

A TYPOLOGY OF THE PRIMARY TOURIST CENTRES OF CENTRAL AMERICA

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This paper deals with the issue of the primary tourist centres of Central America by setting up a typology of such places. Tourism in Central America has steadily been growing in the last decade and is now an important and recognisable segment of the international tourism market. As in other parts of Latin America, the Central American countries have based the promotion of their own tourist destinations on the existence of outstanding natural and cultural resources such as volcanoes, tropical beaches, islands and rain-forests in one hand and ethnic groups, colonial cities and archaeological sites on the other. Most of these places, in turn, are suitable scenarios for the expansion of the new forms of tourism abridged under the name of eco-tourism. Promotion efforts are hard and competition is unavoidable either among Central American countries or with the rest of the world. In this context, we aim at presenting a typology of the primary tourist centres of Central America in order to shed some light on the diversity and hierarchy of places regarding the tourism economy in the region and, in due time, useful as a reference for further investigations in this field.

We consider Central America as the group of countries south of Mexico and north of Colombia, including the following: Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, all of which are now considered emerging destinations within the framework of the world tourism economy. While the region still attracts fewer visitors than the rest of Latin America, the number of tourists in countries such as Costa Rica, Guatemala and El Salvador is a major contributor to their respective gross domestic product. Even if intraregional flows are important and expanding, the geographical origin of most tourists is still deeply rooted in the United States. European tourists, while increasing their numbers on a yearly basis, are well behind their North-American counterpart.

Central American countries are part of two major programmes for the promotion of tourism: Mundo Maya and Central America: so small, so big! The Mundo Maya programme, while not including all of the seven countries here examined, is a basic funding platform for tourist places in Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and Honduras. The other programme is a loose association aimed at promoting the area, as such, in international tourism fairs and markets under a single trademark. These strategies have proven useful for the expansion of the tourism economy in each country,

particularly in view of the competence coming from Mexico and the Caribbean island countries.

The Central American tourism economy shows signs of both strength and weakness. Biodiversity, enjoyable climate and scenarios suitable for the expansion of eco-tourism contribute to the strength tourism has in this part of the world. Consequently, visitors in Central America are attracted by extraordinary natural resources: tropical beaches in Belize and Costa Rica, volcanoes in nearly every country of the region, tropical rain-forests in Costa Rica and Panama. The strength of tourism in Central America can also be extended to the situation that a considerable proportion of visitors look for second residences in places such as Costa Rica and Panama and also to the fact that in many sites where eco-tourism is being promoted, scientific investigation is also carried out, for example the biological stations in volcanoes of Nicaragua or in islands in Panama.

Weaknesses of tourism in Central America are revealed in different situations regarding identity, infrastructure and labour force employed in the tourism economy. In the first case, the lack of identity (for the promotion of tourism products) in the international markets derives from some stereotypes still prevailing among international visitors which may think about this part of Latin America as dangerous (due to wars, military actions, coups or post-electoral confrontations) no matter if, generally speaking, these countries are now stable democracies and have safe political and economy ambiance. Infrastructure available for tourism in each country, regarding land, air and sea communications as well as lodgings, is still behind international standards. There are few international hubs for air travel (only two major international airports at San Jose, Costa Rica and Panama City, Panama) and the road network is based on one major axis running from the Mexico-Guatemala border to the limits between Panama and Colombia; as for cruise tourism, there are only a handful of sea-ports where, only on a temporary basis, ship arrive and depart. International hotel chains are virtually absent in most of the tourist areas in Central America, their hotels are located in the largest urban areas and, therefore, catering mainly to business men and women rather than to visitors or tourists. Finally, labour force having a job in the tourism economy has a low-key presence, with professional skills scarcely developed.

Within this general context, we defined a primary tourist centre as a site counting with exceptional natural or cultural resources (useful for the promotion or expansion of the tourism economy); having diverse lodging facilities, catering to all kind of visitors; enjoying a significant degree of accessibility via air or land transportation; receiving the benefits of government tourism propaganda and publicity; gaining from an popular imaginary which can act as a triggering factor to pull visitors to these sites and, finally, having been included in the World Heritage List. In order to distinguish these sites within each Central American country, we explored both primary and secondary sources of information, from topographic maps to internet sites, from several field-works to the revision of graduate and undergraduate theses and scientific articles on tourism in Latin America in general, and Central America in particular. Once this investigation process was finished we ended up with a total of 93 centres which met all the requirements

abovementioned. Most of these primary tourist centres are located in Costa Rica, 25 out of 93.

These primary tourist centres were grouped in four categories, labelled I, II, III and IV. These categories were established under the consideration of the type of resource most associated with the tourism economy: natural resources (I), cultural resources (II), a mixture of resources, with a prevailing natural resource component (III) and a mixture of resources, with a prevailing cultural resource component (IV). According to this classification, in Central America, the primary tourist centres are currently based on the existence and promotion of natural resources only; 54 out 93 places are considered to be of category I. Tourist places which rely on the promotion of cultural resources for their tourism economy (category II) are second in the list and are commonly found in countries with a strong maya component: Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. The existence of mixed resources for the promotion or expansion of tourism in each country is rather limited. Categories III and IV represent only 3 and 5 cases, respectively, of the 93 sites revealed; this can be taken as a sign of a weak blending of natural and cultural resources in the actual promotion of tourism that needs to be more sophisticated and holistic in order to offer a comprehensive basis for the economy of tourism in each country of the region.

Our major research findings are presented in the maps and tables that accompany our text. While the scale of the main map, containing all 93 sites revealed by our research, is not adequate to show details on their geographical distribution, it is still useful for getting a grip on the general overview of tourism in this part of Latin America. A companion for this map is table 2, where all 93 sites are presented, by category and sub-category. In this way, all archipelagos and islands, natural protected areas, natural protected areas with an outstanding natural feature, lakes, beaches and volcanoes playing a major role in the tourism economy of all seven Central American countries are enlisted and located in the main map and table 2. Regarding cultural resources, modern architecture, catholic pilgrimage sites, large urban agglomerations, market and handicraft centres, colonial cities and archaeological sites are also represented and registered. Finally, places with mixed resources for tourism complete the list; in category III we included sites where tourism is based on the co-existence of ethnic groups and archipelagos, lakes and national parks; a colonial site within a natural protected area, two archaeological places in natural protected areas and agriculture in a mountain zone are included in category IV.

Central America is a region where the tourism economy is expanding rapidly. The promotion and growth of tourism in the region is clearly based on the existence of natural resources which, in turn, could yield considerable profits if used as a basis for the development of the new forms of tourism, or eco-tourism. Competition coming from countries offering similar tourist products, particularly Mexico and the Caribbean island states, cannot be underestimated and Central American nations should present a common front as a unique destination. However, to strengthen this strategy, Central American countries must establish stronger platforms of action in which the promotion of tourism is based on the inclusion of two or more natural and cultural resources, as it is already the case of different tourist destinations in Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama.

While we detected 93 primary tourist centres in this research, undoubtedly, this number will increase in the foreseeable future as in each country transportation infrastructure will improve, lodging facilities will get better and diverse, promotion will bring about economic benefits, local labour force employed in tourism will achieve better standards and the imaginary will change in favour of all Central American countries.