides (Perez, 1983). Rebellions renewed the very next year and Spain declined to honor the Pact. Simmering aggressions continued until the decisive Cuban War of Independence in 1895.

The revolutionary author and philosopher José Martí became a symbol of Cuba's bid for independence from Spain during the nineteenth century and emerged as a central figure in the Cuban War of Independence. While his writings and poetry were widely known and impactful (Cave, 2016) and his influence on Cuban music distinct, he was not a jazz player as some have forwarded. He did have a rather puritanical view on both the Spanish and the US dominance on Cuba and abhorred both. Earlier in his political writings and activity, he seemed to have minimized the US as a potential expansionist. That view changed substantially when rumors began to circulate indicating the possibility of the United States purchasing Cuba from Spain. (He continued to admire the civility in the US and the freedoms the State accorded its citizens.)

Martí viewed the interests of Cuba as being aligned only with other countries in Latin America; no common aspiration or goal linked Cubans with Europeans or Americans (Holden & Zolov, 2000). Later known as the "Apostle of Cuban Independence" (Demas, 1971), Martí traveled widely in an effort to raise the public conscience in favor of Cuban independence. He played a major role in several Cuban assaults against Spain during that time. Martí envisioned Cuba as a democratic republic but believed this could be achieved only by means of a revolution. In fact, the ideological basis of the Cuban Revolutionary Party could be traced to his works (Gray, 1966). The martyrdom of José Martí in a military action during the Battle of Dos Ríos on May 19, 1895 was a key point in the history of Cuba. José Martí's influence throughout Cuban society and culture was pervasive and deep. His mausoleum located in Santa Ifigenia Cemetery in Santiago de Cuba is an important tourist attraction.

The dissonance in relations between the United States and Spain at this time had multiple nuances. The United States played a supporting role in the Cuban War of Independence, which ultimately segued into the much larger Spanish–American War (Offner, 1992). The US had increasingly realized the strategic importance of Cuba, especially in the context of discussions around

developing the Panama Canal. In 1848, the US wanted to purchase Cuba and actually made a US\$ 100 million offer to Spain. The offer was not accepted. Military intervention was pursued before and increasingly after this unusual detour on the part of the United States. At least some commentators view the “conspiracies” surrounding USS Maine in this backdrop (Rohter, 1998). USS Maine (ACR-1) was an American naval ship ostensibly sent to Cuba to protect the interests of the United States. The ship mysteriously exploded and sank in Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898 at the peak of the Cuban War of Independence. The official US Naval Court of Inquiry determined that the ship was likely destroyed by a mine, but did not expressly point a finger at Spain. The majority of the American people and the US Congress took exception to the official findings and placed the blame for the event squarely at the feet of Spain and called for a declaration of war against that country. These events led to the outbreak of the Spanish–American War in April 1898.

The emergence of the United States as the undisputed winner in the Spanish–American War after only three months sounded the death knell for Spain’s presence in Cuba (Chadwick, 1911). At the end of this war, the United States acquired the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Cuba from Spain for the sum of US\$ 20 million. Shortly thereafter, on May 20, 1902, Cuba declared its formal independence from the United States and emerged as the Republic of Cuba. Interestingly, the US still maintained some degree of control and influence over Cuban affairs. Under the Platt Amendment, passed by the U.S. Congress and adopted by the Cubans into their constitution, the US retained certain rights to intervene in the internal affairs of Cuba in the name of the continued protection of Cuba. For US troops to ultimately withdraw from Cuba, this amendment stipulated eight conditions to which the new Cuban government had to adhere.

Essential features of the Platt Amendment include:

- That the government of Cuba shall never enter any treaty or other compact with any foreign power or powers which will impair or tend to impair the independence of Cuba, nor in any manner authorize or permit any foreign power or powers to obtain by colonization or for military or naval purposes or otherwise, lodgment in or control over any portion of said island.
- That said government shall not assume or contract any public debt, to pay the interest upon which, and to make reasonable sinking fund provision for the ultimate discharge of which, the ordinary revenues of the island, after defraying the current expenses of government shall be inadequate.
- That the government of Cuba consents that the United States may exercise the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence, the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty, and for discharging the obligations with respect to Cuba imposed by the Treaty of Paris on the United States, now to be assumed and undertaken by the government of Cuba.

- That all Acts of the United States in Cuba during its military occupancy thereof are ratified and validated, and all lawful rights acquired thereunder shall be maintained and protected.
- That the government of Cuba will execute, and as far as necessary extend, the plans already devised or other plans to be mutually agreed upon, for the sanitation of the cities of the island, to the end that a recurrence of epidemic and infectious diseases may be prevented, thereby assuring protection to the people and commerce of Cuba, as well as to the commerce of the southern ports of the United States and the people residing therein.
- That the Isle of Pines shall be omitted from the proposed constitutional boundaries of Cuba, the title thereto being left to future adjustment by treaty.
- That to enable the United States to maintain the independence of Cuba, and to protect the people thereof, as well as for its own defense, the government of Cuba will sell or lease to the United States lands necessary for coaling or naval stations at certain specified points to be agreed upon with the President of the United States.
- That by way of further assurance the government of Cuba will embody the foregoing provisions in a permanent treaty with the United States.

Cuba amended its constitution to contain these conditions in 1901 and became a self-governing colony of the United States. Tomas Estrada Palma served as the first president of Cuba and held that office from May 20, 1902 to September 28, 1906. He signed the Platt Amendment into law in Cuba. Shortly thereafter, in February 1903, he signed the Cuban–American Treaty of Relations granting America a lease in perpetuity for the Bay of Guantanamo to be used as a military base. Today, the United States still maintains control of Guantanamo Bay.

1.2. The “Golden Age of Cuban Tourism”

With the arrival of Prohibition in the US in 1920, Cuba established itself firmly as “America’s playground in the Caribbean” (Miller & Henthorne, 1997). Prohibition (the Eighteenth Amendment to the US Constitution) made it illegal to produce, transport, or sell alcohol in the United States. This law was in effect from 1920 until its eventual repeal in 1933. Prohibition shuttered bars, distilleries, and bottling facilities across the United States. Companies in the business of producing, distributing, or selling alcohol were wiped out, except for a few that were able to diversify or move their operations to other countries. Prohibition, while causing all sorts of distress and havoc for producers and consumers of alcoholic beverages at home, was a huge boost to producers and purveyors of alcohol in Cuba (Schwartz, 1997). Thus began the “Golden Age of Cuba Tourism.”

The highly successful Cuba-based Bacardi Company had expanded into the US, building a plant in New York just a few short years prior to the passage of Prohibition. Now they were forced to close their new plant and destroy 60,000

cases of inventory. Instead of succumbing to this potential disaster, Bacardi sent thousands of colorful postcards enticing Americans to escape their oppressive and “dry” country and come to Cuba and experience the good life (bacardicuba.net, 2017). The company partnered with Pam Am in a joint advertising campaign and launched slogans such as “Leave the dry lands behind” and “Flying to heaven with Bacardi.” Those with the desire and means and readiness for uninhibited “wet” exploits could sidestep this newly imposed morality and slip away to that “Americanized” island country of Cuba. Intoxicatingly strong rum, high-potency Hatuey beer, exotic and available companionship, Spanish culture, syncopating music, powerful hand-rolled cigars, and seductive nightlife made Cuba an extremely hard-to-resist destination. The annual number of US tourists to Cuba grew from 44,000 to 90,000 in the span of years between 1919 and 1926 (Gjelten, 2008). In fact, between the years 1915 and 1930, Cuba received more visitors than any other Caribbean destination (Figueras, 2001).

In 1920, Cuba created the National Tourism Commission with the objective of creating and marketing a distinct sense of identity for Cuban tourism (Photo 1.3). For once, it seemed as though Cuba was in the right place at the right time and pursuing the right strategy. Tourism numbers continued to climb throughout the 1920s. In 1926, Hurricane Seven, also known as the Great Miami Hurricane (this was before the age of giving storms human names), made a direct strike on Miami wiping out many of the recently built hotels and laying waste large



Photo 1.3. Vintage Cuba Travel Poster. *Source:* Cuban Tourism Commission.

swaths of land. Never to be deterred by misfortune, the American winter crowd simply moved their holidays to Cuba. The island was open for business and welcomed them with open arms and sunshine (Moruzzi, 2008). New hotels, restaurant, bars, and nightclubs seemed to sprout like weeds. Substantial investments were placed in existing properties to improve or upgrade their facilities. All this development and investment was driven for the sole reason of feeding the continually growing and seemingly insatiable appetites of the American traveler.

For those adventurous Americans looking to make the journey to Havana, the options were becoming more plentiful and the costs more reasonable. As a result, Cuba became accessible to a wider range of fun seekers than ever before. Peninsular and Occidental (P&O) Steamship Company, a British logistics business that began operations in the early nineteenth century, offered both cargo and passenger traffic to Cuba. Their steamship, *SS Florida*, sailed multiple weekly trips from Miami and Key West. The 725-passenger cruise liner offered round-trip tickets for a mere US\$ 46 (around US\$500 today). During the overnight journey, accommodations included a private stateroom with fans and running water, fabulous meals, and dancing to the ship's orchestra.

A number of other companies sailed the waters between the US and Cuba during the same period. The New York and Cuba Mail Steamship Company, also called Ward Line, operated round-trip junkets from New York's Manhattan terminal to Havana. The Munson Steamship Line started as a freight line in 1899. By 1919, the owners realized they could make more money by bringing tourists to "Stay and Play" in the glamorous hotels and nightclubs of Cuba. They immediately instituted a very profitable passenger route between from New York and Havana. The company operated from 1841 until 1954. The New Orleans based Vaccaro Brothers & Company Line operated two ships, the *Contessa* and the *Cefalu*. The ships sailed from New Orleans and called on ports in Cuba, along with stops in other countries. Their all-inclusive weekly tours to Cuba and Panama were advertised for less than US\$ 100.

Until the ascendancy of Fidel Castro, railroad companies in the United States collaborated with steamers to create a seamless cargo and passenger network between the continental US and Cuba. One rarely known but intriguing fact about the US–Cuba relationship during this period was the existence of the *Havana Special*. The *Havana Special* was a passenger train offering "Rail by Sea Train Service" all the way from New York to Havana (American-Rails.com, 2017). For the Key West to Havana segment, the railcars were transferred to enormous ferryboats for the final 10-hour leg of the trip; passengers never had to leave the comfort of their staterooms (Photo 1.4). The entire route from New York to the ferry terminals of Key West covered 1,523 miles and totaled 1,613 miles to its termination point in Havana. A total of 42 hours was required to make the journey. The *Havana Special* brought thousands of well-heeled travelers to Cuba; so many in fact that Constantino Ribalaigua, owner of the *El Floridita* bar in Havana, created a drink exclusively for them: "The *Havana Special*" (Ross, 2013). The *Havana Special* operated for over 20 years until the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935 took out the Miami-Key West stretch of the rail line (American-Rails.com, 2017).



Photo 1.4. Havana Special Postcard. *Source:* Photograph by Jonathan Nelson, State Archives of Florida, Florida Memories.

Cuban aviation also had a remarkable past. On May 17, 1913, aviation history was made when Domingo Rosillo del Tora, flying from Key West, landed in Cuba. He had just set a world record for the longest flight ever completed over water – 90 miles (Clark, 2013). A short seven years later (1919), Cuba was flying. *Compania Aerea de Cuba* (CAC) was founded and quickly set about establishing the first regular airline schedule in Latin America. Although the company lasted a mere 15 months, it set the stage for what was to come. *Compania Aerea de Cuba* (established 1919), *Compania Aerea Cubana* (1920), and *Compania Cubana Nacional de Aviacion Curtiss* (1929), all based in Cuba, were some of the earliest airline companies in Latin America.

Cubana de Aviacion survived a panoply of economic vicissitudes before being acquired by Pan American Airways in 1932 (*Flight*, 1957). Pan Am had established successful scheduled services from Key West to Cuba since 1920. The acquisition of Cubana de Aviacion was a good strategic fit for the company and helped to solidify Pan Am's early dominance in Caribbean and Latin American markets. Pan Am continued its expansion and established a hub in Cuba to its expanding operations to various destinations in Latin and South America. Following the conclusion of World War II, a growing sense of national awareness developed throughout Latin American, Cuba included, leading to a gradual withdrawal of Pan Am's control of Cubana (Smithsonian, 2017); by the 1950s, Pan Am had wholly divested itself of that

company. Since that time, Cubana has remained a domestically funded enterprise and is renowned as Cuba's national airline. It is also Cuba's largest air carrier.

Finally, American-based Aeromarine West Indies Airways began service from Key West to Havana in 1920. The airline is acknowledged as providing the first regularly scheduled US international passenger service when they launched their Key West to Havana service on November 1, 1920 (Kusrow, 2013); even though Pan Am had offered services since 1920, their regularly scheduled flights did not begin until 1928. Cuba was flying high.

The grand dame of Havana hotels, the Hotel Nacional, opened to the public on December 30, 1930 and helped solidify Cuba's position as "the" place to be. Sitting on a bluff overlooking the slight inward curve in Havana's Malecon, from its beginning, this hotel has served as an iconic image of Havana as much as the Eiffel Tower in Paris (Mott & Savona, 2011). Even today, the hotel is viewed as a lasting testament to Havana's grand era (Photo 1.5).



Photo 1.5. Havana's Hotel Nacional.
Source: © Patrick J. Kelly. Used with permission.

However, as the saying goes, "all good things must come to an end." With the arrival of the 1930s came the catastrophic worldwide economic collapse known as the Great Depression, characterized by extraordinary high levels of unemployment and declines in personal income. In the US, unemployment rose to over 25%. Worldwide, GDP fell by 15%. Americans no longer had the means or the motivation for travel to Cuba for recreation and excitement; they were desperately trying to survive and maintain their own personal and

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family existences. This shattering event, coupled with the repeal of Prohibition in 1933 and the worldwide terrors and economic causalities surrounding World War II, dealt a severe and sustained blow to Cuba's thriving tourist trade. The "Golden Age of Cuban Tourism" was put on hold. It was not until the early 1950s that fledgling signs of life were once again evident in Cuban tourism.