

Marketing "Maya" Heritage

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The Maya archaeological park of Tulum is arguably the most visited archaeological site in all of Mexico, in part because it overlooks the sparkling white sand beaches and turquoise waters of the Caribbean. With 8,000 visitors each day, however, Tulum is at high risk of irreparable degradation and appears to many visitors today as a worn-down resource. This is so even though most of the site has been roped off to prevent climbing on the buildings, and after the entrance to the site was moved to minimize damage to a surrounding wall.

Without a trace of irony, highway signs now designate the entrance to Tulum as "Subway Tulum," highlighting the prominent, if incongruous, location of a Subway sandwich shop adjacent to it. Once visitors enter the site, most tend to treat it more as an amusement park than as a central element of Maya heritage.



Tourists at Tulum. Photo by Cameron Walker

Located further off the beaten path, the site of Cobá fares better than Tulum in many respects. For the Maya, Cobá has always been imbued with powerful imagery of good and evil, exemplified by continued pilgrimages to the site, and by the burning of candles at the base of the main pyramid to keep malevolent spirits at bay.

A visitor entering the narrow gate at Cobá is presented with official signs displaying identical texts in Spanish, English and Yucatec

Mayan, although there are few signs anywhere else at the site and no brochures or pamphlets are available. In contrast to the sparse vegetation at Tulum, the grounds of Cobá are heavily forested, with most of the unexcavated mounds hidden among the dense vegetation.

Only about 200 visitors arrive at Cobá each day, but about half of the local working population now earns at least some income from tourism. Besides the restaurants and souvenir stands, a particular enter-

prise stands out when visiting Cobá: the local Maya now rent mountain bikes to cover the considerable distances between the excavated monuments.

COMMENTARY

Presenting Maya Heritage

These two archaeological sites along the Yucatán Maya Riviera provide insights into ways archaeologists, modern Maya, and the tourist industry present and identify (or fail to identify) the ancient Maya heritage. The tourism industry markets the Maya heritage and archaeological sites mainly to attract and amuse tourists. The National Institute of Anthropology and History of Mexico (INAH), charged with administering all research, interpretation and management of Mexican archaeological sites, has been hard-pressed to meet its numerous responsibilities, particularly since archaeological sites are seen by Mexican politicians as requiring little in the way of upkeep.

Visitors to Mexican archaeological parks such as Tulum and Cobá usually have three options to learn about the site: they can arrive with a guidebook describing it; they can search

Developing Heritage Tourism in Honduras

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With the inauguration of President Ricardo Maduro in 2002, the Honduran government significantly boosted its once-marginal support of the tourism sector. Today, revenues from tourism-related businesses provide the third largest source of foreign income in Honduras. This past January the country celebrated the arrival of the millionth visitor to Honduras, reflecting the success of the government's investment in tourism.

A Development Strategy

The Honduran government recently embraced heritage tourism in an attempt to solve its concerns about archaeological resource protection, local and larger scale economic development, compliance with international heritage norms, and

funding shortages within government agencies.

Heritage is a major component of Honduras' tourism development strategy. In tourism literature, Honduras promotes itself as a multicultural nation with rich cultural and natural resources. Yet this *patrimonio* (heritage) is largely represented by a single, well-known archaeological site: the Copán Archaeological Park. Copán is an ancient Maya city that has been recreated as an international destination through archaeological research, tourism marketing and contemporary management and conservation practices.

Copán is both a Honduran National Monument and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, linking it at once to local, national and global communities interested in preserving heritage. Drawing on its established international fame, the Copán Archaeological Park currently attracts upwards of 130,000 national and

international visitors a year, making it the second most popular tourism destination in Honduras.

Presenting the Maya Past

Copán is a showcase of the spectacular and exotic Maya past, one of the world's celebrated ancient cultures. Interest in the ancient Maya has grown rapidly over the last 20 years, fueled in part by advances in deciphering Maya hieroglyphs and the proliferation of new field research, coupled with the growth of popular media that packages the Maya past for non-academic audiences. The presentation of the Maya past at Copán targets an audience that seeks authentic experiences of pristine places and a material connection to an exotic time. The restored buildings, excavated tombs and sculptured artwork set amid the tropical forest at Copán create a sense of dis-



Maya temple in the Copán ruins in Honduras.

Courtesy of Let's Go Honduras

tance for the visitor, allowing them to imagine a separation from their modern experience. Copán's designation as a World Heritage Site operates as a marker of international status but does little to generate a shared connection between the global community and the Maya past that visitors experience.

out the infrequent INAH signs; or they can hire a personal tour guide.

A Successful Tour Guide

Licensed Mexican guides depend mainly on tips, so they often seem more interested in trying to figure out what a group wants to hear than in providing up-to-date information. A successful guide has to be intuitive and follow conversational leads to deliver the level of information in which a client is interested. Occasional eavesdropping confirms that many guides at times make up stories to please their clients, emphasizing the more sensational aspects of Maya human sacrifice and frequent warfare.

Sometimes guides try to match the tone and direction of their official presentations to tourists'



Forested Cobá. Photo by Cameron Walker

The presentation of Copán for local and national audiences, on the other hand, actively promotes a connection between modern Hondurans and this famous site. In school textbooks, national exhibits, political rhetoric and other vehicles that help shape national identity, Copán is celebrated as the antecedent for the contemporary *mestizo* nation. Copán's tourism industry also helps promote a sense of local and national heritage, even as its products are marketed for an international audience. The steady rise in visitors to Copán over the last decade has increased local awareness of the international importance of the Maya past, prompting many residents to assign new value to a place that they once viewed as merely a source of seasonal employment. Additionally, as more and more families who live in the vicinity of Copán depend on tourism revenue for their primary income, they have become invested in protecting the place that sustains the tourism industry.

Honduran's Concerns

Heritage tourism makes the local past global, which in turn shapes

nationalities. Because of their particular social history, guides often consider it easier to describe kings, priests and warrior elite to European tourists; yet these guides might see a need to first explain a non-democratic sociopolitical system to North Americans before launching into archaeological descriptions.

Tourism and Development

Tourism has become an essential regional development strategy in the Yucatán, one where governments and businesses become inclined to treat heritage resources as local attractions. In the process, ideas of "Maya," often those sensationalized for visitors, become an added value for the tourism experience. At the same time, local Maya today risk becoming ever more economically, socially and culturally marginalized unless they too can find ways to market their heritage in their own terms. ☐

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the local value of heritage. As a result of the growth of heritage tourism, more and more interested parties now share a concern in how the Copán Archaeological Park is managed and how heritage is constructed there.

COMMENTARY

Copán's rising international profile has also generated new challenges, such as recent conflicts over decisions affecting Copán. There are many stakeholders who find their futures affected by the Maya past—local landowners, residents employed in the tourism industry, foreign archaeologists, government officials responsible for protecting the country's cultural resources and the Chortí, local indigenous descendants of the ancient Maya. The rising local and global stakes makes negotiating among these interests increasingly complex, but also increasingly important. ☐

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Post-Revolutionary Tourism

Heritage Celebrated or Forgotten?

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Tourism, many reckon, is the leading industry in the world today. Unlike other industries in the global economy, tourism has as its principal product whole regions and nations. "Branding" nations to sell them to international travelers is the mission of leagues of employees in tourism ministries and private companies. Frequently, national heritage is a calling card for tourism development, offering something more meaningful than the formula of "sun, sand and sea" to lure travelers.

Beckoning Visitors

Yet heritage takes diverse forms and countries that have recently undergone periods of social upheaval, political conflict and economic transformation must determine what aspects of the past and of contemporary national identity to represent to visitors. In the post-socialist period, promoters of tourism often negotiate the balance between assuring potential visitors that it is once again safe to approach their shores and beckoning them with the prom-

ise of experiencing something different and once forbidden to Westerners. One has only to read the *New York Times* Travel section for a few weeks to be persuaded that tourism in post-conflict "hot spots" is all the rage.

COMMENTARY

One recent *Times* article describes the positive economic impact on Laos following UNESCO's decision to name a town a World Heritage Site, calling it the "Best Preserved City in Southeast Asia"—with the result that "tourism has rescued the town." Another article touts South Africa, and Johannesburg in particular, as revived and ready for visitors. Whereas in the past tourists have often flocked to game parks, in post-1994 democratic South Africa, many wish to discover the country's national museum of apartheid atrocities and to visit Nelson Mandela's prison cell. Still another article invites readers to consider the advantages of travel to Libya, long viewed as a despotic nation and now a "must-see destination." The writer points out that much of the appeal is the attraction of the forbidden, at least for US residents who were banned from travel there for 23 years, and that Libya's reputation as a dangerous place actually serves to draw more travelers.

In Chiapas, Mexico, site of the Zapatista uprising a decade ago, San Cristóbal de las Casas has garnered a record number of tourists and a *Times* reporter states that the rebels have served as a "radical-chic" attraction. Similarly, El Salvador has emerged from civil war in the 1980s to post-conflict tourism, which relies not only on the country's lush natural landscape but also on its rich cultural heritage. And the movie *The Motorcycle Diaries*, based on the journal of a young Che Guevara as he traveled through South America, has sparked more travel in that region, so much so that the Bolivian government has recently promoted the "Che Trail" taken by the older, seasoned revolutionary, to enhance tourism. China



A Nicaraguan artist's depiction of an armed Ronald Reagan sitting atop a woman who represents the "open veins" of Latin America, on display at a cultural center. Photo by Florence Babb

See Post-Revolutionary on page 12